

ABSTRACT

PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF WORKING WITH SUBURBAN ELEMENTARY STUDENTS FROM POVERTY

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The increase of poverty in suburban communities since the year 2000 has fundamentally changed the work of elementary school principals in suburban schools. Using a qualitative method, 10 suburban elementary school principals from the Chicago metropolitan area were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions of working with suburban elementary school students from poverty. Principals revealed that they see poverty as having a deficit influence on suburban elementary students. They defined that they see the role of principal as helping students gain from the school experience by reducing the obstacles to learning that poverty presents and, therefore, providing access to education. Finally, in the context of working with suburban elementary school students from poverty, the principals described the elements of the school that are influenced by their leadership and the factors that have had an influence on their leadership. Confirming existing research, the findings reveal that relationships with students, parents and community are an essential component of the principal's work with suburban elementary school students from poverty. The findings suggest that by gaining a greater understanding of the principals' perceptions, professional practice can be impacted and thus increase the students' chances for success later in school and in life.

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PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF WORKING WITH SUBURBAN
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my amazing family. First and foremost, I dedicate this work to my parents, Edward and Dawn Diedrich. My father was a defense attorney and emboldened the philosophy to “never look down on someone, unless you are helping them up.” He passed that along to my sisters and me, and our life work as adults is reflected in that philosophy. My mother was an artist by talent and an art teacher by choice. Her vision for aesthetics and creativity, and her fierce advocacy for public education, formed my attitudes and beliefs about the rights of every child to have the opportunity to experience the beauty of learning about the world around them.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Economic disadvantage can depress students' academic achievement through multiple mechanisms, including reduced access to educational resources, higher levels of stress, poorer nutrition, and reduced access to healthcare. (Claro et al., 2016, p. 8664)

At the start of Kindergarten, five-year-old Laura arrived at school for her first experience in a formal school setting. Laura was small for her age, but she had a larger-than-life smile and an eagerness to be at school. However, as she entered the classroom, Mrs. Jones, the teacher, saw that Laura had something that warranted concern; she appeared tired and unkempt. Her smile revealed swollen gums and dark tooth sockets where teeth should have been. Laura handed Mrs. Jones an insulated lunch box that was tattered and worn. Inside the lunch box was an insulin pen that Laura carried with her on the bus. Laura brought nothing else with her that day—no backpack, no supplies, and no lunch of her own.

Laura was a child from a situation of poverty. She was being raised by a single, disabled parent with only social security as income. They were temporarily living with a grandparent and seemed to have little consistency in their lives. Laura's complex health history included diabetes, severe eczema and significant oral health neglect. These issues were made worse by lack of access to quality and consistent healthcare due to poverty. The suburban community in which Laura attended school was host to an increasing number of families from such circumstances.

The impact of the situation of poverty from which Laura came became quickly apparent to the school staff. Laura had few, if any, early learning skills. She could not name the letters of the alphabet, write or identify the letters of her name, or count or name numbers to ten. These were skills most of her schoolmates displayed when they entered Kindergarten. She also had limited vocabulary and speech and delayed social skills.

Mrs. Jones met with Mrs. Smith, the principal, on that first day of school to bring her concerns to light and to receive guidance on how to proceed with meeting Laura's needs during the school day. Mrs. Smith took several steps that day, and in the weeks and months that followed, to mitigate the impact of poverty on Laura's school experience.

As Mrs. Smith reflected on the experience, she realized that her leadership position in this suburban school was changing. This was only one of many cases in the school community involving students from poverty. In recent years, she had seen the rate of poverty in her school increase from 6% to 18%. Much of her work had become about that topic in particular, and she found herself asking, "How do my leadership actions impact the school experience of students from poverty?"

Stories such as the one above detail the situation of poverty that young students experience and have to overcome to participate in their education. These stories pose an issue of great concern for our nation's schools. The issue of poverty for young children is particularly poignant, as young students experience the effects of poverty in ways that are different from older students. They do not have the tools and abilities to help navigate the difficult situation of poverty on their own. This is not to say that older students have everything they need to overcome the impact of poverty on their education or to minimize the impact that poverty has on

their school experience. It is to emphasize the deeply affecting situation that young students – students in elementary school – experience.

To further understand the impact of poverty on the national scene of public education, we must understand that the face of poverty has undergone changes in recent years. Since the economic downturn in the United States, marked by the housing market crash in 2005, poverty has increased to historic levels. In 2011, 46.2 million people were in poverty in the United States, making the official poverty rate 15 percent, and in that same year, the poverty rate for school age children (ages 5-18) was 21.9 percent (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2012c).

While the poverty rate in U.S. cities continues to be higher than in suburbs (20.9% compared to 11.4% in 2010) (Berube & Frey, 2002), it is apparent that poverty is not an issue isolated to urban areas (Berube & Frey, 2002). In stark contrast to what has been the historical picture of American poverty (that of poor families in urban centers), the number of residents living in poverty in the suburbs surpassed the number of residents living in poverty in urban centers as early as 2000 (Berube & Frey, 2002). The Brookings Institution (Berube & Kneebone, 2011) reported that 15.4 million suburban residents lived below the poverty threshold in 2011, while for urban residents the figure was 12.7 million.

Problem Statement

The United States Department of Commerce population survey (2012a) information from the last decade indicates that there has been a dramatic shift in poverty levels in suburban areas across the United States. Poverty, viewed typically as an urban plight, is now an issue that impacts suburban communities more than at any other time in history. Suburbs have been viewed historically as places of affluence and work, as thriving communities with vibrant social

surroundings. While poverty affects all aspects of suburban communities, it is important to understand that suburban schools face new, demanding, and urgent challenges related to poverty that have been previously unseen. The challenges brought on by poverty include lack of adequate housing or homelessness, lack of quality and consistent health care, hunger, and lack of access to community resources. In the school setting, symptoms of poverty include underdeveloped vocabulary, lack of parental involvement due to employment outside of school hours, limited experiences outside of the home, and malnutrition (Alexander & Salmon, 2007; Darbes, Dias, Suarez-Orozco & Sutin, 2011; Freire, 1993; Jensen, 2009; Seccombe, 2000). Suburban schools are not immune to issues of poverty and the impact it has on students and their families.

Poverty in urban areas has long been a topic of discussion (Freire, 1970; Wilson, 1996). Studies focused on leadership characteristics and their impact on learning for students from poverty have been conducted in rural and urban settings (Horst & Martin, 2007; Suber, 2011). Missing from research, however, is the relatively new situation of suburban poverty and how it impacts the work of the suburban school principal.

The work of Payne (2005) has helped to create a more common and mainstream approach to understanding poverty, in particular as it impacts schooling. A widely accepted source on understanding poverty, Payne brings to light statistics on poverty and what students from poverty need in the school setting to increase their learning. While her work has been criticized by researchers as lacking credible research and relying on deficit perspectives of students in poverty (Nieto & Bode, 2012), there are elements of Payne's book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, that serve to inform how schools can address the needs of students in poverty. Jensen

(2009) extended Payne's (2005) research and describes the impact of poverty on the development of the brain.

It is not enough to only know there is a link between poverty and low-performance; it is also essential to know how to treat the schooling of students from poverty. "In most literature that mentions successful and failing schools, leadership is the one component that is the most praised or examined" (Suber, 2011, p. 3). Close examination of school leadership characteristics must be part of the research on how we impact the education of students from poverty.

It is essential in our society that we have strong, established access to equal education for students living in poverty (Coclough, 2012). Effective leadership in high-poverty schools is a key factor in establishing access to education for students from poverty (Horst & Martin, 2007; Suber, 2011). In suburban elementary schools, the leadership of the principal can remove barriers and improve the school experience for students from poverty. Leadership actions such as outreach to families, professional development with teachers and staff, shared decision making, developing a shared vision for learning for all students, and building support and connections with outside organizations are some approaches that provide access to education for students from poverty (Jacobson 2011; Lambert, 2006) .

The question that begs to be answered is "what do students from poverty need in school?" Students from poverty need a connection to their school that will place them at an advantage to learn. They need adults who have empathy for and understanding of their situation. They need leadership from the principal that will develop shared knowledge about the issues that surround poverty and establish a culture of high expectations and learning for all students. They need access to high quality educational opportunities and teachers who collaborate to provide individualized learning. They need adults in the school setting who, under the leadership of the

principal, will collectively take on the work of providing information about community resources such as social work, health care, food and nutritional assistance and recreational activities (Cooper, 2010; Epstein, 2002; Ladd, 2012; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Payne, 2005). They need leadership at the school level that will develop parent outreach programs on how to be involved at school and how to help children learn at home. The focus of these activities strengthens the parents' connection to school and, in turn, increases the academic engagement of students from poverty (Epstein, 2002). The leadership actions of the school principal have a direct impact on how these needs are met in the elementary school setting (Marzano et al., 2005; Westerberg, 2016).

As poverty moves to suburban areas at an increasing rate, the issues of poverty have become prevalent for school principals in these areas. This study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of school principals in that context as well as the effects of poverty on elementary students. The movement of poverty into suburban areas over the past decade (2000-2010) was also examined.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore elementary school principals' perspectives of working with students from poverty in the context of the suburban elementary school. I find it important to place this study in the context of suburban elementary education and poverty and the changing dynamic of suburban elementary schools. My interest in the study stemmed from my own work as a suburban elementary school assistant principal and principal. From 1999-2017, I experienced work as an administrator in schools with poverty rates ranging from 6% to 30%. As my career continued from my early years as an assistant principal to my current

experience as a principal, I saw the dynamic of poverty in the suburban school setting grow and change. In line with the current research on demographics of suburbs, movement of poverty and census results, I noticed an increase in poverty rates in the suburban schools I served. In one school, the rate tripled in the six years I was there, rising from 6% to 18%. I noticed children coming to our schools with fewer opportunities and more needs. The impact was pronounced on the early learners – those from pre-school through second grade. I saw the urgency of advocating for students, and I noticed the significant impact school had on many aspects of their development. My work became to advocate for students from poverty – whoever they were and whatever they needed.

I also saw the opportunity that I had to influence how everyone within the school responded to these children. How would the secretary greet the families when they came to register for school? How would the teacher know the child's background experiences were lacking? How would the school nurse respond to the child and family when health needs were not met? How would I work with the directors in roles at the central office to secure resources like transportation, books and home support? It became my ongoing mission to make sure the school day provided the best experience of the child's day and perhaps the most secure time of their young life. This was the inspiration for this study.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed:

1. What is the suburban elementary school principal's perception of how poverty impacts suburban elementary students living in poverty?

2. How has the work of suburban elementary school principals been influenced by elementary students living in poverty?
3. What are the leadership practices of suburban elementary school principals that impact students living in poverty?

Significance of the Study

The rise of poverty in suburban schools presents new challenges for respective school principals. Poverty affects a student's participation in the school experience. Whether measured by academic performance, social-emotional development, or parental involvement, the situation of poverty and how to mitigate it is a pressing issue for educators. This study helps elementary school principals in suburban settings gain a better and more informed perspective about how to handle the education of elementary students coming from situations of poverty. School principals in suburban areas will gain greater insight into their own leadership in the context of increased poverty.

This study also sheds light on the unique and previously unknown situations of poverty that students experience in suburban education. This awareness provides insight into needed professional development of principals to address the educational needs of increased numbers of children coming from poverty in suburban areas.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is social constructivism, often used interchangeably with social constructionism (Andrews, 2012). Within qualitative research, social constructivism stems from interpretive research as the researcher interprets the

information from the participants and constructs knowledge (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009).

Social constructivism is based on the idea that knowledge is socially constructed by individuals (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). People develop the meaning of social experiences and interactions and create knowledge based on those experiences and interactions. Knowledge can also be socially constructed through the lived experiences of a group of people (Creswell; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Merriam; Mertens, 2010); therefore, how people interpret their social reality and what it means to them provided the basis for this study (Denzin & Lincoln).

Social construction of knowledge was solidified in the writings of Berger and Luckman (1966), and much of the research available today is influenced by their writing. Berger and Luckman provide a “systematic theory for the sociology of knowledge” (p. 207). Their sociological theory influences research into how people construct knowledge from their social experiences. This research sought to understand the experience and meaning of working with students from poverty through the standpoint of a group of elementary principals. By developing understanding, this research extends the knowledge of what it means to work with children from poverty in elementary schools.

Shaped by their own experiences (i.e., their childhood, their work, their culture, their history) principals develop their own knowledge of what it is like to work with children from poverty. Their knowledge is also influenced by their interactions within the context of the school setting: the culture of the students, the history of the community, the socioeconomic context of the students. The interaction of the participant within the social context to develop meaning is an essential component of social constructivism (Creswell, 2007). Principals construct meaning of working with students from poverty in the school setting. When principals become aware of this socially constructed knowledge, it shapes the way they work within the school context with

students from poverty. This knowledge is socially constructed based on the interaction of the principal with the students from situations of poverty.

Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions should be understood.

Free/Reduced lunch: According to the United States Department of Agriculture (2013) National School Lunch Program Fact Sheet:

Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals, for which students can be charged no more than 40 cents. (For the period July 1, 2012, through June 30, 2013, 130 percent of the poverty level is \$29,965 for a family of four; 185 percent is \$42,643).

Poverty: Indicated by a family's income and the number of people living within the household. The poverty threshold for 2014 for a family of four with two children under the age of 18 was \$24, 008 (United States Department of Commerce, 2016). In the context of students enrolled in public school, a student in poverty is identified by the family's qualification for the free lunch program.

Rural: An incorporated place or census designated place with a population less than 25,000 and greater than 2,500 and located outside a Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area (CMSA) or Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). Also any incorporated place (United States Department of Commerce, 2012b).

Suburban: Any incorporated place, census designated place, or non-place territory within a CMSA or MSA of a mid-city or large city defined as urban by the Census Bureau in the United States Department of Commerce reports (2012b). Also, any incorporated place or Census

Designated Place with a population greater than or equal to 25,000 and located outside a CMSA or MSA.

Urban: A central city of a CMSA or MSA (United States Department of Commerce, 2012b).

Methods

Merriam (2009) provides clarity to the complex definition of qualitative research by explaining that it focuses on meaning and understanding, utilizes the researcher as the “primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (p. 15), is an “inductive process” (p. 15), and “is richly descriptive (p. 16). “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed – that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 13).

In this interpretive research study the researcher sought to discover a deeper meaning and description of school leadership as it relates to working with elementary students from poverty in the suburban setting. A basic, inductive qualitative research design presents a thorough and effective method by which a deeper meaning and description of school leadership in this context can be revealed. The experiences of elementary school leaders as they work to mitigate the effects of poverty on young students were explored through interviews with multiple elementary principals from different suburban school districts.

This research study was framed within the constructivist research paradigm. To further understand, it is useful to gain insight about the basic beliefs of this paradigm, and Mertens (2010) provides a thorough description. Through the process of research, meaning will be interpreted and created by the researcher as she “attempt(s) to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (p. 16).

The participants in the study were current elementary school principals, practicing within a selected suburb of a large metropolitan area in the Midwest. Further criteria for participation in the study were that they had at least one year of experience in the position of principal and five years within the field of education. The participants were recruited through phone calls and emails, using network and criterion sampling. Network sampling, as explained by Merriam (2009), “involves locating a few key participants who easily meet the criteria you have established” and asks each for a referral to another participant (p. 79). It was a technique that the researcher used to identify key people who hold valuable knowledge about the topic who then recommend other people to include in the sample. Criterion sampling indicates that the participants must possess necessary attributes to take part in the study (Merriam).

The method for data collection was an interview protocol. This mode of data collection provided a deep explanation of the experiences of the participants as they worked with students from poverty. Data were analyzed to answer the research questions. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher and coded as themes emerge, utilizing the theoretical framework of social constructivism.

Throughout analysis of the interview data, constant comparative analysis as described in Mertens (2010) took place. This was accomplished through involving other researchers familiar with qualitative research in the coding process. In this format, constant comparative analysis became a peer-reviewed approach for analyzing the data. Additionally, member checks of the data were conducted throughout the analysis. This served to increase the trustworthiness and validity of the study (Mertens).

Delimitations

The selected elementary school principals were from elementary schools within one suburban county of a major metropolitan area in the Midwest, which may have affected the transferability of the study. The role of the researcher and her experiences as an elementary principal that she brought to the interpretation of data may also have been a limitation.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the study, the problem statement, and the purpose of the study, along with the theoretical framework. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature regarding suburbanization, poverty and its impact on learning, and the characteristics of elementary school leaders. Chapter 3 focuses on the research methodology, data collection, and analysis. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present the interview findings. Discussion of the findings is presented in Chapter 7, along with the recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

For decades, the poor population in the United States has grown at a faster pace in suburbs than in other types of places. (Kneebone & Berube, 2013, p. 35)

Poverty in urban and rural areas has long been a topic of discussion, and research has largely been focused on the impact poverty has on learning for school-age children (Jensen, 2009; Freire, 1970; Payne, 2005; Wilson, 1996). Significant research has sought to reveal the leadership practices of local school administrators that lessen the impact of poverty on learning, but studies focused on leadership characteristics and the impact on learning for students from poverty have mainly been conducted in rural and urban settings (Horst & Martin, 2007; Suber, 2011). Of interest in this study is the impact of poverty on the suburban elementary school principal experience. Related to this is how local school leaders deal with the rising tide of poverty in suburban schools and the leadership characteristics present in high-performing, high-poverty schools.

This review examines the literature on the meaning of poverty, the current situation of poverty in the United States, and the history of the growth of suburbs in America. This is done to gain a greater perspective of how these elements may impact the education of students from poverty in suburban settings. Also examined are the effects of poverty on students and the literature on leadership characteristics of principals in high-poverty, high-performing schools. These topics are considered through the lens of the suburban school experience.

Poverty

There are different ways of defining poverty. In terms of government policy and decision making, a definition that places a dollar amount to categorize an individual or family for poverty is useful. This could be seen as an economic or governmental definition of poverty and is statistical in nature (Fisher, 1997). To gain a more thorough understanding of poverty, social research looks beyond a dollar amount to describe the experience of poverty (Seccombe, 2000). This is a more humanistic approach to understanding poverty.

Economic and governmental definitions are utilitarian. These definitions contribute to national policy and create a common language for discussion, debate and decision making and, as reviewed below, present limitations (Seccombe, 2000). Sociological, theoretical and humanistic definitions are more compelling by focusing on the nature of poverty. They focus on the situation – its causes, its effects, its realities and the forces that perpetuate it. To address the situation of poverty and develop policy and systems that work against poverty, it is necessary to understand both the economic and social perspectives.

Fisher (1997) provides information on what lies behind the current definition of poverty in economic, political and governmental terms. Poverty thresholds, as they are referred to in federal policy, are based on a formula that takes the current cost of a minimum food plan for a family and multiplies it by 3.7. This approach was developed early in the 1960s by the Social Security Administration when the typical American family spent approximately a third of its income on food. The original author of the poverty threshold standards, Mollie Orshansky, acknowledged the difficulty in establishing a widely accepted definition of poverty. Orshansky explained that “if it is not possible to state unequivocally ‘how much is enough,’ it should be

possible to assert with confidence how much, on an average, is too little” (as cited in Fisher, pp. 1-2).

A report by Gabe (2012) for the Congressional Research Service also provides detailed information about the official measure of poverty used by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Department of Health and Human Services. Poverty thresholds were developed by the Social Security Administration in 1963 and officially adopted as the measure of poverty in the U.S. in 1969. They have changed little, if at all, despite significant changes in our society related to how individuals and families earn and spend money (Fisher, 1997; Gabe, 2012).

The Census Bureau’s poverty thresholds form the basis for statistical estimates of poverty in the United States. The thresholds reflect crude estimates of the amount of money individuals or families, of various size and composition, need per year to purchase a basket of goods and services deemed as “minimally adequate,” according to the living standards of the early 1960s. The thresholds are updated each year for changes in consumer prices. In 2011, for example, the average poverty threshold for an individual living alone was \$11,484; for a two-person family, \$14,657; and for a family of four, \$23,021. (p. 7)

Since the official definition of poverty was adopted by the federal government, many governmental and non-governmental groups have formed to evaluate its effectiveness and to make recommendations to improve it, but there has been little action in modernizing the definition of poverty in the federal government (Gabe, 2012). The fact that these standards have not changed at all from nearly 50 years ago is symbolic of the difficult task of formulating policies and systems that serve to lift people out of the situation of poverty.

There is widespread agreement among researchers that the current definition of poverty used by the federal government is flawed (Fisher, 1997; Gabe, 2012; Seccombe, 2000). A weakness in the official definition of poverty is that it relies on standards of living that are nearly 50 years old and uses an equation based on an amount substantially below what middle class

families spend on food. Although there are significant variances in costs of living across the different geographical areas of the United States, these are not considered when defining poverty (Gabe; Seccombe). Additionally, the current definition of poverty includes a family's gross income, which is not an accurate reflection of the actual income available for living costs. It does not account for the benefits they may receive from subsidies such as free and reduced lunch or the child tax credit (Gabe).

Also missing in the inclusionary criteria of poverty are the expenses related to working, such as transportation and child-care (Gabe, 2012; Seccombe, 2000). This is significant when considering the distance people are traveling to get to work and the time that is added to the supervision of children in day-care. Both costs (transportation to work and child-care) cause a significant strain on a family's income. Moreover, the cost of providing healthcare for members of the family is not included in the equation for measuring poverty. Certainly in recent years this topic has been at the forefront of political debate and is a critical issue for families. The cost of healthcare for families drains financial resources that would otherwise be available for a more prosperous lifestyle (Gabe; Seccombe).

To gain a more thorough understanding of poverty, social research looks beyond a dollar amount to describe the experience of poverty (Seccombe, 2000). Sociological, theoretical and humanistic definitions are more compelling, focusing on the nature of poverty. They focus on the situation – its causes, its effects, its realities and the forces that perpetuate it. Poverty, as Seccombe (2000) explains, “is more than an economic inconvenience easily overcome with increased initiative” (p. 1096). Poverty is defined by much more than a dollar amount, and there are varied dimensions of poverty. A family or an individual, certainly a child, should have the

ability in our society to access the basic needs of food, shelter and clothing. In our culture, this list of basic needs also includes education.

In their 2007 journal article, Alexander and Salmon point to the work of Amartya Sen, an economist who defined “poverty in terms of capabilities” and the “ability to achieve” (p. 208). Alexander and Salmon contend that Sen would say that the “government should attend to the basic needs of people to acquire the capability to exist in society” (p. 208) and that this should be done so people can have “some minimal level of dignity in the society in which they find themselves” (p. 208). This defines poverty, then, as a lack of ability to obtain the resources necessary to participate productively in society.

Further, Alexander and Salmon (2007) describe a “system that breeds poverty” (p. 203) in the United States. Pointing to trends in wealth inequality since the 1970s and in the systems and policies since that time, the authors make a compelling case that the tax system of the federal government favors the private, personal, and corporate interests in a way that is harmful and even injurious to those that are “less advantaged” (p. 205). Descriptions of systems that “seed poverty” (p. 206), such as social and racial exclusion and inadequate government programs to assist the poor—systems that pull down a significant number of people into the holds of poverty and keep them there, fortify their argument.

Although there are social systems to mitigate the effects of poverty in the U.S., they are out of balance with those that serve private personal and corporate interests. Alexander and Salmon (2007) point to the voucher system and charter school movement that not only take funding from local schools, but in some cases further social and economic segregation. In these scenarios, it is a daunting task for American public schools to come out from under the weight of the circumstances these structures create. Furthermore, while education expenditures are high in

comparison to other countries, funding for public education is inadequate and inequitable across economic groups and the burden of educating students from poverty is insurmountable. There is a diverse population of students within America's public schools, many of them coming from a dismal environment of poverty. The inadequacy of funding to meet the needs of that diverse population is a burden unique to American public schools. This creates a false sense of failure in American schools (Alexander & Salmon, 2007).

Current Situation of Poverty in the United States

In 2011, 46.2 million people were in poverty in the United States, making the official poverty rate 15 percent (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2012). In that same year, the poverty rate for school age children was 21.9 percent (U.S. Department of Commerce). As described in Chapter 1, the poverty rate in U.S. cities is higher than in suburbs (20.9% compared to 11.4% in 2010) (Berube & Frey, 2002). Poverty is no longer an issue isolated to urban and rural areas. For the first time in our history, the number of residents living in poverty in suburbs surpassed the number of residents living in poverty in urban centers. This happened as early as 2000 (Berube & Frey, 2002). The Brookings Institution analyzes the U.S. Census data and reports that "from 2000 to 2010, the number of poor individuals in major-metro suburbs grew 53 percent, compared to 23 percent in cities" (Berube & Kneebone, 2011). For the first time in the history of our country, and specifically over the past two decades, there has been an increase in the rate of poverty in suburban areas that is greater than in urban areas (Garnett, 2007; Murphy, 2010). Poverty is changing the face of suburban America.

Poverty in suburban areas has been impacted by many complex forces. "A combination of factors including overall population growth, job decentralization, aging of housing,

immigration, region-wide economic decline, and policies to promote mobility of low-income households led to increasing numbers of the poor inhabiting the suburbs over the decade” (Berube & Kneebone, 2011). Another possible consideration is that the gentrification of urban neighborhoods has pushed non-traditional families out of cities and into suburban areas. Additionally, there is increase of immigrant families bypassing urban centers and migrating directly to suburban areas (Darbes et al., 2011). The movement of the population to the suburbs, along with the current economic climate in the United States, has led to an increase of poverty in suburban areas while also making suburbanization a factor in the increase of poverty in urban centers.

Researchers and theorists (e.g., Alexander & Salmon, 2007; Darbes et al., 2011; Freire, 1970; Seccombe, 2000) describe the effects and the experience of poverty. Consider the 2011 poverty rate of 21.9% for school-age children, age five to 18 (United States Department of Commerce, 2012c). What does this mean for children who come from situations of poverty and are attending school? Sleeplessness, hunger, after school work, low achievement, lack of concentration on school work and interruptions to schooling due to mobility are just a few of the obstacles presented. The factors that contribute to poverty are vast. These include, but are not limited to, physical and mental health, disability, joblessness, social structure, inherited disadvantage, oppression, race, gender, immigration status, educational attainment, and the list goes on.

Insight into the situation of poverty in urban and rural settings has been well-documented by various researchers and theorists (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Freire, 1993; Wilson, 1996). However, what is seen in recent years is the increase of poverty in suburbs. What is conspicuous is the absence of research on poverty in suburban areas, in particular as it relates to schooling.

Suburbanization

This section will examine the growth of suburbs to gain an understanding of the factors that have contributed to that growth. For various reasons throughout American history, many people have left urban centers and established residency in suburban areas. Defined by *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2012), a suburb is “an outlying part of a city or town,” “a smaller community adjacent to or within commuting distance of a city,” or “the residential area on the outskirts of a city or large town.” To understand the work of the elementary principal in suburban areas, it is enlightening to understand the reasons that populations move to the suburbs.

In her work in the *Michigan Law Review*, Garnett (2007) details the phenomenon of urban and suburban population movement from the mid- nineteenth century through modern times. Garnett notes that during the mid-nineteenth century, immigration to America brought increased population to city centers as immigrants sought opportunity for economic and religious freedom. American cities offered great opportunity. Population increased in cities at the turn of the twentieth century due to continued immigration and industrialization. Industrialization had an impact on the aesthetic value of cities, establishing densely populated living areas that were marked by pollution and unsafe living conditions. Residents living in cities sought relief from the circumstances of urban dwelling.

During the mid-nineteenth century, as dense population growth in cities was taking place, residents with financial resources were fleeing urban centers to put down roots away from the “unpleasant and dangerous aspects of urban life” (Garnett, 2007, p. 280). Advances in technology and economy, marked by improved transportation during this time period made movement to the suburbs possible and desirable (Jackson, 1985).

The trend of decentralizing urban centers continued throughout the twentieth century, reaching its height after World War II (Garnett, 2007). During the postwar years of 1950-1970 suburban life became synonymous with the American dream. Large tracts of homes were built isolated from commercial areas along main transportation corridors. The design of suburban communities defied the grid-like pattern of urban centers and favored cul-de-sac streets lined with single-family homes. Suburbs became autonomous municipalities that were legalistically different than urban centers with zoning regulations to deliberately separate urban from suburban communities (Jackson, 1985).

The increase of suburbanization was also marked by the migration of African American populations from the rural south to the urban north between 1940 and 1970. Many African Americans were attracted by economic opportunities in the North, but the racist social practices of Jim Crow in the South also had a dramatic effect on the migration of African Americans. During that time period, Boustan (2010) explains, four million black migrants left the South, changing the racial makeup of northern and western cities from “4% black in 1940 to 16% in 1970” (p. 417) and America experienced a “17% decline in urban population” (p. 438). This phenomenon of black in-migration to cities and white migration to the suburbs has come to be known as “white flight” and has been studied by sociologists, educational researchers and economists to gain an understanding of the impact on aspects of public services, including education (Alexander & Salmon, 2007; Boustan, 2007; Jargowsky & Park, 2008).

Boustan’s (2010) work explains that for every one black in-migration to cities, there were 2.7 migrations of whites out of cities. This helps to understand the growth of the suburbs during this time in history. There are other reasons whites left cities, including the changing racial and

socioeconomic landscape of neighborhoods, along with changes in city policies and politics and the desegregation of public schools during the 1960s and 1970s

Jargowsky and Park (2009) discuss the phenomena of crime in metropolitan areas and its link to suburbanization. Crime is generally understood to be a main contributing factor in the movement of middle-class families from the cities to the suburbs. Figures indicate that “violent crime rates in cities with populations of more than 250,000 in 2005 were almost three times higher than in suburban counties and more than four times higher than in rural counties” (Jargowsky & Park, 2009, p. 28). Statistics such as this point to the growth of residential and commercial land use in the suburbs. Middle-class movement to the suburbs takes away both social and economic capital from city neighborhoods, rendering it more difficult for cities to provide public services to its residents. A significant point is Jargowsky and Park’s conclusion that suburbanization may actually be a cause of high crime rates in cities:

Movement of the middle and upper classes to the suburbs, in turn, leaves behind and isolates the poor in central-city ghettos and barrios and reduces the fiscal capacity of central cities to address social and economic problems. Rapid suburbanization and large-scale urban blight have caused declining tax bases in central cities, shrinking federal subsidies (based in part on population size), and poor public services. Sociologists and criminologists have long argued that the concentration of poverty creates an environment within which criminal behavior can become normative, leading impressionable youth to adopt criminal lifestyles. Moreover, from the perspective of routine activity theory, the deterioration of social capital in high-poverty areas reduces the capacity for guardianship. For these reasons, suburbanization may also cause crime indirectly by causing the social and economic isolation of inner-city neighborhoods. (p. 29)

The significance of this idea is that people moved out of cities to the suburbs because of crime; however, movement to suburbs may actually be a contributing factor to high crime rates and other social problems, such as reduced social services, in cities. Jargowsky and Park (2009) explain this through the lens of social disorganization theory. As population decreases in urban

neighborhoods, they become unstable, leading to increased isolation and criminal activity. This has been a “major factor in the rapid suburbanization of U.S. metropolitan areas” (p. 30).

Effects of Poverty on Students

There is ample research into the effects of poverty on the school experience of students as well as research that identifies the needs of students in poverty in the educational setting (Colclough, 2012; Cooper, 2010; Duncan, Ludwig & Magnuson, 2007; Jensen, 2009; Ladd, 2012; Myers, Kim & Mandala, 2004; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Payne, 2005). Consider the 2011 poverty rate of 21.9% for school-age children, age five to 18 (United States Department of Commerce, 2012c). What does this mean for children who are attending school that come from situations of poverty? Sleeplessness, hunger, working after school, low achievement, lack of concentration on schoolwork and interruptions to schooling due to mobility are just a few.

Payne (2005) describes poverty in a manner that goes beyond the governmental definition presented by Fisher (1997) and Gabe (2012), which defines poverty thresholds, as they are referred to in federal policy. Payne’s (2005) definition of poverty is broader. As she describes it, poverty is “the extent to which an individual does without resources” (p. 7). The resources include financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships/role models and knowledge of hidden rules (Payne, 2005). Payne posits that educators have influence over many of these resources and can have a tremendous impact on the learning of students in poverty. Payne presents research about the elements of instruction that can impact students from poverty. Helping students to learn cognitive strategies, developing lesson design and addressing learning styles are approaches teachers and schools can take that may impact the learning of students from poverty. The broader idea is that schools keep a focus on learning

through “insistence, expectations, and support” (p. 107). There is a focus on the essential work of schools – the ability and necessity to create relationships with students from poverty (Payne, 2005).

Jensen (2009) extended the research and described the impact of poverty on the development of the brain. These findings are of particular interest to this study as Jensen focused on students in elementary school. Jensen points out that poverty puts the “cognitive well-being” (p.7) of students at risk. Children in poverty experience less supportive social environments with less access to safe neighborhoods. They also experience home situations that are more chaotic with less supervision and more exposure to unsafe living conditions (Jensen, 2009).

As illustrated above, students from poverty must overcome significant barriers to succeed. The obstacles to learning that are present for a student from poverty can prevent him or her from achieving academic success (Jensen, 2009; Payne 2005). Interesting research has emerged in recent years that reveals that a student’s belief in their ability to grow their intelligence can mitigate the effects of poverty on learning (Claro et al., 2016). This belief in the ability to grow one’s intelligence has come to be known as growth mindset – the idea that “everyone can change and grow through application and experience” (Dweck, 2008, p. 7). A growth mindset is in contrast to a fixed mindset – one that espouses that a person’s intelligence is absolute and cannot be altered (Dweck, 2008). Carol Dweck (2008) has led research in the field of psychology over the past several decades to examine growth mindset and the impact that it can have.

Students from poverty often do not hold a growth mindset, and are more likely to possess a fixed mindset, although it is less clear as to why that is the case (Claro et al., 2016). In

combination with the other obstacles that poverty presents, a fixed mindset can have a deleterious effect on students' learning and social experiences in school (Claro et al., 2016). Some practices in schools contribute to fixed mindset in children from poverty. Practices such as tracking by ability level can cause students to see their ability as fixed, with little optimism that they will grow or aspire to higher levels of achievement. A school culture that perpetuates negative stereotypes of students can also contribute to a fixed mindset – such as a stereotype that students from poverty have families who do not care about school. Tracking and negative stereotypes can hinder a student's sense of belonging that can develop a fixed mindset for students (Dweck, 2008). Such practices can contribute to students' beliefs that they cannot grow their abilities, and may “suggest that economic disadvantage may lead to poorer academic outcomes, in part by leading low-income students to believe that they cannot grow their abilities” (Claro et al., 2016, p. 8667).

Alternately, research has revealed that a growth mindset can contribute to higher academic achievement for students from poverty, and what's more is that it is possible that a student's mindset can change (Claro et al., 2016). The relevance of Dweck's (2008) research to this study is that helping to develop the growth mindset of students from poverty could help them to overcome the barriers to learning that poverty presents. Overcoming barriers of poverty through persistence and increased effort on difficult tasks can help students from poverty strengthen a growth mindset. In turn, this can help them to increase their academic achievement and success in school and emerge from the cycle of poverty. Being that Dweck's research has revealed that a person's mindset is “amenable to change”, schools have the opportunity to mitigate the effects of poverty on students by developing the beliefs and actions related to growth mindset within their school (Claro et al., 2016, p. 8664).

Expanding the knowledge of the impact of poverty on students, there is extensive research that reports that life for children in poverty becomes about survival in an unpredictable and chaotic place (Alexander & Salmon, 2007; Darbes, Dias, Suarez-Orozco & Sutin, 2011; Freire, 1993; Jensen, 2009; Seccombe, 2000). In this environment, there are decreased opportunities to develop cognitive skills through engagement in the daily activities from which children benefit. In homes of poverty, there are fewer books and fewer trips to the library. There are fewer role models and support systems for emotional response and development, in part due to single-parenting and high levels of stress and anxiety among adults in poverty. This is reflected in the lacking vocabulary development of young students who are not exposed to quality or quantity of adult language (Duncan, et al 2007).

There is also increased exposure to abuse and violence in households in poverty (Seccombe, 2000). All of this is in direct contrast to students coming from more stable homes in which children have more access to resources such as time with parents, community activities and better schools. This extensive research also concludes that students from situations of poverty perform far below their peers from more advantaged situations (Alexander & Salmon, 2007; Darbes, Dias, Suarez-Orozco & Sutin, 2011; Freire, 1993; Jensen, 2009; Seccombe, 2000). This is especially true during the early experiences of preschool, kindergarten and first grade (Jensen, 2009).

Leadership

Effective leadership in schools is not traditional, individualistic work. Educational leaders cannot focus on short-term, isolated goals, but instead have to focus on “empowerment, transformation, collective learning and community” (Jacobson, 2010, p. 35). Motivation of

teachers, the quality of instruction and student outcomes are all influenced and determined by the quality of educational leadership (Fullan, 2001; Marzano et al., 2005, Sergiovanni, 2001).

Building the capacity of teachers and other personnel in the school through staff development focused on a shared purpose and collective vision for learning is a cornerstone of more contemporary leadership studies (Jacobson, 2010).

Effective leadership research is linked to effective schools research, which became prominent in the field of educational research in the 1960s and 1970s. Effective schools research stems from James Coleman's 1966 Equal Educational Opportunity Study (EEOS; Suber, 2011). Commonly referred to as the Coleman Report, it was commissioned by the federal government in the 1970s in response to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which established equal access to quality education for minorities. It is widely viewed as one of the most important studies in education (Borman & Dowling, 2010). The Coleman Report drew the conclusion that students from low-economic circumstances performed better when they were in school with students from middle- to upper-income situations. The conclusion was that considering the impact of teacher qualifications, expenditures and facilities on student outcomes, "the stronger variable impacting student achievement was the parent's socioeconomic class" (Coleman, 1966, as cited in Suber, 2011, p. 4). Family background, socio-economic status and race were significant factors in student achievement (Jacobson, 2011). The findings of this report contributed to the future direction of educational policy and practice in the United States, including urban school desegregation and school choice (Borman & Dowling, 2010).

Effective schools research provides a framework useful for studying leadership characteristics. The results of the effective schools research indicated, at the time, that most schools were not effective and pointed to a variety of reasons why. The research revealed that

the composition of student population and parents' socioeconomic status has a significant impact on the ineffectiveness of schooling. Suber (2011) cites reports from Coleman and Jencks that support this stance: "Jencks concluded that public schools not only did not help alleviate inequality in the United States but, in fact, contributed to such inequality" (p. 4). From this conclusion one can see the importance of considering how school leadership can impact the education of students from poverty.

Early work by Edmonds in 1979 (as cited in Suber, 2011) examined a link between educational leadership and student outcomes. Edmond's stance was that "effective schools have a climate of expectations in which the personnel seek to be instructionally effective for all children and no child is allowed to fall below minimum achievement standards" (p. 4).

Characteristics present in effective schools are alignment of instruction and assessment, focused professional development, effective monitoring of instruction, reduction of teacher attrition, and a positive school culture. Using effective schools research as the theoretical framework, Suber (2011) revealed that each of the characteristics of effective schools were present in the leadership of the high-performing, high-poverty schools that he studied. The effective leaders in high-poverty schools provided "strong leadership, safe and positive environment, high expectations for students and frequent monitoring of student progress" (Suber, 2011, p. 5). He further identified teacher empowerment, relationships, setting the example for stakeholders, and a philosophy of shared responsibility as factors that contribute to effective leadership in that "school principals who focus their time and energy on student learning and school improvement find present and future success for their schools regardless of the school's student composition" (p. 2). This approach of linking leadership characteristics to effective

schools research contributes to the literature by offering a modern, relevant perspective of educational leaders working under conditions of high accountability for learning for all students.

Students from poverty face significant obstacles to learning, such as an increased likelihood of learning disabilities and low test scores (Horst & Martin, 2007). Horst and Martin (2007) offer insight into the effect of leadership on the achievement of children from poverty in a rural Missouri school. Horst and Martin (2007) describe that rural education presents unique circumstances to and challenges to school principals such as small class size, percentages of special education students that are too low to generate financial aid, state funding reduction of already limited budgets and a small local tax base. Often school leaders in rural areas have to assume the responsibilities of multiple roles typically assumed by more people in suburban or urban areas. Additionally, geographic isolation can lead to isolation in how work is conducted, and there is an absence of collaboration because of this. In rural areas it can be difficult to hire teachers who meet the federal regulations of a highly qualified teacher. Most notably, in relation to the education of students from poverty, the authors note that “rural schools educate an increasing number of migrant workers, immigrants and families in poverty” (Beeson, 2001, p. 34). This shifting population focuses on another potential barrier to achievement: poverty. However, there are benefits to rural schooling that suburban and urban schools may not experience. Rural schools allow for the formation of close relationships among teachers, students and families, which Horst and Martin (2007) point out contributes to the “development of social capital” (p. 34). The organizational structure of rural schools can also be beneficial as it presents varied interests and approaches in a K-8 school (Horst & Martin, 2007).

Horst and Martin (2007) examined student achievement in a high-poverty school through the lens of transformational leadership and collaborative leadership. The findings of the case

study pointed to ten effective leadership practices that contributed to high-performance in a high-poverty school, including “develop a focus and vision, set expectations, serve as a role model, conduct evaluations, analyze data, provide resources, build collaboration, empower staff, build community relationships and maintain integrity” (p. 38). In a school setting, transformational leadership is characterized “by the degree that a principal communicates a mission, encourages development, and builds community” (Urlick & Bowers, 2014, p. 99). In the context of schools, transformational leadership looks like the principal who values the students and staff over him or herself. Transformational leadership suggests that teachers are empowered through their involvement in school leadership. Urlick and Bowers (2014) summarize the four I’s of transformational leadership as presented in the research: individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence. Furthermore, Leithwood and Sun (2012) identify four categories of transformational leadership in the lens of educational leadership: setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and improving the instructional program. It is important to understand that the transformational leader is motivated by the needs of and loyalty to the organization.

According to Horst and Martin (2007), effective leadership in a high-performing, rural school with a high-poverty rate can help students from poverty overcome barriers to learning. Understanding rural issues and the components of effective leadership in high-poverty schools informs leadership practices of others in the field and can provide information in the development of leadership programs and trainings. By applying what is learned from leadership studies in high-poverty, high-performing rural schools to the challenges faced by growing poverty rates in suburban schools, the impact of this research is widened.

Research establishes a link between effective schools and effective leadership characteristics. Sustaining school success cannot be ignored as an important component of effective leadership. It is not beneficial to look at one or two years of school leadership and its impact on mitigating the effects of poverty on students. One has to look at leadership that sustains positive educational outcomes for students in poverty over time. Jacobson (2011) “examines the effects of leadership on student achievement and sustained school success, especially in challenging, high-poverty schools” (p. 33). The results of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSP) from 2001 offer more insight into the characteristics of effective leadership over extended periods of time.

Jacobson’s (2011) research asserts that in high-poverty schools capacity building includes principals creating a safe environment conducive to learning. Forming connections with the community and families is also essential leadership work in areas of high-poverty. The symptoms of poverty such as crime, poor nutrition and low attendance rates demand that safety, community and parent connections be tended to first. Jacobson points to Hargreaves’s description of “cultural relationship” to further understand this concept. Establishing these priorities can establish a connection with community and families based on openness and collaboration, making the community and families participants in schooling. This type of connection allows parents to come into the school, have discussions with teachers, and see the school as a resource for their child. This can be very powerful for engaging families from poverty in the educational process (Jacobson, 2011).

Revealing more insight into the components of effective leadership per effective schools research, Jacobson (2011) lists the following components: “create safe and orderly learning environments; set clear instructional objectives; expect high performance from teachers and

students through increased time on task; and develop positive home-school relations” (p. 34).

All of these components of instructional leadership describe the effective actions of school leadership.

The International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSP) from 2001 connected the core practices of principals to student results and found that three core leadership practices of effective school leaders were present across international settings. The findings also state that the leadership practices are highly adaptable, meaning they are practiced depending on the context. The core practices, as delineated in the ISSP, are direction setting; developing people; and redesigning the organization (Jacobson, 2011). Jacobson offers a useful summary of the three leadership actions:

Direction setting requires leaders to identify and articulate a vision, foster the acceptance of group goals and create high-performance expectations for children and adults. Developing people to meet these expectations requires intellectual stimulation, individual and collective support, and for the leader to provide an appropriate role model... Finally, the educational organization itself must be redesigned to strengthen school cultures, build collaborative processes and remove obstacles to success. (p. 36)

Social Constructivism

Social constructivism is situated in the constructivist paradigm and deals with the nature of reality (Andrews, 2012). Social constructivism is frequently used interchangeably with the term social constructionism (Andrews, 2012). Social constructivists are interested in finding answers to how social experience creates knowledge and develops meaning (Creswell, 2007). Of essential importance is the role of relationships in the social constructionist framework. “Within the constructionist dialogues we find that it is not the individual mind in which knowledge, reason, emotion and morality reside, but in relationships” (Gergen, 2015, p. 100).

The development of social constructivism came to being with the significant writings of Berger and Luckmann in 1966 and is seen as influential within grounded theory work (Andrews, 2012). There is more recent development in the realm of social constructivism in the field of mental health and counseling (Gergen, 2015). Gergen (2015) suggests that “the most generative idea emerging from the constructionist dialogues is that what we take to be knowledge of the world and self finds its origins in human relationships” (p. 99).

Berger and Luckman present the social construction of knowledge in their 1966 work, *The Social Construction of Reality*. This piece is often considered the “landmark” work in social constructionism (Gergen, 2015). Berger and Luckman (1966) theorize that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work – their everyday life. They “are concerned with the nature and construction of knowledge: how it emerges and how it comes to have significance for society” (Andrews, 2012, p. 39). Individuals develop subjective meaning of their lived experiences. These meanings are varied, multiple and complex. The construction of knowledge, then, is based on the individual’s views of the situation. The everyday life of the individual becomes a meaningful reality, taken for granted as a “coherent world” (p. 33). The knowledge constructed from experiences enriches everyday life. When problems are encountered, they are integrated with what is already known from everyday life, and new knowledge is constructed.

Social constructivism serves as a theoretical framework for a wide variety of qualitative research studies, ranging from educational practice (Hirtle, 1996; Kivunja, 2014; Walker & Carr, 2006) to counseling (Cottone, 2007; North, 2016), and just about everything in between (Gergen, 2001; Kukla, 2000). Gergen (2001) points out that “many scholars and practitioners draw from constructionist ideas to fashion new forms of practice” (p. 2). Social constructivists maintain

that knowledge is created, rather than discovered, through experience, activity and interaction (Andrews, 2012; Kukla, 2000). Language and communication in the social context help to develop the meaning of reality (Keaton & Bodie, 2011). “Central to the constructionist account of the social origins of knowledge is a concern with language” (Gergen, 2015, p. 100).

In education, social constructivism refers to the learning experience for students, including the unique experiences and personal beliefs students bring to learning (Hirtle, 1996). In a constructivist learning environment, students construct knowledge within a social environment. This theory was first presented by Lev Vygotsky in 1929, who developed the idea that learning is a social experience rather than just an individual one (Kivunja, 2014). This came to be known as the developmental theory of social constructivism. Vygotsky’s theory established learning as a cultural experience influenced by interaction with others in a social environment (Kivunja, 2014). Hirtle (1996) posits that constructivist thought in education is situated on the belief that thinking (knowledge) is built on communication (language) that honors a learner’s culture through using discourse to construct knowledge about the world and open boundaries for students. This seems to be a precursor to the framework of social constructivism beyond the education of the child to the greater society.

A look into beginning principals and stories of success in their professional development was the basis for a study by Walker and Carr-Stewart (2006). Social constructivism served as the framework for their study, which sought to use the information gathered from the study to nurture the capacity of new principals. Socialization and sense-making were the social constructs applied to the narratives of beginning principals as they reflected on a success story from their first year as principal.

Walker and Carr-Stewart (2006) point out that the principal's environment is continuously impacted by others (students, parents, and teachers) and by forces such as reform efforts, increased student needs, and the need to connect with community agencies. These forces make the work of the principal more complex. In response, the principal changes his/her understanding of the environment through interactions with others. Sense-making describes this process as the principal constructs meaning from these lived experiences (Walker & Carr-Stewart, 2006).

The qualitative study by Walker and Carr-Stewart (2006) used an appreciative inquiry (AI) approach that focused on developing a shared meaning of success by identifying common themes in the principals' narrative responses about success. Using AI, a shared image of a preferred future was created, leading to planning for ways to reach that future. Their results suggest that providing beginning principals opportunities for reflection on success, paired with dialogue with other principals, allowed for sense-making of the successful scenario and contributed to professional growth and efficacy for beginning principals.

Conclusion

Transferring this research to high-poverty schools, it is evident that leading such schools requires a commitment to social justice in the form of equal access to quality education. Principals in high-performing, high-poverty schools demonstrate that they have passion, persistence, and enthusiasm to contribute to positive learning outcomes for students in poverty and strongly believe that all students can achieve. They handle the many facets of leadership in a culturally sensitive manner. Realizing that they face difficulties in ensuring positive learning outcomes for students due to scarce resources and the situation of poverty itself and all that it

generates, these principals overcome resistance by developing capacity in their staff and making connections with families and the community to create safe and secure learning environments wherein the school becomes the center of the community. Primarily, leadership in high-performing, high-poverty schools has to build capacity for learning that goes beyond the actions of one person.

Effective leadership in high-poverty schools increases access to education for students in poverty. Indeed, access to quality education increases the economic and social development of our greater society and our local communities. A reciprocal relationship exists between education and economic and social development. The more we increase access to quality education for students in poverty, the more social and economic development we experience. The more social and economic development we experience, the more we increase access to quality education for all students. To alleviate the impact of poverty on our society, our communities and our schools, students in poverty must have equal access to quality education.

Human capital theory advances that education is economically productive (Colclough, 2012). This is supported by economists who for more than a century have indicated the economic advantages of investment in education. Colclough (2012) cites the work of the 1920s economist Alfred Marshall in saying, “The most valuable of all capital is that which is invested in human beings” (p. 145). Strengthening the investment in education by ensuring effective leadership in high-poverty schools ensures better outcomes for students in poverty and in turn better outcomes for society.

An investment and plan to effectively improve the quality of public education is the best bet for mitigating the effects of poverty on students by providing them access to education (Colclough, 2012). While it may afford a quality school experience, privatizing education does

not serve as a widely effective approach to mitigating the effects of poverty on students. The cost of private education serves as an obstacle to students from poverty and, in many cases, can further segregate schools as students from middle- and upper-class families leave neighborhood schools (Colclough, 2012). An integral part of that plan is the development and implementation of effective school leadership in high-poverty schools. Knowledge that is gained through the study of characteristics of effective leadership in high-poverty schools can be utilized to develop leadership in suburban schools where the rates of students coming from poverty are increasing.

As students from poverty have increased access to quality education, ensured by effective school leadership, they experience more positive educational outcomes. As more students from poverty obtain a quality education, the impact on communities and society is progressive as they become productive and contributing members of society. This, in turn, contributes to more positive social, economic and cultural outcomes of education (Colclough, 2012).

Colclough (2012) develops this further by pointing out that poverty can have negative effects on “both the quality and quantity of education, which in turn reduces its income benefits, thereby preventing the poor from capturing its rewards” (p. 145). Leadership in schools must be developed and practiced to reduce the negative impact of poverty on individual student’s education so students in poverty can capture the rewards of schooling. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the perceptions and experiences of school leaders as they work with students from poverty.

All students can and should learn and be held to high expectations for learning regardless of their socioeconomic class. This perspective is supported by research that shows students from the lowest economic backgrounds, those students in poverty, can perform to high levels (Horst & Martin, 2007; Suber, 2011). The burden to educate all students while disregarding class lies on

the shoulders of our schools and the educational leaders within the schools. We know it can be done, but the challenge becomes how do we do it? An important component to achieve high educational outcomes for students from poverty is to have highly effective leadership in schools with high-poverty rates.

The landscape of American public education continues to be transformed by the issues that affect our greater society. The crossroads of schooling, poverty and school leadership are complex, confusing, and sometimes chaotic. Growth of the suburbs, the expansion of poverty into suburban areas, and the complexity of school leadership practices interface and bring new challenges to the forefront of schooling in suburban areas.

Poverty is a significant and growing issue that is effecting public education in suburban areas in ways that suburban principals have previously not experienced. It is no longer an issue of concern to only urban and rural communities. Educational leaders must respond to this issue by developing the characteristics of effective leadership that respond to the needs of communities with changing/increasing rates of students in poverty. The literature offers useful information for principals who seek to refine and strengthen their leadership approaches to better serve students from poverty. Current research contributes to the larger field of leadership development and school improvement by offering insight into how to mitigate the effects of poverty on schooling.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative researchers attempt to expand rather than confine understanding.
(Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 27)

This qualitative study sought to gain a deeper understanding of elementary school principals' perspectives and experiences of working with young students from situations of poverty. Basic, interpretative, qualitative research borrows from many forms of qualitative research rather than espousing one particular approach. Merriam (2009) provides clarity to the complex definition of qualitative research by explaining that it focuses on meaning and understanding, utilizes the researcher as the "primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (p. 15), is an "inductive process" (p. 15), and "is richly descriptive (p. 16). "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 13). Through the process of research, meaning is interpreted and created by the researcher as she "attempt[ed] to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (Mertens, 2010, p. 16).

Mertens (2010) defines the axiological, ontological, epistemological and methodological aspects of the constructivist paradigm. This study provides a balanced representation of the views and the meanings the principals attributed to their actions in working with students from

poverty and raising their own awareness of the meaning of their leadership actions (axiology). In the constructivist paradigm, knowledge is socially constructed. In this study the goal was to construct deeper knowledge of the reality of school leadership by studying the social contexts of principals working with students from poverty (ontology).

Typical of constructivism is the process that links the researcher and the participant (Mertens, 2010). The researcher used in-depth interviews to examine the perceptions and experiences of participants regarding their work with students from poverty. The data were interpreted by the researcher and supported by specific information from the participants (epistemology). This chapter is divided into six sections: research questions, participants, data collection, data analysis and a conclusion.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore the elementary school principals' perspectives in working with students from poverty in the context of suburban elementary schools.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What is the suburban elementary school principal's perception of how poverty impacts suburban elementary students living in poverty?
2. How has the work of suburban elementary school principals been influenced by elementary students living in poverty?
3. What are the leadership practices of suburban elementary school principals that impact students living in poverty?

Research Design

A basic qualitative research design was used for this study. As Mertens (2010) explains, qualitative methods set out to explore and “make sense of a situation” (p. 225). This study focused on the perspectives and experiences of suburban elementary principals as they worked with elementary students from situations of poverty. A focus on one-to-one interviews as well as general demographics about the participants and the schools provided descriptive information about the elementary principals’ experiences. The researcher, while gathering information, examined the meaning of the information and interpreted the meaning within to provide a “richly descriptive” (Merriam, 2009, p. 16) picture of the participants’ perspectives and experiences. As information was collected and interpreted, knowledge was constructed and a thorough understanding was formed (Merriam, 2009). This served to help school leaders understand why they did what they did and the impact their actions had on students from poverty. A constructivist paradigm that influences the researcher’s “view of the world” is associated with this study and with its qualitative methods (Mertens, 2010, p. 226).

An interview guide was developed using the three research questions as a foundation for questions (Appendix A). The interview guide was field tested in advance of the research study. Two principals who were not involved in the study were presented with the interview protocols, and provided feedback and insight into the content and the structure of the protocols. The field test led to a revision of the research protocols to more concisely focus on the three research questions. Table 1 displays the research questions aligned with the interview protocol.

Table 1

Crosswalk of Research Questions and Interview Questions

Research Question	Interview Questions
1. What is the suburban, elementary school principal's perception of how poverty influences suburban elementary students?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. How do you think poverty impacts suburban elementary students? b. Describe how you have seen poverty impact students': <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Social interactions ii. Learning iii. Behavior c. As you think about yourself as a school leader, what do students from poverty need from you?
2. How has the work of suburban elementary school principals been influenced by elementary students within the school who live in poverty?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> d. Describe your experience in working with elementary school students living in poverty. e. What role does an elementary school principal play in the school experience of students living in poverty? f. What has your role been in helping to mitigate the effects that poverty has on suburban elementary students?
3. What leadership practices of suburban elementary school principals impact students living in poverty?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> g. How have you worked with the teachers and staff to impact their work with students living in poverty? h. Describe any policies, procedures or changes you have implemented in your school for students living in poverty? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Can you describe some of those policies and procedures? ii. Explain why you made these changes. iii. Explain how you went about implementing those policies/changes. iv. How do you perceive those policies/procedures/changes have impacted students living in poverty? i. Are there factors that have influenced your leadership actions in dealing with poverty? j. Can you describe some of those factors? k. Have you personally experienced social constraints, obstacles, or life history that influences this leadership?

County Context

Suburban elementary schools offered an essential element in this research study. As poverty has increased in suburban areas, as discussed in Chapter 2, the work of suburban school principals has changed. This is seen in how suburban school principals work to mitigate the

impact of poverty on students by partnering with community organizations or by creating and assigning tasks to personnel within the school to help such students.

The research for this study took place in schools located in one suburban county in the metropolitan Chicagoland area. This geographic location was convenient for the researcher and was also of interest because of its vicinity to a large metropolitan area. Chicago and the metropolitan area surrounding it exemplify the movement of poverty from urban to suburban areas. In 2000, 34% of the region's residents living in poverty were in suburban Chicago. In 2013, that number had increased to 48% (Terpstra, Clary & Rynell, 2015).

The total population of the county was 932,126 in 2013 (Voices for Illinois Children, 2015). The county was selected for research because it had experienced a change in demographics with an increase in the percentage of residents living in poverty, from 3.6% in 2000 (Heartland Alliance 2008) to 6.8% in 2013 (Terpstra, Clary & Rynell, 2015). Of particular relevance to this study, the county had shown an increase in child poverty from 4.1% in 1999 to 10.5% in 2012 (Voices for Illinois Children, 2015). This county is home to a total of 248 public schools, with 159 of those being elementary schools. There are 42 school districts, 35 of which are elementary or unit districts (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.). Four school districts and ten schools are represented in this study.

Principal Participants

Criterion sampling was used for this study, and the suburban elementary school provided the backdrop for this study. Criterion sampling indicates that the participants must possess necessary attributes to take part in the study (Merriam, 2009). This study focused on one large suburban county in a major metropolitan area of the Midwest. Ten elementary school principals

practicing in elementary schools within the suburban county were selected as the participants.

The number of participants ultimately depended on the saturation of data.

The participants had to have been in their current role for more than one year, with at least five years total in the field of education. The selection of participants was not limited to age or gender or to number of years of experience as an administrator. This was the case to not marginalize the perspectives of principals with few years of experience.

An initial number of four principals were approached to participate and network sampling was used to find additional participants who fit the criteria for this study. Network sampling, as explained by Merriam (2009), “involves locating a few key participants who easily meet the criteria you have established” and asking each for a referral to another participant (p. 79). It is a technique that the researcher used to identify key people who held valuable knowledge about the topic and who then recommended other people to include in the sample.

The researcher contacted 14 elementary principals of schools within the selected county regarding participation in the study, and ultimately 10 participated. The primary contact with these principals was made by phone, with a follow up email (see Appendix B). Consent from participants was obtained in writing through the use of a Consent to Participate in a Qualitative Research Study form (see Appendix C). Sampling was concluded when saturation of the data was reached.

Participant Demographics

The participants in this study represent suburban elementary school principals. Ten research participants were selected for participation in this study, utilizing a network sampling approach. A brief biography of each participant follows. It includes information about their

career path leading to the principalship, and an explanation of what drew them to become a principal in the suburban elementary school setting. Table 2 displays the demographics of the participants in the study.

Table 2
Demographics of the Participants

Respondent	Age	Gender	Years as principal	Years in education	Highest degree earned	Number of students	Number of staff	% of free/reduced lunch
Fran	37	F	6	15	MSED	280	25	39
Sylvia	40	F	5	20	EdD	380	60	26
Tiffany	50	F	11	26	MSED	540	50	56
Edward	35	M	9	14	EdS	420	40	14
Fred	42	M	2	20	MSED	623	25	39
Nate	56	M	18	29	MSED	360	40	34
Owen	48	M	11	16	EdS	465	40	24
Steven	39	M	10	27	EdS	485	32	4
Ted	50	M	9	22	MSED	650	50	30
Todd	45	M	14	22	EdD	450	35	32
Average	44		10	21		465	40	30

Fran taught kindergarten for seven years before moving into administration as an assistant principal at an elementary school. She also worked in a Latino parent outreach program for four years before returning to public education as an assistant principal for two more years, and then becoming a principal. Fran was raised in suburban areas, and decided to stay to be close to family. She also was drawn to the diversity that suburban schools presented in schools, including diversity in socio-economic backgrounds.

Sylvia began her work in education as a private school pre-school teacher before moving to a suburban, public middle school to teach Language Arts for three years. She made a decision

to leave the field briefly, staying home to raise her own family for four years. During that time she supervised student teaching placement at a local university. Sylvia made the move into administration as an assistant principal at middle school and elementary levels before becoming a principal at a kindergarten center. The transition from middle school to elementary school came from a place of wanting to learn and contribute more to the foundation of a child's school experience. Suburban schools were what she knew best from her own experiences as a student. She was drawn to work in suburban settings because of the variety of experiences in areas of success and need.

Tiffany entered the field of education as a school social worker, and worked in that capacity for 13 years. She moved into the role of special education coordinator for one year before becoming an assistant principal for one year and is now in her 11th year as a principal in a suburban setting. She was drawn to work in suburban schools because that is where she was born, raised and still lives.

Edward was a second grade and fifth grade teacher for three years before becoming an assistant principal for two years. He has been serving as a principal for nine years. Edward wanted to impact the lives of children and adults on a daily basis, and chose to stay in the suburbs where he grew up and where he lives now with his own family. It was a priority for Edward to work close to home.

Fred's path to the principalship began as an elementary school teacher for three years in a growing suburban community. He was also coaching the high school basketball team at the time, a role he continued for 15 years as head basketball coach. During that time, he also taught English at the high school, and moved into an administrative position as a dean for 10 years. He then made the move to a different suburban district as an elementary principal where he has

served for two years. He considered his return to the elementary level a return to his roots. His work in the suburban setting stemmed from his connections to people and places that he knew there. A strong association with the principal of the school where he student taught led to a job in a suburban school, and also to his current principalship. He considers his work in the suburban setting to be the right place, right time.

Nate worked in suburban schools as an elementary physical education teacher and high school coach for nine years, leading to an elementary assistant principalship for three years. He moved into a principalship in the suburban setting because it was close to home and the opportunity presented itself.

Owen did not begin his career in schools. He worked for eight years as a fast food restaurant owner and manager. He began his work in schools as a substitute teacher, followed by work as a paraprofessional. He then completed his student teaching and continued as a fourth grade teacher and art teacher for four years before becoming an assistant principal for three years. All of this work was in the context of the suburban elementary school setting. He then became a principal, a job he has held for 11 years. Owen was drawn to work in suburban schools because that is where he lived with his family, and where he was raised.

Steven spent the start of his career as a teacher in a combination of rural and urban elementary schools in central Illinois. He completed that work for seven years before moving into administration as an assistant principal and principal in rural, central Illinois. After that time, he moved to the suburban Chicago metropolitan area and continued his work as a principal.

Ted was in the high school setting for 10 years as a teacher and dean. He made the move to a middle school assistant principalship before becoming an elementary principal. Living in

the suburbs made the location of the work appealing, and he grew up in the suburbs, so he felt that it was a place he was familiar with.

Todd entered the field of education as a speech pathologist for three years. He then moved into administration as a student services coordinator in the suburban public school setting. He worked as an assistant principal for two years and then became a principal. Todd indicated that he never considered working in urban or rural schools because he grew up in the suburbs.

The participants showed a variety of experiences that led them to the role of suburban elementary school principal. There was indication from all participants that they were drawn to work in suburban schools because that was congruent with their experience growing up in the suburbs, or that it was close to where they currently live.

Data Collection

The purpose of the study and the research questions were presented to the participants in advance of the interview, via e-mail. Participants were given time to reply with questions regarding the study. A brief demographic survey was provided via email prior to the interview to gather basic information from the participants (see Appendix D).

Interviews were used to collect data related to the research questions. The interviews were scheduled at a time that was convenient for the participants, and were conducted over the telephone. The interviews were recorded using a conference call software, and averaged 35 minutes in length. Interview data were transcribed using the conference call software, and confidentiality of the participants was protected by the use of pseudonyms for the people and schools involved. A brief, follow-up e-mail questionnaire was conducted after the interview and coding, to gain more context of the principals' experience before becoming principal of a

suburban elementary school. It also helped to gain a greater understanding of what led the principals to work in that position in the suburban elementary school setting (see Appendix E).

Principals' experiences and perspectives are influenced by many factors and develop over time, and interviewing allowed the researcher to build a relationship with the participants and gain deeper knowledge of their experiences and leadership (Mertens, 2010). A semi-structured approach to interviewing was utilized so the participants could gain a sense of trust and openness with the researcher and provide a "broader lens for the researcher's gaze" (Mertens, 2010, p. 371). Semi-structured interviews, as detailed by Merriam (2009), are open-ended and allow participants to define their experiences in individual ways.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were reviewed and analyzed by the researcher repeatedly during the coding process. A constant comparative analysis approach helped the researcher concentrate on the data and interact with it in detailed ways (Mertens, 2010). As interviews were completed and data were collected, analysis took place simultaneously, and patterns, themes, and topics were identified. Merriam (2009) points out that "qualitative data analysis is primarily inductive and comparative" and should be focused on answering the research questions of the study (p. 175). That is to say, by analyzing qualitative data from the interviews, meaning was brought out as units of data were considered in comparison to one another.

Coding of data was an essential step in the research process to gain a deeper knowledge of the topic (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Once the interviews were transcribed, manual, open coding was used to sort data and construct themes (Creswell, 2007; Saldana, 2013). At the beginning of analysis, open coding identified and established surfacing themes related directly to

the research questions (Merriam, 2009). Three themes emerged: principal perception of how poverty influences suburban students from poverty; the role of the principal; and principal leadership.

Within the themes, codes were assigned to units of data and categories were formed (Saldana, 2013). The data were organized into categories to strengthen and create a deeper understanding of the experiences of elementary principals as they worked with students from poverty in the suburban school setting. At this stage of coding, a document was created that displayed the participant number, the emergent themes and the line number from the transcript where the theme was represented (see Appendix F). This document helped to identify common themes and the frequency of themes. Later, a codelist (see appendix G) was developed to provide a compilation of the emergent themes, a description of the themes and a typical exemplar of the themes (Saldana, 2013). With each step of coding, the analysis of data into themes was further refined. Finally, a coding paradigm, or a visual display, was constructed for each research question (Creswell, 2007; Saldana, 2013). These are displayed in chapter seven of the study, within the research findings.

The coding process followed a similar approach to a thematic network analysis as described by Attride-Stirling in 2001. A thematic network is an approach used to analyze qualitative data that results in a “web-like illustration” to identify main themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 385). A thematic network provides a systematic way to analyze qualitative data, and provides useful results in a visual display. Of particular relevance in the thematic network method of analysis is the identification of higher order and lower order themes. The process of identifying the themes works from identifying basic themes, or lower order themes, and working back towards identifying global, or higher order, themes. Several iterations of coding with

organization of data are included in the process. The description of thematic network analysis closely represents the process undertaken in this study (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

The analysis of data relied on the rich descriptions that the principals provided of their experiences of and insights into working with suburban students from poverty. Their descriptions were detailed and personal accounts of how they viewed working with students from poverty. The data also included details of their direct experiences of working with students from poverty. In many cases, they provided personal narratives of their first hand involvement with students and families from poverty, describing how they had seen the deficiencies posed by poverty play out in the school. They were reflective about their views, drawing on past occurrences and applying new insights to future situations that they might encounter. Many times they relayed that they hadn't thought about what caused them to act the way that they did, just that they knew it was the right thing to do. Their descriptions represented the emotion that they encountered in their work when dealing with the obstacles that students face due to poverty.

Trustworthiness

Throughout analysis of data from interviews, peer review and a constant comparative method of analysis as described in Mertens (2010) took place. Peer review was completed by the dissertation committee chair. In this method, the peer reviewer, who is familiar with qualitative research, was presented the methods used to organize the data into emergent themes. Additionally, the peer researcher was asked to review the data and the emergent themes to ensure the plausibility of the findings. The researcher and the peer reviewer were involved in meetings discussing similarities and differences in the interpretation and coding of the data. Nine meetings were held either by telephone or in person, over the course of nine months. Meetings

typically lasted 30 minutes. The researcher sought input from the peer reviewer and created dialogue surrounding the data related to believability and emergent themes. A theme was supported if at least 50% of the participants shared perspectives that identified that theme.

Constant comparative analysis allowed for a richer and deeper interpretation of the data by creating more dimensions of understanding of the principals' perspectives. During meetings between the researcher and peer reviewer, coding and thematizing was presented for review. Discussions focused on the content of the interview data and the interpretation related to themes. Differences in interpretation were discussed, and relationships between responses and themes were solidified. Mertens (2010) points out that this allows the researcher to “explore differences in interpretations; this can be an opportunity for surprising discoveries” (p. 428). Merriam (2009) also supports this approach as increasing the validity and reliability (trustworthiness and rigor) of a qualitative study by “asking a colleague to scan some of the raw data and assess whether the findings are plausible based on the data” (p. 220).

Member checks, or “respondent validation” as Merriam (2009, p. 217) refers to it, were used to ensure credibility of data. Each participant had the opportunity to review his/her responses and to review the emergent themes assigned to their responses. This was accomplished by sending the participants the transcript of their interview via e-mail, with the codes and themes identified within the transcript. Participants were provided an opportunity to comment on the analysis of the data and provide insight as they saw fit through an e-mail reply (Merriam, 2009). Each participant responded within two to three days. All participants responded positively to the content of the transcripts, including the coding and themes that were presented in context of the interviews. No modifications or suggested changes were provided by the participants.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the elementary school principal's perspectives in working with students from poverty in the context of the suburban elementary school. This basic, interpretive, qualitative study used a semi-structured interview format to collect data. All data came from the transcriptions of the interviews. Social constructivism provided the framework to bring to light how principals, as institutional leaders, dealt with the issue of increased poverty in suburban schools. Interviews were coded to construct knowledge and gain insight into the participants' experiences and perspectives as they worked with students from poverty. Through detailed analysis of interviews, utilizing various coding techniques and constant comparative analysis, a trustworthy and rigorous study was presented.

Chapters four, five and six present the findings for the study, organized by research question and emergent themes. Three primary themes that emerged from the coding of the data are presented across the following chapters: Principal perception of poverty's influence, the role of the principal, and principal leadership. Figures within each chapter provide a visual display and organization of the themes that emerged from the analysis of responses. Chapter seven provides a discussion of the findings and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 4

PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY'S INFLUENCE

They're coming to us with a lack of sleep due to their living condition and a family not having enough money to afford a safe living condition. (Fred, 2016)

This chapter reveals the suburban elementary school principal's perception of how poverty impacts suburban elementary students living in poverty. Three themes emerged from the participants' insights into this area: suburban students from poverty are influenced by a lack of basic needs, a lack of background experiences, and a lack of relationships. Poverty's influence on suburban elementary students is more deeply understood through the principals' descriptions of their perceptions of how they see poverty impacting suburban elementary students.

Across the board, principals described that suburban students from poverty often lack basic needs that peers from more affluent families typically have. Students living in poverty can lack the elements that are essential to functioning in a community, including nutrition, sleep, shelter and healthcare. This can have a significant impact on them at an important developmental time of their lives. Participants also described that students living in poverty lack background experiences in and around their community, such as trips to stores and the library or visits to museums. Background experiences in the community connect students with the world around them and provide a foundation for later learning in school. Lacking in basic needs and background experiences, the principals related that children from poverty struggle to build and tend to relationships with peers and adults around them. This is significant because a child's

abilities and experiences in building and maintaining positive relationships are essential for success in school (Jensen, 2009; Payne, 2005).

Principals expressed that elementary students come to school with their basic needs unmet and with a lack of background experiences. These two elements contribute to a third impact – a lack of developing relationships. These are the three emergent themes in the first section of research: basic needs, background experiences and relationships. Figure 1 depicts how these themes extend from the principals' perceptions and how the themes relate to one another.

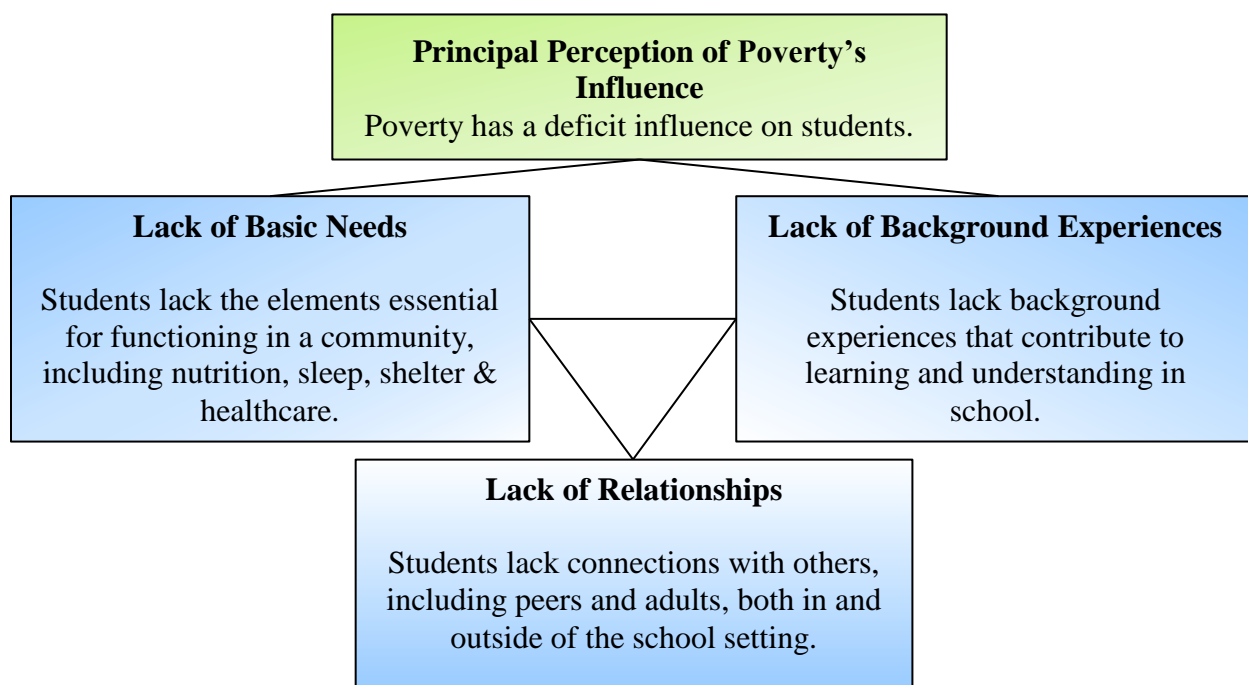


Figure 1. Principals' perceptions of poverty's influence. This model displays the findings from research question one. The green box is the focus of the research question and the blue boxes indicate the higher order themes.

Lack of Basic Needs

When elementary students arrive at school and their most basic needs have not been met, the principals perceived that it creates a disadvantage that is difficult to overcome in school. They see that students from poverty often come to school hungry or sick, with inadequate dental or medical care, or with a lack of sleep due to homelessness or shared living environments. These setbacks present challenges for students in terms of readiness to learn, in particular for elementary students.

During the course of the interviews, the principals expressed that they perceived the lack of basic needs to impact a child's readiness to learn. Owen's response articulated this when he said, "I think it impacts in nutrition, which can impact the child's human development, as far as being ready to learn". Todd added, "I know that they're impacted by not having their basic needs necessarily met before they come to school or outside of school and that's going to have an impact on their learning readiness." This theme was strong among principals, who provided deeper descriptions about their perceptions of how the lack of basic needs impacts students living in poverty relative to their school experience. Tiffany extended this idea, and described how the school becomes a place where basic needs are addressed, "... [the students'] basic needs being met...Dental, hygiene, food, places to sleep...it's one thing we have to do here is work on meeting those needs. So we have a dental van that comes to our school."

Another participant, Fred, responded by elaborating on the lack of sleep and nutrition as basic needs that are not being met. Fred shared his perception of how this impacts a child's school day:

I think because of the circumstances that are beyond a kindergartener through fifth grader's control, it can affect them in that – they're either run down because they're so

tired because they don't have the living conditions to sleep right or they don't have the money to eat right. And so, if those external things are taking place from 3:30 pm to 9 am in the morning, it's going to set them back when it's time for them to be here at school and ready to learn.

Other respondents pointed out that if a student's basic needs are not met, it can cause a student to have a lot on his/her mind during the school day. With worries about food, shelter, and health, students are not mentally engaged in learning and instead are worried about situations outside of the school day. Owen's thoughts resonated with this:

I think it impacts them...at their foundation, with their start of the day. It impacts them with their nutrition...depending on the location where they live, because of their condition, they could be living with another family member, another family. They could be living in a car...They might have a little more of the home things to be dealing with, than somebody who has a more secure life at home.

Similarly, Edward expressed his perception that the extra worry of living in poverty weighs heavily on a student during his or her school day:

I think the other side of it is the social/emotional side of it. The child's not eating breakfast in the morning. If the child's getting themselves up on their own and getting themselves to school...maybe being held accountable for a younger sibling...They've got a burden on them that our children that are not living in poverty don't have...they're bringing extra weight to their day. And I think that impacts their learning because they're not totally prepared to come and learn because of the other things that are going on.

Having basic needs such as nutrition, sleep and shelter, provides a stable foundation for students to come to school and be ready to learn. Participants conveyed that they see that the lack of basic needs that children from poverty experience has a significant influence on the school experience.

Lack of Background Experiences

The background a student brings to school is formed by interactions with the world around him/her. Background experiences in the areas of language and vocabulary development,

early learning, family support and community experiences are impactful in providing young students with a rich base of knowledge they build on once they enter elementary school. Poverty influences these background experiences by creating a deficit of experience. Hence, students from poverty come to school lacking a basis of knowledge and are already behind their more affluent peers in their early school years (Jensen, 2002). Imbedded in this theme are descriptions of principals' perceptions of the impact of poverty on the lack of language and vocabulary development, early learning experiences, family support and community experiences.

Tiffany shared her perceptions about students from poverty and their lack of vocabulary development: "They're not necessarily getting those quality interactions in talking with the adults in their life, which not only impacts them socially and emotionally, but their vocabulary is significantly impacted." This was supported by Edward's response: "I think many times there are students that are coming from homes of poverty, may have lower vocabulary than those that are not. So, I think you look at the learning piece, you see some impact there."

The participants continued to describe the impact that the lack of vocabulary and language development can have on student's performance in more depth. Sylvia's thoughts reflected how lack of vocabulary development connected to a lack of background experience for students:

We look at vocabulary, and background experiences – it's really important for us to build background for our students and I think teach them explicit vocabulary...making sure that we aren't making assumptions about things that they've done and seen because those experiences might look very different than they look for other students.

Sylvia's insight was shared with Edward, who described his perception about the lack of vocabulary and language development on other learning areas:

So spoken language is a big piece...we're well aware that most of our students coming from homes of poverty, are in homes where there's not as much spoken language...in

their younger years. And so we see that impacting them across math, reading, written language, spoken language.

Respondents also described the perceived impact of a lack of background experiences on early learning. The principals explained that many students from poverty do not have access to experiences beyond the home that prepare them for the learning that takes place early in elementary school. For many of the students from poverty, this first formalized learning experience in literacy and math presents a whole new world of information and resources they have little or no encounter with. Todd shared his insights: “Learning-wise I think it’s most obvious with our kindergarten students coming in and those learning readiness skills tend to be lagging”. Todd elaborated on this idea, and other respondents (Fran and Nate) expanded on this impression.

We definitely see students among our free lunch groups that their literacy skills are way behind. They’re almost nonexistent sometimes. They haven’t had their hands on books or magazines or trips to the library, things like that. And so they start off with their very first experience here in public education behind their peers and we have to work on them... So it can be pretty pervasive.

Fran connected the lack of background experiences to a child’s confidence in and behavior or attention toward learning:

[what] we’ve observed is really that students who come from poverty backgrounds don’t necessarily have social skills or emotional intelligence to have confidence in learning...that really impacts them socially and emotionally in how much confidence they have to try and become a learner...They’re not coming to school prepared for learning...we see a big impact on that...leading into behavior as well and their attention...we see students with executive functioning issues more so that come from a poverty background. They’re not able to organize for the day. They’re not able to be prepared for coming into school and the steps to get ready for the first activity...we...see those issues really affecting, then, how they perform in the classroom because they’re not able to be ready to learn.

Nate described his perspective by explaining a variety of ways the background experiences of students from poverty impact them as early as their arrival at school:

Unfortunately, when we look at the data, we still see a learning gap in reading and math [among students from poverty]...It seems like it [poverty] has a direct impact...they show up with what is a perceived disadvantage already...the other thing that we see...they've [students from poverty] been to their third or fourth school already...

The support of adults at home, or the lack thereof, is also part of the background experience children bring with them to school. How parents and other adults interact with children outside of school and how they help them with learning or expose them to early learning activities such as reading are part of the child's early life background. Children from poverty tend to lack supportive learning environments at home. This is not because families do not value learning and experience but is because they are often strapped with situations that do not allow them time or resources to provide support for their child (Jensen, 2009).

A lack of home support is a significant factor in how the principals perceived students to be impacted by poverty. Sylvia described, "I think poverty most frequently deals with the home support element that students may have, and may deal also with like resources or access to resources, background information and life experiences that students have had." This view was echoed by Steven, who said, "I just see them as lacking the support system at home to help them with their education." The participants expanded on this theme with thorough descriptions of their perceptions of how students from poverty are impacted by the lack of home support. Sylvia expressed her view:

Sometimes some of our families that fall into...that lower socioeconomic status sometimes they have parents that don't speak the same language or have had a lower level of schooling themselves and so their ability or just their confidence even to help their child reinforce learning concepts at home is a little bit tricky.

Ted's response in this theme echoed Sylvia's. Ted expanded his thinking to include the possible reasons that students do not have support at home:

Looking at the academic, a lot of our students...that are part of free lunch program, don't have the academic support at home...when I talk to parents, they just spent 10 or 12 hours working all day, the last thing they [want to] do when they come home is fight with their child about homework...if it's not done by the time they get home from work, it's not [going to] get done. That's kind of the academic piece.

The principals also discussed that a student's background in community experiences provides him or her with significant knowledge when entering elementary school. In early years, when families visit local places like libraries, stores, parks and museums, children gain knowledge about the world around them. They bring this knowledge with them to the classroom as background experience, and it serves as building blocks for academic instruction. Poverty influences the ability of families to provide these experiences for their young children, and as such they come to school with a deficit of experiences in the community, having a direct impact on how they connect learning in the classroom to their lives. This perspective was heard through Tiffany sharing what she sees regarding the lack of experiences in students from poverty: "They lack background information that...in other suburban...typical...middle class, upper class schools, kids...they would have. They don't have those experiences."

The lack of experiences in the community and how this plays out in school was a common theme among respondents. The principals indicated that students find it more difficult to connect with learning in the classroom if they are lacking general experiences their peers from high socio-economic backgrounds may have. Owen expressed his perceptions about how a lack of experiences outside of school plays into a child's schooling:

I think it impacts their experiences that they might bring to [the] classroom. A child who has more experiences coming to the classroom can relate to different books and can make a connection right away to some of the things they do in the classroom. Kids that have had less experiences, I have found, it's not as easy for them to make those connections in the classroom. Maybe they've never been to a farm or aren't familiar with certain situations that are brought up within the classroom.

Tiffany also saw this impact and described the challenges that students face comprehending information presented at school when they lack background experiences:

...just things like them not knowing - you're reading along, you're teaching reading and you think they should know certain words and they're like, "what's a tablecloth?"...[Things] like that that you would assume they know...I believe that impacts their comprehension...because they don't have these conversations...which impacts their reading, which impacts their comprehension.

Similarly, Steven expressed how he viewed the lack of experience children from poverty have as learning experiences that prepare them for success at school:

Well, definitely, they don't have exposure to some of the experiences that other students of their age may have...and then go back to just being read to at home, exposed to various opportunities for success.

These perspectives from participants revealed the important role that background experience plays in a student's life at school. The principals contended that when students from poverty are lacking experiences students from more typical suburban families might have, they are at a disadvantage in their early learning.

Lack of Relationships

Findings from the interviews support the idea that there is value in how students connect with peers and adults in school to form positive relationships at school. The principals shared that elementary students from poverty often experience obstacles participating in positive social interactions and navigating typical problems or conflicts. Often this is because their basic needs have not been met and/or they have a limited experience base – the two factors previously explored.

Because a life of poverty presents challenges for students to create positive relationships outside of school, many students from poverty look to their relationships at school to fill an

emotional need, such as attention. This was expressed by Tiffany, who described her experience working with children in a high poverty school as a first-year principal. She said, “My first year, one thing I really noticed was the kids just craved our attention; from the adults.” This sentiment highlights the difficult situations families have when their own interactions with their children are limited because of the stressors of poverty. They may be working multiple jobs trying to make ends meet or suffering from stress and anxiety due to their situation and not engaging in positive relationships with their children (Duncan et al., 2007). Not having solid role models for positive relationship building leads to struggles in how students from poverty may interact with peers and adults in the school setting. This is explored through the participants’ responses.

Respondents expressed that overall health and development for students from poverty can be lagging due to lack of care, posing difficulties for their interactions with others. That is, a child’s social interactions with others can be hindered when they are not provided basic needs and quality background experiences. Additionally, the principals explained that students can lack practice interacting with others if they have not had opportunities to do so at home and in the community. Experiences out in the community provide opportunities for children to interact with other children and adults, developing their problem-solving skills and emotional background among other things. They learn social norms such as greetings, expressing wants and needs, and sharing. They learn how to participate positively in social groups.

Tiffany expressed how she sees a lack of experience in social settings play out for students when she said, “I’ve seen...social interactions...[that] they [students from poverty] don’t have, basic...social greetings. How do you greet people; how do you...receive a compliment; how do you disagree with people?”

This is a sentiment that was shared by Sylvia as she thought about poverty's influence on students. She specifically spoke about refugee students and their lack of background experiences that transfers to their interactions in social settings in school:

Some of our students come to us from other countries, so they're refugee students that have moved into our area, and so in some instances they've not been in situations before where they have interacted with other kids in the way that I would say our American-born school students have done... Like the more unstructured areas like lunch, recess, getting ready to come in before school, leaving after school, sometimes I see that play out because of just students' personal experiences that they've had.

This idea was elaborated on by Edward, who explained that he sees social interactions as challenging for students from poverty because of the background experiences that they don't have. He depicted that the different background experiences of a student from poverty and the background experiences of a more typical suburban student shape the students' interactions:

I think in my [school]building, we have such a wide span – our students are living in poverty – some are well below the poverty lines, from government housing. And typically they're refugee status, or from the south or the west side of Chicago... I think that social interaction, just because the climate that the children are growing up in can be different... just having different opportunities that our students living in poverty don't have. I think [that] just naturally affects the social interaction, because of their natural perspective of what the world is...

When students' basic needs and experiences are lacking, the principals explained that students display problems navigating different aspects of relationships. In particular, Todd expressed that students from poverty experience the impact of lacking background experiences on their ability to form and navigate relationships with peers, including problem-solving and addressing conflicts:

I see differences in relationships... sometimes their ability to navigate friendships and relationships... which can sometimes lead to behavioral challenges and arguments and issues on the playground, things like that.

I think of lot of the time the behavioral issues that we see come from skills that are lagging in making heads or tails of those social interactions... A lot of our students of

poverty did not have preschool experiences. They haven't been to summer camps, that sort of thing. So they haven't had as many opportunities to navigate socially so they struggle, especially in those more problem-solving type situations.

The theme of relationships describes how students connect with others, including peers and adults, in the school setting. There was a strong indication from the participants that poverty influences elementary students' abilities to build and maintain relationships at school. There was a sense that the lack of relationships is impacted by the lack of basic needs being met and the lack of background experiences that students from poverty have.

Conclusion

Poverty's influence on elementary students is more deeply understood by hearing these suburban elementary school principals' perspectives. Responses that support the three themes – lack of basic needs, lack of background experiences and lack of relationships – provide insight into how these principals viewed poverty as impacting their students. Their viewpoints have created a knowledge base that informs principals of what their students in poverty need. This leads into the next section of research that examines the perspectives of how the work of the suburban elementary principal is influenced by students within their school who are living in poverty.

CHAPTER 5

ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL

Those are the kids that need us the most because they have the least. (Fred, 2016)

Chapter 4 demonstrates that the principals have insight into how poverty influences suburban elementary students. This insight forms what principals perceive their role to be and how their work is influenced by students from situations of poverty. In addition to how the principals perceived the effects of poverty on students, I also sought to discover what they perceived their role to be in working with students from poverty. This chapter addresses the question, “how has the work of suburban elementary school principals been influenced by elementary students living in poverty?”

From the participants’ responses, one higher order theme and three lower order themes emerged. The higher order theme that emerged is access to education, and the three lower order themes are securing and allocating resources, fostering relationships, and holding high expectations.

Providing Access to Education

In the context of this study, access to education meant the elimination or reduction of obstacles to learning so students from poverty can benefit academically and socially in school. Stemming from the research question, one higher order theme emerged. That theme was providing access to education. From there, three lower order themes emerged: securing and

allocating resources, fostering relationships, and holding high expectations. Through their work within these three roles, these principals provide access to education for students from poverty.

Figure 2 offers a visual depiction of the themes.

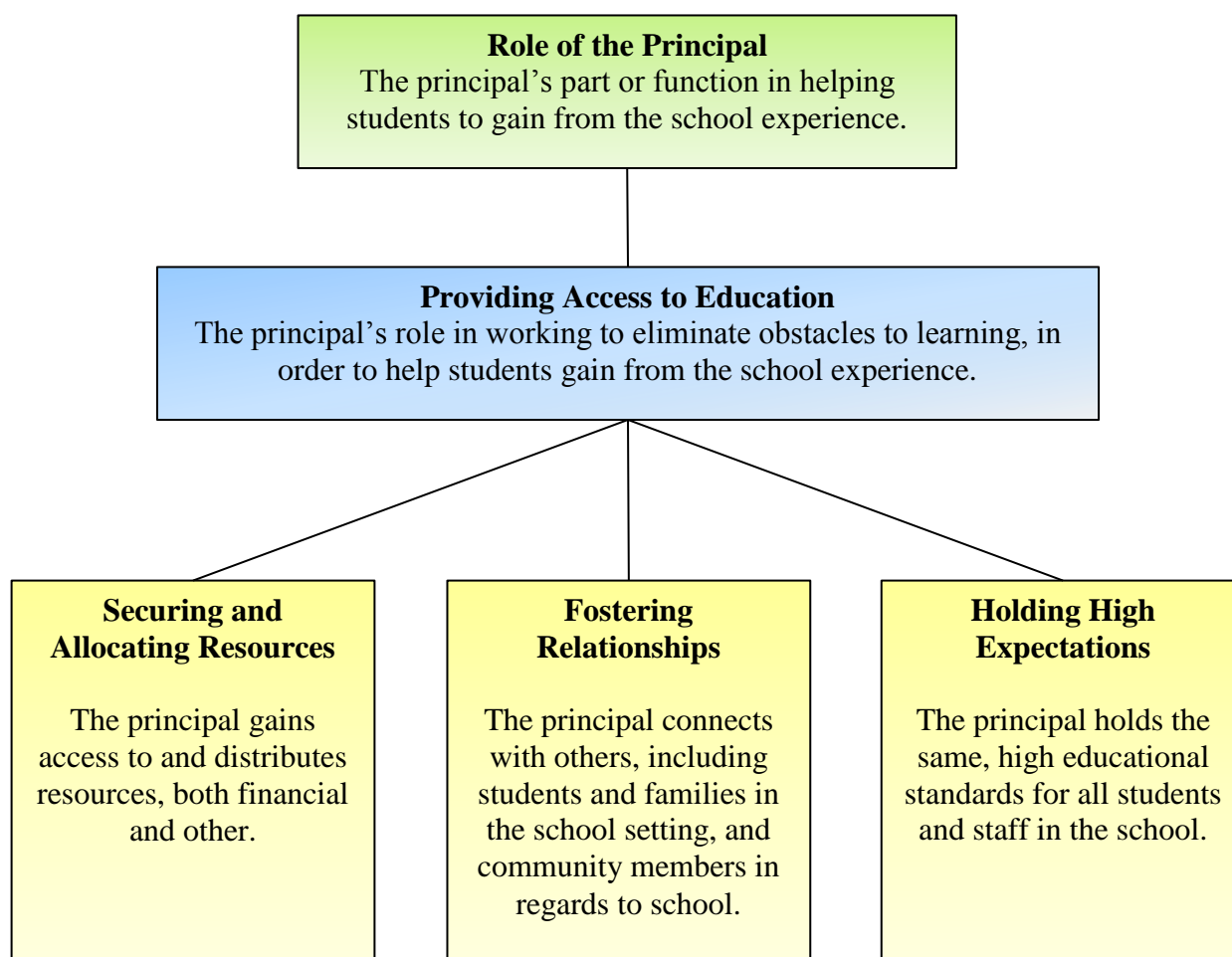


Figure 2. Role of the principal. This model displays the emergent themes from research question two. The green box indicates the focus of the research question, while the blue boxes identify higher order themes, and the yellow boxes indicate lower order themes.

Responses to the questions in this area of research conveyed that the principals took this role very seriously. The gravity of this idea is expressed by Edward who shared, “For me...you

learn a lot about yourself...for one, it's [working with suburban students from poverty] helped me grow as a leader just because the responsibility that you have in school spans so great – so many places.”

Ted also stated that working with suburban students from poverty has pressed him to “want to learn how to reach those kids better.” Related to reaching all students, Edward summarized how access to education is pervasive in his role:

You want every student to have a fair shake...have an equitable chance at learning, and have the equitable opportunities. So, that definitely affects everything you do as a leader. Because you've got to make sure that every student has the same opportunity to be successful.

Representing equitable access, the phrase “level the playing field” was used to describe why the principals work to provide access to education for students from poverty. Owen described this aspect by saying, “Probably trying to keep the learning environment as level as possible, or the playing-field as level as possible, to...lessen or...eliminate some of the things that might set them apart from feeling normal”. Fran also expressed this in relation to her role, “We try very hard to make it a level playing field when kids come to school, with making sure they have the supplies and anything...that they'll need during the school day.”

The work of these elementary suburban principals was influenced by students within the school who live in poverty. Their role was defined by how they respond to the myriad of situations that are present as they work to ensure access to education for students from poverty. Following, we gain a greater understanding of the principal's role as one who provides access to education through securing and allocating resources, building relationships, and maintaining high expectations.

Securing and Allocating Resources

The principals provided descriptions of what they viewed their role to be in helping eliminate obstacles for students by securing and allocating resources to ensure that students from poverty can gain from the school experience. Tiffany's ideas succinctly represented this concept. She explained her role as principal as "managing the resources and focusing the resources...and mak[ing] sure we're doing it well." The principals secured and allocated resources from various places. Todd described his role as "working really hard to get those resources into the kids' hands, parents' hands and teachers' hands." Sylvia expressed a similar idea, explaining how she views her role in helping students and families get access to resources they need. She said, "I think knowing what resources within our school community and the greater community are available to support our families with some basic needs they might have is important."

To secure resources, the principals often worked with groups like local churches, non-for-profit organizations, and the parent-teacher organization (PTO) as part of their role in securing and allocating resources for students from poverty. Fred discussed working with a local church to secure items for students in need:

We have storage closets full of supplies for them, whether it [is] for school or for the winter months when they don't have the money to get a coat or boots or gloves... I've been fortunate enough to partner with a local church...

Edward explained how he worked with his school social worker to secure resources from a non-for-profit organization, and why that is an important aspect of his role :

We're going to do everything we can to make sure our students have everything, from a physical standpoint, that our students not living in poverty have...my social worker and I have...held to that...Anything that a child in poverty doesn't have, there's a process that they go through. So we can take that burden off our kids, so that they can be successful at

school and focus on learning instead of worrying about not having a jacket, not having food...

Owen identified how he guided the PTO to secure support for students from poverty, discussing his work and the conversation he would have to ensure that all students are being provided for. Owen elaborated on this point to provide more examples of securing and allocating resources to eliminate obstacles and to provide equitable experiences for students from poverty:

My job is at PTO meetings and in the community to say... "Not everybody can do this... PTO, can you buy this for everybody, so everybody has the same thing?"... So we're not setting up a situation where one group has more than another... when we look at a celebration or curriculum, we want to make sure that we're providing it equally for everybody.

The process of advocating for students was echoed in Todd's reply. He defined the process as advocating for students to access activities and resources:

They need for me to be an advocate within the district and within the building. It can be anything from advocating with our PTA [parent teacher association] that maybe an activity they have planned they need to be considerate of how people can access that... At the district level advocating... for our population and our students to make sure that we're getting the extra help and the extra resources we can.

Tiffany's perspective on accessing and allocating resources came from her background as a principal of a school that qualifies for additional federal funding, known as Title I, due to a high poverty rate.

Well, I think the role is help trying to get them an even playing field. And that's... where Title I comes in. Why we have Title I funding is to create an even playing field. So I think how I mitigate it is by trying to give them some resources that maybe they wouldn't have otherwise.

Tiffany went on to explain how she allocated the funding to create access to powerful learning experiences for students they may not have without this type of involvement:

I can impact things on a greater scale with that money. So we – my kids right now are almost one-on-one technology because of Title I. My second - my second, third, fourth, and fifth grade kids all have [laptop computers] that are assigned to them. Which no other school in my district has that... we do Second Step [social emotional learning] curriculum. And I was able to easily purchase a kit for every single teacher...So there's some benefits to that as well...it's great for my kids...trying to give them some different experiences...

Another principal, Fran, described technology resources that have been allocated to students from poverty to increase their access to learning outside of the school day. This included working to provide technology devices to students and working with the community to provide access to wireless service in public. Fran provided a detailed description of her views of why it is necessary:

One of the things that we are working on...is providing some laptops, some [tablets], and Wi-Fi in our low-income areas so that they can have the devices at home and the Internet access at home to do some of the things that we're asking them to do during the school day...We're... excluding a large portion of our population if we're not providing them the opportunity to have a device and to have Wi-Fi at home...we have some devices and we have some hot-spots set up in one of our low-income areas that are...on loan...trying to create more of a level playing field to lessen that impact [of poverty]. Having technology, having all these expectations to use it as a tool is great, but that ends at 3:30 when the kids go home...Our district has also worked with...some local businesses and we now have stickers in the windows of some businesses downtown that say "Free Wi-Fi for District kids."

Supporting Fran's and others' stance, Steven provided a broader view of securing and allocating resources that summarizes how the principals perceived their role:

The principal's role is just to...facilitate the process where the parent can receive – and the student as well...what they need just to make sure that their child is ready for school. We have some, a couple different charitable organizations who reach out to us at the beginning of the school year to make sure that we have backpacks for those students. We make sure that they do have a lunch, they do have snacks... We have a...tutoring program...after school so that we provide free tutoring...the principal's role is just to make sure that resources are available when necessary for those students.

As the participants described, one way of impacting students from poverty is to work in partnership with organizations to secure resources for students in need. The organizations the

principals work with include school-based organizations like PTO and community organizations like community outreach centers and faith based organizations. In addition to securing resources, principals described the allocation of the resources. Directing the resources to the students who need them most is an area where principals can influence the school experience for students from poverty. The resources that are secured and allocated for students in poverty expand beyond financial resources. The participants described resources that fill gaps in the areas of technology, basic needs, and programming options.

Fostering Relationships

The principals viewed fostering relationships – their overall role in connecting with teachers, students, parents and the community – as having a great influence on their work to provide access to education for students from poverty in suburban settings.

Relationships with the Community

The principals' responses indicate that working with students from poverty has caused them to emphasize relationship building in their work. They do this by connecting families with resources in the community, advocating for students, getting to know students and their families, creating a sense of belonging in the school, and developing empathy and understanding, among other relational components. All of this is done in the vein of creating access to education for students from poverty. Their emphasis on fostering relationships is seen as helping to connect families and students with more opportunities to support their learning by eliminating the obstacles that are posed by poverty. The rich descriptions of the principals' perspectives in developing relationships with students and families are critical to this theme. There was also

strong representation of these ideas in all of their responses. All of the principals provided details about deliberately reaching out to community groups to bring assistance to the school, purposefully advocating for students from poverty so that they could gain from their school experience and focusing on creating a sense of belonging among students from poverty.

Planning and coordinating before and after school programming or community outreach is an example of how these principals built relationships in the community to help access learning, as Tiffany summarized, "...we do a lot of partnering...with community groups...to provide support for our kids".

When principals partner with community groups, as Tiffany stated, their role becomes that of a coordinator of resources. Fran provided details about how she views this work for families:

I've seen my role...has been one that's coordinating resources and reaching out to the community and trying to connect what those community resources are with what parents need...I've spent some time developing relationships with a local university as well as some local outreach services to try to put those things together, to connect the two...I really see my role as...assessing what the needs are and then reaching out into the community, and within our staff, to see what we can do to...make the two meet in the middle.

Along those same lines, this role was represented by Edward. He provided specifics about how he fosters relationships with the community to provide specific resources to students in poverty:

I work closely with the community outreach center...So that we can have wraparound services for families. The outreach center offers counseling, they offer extra tutoring, they offer some full-day programming for our half-day students...I would say the other piece is I've made a concerted effort...in the past few years we've gotten every single one of our students into all-day programs [that are] from a home of poverty.

Nate's response provided more details about some of the resources that he lines up for families. He described that he builds relationships with the community center to help the school work more effectively with families:

There's an outreach community center and they do after school tutoring and they do summer programs...they're a vital partner...we always have students who take advantage of their tutoring programs and their summer school programs and they have mentor programs...[they] help us understand some of these families who are dealing with...these poverty issues so that we can...work with them better.

Relationships with Students

Building relationships with students from poverty was seen as advocating for students, and is one component of fostering relationships with students. Sylvia described her view on advocating for students in poverty as one of connecting:

I...feel like as a principal it's really important for me to be an advocate for our students in poverty because sometimes they have more pressing issues in mind...if they come to school and they haven't slept well or they haven't eaten or their mom works overnights and they're worried about it. Those things can impede learning.

She went on to portray her role as a key player in connecting people and resources. "I see myself in a lot of ways as a connector. So connecting people with the people or resources they need."

Moreover, the participants identified social-emotional support for students as a significant component in fostering relationships. This was demonstrated through concepts like belonging, understanding, acceptance, attention, welcoming and love. Nate was succinct in saying how he viewed it: "They [students from poverty] need love, caring, respect." Todd, Nate, and Ted described the importance they place on relationship building. Todd described it as not only his role, but as his responsibility:

I feel like it's my responsibility when they come in...to get that relationship going and some trust going so that those parents feel more comfortable and those kids more

comfortable letting us know if they have needs we're not anticipating or not seeing, so that we are somebody they'll trust and tell their stories to and let us help them.

Emphasizing the aspect of belonging and the level of importance in relationships, Nate expressed how he thinks about students from poverty, saying, "If you show up at our school, you come through our front door, I don't care what family you're from, what's your background situation, how much money your family makes, what your mode of transportation is here. You're as important as anyone else." He further shared how he has created a sense of belonging for students in his suburban elementary school. "When you come to our school...the name of our school is [Hilltop]...they understand what it means to be a [Hilltopper], which means you're part of this community, you call this your home." Creating this sense of belonging and connectedness is a prime example of fostering relationships with students to increase their access to education.

The same belief that a sense of belonging is an important component for students from poverty was also shared by Ted. "We need to make sure that...the kids in our building, especially those from poverty, feel like they belong in our building and that they're welcome here, and that they're a part of our school community". He also included the word safe in his description of creating a school that is welcoming. "I think...it's that I've got to create a safe place for them, where they feel welcome." Tiffany echoed this idea of safety as a relationship component when she said, "I think one of the roles [for principals] is for...them to know that I accept them and that I care about them and that the school's a safe place for them".

Owen's views also related to a sense of belonging and understanding for students as a means of fostering relationships:

I think that's what my job is, to make sure everybody feels like this is their school, regardless of their language, their background, their parents, their address, things of that

nature. I think understanding. I think I need to understand where my kids are coming from, and try to relate to the kids, as far as trying to understand their situation, respecting their situation.

He made sense of his experience by saying, “My experience has been, if I can, first of all, get to know them, make a connection with them.” Owen elaborated; “I think my experience is to try to get to know my kids that might have different situations. And if I can know where they’re at and understand where they’re at and...still make them feel like everyone else in the school.” He also described empathy as playing a strong role in his work. He stated, “I think empathy has a lot to do with what I think my job is - to always try to make sure all of our adults are being empathetic to everyone’s home life, or everyone’s experiences coming to school.” By making connections with students and knowing their individual situations, Owen fosters relationships with students from poverty and ensures others do the same. This strengthens the students’ sense of belonging to school, helping to eliminate some of the obstacles that poverty presents in school.

Relationships with Parents

Across the interviews, participants spoke about fostering relationships with parents. This is done to provide a stronger connection to school, therefore increasing a student’s access to learning. Working to create a sense of belonging for students and ensuring that they feel love caring and support were important elements for principals. Steven spoke about developing a relationship with families from poverty based on integrity and belonging. His desire to “protect the privacy of that family and that student, so they don’t feel singled out; they don’t feel different from the other population” can influence the access to educational experiences that families have.

Sylvia expanded the idea of belonging and creating a welcoming school by explaining her role in connecting with the parents of students from poverty:

We also do enjoy a very good relationship with a lot of our parents. And I think part of my job too is to make sure all of our parents feel welcomed at school and knowing that for some families maybe they didn't have a positive school experience. Or like I said before maybe they're not confident in their ability to be an active member of the school community or don't feel like they have something to contribute. And I think it's really important to make school a welcoming place where everybody feels valued and feels like they have something to add. And really just honor their role as the child's parent...

As Sylvia's response indicated, establishing relationships with parents is a priority so that they can connect to their child's school experience. Todd's response supported this: "I think as school leaders, the first thing that kids need from us is that they need us to be aware of the challenges that those students [from poverty] face rather than dismissing it out of hand." Fred's response also resonated this, explaining that he feels attention, love and support are what students need from a principal. He started by saying, "You know what – this is so simple- they need love from us...people who are caring and kind... They're telling us that they need our attention and they need our love and they need our support."

Love, caring and support are the basis of relationships. Steven described how working with students from poverty has shaped his work by discussing his role in building those relationships:

I look at the whole child, as far as the social/emotional needs and are we meeting those needs here within the school confines as well as helping them outside the school setting to make sure they have the support that they need to be successful? So there's more to life than just a [standardized test] score. Definitely equipping them with the tools and resources to be productive citizens and so that really has, that's had a profound impact on me.

Likewise, Nate's ideas demonstrated his perspectives on the goal of relationship building for principals – be more connected with students and families and you will be a more effective

leader. Being more connected helped him make better decisions, thereby creating greater access to learning for students, as understood through Nate's explanation:

And so I go out of my way to get to know those kids and to get to know their families, and I think that's also my role as – I think that's a principal's role, a leader's role, to do that. Because you can really be more effective and make better decisions...from the context of those strong relationships.

Emphasizing the importance of relationships, Ted expressed that access to learning could not happen if relationships were not a priority. He stated, "We have to make relationships with kids. If we don't have the relationships, they are not [going to] learn."

Relationships strengthen the work of the school, and Edward connected the elements of relationship building to high expectations, leading into the next theme:

I think the first thing they need is just love. And empathy. Understanding the place that they come from. I think that has to be paired though with structure and high expectations....I think that's kind of a balance that you walk of that empathy, that love, that caring. And balancing that with believing that they can learn at high levels. And holding them accountable for it, and providing structures that allow them to be successful.

Maintaining High Expectations

Maintaining high expectations refers to holding the same high educational standards for all students in the school, including students from poverty. They described maintaining high expectations by eliminating obstacles to learning as one more way they provide access to education for students from poverty. In this context, the principals demonstrated these expectations by communicating a culture of high expectations with the teachers, students and parents, securing and developing quality teachers, and holding students and teachers accountable.

Expectations for Students

Parents from situations of poverty have high expectations for their children to learn and grow in school. This was a view that Fran confirmed when she shared, “I think they...come to school and...parents expect what’s best for their kids and they...need an environment that’s going to support them and take them from where they are and move them forward.” The expectations the parents and the community have for their children play out in Fran’s role as principal. She reiterated it as what families in the community expect from the school:

I think it comes down to our accountability and our responsibility to help these students achieve. And it’s an expectation of our district but it’s an expectation of the community and the parents, too. It’s a community with very high expectations for all students...it’s an expectation that these students will become part of our community and achieve at high levels.

Fran’s response was echoed throughout the interviews. Sylvia agreed that she sees holding high expectations as part of her role to establish a culture in the school that “has high expectations for all...so that students can continue to move forward”. Additionally, Nate expressed, “They [students from poverty] need to know that I expect the same [out of] them as I do anybody else,” while Tiffany stated, “we want them here, we expect great things of them.”

In their responses, many participants spoke about the importance of having and developing quality teachers for students from poverty. The principals demonstrated a high expectation to have effective teachers as a means to increasing access to learning and saw this as an important focus of their work. One participant framed her perspective in relation to her role by saying, “They need me to have the best possible teachers...so that’s one thing they need from me is to give them the best teachers that I possibly can” (Tiffany). Assuring quality staff is an essential part of holding high expectations. Nate shared his impressions of how students view

this component, saying, “They [students from poverty] just need the best [teachers] we have.”

Both of these statements communicate a high expectation for securing the best teachers for students from poverty.

Todd also had a high expectation regarding providing students from poverty with the most effective teachers.

I think it’s my number one responsibility for all kids to make sure that they have the very best teachers in every class. Every bit of research shows that that’s number one. I think it’s even more critical...for students of poverty to have those amazingly, high qualified, engaging, awesome teachers.

The responsibility that Todd articulated also surfaced in Edward’s answer. Edward described how working with students from poverty has influenced his work by realizing his accountability for learning by students from poverty:

I think impacting or influencing my work as a leader...you look at a lot of things through the lens of children in poverty because we’re accountable to helping all students learn. And many times our students that come from homes of poverty are the neediest, so we have a responsibility to help them achieve just like all other students.

Edward went on to explain that part of holding high expectations for all students to learn requires holding teachers to high instructional expectations. He said, “Holding our teachers to high expectations for how they instruct. What are the opportunities that they’re giving to meet all kids’ needs in the classroom?”

Expectations for Teachers/Staff

Other principals shared their thoughts about setting high expectations for teacher practice when working with students from poverty. One principal in particular, Owen, described how he works to develop shared knowledge about students’ backgrounds or what students from poverty

may need in classrooms. Owen discussed his high expectations for teachers to ensure fairness, equity and civil rights in their classrooms.

I think I need to educate my staff. I think I need to let them know that not everybody is a white, suburban, middle-class person that they're teaching. And that we sometimes be reminded of that when we're setting up our lesson or our experiences ...I think that's a big part of my job. Teachers are so creative. They always come up with different things. I feel like I'm that person that might step in when I feel like it might not be that fair or that equal . I don't want to stifle a teacher's creativity. But, if I feel like they are stepping on either the civil rights or the feelings of somebody, I think that's my job.

High expectations for staff are bolstered by morale. Tiffany's response indicated that she establishes high expectations for staff by developing their morale. This is an aspect of her work that she believes impacts students. "How I impact the kids is by keeping the teachers together and keeping their morale up. Helping them...see hey, our kids can do things. Because it's easy to get...in that martyr syndrome." This response speaks to Tiffany's perception that her role is to help to keep the staff cohesive and to keep their spirits and their beliefs in their students high in a job that is very demanding. It exemplifies that she has high expectations for her teachers to stay positive and not be overcome by feelings that their difficult work is more pressing than the situations of poverty that students come from. When teachers are positive about their work and the difference they are making, they will be more effective with students. This is an example of increasing access to learning for students from poverty by ensuring effective teachers are in every classroom.

Holding high expectations was expressed as a component of the principals' role in working with students from poverty. The principals identified holding high expectations for students and staff as a means of ensuring access to education. They also expressed that parents of students from poverty have high expectations that their children will have the same opportunities other students have and that influences the principals' work.

Conclusion

The principals' responses show that working with students from poverty in the suburban elementary school setting influences their work. The varied circumstances that students from poverty face define how principals viewed their role as one of assurance that students would have access to education. Key to this role was securing and distributing resources, building relationships with students and families, and maintaining high expectations of students and staff.

CHAPTER 6

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

The needs of the students are bottom line, what impacts my decisions. (Tiffany, 2016)

This chapter addresses the findings for the third research question: What are the leadership practices of suburban elementary school principals that impact students living in poverty? Over the past several decades, leadership studies have “identified the principal as the single most influential person in a school” (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005, p. 5). Principal leadership influences all aspects of the school, including how the school works with students from poverty. What is also interesting is to consider what has influenced the principals’ leadership practices, in particular when working with students from poverty. Findings from this study show that the principals’ perspectives on leadership and the part it plays in influencing the school experience of students from poverty in the suburban setting is two dimensional: what is influenced by principal leadership and what are the influences on principal leadership. These two dimensions represent two higher order themes. In analyzing each higher order theme, lower order themes emerged.

In analyzing the first higher order theme – what is influenced by the principals’ leadership in working with students from poverty – three lower order themes emerged: school culture, policies and procedures, and relationships. The second higher order theme – what are the influences on the principal’s leadership in working with students from poverty – led to the

emergence of four lower order themes: principal's life experience, preference for shared leadership, mission, and relationships. Figure 3 provides a visual display of these constructs.

Further analysis revealed that these two dimensions are also cyclical. Elements that influence the principals' leadership also form the principals' leadership actions. These actions have an influence on the school and represent what is influenced by the principals' leadership. What is influenced by the principals' leadership then becomes an experience that returns as an influence on the principals' leadership in the future. Key to this understanding is the role of relationships in both dimensions. Indeed the role of relationships is woven throughout all of the findings of this study.

Influenced by Principal Leadership

This higher order theme presents findings from school culture, policies and procedures, and relationships. School culture is defined as "the beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, written and unwritten, that shape and influence every aspect of how a school functions" (Glossary of Education Reform, 2013). Principals interact with parents, students, teachers and the broader community to impact the school experience for students living in poverty. Their interactions, in words in and in behavior, directly influence the school's culture related to working with students from poverty.

Policies and procedures, while not always set by principals, are influenced by the ways in which principals implement policies and procedures. Most often the principals described how they designed school-specific systems around the policies and procedures of the district. Policies and procedures such as homework, distribution of free or reduced meals and attendance were discussed in relation to this aspect.

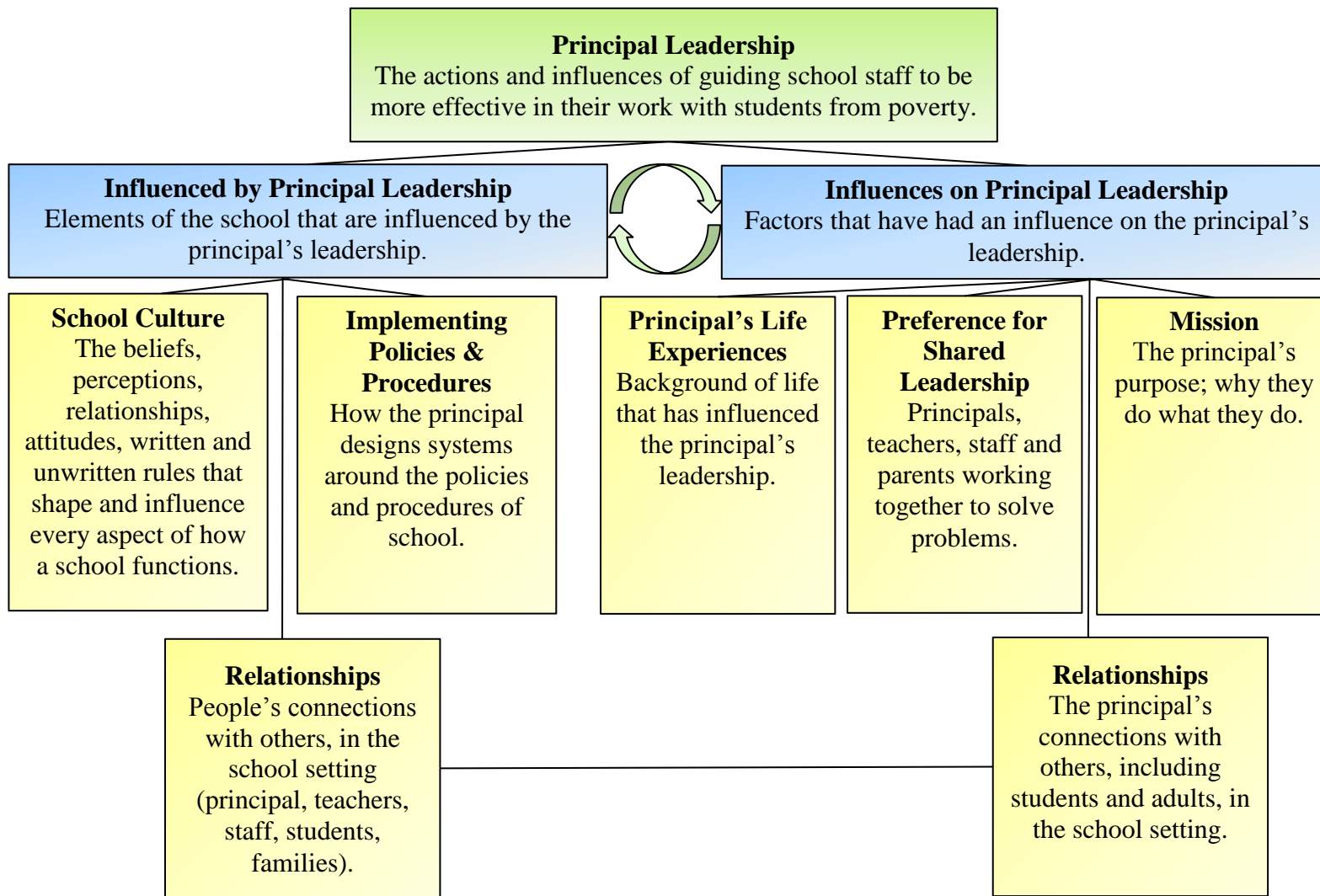


Figure 3. Principal leadership. This model displays the emergent themes from research question three. The green box indicates the focus of the research question. The blue boxes identify the higher order themes, and the yellow boxes indicate the lower order themes. In this theme, the higher order themes are circular – meaning they contribute to one another.

Relationships were also influenced by the principals' leadership actions. As discussed in previous themes, relationships are the connections that principals have with others, including students, staff, families and community members.

School Culture

How these principals worked with teachers and staff to impact the culture of the school was represented across the responses. The principals' values and beliefs filtered down to the teachers who have the day-to-day interactions with students that influence their experiences as well as the attitudes and relationships among staff to shape the culture of the school. Principals accomplished this by modeling behaviors that aligned with their beliefs and values so that others would be influenced and do the same. A principal's leadership influences school culture as described by Sylvia, "I think it's as basic as driving the culture of the school so that it's a school community that's accepting...of everyone." Sylvia added that she demonstrates her beliefs in her behavior in a way to which she hopes others will respond. She said she does this through "modeling a non-judgmental attitude about people and their circumstances, so that hopefully others will follow suit." She explained:

Making sure that staff members and other parents value everyone for what they can bring to our school community...encouraging people to be flexible thinkers about what we can do...for example with the home support and helping them at school or finding successes to celebrate and acknowledge kids...there's that whole social, emotional piece too...we are modeling behaviors and we are modeling the kind of interactions that we want kids to have and giving kids resources that they need to do their best.

Similarly, Fred discussed how he works to create a culture of kindness and caring among the staff at his school. He does this by helping staff to understand the student's circumstance.

Creating that climate or culture of kindness and caring and knowing that the kid is having a tough time and it's not that kid's fault...most of the time it's – well, all of the time it's –

out of that kid's control. And so the safest place for them is 9[am] to 3:30[pm] where we have caring and nurturing people surrounding him or her.

Supporting this idea, Edward's lead a school culture that focused on each individual child and his or her needs, so all students can learn. He said he guides the school toward that vision by modeling those beliefs in his actions. By modeling this behavior he is able to effect students indirectly:

I think the first thing is, is having a clear vision...and communicating that vision – that we believe all kids can learn...there has to be that belief...serving as a role model in that. That we're going to do everything [we can], for every child.

Communicating vision is essential in the principals' leadership. Vision can establish the tone for how the school views the role of parents, in particular relationships with families in poverty. The principals modeled values and beliefs that built a culture around service to parents and inclusion of parents in their child's school experience. Supporting this, Sylvia stated that she believes school is a resource for parents and that she tries to form positive attitudes among staff so that they are "making school an accessible place for all of our parents." Explaining further, Steven expressed his belief that school is an important resource for families in poverty. He explained how he views having a helpful attitude toward parents as working toward a culture of valuing each individual, regardless of his/her background:

We want to make sure that...the parents feel that they can reach out to the school in case they need something...that's first and foremost...developing a culture where parents know and rely on the school, and aren't ashamed to call and say if they might need a resource or might need something for their child...establishing that culture

Principal leadership can influence a school culture by creating an environment in which teachers have flexibility in how they are meeting students' needs. Sylvia explained this idea, saying that she "encourages teachers to sometimes think a different way or offer different opportunities for families so that we can meet their needs." She noted that this can be done

regarding academics or social-emotional needs. Communicating a belief that students' social-emotional needs are a priority and putting practices into place that support flexibility in meeting academic or social-emotional needs were ways these principals' leadership impacted the school culture. Tiffany explained that her work with teachers and staff has been focused on helping them understand the social-emotional needs of the children as the first priority before the curriculum needs:

I think at this point I have focused on helping them understand the social-emotional needs of the kids and that it's okay to deviate from your curriculum to address those needs...making sure they're [students] engaged...a school climate needs to be...the best for kids.

This position was also expressed by Ted, who explained that an emphasis on academics and testing can get in the way of connecting with students. Ted led the teachers in his school to put practices into place that demonstrated the value of relationship building with students. He demonstrated his belief by dedicating time on a teacher training day for teachers to plan activities with students the first few days of school. This is an example of leadership actions influencing a culture that focuses on relationships before academics. Ted described:

This past year, one of the things that I learned building those relationships, is teachers haven't felt that they have the permission to not go into academics, to get away from academics, because of all this high-stake testing. They've really focused on academics, and have kind of pulled away from that relationship. Last year the first two days of school, I said there could be no academics, there's no passing out books, nothing. You're to focus on building relationships with kids...

Changing the beliefs and perceptions people hold about the school and the students in it is also the work of shaping the school's culture. Community members, parents, students, and school staff have perceptions about a school that can influence the school experience for students. The principals expressed that they have had to work to influence those beliefs and perceptions to provide a better school culture for students from poverty. The emphasis was on

developing the belief that all kids can learn if there is a culture of shared responsibility. Fran explained that when she arrived at her school as the principal, students were separated by income and language for instruction. She worked to change people's beliefs so the school culture reflected a shared responsibility by all staff. Fran stated:

When I approached the position, [it] was really that the kids were...separated...we had specific staff working with our low-income and our second-language students and then classroom teachers were really working with everyone else. And so we tried to work with staff and create more of a community by saying "These are all of our kids and we're going to all share the responsibilities."

Todd described that when he came to the school as the principal, he noticed the staff had limited expectations of performance for students from poverty because of their socio-economic background. He asserted his leadership to change attitudes that students and parents did not care about education because of the school's status as a school that received Title I funds. Todd offered this explanation:

When I came here, even internally there were staff members that really didn't think the kids could perform better than they were. That was –there was some work to be done there with changing some attitudes...there's a perception I think that some of the Title One schools are these bad scary places with naughty kids and parents don't care and that sort of thing. And it's really not the case...[I] do what I can to fight that image, and project a better image on behalf of the kids and parents and staff here.

The principals described how they worked to influence the beliefs, perceptions, and actions of their schools to respond to students from low socio-economic backgrounds in productive ways. Their explanations included modeling behaviors that created a culture of shared kindness and caring that focused on students' social-emotional needs and on encouraging flexibility in how teachers were meeting the students' needs. The principals emphasized creating a culture that developed relationships with parents and included them in the school experience.

Changing others' attitudes and beliefs toward students from poverty was also portrayed as an important element of shaping the school culture.

Implementing Policies and Procedures

A school is a place of complex systems driven by the laws, policies, and procedures of federal and state government, the school district, and the school board. Policies and procedures are aimed at providing academic and social learning, as well as other services, to students. A principal leads the implementation of the policies and procedures, designing systems so the school day can function smoothly and safely and can provide access for all students. Edward put it in perspective by saying, "Let's quit excluding groups of people. So if you have a policy or practice or anything that excludes people simply because of who they are, then that needs to be addressed." In this study, the principals described how their leadership influenced the implementation of policies and procedures such as scheduling academic time, homework and attendance policies, meals in school, behavior supports and extra-curricular programming, in particular for suburban students from poverty.

The primary goal of schools is academic learning. The principals considered how academic services and programming are structured throughout the school day for students. Related to this idea, Edward represented how he examined the school day schedule for students from poverty, explaining that he was, "Looking at effective scheduling measures so that we have carved out blocks to meet all kids' needs. All those things that kind of help them mitigate those effects [of poverty]". To further explain, Fran described how she led the school to restructure academic grouping for students from poverty:

One of the things we've changed is how we're delivering our services. We're trying to provide more co-teaching opportunities so that our second-language learners, who are our kids of low-income in our district, are in the classroom more. They're not missing core instruction anymore. We've built that master schedule around making sure that our kids [from] poverty are getting the core, they're getting full minutes in reading and math and that wasn't always occurring before. So that schedule change and the co-teaching model is really new and has really been impactful on our second-language learners and our kids in poverty...It's just changing...the format of how we deliver instruction.

Academic programming for support services such as social-emotional learning or social work are also procedures principals put into place surrounding a school's academic programming. Owen described this concept, saying, "We might go out and offer a little more of our social-work services, and reach out for outside services that somebody might need, to try to get them as stable as possible." This described a procedure of outreach to families for social support. Illustrating how outreach programs are used as a procedure connecting families from poverty with social emotional support from the school, Owen detailed an approach his school used:

We had a housing development where...most of our low-SES students were from...we would organize certain things, as a staff, to do, either at the housing complex—to either be a bridge in the summer for learning, or to extend some of the social/emotional learning that we do in the school, but to extend it into their community in the apartments, as well. So, to go where the families were, educate the families...

Like Owen, Sylvia expanded on this idea of offering additional services by illustrating a program support she has put into place for families of different languages:

We have a night where we bring in translators for the different languages represented at our school so we can do a more personalized experience for some of our English learner families. So that they feel they can understand what's happening and become more comfortable and confident.

Providing community outreach for families is one way that principals use the procedures of planning for school for the benefit of families and students. The procedure of providing

social-emotional learning is taken on at the local level by Edward's school, and he has led an initiative to put a curriculum program into place:

Our social/emotional learning programming is something we focused on pretty strongly, so we've developed our own curriculum – myself, our psychologist, our social worker, our speech pathologist... So we're directly modeling those pieces that are good for all of our kids. And they're especially good for our kids coming from homes of poverty.

Homework policies were also depicted as an aspect influenced by principal leadership to work more effectively with students from poverty. As discussed in Chapter five, students from poverty often do not have support for learning at home for a variety of reasons. This can make homework completion very difficult for students from poverty. The principals said they wanted to support students during the times they have influence over – during the school day. This caused the principals to develop a shared understanding with the teachers to rethink the expectations of homework, “Understanding that you probably [are] not going to see a lot of homework coming back if they're not sure where they're spending the night tonight” (Todd).

Ted encouraged his teachers to form their own approaches to helping students who may not have support for homework at home – procedures that can be implemented during the school day to alleviate the demands of homework allow for greater success and connection to school. Ted discussed a simple approach to help a student who did not have strong reading support at home:

He was a second grader, he was a poor reader and the teacher knew he wasn't going to be able to go home and read. But he was supposed to get in his 20 minutes of reading at night...so he arranged with a fifth grade teacher...a fifth grade buddy...and they read the last 20 minutes of school together in the hallway...when you give teachers that – the freedom to be able to do those types of things, that's a great thing to start coming out.

Edward explained more about the homework policies at his school and how general practices have been impacted among teachers when they developed a shared understanding of

how poverty impacts a student's ability to complete homework. He referred to his discussion with teachers:

Don't automatically assume because a child...doesn't get his homework done that you're [going to] just hold him accountable like you typically would in more of a traditional way. Before you go there, you need to have a little bit of understanding in terms of what is going on...Does that child have a place to do their homework? Does that child have anyone at home to remind him that [they're going to] get [their] homework done or to even...support him in the same way...practices have changed in...these areas.

Similarly, the principals described how they consider the students' socio-economic backgrounds and their approaches to the policies of attendance and tardiness with families. In Todd's school, when a student from poverty is frequently late or absent, Todd refrains from sending a form letter that may be district protocol and instead has the teacher reach out to the parent personally. Todd explained:

A lot of our students of poverty, we have some attendance and tardiness issues, so I've had to implement some policies where I have asked teachers to make some phone calls directly to those families...they usually respond pretty well...Getting a form letter that your kid has been tardy six times this quarter is very different from Mrs. Smith calling and saying, "I am very concerned. He's been late, an average of two to three days a week".

Also related to attendance, but differing in her approach, Sylvia articulated that she demonstrates flexibility with attendance and tardiness. She does this to help maintain a productive relationship with families from poverty:

[It's] something as an office staff we have become much more forgiving of and really focus on building a relationship with the family... not harping on them every time she [the parent] came late with the kids...not asking kids why they were late but taking a posture of "we're so happy to see you today...Welcome to school, have a great day". Thanking mom, wishing mom a great day...those kinds of steps have really allowed us to build good relationships with those families and I think have been really direct contributors to the students' confidence in school, to the support we get from the parents and then to the students' learning.

Examining other policies, school breakfast and lunch programs also offer policies and procedures that have an impact on students from poverty. Providing meals in school is a policy for which principals have to develop implementation systems. The federal government provides funding for meals for students from poverty through the National School Lunch Program, as defined in Chapter 1. All schools in this study participated in the National School Lunch Program, offering free or reduced lunch to students from poverty. Fran shared that providing breakfast to students required her to adjust some of the school procedures during the day, mainly related to supervision of students and accounting for student attendance and timeliness. Fran described how she has accommodated the procedure of serving breakfast:

[For] our students of poverty, we've started offering a breakfast program. So they could come into school about 25 minutes before the bell and they come in early and they get a hot breakfast every morning that's free. And that's been pretty impactful and...that's changed our schedule a little bit...We service almost 100 students every morning.

Steven also explained a unique situation his school has related to free and reduced meals. The percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch is low enough that the school does not provide a hot lunch program. This created a challenge when the school still had to provide a free or reduced lunch for those students who did qualify. Steven had to consider a way to implement the distribution of free and reduced lunch in a manner that would protect the social emotional well-being of the students. He offered his description:

We do not have a lunch program here...So we took the students' lunches, instead of putting them on a cart, we now just take them and put them in their lockers, so that the students...don't have to go to that one table to get their lunches. But even moving forward, probably making sure that they have a lunch box of their own that they can just even put in the lunch box so that they're not singled out.

In addition to providing free or reduced lunch, many of the schools also provided breakfast to students from poverty. Owen spoke about the rationale: "We started a breakfast

program for our students...the target of breakfast was our free-and-reduced lunch students. We wanted to make sure they were getting two meals a day, instead of the one that we could guarantee when we just did lunch.” Todd described how he has set up a procedure so that students can have food throughout the day, by “working with our food service contractor...to make sure that they [students] can then also grab some things for snack...an extra apple or banana or a box of cereal...” Serving breakfast has an impact on attendance and tardiness procedures in Todd’s school. This caused him to put procedures into place to accommodate the time it takes to serve breakfast before school. He explained, “We’ve adjusted procedures for attendance...to accommodate a growing number of students who are eligible for breakfast.”

In addition to attendance and meal policies and procedures, Todd identified procedures having to do with fieldtrips and ensuring that every student, regardless of his/her socio-economic status, gets to attend field trips. He described, “PTA supports our fieldtrips to a large extent. It’s not really a written policy, so it’s kind of an unwritten policy...making sure that between them and some of our [building budget accounts]...to go to bat for those experiences.”

Likewise, Edward described how he has worked to adjust the procedures for fieldtrip experiences for students from poverty. At his school, fieldtrips were set up in such a way that students had to arrive at school early to attend the fieldtrip so that transportation times to and from the fieldtrip would work out. This created an inequity as students from poverty could not always get to school early due to constraints their family faced. Edward noted:

We have fieldtrips and our school day starts at nine o’clock...And it took me a while to realize what was going on but I had kids missing fieldtrips because our teachers were expecting them to show up at school at...8:30 in the morning so that they can get on the fieldtrip. And I had to...say, “Listen, I don’t ever want one of our students missing a fieldtrip simply because he doesn’t have someone who can bring him to school.” That’s not right... so we had to make a few changes...

The implementation of policies and procedures for suburban students from poverty is influenced by the principal's leadership in a school, and the principals give careful consideration to how policies and procedures will be carried out for these students throughout the school day. The principals in this study detailed some of the policies and procedures and how they implemented them with the needs of students from poverty in mind. These included academic scheduling and programming, support services, attendance and homework policies, meals in school, extra-curricular experiences and behavior.

Relationships

Appearing again is the theme of relationships in a principal's work – this time understood through the lens of how a principal's leadership influences the relationships of others in the school. A principal's leadership influences the school experience of students from poverty by emphasizing the development of relationships between stakeholders (teacher-student, teacher-family, principal-family, etc.).

Fred expressed that “it's in our nature and it's a passion of our profession that we care for these kids outside the school because that determines what happens inside the school.” Building relationships by getting to know and understand the backgrounds of the students that are within the school was described by the principals as an important beginning step for teachers. Todd does this by sharing relevant information so teachers can get to know their students before they begin their school year. He emphasizes, “making sure that they [teachers & staff] understand who's [students] coming in...we've had students living at [the shelter]...just making sure that the teachers know that ahead of time...so that they can be aware of that.” This

demonstrates the importance that Todd places on getting to know each student's circumstance individually to connect with them.

Fred also illustrated how he emphasizes the importance of knowing who the students from poverty are, so teachers are sensitive and responsive to their needs:

From a leadership perspective, I think it's my responsibility to emphasize to our staff the importance of knowing our school and, within that, knowing our students and who these kids are and identifying them and meeting the needs that they have. I think that's something that, as a leader, I just have to hammer home and make sure that we are being sensitive to and we are responding to.

Ted talked in more detail about his desire to focus teachers on the necessity of forming relationships with students – to understand their challenges to help them overcome obstacles to learning. To him, it is necessary to show value and reinforce the positive attributes of students who may be struggling:

Really, when some of our students struggle...those are the kids that need...extra positive[s]...It's those kids that aren't doing their homework – are you getting mad at them, are you finding out why isn't he doing his homework? What's going on...Instead of getting upset with him for not doing his homework, let's take time – you show the student that you care that they're not doing their homework, and that it matters to you.

Giving teachers permission to focus on relationship building with students after a holiday break is something that Ted encourages. He provided an example of how he shares his perspectives with teachers about students' backgrounds so they can make decisions in their classrooms that will support students:

We're coming back from Christmas break, this is another good time to take an hour or two to go back and look at those relationships and really make connections with kids, and don't have them just write down what they did over their winter break, talk with them, have conversations with them, and get down on their level". I think my role has been...first of all, making them aware of the situation, and then giving them permission to do some things that hopefully will foster those relationships with kids.

Building a safe school environment Nate related relationship building to a safe school environment. The meaning of safe in this context refers to emotional safety, reducing the impact that poverty has on a student's school day:

I think if we can make sure that the school environment is a safe environment, it shouldn't matter when you show up here at school what situation you're in. You need to have the same opportunities as everybody else, you need to be treated the same...if we can...get kids to understand that...at least while they're here at school, that should help lessen those impacts... encouraging those social relationships

Throughout the findings of the study, there is an underlying current that depicts relationships as a cornerstone of the principal's work in dealing with the schooling of suburban students from poverty. This theme represents how principals view the influence of their leadership on relationships within the school.

Influences on Principal Leadership

In this higher order theme, the influences on principal leadership are explored. The findings revealed intriguing commonalities among the principals – that their life experiences, their mission, their leadership style, and their relationships with students have all influenced how they lead their school through the complexities of working with suburban students from poverty.

Principal's Life Experiences

From these interviews, a greater perspective was gained regarding the principals' own life experiences and how those experiences have formed their leadership approaches with suburban students from poverty. When asked to describe if they had experienced any constraints, obstacles, or life history that influenced their leadership in working with students from poverty, the principals were reflective. They all shared that their life history was vastly

different than that of a student growing up in poverty. They defined their experiences as those of more privileged families with access to the things that they wanted and needed. Steven summed up this aspect of his life history, “I can just say I was very fortunate to come from an affluent family and go to a Catholic school for many years, so kind of [was] isolated from poverty.” In most cases, this caused the principals to think deeply about how their life history had shaped their leadership.

Owen reflected on his life history as a middle-class suburban student. It is clear to him that reaching out to students and administrators who come from diverse environments and cultures is essential in doing his work:

I was raised middle-class, suburban, and white. And so, it takes more for you to recognize cultures or lifestyles that are different than yours, when you continue to live, work, and grow in that same area that you grew up in, you have to work a little harder on noticing what other people are—what other peoples’ cultures or backgrounds or what they bring to the same table. As a kid, you really don’t—you might not get that as much. But as you get older, and certainly since I’ve gotten into education—maybe not as much as a teacher, but certainly when I got into the administrative role, I really saw how that impacted individual kids. And that probably made me more aware of it, and made me want to do something about it, or do more about it.

Todd’s experience was similar though he expressed it differently. It is more important to Todd that he acknowledge that his experience was different, and he cannot completely understand or empathize with what a child in poverty is experiencing:

I think at some point recognizing that my experience in growing up in a white, almost exclusively white, suburb of Chicago...where people were pretty well-off and not experiencing those things. Both my parents were educators...and so there were all kinds of books and things in the house. My experience couldn’t be more different from that [of a child in poverty] but I don’t think that occurred to me until after college.

I am a white male and grew up in this suburb of Chicago and it was pretty sheltered. And no, it didn’t occur to me that I wouldn’t go to college, it didn’t occur to me that I wouldn’t have a career and that sort of thing.

Tiffany shared her perspective on how the disconnect between her life experience and the life experience of a student from poverty makes her work challenging and sometimes feels uncertain. Coming from a familial background where she felt secure and safe makes it essential for her to continue to learn and become educated on how poverty and other factors impact her students:

I think that is one thing that makes it tough for myself and many of my teachers is that we don't understand it completely...we have assumptions and we have expectations we think that all parents should meet. But we have never been in those situations where we have to work two jobs to be able to stay in our house...Of course, I try to understand it from my own perspective and from my training, but I have never experienced that. I never remember as a kid...where I ever worried where was I going to sleep, what was I [going to] eat, never anything like that. So I don't know what that feels like. And so...it's all my training and just what I've read and learned and hopefully...I'm doing this right.

The principals' comments provided an interesting juxtaposition of their life experiences with the life experiences of students from poverty. In lacking the first-hand knowledge of what it is like to live as a child in poverty, the principals created a stronger sense of empathy as they tried to understand their students better so they could provide for them in school.

The principals also described other factors from their life history that influenced their leadership – things like others' perceptions of students, formal training or coursework, faith or experiences in other work places.

How parents and colleagues view students from poverty had a significant influence on Ted's leadership. This caused him to emphasize his perspectives about treating students with equity. Ted shared a specific experience that was a turning point for him:

I guess one of the biggest changes that happened to me was when I was... [at another] elementary school...my first year, we really didn't have any of the free and reduced – I think our free and reduced lunch population was probably under 5%. But [there were] boundary changes, and...we got a couple more buses, and those happen bring in [students on the] free and reduced lunch program. And there were teachers in the building, and there were parents that came up to me and said, "Why do those kids have to come here,

those kids are gonna lower our ISAT scores.” And I started asking, “Who are those kids”, because I don’t think that way.

That was the first in my face thing that I dealt with, adults talking about “those kids.” And I think from that point on...that just became a very sore spot with me...

Formalized schooling and training also played a significant role in the life history of the principals, influencing their leadership. Tiffany explained her experience as a school social worker prior to being a principal:

I think for one thing, my social work background...I was a social worker for 13 years. And so I feel like that is who I am and that’s a piece of who I am. And so I look at kids...I think what influences me is the kids. So I see what’s happening and I feel like I react to the kids’ needs. And being a school social worker, I think maybe I see their needs a little differently than maybe another principal would because of my background. So I really focused on social-emotional learning and climate and building relationships with kids. Because research shows...how kids learn is based on the relationship that they have with the teacher.

Educational experience and professional development, in combination with personal interactions influenced Todd’s leadership approaches. One thing that has influenced him most significantly seems to be hearing from parents who experience the difficulties of raising children in poverty:

Things that have influenced me, things that I have read, and conferences that I have attended. My doctoral program at Illinois State University absolutely had a strong social justice component to it...it was pervasive. That was visited in most of our classes. Those are all influential. Working directly with some of those parent liaisons through our Title One meetings and hearing about their experiences is a big deal. That makes it a lot more real.

Drawing on the past life experience of different roles within education, Fred and Fran illustrated the influence those experiences had on their leadership style. Fred told of his experience as a high school administrator and how he saw the impact on students later in life. That caused him to realize the important impact of the elementary school experiences:

Professionally, I think being that I was a high school administrator for 10 years and working in the Dean's office in the realm of attendance and discipline, you really get to know...the kids...and what they're doing...digging deeper into why they're doing it. So I heard a lot of bad stuff for kids at that age. And so the perspective I brought from being a high school administrator for 10 years is I have seen kids who are 14, 15, 16, 17 and now I'm at an elementary school and it's like, we [have] to get to them early because, if we don't, it just gets worse and it can really get away.

Similarly, Fran discussed her role as a teacher and the influence it had on her as a principal. Her years of direct service with low income families shaped how she works with students and families. She is aware of the need for specialized and informed leadership:

As a teacher, I worked in a very low-income district for seven years...we were hovering around 70-80% low-income and so...early on, as a teacher, I learned very quickly about the effects of poverty and some of the gaps that exist and I just became very passionate about helping this group.

Sylvia also provided a rich description of varied life experiences that have influenced her leadership. Her own life history has allowed her to develop knowledge and understanding of how to help students in poverty and other challenging circumstances succeed.

As a kid my...my mom worked days, my dad often worked nights. And so we didn't necessarily do...homework around the dinner table and everybody help everybody all the time.

Sylvia continued to describe her background experiences that have contributed to her leadership approaches:

We [Sylvia and her husband] do have children that were born in a third world country that we've adopted and...I think at a most basic level...my own faith life is a factor...considering how we treat people in general and support one another as people.

Edward described how his life experiences impact his leadership by simply explaining an influence that is "coming from a place of love...where my morals and values rest." He elaborated by expressing that what he has seen as a principal has made the biggest impact on his leadership:

You want to do right, and you naturally want to...help our kids have a better situation. Have a better life. Help them improve, help them grow...first-hand seeing it as a principal, as a teacher, in all my experiences, I would say more than anything.

The life histories shared by the principals have had a significant influence on their leadership when working with suburban students from poverty. The principals described their upbringing, education, and previous work experience as elements that have shaped their leadership. Most interesting, the reality that none of the principals had ever experienced poverty created an opportunity for the principals to reflect more deeply about how this difference has influenced their approaches with students from poverty.

Preference for Shared Leadership

As the principals described how they would go about implementing policies and procedures, putting supports into place for students from poverty, or creating a school culture, time and time again they described a preference for shared decision making that influences their leadership. Very rarely were their descriptions of leadership top-down. As Edward described, many of the procedures that were implemented were accomplished “through committee approaches.”

Owen took the approach of developing shared knowledge of a situation to help others get on board. Working from a collaborative starting point he is able to bring people together to build on a common interest:

I think it's—first of all, you have to establish a need. Educate people...that there's a need, in the first place. Usually, people in education, if they realize there's a need, they want to do what's best or what's right... You have to involve people that it impacts. Identify the problem. Educate people on the problem and say, “How can we work together to do this?”

Tiffany developed shared decision making to the extent that important decisions within the school structure are led by teachers. She described how schoolwide behavior expectations were developed through shared decision making, helping to teach positive social behaviors for students from poverty. This gives teachers a greater sense of ownership in setting up systems of support for students from poverty. Tiffany elaborated:

Coming from the teachers saying we have to do it [teach common behavior expectations]. I feel like we have to do it, too, but it's going to be coming from them [teachers]...So I'm working with my teacher team and they are the ones that said...we need to do this. Fran discussed how arranging transportation for after school activities was coordinated

among groups of people, including the building secretary. She also highlighted how she included parent committees to develop shared understanding of decisions:

With the after school busing, it was really working with the district transportation director and the bus company...it was just logistics and coordinating how that would work. Our secretary played a huge role in that, helping us create some of those bus routes. And our parent liaisons were also important. We have two bilingual parent liaisons that communicate with our parents. So that communication was also important so that parents could understand the why.

Sylvia provided her teachers with the opportunity to design events for families from poverty and to craft their own professional development. This is also an example of shared decision making, giving staff the chance to contribute to how supports are designed. Sylvia illustrated what that looks like:

We use some community building type things too surrounding the diversity that's at our school. Which is not all students of poverty, but a fairly high percentage. So we have events that celebrate that as a school community as a whole. Our teachers are really heavily involved in all those events and helping. We also had a group that...had some autonomy in a professional learning opportunity...that studied the effects of poverty on students. And then they were able to share with our full staff about that.

Further, Sylvia emphasized the idea of spending time with teachers through developing the idea of honoring every child through learning and processing their stories:

We did some spend some time at an institute talking about the importance of knowing everyone's story... talked about some perceptions sometimes that I think in some cases are applicable to not just students from another country or students of poverty but students just with different backgrounds... knowing and honoring the story of each child.

Sylvia went on to describe how she talks with teachers and staff to share her perspectives and to bring them along, developing their knowledge about the importance of recognizing each student as a unique individual so the child can be supported:

It's really about a lot of one-on-one conversations and a lot of conversations about specific kids and specific incidents. It's recognizing... all of our kids at school have some unique circumstances and talents and challenges and so it's kind of a natural part of that conversation when we're talking about how to support a student is considering that big picture.

Examining his decision making through the lens of school improvement, Edward spoke about the questions that he asks his staff. He and his school psychologist work as a team to ensure that the staff has shared responsibility for equity:

What are you doing with school improvement, and how are your structures and all your tiers set up? Are they established equitably? And are you being fair in taking into consideration the social/emotional, and the demographic backgrounds of your kids, so that you're not placing kids from homes of poverty in special [education] and making it a dumping ground. They're authentic and thorough in those processes, and my psychologist and I and our team has worked hard to make sure that we're fair and ethical in that process.

Edward went on to explain how he takes a personal approach in that type of situation:

I just talked to the teachers one on one... not in a belligerent way... just explaining, "These are my expectations and here's why." And typically when I explained why, especially if it's because these kids really deserve every opportunity... it was, "OK... we'll make sure that we do that."

Ted also described how he worked with teachers individually to help them gain a better understanding about connecting with students. It is essential to him to provide a supportive and nurturing environment where his teachers are able to do their best work:

I've got to provide that [a safe and welcoming place]...whatever our staff needs so that they can do that in their classrooms. And if teachers are struggling doing that in their classrooms, making connections with kids, then I've got to either provide them with professional development or work with them independently and say, "You know what, you've got to start working with this group of kids in a different way, get a better understanding."

The principals illustrated shared leadership approaches when dealing with the schooling of students from poverty. They shared leadership with parents, teachers and staff at the district and building level to develop understanding and ownership around the implementation of policies and procedures. The principals described working side by side with others, many times through individual or committee conversations. The preferred approach of shared leadership influenced the principals' overall leadership in the school, impacting the school culture, the implementation of policies and procedures, and the relationships with others in the school. It developed and strengthened a shared mission or purpose in the school to help students overcome obstacles that poverty presents.

Mission

Participants in the study expressed a strong mission for their work that has had a significant influence on their leadership. Mission articulates purpose. It defines why we do what we do. For principals in this study, mission defined the root cause of why they focus on a situation through the lens of the child from poverty, or it might get to the root cause for carrying out procedures and policies in a certain way. Some principals focused on the purpose of their actions by describing what might be called a moral compass - it guided them to act in a certain way because it was the right thing to do.

Owen explained that his mission is to support suburban students from poverty in school so they can overcome adversity and challenges in other areas of their life. By providing teachers

with the support to help children achieve through adverse circumstances a teacher can change a student's life:

Because it's the right thing to do...And I want to eliminate obstacles to learning...I truly believe great people come from great adversity. And I think in a school setting, we have to help—we don't need to be a part of the adversity. We need to make the person feel like they are a part of us, not that they're struggling to fit in with us...it might be one positive thing that helps. It might be one less thing for a child to worry about, for a parent to worry about...I don't feel like we're taking all the worries away. But, I think it just makes school a little bit easier.

Owen summarized his mission for students, "The bottom line is the child and what they're going through, and how ready they are for learning. I want them to be as ready to learn as possible."

This philosophy articulates Owen's mission as a principal, and it influences his leadership.

Sylvia expressed a mission that has influenced her leadership focus to ensure that school meets the individual needs of every student. She said, "Honoring every kid and family in our school community." She described her mission as her ultimate goal:

Our bigger picture is working in partnership with the parents for the children to have what they need. That's our ultimate goal... for the kids to have as many opportunities as possible and not miss opportunities because of their life circumstance...-so if we can all agree that our focus is for these boys and girls to get the tools they need to be confident, social learners...

Todd articulated how he feels about his service to the students in his school, noting that his mission is to do the right thing for every student in his building. He values each student, and his commitment to each student is a primary reason for his work:

...We can certainly reach out and build relationships with parents and work on it, but we can't control that [what goes on at home]. We don't get to pick our students...every parent has sent us their best ones...So I think we make these procedures, we make these policies because it's the right thing to do for these kids...because that's the bottom line...we're going to make sure we do it and give them what they need. I don't think you're going to close an achievement gap by just telling them a certain expectation and meet it or don't...

Fred has a defined mission for caring for students. It is important to him that students know he cares:

All I want them to know is that we care and we're trying to make it better for them... I'm not going to sit across from those parents, or talk to them on the phone, or when I see them here, to pretend that I know what they're going through. I just want them to know...that I know. I'm not going to pretend that I understand...we need to communicate "We care, we're here."

Edward shared that his leadership is influenced by his mission to give every student opportunities. He believes in equal opportunity for each child:

I think more than anything I just believe that we have the responsibility to meet all kids' needs...[Be]cause it's the right thing to do...I really believe that every kid deserves every opportunity that we're able to give [them]...it shouldn't be different for any kid no matter who he or she is.

Tiffany expressed her mission very simply, "Educate the whole child." This concept influences her leadership as she implements procedures and policies, creates a school culture, and forms relationships for the benefit of students from poverty.

A principal's mission drives their leadership. It serves as their guide to answer the question, "why do I do what I do". It has an influence on the principal's leadership, which in turn influences how policies and procedures are implemented, how a school culture is shaped and how relationships are formed.

Relationships

Woven throughout the responses, sometimes in intricate ways, was the influence of relationships on leadership. It became clear from the descriptions that principal leadership is influenced by the high value the principals placed on relationships – relationships with families, students, parents, and staff, which then infiltrated all of the other areas – the school culture, their

leadership style, implementation of policies and procedures, and their interpretations of their life experiences. Ted described it as the primary goal of his leadership, “The first big step is building those relationships.”

When asked what influenced leadership actions when dealing with poverty, there was a strong response that the principals were influenced by the students from poverty – influenced by the individual stories of the students, the needs of the students, and the reactions of the students to the school experience. These areas were indicative of the influence of relationships on a principal’s leadership.

Owen articulated that the students were the main factor that influenced his leadership actions when dealing with issues of poverty. He sees that empathy goes a long way in helping students from poverty succeed:

The kids. I think of an individual person...I try to put myself in that person’s shoes and think, “How would I want to be treated? What would help me in this situation?” Or I try to put myself in that parent’s shoes and say, “What would make my life easier, in providing what I want to provide for my kids?”

Tiffany referred to her background as a social worker and related those experiences to understanding what the students need. She explained, “My background and my way of looking at kids influences what I think their needs are...I think that’s the bottom line; is what are the kids telling me they need by their actions.”

Listening to students and their stories is what influences Todd’s actions as a school leader: “Hearing from kids –you know some of the kids will share and just hearing their take on why there was this big knock down drag out argument in the lunch room and having a girl come in and tell me what happened is eye opening”. Todd elaborated on his mission and the connection it has to relationships: “I like working with the kids and I still do believe we’re here

for them and that's why we should be doing this...you take them from where they are and move them forward.”

Sylvia's emphasis on relationships was strong in her response. She expanded the relationship element to also include parents, in that the relationship with the students and their parents influences her leadership and how she responds to student needs:

The relationship that we build with parents in elementary school I think impacts how they approach school and as a result how their kids approach school moving forward... thinking about kids that either don't have time or support from their parents...not necessarily because parents don't care or aren't engaged but they're trying to work toward more basic needs...that makes me think too about our [students] who at home maybe just don't have the support or the resources.

Sylvia went on to describe a scenario in which a student's situation was not honored, which could have led to a very different outcome that could actually exclude the student from his/her educational experience. Considering the student's background and extending the opportunity of a relationship with the student played out in a more positive way for the student moving forward. This required the adults (teacher, principal, staff) in the school to be aware of and to display empathy toward the student. Sylvia illustrated this by describing such a situation:

So if you have a student for example that their prize possession is their cell phone...you notice they have it in school even though they're not supposed to...you approach the student and tell them to hand it over to take it...that's just not going to go well because the students often times would feel very threatened by that...then the issue moves from cell phone to an insubordination, disrespect issue when really if we would have taken time to know the child and know their story and build a relationship with them...I think that event could have played out differently...

Sylvia's explanation brought to light the connection between how leadership is influenced by relationships and how leadership has an influence on relationships. Feeling excited for the students' success has an influence on and affirms the principals' leadership,

which influences elements of the school such as school culture, implementation of policies and procedures, and future relationships. Sylvia portrayed this idea in the following way:

It's always great to see those times when kids have done really well with the right kind of support in place. I think that is super exciting to see and I think then those sometimes are reminders that we can do this...meet their needs and help them move forward in a positive direction

A sense of inclusion and belonging are relationship aspects that Edward identified as having an influence on his leadership. He returned to the story of the fieldtrip described earlier and how the end result of the change in fieldtrip procedures was that students felt included in the school. Edward's example of the influence of relationships on his leadership actions is illustrated by how he responded to teachers when parents could not get their students to school for the fieldtrip:

Well, then call these families...let's then support them so that we can make sure that they have the opportunity. And if they don't, let me know and we'll figure something out for [them]." And it was amazing; every kid was [able] to make it...We had to go out of our way a little bit to make sure that they were all here...But it's worth it... They just feel included; they feel part of our school.

Like his colleagues, Edward expressed that the relationship he has with the students influences his leadership:

I think the main thing that has influenced me is just getting to know these families and their kids...they're just real people...if I ride a school bus and I show up at a bus stop, I can't tell you how appreciative these parents are...They appreciate the attempts that we make on behalf of their kids.

He revealed that working with students and families from poverty has strengthened the relationship building component for him, helping him to be a more effective leader:

It's helped me tremendously...It's given me a lot more understanding. I think when you don't know and you don't understand, it's easy to like live in fear of things, like, "I wonder about this," or, "I'm afraid of that." And what they've shown me is like there's really nothing to fear.

Relationships with students, parents and staff had a significant influence on the principals' leadership, as indicated by the reflective responses in this study. The principals expressed that their interactions and connections with students from poverty guide how they respond to various situations within the school, such as fieldtrips and discipline. Their responses to such situations were influenced by the relationships they had with students, and also had an influence on the relationships moving forward.

Conclusion

The findings from this study revealed two higher order themes: influenced by the principal's leadership and influences on the principal's leadership. School culture, implementation of policies and procedures, and relationships are influenced by the principal's leadership, while the principal's life experiences, their preference for shared leadership, their mission, and their relationships with others have an influence on the principals' leadership. The cyclical relationship between the two higher order themes is complex. This cyclical relationship shows the connections that define various aspects of how the principals perceived their work with students from poverty. The most evident element in each construct was the important perspective of relationship building with students and families from poverty. Relationship building was identified as the most significant theme in this research. This will be discussed more in Chapter 7, along with the implications of the research and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Everything that takes place in a school is built on relationships and validation.
(Johnson, 2013, p.1)

The purpose of this study was to explore the elementary school principals' perspectives of working with students from poverty in the context of the suburban elementary school through the lens of social constructivist theory. Interviews were used to gather information regarding how the principals understood and developed meaning from their experiences and interactions with students from poverty in the suburban elementary context. The study was based on three research questions:

1. What is the suburban elementary school principal's perception of how poverty impacts suburban elementary students living in poverty?
2. How has the work of suburban elementary school principals been influenced by elementary students living in poverty?
3. What are the leadership practices of suburban elementary school principals that impact students living in poverty?

This chapter presents the discussion of the research findings related to the three research questions. The discussion is organized by emergent themes from each research question and connects these themes to current research into poverty's impact on schooling as well as the leadership role of the principal. The organization of the discussion follows the emergent themes

represented in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, and the figures associated with the themes. The chapter will then link the findings of the study to the theoretical framework of social constructivism. Finally recommendations will be made based on the critical learning from the study, and considerations for future research will be presented.

Discussion

This study focused on elementary school principals in suburban settings and their perceptions of working with students from poverty. The narrow focus on this group of students was twofold. First, research makes a strong case for the negative consequences poverty carries with it for students in the early years of their education. This is documented in the research over decades that reports students who experience poverty in their early years are less likely to graduate from high school, are more likely to experience learning and behavioral difficulties, and are more likely to experience a more chaotic home life over time (Brooks-Gunn 1997; Evans, 2004; Jensen, 2009). This suggests effort should be made to understand how to mitigate the effects of poverty for our youngest students. Second, the changing demographic of the suburbs, notably the increase in poverty in suburban areas as discussed in Chapter 2, requires educational leaders in suburban areas to look at school leadership, resources, policies and practices in a different light.

Research that explains how poverty impacts young students (Colclough, 2012; Cooper, 2010; Duncan, Ludwig & Magnuson, 2007; Jensen, 2009; Ladd, 2012; Myers, Kim & Mandala, 2004; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Payne, 2005) supports the findings of this study related to the principals' perceptions of poverty's influence on suburban students. How principals in this study viewed their role is also supported by current research that looks into the role of the principal in

the school experience of students from poverty (Habegger, 2008; Jensen, 2009; Payne, 2005).

Further, principals in this study described their leadership actions in ways that mirror prominent research into effective leadership components by researchers such as Fullan (2001), Marzano et al. (2005), and Sergiovanni (2001). Finally, the emphasis that principals in this study placed on relationship building as a significant influence on students from poverty is in line with research by Jensen (2009) and Payne (2005).

Principal Perception of Poverty's Influence

The first research question was designed to gain an understanding of the principals' perceptions of the ways in which poverty impacts suburban students from poverty. The principals detailed that they see poverty impacting students in a deficit manner. They provided insight into the deficit of basic needs, background experiences, and relationships. The lack of these elements in a student's life has an impact on elementary students within the school environment, a stance that is supported by extensive research on the topic, as presented in Chapter 2.

The principals shared that they see suburban students from poverty lacking basic needs such as health care, food and nutrition, and living conditions – things that are commonly taken for granted and are typically seen as being secure in a suburban setting. They saw that the lack of these basic needs presented challenges for students that caused stress and worry during the school day and detracted from the student being ready to learn. These perspectives are explained in Jensen's (2009) research into the effects of poverty on the development of young children and the impact was described by several of the principal participants in the study.

Lack of Basic Needs

There is adequate research that supports the principals' perceptions that poverty creates a deficit experience for students in the area of basic needs like nutrition and health. Jensen (2013) affirms that "children who grow up in poor families are exposed to food with lower nutritional value" (p. 24), impacting their ability to learn. Stallings (2012) presents an extensive study on the aspect of nutrition among U.S. women and indicates that individuals from low-incomes generally consume levels of fruits and vegetables that are lower than recommended amounts. In Illinois in 2010, 20.8% of children experienced food insecurity, meaning that families lacked the necessary resources to have nutritionally adequate and safe food (No Kid Hungry, 2017). This is in line with the poverty rate among school aged children at that same time, which indicates that principals' perceptions are representative of current research.

The case for health and environmental disadvantage for young children from poverty is well documented in research by Cooper (2010) and Evans (2004). Evans states that "exposure to multiple stressors may be a unique key feature of the environment of childhood poverty" (p. 77). Research reports that young children in poverty suffer from multiple stressors of impoverished nutrition, health problems and mental health risks, family living conditions and more. Seccombe's (2000) findings show that the poor are more likely to suffer from chronic health conditions like childhood asthma, depression and anxiety, and obesity when compared to middle- or upper-income peers (Cooper, 2010; Evans, 2004). In suburban areas, the effects of poverty such as these could be attributed to limited access to health care, less healthy lifestyles, and lower levels of parental education (Seccombe, 2000).

Lack of Background Experiences

Evans's (2004) research details the psychosocial impacts of childhood poverty. Psychosocial is defined by *Merriam Webster* (2017) as "relating social conditions to mental health," pointing to connections between the social condition of poverty and negative social development, such as relationship building. Evans (2004) found that parents are often more punitive in behavior management of their children in homes of poverty and that neighborhood supervision is decreased, exposing children to risks of anti-social behavior. The current research is bolstered by the findings of this study which expresses the deficit impact of poverty on children's background experiences and relationships.

In terms of background experiences, research into the early childhood experiences of children living in poverty points to reduced exposure to learning in the home and in the community. This directly impacts the knowledge students bring to school. Much of the research emphasizes gaps in vocabulary development that students from poverty have, and this was echoed by the principals in the current study. Jensen (2013) reports that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds hear approximately 60% fewer words by age four than their upper-income peers and 50% fewer than their middle-income peers. This is a point emphasized by Evans (2004) as well, indicating that social class has a significant impact on the verbal interactions parents have with their children. He asserts that "low-income compared with middle-income parents speak less often and in less sophisticated ways to their young children" (p. 80).

Children from homes of poverty also have fewer learning experiences in and outside of the home. Evans's (2004) research suggests that home environments tend to be lacking in

engaging activities focused on learning for students from poverty, such as singing alphabet songs or practicing math skills. Children are less likely to have access to children's books in the home or to adults who spend time reading to them daily. Trips to the library are not as typical for families of low socioeconomic background. There is also a lack of age appropriate toys at home that would advance their learning before coming to school (Evans, 2004). Such circumstances were described by the principals in the current study. The principals indicated that they saw the impact on the knowledge students brought with them to school – knowledge of the world around them through language exchanges and background experiences. This is particularly poignant when, as Cooper (2010) points out, “during early childhood, education-related parenting, in particular, appears to be a key family process through which poverty and economic disadvantage influence academic outcomes” (p. 481).

Lack of Relationships

The principals in the current study reported a deficit experience for suburban students from poverty regarding forming connections with others, including peers and adults. This perception is supported in research that explains students from homes of poverty are more likely to experience not only a lack of relationships but often experience negative relationships among peers and or family members. For example, the strains of poverty can induce higher levels of violence in the home and more punitive parenting. Children from situations of poverty also can experience increased separation from their family members through foster care (Evans, 2004) or temporary living environments. Cooper (2010) points out that this is “manifested in less healthy socioemotional development” for children in poverty (p. 481).

Jensen (2009) points out that the relationships for students from low socio-economic backgrounds suffer because they have “fewer and less-supportive networks than their more affluent counterparts do” (p. 8). Evans’s (2004) research bolsters this stance, citing that families in poverty have smaller social networks and are involved in fewer social organizations outside of the home. In the suburban setting this might mean that families in poverty have a smaller circle of neighborhood or community contacts and are less likely to be involved in activities like parks and recreation sports, YMCA activities, or books clubs that might be more typical of affluent families in the suburban setting. This can hinder the ways in which students from poverty develop relationships with others in the school setting.

The suburban principals in this study expressed great insight into the ways in which they see poverty influencing elementary students in their schools. The descriptions they provided reflect what research shows and what we already know about poverty’s influence on students in the elementary setting. Poverty creates a deficit influence for students in the areas of basic needs, background experiences, and relationships. These influences present unique challenges for students of poverty in the suburban elementary school. Suburban elementary principals have to use their role as principal to provide for students from poverty to overcome the influences poverty has on the children and create opportunities within the school setting that level the playing field for students.

Role of the Principal

The second research question sought to reveal how the work of the suburban elementary school principal has been influenced by elementary students living in poverty. The principal is the key figure in structuring the school experience for all students and, in this case, is the

essential figure in structuring the school experience for students from poverty. In this study, the principals explained their role as one that provided access to education through securing and allocating resources, fostering relationships, and holding high expectations for students and staff.

Providing Access to Education

Marzano et al. (2005) presents historical leadership research that describes the importance of a principal's leadership role within a school. Marzano et al. synthesized vast research reaching back to the 1960s that supports the stance that a principal's work has influence over all aspects of the school, including "students' opportunity to learn" (p. 5). Marzano et al.'s meta-analysis mainly sought to define the effect of the principal on student achievement, which is not the purpose of the current study. However, the elements of effective leadership that Marzano et al. (2005) reveal from decades of leadership studies are related to aspects of this study.

Interestingly, Marzano et al. (2005) illustrates the important role of the principal by presenting a passage of a 1977 U.S. Senate Report on Equal Educational Opportunity:

In many ways the school principal is the most important and influential individual in any school. He or she is the person responsible for all activities that occur in and around the school building. It is the principal's leadership that sets the tone of the school, the climate for teaching the level of professionalism and morale of the teachers, and the degree of concern for what students may or may not become. The principal is the main link between the community and the school, and the way he or she performs in this capacity largely determines the attitudes of parents and students about the school. If a school is a vibrant, innovative, child-centered place, if it has a reputation for excellence in teaching, if students are performing to the best of their ability, one can almost always point to the principal's leadership as the key to success. (pp. 5-6)

This passage speaks to equal educational opportunity. There is no chance at educational opportunity if there is not first access to education. The principal's role within the school

connects the equal and opportunity by structuring the school to provide equal access to education for students from poverty. The principals in the current study modeled that belief in their answers.

Coclough (2012) presents the idea of access to education as “capturing its rewards” (p. 145) and paints a description of the economic benefits of education for society. He states that the local context of education, that in part includes the role of the principal, mediates the ability of low-income students to benefit from schooling. If school leadership does not increase access to education for students from poverty, schools can perpetuate poverty rather than become a vehicle for students to escape poverty. This idea establishes a link between effective school leadership in providing access to education for students from poverty.

In contrast to the statement in the U.S. Senate Committee Report above, no principal in the current study actually described himself or herself as the most influential individual in the school. Instead their descriptions tended to describe how they work alongside of and with other partners in the school, including school district staff, parents and community members. Considering the date of the above U.S. Senate Committee Report, it is interesting to contemplate whether the influence of the principal would be represented in the same way in today’s view of educational leadership. Also of interest is why the principals in the current study did not describe their role as the most influential. Does this shed light on how influential they perceive their role to be?

Securing and allocating resources: The principals interviewed in this study saw their work in securing and allocating material and financial resources for students from poverty to be an important role so the obstacles associated with poverty were minimized and students came to school ready to learn. This role of the principal is more behind the scenes type of work, but it

still has a great influence on students from poverty. Brown (2016) describes this as indirect work on students' behalf because it is less overt than some other leadership practices. The principal's role in this capacity supports access to learning for students from poverty. Title I resources and school budget resources fall into this category, as do resources from organizations like churches, parent-teacher organizations, and community centers.

Principals are the main decision makers into how resources at the building level are allocated and can craft a specific design to direct resources toward influencing learning experiences for students from poverty. Directing financial resources toward students from poverty helps schools, teachers, and students meet learning goals and broader district initiatives (Brown, 2016). The principals in the current study described some of the initiatives that are typical in the suburban schools, like using technology for learning. For example, one principal designed the allocation of one-to-one technology devices to students using Title I funds. Another principal worked to ensure that Wi-Fi was available to low-income families around the community so students could use their devices to access learning outside of school. Using individual devices and having access to internet services were part of the instructional framework of this particular suburban district, and the principal allocated resources so students from poverty had equal access to the essential materials related to the initiative. Working in this manner is an example of the principal's role in securing and accessing resources that will help to meet students' needs (Brown, 2016).

The principal's role in securing and allocating resources is linked to the description in the U.S. Senate Committee Report cited above as "the main link between the community and the school" (in Marzano, 2005, pp. 5-6). Principals placed an emphasis on how they worked with their school level parent-teacher organization to provide funding for field trips for low-income so

all students could benefit from and build on those experiences in future learning. The principals also used their role to secure materials like school supplies and clothing to level the field for students from poverty, hoping to reduce the stressors that come with living in poverty and to provide a more solid foundation upon entering school.

Holding high expectations: Holding high expectations for students and staff alike was represented across the interviews as a means for providing access to education for students from poverty. Johnson (2013) contends that “poverty does not mean a person is unable to succeed. Children who live in poverty can meet high expectations and standards” (p. 1). The principals in this study talked about their perspectives on high expectations with a hopeful take on moving students forward from their current situation. They took action to establish a culture of high expectations among teachers, students and parents and described it as their responsibility. They accomplished this by holding teachers to high instructional expectations and ensuring that they have “the very best teachers in every class” (Todd, 2016).

Cooper (2010) bolsters the case for ensuring effective teachers in every classroom, particularly in the elementary school, by presenting research that states, “During early childhood, for example, teachers’ grade-level experience and level of education predict early learning” (p. 482). There is also some indication in the research presented by Cooper that more qualified teachers are more likely to have a high level of involvement by parents of students. This could be due to their effectiveness at connecting with parents and having more strategies to draw from to encourage parent involvement.

Cooper (2010) discusses the idea of holding high expectations by explaining that families can actually become discouraged from participating in school if they sense that the school has low expectations for their child. Families with a low-income background are already challenged

to establish a high level of participation in their child's school experience, so this is a factor that should not contribute another obstacle. When principals hold high expectations for children from poverty and communicate those expectations with students and staff, families become more optimistic about their child's future and more willing to participate in school with their child. This can lead to the well-established benefit of parents' involvement in their child's schooling experience, as described in Cooper.

Cooper's (2010) research suggests that establishing a belief that families' from poverty participation in school matters is reminiscent of Dweck's (2008) research on growth mindset. The principals in this study described that they hold high expectations for students and staff through their words and actions. This is akin to developing a belief that students can grow and reach higher levels of achievement if this belief is communicated and demonstrated. The work of principals to communicate and act in such a way that promotes growth in students may lead to students persisting and overcoming obstacles in their learning that are presented by poverty. Putting high expectations into action for students from poverty "can help students start to develop a growth mindset and... can lead to higher achievement for students facing greater adversity" (Claro et al., 2016, p. 8664). This view applies to students who are overcoming adverse situations due to poverty.

A component of holding teachers to high expectations is to provide quality professional development for teachers so students have access to effective instruction. Kennedy (2010) highlighted the practices of teachers in improving literacy achievement through the implementation of an intervention focused on essential literacy skills for first grade students in high-poverty schools. The intervention resulted in significant growth for students in literacy during their first grade year, contributable in part to teachers' high expectations for students.

This stance parallels Jensen's (2009) stance that "teacher beliefs and assumptions play a big part in the outcome, *especially* for students subjected to low expectations" (p. 112 emphasis in original). Students from poverty need a message of hope and aspiration and that can be communicated through the principal's and the school's expectation for them. The principals in this study communicated that message of high expectations and hope for their students.

Holding high expectations for students, teachers and parents is one way these principals provided access to education for students from poverty. Professional development for staff that focused on effective teaching along with encouraging parental involvement in schooling helped to create a climate in which learning was an expectation for all students, regardless of their background. Fostering relationships played an important part in establishing a climate of high expectations among the students, teachers and parents and could not be overlooked. This element is examined in the following section.

Fostering relationships: The principals in this study built relationships both within and outside of the school to increase access to education for students from poverty. They worked with organizations outside of the school to connect families with resources such as before and after school care and adult education classes on how to help their child at home. One principal described a relationship that he formed with an outreach center to provide after school tutoring for students and to also provide staff development on understanding the situation of poverty that students come from. The principals explained that they did these things to give students from poverty an increased chance to access learning during the school day. They saw their role as a way to level the playing field by advocating for students and connecting families in poverty to people and to resources. This is reminiscent of the role of securing and allocating resources

described earlier, but places an emphasis on how forming relationships with outside organizations is a benefit to students from poverty by increasing their access to learning.

Of more significant note was the emphasis the principals placed on forming strong social-emotional connections with students in the school so they would have a stronger sense of belonging, reduced stress and be more available for learning. This role is supported by the research of Payne (2005) and Jensen (2009), among others. Their research supports that developing relationships is a necessary foundation for impacting learning for students from poverty.

In particular, Jensen (2009) links the power of relationships with students from poverty to brain development. He points out that through positive relationships, students learn positive emotional responses to situations they may otherwise fail to know how to navigate. This translates into school performance when students who lack relationship skills may become frustrated too easily to complete complex tasks or not work well in groups with other students. In that situation, students cannot gain from the school experience. Behaviors, or lack of positive behaviors, actually impedes their ability to access learning. By focusing on the strength of relationship building and helping students develop appropriate responses to the social situations within learning, principals can increase access to learning for students from poverty. This is especially poignant in early elementary school (Jensen, 2009).

The importance of relationships that focus on social-emotional well-being for students from poverty cannot be underestimated. Payne (2005) devotes an entire chapter in her book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, to the topic. Payne conducted years of research in her work as an educational administrator and shared her insights after conducting research with teachers, administrators, and students. Her studies thoroughly examine the different types of

poverty, how people perceive poverty, and how schools can respond to poverty. Specifically, she provides insight into how schools can respond instructionally if they understand the deeper meaning and situations of poverty. Understanding poverty includes fostering meaningful relationships between teacher and student, administrator and student, and student-to-student. In the school setting that is accomplished “through support systems, through caring about students, by promoting student achievement, by being role models, by insisting upon successful behaviors for school. *Support systems are simply networks of relationships*” (p. 111). This not only defines the essential component of relationships but also is reminiscent of holding high expectations. Payne’s (2005) research is strongly reflected in the perspectives shared by the principals in this study, emphasizing the power of the relationships within the school to influence students from poverty.

The principals emphasized the importance they placed on relationships and on creating safe and accepting environments so students know they are cared about first and foremost. The principals discussed how they approach students and families in a non-judgmental manner based on respect for their story. This is emphasized by Westerberg (2016), who writes that respect is the basis for healthy relationships in the school. Respect is conveyed through personal interactions that are caring and kind. The principals in the study explained that they accomplished this through modeling behavior that is empathetic or does not single out families based on their low-income and demonstrates support. These relationship building qualities help students by creating an environment in which they are emotionally safe, reducing stress and helping them be ready for learning.

The discussion of research question two sheds light on the principals’ shared perspectives of their role in working with students from poverty. The principals viewed providing access to

education as central to their role by securing and allocating resources, holding high expectations, and fostering relationships. These three themes were prominently represented by the principals to be the main ways in which they provided access to the school experience for students.

Research bolsters the principals' perceptions that these elements are essential elements of their work, especially in the context of early learning at the elementary level. Further, providing access to education through these channels for suburban elementary school students from poverty is essential for their success in elementary school and in future years.

Principal Leadership

The leadership practices of suburban elementary school principals that impact students living in poverty was the focus of the third research question. Information has been presented that supports the principal as having a significant impact on all aspects of the functioning of a school (Marzano et al., 2005). This portion of the discussion is dedicated to gaining a greater understanding of the principals' perspectives of their own leadership when working with suburban elementary students from poverty. The findings resulted in a two dimensional understanding of principal leadership – elements of the school that are influenced by principal leadership and elements that have an influence on the principal's leadership. The two dimensions form the higher order themes of the research findings. Lower order themes were revealed for each higher order theme. School culture, implementing policies and procedures and relationships emerged from the first higher order theme as elements that are influenced by principal leadership. The principal's life experiences, preference for shared leadership, mission, and relationships emerged from the second higher order theme as elements that have an influence on principal leadership.

What is more is that the relationship between the two dimensions is cyclical – the themes influence one another. The elements that have had an influence on principal leadership impact the way a principal makes decisions in the school environment. Elements of the school are influenced by the principal's leadership and, thus, become an experience that has an influence on the principal's leadership. This demonstrates that principal leadership is dynamic and diversified and influenced by many factors. Leithwood's (1994) detailed description of transformational leadership is a useful framework to create more understanding about the cyclical relationship between these two factors.

Current research concludes that principals “simultaneously practice leadership behaviors associated with multiple leadership styles in accordance with their background and school context” (Urlick & Bowers, 2014, p. 97). This is a meaningful frame as the study focuses on working with elementary students from poverty in the context of the suburban elementary school. Also of interest is the presence of the principal's background life experiences as an influence on principal leadership. Responses from the principals support the research findings that they use multiple leadership styles depending on the need and context of the situation that students from poverty are experiencing. The principals' descriptions of their leadership behaviors were reminiscent of transformational leadership and servant leadership.

Leithwood (1994) explains that the leadership practices are “overt behaviors” (p. 502) that leaders put into play and that leadership behaviors are a product of “internal processes” that the leader possesses, such as “past experiences, feelings, beliefs, preferences and thought processes that feed into the leader's overt behaviors” (p. 502-503). This supports the findings of the cyclical relationship between the two-dimensions discussed above – elements influenced by principal leadership and elements that have influence on principal leadership.

Servant leadership resonated in the principals' responses. Servant leadership was first developed as a leadership concept in the 1970s by Robert Greenleaf (Reinke, 2004). Greenleaf (1977) defines servant leadership as "the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (p. 6). Servant leaders place a priority on the needs of others and serving others to their benefit. The ultimate goal of servant leadership is that those being served become "healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants" (p. 6). What is exceptional in relation to the current study is that Greenleaf (1977) poses the question, "what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit or at least not be further deprived" (p. 6). Servant leaders are motivated to serve others out of an altruistic nature (Parolini, Patterson & Winston, 2009).

Parolini et al. (2009) offer a detailed distinction between transformational and servant leadership. Their research points out distinctions in the two types of leadership signified by the moral, focus, motive and mission development and influence distinctions. Their conclusion offers the explanation that

transformational leaders were differentiated by their focus on the needs of the organization, inclination to lead first, allegiance toward the organization, and influence through conventional charismatic approaches as well as control...servant leaders as differentiated by their focus on the needs of the individual, inclination to serve first, allegiance toward the individual, and influence through unconventional service as well as through offering freedom or autonomy.

There are times when principals might draw on leadership actions that are concurrent with transformational leadership if they are influencing the larger organization, such as in cases in which they are implementing policies or procedures or building school climate. Other times they may draw on servant leadership, such as if they are discussing ways to alleviate tardiness issues with a family in poverty or discussing supports with a teacher for child who is chronically

missing homework. Each of the emergent themes stemming from this section on principal leadership will be discussed in relation to the research on transformational and servant leadership.

Influenced by Principal Leadership

There is ample research, conducted over many decades, into the many facets of the school that are influenced by principal leadership, and Marzano (2005) represents this research in his meta-analysis. He points out that “leadership is considered to be vital to the successful functioning of many aspects of a school” (p. 5). Principal leadership impacts positive change in a school by influencing the climate and culture of the school, the instructional practices in the classrooms, the outlook of the teachers, and ultimately student achievement. Principals in this study represented the influence of their leadership on school culture through implementing policies and procedures and relationships. Responses from the principals in this study reflected that their leadership has an influence on creating a school culture that is overall helpful to suburban low-income students and their families. They emphasized how their leadership influences how policies and procedures are implemented with overall sensitivity to the students and their families so as not to distance them from the school.

School culture: Creating a positive culture that focuses on the needs of students is an imperative component of the principal’s work. Culture is the cornerstone of the principal’s work in a school as it provides the solid foundation for all other work of the principal (Habegger, 2008). Research represents that the leadership of the principal is a strong influence on school culture. It is seen as having an indirect impact on students and is essential to bringing about positive change in an educational organization. Marzano et al. (2005) define culture as “the

extent to which the leader fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation among staff” (p. 48). In the context of this study, school culture is extended to include how the principals’ leadership influences the school culture for students and their families.

The principals in this study shared that they influence the culture of the school through focusing their efforts on creating a sense of belonging for students and families from poverty. They emphasized that they model behavior that is accepting and welcoming in the school environment, where families can rely on the school if they need something for their child. They model such behavior so that the whole school takes on a shared responsibility for the students. These descriptions of principal leadership have strong connections to servant leadership as the principal creates a school culture that exists to serve its students and families, especially those in need.

Creating and communicating a clear vision that every child can learn was also expressed by the principals in this study as work that builds a positive school culture. Representation of growth mindset surfaces in this context as principals establish a school culture based on the belief that all students can grow and learn (Dweck, 2008). This also connects to the research on transformational leadership, which supports that principals shape a school culture through the establishment and frequent communication of a mission and vision (Urick & Bowers, 2014).

The principals placed an emphasis on sharing information about the background of students in non-judgmental and caring ways. They believed this helped teachers develop relationships based on care and concern for students, which in turn helped break down barriers to learning. Focusing on the individual student and social-emotional needs, this was more typical of a servant leader response. They also stressed that they make sure they send a message in their actions and words that every student and family in the school is valued, setting the tone for how

the school responds to the students and their families. These elements echo the transformational leadership component that tends toward offering individualized support to strengthen the overall organization (Urlick & Bowers, 2014).

Also in the vein of transformational leadership, the principals described how they gave teachers permission to veer away from academics in their classrooms so they could focus on getting to know students. In other areas, the principals explained that they had to work to influence the beliefs and perceptions among staff and community members that students from poverty can succeed in school. This is demonstrative of the component of transformational leadership that demonstrates high performance expectations.

The leadership actions the principals described had a direct impact on the school culture. Their actions promoted cohesion within the school for addressing the social emotional needs of students and for creating a kind, welcoming, and caring environment that served individuals and families. They also furthered the schools' missions and visions to ensure that all students benefit from school, in particular those from poverty. These elements are symbolic of transformational leadership and servant leadership.

Implementing policies and procedures: There were indications of transformational and servant leadership in the principals' responses to how they implemented policies and procedures within the school. The principals addressed policies that might infringe on the basic rights of students to have an emotionally safe environment, such as segregating low-income students for instruction or excluding students from field trips if they could not arrive to school on time due to lack of transportation.

In one context, a principal adjusted the policies and procedures of the school-wide academic schedule to accommodate students from low-income second language backgrounds.

These students were previously separated from the general education environment, which created inequities in their school experience and furthered the stigma that they were different than their peers. The principals built a master schedule for the whole school around making sure the students were getting instruction minutes with their peers through a co-teaching model. This fostered a sense of community within the school that is typical of transformational leadership.

Other programmatic procedures that principals implemented were indicative of transformational leadership. One principal described an outreach program he led that included visits to an apartment complex where many low-income families resided. Once there, school staff would lead activities that provided students with experiences in social relationships. Another example was the implementation of social emotional learning curriculum implemented school-wide. Programs such as these were designed to directly reach low-income families and students, and ultimately had an influence on the overall improvement of the organization (Urick & Bowers, 2014).

Representative of servant leadership, the principals used their leadership to influence how teachers responded to students who do not have support for completing homework at home. They focused efforts on creating individual supports for students during the school day. They encouraged understanding from the teachers and shared the individual circumstances of students to create greater ownership in the success of the student. How principals respond to issues of attendance and tardiness is also an area in which servant learning came into play. In this area, the principals discussed that they sometimes arranged special transportation or changed the times of school events so students could be on time and participate in the activities. This clearly demonstrates putting the needs of the student and family first, and is indicative of servant leadership.

The policies and procedures associated with providing meals for low-income students during the school day are representative of a high priority need. When principals used their leadership to influence how students are provided meals in a manner that demonstrates integrity, they were calling on servant leadership. One principal described that the school-wide arrival procedures had to be adjusted so that students from poverty who were in need of breakfast could go to the cafeteria and eat breakfast and not be marked tardy for class. He felt that students should not have an increased number of tardy marks on their educational record because they did not have access to food at home. Another principal described how he changed the procedure of distributing free lunch to students by placing it individually into the students' lockers instead of handing it out on a cart in the cafeteria where everyone could see who was provided lunch. He took it a step further by providing an individual lunch box to those students to further reduce the stigma of poverty.

These actions are demonstrative of policies and procedures influenced by a principal's leadership. Transformational and servant leadership provided insight into defining the leadership approaches related to implementing policies and procedures.

Relationships: Relationships within a school: teacher to student, principal to student, and student to student are influenced by principal leadership and are essential to the positive culture of a school. Transformational and servant leadership rely on the principals' ability to form relationships. Principals influence relationships with these stakeholders through their actions and interactions, and model and demonstrate the power of positive relationships. Westerberg (2016) refers to this as affinity, when principals connect with students and establish relationships that bring students "joy" and "ease their burdens" (p. 59).

The relationships that principals formed with students sought to serve the student and, as such, are reflective of servant leadership. As the student benefits, so does the school organization, which connects relationship building to transformational leadership. The principals in this study shared that they model relationship building with students and families in poverty to influence the staff to get to know their students individually. The principals highlighted that they spent time developing the knowledge that teachers and staff have about the individual students in the school ensuring that teachers are sensitive to the students' needs. They viewed it as an obligation of their leadership. Their goal was to develop a sense of belonging and caring in the school environment so students would have a stronger connection with school and be more likely to experience success.

Influences on Principal Leadership

Leithwood (1994) declares that "leadership only manifests itself in the context of change, and the nature of that change is a crucial determinant of the forms of leadership that will prove to be helpful" (p. 499). While there is generous research into the influence that principal leadership has on student performance, surprisingly, there is a lack of research literature into the factors that have an influence on principal leadership. Leithwood's 1994 report makes brief mention of the internal (past experiences, feelings, beliefs, preferences, thought processes) and external influences (formal training, informal socialization experiences) on principal leadership, and this provides a starting point for more consideration. Urick and Bowers (2014) point out that more research is needed into principals' perceptions of their own leadership, which would provide greater insight into the elements that influence a principal's leadership. In light of that, this section draws from the principal's responses to connect the themes of background life

experiences, preference for shared leadership, mission, and relationships to transformational and servant leadership.

Principals' life experiences: This portion of the discussion will focus on the factors that have influenced the principals' leadership in dealing with poverty in the suburban elementary school context. This is supported by Leithwood's (1994) frame that past experiences influence a leader's actions.

There were a variety of background experiences the principals brought to this study, including advanced degrees, multiple years of experience as a principal, and faith experiences. A common thread among them was a suburban middle-class life history. As the principals reflected on the idea of what has influenced their leadership in working with students from poverty in the suburban elementary school setting, they were highly reflective. What is interesting about this point is that the principals had a disconnect with the experience of growing up in poverty that actually caused them to be more concerned for the students. They took on an empathetic tone in their answers, describing that they could not imagine the strife these students faced coming from situations of poverty. They expressed that they had never been in the position they saw many of their students and families in – lacking enough money to buy food, not knowing where they might sleep at night, or not having a hope for their future. This empathy drew out a desire in the principals to provide an experience that did not judge students based on their socio-economic background but instead saw them as a valued individual. This speaks of servant leadership, drawn from a place of wanting to serve (Greenleaf, 1977). Spears (2002) strengthens this discussion by indicating empathy as a critical characteristic of servant leadership.

Also in line with Leithwood's (1994) explanation of influences on leadership, the participants indicated that their formal training in university programs and workplace professional development influenced their leadership. One principal cited the social justice underpinnings during his doctoral program that influenced his leadership. Overcoming social biases was represented in only one response, as the principal had to confront community members who were not accepting of the students and families from poverty attending the suburban school. Others contemplated their past roles as social workers, teachers, and secondary school administrators, contrasting their current experience as a suburban elementary school principal with their previous work. In all, the principals were highly insightful and reflective about the forces that have influenced their current leadership with students from poverty.

Preference for shared leadership: Within the construct of transformational leadership is the factor of "developing structures to foster participation in school decisions" (Urick & Bowers, 2014, p. 100). There was strong indication from the principals in this study that they shared decision making capacity with the teachers and staff within the school. The principals operated in this manner so they could garner support for their work, build a sense of teamwork, and ultimately create a support structure for students from poverty. This approach was taken by the principals who structured committees to work on specific initiatives directed at issues of poverty, like social-emotional learning. Working with teachers to create a curriculum used exclusively at their school provided teachers ownership over the curriculum and allowed them to design it to the unique needs of their students. The teachers came to see great benefit in the program for students, and the whole school gained a sense of pride in their connectedness. In a similar situation, another principal fostered the leadership and growth of teachers by providing them with the opportunity to design events for families and to craft their own staff development

related to low-income student populations. The principals also reported a shared decision making approach to school improvement, response to intervention, and instructional improvement with students from poverty. In this vein, the teachers felt empowered and committed to the greater good of the school organization and to making the school experience valuable for students from poverty.

Overall, the principals' preference for shared leadership was a key indicator that transformational leadership was a strong component that influenced their leadership. Urick and Bowers (2014) established a link between shared leadership and transformational leadership in that this approach boosts the involvement of teachers in decision making and builds community by focusing on the needs of students. Urick and Bowers (2014) summarize the significance of this approach: "Principals increase the extent of their influence over school improvement by sharing leadership with teachers" (p. 98). Additionally, shared leadership as described in the leadership actions above, is also demonstrative of servant leadership. The principals' commitment to the growth of teachers and the resulting contributions of the teachers to the growth of others points to characteristics of servant leadership (Spears, 2002).

Mission: Mission had a strong influence on the leadership of the principals in this study. Seeking to define why they act in the ways they do when responding to students from poverty, the principals used their moral compass to do the right thing for the students. They placed students from poverty at the center of their decisions, citing that they had a strong drive to "eliminate obstacles" (Owen, Interview, 2016) and to be present for every student and honor the individual story of the children, regardless of their background. The principals also explained that they want to try to make things better for the students, to partner with families to provide as many opportunities for learning as possible, and to reduce the stressors of poverty by reducing

adversity at school. This drive to do what is right for the students from poverty demonstrates the principals' commitment to contributing to the students' growth and development as individuals. It also demonstrates the principals' ability to conceptualize what the future could look like for the students in poverty. These are characteristics that contribute to servant leadership (Spears, 2002). Missions guided the principals' leadership actions and caused them to respond with behaviors in line with servant leadership.

Relationships: Relationships with students from poverty within the school setting were described as having a significant influence on principal leadership in the context of this study. The individual stories of students and the way that principals viewed the needs of the students impacted how the principals responded. The relationships the principals had with students from poverty were based on empathy, a component we see throughout this study.

Relationships with parents were also represented as having an influence on principal leadership. Through providing support and connecting with families on an individual level, the principals' leadership was influenced. Forming a relationship with a family helped the principal develop an understanding the needs of a family in poverty. For instance, the family may have after school childcare needs, transportation difficulties, or crowded living conditions that impact the child during the school day. If the principal has a relationship with the family, there is a basis of trust that will allow the principal to help the child and the family by providing connections in the community, arranging transportation with the district, and/or working with the teacher to provide homework support during the day.

At the heart of transformational and servant leadership is the principal's relationship with others. This section brings together the two dimensions of principal leadership presented earlier in this chapter – elements influenced by principal leadership and elements that have an influence

on principal leadership. The two dimensions are tied together by the critical theme of relationships in principal leadership. Relationships that perpetuate the cycle of what has an influence on principal leadership become the basis for what is influenced by principal leadership. As the principals worked to mitigate the impact of poverty on suburban elementary students, they drew first on the importance of relationships.

The principals' responses to their perspectives of leadership presented complex information that revealed the intricacies of principal leadership in working with suburban elementary students from poverty. The principals had to think deeply about the school culture that they influence and to reflect on the policies and procedures they impact through implementation. To become even more conscious about their perspectives, the principals expressed what it is that has an influence on their leadership. They represented rich information about their life experiences, their preference for shared leadership and their mission. Standing out as the key finding is the theme that emerged from both dimensions – relationships. Definitively, the theme of relationships emerged across all research findings, making it the most compelling theme related to how principals perceive their work with suburban elementary students from poverty.

Social Construct of Relationships

When students who have been in poverty (and have successfully made it into middle class) are asked how they made the journey, the answer nine times out of 10 has to do with a relationship – a teacher, counselor, or coach who made a suggestion or took an interest in them as individuals. (Payne, 2005, p. 110)

This statement by Ruby Payne brings together the research from this study and places it firmly in the social construct of relationships. Human interaction and associations are social by

nature, and social constructivism provides a framework for individuals to understand and develop the meaning of those social associations (Berger & Luckman, 1967). Through the theoretical framework of social constructivism, the principals made sense of their experiences of working with suburban elementary students from poverty through the lens of relationships.

The principals responded to the context of suburban poverty by building relationships. The associations the principals had with the students, teachers, parents and community formed their perceptions about their work as an educational leader in the context of the suburban school. Through understanding the social dimension of relationships in their work, the principals developed meaning that helped them navigate the complex situation of educating suburban elementary students from poverty. The principals in this study have constructed meaning from their own unique experiences in working with suburban students from poverty—they are relationship builders.

Critical Considerations

Three critical considerations became prominent after analyzing the research from this study. First, this study confirms that relationship building is a key element in the principalship, in particular when working with students from poverty. There is ample research presented in the literature that promotes this idea, and the principals' perspectives from this study support this view. The second critical consideration is that poverty is a real and present issue for principals in suburban elementary settings. Finally, the third critical consideration is that principals in suburban elementary schools must possess strong relational skills to effectively work with suburban students from poverty so that the students can benefit from their school experience. These three critical considerations provide insight into the recommendations from this study.

Recommendations

Three key recommendations for school districts are presented from this study. The first recommendation is related to the hiring and supervision of principals, while the other two recommendations are related to professional development for principals. Through this study, a greater understanding of the principals' perceptions of working with suburban elementary students from poverty has been gained. In gaining a more thorough understanding of the principals' perspectives, professional practice can be positively impacted to increase the students' chances for success later in school and in life. The Illinois Performance Standards for School Leaders bolster these recommendations as they articulate relationship building, equity and high expectations in the principal's work (Illinois Principals Association, 2017).

This study provides recommendations for school districts in the hiring and supervision of principals. As suburban school districts experience increased rates of poverty, they can use the information gleaned from this study to hire and supervise principals with strengths in relationship building across stakeholder groups. It is essential that the hiring and supervision of principals in suburban elementary schools focus on relational skills as a vital component. Empathy, connectedness, collaboration, caring and compassion should be at the top of the list of traits as suburban school districts look to place effective principals in positions of leadership. These traits are essential for principals to develop and maintain strong relationships with families from poverty to mitigate the negative effects that poverty has on the educational experience. Relationships help by strengthening the connection to school for families from poverty. Because of stronger connections to school, greater access to education is possible for students from poverty. Hiring principals that possess strengths in relationship skills will build a school culture

that is centered on equity and high expectations for suburban students from poverty, both themes that were represented in this study.

Markedly revealed through this study is the necessity of principal leadership development in relationship building. This is the second recommendation. It is imperative that school districts provide professional development for principals that concentrates on the importance of developing relationships with families from poverty. Professional development should emphasize leadership actions that demonstrate relationship building with stakeholder groups. Transformational and servant leadership styles should be a main component in the professional development of principals as these styles are rooted in relationships. Considerations for professional development in this area include engaging families from poverty, communicating with equity and sensitivity, and creating a safe and supportive learning environment for students from poverty.

The third recommendation is to ensure that professional development prepares principals in suburban elementary schools to become fully aware of the implications of poverty for students, as well as how to work with students from poverty, so that students can maximize the benefits of school. Vital to this professional development is the importance of understanding the impact of poverty on students from the earliest stages of school. Suburban districts would be well-served to consider these essentials in designing professional development programs for principals. Professional development for suburban elementary school principals must emphasize the knowledge and understanding of the situation of suburban poverty and the importance of knowing how to work with students from poverty to help students learn and to reap the maximum benefit from their school experience.

Limitations

Ten elementary schools from four districts in a large, metropolitan county of Chicago are represented in this research. This is a small sample size as there are 159 elementary schools in 35 elementary or unit districts within the county. While the findings of the study may be transferable to similar contexts, they may not be generalizable on a broader scale.

Future Research Considerations

As a result of this study, several considerations for future research are made. Research into the differences among urban, suburban, and rural poverty would be substantially informative for educational leaders. Missing from the research to this point is how to best address poverty in suburban settings given the geography of suburbs. Suburbs typically cover larger land areas and may be more likely to lack public services like transportation and health care. The unique characteristics of suburbs, and how suburban areas differ from urban and rural areas, poses an interesting backdrop for studying poverty and schooling.

Also of interest is research into the experience of the suburban family living in poverty. Research could reveal intriguing perspectives that have not been previously considered about families' perspectives on the experience of living in poverty. It would be enlightening to gain the perspectives of children in suburban poverty regarding what they view as having a significant influence on their school experience. This could help local school districts advance their understanding of the needs of families and children in their schools, helping to guide programming decisions at the local level. Considering how to treat the education of suburban students in poverty is a topic that needs more research.

Future research should explore how the years of experience that a principal has in his or her role influences how he or she works with students from poverty. This would offer insight into whether the years of experience a principal has presents different approaches taken with students from poverty. Additionally, future studies should examine whether the level of poverty in a school influences the principal's actions in working with students from poverty. This would lead to the discernment of principal leadership practices in different contexts of poverty within suburban elementary settings. Finally, through a narrative analysis, one could investigate how principals deal with large increases in the number of students from poverty in suburban settings in order to gain greater understanding and awareness of the issue of the impact poverty has on the role of the principal.

This study also provides guidance for future leadership studies. Of interest would be pursuing study of principals' perceptions of their own leadership. As Urick and Bowers (2014) point out, research into principal perceptions of their own leadership is lacking and could help further understanding of the influence of factors such as principal background and school context on leadership. Such research could generate a greater understanding of how principal leadership informs improvement within a school organization, and lead to principal growth and confidence across school contexts.

Conclusion

This study makes a contribution to the field of educational leadership by presenting a deeper understanding of principals' perceptions of working with students from poverty in suburban elementary schools. The ultimate goal of improving professional practice for

principals is to improve the school experience for students, therefore increasing their learning And their chances for success throughout school and later in life.

Poverty has a profound impact on the education of our youngest students, and its impact is felt and seen at a growing rate in our suburban communities. Focusing on how suburban elementary principals perceive their work considering the juxtaposition of poverty against the backdrop of the suburban setting provides an interesting context for the study. It is important to gain a greater understanding of the principals' perceptions of their work so educational leaders can learn how to more effectively navigate the complexity of the impact of poverty on students in the suburban school setting. The work of the principal is emphasized in this study because of the key role a principal plays and the impact school leadership has on the school experience for students from poverty.

The suburban setting is one that is typically associated with abundance and affluence – where students come from backgrounds that provide basic needs, background experiences, and relationships that will set them up for success in school. Poverty, however, creates a critical deficit experience for students that presents a multitude of challenges for their learning. It is the elementary suburban principal's work, as school leader, to mitigate the effects of poverty on our youngest students.

Research presented in this study points to an increase in suburban poverty since 2000 (Berube & Frey, 2002) when the number of people living in poverty in suburban areas surpassed the number of people living in poverty in urban centers. This shift in the demographics of suburbs has brought about change for schools, in particular school leaders, as they strive to provide quality school experiences for all students.

In this qualitative study, the principals shared great insight into their perceptions of how poverty impacts students in suburban school settings. They revealed that they see poverty impacting students in a deficit manner through the lack of basic needs, lack of background experiences, and lack of relationships. The principals' insights into these areas revealed the difficult circumstances of students and families living in poverty and the influence it has on the suburban school experience. The principals also described how they perceived their role to be one of providing access to education through leveling the playing field for students from poverty. They did this by securing and allocating resources, fostering relationships, and holding high expectations.

Finally, the principals detailed their leadership in relation to working with suburban students from poverty: what they viewed to be influenced by their leadership and what they viewed to have an influence on their leadership. The components they described as having been influenced by principal leadership were school culture and how policies and procedures were implemented. Significantly, the principals also discussed the relationships within the school and community that are influenced by their leadership in the context of working with suburban students from poverty.

Of particular interest in the area of principal leadership, the principals reflected deeply on the factors that had influenced their leadership in the context of working with suburban students from poverty. They portrayed their life experiences, their preference for shared leadership, and their mission in their work. Of notable interest in this area was the idea that their relationships have a considerable influence on principal leadership. Thus, the social construct of the principal's role was as a relationship builder. This finding is significant as it bolsters what current research proposes with the actual perceptions and understandings of practitioners.

Additionally, it offers a more thorough understanding of the principals' work that can be built on to inform future practice in the complex setting of suburban schools with increasing rates of poverty.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Research Question	Interview Questions
4. What is the suburban, elementary school principal's perception of how poverty influences suburban elementary students?	l. How do you think poverty impacts suburban elementary students? m. Describe how you have seen poverty impact students': i. Social interactions ii. Learning iii. Behavior n. As you think about yourself as a school leader, what do students from poverty need from you?
5. How has the work of suburban elementary school principals been influenced by elementary students within the school who live in poverty?	o. Describe your experience in working with elementary school students living in poverty. p. What role does an elementary school principal play in the school experience of students living in poverty? q. What has your role been in helping to mitigate the effects that poverty has on suburban elementary students?
6. What leadership practices of suburban elementary school principals impact students living in poverty?	r. How have you worked with the teachers and staff to impact their work with students living in poverty? s. Describe any policies, procedures or changes you have implemented in your school for students living in poverty? i. Can you describe some of those policies and procedures? ii. Explain why you made these changes. iii. Explain how you went about implementing those policies/changes. iv. How do you perceive those policies/procedures/changes have impacted students living in poverty? t. Are there factors that have influenced your leadership actions in dealing with poverty? u. Can you describe some of those factors? v. Have you personally experienced social constraints, obstacles, or life history that influences this leadership?

APPENDIX B

PHONE SCRIPT AND E-MAIL INVITATION

Dear _____:

My name is Katy Schafermeyer, and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Northern Illinois University. I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore the elementary school principal's perspectives in working with students from poverty in the context of the suburban elementary school.

I am looking for participants who have at least 1 year of experience in the field of education (public or private), are currently in the role of a suburban elementary school principal and have held that role for at least one year.

This study consists of one interview, lasting approximately one hour. The interview will take place in your school or another professional location of your choice, or via phone. If necessary, a follow-up phone interview may be conducted for further clarification of responses. In addition, you will be asked to provide demographic information about yourself, your background, and the characteristics of the school at which you are currently principal.

If you are interested, please reply to this e-mail expressing your interest. Please include your preferred contact information so I may reach you to set up an interview date and time.

If you have any additional questions or need more information about this study, I may be reached by e-mail at [REDACTED] or by cell phone at [REDACTED]. My faculty advisor, Dr. William Pitney, may also take your questions at [REDACTED].

Thank you very much for your time.

Sincerely,

Katy Schafermeyer
Doctoral Candidate
Curriculum and Instruction

APPENDIX C

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

I agree to participate in the research project titled The Principal's Work: Working with Suburban Elementary Students from Poverty, being conducted by Katy Schafermeyer, a graduate student at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to explore the elementary school principal's perspectives in working with students from poverty in the context of the suburban elementary school.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to participate in an interview, either in person or by phone, for approximately one hour, with the possibility of an additional follow-up phone conversation. Additionally, I will be asked to answer a brief demographic survey about myself, my background and the characteristics of the school in which I am currently the principal. I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice.

If I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact Katy Schafermeyer at [REDACTED] or her faculty advisor, Dr. William Pitney at [REDACTED]. I understand that if I wish further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8588. I understand that the intended benefits of this study include deepening the body of knowledge around the education of young, suburban students from poverty as well as informing the field educational leadership. I have been informed that there are no potential risks and/or discomforts I could experience during this study.

I understand that all information gathered during this experiment will be kept confidential and there will not be any identifiable information concerning the participants or the organizations shared in the report. This will be accomplished by using pseudonyms for the participants and the

school districts. Records of the interviews (recordings and transcripts) will be kept by the researcher in a locked location for three years.

I realize that Northern Illinois University policy does not provide for compensation for participation in this study. I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature of participant

Date

I agree to the audio recording for the purposes of gathering data related to this study.

Signature of participant

Date

APPENDIX D
DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Demographics of Participant _____

1. Age: _____
2. Gender/Sex: _____
3. Years of Experience as a principal:
4. Years of experience in education:
5. Highest degree attained
 - a. Doctorate (eg, Phd, EdD)
 - b. Masters
 - c. Bachelors
 - d. Other (please identify): _____
6. Student enrollment:
7. Number of certified staff, including classroom teachers, specialists and certified support staff:
8. Percentage of students receiving free and/or reduced lunch at your school

APPENDIX E
FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

1. What was your career experience, and for how long, before becoming a principal?
2. What drew you to work within the context of the suburban elementary school?

APPENDIX F

CODES WITH TRANSCRIPT PAGE NUMBERS

Respondent #/Theme/ Line Number

R#	Empathy	Mission	High expectations	Relationships	Access	Basic needs	Life experiences	Leadership
1	176-178; 207-209; 222-225; 234-236; 441-443; 453-457;	303-304; 307-308; 309-310; 396-399; 400-402; 457;		102-106; 123-125; 127-132; 156-162; 182-187; 217-220; 225; 231-232; 335; 399-400;	178-182; 243-245; 248-251; 255-258; 262-275; 322-327; 329-335; 349-350; 370-372; 386-391; 397; 423; 427	94-102; 141-142; 251-252; 337-349; 357-358;	142-148; 470-480;	407-413;
2	420; 436-437;	195-200; 214; 220-221; 230-231; 418-419; 429-434;	133-139; 187; 331-335; 389-391;	30-41; 61-63; 106-111; 115-119; 141-144; 185-187; 188; 393-398; 419; 422-423; 425-426	163-167; 170-173; 179-183; 206-211; 242244; 246-249; 251;	71-75; 79-83; 96-100;	65-68; 93-96; 97-98; 416-422; 435-436; 445-458;	294-301; 309-312; 348-352; 354-356; 370-372;
3	130-132; 217-222; 321-323; 517-520;	142-143; 157-161; 283-287; 319-321; 391-397; 402-419; 542-550 596-603;	136-142; 211-216; 582-588;	64-68; 74-77; 83-90; 92-101; 189-198; 202-206; 261-266; 269-282; 348-355; 361-363; 491-496; 513-515; 573-582;	143-151; 222-236; 248; 250-261; 266-268; 340-342; 364-370; 371-378;	71-73; 105-106; 109-113; 117-120; 184-188; 246; 344-348;	471-490; 509-513; 520-525; 564-570;	294-305; 426-439; 450-454;

4	127-131; 280-284;	133-139; 184-188; 205-209; 224-226; 313-314; 327-328;		107-109; 118-121; 170-172; 176-179; 226-231; 254-272	209-217; 289-297;	111-116; 132; 157-161;	307-313; 314-324	188-193;
5	342-347;	349-351	152-154; 199-200; 266-276; 356-361;	157-158; 213-221; 343-345;	112-120; 134-136; 188-191; 201-203; 211-213; 232-252; 292-294; 310-316; 335-342	127-143; 147; 179-185; 286-287; 304-309	368-376	236-238; 322-328;
6	315-328; 337-341;	183-184; 350-354;	122-129; 162;	82-90; 129-133; 148-156; 161-162; 186; 188-191; 204-211; 228-248; 259-260; 264-267; 274-279; 289-290; 329	73; 165-168; 182; 260-262;	72-73; 163-165; 178-181;	74; 95-104; 139-144; 305307; 312-315; 329-332; 347-348; 59-67	133-137; 199-201; 211-215; 217-218;
7	140-144; 263-270; 126-130; 145-146;	115-120; 142-144; 161 170-172;	90-92; 127-128; 130-132; 146-148;	94-96; 153-157; 183-186;	158-161; 169-173; 209-2211; 226-229; 148-155	51-52; 161-169;	261-262;	163;

8	325-329;	160; 170-172; 205-208; 268-270; 329-333;	164-166; 191-197; 222-226;		167-169; 177-189; 197-199; 212-222; 235-240; 241-251; 253-259; 294-296	63-67 101-108; 264-267;	74-87; 96-101; 113-117; 324-325;	161-164; 282;
9	235; 288; 320-327; 373-375; 511-519; 705-709;	152-153; 327-343; 399;	235-237; 288-289; 298;	119-120; 181-182; 289-292; 300-304; 328-331; 392-394; 401-405; 430; 616-619; 632; 680-692	265268; 361-371; 422-427; 433-440; 485-487; 547-554; 562-568; 579-583; 611-616; 619; 646-648	202-203;	121-130; 207-209; 214-216; 221-222; 226-227; 312; 334-343; 525-534; 591-595;	352-354 376; 398-399 610;
10	330;	210		174-176; 181; 186-189; 232-238; 266-277; 281-291; 299-300; 308-315; 340345;	325-330; 349-354; 411-416;	87-89; 169-174; 176178; 245-246;	145-153; 197-198; 315-317; 374; 378-383; 387-392; 396-411; 425-429;	246-251; 262-263; 354-356;

APPENDIX G

CODELIST

Theme	Description	Inclusionary Criteria	Typical Exemplar
Research Question 1			
1. Poverty's Influence	Poverty has a deficit influence on elementary students.	Basic needs, background experiences, relationships	
A. Basic Needs	Lack of elements essential for functioning in a community, including nutrition, sleep, shelter, healthcare.	Food, shelter, healthcare.	<p>“They might not be getting all of their meals at home.”</p> <p>“They could be living in a car.”</p> <p>“They could be living with another family member, another family.”</p> <p>“...so our kids get free dental. They get free checkups...”</p>
B. Background experiences	Lack of background of life that a student brings with them to school.	Language development, community experiences, family support, early learning experiences.	<p>“Kids that have had less experiences, I have found, it's not as easy for them to make those connections in the classroom. Maybe they've never been to a farm, or aren't familiar with certain situations that are brought up within the classroom.”</p> <p>“Learning-wise I think it's most obvious with our kindergarten students coming in and those learning readiness skills tend to be lagging.”</p>
C. Relationships	Lack of connecting with others, including peers and adults, in the school setting. How students behave with others.	Peer and adult relationships, social circles, behavior, attention, family support, safety.	<p>“I think they have a more challenging time going from different small groups to other small groups or cliques...”</p> <p>“My first year, one thing I really noticed was the kids jut craved our attention...”</p>

Research Question 2			
2. Access to Education	Eliminating obstacles to learning, allowing students to gain from school, academically and/or socially;	Role of the principal, high expectations for all students, relationships, leadership	
A. Role of the Principal	The principal's part or function in helping students to gain from the school experience.	Level the playing field, getting what they need, advocating, outside of school programming, funding (Title I)	<p>"I think managing the resources and focusing the resources."</p> <p>"I think the role is help trying to get them a level playing field...trying to give them some resources that maybe they wouldn't have otherwise."</p> <p>"look out for the little guy, no matter what little guy we're looking out for. And I think our low-SES is definitely a population that is the little guy".</p>
B. High Expectations	Holding the same, high educational standards for all students in the school.	Quality staff, performance, changing attitudes, scores, accountability, achievement.	<p>"So that's one thing they need from me is to give them the best teachers that I possibly can."</p> <p>"When I came here, even internally, there were staff members that really didn't think the kids could perform better than they were... Those scores are way up compared to what they were."</p> <p>"...it comes down to our accountability and our responsibility to help these students achieve."</p>
C. Relationships	The principal connecting with others, including students, families and adults in the school setting.	Friendships, social circles, behavior, attention, parents, acknowledgement, belonging, safety.	"...part of my job too is to make sure all of our parents feel welcomed at school...where everybody feels valued and feels like

			they have something to add.” “...finding successes to celebrate and acknowledge kids.” “...you’re part of this community, you call this your home...”
D. Leadership	Guiding school staff (teachers) to be more effective in their work with students from poverty.	Teachers, committees, professional development	“I’ve got to provide them with professional development, or work with them independently” “You’ve got to start working with this group of kids in a different way, get a better understanding.”
Research Question 3			
3. Principal Leadership	Guiding school staff (teachers) to be more effective in their work with students from poverty.	Policies/procedures, principal’s life experiences, mission, distributed/shared leadership, school culture, relationships	
A. Policies/procedures	Things that schools “do” to provide for needs of students	Programs, approaches, activities, homework, breakfast/lunch	“worked with Aramark to make sure that they can grab some things for snack, both for nutritional purposes” “we have some attendance and tardiness issues, so I’ve had to implement some policies where I have asked teachers to make some phone calls directly to those families...” “we’ve worked with a bus company to provide free transportation to students who want to participate in after school activities”

<p>B. Principal's Life Experiences</p>	<p>Background of life that has impacted the principal's views on school leadership.</p>		<p>"...as a kid my parents, my mom worked days, my dad often worked nights. And so we didn't necessarily do the old homework around the dinner table and everybody help everybody all the time." "my own faith life is a factor just in considering how we treat people in general and support one another as people." "...there were parents that came up to me and said, "why do those kids have to come her, those kids are gonna lower our ISAT scores."</p>
<p>C. Mission</p>	<p>What drives the Principal's actions; purpose of actions.</p>	<p>Important, valued, future of student,</p>	<p>"The needs of the students are bottom line what impacts my decisions." "trying to build that in so that the kid has a great experience and then becomes a parent someday who will take some of that stuff for granted...trying to break some of these cycles."</p>
<p>D. Preference for Shared Leadership</p>	<p>Including staff, parents, students in decision making</p>	<p>Committees, programming, communication, teacher teams,</p>	<p>"We have two bilingual parent liaisons that communicate with our parents" "you have to involved the people that it impacts" "I put together a universal PBIS team, teacher team."</p>

<p>E. School Culture</p>	<p>The beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, written and unwritten rules that shape and influence every aspect of how a school functions (edglossary.org)</p>	<p>Knowing your students, scheduling, delivering instruction, feel of the building, celebrating differences, social/emotional curriculum, modeling positive interactions, individualizing, relationships.</p>	<p>“...we’re going to talk a little bit about our interactions with students and expectations...” “our social/emotional programming is something we focused on pretty strongly, so we’ve developed our own curriculum...” “that flexibility piece and just encouraging teachers to sometime think a different way or offer different opportunities for families so that we can meet their needs.” “...we had less discipline...and I attribute it to more kids felt like they belonged in our building...there was a different feel in the building.”</p>
<p>F. Relationships</p>	<p>Connecting with others, including students and adults, in the school setting.</p>	<p>Friendships, social circles, behavior, attention, parents, acknowledgement, belonging, understanding</p>	<p>“I think the main thing that has influenced me is just getting to know these families and their kids.” “Again, the power of the relationship.” “we need to make the person feel like they are a part of us, not that they’re struggling to fit in with us.”</p>