

EXPLORING THE PHENOMENON OF PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN TEXAS
WHO STAY AT A TITLE I SCHOOL FOR FIVE OR MORE YEARS

by

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ABSTRACT

Student achievement is positively correlated to effective principal leadership (Marzano et al., 2005). Data suggests school improvement efforts need three to five years to be fully implemented and for the impact to be realized (Beckett, 2018). The most recent principal turnover data in Texas indicates a turnover rate of 52.2% within a three-year period and 71.3% within a five-year period (Fuller, 2008). The turnover rate at Title I schools is higher than non-Title I schools (Grissom & Bartanen, 2018). There is evidence and research around why principals leave (Baker et al., 2010; Battle & Gruber, 2010; Beckett, 2018), but little to no evidence surrounding those who stay five or more years.

This qualitative study explores the reasons or factors principals of Title I public schools in Texas continued to lead their schools for five or more years. In this phenomenological study, ten principals of schools grades five or higher were interviewed to understand the phenomenon of longevity in a role with a high turn-over rate in Texas and nationally. Data from these interviews were coded and analyzed. The findings were reported with conclusions drawn about the reasons discovered. This study hopes to provide public school district leadership a clearer understanding of why some leaders of schools designated as Title I persist for five or more years.

I. INTRODUCTION

One, two, four, three, and four are the number of years I spent as the principal of each public school I led in Texas. I started as an elementary school teacher for a total of five years then transitioned into school administration as an assistant principal for the next five years of my career. After a decade as a public school educator, I began the next phase of my career as a principal.

One Year

I accepted my first principalship at an elementary school in a small district of 4,800 students in the Houston area. It was a newly constructed school in a district that was new to me. The majority of students traveled from the opposite side of the district to attend the dual language program at our school. It was thrilling not only to be a principal, but also to open a new facility and welcome students into our shiny new halls where we provided opportunities they had not yet imagined.

Two Years

At the end of that school year, the district of 21,200 students on the east side of Houston where I taught and served as an assistant principal offered me an appointment as the principal of an elementary and middle school. I previously served as the assistant principal at the elementary school, was familiar with the schools and the district, and was honored to be offered the opportunity. I accepted the challenge and led both schools for the next two years.

The schools were next door to each other, so it was easy to spend time at each throughout the day. Due to the needs of serving an age range that covered four-year-olds in our prekindergarten classes through overage eighth graders, our team worked with our

district to highlight the need for instructional leadership at both schools. As the principal of both, I felt I was merely a manager of the day-to-day operations. This feeling may have been rooted in my inexperience as a principal. The district heard our justification and kept me at the middle school and subsequently hired a principal for the elementary.

Four Years

For two more years, I remained at the middle school where we continued to expand access and opportunities for our students. During the fall of 2008, Hurricane Ike blew through Houston, and we were out of school for two weeks. My family showed interest in moving further inland. An opportunity to open a new middle school south of Austin presented itself in the spring of 2009. I accepted the offer, and we relocated. I was a middle school principal in the Houston area for a total of four years.

Three Years

The next school I led was the fourth middle school in a district of 14,500 and served a population of over eighty percent economically disadvantaged students. We were allowed to think differently and be innovative in our approaches to teaching our students. It was an exciting and rewarding time. Near the end of my third year, the superintendent approached me about considering a move to lead the high school. I had minimal high school experience having only taught at that level for one semester, but the challenge was intriguing because of the opportunity to follow my middle school students and to gain high school administrative experience. My supervisor asked me, signaling to me his confidence in me and, to a certain degree, his expectation that I would say yes. I applied, interviewed, and accepted the offer of employment.

Four Years

My first position leading two schools at the same time with a high percentage of students on free and reduced lunch had been extremely challenging, but this former position, serving for four years as a high school principal of over 2400 students was equally (if not more) challenging for me. The internal level of support improved over time, yet the board politics surrounding the school and district was a significant challenge because, from my perspective, the focus did not feel like it was student-centered. I began seeking my next opportunity to grow and impact students; it led me to a district-level position in a similar-sized public school system on the outskirts of San Antonio. This ended the twelve-year period of my career as a principal.

Principals leave for various reasons that range from the system and school level to the personal level. Most principals leave for voluntary reasons, though there are involuntary departures (Snodgrass-Rangel, 2017). Each time I left a position, it was primarily for job advancement. There were also other influences: board politics, district culture, family satisfaction, professional challenge, and financial gain. I never stayed at a school longer than four years.

In each district I worked, I found leaders who remained at the same school for five or more years, and I found myself wondering, what kept them there? Some did not have a supportive district culture and climate. Others faced unimaginable school crises. Some endured political pressures to change their practices. What made them persist through challenges? To what do they attribute their tenure? Self-efficacy? Persistence? Altruism? Resilience?

Problem Statement

Just over fifty percent of principals remain at a school for three or fewer years and less than thirty percent stay longer than five years (School Leaders Network, 2014). Nationally, eighteen percent of public school principals leave within the first year (Goldring & Taie, 2018). This pattern was consistent in 2008-2009, 2012-2013, and 2016-2017 (Goldring & Taie, 2014; Goldring & Taie, 2018). The most recent principal turnover data in Texas indicates a turnover rate of 52.2% within a three-year period and 71.3% within a five-year period (Fuller, 2008). These percentages climb at schools where at least fifty percent of the students are identified as economically disadvantaged to 73.4% overall and to 81.4% at the high school level (Fuller, 2008).

I was one of those Texas statistics. Every school I either taught at or led was classified as Title I. Schools designated as Title I are eligible to receive additional federal funds because more than forty percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch or are economically disadvantaged (United States Department of Education, 2015). Because of my personal experience as a principal of Title I schools, I want to better understand what brings people to not be a statistic like I was. That brings me to the primary question guiding this study: twenty-six percent of principals of highly economically disadvantaged schools in Texas stay for five or more years at the same campus. What are the reasons they remain?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my study was to determine the reasons public school principals at Title I schools in Texas stay at the same school for five or more years. The turnover rate at Title I schools is higher than non-Title I schools (Fuller, 2008). Data suggests school

improvement efforts need three to five years to be fully implemented and for the impact to be realized (Beckett, 2018). Effective principal leadership is positively correlated to student achievement (Marzano et al., 2005). There is evidence and research around why principals leave (Baker et al., 2010; Battle & Gruber, 2010; Beckett, 2018), but little to no evidence surrounding those who stay five or more years.

I explored the phenomenon of public school principals in Texas who stay at a Title I school for five or more years. I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten participants who met the following criteria:

- Public school principal in Texas
- School designated as Title I
- Remained at same school for five or more years as the principal

I hoped to learn from the participants the reasons they stay or stayed so those reasons may inform hiring, support, and development practices in school districts for Title I schools.

Research Question

What are the perceived factors public school principals attribute to their decision to stay five or more years at the same Title I school?

Theoretical Framework

Personally, and as an educator, I believe that knowledge is constructed mostly through experiences and observation. One can read to learn, but my greatest learning has been through experiences. I prefer positive experiences yet tend to learn more from failures. Failure usually motivates me to try again with alterations to previous attempts; I

believe I can choose my perspective or outlook when responding to adverse outcomes to improve future efforts.

Social learning theory, proposed by Albert Bandura (1977; 1991; 1997), added the social component to learning theory. This theory posits that individuals can learn through observation, both positive and negative. When an individual replicates observed behaviors and is successful or rewarded, his/her efficacy develops. According to Albert Bandura (1977; 1991; 1997), self-efficacy is the belief one has regarding personal capabilities to exert control over events that impact their lives and their functioning. Efficacious individuals are more motivated to take action, display more effort toward actions, are more resilient, and face obstacles with greater perseverance (Anderson, 2008). Strong self-efficacy leads to setting challenging goals with a related drive and commitment to meet them through any setbacks that may arise. Individuals who are not efficacious tend to withdraw from arduous undertakings and feel threatened by adversity. They tend not to take risks and focus on their personal deficits rather than their assets (Bandura, 1997).

Leadership efficacy is the leader's perceived ability to successfully develop relationships with colleagues that build commitment toward improvement goals, to set focused direction for the work, and work collaboratively with them to overcome any obstacles that may present themselves (Paglis & Green, 2002). Tenacious leaders are driven with mental and physical fortitude to tackle challenges with relentless optimism and energy; the needs of the organization are consistently considered ahead of personal needs (Anderson, 2008). Leadership efficacy is the principal's belief in his or her abilities to make a difference in the schools they lead (Bauer & Silver, 2018).

Efficacy develops in one of four main ways: performance outcomes, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological feedback (Bandura, 1977).

Performance outcomes are positive and negative experiences that influence one's ability to perform a task. When one feels positive or competent due to a prior experience, he or she is more likely to attempt similar tasks in the future. Vicarious experience is learning through observation of behaviors and consequences of others. The individual compares his or her own competence with that observed in another person and derives a level of efficacy. Verbal persuasion influences the development of efficacy through encouragement or discouragement from others. Physiological feedback refers to the physical or emotional response to performance. Positive or more exciting responses develop efficacy more efficiently than do negative or anxious responses. When considering longevity in a position, I wondered if there was a level of efficacy that leads to perseverance.

Another consideration with social learning theory is how individuals make career choices. Various factors come into play: based on their combination and how they interact, they impact career decision-making (Krumboltz, 1976). For an educator to reach the level of the principalship, there are multiple experiences and characteristics that influence the professional pathway. These include personal characteristics and demographics, educational background, commitment to educational administration, quality of experiences, school climate, and external influences (Krumboltz, 1976).

Both self-efficacy and career decision-making are rooted in social learning theory. These served as the theoretical framework upon which my research rests.

Significance of the Study

There is a gap in knowledge as to what contributes to a principal remaining at the same school for five or more years. Studies (School Leaders Network, 2014; Mascall & Leithwood, 2010) indicate how to support principals and train them prior to moving into the role of the principal; however, there is limited study surrounding those who persist. This information is important for human capital departments as it could inform hiring, support, and development practices, specifically for principals of Title I schools. Economically disadvantaged students who attend schools designated as Title I usually come to school with more limited access to prior formal educational opportunities, and they depend upon the school to expose them to more experiences. The physical and emotional investment by staff in Title I schools may lead to a more challenging work experience (Solomon & Lambie, 2020). This information might also inform district policies and procedures for supporting leaders of campuses with large numbers of economically disadvantaged students.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, I hope this study helps begin a conversation in which we as educators can begin to unpack the many associations and implications we have invested in the term “Title 1.” As I stated above, I believe knowledge and meaning is socially constructed—in this case, that means that while Title 1 technically is a value-neutral budgetary category, it has been invested with a lot of associated social meanings, many of them negative. When someone says they are a “Title 1 principal”, or they work with “Title 1 kids,” those words carry heavy, and predominantly deficit-based, social meaning. That is visible in some of the interviews I quote throughout this work, and when it arises I try to unpack it as a first entry in a larger conversation.

Key Terms

Several key terms are used throughout this study; they are defined below as they are used in this analysis.

Leavers

Leavers are defined in this work as a principal who left the principalship either through retirement or a career change to another profession (Goldring & Taie, 2014). See also “Principal Turnover.”

Movers

Movers are defined in this work as a principal who moved to a different school either in the same district or into another district, or those who accepted a promotion within the public school system (Goldring & Taie, 2014). See also “Principal Turnover.”

Persistence

Persistence is the ability to absorb uncertainty, ignore distractions, and keep going despite obstacles to maintain a course of action (Graves, 1985).

Principal Turnover

Principal turnover is defined as when a principal leaves a school. It includes principals who leave the profession entirely (such as through retirement or career change), those who move to another school within the same district, and those who move to another school in another district (Snodgrass-Rangel, 2017).

Resilience

This is defined as the capacity to positively meet challenges and overcome setbacks (McDargh, 2004). People who are resilient perceive failure as a temporary

setback to learn from, are able to make sense of complex situations, and provide creative solutions to ambiguous challenges all while thriving through uncertainty (Wilson, 2013).

Self-Efficacy

Performance and motivation are determined by how effective a person believes he or she can be; this is the definition of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). As self-efficacy relates to the principal, it is the belief in one's capabilities to make a difference in the schools they lead (Tschannen-Moran & Gaeris, 2004).

Social Learning Theory

People learn through observing the behaviors and actions of others (Bandura, 1977). The processes that make it more likely that the behavior will be learned and/or replicated include:

- Imitation of the behavior by the observer who perceives similarity to the model
- Positive or negative reinforcement of the behavior increases the likelihood of repetition of the behavior

Stayers

Stayers are defined in this work as a principal who stayed at the same school for consecutive years (Goldring & Taie, 2014). For the purposes of this study, five consecutive years or more was utilized.

Title I

As defined by the United States Department of Education, Title I is part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (2015). This act provides funds to school districts with high numbers or high percentages of students from families who are designated as low-income as measured by the Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL)

designation. Schools who enroll at least forty percent of low-income children may be designated as schoolwide programs. The purpose of Title I funding is to, “ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (United States Department of Education, 2015). For the purposes of this study, only schoolwide Title I campuses were considered.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

School leadership is one of the key levers to student success (Waters et al., 2003). Although the position of principal is more challenging now than it was in the past, the complexities have been a constant (Kafka, 2009). The position is currently vacated at a rapid rate, which has an adverse effect on student achievement and school improvement (Beteille et al., 2011). Fewer than thirty percent of campus leaders remain at the same school for five or more years; therefore, I examined what keeps them there.

The Principalship: A Brief History

Free public education in the United States began in the 1800s (Lattuca, 2012). As cities grew, so did schools, and with this, the need for structural organization and management grew (Lattuca, 2012). The school board or governing council designated a head or principal teacher to teach and manage the school (Kafka, 2009; Kavanaugh, 2005). Laws that gave public school access to all students were enacted in 1834 and 1836; this caused an increase in enrollment that necessitated even greater organization and efficiency within the school (Lattuca, 2012). Communities grew as did the schools. Tasks became more complex and a “principal teacher” was designated to be responsible for the school-related tasks which included supervision of staff, maintaining the building, and managing the budget (Lattuca, 2012). Teaching was no longer an expectation of the position because school superintendents delegated school-level decisions to the campus administrator. Population growth also led to the principalship (Goodwin et al., 2005). The responsibilities of professional development and student promotion or retention were added to the responsibilities of the principal (Weiss, 1992).

During the early 1900s, principals were expected to work with the community and lead school reform efforts. These efforts included teacher observation and curriculum development (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Kavanagh, 2005). It became a role that mirrored a business executive during the 1930s. By the 1940s, it became more democratic in nature to prepare children to be active and educated citizens (Beck & Murphy, 1993). By the 1960s, principals were managers who were evaluated on measurable student results (Beck & Murphy, 1993).

Principals continued to work collaboratively with their staff to manage the school. They also expanded their influence in the community as a leader. They served as the architects to support teaching and learning (Goldring & Sullivan, 1996). New structures of support were expanded to facilitate meaningful student learning (Weiss, 1992).

By the 1980s, principals were expected to be the instructional leader of the school. They interacted directly with teachers during the planning and delivery of instruction. They were expected to set the vision and devise a plan to actualize that end as the lead agent of change (Kavanagh, 2005). During the 1990s, the relationship of the principal with the community shifted to a partnership of collaboration to best meet the needs of the students. The community demographics diversified to include more English Language Learners, increased enrollment of minorities, and more students who lived in poverty.

Charter schools sprung up in the early 1990s; this gave families a choice which was in direct competition with public schools (Fullan, 2016). Principal performance was tied to state assessment results. The principal role transitioned to facilitator of a learning community who navigated the political environment while maintaining a focus on student

learning (Barth, 1990). Responsibilities are not new to schools and neither is the expectation from the community that the principal is the hub; the new responsibility is the pervasive expectation that the school will eradicate inequities (Hallinger, 1992).

Principals navigate variables that include changing demographics, expected school reforms, increased accountability measures, and the enhanced role of families and the community (Latucca, 2012). The metamorphosis of the position from head teacher to transformational leader impacts the desire and tenure for the job. From instructional leader to mental health specialist to safety and security facilitator, the intensity of multiple roles requires a specialized skill set and significant personal investment by the leader (Mascall et al., 2011).

Leadership Matters

A highly effective principal is the second most significant indicator of student achievement after a highly effective teacher (Waters et al., 2003). The relationship between student achievement and leadership is significant (Waters et al., 2003; Miller, 2004; Edgeron & Kritsonis, 2006; Dhuey & Smith, 2010). Students who learn in schools with effective leaders have an average of twenty-five percent greater results in achievement (Waters et al., 2003). The alternative is also impactful; ineffective leaders can negatively influence achievement (Waters et al., 2003).

In addition, principal departure may have an adverse impact on a campus and actually decrease achievement (Miller, 2013; Superville, 2014). While some principal attrition may be unavoidable, there is a disproportionate impact on economically disadvantaged students and their families (Miller, 2013). Economically disadvantaged students bring a wealth of life experiences to school that may not transfer to academic

content experiences. Instability due to leadership turnover continues the turbulence these students may experience at home (Miller, 2013).

Support and Training

Investment in the retention of principals through ongoing support and training increases the likelihood they remain at the helm of schools (School Leaders Network, 2014). Examples of training include:

1. Continued investment in leadership development beyond pipeline investments
2. Engagement of principals in authentic peer networks for collaborative learning
3. One-on-one coaching support beyond the first two years of the principalship
4. Revised structure and purpose of principal supervisors' roles

On-going support can mitigate the frequency of principal turnover (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010).

School Reform

Public education continues to face the urgency to continuously improve and reform in order to meet the variety of student needs. It can take a minimum of five years for implementation of improvements to realize the desired change (Beckett, 2018). When principals depart from their campus within three to five years, schools are left with instability which can result in difficulty sustaining reform efforts (Holme & Rangle, 2012). Staff morale issues may arise with principal transitions. This can be evidenced by resistance to improvement efforts and cynicism toward new leadership directions for reform (Fink & Brayman, 2006; Mascall & Leithwood, 2012). Learning the school culture and internal politics add to the challenge of implementing improvement efforts in the short term (Fink & Brayman, 2006). Because large-scale reform requires a minimum

of five to seven years to become embedded in practice, principals who leave within two to three years leave a campus in the early stages of improvement, only to restart with the next leader (Mascall & Leithwood, 2012).

Rate of Departure

Much of leader attrition is moving to a different school either within the same district or into another district (Akiba, 2004). Most principals leave the position within the first three years at a school. Retention and turnover of a principal are two different concepts. Principal retention is defined as the length of time a principal stays at the same school before leaving (Snodgrass-Rangel, 2017). Turnover is defined as a principal who does not return to the same campus from one year to the next (Baker et al., 2010).

Most principals who lead United States public schools have fewer than ten years in the position. About twenty percent of school leaders across the United States leave the position each year (Miller, 2013). Across states, there are similar numbers. In Colorado, 76.3% of principals left their school within a five-year period (Beckett, 2018). This was only slightly higher than the Texas rate of 71.3% within a five-year period (Fuller, 2008). In Colorado, Illinois, North Carolina, and Wisconsin, urban principals were more likely to change schools than in rural or suburban areas (Beckett, 2018; Gates et al., 2006; Podgursky et al., 2016). In Colorado, urban leadership transitioned every 2.5 years with 23.7% staying at the same campus for a minimum of five years (Beckett, 2018). In the districts surrounding Chicago, Illinois, urban principals were fifty percent more likely to change schools than their suburban peers (DeAngelis & White, 2011; Gates et al., 2006). According to Grissom and Bartanen (2018), principals of schools with a free or reduced lunch qualifying rate below 25% had a turnover rate of eighteen percent. In schools with

more than 75% of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch, the turnover rate is 26% (Grissom & Bartanen, 2018). Fuller (2008) found this turnover rate to be higher in Texas. Seventy-three percent of principals in Texas who led at schools with at least fifty percent economically disadvantaged students left within their first three years at the school (Fuller, 2008).

Reasons for Departure

School leadership is both challenging and rewarding. Despite the reward, principals leave a school and/or the profession for various reasons. These include external factors at the system level, internal factors at the school level, and self-factors at the individual level.

External Factors at the System Level

District level factors are typically outside the locus of control of the leader. Principals leave for voluntary reasons such as retirement, promotion, transfer, personal, or a change in profession. They may also leave for involuntary reasons such as poor work performance or termination (Snodgrass-Rangel, 2017). Some principals cite the lack of autonomy in the role as a reason for leaving (Farley-Ripple et al., 2012; Tekleselassie & Villarreal, 2010). Much of the role of the principal is linked to relational leadership. Negative relationships with stakeholders increase the stress and workload for the school leader. Students, staff, parents, district leadership, and community members all vie for the attention of the principal, often times with competing priorities. This creates a perception by the leader of more work and political conflict. Beckett (2018) suggests that the strength of the interactions and relationships is more indicative of attrition than fixed characteristics of the school community and environment.

Internal Factors at the School Level

Longitudinal data indicate school-level variables that contribute to principal departure include school performance, school conditions, school level and size, school urbanicity, student race and ethnicity, student socioeconomic status, and the proportion of special education students at a school (Akiba & Reichardt, 2004; Baker et al., 2010; Battle, 2010; DeAngelis & White, 2011; Fuller et al., 2007; Gates et al., 2006; Papa, 2007; Partlow, 2007; Snodgrass-Rangel, 2017; Tekleselassie & Villareal, 2011; Young & Fuller, 2009).

State and federal accountability measures for student achievement have increased the pressure of the principalship. Campuses that perform at low levels on standardized assessments have greater turnover rates than schools that perform at average to higher levels (Miller, 2013; Solano et al., 2010). In low performing schools, female leaders have been found to be more likely than male principals to leave in three years or less (Akiba, 2004).

While Tekleselassie and Villareal (2011) and Partlow (2007) presented evidence that school size was not a significant factor in principal turnover, other studies presented evidence that there was more frequent turnover at small schools as opposed to large schools (Baker et al., 2010; Berry, 2014; Gates et al., 2006; Podgursky et al., 2016). Blazer (2010) and Papa (2007) found that principals preferred to work at smaller schools with fewer students. Large schools were more likely than small or middle-sized schools to have principals depart (Akida, 2004). There was little information regarding principal transition by school level except in Texas; high school principals left the principalship at a rate of 81.4% (Fuller, 2008). These studies suggest that school size is not a consistent

predictor to principal turnover.

Schools are categorized by location as urban, rural, or suburban. Data indicate that principal turnover in urban settings is more frequent than non-urban areas (Béteille et al., 2012; DeAngelis & White, 2011; Gates et al., 2006; Podgursky et al., 2016). As mentioned earlier, principals leave their schools at an average rate of 20% nationally each year; this increases to 22-30% in urban settings (Battle, 2010; Béteille et al., 2012; Goldring & Taie, 2014).

In addition to school characteristics that are found to contribute to principal attrition, student characteristics were found to be contributing factors. One student characteristic is race or ethnicity (Béteille et al., 2012; DeAngelis & White, 2011; Gates et al., 2006; Papa, 2007). Schools with a high percentage of students of color were found to correlate to high principal turnover; the percentage of students of color was found to be the only predictive variable from 2010-2015 of principal turnover (Beckett, 2018). In Illinois and Colorado, principals of schools with high percentages of students of color left at higher rates than principals of schools with low percentages of students of color (Beckett, 2018; DeAngelis & White, 2011). Beckett (2018) found that schools with higher percentages of White students had principals who stayed in the position longer. Baker et al. (2010) found that an increase in the Black student population resulted in increased turnover of principals.

The frequency of principal turnover is greater at schools that serve more low-income students (Béteille et al., 2012; Fuller et al., 2007; Goldring & Taie, 2014; Superville, 2014; Young & Fuller, 2009.) Schools with high percentages of low-income students are frequently led by more inexperienced principals due to the turnover at these

types of campuses (Snodgrass-Rangel, 2017). Colorado principals left low-income schools for higher-income schools (Beckett, 2018). Principal mobility in Minnesota was found to be significantly predicted by the percentage of students who live in poverty (Podgursky et al., 2016). In Texas, schools with 25% or more economically disadvantaged students experienced higher principal turnover rates than schools with fewer than 25% economically disadvantaged students (Fuller, 2007). Additionally, principal tenure at low-income schools was found to be shorter than at higher income schools (Young & Fuller, 2009). About 20% of principals of high-income schools left in comparison to 27% who left low-income schools during the 2012-2013 school year, according to the National Principal Follow-up Survey (Goldring et al., 2014; Superville, 2014).

Papa (2007) and Loeb et al. (2010) reported that school leaders found schools with low percentages of English Language Learners (ELLs) more desirable than schools with high percentages of ELLs. Urban schools tend to have more low-income students, more students of color, and more English Language Learners; none of the studies discussed the impact of compounded student characteristics, but rather considered each in isolation.

Self-Factors at the Individual Level

The personal demographics of the school leader were found to be an indicator of principal turnover, but not to a significant degree (Beckett, 2018). Race, gender, education, and preparation program were not found to be predictors of turnover (Akiba & Reichardt, 2004; Fuller et al., 2007; Tekleselassie & Villareal, 2011; Young & Fuller, 2009). One study found that there was a 13% lower likelihood of a school change if the

leader was the same race as the majority of students in the school, and the probability of the principal leaving the system decreased by 25% (Gates et al., 2006). Twenty-five percent of male and non-minority leaders left a school at age 56 or older or before 35 years of age while forty percent of female and minority leaders were more likely to leave before age 35 and after 56 years of age (Akiba, 2004).

Summary

This review provides information about the significant impact of the principal on student achievement and the effect of turnover on that achievement. It also highlights that sustainable school reform requires five to seven years and that fewer than 30% of principals remain long enough for that to happen. Several variables that contribute to principals leaving the position were found. Throughout the literature, there is little to no discussion or data surrounding the principals who do remain in the same position for five or more years; thus, there is a gap in the existing literature. While the attrition rate is high, there are public school principals who persist in the position; what keeps them coming back, year after year?

III. METHODS

Overview of Research Design/Approach

Political and societal factors have expanded and increased the roles, responsibilities, and amount of accountability placed on the public school principal (Kafka, 2009). According to Marzano et al. (2005), leadership by the principal is the second most significant factor in student achievement, yet 71.3% of principals leave their position within the first five years (Fuller, 2008). This means that 28.7% percent stay; what can be learned from those who remain in their positions for five or more years?

Knowing that effective leadership over five or more years leads to sustainable school improvement, I was interested in understanding the experience or phenomenon of principals of Title I schools who remained at the same school for that length of time or longer. I utilized a phenomenological approach. Its emphasis is on making meaning of an experience where the researcher is the main instrument of data collection and analysis with a deep description as the end result of the research (Merriam, 2009). This process helped me uncover those reasons principals persist and how we can use that learning to support for longevity of the principals in our most economically disadvantaged schools.

The purpose of phenomenology is to collect information about a lived experience by several individuals who had the same job title and setting and describe it through themes and patterns discovered through the research (Creswell, 2013). I chose phenomenology as the approach for my study because I wanted to understand the essence of persistence by public school leaders in Title I schools and the impact of their experiences. Understanding and describing the human experience is not a quantitative

approach; therefore, using a qualitative approach provides more insight into the wholeness of the experience.

The accuracy of my data and findings is critical; to maintain accuracy of both, I used several validation strategies. To garner the most honest responses possible, I built rapport and trust with participants by sharing my own story as a principal, as well as my curiosity in understanding this phenomenon.

Peer review and/or debriefing was used to verify the data. A colleague reviewed the data to check accuracy in recording or interpretation. This was used in conjunction with member checking with participants to ensure I interpreted their responses and perceptions accurately. Member checking is the process by which the researcher solicits feedback from the person or people interviewed to verify accurate interpretation of statements (Moustakas, 1994). I used epoche to clarify my biases as a researcher and put them aside before each interview, so I was receptive and objective to the responses. Epoche is the process used by a researcher to set aside personal biases, judgement, and/or knowledge so the information can be received objectively (Moustakas, 1994).

Site and Participant Selection

I submitted my research proposal for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and included both the interview invitation and one-on-one interview questions; these are found in Appendices A and B, respectively. Once IRB approval was granted, I sent invitation emails to identified participants. I used convenience and criterion sampling to identify ten participants. I chose ten because it was a realistic number for me to tackle considering the amount of time needed for interviews (approximately 900 minutes, or fifteen hours), time to transcribe the interviews, and time to analyze the transcripts.

Convenience sampling is selection of participants who are convenient to access (Patton, 2002). Criterion sampling is selection of participants who can inform an understanding of the phenomenon and research problem in the study based on a profile or set of criteria (Creswell, 2013). The criteria for participation were:

- Public non-charter school principal in Texas
- Title I school
- Remained at the same school for 5 or more years

I was interested specifically in public non-charter schools in Texas because that was the type of administrative setting where I have personal experience, and it is my personal experience that was the root of my curiosity regarding the phenomenon of “staying.” Title I principals was a criterion since the rate of leaving schools with a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students is higher than from schools not identified as Title I (Fuller, 2008). All the schools in my school leadership experience were Title I. The criterion of five or more years was the crux of my interest: what are the perceived factors public school principals attribute to their decision to stay 5 or more years at the same Title I school?

I drafted a list of potential candidates who met the study criteria who I knew through my work with them as a peer or as a former subordinate. I collaborated with colleagues who work with or know principals for additional potential participants. None of the final participants were related to me nor were they current subordinates.

I emailed an invitation to participate to each potential participant. The invitation included the purpose of the study and the request to participate in a 60 to 90-minute one-on-one semi-structured interview at the location of his/her choosing. A semi-structured

interview consists of a set of questions that are asked of all participants and less structured questions that are used with flexibility, depending on the participant and his/her responses. The participant self-selection of the location was to ensure he/she was as comfortable and relaxed as possible, so I could solicit the most honest and candid responses possible. I developed an objective, collegial relationship with the participants. When I interviewed known participants, I was acutely aware of any biases or personal feelings toward the individual that may have influenced my analysis; peer review assisted with the identification of potential biases.

Data Collection Procedures/Strategies

I developed one-on-one semi-structured, open-ended interview questions for the selected participants. Interview and recording tools were gathered and included a voice recorder, interview consent form, questions, notepad, and writing utensils.

When I met with each participant for the interview, I started the recording device, then began the interview. I reviewed the consent form, ensured confidentiality, and secured written consent (Appendix C). At the conclusion of the face-to-face interview, I thanked each participant.

I sent the audio recording a transcription service to be transcribed after each interview. When the transcription was returned to me, I reviewed each written transcript while listening to the audio recording for accuracy and to correct any errors. I collected demographic information including ethnicity (African American, Hispanic, Asian, White, Other), gender, location of the school (urban, suburban, rural), school level (elementary, middle, high), and student enrollment through the Texas Education Agency website. This demographic information was included because personal demographics have been

identified as characteristics that influence the decision-making of a principal to stay or leave a school. I also wanted to determine if there were any trends (or not) across different demographics.

Data analysis

The data analysis process was a modification of the van Kaam Method (Moustakas, 1994). I chose this process because it is clear and helped me be more objective about my analysis. To begin, I thoroughly read each transcript to learn all aspects of the experience. This included the people present (or not present), objects, physical surroundings, outcomes, interactions, time frame, emotions, beliefs and values, and attitudes. I identified statements or quotes that shed light on the experience of the participants; this is known as horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). Horizons are the conditions or unique qualities that help describe the experience. Because there was a significant amount of data, it was critical for me to organize it by breaking it down. I did this by coding the identified statements that were essential to the experience. Coding also helped me be more objective. If an aspect can be changed without losing meaning of the experience, then it is not an essential part of experience and was removed. This step is known as reduction and elimination (Moustakas, 1994).

Next, I reviewed and sorted the codes according to themes. Themes are the elements of the experience that cannot be changed without losing the essence of the phenomenon experienced by each leader (Moustakas, 1994). There were themes that emerged that were common across all participants and there were themes or unusual findings that were unique to fewer than five leaders. I used the common themes that I identified across participants to write a textural description of the experience. Textural

descriptions describe the WHAT of the experience of each participant (Moustakas, 1994). This included verbatim quotes from individuals that clearly describe or explain the experience. Common themes were those that were present across more than half of the participants in the study. Following the textural description, I reflected on the individual stories and interpreted them. I wrote a structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience by incorporating the themes. Structural description describes the HOW the participant experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I analyzed the two descriptions to uncover the essence of the experience or phenomenon. By exploring the deeper meaning of the identified themes, I identified elements that are generalizable across the experience of “staying.”

Limitations

A significant potential limitation was my personal biases based on personal experience. I needed to be aware of how my experiences as a white female who led Title I public schools in Texas was similar or different than those of my participants. Leaders of other ethnicities may have different experiences, expectations, and desires that required me to remain as objective as possible. The information shared or willingness to be open may have been influenced, positively or negatively, by my gender and race. I used bracketing to identify and set aside personal experience with the phenomenon I studied to diminish my potential bias. While I felt I could be objective, I needed to recognize that my experiences may have influenced my analysis.

Another limitation was the information the participants chose to share. Some provided depth while others did not provide as much depth, even with more specific questioning. Additionally, my relationship or lack of relationship with the participant

may have been a limitation. Prior to conducting the interview, I took time to build rapport and trust, so they felt more comfortable opening up to me. This included meeting at a non-school location of the participant's choosing, demonstration of sincere interest, and reviewing the consent form. I ensured anonymity, which encouraged transparency and openness.

The criteria I selected was also a limitation. Due to convenience sampling, I limited my scope to Central Texas. Expanding the scope could be considered for future study to determine generalizability across the larger population.

Conclusion

Leading Title I public schools is rewarding yet challenging. There are internal “forces” at play with principals who remain at a Title I school for five or more years. Prior to my study, I wondered what held these leaders to their schools.

- Did the leader feel a strong sense of community?
- Did the leader have a desire to “give back” to the place that grew the leader?
- Does the leader have strong district support systems that nurture the leader's growth and provide support through challenges?
- Do principals who “stay” remain due to a lack of opportunity for advancement?
- Does the leader stay because he/she is stagnant?
- Does the principal stay due to location, such as a rural community, or due to an inability or unwillingness to relocate?

While all these were possibilities, it was the concrete reality that I hoped to uncover during this study. The results may help inform future hiring practices for Title I schools in the state of Texas. They may also inform what districts might do to retain successful principals at Title I schools.

IV. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Introduction

Principal turnover in Texas exceeds seventy percent within the first three years of the principalship (Fuller et. al., 2008). The purpose of my study is to determine the reasons public school principals at Title I schools in Texas stay at the same school for five or more years. In this chapter, I will share the demographics of the ten participants and of their schools. I will then introduce each participant by sharing their stories and their motivation or “why” for leading in a public school. After the participant profiles I discuss the themes and unusual findings that emerged as a result of this study.

Participant and School Demographics

I interviewed ten Texas public school leaders who remained principal at the same Title I school for a minimum of five years, with the longest beginning her fourteenth year during the 2019-2020 school year. All ten leaders are in the minority with regards to longevity. In this chapter, I document what I have learned through my interviews regarding the reasons they stay or stayed. My hope is that this study can positively inform future hiring practices in school districts with Title I schools.

Table 11 titled “Participant and School Demographics” highlights the ten principals who participated in this study. Six of the participants are female and four are male. There are three White, two African American, four Hispanic, and one leader who self identifies racially as “other.” All ten participants represent schools that educate students in grades five and older. The sites enroll 675 to 3011 students, depending upon the campus. Every school meets the federal definition of Title I with a range of 42.1% to 84.3% economically disadvantaged students (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

Table 1. Participant and School Demographics							
Participant	Gender	Race	Level/Grades of School*	Number of Students*	% eco dis*	TEA District Type**	# Years at school
#1	F	H	Middle, 6-8	806	60.7%	major suburban	13+
#2	F	W	Middle, 6-8	801	52.4%	major suburban	13
#3	M	H	High, 9-12	1227	77.3%	major urban	10
#4	F	H	High, 9-12	1248	84.0%	major urban	11
#5	F	OTHER	Intermediate, 5-6	826	42.1%	other central city	6+
#6	F	AA	High, 9-12	794	74.8%	major urban	8
#7	M	W	Middle, 6-8	1017	45.2%	major suburban	6+
#8	F	AA	Middle, 6-8	935	76.3%	Non-metropolitan stable	9+
#9	M	H	Middle, 6-8	675	84.3%	major suburban	5+
#10	M	W	High, 9-12	3011	71.8%	major urban	9+

*taken from Texas Education Agency, 2017-2018 School Report Card (2019)

**taken from Texas Education Agency, District Type Glossary of Terms, 2017-2018 (2019)

+still principal at the school

Collectively, the ten leaders represent seven different public school districts located within a one hundred mile radius from the Texas State Capitol in Austin, Texas. Texas public school districts are classified by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) into nine types using factors that include economic status, enrollment, growth in enrollment, and proximity to urban areas (2019). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) classifies school districts into twelve categories based on population and proximity to urban areas (Texas Education Agency, 2019). The TEA district types were used because this study focuses on public schools in Texas. The nine TEA types include Major Urban, Major Suburban, Other Central City, Other Central City Suburban, Independent Town, Non-Metropolitan: Fast Growing, Non-Metropolitan Stable, Rural, and Charter School Districts. These classifications are used by TEA in reporting and

monitoring systems. The districts represented in this study are defined by TEA as four of the nine types as described below:

Major Urban: Across Texas, there are eleven districts classified with this label. These districts:

- Are located in a county with a population of at least 985,000;
- Have the largest enrollment in the county or at least 70 percent of the largest district enrollment in the county;
- At least 35 percent of enrolled students are economically disadvantaged. A student is reported as economically disadvantaged if he or she is eligible for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Program.

Major Suburban: Across Texas, there are 79 districts classified with this label. These districts:

- Do not meet the criteria for classification as major urban;
- Are contiguous to a major urban district;
- Its enrollment is at least three percent that of the largest contiguous major urban district or at least 4,500 students.

Additionally, a district is also classified as **major suburban** if:

- It does not meet the criteria for classification as major urban;
- It is not contiguous to a major urban district;
- It is located in the same county as a major urban district;
- Its enrollment is at least fifteen percent that of the largest major urban district in the county or at least 4,500 students.

Other Central City: In Texas, 39 districts are classified with this identifier. These districts:

- Do not meet the criteria for classification in either of the previous subcategories;
- Are not contiguous to a major urban district;
- Are located in a county with a population of between 100,000 and 984,999;
- Its enrollment is the largest in the county or at least 75 percent of the largest district enrollment in the county.

Non-Metropolitan Stable: In Texas, 168 districts meet this size classification. These districts:

- Do not meet the criteria for classification in any of the previous subcategories;
- Enrollment is equal to or greater than the median district enrollment for the state. (Texas Education Agency, 2019)

The last year nine of the ten participants served as the principal of his or her respective campus was during the 2017-2018 school year. While not part of the participation criteria, it is noted that every school represented in this study met the Texas state accountability standard during that school year. This means that the school was not low performing and/or in need of a specific state intervention plan for improvement.

Participant Profiles

Ten participants who met my study criteria shared their experiences and perspectives through an individual interview. They were selected through convenience sampling; I have worked or collaborated directly with eight of the ten participants in the

same district or through the same professional affiliation. Two of the ten participants were referred to me via a professional colleague with whom I work closely. Below is a brief profile of each leader that describes their experience leading to the principalship and his/her “why” for being a leader. Personal experiences were solicited and analyzed to determine what, if any, influence those experiences played in the participants’ rationale for remaining as the principal at the same school for five or more years. In hiring teachers and school leaders, a frequent interview question surrounds a candidate’s personal motivation or “why” for entering or being part of the profession. I included the personal “why” for each leader to ascertain potential commonalities in the motivation for those leaders who demonstrated longevity in the principal position.

Participant 1

Participant One is a Hispanic female in her fourteenth year as the principal of a middle school. This is the only school where she has been a principal. She grew up with both her parents and sister in a small Central Texas community about thirty miles south of the community where she works as a principal. She attended and graduated from a local Texas public school district, then went to college in her hometown. “I didn’t even think about going anywhere else. In my mind, it wasn’t even a thought to go out of town.”

She babysat for years and knew she loved children. When she entered college, she was undecided about her major of study. She worked part-time in an office while she went to school and knew she did not want to do that for the rest of her life. During her third year of college, she mentored a junior high student. Each of these experiences led

her to study and graduate with a degree in elementary education because of her love of children and mentoring them.

After teaching for three years, her parents encouraged her to continue advanced education. “My parents said, ‘You need to go back to school, so we can pay for your degree, while we still work.’” She began her graduate studies in bilingual education because as a teacher, she found she had a passion for bilingual students. She took about twelve credit hours, then she stopped because she realized it wasn’t what she really wanted to do. She continued teaching and observed the leadership at her school. She had ideas about how to build systems and improve outcomes for students. “There were a lot of things that I saw my principal wasn’t doing that I felt like I could be the change. I felt like our campus could be better. I was like, ‘You know what? I want to go be a principal so I can be that person.’” A few years later, she went back to graduate school to study administration.

Her motivation or “why” she leads has evolved over time:

My parents grew up in a time where they didn't have opportunity. They grew up in an environment where they were made fun of, and they weren't allowed to speak Spanish, and kids made fun of them. I feel like my parents were pretty bright kids. My dad in particular, I thought was very bright and very smart. I don't think that he ever connected. He went to school because his parents pushed him to go to school. It was very important for his father that he go to school. He [my dad] never went to college, but he instilled in us the power of education. For me, I want to provide that opportunity for kids like my dad, who didn't have that. My grandparents are Spanish speaking. None of them had high school educations. They wanted what was best for him, and so I wish someone had encouraged him and pushed him to go to school.

For Participant One and her family, the power of education was the opportunities and doors that higher education opens for individuals who do not look like the dominant White culture. Her “why” morphed when she and her husband became foster parents to

twin girls and a nineteen-month-old boy who had a below-average vocabulary for a child of his age. The three siblings had been removed from their birth mother and the boy received support from the Texas Health and Human Services Early Childhood Services program. The program provides services to children from birth to age three with disabilities and/or developmental delays. Under the foster care of Participant One and her husband, he advanced out of the program.

I saw firsthand what poverty was like [the impact on development]. I always hope that someone inspires him, because...my hope is for kids like him, someone inspires him, because he was a smart kid. He just needs someone to believe in him, to inspire him.

All three foster children returned to their mother and are now under the care of their grandmother. Participant One and her husband have since adopted a little girl. She is still the principal of the school.

Participant 2

Participant Two is a White female who was the principal of a middle school for thirteen years before moving to her current position as principal of another middle school in a different district. She grew up with her parents and younger brother in North Texas and graduated from the same public-school district she attended her whole childhood. She liked school and science, although reading was a struggle for her. Her parents had a tutor come to their house a couple of times a week to help her.

I think finding sports in middle school or junior high at the time really kind of helped me out, be involved. [I was a] really bad kid, really rough kid, really noncompliant kid at home. Anything to get out of the house. I have a great relationship with my parents now, with my family now, but that was not what it was in high school growing up.

From age twelve, she worked in parks and recreation at the local pools as a swim instructor, lifeguard, and pool manager. Her dad was a college professor and her mom

was a teacher. She did not want to study education because she did not want to be like her parents at that time. She set her sights on studying business. A university north of Austin offered her the best scholarship deal, so she took everything that belonged to her and left home. She played basketball for the school and started her studies in business.

When I got into the business classes, I was like, ‘This is kind of fun, but what do you do?’ I still to this day don’t know what you do in business. In education, I feel like I know what we do.

She changed her major and earned her bachelor’s degree in secondary education. She met her husband in college and they decided to stay in Central Texas. She taught for five years and earned her master’s degree in physical education with a minor in administration.

In her words, her motivation for leading and working in education “is for the kids and for our community and for our society.” Her passion for education grew over time and she has learned how to better articulate it to her staff and stakeholders.

I like what I do. I feel like there’s purpose and there’s value and I’m really supporting the growth and development of the next generation of our community, of our society, of our world as we do what we do.

Participant Two lived in the same community where she was the principal for thirteen years. She reflected,

I think there’s value in living in your community that you’re serving, because you see it, you live it, you’re right her and you’re part of it.

Her words imply that by living in the community where she worked, her commitment was more integral to her personally. She still lives in the same community and is the leader of a non-Title I school in another district.

Participant 3

Participant Three is a Hispanic male who was the principal of a high school for ten years. This position was his first and only principalship. He grew up in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas with both his parents and older sister and attended local public schools. His father, a White male, had genealogical roots that included Scottish and Irish lineage. His mother's heritage was Hispanic.

My father was an attorney, and my mom was in the savings and loan business before it tanked, and then went into education. [That] county is usually in the top three poorest counties in the entire country. I think it's important to say that I, for [local] standards, our family was probably upper middle class, and that gave me not only a unique experience with friends, but how I was treated by teachers, counselors, administrators, friends. But they, especially my dad, taught me about empathy and understanding other people and where they come from. His background wasn't similar. He came from the opposite. My paternal grandparents loved me. Never treated me different, but I know that they had some different views about different ethnicities, and my dad really didn't take to that and made sure that he nurtured the care of all people, both upper class, middle class, lower class, poverty, impoverished.

This implies that his White paternal grandparents were not inclusive of races or ethnicities different from them, but that his father was inclusive and taught his children to be inclusive, as well.

He applied three times to a large university in Central Texas. He was rejected the first two times. On his third attempt, he used his mother's Hispanic surname and was accepted to the same university. To this day, he wonders if he was accepted because he met a racial quota. There was the family expectation that he and his sister would attend college and leave home.

I went to [the university] not as an educator. I think I switched my major a dozen times. I went pre-dentistry because I remember seeing a piece of paper that said dentists earn around 120 grand the year they came out. I took my first medical terminology class: I was out. So, then I switched.

I did everything, pre-law, although as an attorney, my dad said, don't be an ambulance chaser, do something else.

During his junior year of college, he took a part-time job at private school teaching after-school activities to make extra spending money. He fell in love with teaching as a result of that experience. He was close to graduating college but did not switch his major again to education because it would have required more hours. After earning his bachelor's degree, he entered an alternative certification program to earn his teacher certification. In Texas, individuals who have graduated with a bachelor's degree can earn a teaching certification through an alternate route that involves additional coursework and experiences; it is usually a less expensive route than earning a second bachelor's degree in education.

He graduated with his bachelor's degree then returned to the Valley to help take care of his sick father and accepted his first teaching position at the same junior high he attended as an adolescent. After his father passed away, he returned to Central Texas a few years later and took a job with a technology start-up company. He hated every minute of it. About nine months later in December, he secured a teaching position at a middle school and has remained in Central Texas since then. He completed a master's program in school administration and served as an assistant principal at several schools over a period of about seven years. On the Friday before the first day of school in August, he was named the interim principal at the school where he was later named the principal.

His motivation or "why" for going back, day after day, year after year, was because though the high school where he was principal had a mixed reputation in the eyes of local residents,

I wanted to change the narrative. I wanted to help the kids in the community change the narrative of what it means to go to that school because it has a rich tradition.

He is no longer the principal of the Title I school; he was promoted to a district-level administrative position.

Participant 4

Participant Four is a Hispanic female who was the principal of a high school for eleven years. That position was her first and only principalship, and she now works for a state agency. She grew up in the Rio Grande Valley with her parents and two sisters. “My father was a school administrator and my mother worked for the county.” Her elementary experience began in the Head Start program. She attended public schools and “I just did everything. I didn't want to be home. My parents were extremely strict, and my mother was very strict.” College and school were never discussed at home, but she assumed it was an expectation. She did not feel she could ask her parents for anything, especially not money, so she worked three jobs to save money for school to get away from home. She applied to a university in Central Texas and was not accepted but told her parents she had been accepted so she could leave. After taking courses at the community college in Central Texas, she transferred to the university and started her degree in journalism, then switched to education when she met her future husband at the school.

Her “why” was because she saw herself in her students.

I got pregnant in high school. I was busted. And so, I feel like a lot of our kids are there, not in that same situation, but like that. When I now deal with kids, you can't feel sorry for them. You can't feel sorry for yourself if you're a kid. You have got to get up and work your butt off so you can get out of the situation, because school is going to be your only way to get out of this.

Participant Four's words communicate an internal resiliency that she had personally to overcome situations independently; she either could not or would not rely on others for help. When she works with students, she understands where they come from, but does not make excuses for them, nor does she let the students make excuses. She believes that education opens doors and changes lives. She is no longer the principal of her Title I school. She currently works for a state education agency.

Participant 5

Participant Five is a female starting her seventh year as the principal of a fifth-sixth grade intermediate school; this is the only school where she has been a principal. Racially, she self-identifies as "other." "My mom is Irish and German, and my birth father is African-American, but they divorced when I was just one. My mom remarried [the man] who I call my dad and he adopted me. He's English White." Her family was in the military, so they moved often until she was in third grade when they settled in South-Central Texas. She attended public schools and graduated from the same district. She started her undergraduate studies at a public university in Central Texas, then transferred during her sophomore year to a large public university in the Houston area in the College of Education because they had a stronger program. She returned to her home district and taught for ten years. She applied for curriculum position opened at the district level but was bypassed because she did not have an advanced degree. She went back to school in curriculum and instruction, then was encouraged by a mentor to consider including the two to three additional administrative courses just in case they were needed for a future opportunity. She expected to retire from that system but accepted her first school administration position in a neighboring district where she currently leads.

She loved school as a child and has always been a fighter for the “underdog.” “I love Title I schools. All kids need people to love and care for them. But I feel like that group of kids needs people to love and care for them the most.” By “that group of kids,” she implies kids who may not have access to the same financial and social capital that other students may have at their disposal.

She is still the principal at her Title I school.

Participant 6

Participant Six is an African American female who was the principal of a high school for seven years; it was not her first principal position, but her first in Texas. She grew up in Florida and started her career in the same public-school system from which she graduated. She was one of nine siblings. “We’ve always just gone to school with kids that look just like us. And our teachers looked like us.” Her mom and dad had a third and fourth grade education, respectively, but it was her mom who reinforced the value of education in her. Her parents separated when she was young, and her mother raised her and her siblings. Her mother finished her GED online and worked at a daycare.

She kind of instilled in all of us that we needed to go to school like the old American Dream. Go to school, learn new things, get a good job, and take care of your family, get what you want. Because she couldn’t give us those things. She was the reason we all went into education, really, because initially I wanted to be a nurse. She always wanted us to do better and have more.

Once exposed to the nursing curriculum, Participant Six switched to education because it was not what she thought it was. She attended a historically Black university in Florida for her degree, then accepted a middle school teaching job in the same school she attended as a child; she taught there for ten years. She studied special education for her master’s degree and earned her administrative certification through a different institution.

She served as an assistant principal for the state minimum of two years, then advanced to her first principal position within the same district at an alternative school for students who needed different academic routes (it was not an alternative school for behavioral support). Her next position was at an affluent comprehensive high school for six years, and then she relocated to Central Texas to lead a Title I comprehensive high school for eight years.

She found her “why” in Title I schools. “I really like Title I schools better than all the schools because I saw the need. I think I saw me; I saw me in those schools. Poor and just not having any direction. So those kids don't have any direction.” I infer from this statement that she encountered students in her school who had limited adult support or access to resources outside of school and who needed guidance with navigating the future and completing education. She was poor and was a latchkey child when she grew up, so she related to the poverty her students experienced and the self-reliance needed outside of school. “I had an older sister that could direct us when my mom couldn't.” She wanted to be a support, like her older sister was to her, and provide direction for students who may not have access to that resource.

She is no longer the principal at that Title I school. She leads as a district level administrator.

Participant 7

Participant Seven is a White male beginning his seventh year as the principal of a middle school. He has worked at this school for thirteen years, starting as a teacher before being promoted to assistant principal and then to principal. He grew up in a small Texas town of about 3,000 people. “There were more cattle than people. Very traditional. I

would say we were upper-lower class. We were all the same kind of poor. We just didn't know any different.” His parents were retirement age when he was born; his dad had been a plumber and pipefitter for thirty years and his mom worked for the state. College was not an option for them. School was easy for him, and he always wondered, “Why do I need to know this?” He was the first in his family to go to college, although that was not his original intention. His mother made him promise to attend one semester, so he attended a public university in Northern Texas and studied music so he could honor her request. He liked the idea of a regular paycheck and consistent benefits and learned that music would not provide that for him. He switched his studies to English, then intellectual property law, then to education. Through each change, an experience he had in high school kept surfacing.

I still remember the kid's name. When I was a senior in high school, we had a PALs [peer assisted leadership] program. You have to remember, now, my hometown is small. So, the high school was next to the elementary. I worked with a student, they're now termed "ID" [intellectually disabled], and I think his name was [deleted] and he was about five and wouldn't sit still to save his life. I'm like “Okay, I recognize myself in this kid. That's why I'm working with him.” But after working with him for a semester, just getting him to be able to give names to the colors, and it was just connecting colors, simple. But that was the coolest thing to see his face light up, right? I didn't think anything of it.

That experience continued to resonate with him, so he changed his studies again and graduated with a bachelor's degree in education.

He knows his “why” and feels that if a person does not know his or her own why, how does one get someone else to discover their motivation?

My why is those kids and those families that a lot of people write off, and sometimes it's just kind of fun to be a stick in the eye.

When he says, “those kids” and “those families,” it is my understanding that he does not imply that as a negative; rather, he relates to them and their experiences. He believes in them and wants to give them the tools and drive to learn something new so they can achieve or accomplish what they want in life.

Working with kids that don't have the advantages that others have to start the race is incredibly satisfying to me, because I want them to prove everybody else wrong.

He still leads the Title I school as the principal.

Participant 8

Participant Eight is an African American female beginning her tenth year as the principal of a middle school. It is the only school where she has been the principal. She grew up in a small town north east of Austin, Texas with her parents and two sisters. Neither of her parents graduated from high school. School came easily to her; she was able to retain information easily.

Math was always my strong suit, but I didn't really struggle in school. And it just always came easy for me. But I also feel like...even with school coming easy for me, I didn't feel like I had enough teachers, besides the minorities, pushing me and making sure that I didn't get bored in on level class. It was just kind of disappointing that I was one of the top students in our class and I was never pushed to take those dual credit and some of those [advanced courses].

In her small town, she only remembers having one African American teacher who was also her coach. This coach had a sister and the two of them encouraged her.

They were the ones that was like, "You smart, you can go to college." Because my parents, neither of them graduated from high school and so they didn't know. It was actually my coach and her sister, they talked to me. They had went to [a public university in East Texas]. And so that was the only thing I knew about college. So, of course I went to [aforementioned university] because really, they were the only ones that talked to me about college and my potential and stuff. Yeah. That's what

led me [there]. It was just like that's all I knew because where they went to.

Because she was good at numbers, she decided a business degree made sense.

Being an educator was in the back of her mind because of her past experiences.

Growing up, we were real big in church. I was a Sunday school teacher. I was the oldest of three kids. And so, I always played school. But you know, when you're in school you always hear, and I think it's the same thing you hear now, teachers don't make much. So, I'm thinking like, "Okay, I want to go to college but...I enjoy teaching, but they don't make much." So, [I thought], "I'm not going to go to college to be a teacher."

After graduating with a degree in business, she worked in retail until she started to have children.

After I had my first-born, I had met up with some of my college friends and I remember one of them is in education. I was telling her how tired I was, and she was like, "You used to tutor us and tutor everybody at college. You really need to go into education and have a same schedule, good schedule for your kids." So, that's what led me to look into Alternative Certification Programs.

Once certified to be an educator, she found her calling. However, a teaching salary was not going to be enough financially.

After my first child, I ended up having four children in six years. So, I had my kids kind of back to back. I knew education was for me, but as you start paying for childcare and things like that, I knew, not because I wanted to, but I knew that I had to move up financially to be able to provide. I wanted to be in education, but financially I knew I needed to move up the pay grade for the four little ones.

She earned her master's degree through an online program with the same institution she graduated from with her bachelor's degree, then transitioned into administration.

Participant Eight's motivation or "why" stems from her personal experience as an economically disadvantaged African American; she wants to remove barriers for all students, but especially those students who share the same experiences as her.

I just wanted to make sure that it didn't matter of your race or anything, all students had access to the advanced classes, or they were told like, "Hey, you're smart." I didn't have a good experience with that. That's one of the things that drives me to stay at a Title I school, just to ensure that students don't miss out on opportunities because their parents don't know about it.

She is still the principal of that Title I school.

Participant 9

Participant Nine is a Hispanic male beginning his sixth year at a middle school; it is his first principal position at a "traditional" school. His first principal position was at the district alternative education placement (DAEP) center for two years. He grew up in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas and attended public schools. At the beginning of his senior year of high school, he relocated with his mother to Central Texas to get away from his abusive father. He generally liked school and found sports as his way to connect. "I didn't enjoy my senior year because moving somewhere for your last year wasn't fun. But it was the best thing that ever happened to me because then it got me on the goal of education, to see how important education was. It was a mix of liking school and then not liking school."

After graduating from high school, he took classes at the local community college and worked at the same time to pay bills to support his family. He then transferred to a nearby university to study exercise and sport science but stopped taking classes because the university expectations were more rigorous, and the classes were larger. He stopped

going to college for a year to play pro football but got injured and took a job as a teaching assistant and coach in a local school district.

I was a TA [teaching assistant] at [deleted] Middle School and then a coach. Then that's when I really figured out this is what I want to do. So, then I went back to school and then I came back to [district] and been here since. I love the coaching part. So, I was like well let me go finish school like I'm supposed to and then come back and coach. And so that's what I did. I went back and put myself through a year and a half. I came back in 2000 as a coach and teacher. I coached and taught for eight years.

After teaching, he moved into school administration as an assistant principal at the DAEP.

I did that two years and then the third year I became the principal there. I was there for two years as the principal, but I wanted to be in a traditional school. I felt I had only had a short time with the kids and trying to fix them to get them back there and I'd rather be on the other end. I'm trying to prevent them from going through the year. Then I moved to the high school as an AP [assistant principal]. I was there two and a half years and then they moved me over here as an AP with the intention of taking over the school. That was in a January and then by May I was made principal.

As the principal, his “why” is about family. “Even though I had a crazy home life [growing up], still everybody around is family and so everywhere I go, I want to have a family. As kids [the students], they were similar to my background growing up and trying to be a role model or a leader for them, you know, to do it the right way. And even though you've had trials and tribulations your whole life, my mom always used to say you can still be successful despite that.”

He is still the principal of the Title I school.

Participant 10

Participant Ten is a White male is in his tenth year as the principal of a high school; he has worked at the school for twenty-three years and it is his first principalship.

He grew up in Indiana. “My father was in finance. He dropped out of college. My mother also dropped out of college when they became pregnant with me and other issues, going into the National Guard and getting sick and all that, but they were not together most of my childhood. Most of childhood was [with my] single mother and so she worked two or three jobs.” He has a sister who is four years younger than him.

School was never something I liked at all. I really started not liking school in kindergarten. I was the very last person to learn to tie my shoes, and my address, and all of that, like by months, according to my mother, because I didn't see why it was important. I started skipping school in fifth grade, I started smoking, I started not really drinking, but I did experience some. I found out later, and of course I kind of knew...I was clinically depressed, and I stopped going to school. I dropped out of high school in my junior year. I was partying for a while. After a few months, I got my head straight a little bit, had a job. I got my GED the April before, of the year I would have graduated. I kind of grew up with a middle-class kind of background, but throughout my childhood became more lower income. We went one winter without a furnace at my house in Indiana. We had a couple of space heaters and wore sweaters and coats to bed. Working class neighborhood mostly, but like I said, just a few blocks away was government housing right next to my school.

After he earned his GED, he worked at a pizza place until late at night, then went partying with friends until early morning. Several months passed of this lifestyle and he realized he needed something more in his life.

I remember thinking to myself specifically this, if I am still doing this when I'm forty, what a waste. This will not be fulfilling. It's not what I was meant to do. I already began to see the futility in it that this is not a sustainable lifestyle and that I needed to do something different.

He started college as an undecided major, but in his mind, he was an education major. He wanted to teach chemistry.

I was interested in science or math and those kinds of things, but I thought [it was] much more challenging trying to understand people so I gravitated toward education. At the end of my first year in college or during my second year, I changed to psychology, same kind of reasoning.

He graduated with a psychology degree and earned his teaching certificate from another institution. As there were limited teaching opportunities in the Midwest at that time, he attended a national job fair in the Midwest and interviewed with a school district from South Central Texas; they ultimately offered him his first teaching job at a middle school.

I interviewed on Tuesday with the team by phone. I got the job offer on a Thursday. I announced it to all my friends, went to dinner. Friday, I packed the car, my dad's car, I didn't even own a car. Saturday morning, I left, Sunday night I got to [city in Texas] and a friend of my dad's daughter that lived in the [deleted] area that said, yeah you can stay with me. Monday, Labor Day, I went and signed my contract, found an apartment, moved into an apartment, Tuesday I started school.

He taught for three years at his first school, then transitioned to a high school in a nearby district as a science teacher. He was part of a team that designed a math and science magnet program within the school. Because of this, he became a lead teacher and transitioned to teaching fewer and fewer classes in order to handle administrative and programming duties. Eventually, he transitioned to the role of the principal of the program and then of the entire school. He bypassed the traditional path of assistant principal to principal.

His “why” is an “opportunity to be a part of something bigger than myself, to make a difference, to have a huge impact in people's lives. That's what draws me. To have meaning, to be able at the end of my life to be able to say, it was a life well spent. That's what drives me.”

He is still the principal at the Title I school.

Themes

After transcribing individual interviews, each transcription was reviewed and assigned codes. A code is a short word or phrase assigned to data to capture the essence or translate the data for analysis and meaning making; it is assigned through the lens of the researcher (Saldaña, 2016). I assigned codes that made sense to me through my personal lens and interpretation of the participants' statements. Next, I analyzed the codes and identified commonalities that I then clustered together into themes. Themes may be observable in the data or underlie the phenomenon (Saldaña, 2016). They are the elements of the experience of each leader. The analysis of the experiences of these ten leaders who served as the principal of a Title I school for five or more years led to five overarching themes. The themes are 1) Re-Defining Title I, 2) I See Myself in Them, 3) Community, Connection, Family, 4) Change the Narrative and 5) Passion.

In addition to themes that were common for most of the participants, I identified three unusual findings that were common to fewer than half of the participants. I call them unusual because they were not consistent across enough of the participants. They are included here because I feel they are worthy of further study due to their potential impact on longevity in the position of school principal. These include the 1) Path to Education as a Career, 2) Importance of Mentors, and 3) First Principalship.

Overarching Theme 1: Re-Defining Title I

My study is focused on the longevity of the principal in a Title I school. The research on principal longevity indicates a higher turnover rate at Title I schools than at non-Title I schools (Fuller, 2008). The participants in this study were specifically selected because they are/were leaders of schools classified by the federal government as Title I

and receive supplemental funding as such. The schools ranged from 42.1% to 84.3% economically disadvantaged as indicated in Table 1 Participant and School Demographics on page 29. This section seeks to elucidate responses to the question, “Do principals who remain at the same campus as the leader for five or more years have a common definition or viewpoint of a Title I school? If so, what is it?”

According to the federal government, the Title I program is about “improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged” (United States Department of Education, 2004). The intent of the supplemental funds is for schools to use the additional dollars to implement scientifically based strategies to improve the performance of students on state accountability standards. A school is eligible to receive Title I funds if it has a minimum of forty percent of its students who qualify for free and/or reduced lunch; distribution of the funds received by the district is determined by local control (United States Department of Education, 2004).

The federal definition of a Title 1 school as one that is “improving the academic achievement of the disadvantaged” represents deficit thinking. In this mindset, someone or something that deviates from the societal norm is seen as a negative, at a disadvantage, or deprived; this is deficit thinking (Sharma, 2018). It can lead to the marginalization of people based on stereotypes or prejudgments (Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Sharma, 2018). In school, the predominant societal norm is White or acting White (Yosso, 2005), which includes assumptions of compliance, a middle-class family income, physical health, and subscription to ideologies of individualism (Spencer et al., 2001).

One of the questions I asked participants was, “What is your definition of a Title I school? What is it like?” I asked so I could learn if they shared a similar definition or not.

If they had a similar understanding or way of defining a Title I school, that could inform how to select or train principals for schools designated as Title I.

All of the participants indicated that the technical definition means that the school has a large percentage of students who are classified as economically disadvantaged. The participants indicated that there isn't necessarily a difference between Title I and non-Title I schools, other than economics. Participant Two has been the principal at both classifications of schools (Title I and non-Title I):

I don't think I would describe it any differently than any other campus. School is school is school. We all have a curriculum that we need to follow; we all have a goal of growing our students. In my mind, I don't really know if there's a difference because it's school.

Participant Eight said,

I think the students are the same. I think Title I just pretty much is based on the economic status of their families. Because the school is a Title I, I don't think that limits what our students can achieve. And the thing is like if you put a high expectation for them, they reach it.

Here, Participant Eight recognizes that some people hold deficit beliefs of low performance in a Title I school, or of the students in the school; at the same time, she is consciously asserting that she does not share that belief. Her perspective of setting high expectations for all students, and especially for her marginalized students, is assets-based, which is the opposite of deficit thinking (Sharma, 2018). This belief stems from her personal experience as an economically disadvantaged Black female in public schools. Personal beliefs are strong lenses that influence how we see ourselves, others, and the world (Nelson & Guerra, 2014).

The participants discussed the belief that each school is different, even if it is designated as a Title I school. Participant Four said:

Each Title I campus is unique with unique needs, with the one commonality being that it's going to have students who come from poverty, and poverty looks very different. I mean that's a term about the amount of money your parents say they have. I know people who grew up impoverished and have no clue.

As Participant Four explained, each of us has our own life perspective and experiences that shape our beliefs. In the case of those she knows who grew up with fewer financial resources, they did not know they were “impoverished” until someone told them. From their perspective, they had everything they needed and made the most of what they had. Being viewed as impoverished by outsiders is the projection of a deficit perspective.

Participant Nine echoed that Title I schools have economically disadvantaged students, but kids are kids. “I don't think of anything necessarily different about the kids. It's just maybe their home life situation, you know.” The underlying message in this statement indicates Participant Nine may have trouble recognizing the assets students bring to school from lower socio-economic homes. While he believes in being a role model for his students, this statement communicates his underlying deficit perspective of his students’ home lives, based on his personal socialization with a childhood homelife that was economically challenging with his single mom. As Nelson and Guerra (2014) point out, a primary purpose of education is to socialize students to assimilate to cultural norms. Participant Nine reflects his learned cultural norms in his beliefs regarding his students.

From Participant Three’s perspective,

There are commonalities and then there are differences. Title I schools have economically disadvantaged students. That is a broad title and broad definition for kids who come from various backgrounds, various regions, various cultures, various thoughts. You can use the definition of economically disadvantaged to say why schools are defined as Title I when it comes to funding, but to define what the school means and what it

does, and its culture, has nothing to do with Title I. You can call it a Title I campus, but in my eyes, it is truly just about money because everything else in there is different.

Participant Three views schools, regardless of Title I designation, as unique places, much like each person is an individual. His acknowledgement of various backgrounds, regions, cultures, and thoughts communicates an assets-based belief, also referred to by some as a funds of knowledge framework (González et al., 2006). As defined by Nelson and Guerra (2014), these are the knowledge and skills learned through lived experiences and are just as valuable, if not more valuable, as the knowledge and skills learned in school.

Participant One described Title I schools as schools with challenges. As a parent, she recognizes what she offers her daughter with regard to reading and experiences such as trips. Her perception is that students in a Title I school may not have access to those same experiences, but she also does not recognize her students' experiences that could be leveraged as assets in the school and classroom; she is not the only participant with this perspective.

I think that all the obstacles that our kids have to go through in order to get what all our other kids need, and so whether they need food, or clothes. I just see that there are more challenges for them. They come with all these things already stacked against them, and I feel like we have to provide that opportunity for them, because they deserve everything that [my daughter] does. Not that [my daughter] doesn't have challenges, because in our environment, there are other challenges that she could face, but it's just harder for kids that come from poor homes, that they just have more to overcome.

Schools, in general, are not designed to recognize and leverage the assets students bring to school. Participant One expresses the overgeneralization of family backgrounds that can lead to deficit approaches to schooling (Yosso, 2005). Below, she recognizes the

importance of connection, which implies an understanding of the collectivist experience of her students of color. She also recognizes the role of formal schooling in teaching students about cultural, social, and economic capital of the dominant culture.

From a teacher perspective, our jobs become hard because we're not just educating the child, we're...educating the social emotional, we're dealing with all the baggage they come [with] every day, we're teaching them skills every day that don't have to do with math. I think of that quote we see all the time now, 'you have to Maslow before you Bloom.' For me, building that connection is what is so important. I guess that's what I think of with Title I. You got to bring your A game every day, and you got to bring out all the bells and whistles, every single day.

Here I interpret Participant One as using the term baggage not in a negative sense, but in recognition that students with fewer financial resources may come to school with different basic needs, such as food and clothing, than students who have access to more financial resources. As Participant Five clarified, Title I schools vary by district:

The kids' needs are still the same. They're still coming from families that struggle. They need things before they can even begin to learn. You have kids that they have basic needs that are maybe not going to be met at home. The school has to help meet those needs. Families are struggling financially. They might be working several jobs to try to make ends meet. The perception sometimes from people can be, Well, they're just not involved. But really, they are involved, and they do care. They have other things on their plate too, just to make sure that they can pay the bills.

Amiot et al (2020) describe a majoritarian narrative in some schools that indicates that students of color fail because of familial failures or poor upbringing. Participant Five recognizes the financial reality her students may be confronted with and rather than see it as a deficit, her statement challenges the assumption that a student's home situation is the cause of his/her failure. Mobility and languages other than English spoken in the home may also characterize Title I schools and present opportunities for the school to embrace and care for their students.

At the end of the day, those kids come to school and mom or dad may be already at work or they worked the night shift. They haven't had breakfast. They had to get themselves up and dressed and ready to [go to] school. Nobody was there to help them with their homework. It's not that those parents don't want to be, but they also have to pay the bills and put food on the table. For our campus, they have to understand that we are going to have to take care of kids on all those other levels, too.

Here I interpret that Participant Five's use of "those" to describe her students and families does not come from a deficit lens, but rather an acknowledgement of the need for care and relationships with students and their families. Caring school-based relationships between students and between students and staff develop the social capital of students (Sharma, 2018).

Healthy connections with students and their families leverage Familial Capital to improve academic performance. Familial capital is a commitment to the well-being of the community as a whole and supports the cultural knowledge that is modeled and reinforced within families (Yosso, 2005). Participant Six recognizes the value of family and the importance of school being an extension of the family.

We've got to look at longevity within our Title 1 schools because it's not a revolving door, those are kids that really need help and they really need guidance and they really need somebody that's going to be there for the long haul with them, that's going to sit right in it with them and understand and just build on what they have and move them from point A to point B and it could be a slow process it could be a fast process, but you got to be steady in the process. I know that those kids are the kids from those neighborhoods that have less than everybody else and they're on free and reduced lunch for a reason, it's not just because they want to be on that. And then they have some gaps in achievement and they have some gaps in social skills.

What Participant Six calls "gaps in social skills" could be reframed as the need for the school to support students in the acquisition of the social skills of the dominant culture and to learn which social skills to use when in order to advance. In essence, helping them

learn how to play the game of the dominant culture through further development of their Navigational Capital, or their ability to navigate social institutions like school (Yosso, 2005).

In addition to leveraging Familial Capital, Participant Seven describes, from his lens as a leader of a Title I school, his opportunity to build students up and dream of what can happen in the future, despite any real or perceived barriers they may face. Yosso (2005) describes this resilient perspective as Aspirational Capital. In Participant Seven's words,

I think of a Title I school, my own included, as the "Prove them wrong" place. People have a connotation of a whole bunch of kids that end up either on some sort of social role, or some sort of penitentiary. The thing that drives me crazy. I was "those kids." I think "those kids" a lot of times have so much more to offer than the "not-those kids" because if they just get a little taste, a little glimpse, a crack in the door, they will shock a lot of people. So, when I think of a Title I school I think of, "Yeah, you're going to have to work harder because people already have an opinion of you. So, what are you going to do about that?" That's what I think of.

Participant Seven's words indicate that he recognizes the potential within students and that his role is to link arms with them to leverage their strengths to dream big and reach their aspirations.

These participants understand their students bring different life experiences and may have needs that the school must meet before they are ready to digest content.

Participant Ten recognizes the strength of students classified as Title I:

I think Title 1 kids are tough, resilient. They have grit in ways that maybe is not typically thought of as grit. They're survivors. They don't even know it. Their lives are horrible. You look at a kid and they're struggling in lots of different ways, and then you meet their parents and you're like, that kid is amazing. I'd be killing people if I grew up with this kind of stuff.

Participant Ten's statements articulate his belief that the challenges students may face outside of school develop an internal set of resources, strategies, and competencies that enable them to survive and thrive difficult circumstances. In other words, their life experiences that may be perceived by others as "horrible" actually develop the students' resiliency. This is the recognition of a student's Navigational Capital (Yosso, 2005).

Participant Four also recognizes the resilience in her students. From her perspective, every child starts with an eagerness and innocence. Each life experience shapes his/her outlook and approach. The students of color she has encountered in her career have life experiences that often include violence, scarcity, and neglect. Frequently, her students assumed responsibilities typically handled by adults as a result of situations beyond their control.

I have pictures of little Black and Hispanic girls that are so eager to learn when they're little. And then, what happens to them when they get to high school, all of the situations, I guess, that they lived through...those little ones are all the same. They're all the same across east to west. They're all the same, cute, innocent little faces that then something happens to them, you know? And I think Title I kids come with a whole different set of life experiences.

Here Participant Four recognizes that many of her students, in a sense, grow up more quickly as a result of their experiences, but that it is these life experiences that build resilience and strength.

Each participant either implied or overtly stated the sentiment of feeling actualized by working in a Title I school. They value their personal efforts to develop the various forms of social capital (Yosso, 2005) needed to survive and thrive in the dominant culture. Based on the ten participants' definitions and perspectives on Title I schools, the common lens I can identify is that participants

view such schools as having more students classified as economically disadvantaged, students with more varied life experiences, and students with differing access to forms of capital (such as aspirational, familial, social, and navigational). These leaders are from diverse backgrounds, yet they often verbalize deficit beliefs; this may be largely due to their adoption and assimilation to the mainstream belief system that the standards of the dominant group are correct (Yosso, 2005).

While the pervasive verbalized belief of challenges may be seen as a deficit, these leaders also recognize the underlying capital of their students. This implies that when district-level personnel are selecting principals to lead schools designated as Title I, there is a need to evaluate the leader's perception of students in a school designated as Title I and the capital the students possess. Do principal candidates possess a largely additive or deficit lens towards the students that might be attending a campus designated as Title I? Potential principal candidates can also learn from these perspectives that when applying for jobs at these schools, such candidates need to be able to articulate how they will leverage the cultural assets of the communities.

Overarching Theme 2: I See Myself in Them

All ten of the participants, or one hundred percent, shared personal life experiences that mirror those of many of the students they serve at their respective schools. The experiences that participants identified as parallel to the experiences of many of their students are growing up in homes that would be considered economically disadvantaged, identifying as a Person of Color, and/or experiencing a specific life

event that they see their students experience aside from race or economics. These experiences do not necessarily apply only to schools designated as Title I but surfaced as a common theme for these leaders of schools designated as Title I. I called this theme “I See Myself in Them” because the participants related to their students from personal experience.

Seventy percent, or seven, of the participants grew up in homes that were classified as economically disadvantaged. As Participant Seven shared,

I see myself in the kids coming from my neighborhood [of the school I lead]. A lot of my parents work a couple of jobs to keep the lights on, and they want more for their kids than what they had.

He grew up with few financial resources, so he empathizes with his students’ experiences. Participant Ten also experienced financial hardship as a child. “Most of childhood was [with my] single mother and so she worked two or three jobs,” he said. These leaders related to this shared experience.

Sixty percent, or six, of the participants identify as a Person of Color. Fifty percent of the participants indicated they grew up both with financial hardship and as a Person of Color. Participant Eight is one of those five.

I was one of those economic disadvantaged students. I feel as a minority, I wasn't focused on like maybe some of my other peers. And so that was a big thing that pushed me into education.

Here Participant Eight shares feeling overlooked because of her race, and that as a consequence of her race, there were low expectations of her. She wants to ensure her students don’t miss out on opportunities like she feels she did.

Participant Six is also African American and grew up economically disadvantaged. She is no longer a principal, but reflected, “I just kind of saw me in those

buildings, you know.” She indicated that her single mother pushed her to see beyond their financial situation. She recognized that not all the students in her school had that same type of external support. “You have to share yourself with your kids and your life experiences too. I mean, you don't have to get into personal things about you, but you have to let them know that it's okay.” Here I understand that she is implying that “it’s okay” to come from where you are and to be strong, as things will get better. Principal Six shared her story with her students and strove to be that support in school for them. As a leader, she challenged herself to build hope in her students.

Let's talk about [the] future and let's talk about what it could look like. We talk about big ideas, and let's dream big, the sky's the limit. I like having those kinds of conversations with those kids, because they can't see themselves beyond their circumstances, because they're so poor. I've always said that this is your happy place, this is where your safety net is. If I need to do anything, then I'm going to be that person. And I will do that.

Participant Six’s words and actions reflect her belief in the power of possibility by developing the Aspirational Capital (Yosso, 2005) of her students. I include her statements in this theme because while she saw herself in her students, she did not see the same support for hopes and dreams she experienced. The power of hope was something she felt she could inspire in her students.

All ten, or one hundred percent, of the participants share a life experience common to some of the students at their schools. The experiences highlighted below can occur in any school, regardless of Title I classification. One similar life experience between Participant Four and her students is that she got pregnant as a teenager and did not feel like she had anyone to turn to—not even her family.

I was busted. Broken, broken, broken, broken. And so, I feel like a lot of our kids are there, not in that same situation, but like that. You're under the control of adults. You're not old enough to make any choices that are

different. And so, you walk down that path that is probably the most long and the biggest mistake, because you don't have help. You [feel like you] don't have options and you don't have anybody to talk to. You don't have any way to just make it better, and it's so easy for us [to help]. It's been a long time since I had to deal with that, but... and I see it in our kids all the time.

What Participant Four here shares seeing in her students was a sense of isolation and not knowing who to turn to for help; this was also her experience as a pregnant teenager. The pregnancy rate among teens age fifteen to nineteen has declined significantly from the 1980s, yet there were still 53,150 pregnancies, or 58 for every 1,000 teens, in Texas among this age group as of 2017 (Kost et al., 2017).

Other life experiences some participants shared with their students include dropping out of high school and experiencing mental health issues. In the 2017-2018 school year, the dropout rate for the state of Texas was 1.9% across all student groups (Texas Education Agency, 2019). Participant Ten dropped out of high school and was also diagnosed as clinically depressed. In 2017, twelve percent of Texas adolescents in grades nine through twelve indicated symptoms of depression (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Participant Ten's experiences mirror those of some of his students.

A life experience for 30.3% of Texas children during the years 2013-2017 was living in a single parent household (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017). Four of the participants in this study shared this experience. Participant Nine voiced that he wants to be the positive example for his students that he did not have:

As kids, they were similar to my background growing up and [I] try to be a role model or a leader for them.

I felt it was important to highlight this theme titled “I See Myself in Them” because these ten participants either implied or directly stated that they saw themselves in their students. There appears to be a potential link between this theme and longevity of five or more years. When leaders see themselves in their students, their work became personal. These leaders in this study strive to remove barriers they personally experienced, so that those barriers are minimized in their students’ lives. It was their opportunity to provide their students what they wish someone had provided them. It also was their opportunity to replicate their positive school experiences. Either way, these leaders did not want their students’ circumstances to define their level of success. This is important because it may be a lived experience that school districts should seek in leaders of Title I schools in their districts if they want to increase the longevity of principals leading said schools.

Overarching Theme 3: Community, Connection, Family

A sense of belonging or connection is part of the pathway to self-actualization as theorized by Maslow (1970). A sense of connection, community, and family surfaced with eighty percent, or eight of the participants in this study as reasons they stayed at the same school for five or more years. Moving toward self-actualization is comforting and may contribute to “stayingness.” This sense may not be isolated to principals of Title I schools, but rather to the longevity of a principal at the same site; exploring the relationship between connections at school and longevity in a particular school site is something that would necessitate further study beyond the present project.

Participant Ten said that one his strengths was connectedness. “The connection is very relevant because I do feel strong connections to people in general. I do feel strong connections to places.” He continued,

Altruistically, I've said for many, many years, at least internally, people leave this community. I'm not going to be one of those people. I'm here, this is my family, this community needs me. In fact, I've told the faculty many times, teachers make a difference everywhere, teachers here make all the difference. They save lives. The connections that our teachers make, and other staff members too, literally change lives moving forward. The kids need us more so than in a non-Title 1 school. That's the altruistic sense of it.

Participant Ten has worked at his current school for twenty-three years, first as a teacher and now as the principal. He has never worked in a non-Title I school, so his perception may stem from his personal experience of needing more as a student. As a child and student, Participant Ten did not feel these kinds of personal connections. Trying to make sure that is not his students' experience, he has made the choice to make the school where he leads become his home, his family. As Participant Ten stated in his interview,

There's a very, very strong sense of family among the faculty and staff, even people that didn't go to school here,” he shared. “I run into people all the time, oh yeah Mr. [Participant Ten], you're still here. Somebody yelled it out in the parking lot. I was like, "Yeah, I'm still here." Where am I going to go? I don't know. This is my family, right? I wouldn't go anywhere else. The whole thing is almost inconceivable to me.

Participant Nine shared the same sentiment about his school being a family for him. His first job in education was as a teaching assistant in the district where he still works.

The school itself felt like family. I really loved the teachers and people I worked with. So, I knew I wanted to go back there because it felt like home. Even though I had a crazy home life, still everybody around is family and so everywhere I go, I want to have a family. Here we try to be family and care about each other because we're all in the trenches together.

I just feel like it's family. Like we care about each other, we genuinely care about each other.

Participant Nine grew up in a single-parent home and didn't have strong family ties. In this quote he shows that his school gives him that connection and family.

After leading her school for thirteen years, Participant Two felt a sense of community and how powerful that can be for a school.

Having been at a campus so long, really knowing family and really the siblings going through, who the siblings are. Our kids are growing up and they're giving back to society. I think when you look at why do you stay so long; I think there's a piece of building that community and seeing your community in that. You've seen the kids go out and do stuff and still are here providing that.

There is a comfort in being part of developing the community and being a known entity.

Participant Ten had parallel thoughts about the relationship of longevity and positively impacting families. "I'm very proud that there are five people who work here that I taught here. There have been as many as nine people that work here that I taught here." These statements indicate the acknowledgement of growing the community through education and relationships.

Participant Seven echoed that sentiment:

At a Title I campus you get a chance to change familial arcs. You really do. You get a chance to develop relationships with families. Having older brothers and sisters...seeing those families grow and change. I've hired teachers that were students. So, it's keeping the continuity of the neighborhood and working with the neighborhood to help the neighborhood move forward.

To Participant Seven, community is key; he has stayed because of his school community.

I feel an obligation to the community at this point. They've come to expect certain things at that school, and they're the right expectations. I want those people to have a school they can be proud of, of what they do, and say "My kid goes there." Why do I open my doors to [the community college] every night of the week? It's for adult G.E.D. and the ESL

courses. Why? That's their school too. Their tax dollars go to that. I want it to be theirs. I don't feel an obligation to the district. I feel an obligation to all these kids and those families.

Three participants implied that when they began at their schools, their relationships with the community were shaky because they set high academic and behavioral expectations for their students and held students and staff accountable to them. Over time, these participants felt that the community came to appreciate the rigor and consistency that the leaders provided. “If you’re doing a good job as a campus leader, then your name starts to trickle around the community,” said Participant Five. “Parents already know coming in, ‘Oh, I've heard this school's great in regard to blank’ or, ‘I heard this school does a good job with this and I know it's going to be great. I think it’s good for the community if the leader’s doing a good job.’”

Connection and family are factors Participant Six leveraged to support her students; they are also factors that kept her coming back each year.

I think that's just natural for me to gravitate to kids that really need the help and really need the services and just finding those wrap-around services for them to make life a little bit more comfortable for them. I will sit on the porch...with the parents and just have those conversations about their kids and what we can do together. I know their resources are limited so I'm going to do all that I can do to make sure that they're successful. I think just connecting with them on that level and sharing myself with them is one of the ways that I've been successful at working with the kids at Title 1 Schools.

To Participant Six, positive, productive relationships with her families feeds her soul and strengthens her connection to them. She has access to resources that she can connect to her students and families to further advance them. Her actions acknowledge and leverage the Familial Capital (Yosso, 2005) her Students of Color bring to school.

“I love Title I schools,” said Participant Five. She wants to serve where her talents are needed most and feels that place is in Title I schools.

All kids need people to love and care for them. But I feel like that group of kids needs people to love and care for them the most. I will say that I am a relationship person. I really need to feel like I have strong relationships. In all of the schools that I've ever worked at, I felt that way. From the day that I was hired [at my current school], there's just something different about that school. The teachers in that school, they're the kind of teacher that I was. They're dedicated to kids no matter what. When I came there, they just didn't know which direction to go. It was like they were all trying all of this stuff, but at the end of the day, their core values were, “we have to take care of kids.” I honestly just felt like that was a luck for me again, that someone put me right there at that school. That was the school that was meant for me.

When she says “they,” she is referring to the staff. The core values of caring for kids demonstrate her recognition of the opportunity to love her students and further build their Aspirational Capital (Yosso, 2005) through caring relationships.

Because her relationship with her family was tense as she grew up, Participant Two found her family at her school. She said, “I think my staying was due to the campus, the relationships on the campus, the teachers on the campus, the families on the campus, the kids on the campus. I think that's what was causing that staying, and I think that validation of relationships we are growing.” Her Title I school was over 90% Hispanic.

I feel like in our Hispanic culture, family is so important, and in my mind I thought it was easier to build family and community here [Title I school] than family and community here [non-Title I school], because everyone is so individualistic over here [non-Title I school]. I [non-Title I school/community] want to get ahead, where we [Title I school/community] want to get ahead, we [Title I school/community] want to do it, as opposed to I [non-Title I school/community] want to do it. It's kind of a difference that I've seen. That's just my opinion. I don't know if it's right or wrong.

She refers to Hofstede's (2001) work around individualistic and collectivistic culture. In his definition, individualistic cultures value personal goals, self-reliance, and

independence. Collectivistic cultures value group goals, social connectedness, and interdependence (Hofstede, 2001). She recognized the collective nature of her Title I school because it was predominantly Hispanic, a culture that emphasizes collectivist values (Gudykunst, 1998). She articulated that it was easier to build connections and family, which contributed to her staying as the principal.

Participant One also feels a sense of family at her school, partly because of her upbringing, and partly because she is the inaugural principal of her school.

What keeps me there? I think there's a lot of things. I think opening the school is definitely one of those things where I have hired every single teacher there. I own it, I take responsibility for it. It's like you are birthing a school. I have birthed that school, and I feel like I'm emotionally attached to that. I'm there because I know the community. I built that community. They know who I am. I don't get nearly as many parent complaints like I used to in the very beginning, but that's because they know who we are, and they know that we work really hard. I have a strong sense of family from my own upbringing, that I feel like I become emotionally attached to my people, and to my community. It's hard to leave your family. It's hard for me.

This is the only school Participant One has led. When she started as the principal, she was not yet married and did not have any children of her own. She also worked within thirty miles of where she grew up and her family still lives. She considered her school as her family from the beginning and now, thirteen years later, they still are her family.

Like Participant One, Participant Ten is still leading his school, the place he has worked for twenty-three years. "I can't leave this school and just do something kind of like it in another place. It's a part of me and always will be." Participant Five, who is still at her school, echoes that sentiment. "I also feel like I don't think I could go. I really feel

like right now, and I could be wrong, I don't know if I could go be a principal anywhere else. I feel like that's where I'm meant to be a principal.”

Relationships are key. The sense of connection and family these leaders communicated contributed to the length of time they stayed at their schools. In the research, it is indicated that principals leave because of poor relationships with their staff, their district, or their community (Beckett, 2018). These leaders are initial evidence that positive relationships with stakeholders may increase longevity of the principal.

Overarching Theme 4: Change the Narrative

Ninety percent, or nine of ten, of these leaders either directly or indirectly implied that they believe people, in general, view Title I schools from a deficit perspective. Even some of their own descriptions carried evidence of deficit thinking to some degree, as I have discussed previously. They articulated a desire to positively influence the trajectory of the students they served by ensuring access to opportunities, support, and development of a positive mindset. They also wanted to change the negative or deficit perception the community holds about students who attend a Title I school and Title I schools, in general. This emerged as a theme that I here call “Change the Narrative.”

In sharing his feelings about the external perception of his school, Participant Ten conveyed his frustration and disgust:

The perception of our own graduates or this community, that this community is bad. It's just so upsetting. Knowing that people talk bad about this school was a constant battle. There's that low expectation, that's the thing that is so insidious. It's classism and racism, whether it's explicit and conscious or implicit and unconscious or anywhere in between or maybe it's just what they've heard from other people and they don't know any different, but it has its roots in racism and classism. Where else could it come from? Sure, do we sometimes get on the news? There's sometimes stuff like that, yeah. But those are mostly outliers and even then, those aren't necessarily bad kids, they're bad situations.

From his personal experience as a student who was disengaged and absent from school and who dabbled in petty activities as a child, he knew at his core that he wasn't a bad person, but he was in a difficult situation, much like his students. He passionately relayed,

There are so many great kids here. People that come often comment, partly I think because they have this expectation that [school name] must be a bad place, but not always, partly they just walk in, and it's like, "people are so nice here, so friendly here." I've had people that have left here and gone to other schools in the district, and they say, "Yeah, it's not the same here. It's not like it was at [his school]."

That passion to change the narrative was also evident in Participant Nine. "You can't change your past, but you can change your future. And so, it starts today. Because I knew I couldn't change my past, but I could always change my future. So that's what I wanted to do for kids, as well." Participant Nine feels driven to change the individual and collective narrative.

Building students up and ensuring they have access and know their options and opportunities is part of changing a narrative. These actions build the Aspirational and Navigational Capital (Yosso, 2005) of students and their families. The opportunity to build these types of capital that can change the narrative for students and their families inspires Participant Seven to stay and to do the work he does,

It's the coolest thing in the world to me to be able to give somebody something, that barring major head trauma, that they will have for the rest of their lives, and they don't have to remember where it came from or who gave it to them, but it's there. The idea that by building those foundational pieces, to give somebody else the palette to paint their world as they want to see it is deadly critical. We talk about changing the world, but if we all tried to paint it the color-by-numbers that we all experienced, then we're not really going to get very far, and I never saw it as my job in education and still don't to tell people what they can be. It's my job to ask them what they want to be and make sure they have the tools to be able to create who

they want to be. That's what keeps me coming back. And like I said, changing familial arcs.

Participant Seven is a champion for and with his students. While he has high aspirations, there is an undercurrent of subconscious deficit thinking, or a need for him to fill his students with resources or skills without acknowledging what they bring to the table.

You can stretch kids further than most people think. My why is those kids and those families that a lot of people write off, and sometimes it's just kind of fun to be a stick in the eye. If I give them the tools and the drive to go find out something they don't know so they can do something that they want to do, then I've done my job. Working with kids that don't have the advantages that others have to start the race [with] is incredibly satisfying to me, because I want them to prove everybody else wrong.

Participant Eight voiced that minority students or those who are low-income or in single parent homes are not often challenged by themselves or others. Supporting and pushing them is fulfilling to her and contributes to her longevity.

I just enjoy advocating for students. Their parents don't know or they're first generations [about] the opportunity to go to school and just pushing students, having a higher expectation for them. Sometimes the education system and educators are like, "Poor old this person," and not really push them. And the thing is like, I know from being a minority and being that person, the world is not going to be "poor old you." I'm just real big about like, "Hey, you got to change the cycle for your family." I'm always about pushing the minority students, just any student, regardless of their background. You sensitive to it. But at the same time, you have to prepare them for the real world because nobody's going to be "poor old you." When you get out in the real world, they need to know, nobody's going to give you anything. You got to work for what [you want]...Just changing the cycle. I always try to share my story with my students too. I'm real transparent with them and I'm just telling them like, "You can do it. Let me tell you, you don't know what I went through, but you got to be the person that changed the cycle for your family."

Her words and actions also demonstrate that she builds the Resistance Capital of her students. According to Yosso (2005), Resistance Capital are the knowledge and skills to work against stereotypes to challenge inequities.

Participant Six recognized the need to build the Resistance Capital of her students and staff in order to change the narrative at her school. When she became the principal at her Title I school, the school had struggled academically for at least five consecutive years. To change the narrative for her students, first she had to help the staff change their deficit narrative and raise their expectations:

It was hard. It was hard work trying to get the teachers on board. I had lots of conversations with the faculty and staff. I said, "It's a new day, it's a new dawn. We cannot operate like this." Because what we're teaching these kids is, they don't worry about it, Superwoman or Superman is going to scoop you up at the end of the day and you're going to be really successful. We are continuing this whole pipeline to prison right here. We're doing that. I said we got to stop and if you're not on board with that I'm going to ask you to go ahead and start looking because I'm going to bring some people in here that want to do this work. Because this is hard work.

She took the time to build relationships with the students, with the staff, with the families, and with the community. She had relocated from Florida to lead this school and was appalled that a public school district would disregard a school to this degree. As much as she wanted to leave and throw up her hands, she knew she could turn it around and raise the life outcomes for the students.

It was a lot to do over there. And it took me the first, almost a year and a half to settle those kids down and then start bringing in some teachers that really wanted to do that level of work. Because I would tell them in the interview, this is not for the faint. If nothing else I'm going to stay for these kids and I'm going to see if I can turn them around and get them on the straight and narrow. So that they can be successful. Because they have to see it different, and they got to live beyond their environment and their community that they sit in. You do not have to become that.

Here Participant Six recognized that the majority of her students were exposed to gangs, drugs, violence, crime, and abuse on a regular basis to the point that that was their “normal.” She wanted to shine a light on another life experience and that with education, other doors of opportunity would be open to them. She concluded by saying,

I was on a mission to make sure, because when the kids didn't want to be a part of it, I said, “No, you can't opt out of this. Your momma, your daddy, your uncle, your grandma, we're going to have a whole meeting because the district told me that if you're smart enough to get into this program you are not coming out.” And I would have those conversations with the kids, and they believed me. You can't let them give up.

She utilized the community to build Aspirational Capital and leverage Familial Capital (Yosso, 2005) to push students to see the array of opportunities available to them so they could make informed choices.

Participant Four agrees, “When I now deal with kids, you can't feel sorry for them. You can't feel sorry for yourself if you're a kid. You have got to get up and work your butt off, so you can get out of the situation, because school is going to be your only way to get out of this.” Participant Four feels she feeds positively off of this work. “I get a super high out of making the undoable doable, you know. That's a super high.” She believes in the power of Resistance Capital (Yosso, 2005) and models that for her students.

“I wanted to change the narrative,” said Participant Three. “I wanted to help the kids in the community change the narrative of what it means to go to that school because it has a rich tradition. Till this day, I cringe when I hear people say that the school is ghetto.” To him, calling his school the deficit-oriented term “ghetto” did not accurately reflect his school and the greatness and assets he saw on a daily basis. He loved his school and believed in every one of his students. Because the surrounding neighborhood

was associated with poverty, the majority perspective from those outside the neighborhood was deficit-based. He was driven to challenge the stereotype.

I think one of the toughest things was convincing your own [students and staff] how great you are; that was tough. It wore me down having to hear every time I wore my [school] shirts somewhere someone apologizing, or “Oh, thank you for working with those kids.” I mean when we eat our own, when my own people talk bad. It was hard. What also makes it tough is always having to fight to prove your worthiness. I also think that to be at a Title I, you have to realize there will never be any accolades. There are, but there aren't. [Test] scores don't mean anything when you know that you're saving a kid's life.

In Participant Three's district, results on state assessments are highly regarded and publicly recognized. In his mind, the true success is the behind the scenes work of changing student's futures through education. Leading a Title I school, for him, requires intrinsic motivation rather than reliance on public recognition.

Like the other principals in this study, Participant Two shared a drive to prove the naysayers wrong.

I think trying to change the narrative of the school, I think those were the hardest things. I think when you live in a community like this [high poverty], you're always going to have a Title I campus, but it felt like this side [wealthier] of the district really wanted to dog us more and hurt us more. It's that piece of someone's got to continue to fight for our kids, who I think are being treated as an underdog or a community that's being treated as an underdog, that's the piece that kept me to stay.

When she talked about the part of the district that, “wanted to dog us more and hurt us more,” she meant that they looked down on her students and her community and would speak negatively or disrespectfully to them or of them. She felt that she could be their champion and their voice. Because she is a White female and the part of the district that was negative toward her community was also predominantly White, I feel that she was

subconsciously communicating that she could leverage her race to change the perception of her school community.

Each of these participants wanted to “Change the Narrative” for their students by developing and leveraging their inner resources and competencies to confront events. This resilience to maneuver stressful situations and settings is Navigational Capital (Yosso, 2005). Participant One summed up the strength this type of capital provides when she said,

It was a little bit of wanting to create the change for what I saw in my own campus. When you see kids that just have this passion and desire, and they overcome these obstacles. All our kids just overcome obstacles, no matter where they come from, to not give up, to have that grit, is powerful.

Participant One recognizes this asset within her students and that motivates her to stay and support her students to persevere.

Overarching Theme 5: Passion

Career choice stems from personal expectations and values within a given context (Watt, et al., 2012). All ten participants in this study expounded on an internal fire or passion that burns and drives them. Passion is a strong emotion for someone or something. Based on the responses of these ten leaders, that passion is to be more, provide more, give more to students who either do not see or believe in the potential. I use passion here as motivation. Intrinsic value and a desire to make a social contribution were the highest rated motivations for choosing education as a career (Watt et. al., 2012). Intrinsic motivation was a strong factor for the participants in this study.

Like many educators, Participant Eight said, “The kids are like the big reason that I’m here. I really like working with kids and making a difference in their lives.”

Participant Six continued the thought when she said, “I was not going to be the coward

that walked away. Because I don't run easily. It was hard, but I stayed.” Her job at the school was a challenge at first because she had to earn the students’ trust and confidence due to numerous leadership transitions prior to her arrival. She persisted because she enjoyed advocating for her kids.

You're not going to put up any barriers that I cannot break down. I'm going to figure out a way for my kids to be successful and do the things that they need to do. I liked what was doing and I liked the kids. Once you get the kids it's a wrap. They got to me. I stayed, and I liked it. That's why I stayed so long.

As she shows here, Participant Six earned the respect of her students and they won her heart.

Students also won the heart of Participant Four and helping her students navigate became a personal mission for her.

I like a good game. I like to be challenged and I like to problem solve. I like to make what is considered undoable doable, somehow, but you've got to think outside the box.

Knowing the challenges her students faced outside of school such as drugs, violence, and poverty, her students’ accomplishments and success in school rewarded her internally. “If you don't have that thing in your throat that makes you want to cry every time they come out in a uniform or they make you proud somehow [this isn’t the job for you].”

In the end, according to participants’ interview statements they seem to share a blend of motivations, rooted in a love of the kids and a love of the work. “I love my job,” said Participant Three. “I was happy to wake up and go to work, and it wasn't work. There is a sense of security when you get to build your own staff and the people around you, and I was able to do that.” Participant Two agreed. “I like what I do. I feel like

there's purpose and there's value and I'm really supporting the growth and development of the next generation of our community, of our society, of our world as we do what we do. I think there's just a piece of love of the job and love of learning. I think the principal job is probably one of the best jobs out there. It's a great job.”

The motivations articulated by these leaders are not necessarily isolated to leaders who stayed or even leaders of Title I schools. They are motivations shared by educators across levels and countries (Watt et al., 2012). Greater in-depth study that isolates different variables is needed.

The five themes of Re-defining Title I, I See Myself in Them, Community, Connection, Family, Change the Narrative, and Passion surfaced from these ten participants as reasons that impact them staying at their respective school for five or more years. It is evident these leaders believe in their students. It is also evident that much of the language they use has deficit thinking undertones. My sense is that their words do not necessarily match their feelings; they have socialized their words to the majority perception of students who attend schools identified as Title I. Regardless of how their words may be perceived, these five themes appear to contribute to longevity in the role of principal at one school.

Unusual Findings

While there were five themes that emerged that were common across eight or more of the participants, there were three additional findings that surfaced in fewer than five of the participants yet lend themselves to potential future study. I titled these 1) Path to Education as a Career, 2) Importance of Mentors, and 3) First Principalship.

Unusual Finding 1: Path to Education as a Career

The route to education was not linear for these leaders with longevity. For eight of the ten participants, education was not the original major. They arrived in education in different ways. For example, Participant One said, “I didn't go into college knowing that I wanted to be a teacher, by any means. I went in undecided, probably for two years. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I worked in an office. I knew that's not what I wanted to do.” Participant Two, “ended up playing basketball in college and majoring in science; I was not going to be in education.” She started studying business but couldn't connect it to something tangible to her. Even though her parents were educators and she did not want to follow their lead, she changed her major to secondary education. “In education, I feel like I know what we do. There's a cycle to it and there's a system to it and there's things that you just know to do. I switched over to be an education major, and I don't think I would do anything else different ever.”

In Texas, individuals with a college degree can complete an alternative certification program that prepares them to earn credentials to become an educator. This was the route two of the participants took. According to Participant Eight, “My major was in business, but I ended up going through the alternative certification through Region Thirteen to become a teacher.”

Participant Three also landed in education via the alternative certification route. “I went to UT [University of Texas], not as an educator. I think I switched my major a dozen times.”

During his junior year of college, he got a part-time job teaching an after-school program and fell in love with it. “At that point I was too close to graduate that I switched my

major to history and sociology but couldn't do the education track. I'd have to add some hours. And then I went the alternative cert [certification] route.”

Participant 10 knew he wanted an education degree but did not start on that path. “I was officially undeclared, I believe. In my mind, I was an education major and I was going to teach chemistry. At the end of my first year in college or during my second year, I changed to psychology. I could be a counselor, I could maybe be a professor, and I could open family counseling, individual counseling. I have a degree in psychology, and I have a teaching certificate, so different colleges. They would not give me a degree in psychology and education.”

Participant 6 said, “I wanted to be a nurse. And I was going to go to nursing school and then I started getting into the curriculum and I'm like, no this is not for me, I'm not going to be able to do all of that right there.” Her older sisters were in education, so she changed her major to education.

“I wasn't going to be in education at all,” shared Participant 4, “because my dad had been in education. And I was a journalist. And so, I came to UT on a journalism scholarship. And then, I met my husband.” Her dream of being a journalist who traveled the world to write stories changed when she got married. She went into teaching.

Participant Seven eventually landed in education.

I graduated high school, and I didn't intend to go to college. My mom made me promise to go a semester. Because I was into music, I went to North Texas, that's what I went to go study. She fully expected me to call that I'd gone to New York or L.A. [Los Angeles]. I thought, “Fine, I'll make her happy for a semester.” Got a lot of friends that are still professional musicians and Grammy winners, and those kinds of things, but I've found out I was attached to regular paychecks and healthcare. Got into the English department, which is fine, I thought, “Okay, maybe I can do something with that”. Getting a good degree will get you into a lot of things. Then I thought, “Well, it'll get you into something, but what?” So,

I kind of started taking a path or an interest in law, intellectual properties, music connection.

Eventually he arrived to teaching because wanted to pay off student loans. That was twenty-three years ago.

Each participant found his or her way to education and eventually to leadership. Five of the participants had a family member who worked in education, in childcare, teaching, or leadership; none of those five started their college studies in education. This may have been a contributing factor in them not beginning in education as a field of study. The decision to teach in public education has been difficult for decades considering the concerns of low pay, low prestige and respect, inadequate resources, poor status, limited career opportunities, and isolating work (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Research in the United States suggests that over 35% of first year teachers did not enter education as their first career (Johnson, 2004).

Unusual Finding 2: Importance of Mentors

Across disciplines, including education and school leadership development, the role of mentors and their positive impact is being recognized for its contribution to attract, develop, and retain employees (Kovnatska, 2014; Zeran et.al., 2009). Mentoring can be formal or informal and involves a more knowledgeable or skilled professional supporting and coaching another professional who has less experience (Tareef, 2013).

Two of the participants discussed informal mentorship that occurred when another professional saw something in them that either inspired or encouraged them to look at school leadership. Participant Six had people who pushed her to do more and advance professionally:

My principals just pushed me, they're like, "Nah [Participant Six], you can do more. You got a lot of stuff, just keep it moving." So, I did, and that's how I ended up in leadership. "You're not getting paid for the work that you do, why don't you just go to school and get paid for this?" I'm like, okay that's a good idea, maybe I should do that. So that's how I ended up in leadership.

She continued,

When other people see your potential, then they want to help tap that for you, so I had a lot of good role models when I was employed at work back in Florida. They'd always just say, "No, just do more, do this, do that." And they gave me a lot of opportunities to do things differently.

Mentoring relationships increase the likelihood of success (Bynum, 2015). Participant

Seven also had a type of mentor.

I had a principal who had been doing it for a million years who would take me into meetings with him and go, "Did you see how I did that?" I'd say, "Yeah." He'd go, "That's the dumbest thing ever. Don't ever do it that way." So, I just had really down-to-Earth people that I worked with that were willing to pull back the curtain and go, "Here's the what and the why, and here's how."

Mentorship of leaders who displayed longevity is an area to learn more about.

Participant One indicated that she did not have a mentor who encouraged her into leadership. She said,

When I looked for my first assistant principal role, I couldn't get my foot in the door. In hindsight, I'm thinking about why. I feel like my principal didn't build capacity in me. I wanted to be a leader, but she wouldn't allow me the opportunity.

Because she did not see any opportunities in that district, she looked elsewhere for her first administrative position.

Studies indicate the positive outcomes of mentorship include increased job satisfaction, and increased opportunity (Eby et al., 2008). Mentoring also benefits the employer through improved productivity and reduced turnover (Aora, 2014). There

appears to be an opportunity to mentor leaders to increase longevity as well as to support teachers into leadership roles through mentoring.

Unusual Finding 3: First Principalship

An unexpected finding that emerged from eight of the ten participants was that the school where they remained five or more years was their first principalship. I consider this an unusual finding because I interpreted this as a potentially subconscious reason these leaders stayed at their schools. One participant described feeling “comfortable” at her school. The phenomenon of “staying” may be connected to a level of comfort of the leader. Two participants indicated they couldn’t see themselves at another school; this implies an allegiance to the first school. Participant Five, who is in her seventh year at her school, elaborated on her thoughts. “I don't know if I could go be a principal anywhere else. I feel like that's where I'm meant to be a principal. When I'm done being a principal, I'll be done at this one school and I'll go do something else completely.”

Participant Ten echoed her thoughts. “I'm going to have to leave at some time, but I cannot be the person that for selfish reasons went somewhere else. I just can't do it. I can't stomach it. I may have to do something entirely different and retire one day, but I couldn't go to one of the other schools. I don't think I could handle it. It would be taking me away from my family.”

The principal position requires personal mental, physical, and emotional investments and negotiation of experiences that contribute to identity development (Crow et al., 2017). The significant investment of time, energy, and effort that accompanies the position, and especially the first principalship, shapes the personal and professional identity of the leader. Because of the way the identity of the school and the identity of the

leader intertwine, these leaders may see the school as an extension of their own identity. This may contribute to why a leader stays for five or more years at the same school.

Summary

This study focuses on the experiences of ten participants who served as the principal of a Title I school for five or more years. Each provided their definition of what a Title I school is and what it is like. Their descriptions mirrored the federal definition and acknowledged their own socialization to the societal deficit perspective of Title I schools and students. Their reasons for staying related to their personal experiences and motivations. While none of them grew up together and they worked in seven different districts, five overarching themes emerged that contributed to their longevity. Three other topics surfaced as unusual findings primarily because they were inconsistent or were limited in the discussion by the participants. The themes and unusual findings each provide an avenue for future or continued study.

V. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Over seventy percent of public-school principals leave either the school or profession within the first five years (School Leaders Network, 2014). Student characteristics are strong predictors of school leadership turnover and schools with larger numbers of economically disadvantaged students experience higher turnover rates (Grissom & Bartanan, 2018). The ten leaders in this study are not part of those statistics. Rather, they stayed longer than five years and they lead schools with large numbers of low-income students. The number five is not arbitrary because research indicates that full implementation of school improvement efforts need three to five years to see a shift in student outcome results (Beckett, 2018). Student performance is adversely affected when the principal of a school leaves and students in Title I environments need the most effective leaders and the greatest stability (Grissom & Bartanan, 2018). The principals in this study stayed at their schools and effectively lead them to achieve success as measured by the state assessment in Texas.

What kept these ten principals at their schools for longer than the research indicates? So I could understand the essence of persistence by public school leaders in Title I schools for five or more years and the impact of their experiences, I utilized a phenomenological approach. I conducted a sixty to ninety-minute semi-structured interview with each individual, then analyzed the responses to determine whether there were any commonalities.

In this chapter, I will discuss the participants' views on the challenges and rewards of the principalship. Educational leadership is a work of heart and is frequently

emotionally charged; it necessitates navigation between belonging and loneliness (Kelchtermans et al., 2011). The participants indicate that the rewards outweigh the challenges, which contribute to them remaining at their respective schools.

Next, I discuss the participants' reflections on longevity, student achievement, and district supports or actions in relation to the prior literature. Connections to the theoretical framework are discussed based on the results. Through the analysis and themes, this study identified six traits or characteristics of leaders who remained as the principal at their school designated as Title I for five or more years:

- 1) They qualified (or thought they may have qualified) as economically disadvantaged as a child.
- 2) Leaders of Color identified with students of the same race.
- 3) Leaders of Color worked in same community or nearby the one in which they grew up.
- 4) They have a need for belonging.
- 5) They exhibit a strong drive to "change the narrative" for students.
- 6) They lead to compensate for what they felt they lacked in their own childhoods.

The perceptions of these ten participants led to three overarching implications to increase longevity in the principalship:

- 1) Recruitment of educators from particular communities/backgrounds and pipeline development,
- 2) Mentorship with the first principal position, and
- 3) On-going leadership support.

Finally, recommendations for further research are listed. The chapter concludes with advice from these leaders to other leaders to increase their longevity in the role of principal.

Participants' Views on the Challenges of Title 1 Principalship

The participants in this study found their positions rewarding; yet they were not without their challenges. I included this section because research indicates the challenges may be a cause of turnover. One issue that impacts principal retention is working conditions such as salary, testing, and the relationship with central office (Fuller et al., 2015). None of the participants in this study verbalized salary as a challenge; one discussed testing and the others discussed relationships with district leadership as their challenges.

According to Participant One, a significant challenge was changes in district leadership and changes in expectations.

Currently, like right now, oh my gosh, just the change in the central office. I feel like this has been my hardest year since I've been a principal. The challenge is, for me, to be a strong principal right now, in an environment that doesn't like the questions, and doesn't like the outspokenness. It's hard for me to just stay quiet.

Because she has been a principal and, in the district, longer than her supervisors, she finds it frustrating that her experience is not honored, and her voice is not heard.

Participant Six shared the same frustration with the lack of district level support by way of listening to her, including her, and valuing her input. She arrived at her school with eight years of principal experience, but was new to the district, city, and state.

The level of support [was a challenge]. I mean, I would get checked on, but I wasn't being collaborated with. It would be, how are things going? But not what can I help you think through, I didn't get that. So, challenging for me is just the people that were, my colleagues that thought

they were better than I was for some reason. And getting to figure it out for myself. I didn't feel like I was getting that level of support.

Because she was experienced, she wondered if that was why she was not included; there was a perceived expectation by her peers and supervisors that she already knew how to do the job. While she understood the role, she felt like an outsider.

When I look back on it, I don't think people knew how to bring me that level of support because they never had to do that. They were never in those situations where they had to produce them [results]. They didn't know how to interact with me.

She took over a school that was failing by state standards and had been through several principals before she arrived. She felt she did not get help or support because no one in the system knew what to do to turn the school around behaviorally or academically and as a result, did not know how to help her. None of the sitting principals expressed interest in the job. She continued,

What I noticed when we had principal meetings, we used to have a presentation by the principals. They would never allow me to present. I always had something to say and I would just say it at the table whether they would listen or not. But I had things to contribute. I didn't feel like I had an opportunity to shine within my own strengths. Nobody realized the potential that I could deliver. They saw me as, 'Okay, well she's done this in Florida, I know she's one of seven turnaround principals in the state, so we'll just bring her here to do this job.' And I think that was the mindset.

As the only African American high school principal, who was also from another state, she felt overlooked by her peers and by district leadership. Her school was her home, where she felt a sense of belonging, yet among those who should have been a support system to her, she felt isolated and alone. This fueled her resolve to prove that she could turn the school around and to prove to her students and their community that they could perform at high academic levels with systems designed specifically for them.

A different layer of poor district support that posed a challenge was identified as a lack of or ineffective district communication. Participant Five said,

It's challenging for me when things are last minute from the top [district leadership]. For me that's challenging, if there's not coordination between departments. I know that the bigger the district is, the harder that is. I think time management is always a challenge. I think there's a lot to be done in the day for a principal. I mean, I'm a planner by nature. We've already mapped our year out.

School principals coordinate various systems, programs, and operations. When there is a lack of foresight by district leadership and their decisions are made at the last minute, the trickle down to schools presents a challenge to coordination at the site level. This also alludes to the way the role of the principal has expanded to encompass various functions and responsibilities. Effective principals design a system to navigate them all.

Little district support presented a challenge in the first year of the principal position at a Title I school for Participant Two. She discussed learning the job and meeting the needs of the various demographics of students who typically attend a Title I school.

It was walking into this position and not knowing everything that needed to happen. I guess one of the hardest things was realizing it wasn't the money that made the difference, it was the collaboration that made the difference. I think trying to figure out how to get teachers who all have a different opinion on how to serve kids onto the same page was probably our hardest piece. And I don't know, again, if that's the Title I campus or if that's the...you know, I don't know what it was, but that was our issue walking in.

While Title I schools receive additional funds to serve the students, Participant Two reflected that collective efficacy and high expectations for students was the difference maker for students at her school. She learned the job and how to meet her students' needs through trial and error.

Three participants expressed that a different relationship challenge was working with the staff at the school. Participant Seven expected his teachers to do their best and found it difficult to hold them accountable.

Where I struggle as a principal is never the kids, it's the adults. A lot of time I give them too many chances. As a principal, I see my adults' failure as my own in terms of I haven't given them what they needed, put them in the right place to do what I know they can do. That's one of my many failings...I believe in people's ability to do things; they just may not know it yet.

Along with that challenge, he believes in putting his students first. Decisions are made that facilitate learning for students; they may not always be comfortable decisions for the adults or easiest for them.

I'm not in the easy-for-adults business, I'm in the kid business. And working through the pushback and the whining and crying, and again I'm talking about the grown people. What I'm trying to get them to do is to move out of the self and to move into the selfless. It's not about you, and you can't tell them, 'I don't really care about you,' because I do, but that's not my priority. So, that's where I struggle as a principal, I think, more than anything. I tell people, 'These kids have already got barriers in their lives, and the adults are not going to be one more. You're not going to tell them what they can't do and let your fear be theirs'.

Participant Seven finds it challenging to support his staff to meet their personal and professional needs and to maintain their focus on the students. It also communicates that he struggles with patience for the adults he supports. He recognizes the finite amount of time they have as a school to positively impact the trajectory of their students.

Like Participant Seven, staff relations are a challenge articulated by Participant Nine.

Sometimes teachers think they're doing the right thing. But sometimes when you go, they're not doing the right thing and they're hindering the kid. And then they get generally defensive.

He implies that it is difficult to help a teacher see how their words or actions may have an unintended adverse effect on students. He finds it challenging to balance support with high expectations.

Participant Ten agreed that adults are one of his biggest challenges.

It's certainly the adults. Most recently, I just have way too much pettiness in my admin team, and it just drives me nuts. It's frustrating because I do have really good people here. Their heart really is in the right place, but they're so pissed at each other, some of them. Everybody is screwed up in some way, stop focusing on it. Do your best. Be good to other people anyway, live the golden rule, get over it.

He holds the adults to higher standards of collegiality and finds it challenging to tell adults to get along. He wants them to get to the root of their issue or problem and address it as professionals so they can focus on the students and their needs, rather than focus on the adult issues.

Fuller et al. (2015) indicated that the pressures of state accountability testing impact principal turnover and their working conditions. Participant three verbalized that the district emphasis on assessments was a challenge for him.

The toughest part is no matter what you do in this district, it comes down to the scores. As a Title I campus, although non-Title I [schools] have their own issues, they're typically nonacademic, and at a Title I, it's always going to be academic gaps and the other stuff, right? I would never want to be the principal at blank high school that's non-Title I; there are issues there. Those issues also occur at Title I, but there's the academic issues. And when you focus on scores, it masks the inequities that certain smaller populations have.

He acknowledges that every school has its challenges, regardless of federal designation. All schools, in his opinion, have students who have needs that go beyond learning content or academics. He feels that Title I schools have more students who need accelerated content learning due to limited access or

opportunity, as well as multiple needs beyond the academics. This reinforces the findings that non-Title I schools tend to have high performing students with more advantages (Bêteille et al., 2012). His preference is to lead in a Title I school. Additionally, he believes that a focus on test scores alone does not shed light on student groups that are too small in number to be reported in accountability results. No representation in the results allows them to be hidden or ignored and for inequalities to potentially continue.

Participant One indicated another challenge regarding staffing that she experienced. “My other challenge, I think, for me, is the turnover [at my school].” She went on to elaborate about the challenge of retaining teaching staff at a school with students who come with needs in addition to academic needs. This reflects research evidence that teacher turnover is a cause of principal departure from their low-income, low performing schools to schools that are easier to staff (Bêteille et al., 2012).

The challenges articulated by the participants all speak to working conditions. One of four issues contribute to principal turnover (Fuller, 2015):

- Personal characteristics;
- School characteristics;
- Emotional aspects of the position;
- Working conditions.

These leaders did not imply nor verbalize any of the first three issues as challenges for them which indicates they may have a grasp of those aspects of the position. Their challenges indicate that principals of Title I schools need or want support

with working with teachers and how to have crucial conversations that set rigorous, student focused expectations. They also highlight the importance of listening to them and valuing their input.

Participants' Views of the Rewards of the Title 1 Principalship

The personal investment in the role of principal is significant. Educators tend to be optimistic and these leaders were not different; they lit up when sharing the rewards of their work. The rewards or motivations are intrinsic, altruistic, and extrinsic. Intrinsic reward is rooted in internal characteristics or personality traits and is frequently found as educator motivations (Tomsik, 2016). Altruistic reward is understood as the desire to help others through intentional actions (Tomsik, 2016). Extrinsic motivation includes benefits the leader may gain from the position (Kass & Miller, 2018; Tomsik, 2016).

Working with the adults in the school can present a challenge but is both an intrinsic and altruistic reward. Participant Two shared,

I like school and I like seeing growth. It's the growth of others now, I think, is what really drives me. It's the growth of the teachers and what you see of them in the classroom. There's a tightness of a school that everyone's trying to get better, and when we have, and I'm going to say weak links, and sometimes the weak links are just going through something personally that they're a weak link and we can coach them back out of it. But I think that piece of the relationships of growth that are happening is what drives me, is being able to see everybody growing, even my custodian growing. My custodian's a mean, grumpy old dude and I love him. He's starting to love me. It's developing those relationships and really getting it going. I'd say growth and relationships is what drives me.

Her use of “weak link” implies the need to invest in those individuals in order to help them grow as a professional because she believes in each and their potential. Her words also indicate the importance of building relationships as critical to supporting growth.

Aside from the intrinsic rewards of the job, the extrinsic value of salary is a reward. This working condition has been found to influence principal retention (Yan, 2020). As Participant Ten commented,

The money is good and the freedom is good. From a more altruistic perspective, I know that I do have a chance to make a difference in more kids' lives, that I'm blessed and really richly blessed in not only being able to have things like a good income and potential to have a reasonable retirement and some freedom to do the things that I never paid attention to when I was a teacher, being able to take care of my dad, he lives with me now. That I still have a chance to really make a difference in people's lives, not only for the kids, but the adults too.

His statements shine a light that the altruistic reward of making a difference is powerful. He also highlights the fact that both teaching and leadership are challenging and rewarding, but that the salary that accompanies the position of principal affords him a certain comfort that he would not experience on a teacher salary. This extrinsic reward positively contributes to his quality of life outside of the job. Salary has been found to be influential in decision-making regarding longevity in the principalship (Yan, 2020).

Participant One finds pride in her students and staff intrinsically rewarding.

The top five [high school graduates] were [our former middle school] kids this year. It's exciting to see them become so successful, because every single one of them had a story. They came back this year, and shared part of their story with our kids. I think it's seeing them just being successful, that's so rewarding to see the kids and giving you hugs, because they're like big ol' babies. I think our teachers, I think it's also just awesome, because they just work super hard. They work super hard for our kids, and it's rewarding to see them see their kids be successful. When I see their pictures ... They go to high school graduation. I think it's so awesome, because they keep in touch with all their kids. They get to see the end, and they love all those relationships, so it's nice that they get all that, as well.

As a middle school principal, she personally invests in each of her students and staff and feels an emotional connection to each. She is proud of students who broke through

personal barriers to reach not only graduation, but the top of their class; they met and exceeded the potential that she saw in them from the beginning. There is also altruistic reward for her that teachers she hired build strong connections with their students and follow them through to graduation and beyond. It brings her pride that her staff see the fruits of their labor. In essence, her reward is that of a proud mother of students and staff in her care and leadership.

In a similar vein, Participant Five finds intrinsic reward in student success.

For me the most rewarding thing is when kids win. If kids win, teachers win, and if teachers win, the admin team wins because we don't have to look to teachers who are very upset, but in the end, kids win.

She sees the relationship and connection between students, teachers, and school administration. Participant Five believes that when she does her job of supporting staff and creating the school conditions that meet students where they are, her students will demonstrate academic success and her teachers will feel actualized. In the end, everyone is successful, or wins. Especially the students.

In addition to academic growth, Participant Nine finds intrinsic reward in seeing the maturation of students.

Seeing the kids change from the beginning of the year to the end. Meaning you see the evolution of the kids. They come in, especially in sixth grade, they don't trust you, they don't know you. And by the end they're all hugging you and they love you.

His words acknowledge the growth of his middle school students in the social emotional aspect. Underlying this is the personal affirmation that he is cared for by his students, which is rewarding to him because it fulfills his need to belong.

As Participant Six put it, her intrinsic reward is

The kids. The crown jewels of education, that's what I call them. The crown jewels were, at the end of the day, I didn't care what nobody thought because my kids were getting it done. Those were your rewards. And when they come back and give back, that's even better. Yeah, I got this. I got it. They're my babies, they still are.

The intrinsic reward for her was also altruistic in that she knows she played a significant role in removing barriers and challenging negative perceptions of outsiders of her students.

In the end, underlying the challenges and rewards is the knowledge that the participants had a hand in impacting the lives and trajectories of students, families, and their staff because of their leadership. The sense of family, of connection, of the need to be needed, and to make a difference rarely brought public accolades, but the intrinsic reward of their students and their accomplishments formed the foundation.

In a study conducted by Fuller et al. (2015) that focused on the perceptions of Texas principals about factors that influenced their decision to leave or stay at their current school, the suburban and urban secondary principals rated a feeling of effectiveness and relationship with the superintendent in their top five factors. Eight of the participants in this study serve in suburban or urban districts; a feeling of effectiveness permeated their responses while the relationship with the superintendent did not rise to the top as a challenge or reward. This implies that this factor may not be as significant in principal longevity. Regardless of the challenges, these leaders chose to remain at their Title I schools for a minimum of five years. The rewards for them outweigh the challenges of the position, district, and school.

Discussion of Themes with Prior Literature

There is a gap in the literature regarding the influences for principals who persist in the position for five or more years. Research clearly indicates that effective leadership matters to school culture, to student achievement, and to school improvement (Mascall et al., 2011; Miller, 2013; Fink & Brayman, 2006; Waters et al., 2003). The longer an effective leader is retained, especially in schools with high proportions of students in poverty, the greater the positive outcome for all stakeholders (Béteille et al., 2012; Mascall et al., 2011; Yan, 2020). The study participants provided their reflections on leadership and its relationship to student achievement. They also discussed their perspectives about the role or impact of longevity in the position. They shared actions their districts took that impacted the length of time they stayed in their positions.

Leadership and Student Achievement

Leadership is second only to the impact of the classroom teacher on student outcomes (Waters et al., 2003). Although each school represented by the participants met the state accountability measures, this study did not seek to measure the effectiveness of each participant. This study sought the answer to the reasons why a principal remained at the same school for five or more years. The participants who demonstrated longevity in their position offered their perspectives regarding the role leadership plays in the student achievement.

Six participants explicitly mentioned that the role of the principal is to provide instructional leadership. One aspect of instructional leadership that Participant Two highlighted was her responsibility to coach and grow her teachers so they could be their best for their students. In her words,

I was a [former] science teacher. But [teacher name] is so brilliant in science, I struggle with how to coach him content-wise because his content knowledge is so far beyond my content knowledge. But as an instructional leader, I should be able to critique him in his delivery, his strategies, his questioning to make him better. It may be the conversation after watching his lesson to allow him to reflect on his teaching and what he thought were strengths and weaknesses. He's going to find something that he wants to change and then how do I support him in that change? So, I think as a leader, as an instructional leader on the campus, I don't know it all. I can't know it all. I can't expect my APs to know it all. But I think going in with a servant-type relationship to my teachers saying, 'What do you need?' Talking to them, letting them articulate it, and then supporting them.

This reflection is important because leaders tend to expect themselves to be all and know all. Her comments show her maturity over time as a leader from self-centered to other-centered, which demonstrates growth in her self-efficacy. They demonstrate her recognition of the impact of teachers on student learning and her role in developing those teachers.

Participant Three agrees that the principal must be an instructional leader. He highlights the difference in the role of the school leader then and now.

No longer the days where you can just manage. The days of not being involved in kids' lives, that was 30 years ago. You have to be an instructional leader. Let me put it this way, you have to know every job in the world to be a principal, from attorney to psychiatrist, to nurse. But if you're not an instructional leader and unable to facilitate what the need is at that point, you can't be successful. You can't just sit back. And if you don't know, you need to go learn. I think another big part is you have to admit when you don't know, you have to admit when you're wrong, and then you have to learn with your people. You can't be above them.

His comments reveal both the necessary shift from manager to instructional leader, as well as the need to be authentic and an on-going learner. His thoughts are reinforced by research that indicates investing in continuous professional development of principals

improves their performance, creates a culture of trust, and builds student engagement (DePass et al., 2019; Ikemoto et al., 2014).

In Participant Six's viewpoint, part of instructional leadership is creating the conditions for learning to occur.

I think that the leadership role should guide some of those processes and systems for student achievement. I think the leadership should be held accountable for what happens to children who were expected to achieve.

This sheds light on her experience as a turnaround leader in a large, urban district. She observed peers who did not accomplish student achievement targets, yet were allowed to keep their position, year after year; they were not held accountable. She is also communicating that every student, black, white, brown, rich, poor, and everything else, is expected to achieve and the leaders in the buildings where the students learn are responsible for that achievement and should be held accountable.

Initially, Participant Eight saw the role of the principal as the disciplinarian. Over time, she realized the importance of being an instructional leader. She feels leadership is a large part of student achievement.

I feel it [my perspective] changed when I became a principal. I feel when I first got into administration it seemed like it was a discipline, more discipline-based for administrators and now I feel like we're more academic and curriculum leaders. And so just being part of the PLCs [professional learning communities], in the classrooms, checking lesson plans, definitely more of an instructional leader is my role.

Instructional leadership includes monitoring expectations of teachers and providing feedback (Alig-Mielcarek & Hoy, 2005; Hallinger, 2005). Her acknowledgement of the necessity of her presence during teacher planning, observing instruction, and providing constructive feedback articulates her clear understanding of what instructional leadership

comprises. It also demonstrates a level of self-efficacy due to her heightened awareness of the role.

Participant Nine articulated another facet of instructional leadership. In addition to growing teachers instructionally, he recognizes the importance of building the leadership capacity of his staff.

I grew more teacher leaders this year because I had to. I relied on my teacher leaders to do more things. When teachers came up to me and said I have this idea, I'm gonna run with it. So, I had more trust in them. And I think it's because I had to. And then we had more success.

He “had to” empower his teachers and other team members to share the leadership because one of his assistant principals was promoted and left a void. This leveraged their collective strengths and improved student outcomes. This aligns to the research findings that team collaboration and the promotion of teachers as leaders benefits all students (Vernon-Dotson & Floyd, 2012).

Four participants indicated that the role of the principal is to set and model the tone or expectations for the school. School leaders create the conditions and expectations for learning to ensure student growth (Robinson & Gray, 2019). According to Participant Three, the role of leadership in student achievement is,

Modeling high expectations, being a leader, whatever the definition is for that moment. You have to know your staff.

He implies that by having a relationship with the staff and knowing them, one can leverage their strengths to maintain their focus on student learning.

When the leader knows their staff, they learn what barriers need to be moved to best facilitate their work. This demonstrates leadership, care, and expectation, according to Participant Seven.

I think it's the principal's job to clear the obstacles for the teachers to do the real work. That's it. That's all principal means is you're the head teacher. That's it. No more, no less. So, what does leadership mean to student achievement? It means taking care of people. Does leadership affect kids? Absolutely. But I think absentee leadership affects kids the most. The last place to look for me is my office, first of all again, I can't sit still. But that's not where learning happens. That's what I'm getting at, is leadership impacts kids when it's absent or invisible. Even bad visible leadership is better than invisible leadership.

This is important because he implies leadership can positively or negatively impact student learning. One element of leadership is visibility in the classrooms, at events, in planning sessions. He indicates that being present in those spaces positively impacts achievement, even if the leader does not contribute or add to the conversation; this is “bad visible leadership” in his words. “Invisible leadership,” to him, indicates a lack of caring and a lack of expectation that leads to an adverse effect on kids.

Participant Four also recognizes the role that leadership plays in student achievement. When she took over her school as a first-year principal, she shared what she observed and the commitment she made from the beginning.

It was crazy. I was going to come into this school. The kids were everywhere but class. It was just awful. And so, I just remember thinking, ‘I'm going to come into this school. What are the first words?’ There was no one that had over three years of experience. Sixty percent of them [teachers] were zero to three [years of experience], you know? What are the first words that I was going to say? Because they were just going to wait me out. They had had so many [leaders] come and go, because they were just going to wait me out. And so, I made a commitment to stay there at least five years. And so, that's what... the first thing that I told them. Like, ‘I'm committed, no matter what happens, to be here, at least for the next five years.

From her perspective, the school and students were not awful; the learning environment and climate was not conducive to learning, and that was an awful disservice to students. She recognized the potential and that the adults could do better for the kids by removing

disruptions, setting high expectations for students, and following a system of clear teaching objectives.

Leaders demonstrate their beliefs about students and their learning through the creation of a culture and climate of trust and high collective responsibility for student learning (Seashore-Louis & Murphy, 2017). In Participant Five's words,

I think the most critical piece for me for campus leadership is really to set the tone for how we go about our business. If we say we believe all kids can learn, do we make sure that everything that comes out of our mouth indicates all kids can learn? Sometimes I've seen leaders make side comments that I think they send an unintended message to teachers. If we say something being funny, but unintended, just like kids do, they pick up on those unintended messages. I think we completely set the tone for what really should be, what the focus is, how we believe, think about kids and believe about kids.

Participant Five's words indicate that she believes a leader is always being watched and listened to and that each word and action should reinforce the expectations for teaching and learning and what they believe about students. Her words also imply that side comments intended to build a rapport with teachers should lift students up and reinforce the leader's beliefs about students rather than diminish them. Leaders' words and actions need to be consistent.

Participant Ten reiterates that the relationship of leadership to student achievement is tied to the tone set by the leader. He acknowledges the evidence that leaders influence student learning indirectly through the work of their teachers (Robinson & Gray, 2019; Waters et al., 2003).

The research is pretty clear. It's [principal leadership] right after the classroom teacher. Gosh, it's so hard to put your finger on exactly why, but it's got to relate directly to culture and climate. You set the tone. There are confidence issues, right? Nobody likes change. So many factors I think go into that. For me personally, I really do think that there's a lot of power behind positive psychology. Like with StrengthFinders, it's all about not

what are your weaknesses, not what are you doing bad, but what are you good at? How do you build on those things?

His words reveal that to build a positive culture and climate, he prefers to focus on the strengths of his teachers and leverage and develop them to improve their craft of teaching. Underlying this message is his belief that through modeling the discovery, development, and utilization of teacher strengths, the teachers will in turn discover, develop, and utilize the strengths of their students.

Culture and climate of a school is developed by the leader and impacts student achievement and school improvement. Teacher perception of caring by the leader also impacts outcomes and relationships (Louis & Murphy, 2017). Two leaders in this study explicitly discussed the role of care by the leader as it relates to student achievement. As Participant Four put it,

You have to provide compassion. You have to provide a safe place for them to work, a safe place for them to share their ideas. At our school, they were all afraid. The teachers were...they were suspicious. They were afraid. They were waiting me out, because they didn't trust that I was going to stay too long.

Because the school she led had multiple leadership transitions and punitive leadership styles prior to her arrival, she communicated that she had to nurture her staff first so they would then nurture and lift up her students. This reveals her belief that in Title I schools, not only the students come with non-academic needs that must be met, the staff also needs care to build trust and commitment that will lead to positive academic outcomes for students.

There is evidence that links student achievement and leadership (Beteille et al., 2012; Fuller et al., 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Waters et al., 2003).).

The ten leaders in this study voiced their beliefs that they are related because of instructional leadership, setting the tone and expectations, and demonstrating care to staff. Their perspectives further support the research because their experiences are mirrored in the literature. Student achievement may decrease as a result of principal departure (Miller, 2013; Superville, 2014). In the next section, these leaders share their views on the impact of principal longevity on a school.

Longevity

Leadership turnover mirrors the instability some Title I students may experience at home due to poverty or inconsistent income (Miller, 2013). Studies indicate that students perform better with consistent, effective leadership (Beteille et al., 2012; Fuller et al., 2015; Yan, 2020).

The turnover rate is higher at schools with larger numbers of low-income students and the longer a principal remains as the leader at the same school, the potential for positive impact on student achievement outcomes is greater (Grissom & Bartanen, 2018). These ten participants shared their perspective that longevity was a benefit to the school community due to the consistency and familiarity or confidence it provides. They also indicate that longevity seems to reduce staff turnover and increase the opportunity to build relationships with them that assist in their development. Most indicated that while longevity is mostly a positive, caution was needed to not become blind to opportunities for improvement.

Sixty percent of the participants felt that longevity contributes to the development of consistency, as well as confidence from the community. Participant One discussed how she evolved as a leader over time.

Your trust in your teachers, and then the trust in the community [is impacted by longevity]. I know for me, we get some parent complaints, but we don't get nearly as many as when I just got there. Plus, I have learned how to finesse a little bit more. Parents know you; they know you as a leader, they know your reputation, they know the school, and they trust. That has some value. I have learned over time to be more explicit. The people that have been there, they already know the [Participant One] way. They know what it's like. I know I have changed. I get better every year. Our team gets better, and so we try to be more explicit, and communicate more.

Her tenure gives her the opportunity to reflect each year so she can continually improve.

Her consistency creates a sense of security or comfort for her staff and community, so they are less anxious because of familiarity.

Participant Three spoke to the reliability of consistency.

Longevity creates clout, it creates confidence, it creates a system of...you're not going to blindside anybody. There's confidence in your work and in your own work, and people knowing you, and community relationships, and kid relationships and things like that, it's great being there for so long. I didn't want to just be a picture on the wall.

At his school, a photograph of each principal lined the main hallway with the dates of their service. He wanted to be remembered fondly and felt that he earned a positive reputation throughout the length of his tenure and that it benefitted the school-community relationships.

Participant Five believes that length of tenure of the principal positively impacts the community and staff.

For me, longevity, it helps the community. If you're doing a good job as a campus leader, then your name starts to trickle around the community. Parents already know coming in, 'Oh, I've heard this school's great in regard to special education.' Or, 'I heard this school does a good job with this and I know it's going to be great.' I think it can be good for teachers in regard to making sure that we keep that path that we've set. But the good thing about it is that there will be no shifting in structures.

Her perspective is that name recognition is important to building support and confidence with the school. She included “doing a good job,” which implies that longevity is beneficial if the leader is effective.

The community response to Participant Eight became positive over time, which speaks to a benefit of longevity.

I think they appreciate it. It's like they know who I am. Even some of the parents or community members that probably didn't agree with me when I first came, I think they appreciate the stability in having the same leader. Because before I came the longest a principal had been at [school name] was two years, but yeah, I feel like the community is real, real supportive. And they weren't when I first came here and so I'm like, who would have known I would have been here ten years. First couple years were rough, but I think that I came here with some systems in place that some of the small-town people didn't agree with. Because they remember when they were in high school and [district name] had 200 students and now we have [over 4,000] students. There's some systems you have to put in place and they felt like it was running a prison. But I think change is hard for everybody, but they end up realizing it makes the school safer. And when you have that many students, there are some systems you have to put in place. I mean you just have to have some systems in place.

Participant Eight clearly understood the importance of systems to maximize learning time for students. Some members of her community equated her structures and expectations to be regimented and strict, prison-like, in their opinion, compared to the lack of structures prior to her arrival. Her actions are supported by the research that clear, consistent routines promote student learning by increasing their opportunities to learn (Robinson & Gray, 2019). Over time, the community sees the value of the structures as they relate to learning and safety for students.

Three participants highlighted that longevity positively impacts teacher retention and provides the opportunity to build the leadership capacity of the staff. Participant One described the importance of knowing her teachers.

When you bring in a new leader, whether you want to admit it or not, you lose a little bit of ground, because they don't truly know every single teacher, right? They don't know the kids, and so for me, I try and know the teachers because I have to know their strengths and weaknesses. I think that when you keep moving people, or the person [principal] leaves, then I think it's hard to maintain that momentum. It's hard to maintain the trust.

Trust is built on consistency and relationships over time (Louis & Murphy, 2016). By knowing her teachers, she can better match her students to the teacher who will best match the student social emotionally and academically.

Participant Two discussed that reduced staff turnover is beneficial for students and the community.

I think when principals stay, there's less teacher turnover, which makes it better for the kids and it makes it better for the community because we know that teacher's going to be there, because we know that principal has been there. I think there's comfort in families laughing about who the teachers are over the years. 'So-and-so's still there and so-and-so still does that?' I think the less turnover that you have on your campus, the better off it is. So I think the longevity of a principal keeps the longevity of the staff and can grow that staff more in a vision of where we are headed and what are we doing." She concluded, "If we're all together and we all have that common belief together and it's grown over time where we are, then I think it's a better pattern for kids.

The continuity that results from consistency is reliable and comforting to families. There are more external stimuli bombarding students of every economic level and the comfort of knowing the people who care for students engenders support. In other words, longevity of effective leadership benefits all students, and especially those who live in high poverty situations (Grissam & Bartanen, 2018).

Longevity strengthens relationships between the leader and teachers, which contributes to a positive culture and climate and reduces staff turnover (Robinson & Gray, 2019). Participant Eight suggests that leaders with tenure promote their teachers and build their leadership skills.

I think just the consistency, as well, too, for systems and things like that in place, and building more leaders' capacity on the campus. Because it's a tough job and so I think that I couldn't do this if I didn't build capacity in my APs [assistant principals], my instructional coaches, our masters teachers. So, I think it's also building leadership capacity in the other workers that work with me.

Building the leadership capacity of her staff not only helps her with her own leadership, it also empowers her teachers' participation in improvement efforts and nurtures a collaborative partnership for the benefit of the students. The length of time she has served at her school contributes to her self-efficacy to share the responsibility.

Four of the participants cautioned that while longer tenure is beneficial, they also felt there is potential for complacency. There is some evidence that indicates a minimum of five years as the principal is needed to positively impact the culture of a school (Mascall et al., 2011). They also indicate that after five years, improvements may not necessarily continue (Mascall et al., 2011). In Participant One's view,

I think there's definitely a benefit to someone being there a lot longer. You just have to make sure they don't stay comfortable. I'm definitely a lot different, because I'm more experienced.

She attributes her experience to the reason her leadership is different, or better, than her first years. She discussed that she started to need something more to keep her "fresh," so she sought out personal learning opportunities outside of what her district offered her. Those experiences refreshed her to continue in her role.

As Participant Three reflects, that longevity, "can create complacency." He left his position as principal after ten years when he accepted a job in district administration.

It was the right time for me to leave because I felt like I wasn't going to just sit in my office. I wasn't going to be 'that' principal [who just drew a paycheck]. I never believe like people say, you'll know when it's time to leave, and you do. It's crazy. I disagree with it still a little bit, but it was time, because I was getting stagnant.

He recognized that while he was an effective leader at his school, the routine was familiar, and he was no longer challenged in a way that made him a better leader for his students. It was time to leave because he feared he might become stale; he needed a change. This sentiment was echoed by Participant Five.

Longevity can hurt a campus too, though, because if the principal's not in it anymore every day for whatever reason, they just need a change, whatever the case may be, it can hurt a campus in that way.

Further echoing the concern that longer tenure may lead to complacency, Participant Seven said,

I think it's a double-edged sword. I think continuity helps, but I think you also become blind to your own systems and the flaws in them. I think you have to fight really hard against that, and I think you have to have people that will come in and ask, 'Well, why do we do it this way?' And you have to be comfortable with that, and you have to have people that will challenge you on those things. I think the continuity is great. I think you build up a connection with the neighborhood in a way, they know what to expect. But I think that blindness to your own misgivings and missteps can eat you up faster than anything. So again, to answer your question, it's two sides of the same coin, and you have to fight to maintain a watch on both.

His statements imply that longevity is a benefit to the community and that to sustain the growth and momentum, a leader who "stays" needs to be surrounded by individuals who can help shed light on opportunities for improvement. That leader also needs to be willing to listen to them for the betterment of the school community.

Complacency of any form, due to longevity or merely holding the title, is unacceptable to Participant Six. She strongly felt that

The principal should have buy-in to whatever campuses they are assigned to or placed at. I just think that principals should, if they're not committed to what they are doing and they are just looking at things as steppingstones to the next opportunity, I don't think they should even be in principal roles. Because they're not invested in what they're doing. I don't think they should be in the role, I really don't.

This communicates her sense of urgency for the students in the care of the principal and that none of them have the luxury of a leader who is not fully invested in the students and community. As a principal, she committed herself to the students and held herself to high personal expectations for them. I included her words because they encompass the commitment and loyalty all of the participants held and hold for their schools. Leaders in turnaround schools, such as hers, have a strong sense of urgency (Crow et al., 2017). The energy and drive that she describes require the leader to identify with, internalize, and become the position (Crow et al., 2017).

Longer tenure, as these leaders reflected, has benefits to the school that include confidence from the community and consistency for systems, relationships, and reduction in staff turnover. They also articulated the potential for complacency with longevity. While a minimum of five years has been found to be most impactful to initiate change/improvement, establish routines, and instill new practices, it is hypothesized that seven years may be the proverbial sweet spot (Mascall et al., 2011). Seventy percent, or seven, of the participants in this study stayed over seven years and forty percent, or four, remained ten or more years at their respective schools. The purpose of this study was to discover the reasons that kept principals in their positions at least five years rather than determine the optimal length of tenure to sustain growth in student outcomes; this is a recommendation for further study.

District Support/Actions

The research indicates there are system-level factors such as lack of autonomy, negative relationships, and politics that contribute to principals who leave within the first five years at a school (Farley-Ripple et al., 2012; Snodgrass-Rangel, 2017; Tekleselassie

& Villarreal, 2010). Six of the ten participants in this study are still leading their schools. Of the four who left, two accepted promotions, and two left for political reasons. Both leaders who left for political reasons indicated they were not given the opportunity to advance within the district; they felt overlooked when peers with less experience were considered and advanced instead of them. In addition, they did not feel their respective districts invested in their continued personal growth and development as leaders. None of the participants left for school or community factors; it was those factors that kept them coming back. As Participant Seven put it,

I don't feel an obligation to the district. I feel an obligation to all these kids and those families. I feel an obligation to the community at this point. They've come to expect certain things at that school, and they're the right expectations. I want those people to have a school they can be proud of, of what they do, and say, 'My kid goes there'.

His words communicate his devotion to creating a learning environment that promotes student achievement and brings pride to the community. This supports prior research by Beckett (2018) that suggests that the environment and school community are less indicative of turnover than are the strength of the interactions and relationships.

Three participants voiced that they could not pinpoint anything specific the district did to make them want to stay. Participant Six implied the lack of support she received from her district; yet she persisted. Supportive, collaborative relationships between supervisor and principals and between principals have been found to increase retention of leaders (Cieminski, 2018). Those types of relationships were not cultivated with Participant Six.

Things were not shared among the high school campuses, everybody kind of had their own little cliques and their own little groups about how they did things and if they were able to figure out some systems or some support services, or just anything to do with the kids it was not readily

shared among the group, especially with me. I was the only African American high school principal, with the entire group. And they knew I had come into [district] being paid probably 30,000 dollars more than their salary was. So their thing with me was, okay, you get paid the big dollars you figure it out yourself. And I felt that. One of the principals just plainly said one day, 'you know, well, we don't understand why you're getting paid the salary that you're getting paid' and then I turned around, flip as I am, because they don't know me, I said, 'So, how long was that campus vacant for? Did you all have an opportunity to apply for it? Because if you didn't apply for it because you knew you didn't want to go into that community, you didn't want to go into 'the hood' as you all call it here. You didn't want to work with the 'thugs and the gang bangers' so then I come in here and I do it and you want to turn around and question my salary? I said you better find somebody to ask because you will never have this conversation with me again. I felt like I was not part of the group.

Her words shed light on her feelings in that situation, starting with isolation within the team of high school principals. Their secrecy and competitiveness contributed to her feelings of being shut out, in addition to the resentment she felt from those who questioned her pay. Her mention of her being the only African American principal in the group contributes to the sense of isolation and exclusion. When she stood up for herself and her students, her words implied that the other leaders, who had the opportunity to take the position she held, were too fearful to lead the school she was leading based on their negative perceptions of the students and community. This is important to this study about "staying" because Participant Six persevered despite the absence of support from her peers or her supervisor. She did not view her students as "thugs" or "gang bangers;" her students rewarded her and built her up.

On my campus, I was the Queen. So that's where my sacred space was, on my campus, because I could control what I could control. Outside of there I did not feel supported, I did not feel like they shared things, even when it comes to systems, with guidance, with any little thing that you can think of that I probably should be sharing best practices with. I got none of that, none of it. I didn't feel the love and support. I didn't feel like people were being open and honest about anything. I just didn't.

Despite the lack of support, she persisted. The research indicates that district leaders who foster collaborative relationships influence retention (Cieminski, 2018; Farley-Ripple et al., 2012). Her words indicate a lack of support and that district leadership did not cultivate supportive, collaborative relationships. Her resolve, commitment to her students, and self-efficacy were stronger factors in her tenure.

Another action that communicates a lack of support is limited time to implement reform efforts, specifically as they relate to improving student outcomes. Increased accountability for student achievement adds to the complexity of the job of the principal (Zepeda et al., 2012). From Participant Three's perspective,

Title I principals do not stay long because they are not given enough time to change the culture of the campus. There are tons of Title I principals who get fired or move on because they're just not given enough time, because the scores didn't come back the way they were supposed to. I was fortunate. We nailed our scores after year one. But given the time, you'd see we could change communities if we gave principals more time and support and more time.

The internal school factors of state and federal accountability measures discussed by Participant Three reflect the research by Miller (2013) that low performing schools have greater turnover rates than average to high performing schools.

Three participants expressed that they felt supported by their districts. Participant Eight has had a positive experience with the system she works in because when she asks for help, she has gotten what she needed.

I think my district is real supportive and I feel like after you've been somewhere ten years you kind of know the systems. And so I think that's a big part for me too is just kind of comfort...At least I know the strengths, the weaknesses here and then going to another district and having to re-figure that out.

She implies that because of her tenure in her district, there is a comfort in knowing the ins and outs and the people in the system. The thought of moving to another district and learning a different system is not appealing to Participant Eight.

In addition to feeling supported by his district, Participant Nine implied that the positive relationships contributed to him staying in his position.

I don't know if they do anything themselves,” said Participant Nine. “I think it's just the atmosphere. Everywhere I've been, it's been family and I think I like where I work. So when you like where you work, it makes it so much easier.

His reflection that he likes where he works reinforces the literature that maintaining supportive, positive relationships with principals by district administration influences tenure (Cieminski, 2018).

Participant Five discussed that her district contributes to her staying in her position at her school because they empower her as a leader.

In regard to district support, I think that from my perspective, I feel like I'm trusted to do the right thing by kids and what I need to do and I appreciate that. I feel like the focus, the expectation for principals is that we are instructional leaders and I appreciate that. If I want to manage people, I'll go work in the business end of it. I don't want to manage people. I want to take care of people and make sure that we're taking care of kids.

Her words highlight her core values of trust and care as a leader. As Fullan (2016) put it, she is a leader who knows how to engage the hearts and minds of her staff to cultivate a collaborative culture that positively impacts students. She continued,

I think that principals' opinions are very highly respected,” said Participant Five. “I don't feel like in [district name] that stuff happens to principals or is made to happen to principals. I feel like we're a part of that decision making. Which I really think is critical because at the end of the day we're the ones that are going to be held accountable if it doesn't work.

Her words indicate that, for her, when the leader is accountable for outcomes, the leader needs to be empowered and trusted to lead the school. The aspects she mentioned of respect, personal regard for others, and competence build relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The value of trust and a collaborative culture demonstrated by her district aligns with her values and contribute to her staying.

This section sought to explain the actions the seven districts in this study took that positively influenced these ten leaders to stay in their schools longer than over seventy percent of their peers across the nation (Beckett, 2018; Fuller, 2008). While two leaders indicated they left their positions due to political reasons, they endured for thirteen and eleven years, respectively. This implies that something else kept them returning despite the politics. Two leaders expressed a general feeling of support but could not articulate specific actions taken by the district. One participant clearly articulated a feeling of support from her district. This indicates that external factors at the district level did not directly nor indirectly influence their decision to persist. All ten participants continued despite the external system. This points to the finding that there is something internal that contributes to each leader enduring in the position over time.

Connections to Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study was Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977, 1991, 1997). His theory proposes that individuals can learn through observation. When said individual successfully reproduces those observed behaviors, his/her efficacy develops. Self-efficacy is the belief one has regarding personal capabilities to exert control over events that impact their lives and their functioning

(Bandura, 1977, 1991, 1997). Leadership efficacy is the principal's belief in his or her abilities to make a difference in the schools they lead (Bauer & Silver, 2018).

The principals in this study exhibited leadership efficacy and directly or indirectly articulated how it developed in one or more of the main ways: performance outcomes, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological feedback (Bandura, 1977). All ten leaders experienced each of the four indicators. For some, they had positive experiences. For most, they learned by non-example or from negative feedback/reinforcement. Each had a level of perseverance and resilience that contributed to their longevity as a principal.

Originally, I had intended to learn about the career decision making of each participant. As I interviewed each, I focused on the phenomenon of staying rather than focus on the career decisions that led each participant to his/her school. Career decision-making did not align to my research question.

Interpretation

Various studies found that principals leave their positions for reasons that include personal characteristics such as race, gender, and age, school characteristics such as demographics, income, and student performance, or working conditions such as salary, accountability pressures, and lack of support (Beteille et al., 2012; Fuller & Young, 2009; Fuller & Young, 2012; Tekeselassie & Villarreal, 2011). The leaders in this study persevered in their positions despite these aforementioned reasons that have been found to influence leaders' decision to stay or leave. I found that their personal life experiences and internal traits influenced their resiliency to external factors.

Traits of a Title I Principal Who Stays

Papa (2007) found that it is important to attract highly skilled leaders to the principal position and to match their traits to the culture, context, and structure of the assigned school. This study uncovered evidence that matching leaders to schools may reduce turnover. Based on the experiences of these ten participants, six traits of a principal who stays at a school identified as Title I emerged. These traits, found in Table 2, may inform recruitment, hiring, and support processes. They align to three of the overarching themes titled 1) I See Myself in Them, 2) Community, Connection, Family, and 3) Change the Narrative that were discussed in chapter four. Based on my results, a leader must exhibit at least one of the traits within each theme to increase the likelihood of them staying in their position. While these traits surfaced in this study, more in-depth research needs to be done to determine generalizability of the results.

Table 2. Traits of Principals Who Stay at a Title I School Five or More Years	
THEME	TRAIT
See Myself in Them	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Qualified as economically disadvantaged as a child• Leaders of Color identified with students of the same race
Community, Connection, Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leaders of Color worked in same community or nearby the one in which they grew up• Need for belonging
Change the Narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strong drive to “change the narrative” for students• Compensation for childhood

The theme “See Myself in Them” included the traits of economics and race. The economic experiences of the participants, in general, mirrored the economic experience of the economically disadvantaged students at their school. In other words, they received

or qualified to receive free and/or reduced lunch when in public school as a student. The Participants of Color described how their students looked like them and shared similar school experiences. The White participants were similar to their students only relative to economics. The leader's own story and experiences influence their personal identity. A school also influences the identity of the leader (Crow et al., 2017). Not only did the leaders identify with the students in their schools, their schools became part of the leaders' identity.

The next two traits relate to the theme of "Community/Connection/Family." Six of the seven Leaders of Color in this study worked in the same community they grew up in, or within fifty miles of the high school they graduated from; none of the three White participants worked in those proximities. The second trait within this theme is a need for belonging that relates to the leader feeling a sense of community, connection, and family at his/her school. Kass and Miller (2018) found that childhood experiences and family history may influence career choices. They went on to determine that some career choices enable individuals to reconstruct significant childhood memories or satisfy unrealized childhood needs (Kass & Miller, 2018).

All of the participants, regardless of race, had a common drive to "Change the Narrative" for the students at their schools. Their passion to increase opportunity and access was evident in their discussion of why they do the work they do. The Participants of Color described a strong desire to remove as many barriers as possible for their students. All ten participants articulated the importance of holding high expectations for all students, while also understanding the challenges they may face. The passion and

drive to be a social change agent to benefit the students and community may stem from hardships experienced earlier in life (Kass & Miller, 2018).

In addition to these traits, the participants had a conscious or subconscious belief in their performance and motivation to be effective as a leader; they had a strong sense of self-efficacy. Two additional traits bubbled to the top: persistence, the ability to keep going despite obstacles (Graves, 1985) and resilience, the ability to thrive through uncertainty (Wilson, 2013). I believe the three are interrelated. As Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004), pointed out, self-efficacy predicts the likelihood of persistence through challenging circumstances. I believe self-efficacy also predicts resilience, based on the participants' perspectives. I additionally believe that all three, self-efficacy, persistence, and resilience, predict longevity. I do not include this as conclusive findings because I believe a more objective measure of each could describe their relationship to each other and to longevity in the role of principal; this begs further study.

Implications of the Study

School district leaders recognize there are three distinct career points in principal succession: before hire, upon hire, and throughout employment (Chiang et al., 2016; Cieminski, 2018). The results of this study lead to implications that are related to school district policy and practice at each career point but are specific to leaders who have demonstrated longevity in the role of principal. The three policy and practice implications are recruitment of educators and pipeline development (before hire), mentorship (upon hire and year one), and on-going leadership support (throughout employment). I have also included additional suggestions solicited from the participants.

Recruitment of Educators and Pipeline Development

Before the principal is hired, there is a need to strategically plan and manage practices for preparation, recruitment, and selection (Cieminski, 2018; Zepeda et al., 2012). All districts need a plan to staff every school type, however Title I schools need even more strategic identification and recruitment actions if one of the goals is to staff and retain the principal at that school. Of the implications of this study, this is the most critical because the results outline six traits of a leader who stays at a Title I school for five or more years (see Table 2 above). There are three additional traits that need to be evident. Systems should devise strategies to elicit the traits from potential candidates. I suggest seeking these traits in hiring of teachers, then following, nurturing, and supporting their growth and development into the leadership pathway.

The results of this study clearly indicate that Leaders of Color who stay at their Title I school for five or more years tend to seek out and accept jobs either in or near the community they graduated high school from. Potential candidates include current students, auxiliary staff, teachers, and people already working outside of education.

Public school districts can strategically identify Students of Color and economically disadvantaged students sitting in their schools currently as future teachers and leaders in their districts. School systems can devise pathways into education that identify, recruit, promote, and support students from beginning to end in a type of grow your own process. An example is creating a pathway in technology early college high school (P-TECH) that partners the school district with a university with teaching certifications.

In addition to identifying and recruiting current students, many districts employ People of Color in auxiliary positions such as clerical, student nutrition, custodial, and transportation. Many of these employees tend to be strongly tied to the community and may be a source of education candidates to recruit. Districts could positively impact their retention by creating a homegrown type of program that supports their education while they continue working in their current capacity.

Current teachers and assistant principals are another source of potential principal candidate who can be strategically recruited. Many districts have some sort of pipeline development program that rely on personal interest or recommendations from colleagues. More strategic talent management policies and practices that identify the aforementioned traits can increase the likelihood of attracting leaders who persist in the role.

About thirty percent of all classroom teachers arrive to education as a second career, many of whom are People of Color (Johnson, 2004). Districts can strategically recruit from this pool of candidates and work in collaboration with a strong alternative certification program to assist these individuals in acquiring certification to teach and then lead. Due to the relational nature of education and leadership, a district should design a highly relational approach to development and support throughout the entire process that is supportive and collaborative (Cieminski, 2018; Ikemoto et al., 2014).

Mentorship

This study found that eight of the ten leaders remained in their first principal position for five or more years. This implies that districts need to carefully and strategically select the right people to lead schools that need systemic strengths to leverage the students' assets. Once the "right" candidate is secured, a mentoring

relationship nurtures growth and increases the likelihood of success (Zepeda et al., 2012). Mentor partnerships have been found to assist the protégé without fear or judgment, as well as serve as a critical source of emotional support (Bynum, 2015). While these leaders will ideally exhibit the internal traits of self-efficacy, persistence, and resilience, there is an opportunity for districts to provide differentiated support to principals in their first principalship through mentorship.

New to district or new to position leaders need a go-to person. Participant Six articulated an example of how a mentor would have benefitted a leadership transition. She arrived to her Title I school with prior principal experience, but was new to the state, the district, and school. She said,

I wish the district would have maybe reached out a little bit more. Maybe provided support in areas that the campus struggled in. Or that I had personal troubles with. But I didn't have that go-to person or people that could do that. It was so disconnected; I never had any interaction with anybody downtown [district office]. Nobody ever came, nobody ever said anything. The only people I saw were the principals when we had our monthly meeting. Everybody else was kind of disconnected. We had that once a year rah-rah session that [superintendent] does right now. Outside of that no, nothing. You had to build your own connections through just talking with people. I built it that way, just one-by-one, every department that I needed to interact with I found a person within that department that I could connect to. And then that's how I started to build relationships one at a time.

Her words reinforce how district support would have helped her. Fortunately, she had experience and she had a significant level of self-efficacy that drove her to reach out to build relationships and make her own connections. Zepeda et al. (2012) found that mentoring may be deployed in different manners from informal to formal arrangements related to the size of the district, but that it is valued.

On-Going Leadership Support

Research indicates specific support and training actions school systems can take to increase retention of principals (School Leaders Network, 2014). The participants in this study echoed some of the same findings and included some of their own. This study reinforced the need for continued support, collaboration, and actionable feedback to facilitate the personal and professional growth and development of the school leaders (Cieminski, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Ikemoto et al., 2014; Parylo & Zepeda, 2015).

One way this support can be provided is through a professional coach for the principals. This strategy is reinforced in the research as an investment that increases retention. School Leaders Network gives the example of one-on-one coaching support beyond the first two years of the principalship as an effective approach (2014). According to Participant One,

I feel like maybe providing, for me, would be providing someone who is a coach, rather than just being a manager and a boss. I think about my role, and [my last supervisor] taught me that. You treat your people how you want. He treated me how he wanted me to treat my teachers, so that your teachers would treat your kids that way. I wish that they would see their role that way.

Of the five different supervisors Participant One had during her tenure, only one served as a coach. She found that approach most beneficial to her growth.

Another approach to providing on-going support to principals is to develop a team, allow the principals a voice, and provide time to collaborate with peers (Cieminski, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Ikemoto et al., 2014; Parylo & Zepeda, 2015). Engagement of principals in authentic peer networks for collaborative learning is discussed by School Leaders Network as an effective investment in leadership

development (2014). The participants in this study agree. Participant One discussed her experience of a peer network of secondary principals in her district under the supervisor who provided coaching.

I think it was also really nice when we were able to be a secondary team. We just don't see that anymore. To build us up to where we had a voice...I think when we came together as a secondary team, we had some voice, and so some people don't like us having a voice. They would rather us just be little ducks and walk in a row, and so then they'd separate us to where we don't have that collective voice. Collectively, they know that we have power, and so they'd separate us as a secondary group. We don't really have that time anymore.

Participant One referenced “they” as central office leaders. She implies that she does not feel her voice, nor her experience is valued by the current district leadership as evidenced by the division of the group of principals. Participant One reflected on a recent professional development opportunity she sought out that sent her to Harvard Graduate School of Education for learning.

I wish they would give time for collaboration. You think about, why was Harvard so awesome? Because we got to sit there and collaborate with our peers, but then we're not afforded that same opportunity in our own district.

Her words reinforce her value of collaboration with peers as a powerful professional learning.

Growth opportunities retain school leaders; lack of growth opportunities may drive them away. Participant Two left her school after thirteen years because she did not feel her district wanted to invest in her.

[I wish they had] given me an opportunity to grow. I think they just left me and I was trying to pursue things on my own to grow, which I think is good, but I think also in the same breath pursue you to grow. I could still add value to the system, and I think that's the piece of I want to add value to the system that I'm in that I feel like I have to give.

Participant Two's sentiment is reinforced in the literature. Continued investment in leadership development beyond pipeline efforts is an effective retention tool (Ikemoto et al., 2014; School Leaders Network, 2014).

The above actions articulated by the participants in this study are reflective of the research on principal retention. On-going support can decrease the frequency of departure from the principalship (Mascall & Leithwood, 2010). Revised purpose for the principal supervisor as a coach and mentor can also positively impact retention (Chiang et al., 2016; School Leaders Network, 2014).

Additional Participant Suggestions

When asked, "what do you wish your district would do to increase your longevity?," the participants articulated the additional actions below. These strategies are not found in the literature but are perceptions of some of the participants in this study.

Don't Replace Everyone at the District Level at the Same Time

According to Participant One, when her most recent superintendent started in his position, all other district leaders were also new to the system.

I wish they had not gotten rid of everybody, because that was the shortfall this time. It's like they got rid of every person possible, so there was no historic [knowledge] about this is what we used to do. They were just running blind.

These comments imply a sense of frustration and lack of support due to district leadership turnover that adversely impact culture and climate.

District Leaders Should have been School Principals

Two participants indicated a preference for supervisors and district administrators who have served in the principal role. Participant One said,

It's like you [district leader] forget what it's like to be in my shoes. You forget the demands that we're under. You want to have this standard for me, but not that standard for you. The past two human resource people were not principals. Now I have [current HR director] and she's been a principal; she's freaking awesome. We have a person, a director of curriculum. He's never been a principal. Sometimes, I feel like people in those roles need to have been in my shoes, just because it's such a different role.

Participant One implies that serving in the principal role prior to leading at the district level provides greater perspective and understanding of how to best support a school leader. Participant Two agrees.

I left because the advancement in the district was so frustrating because there was no place to advance and they kept hiring people who had no principal experience in these roles. I kept saying, 'You're hiring people that don't have principal experience and you're asking them to come in and supervise me.' They don't understand my job. They don't understand what I've done, and my belief is, I hope you say, 'I'm here to serve you.'

Support to Participant Two looks like supervisors and central office administrators who have school level leader experience.

Advocate for Title I Schools

There is not research that points directly to advocacy, but this can be interpreted as support and appreciation for the work of a Title I leader. Participant Ten voiced his perspective of how this validates him as a leader.

In recent years, I think our superintendent has been much more vocal about that Title 1 schools need more support. Just because somebody is poor, it shouldn't matter your zip code whether or not you get a good thing. He's talked a lot about equity and that if a test just correlates highly with economic situations of families, what does that mean? That doesn't mean anything. I think more and more the district is probably, because of his attitude, is growing more aware that we need to get more supports. He's a supporter that Title 1 schools probably should get more money from the state. I've been encouraged by that, but it's almost a separate opinion of whether I stay here. There's zero interest in going anywhere else.

Participant Ten's reflections speak to the impact a superintendent has on reinforcing the efforts of the educators in the district. Most districts need a significant cultural shift to a climate of shared ownership, mutual accountability, and trust where school and district leaders partner to meet student needs (Ikemoto et al., 2014).

Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study lend themselves directly to future qualitative and quantitative research. I suggest further exploration into the following areas noted below.

1. More study with regards to the personal demographic characteristics or traits of the leader would strengthen the base of knowledge related to longevity in the principalship. In particular, these traits include economics, race, and gender. By isolating each trait, the impact, if any, could be determined related to longevity in the role.
2. This study included participants who led schools that served grades five through twelve. What is the experience of elementary school principals who led the same school for five or more years?
3. What is the formal preparation and career decision-making of leaders who experience leadership longevity at the same school? Does the original college major matter? What are the preparation experiences of leaders who stay? While this study uncovered pieces of this path, a more directed study could inform the field.
4. This study focused on schools designated as Title I by the federal government. What contributes to principals who stay five or more years at the same school at

the different percentages of Title I status from non-Title I to 90% or greater? Are the reasons generalizable across Title I designation levels?

5. How long do principals remain in their first principalship? This study found that eight of the ten participants stayed over five years in their first assignment; are these results generalizable? How does that length compare to subsequent schools, if there are any?
6. How does the personal pre-high school graduation schooling experience mirror, or not, the school experience of the school led by principals who stay five or more years? When hiring a principal for a school, does a shared experience increase longevity?
7. How do the participants who stay five or more years at the same school make career choices that lead to the principalship?
8. What is the level of self-efficacy of leaders who stay and leaders who do not stay? Does the economic designation of the school make a difference in the traits of a leader who stays?
9. What is the optimal length of principal tenure to sustain growth in student outcomes?
10. What is the measure of self-efficacy, persistence, and resilience of leaders who remain at their school five or more years? What, if any, patterns, relationships, or commonalities are there?

As can be seen with the number of recommendations, I ended the study with more questions. Evidence can be found for treatments to increase retention (Chiang et al., 2016; Ikemoto et al., 2014; School Leaders Network, 2014). Rather than merely apply a

treatment, I believe there is a need to confer with those who have experienced what we are seeking: reduced principal turnover. Then we can best determine the treatment.

Final Thoughts: Advice from Leaders Who Stay to Increase Longevity

The research indicates the positive impact of school leadership longevity can have on student performance in public schools. When asked the question, “What advice would you give to school leaders that could increase their longevity in the principalship?”, the ten participants in this study offered the suggestions, in no particular order, below:

1. Find A Home and Want to Stay

Participant Three advised making a commitment. He said,

I made [my school] my home and I made them my family. If you want to change kids’ lives and break the cycle of poverty and things of that nature, then you have to make them your family and you can only make the school your family if you’re invested and you’re willing to stay.

He suggests a dedication, regardless of what the system does or does not provide.

Participant One went further than willingness to wanting to stay.

A person has to want to be in that role. For me, I want to be in my role. I like working where I am. I like my community. I like the staff I’m with.

Both participants imply that there needs to be an internal commitment to the job, the school, and the community if one plans to remain in the position for the long-term.

2. Continue Professional Development for Continued Growth and Development

Participant Three believes a leader should seek out professional learning for oneself as a leader.

What are the things that even in your role we're never done learning? We're never done learning. We can continue to learn, so what are those things, what are those passions?

She communicates the importance of investing in oneself and one's own continued leadership development.

3. Continue to Build Capacity and Share the Leadership Influence

Three participants suggest a leader distribute leadership by empowering and developing others' capacity to lead. Participant Two said,

Remember to build others. There may be an autopilot piece that you might think, 'I'm tired of this, I'm worn out of this,' but who else are you developing along the way, whether that be a paraprofessional, a teacher, an administrator?

Participant Two's words articulate the fatigue that can accompany the position but developing others and sharing the leadership contributes to longevity. Participant Nine also voiced the power of building capacity.

It's showing that you care and that you believe in other people as well. Because the principal is a smart person. But we're smarter if there's twenty, thirty of us doing the same goal, the same way.

Participant Nine implies the strength of a team which may also reduce the isolation of the job. Building team capacity engenders commitment to the organization and the team. Participant Four said,

Do not be afraid to share the leadership influence. I hate to say the power, because it's not power. It's far from power. The decisions that you make are so big that sometimes you have to be able to trust your team to say, 'What are we doing? Are we going right? Are we going left?' I didn't keep secrets from them as we went along.

Participant Four reveals her ability to be vulnerable with her team which, from her perspective, contributes to longevity.

4. Build Relationships and Trust the Leadership Team

A critical factor to building leadership capacity is to first build trusting relationships. Participant Nine said,

Trust your teachers, meaning build leadership capacity in the teachers. I want to build relationships with them. So, the number one thing too, first, is tell them [principals] to build relationships with the teachers. Because if they care about you, they're going to work harder for you. Trust the teachers to do the right things. Still monitor them. Definitely. But trust them and build the capacity of the leaders.

Leadership capacity and building relationships are intertwined recommendations from these leaders. Several participants mentioned the importance of building relationships with all stakeholders. Participant Five expressed that relationships should be a priority.

I would say they need to focus hard to build good relationships with teachers and families and central office.

Participant Eight elaborated further.

You got to build relationships with your staff, you got to take that time to get to know them. Because it's just like students, when you build that relationship with them, like when you got to have the hard conversations or when you need them to do something for you, they respect that. It's just important. Relationships, building relationships are important.

A positive rapport of mutually respectful relationships is like building a team that shares the efforts to educate students.

5. Listen

A key component to building positive, productive relationships involves the ability to listen. As Participant Three stated,

You have to listen and not just to teachers, not just the community and parents, but you have to listen to kids. The parent who hates

you to the parent that loves you, to the kid who hates you, to the kid that loves you.

Listening is a skill and being receptive to the positive and negative is his recommendation. Participant Ten also recommended the need to listen first.

Don't be so quick to have an answer because what people present to you as the problem is not always necessarily the real problem.

Participant Ten highlights the nuance of hearing what is not being said when listening.

6. Don't Let Them Win

Listening is key and building a thick skin against personal attacks from “them,” or anyone who may be a naysayer, is critical. Being a principal of any type of school requires a level of personal resolve and strength to navigate the ups and downs. Participant Three said,

There's always going to be someone who says that you can't, that you suck, you're ugly, whatever. When everybody says that you suck, don't let them get you down. You can do it. You've got to believe in yourself. So listen so that you can believe in yourself. Listen so you know the true reality. Don't let them get you down.

Participant Three's words support the need for self-efficacy, persistence, and resilience as a school leader who endures in the position.

7. We are Always Educators

Another key to longevity, according to Participant Two, is to remember that leaders are on display all the time; words and actions make a difference.

We are always educators, no matter if I'm at the grocery store, if I'm walking down the street. We're 100% in our role 100% of the time. Remember the people are looking to you and what you provide in that.

This speaks to the level of awareness of and integrity for the significant responsibility needed and expected of leaders. Those who plan to stay in the position need to be ready to accept and thrive in that environment.

8. It's About Family

Two participants advised that longevity is a family affair. A leader has to recognize they will have two families: the school family and home family.

Participant Seven said,

It's about the families in the community. It's about the family at the school. Sometimes you fight like family, too, at school. It's about the families. Those kids are going to grow and if you're there long enough to bring back, but it's about your own family, too.

Participant Four agrees that the longevity in the principalship also involves your personal family.

There's going to be so many times you can disappoint your family, because you're not there. And so, your spouse or significant other has to be 100% in. Your children need to be 100% in. And then, you cannot rest when you leave that school to go home.

Both participants imply that it is crucial to acknowledge that the school and community becomes like an extended family member.

9. Make Sure Every Single Person Knows their Value

Participant Four recommends ensuring every staff member knows they are a valuable member of the team that is educating the students in the school. She said,

Just making sure that every single person knows their value, that the clerks know their value. The custodians know their value and they are all respected to be the professionals. Because I do that, they take so much pride in what they're doing. They're pretty smart and have a lot of experience and have the heart for kids.

Participant Four articulates that communicating and recognizing the value of others develops the team and enhances longevity. Participant Six reinforced the importance of motivating others through feedback.

Be very thoughtful and strategic about how you interact with people. How you allow them to shine at their best selves on your campus.

Participant Six's words imply that all humans in the care of the leader should be positioned to excel.

10. Students First

While this advice seems obvious, principals balance competing stakeholder priorities. Participant Five expresses that this can be a challenge with adults.

I think that you have to always keep in mind that everything you do is about students first. You have to approach that with teachers.

Maintaining a focus on students and what is in their best interests affords the leader confidence when addressing difficult decisions or situations. One method that helps keep students at the center is to know them. Participant Six advises,

Get out there with them, interact with them, attend their events, know something about them. You may not know every name on your campus, but every student on your campus should know you.

This suggestion is an important element of instructional leadership; knowing the audience or customer improves service. Participant Six's advice underscores that her students feed her and motivate her to continue.

11. Be Reflective and Know Personal Strengths and Weaknesses

Personal reflection is suggested by Participant Seven as something that contributes to persevering in the position.

It's real self-honesty. Am I moving this forward, or am I the barrier that's keeping us from going forward? It's that simple. When you become the barrier, move. That's hard for some people. It becomes comfortable.

Recognition of personal discomfort requires self-awareness of personal aptitudes; this is one of Participant Five's recommendation for longevity.

[They should] build around themselves an administrative team that compliments those strengths and weaknesses. I've been lucky enough to be able to hire my entire administrative team. Every time I hired, I was looking for something very specific to complement the current team. I think really knowing yourself so that you can make sure you hire a balanced team.

Being self-aware demonstrates a level of self-efficacy that improves effectiveness.

Participant Five additionally acknowledges the importance of building a team with strengths that enhance each other. This self-awareness is extended by Participant Six to an awareness of needs.

Be aware of who you surround yourself with, be aware of who you hire into your buildings, be aware of the needs of your student population and your faculty and staff. Be aware of that and respond to that.

This implies that finding a match of adult competencies to student needs is an important awareness. In other words, hire tough and maintain high expectations.

12. Hold Staff to High Expectations

Frequently there is discussion about maintaining high expectations for students.

Participant Eight recommends high expectations for staff that are clearly articulated from the beginning.

I learned is that when you have high expectations then you need to make sure you have a system in place for high support. If something is important to you or you want that to be a priority for your staff members, then you need to give them the time and the support to ensure that that happens.

Participant Eight's suggestion promotes a positive culture and climate with the employees.

13. Find a Friend

Mentorship was discussed as an implication of the study. Participant Nine did not have a structured mentoring program for school principals in his district, but he found an informal mentor.

Another thing a principal should not be scared of is finding somebody. Don't be afraid to listen to other people in your position and make them your friends and share ideas and steal ideas from them. Finding somebody that truly will give you constructive feedback, but in a way that they care about you and that you're going to do it right. Not just to shoot you down.

Participant Nine recommends a peer in the same position as principal for collaboration. This may also allay some of the isolation that accompanies the job.

14. Don't Get Too High, Don't Get Too Low

Serving in the role of principal can be an emotional endeavor. Participant Ten shared advice on how to navigate the emotions and events.

There's some advice that I got that was really good from the person who was here [at his school] before. Don't get too high, don't get too low. It's kind of like, you're really excited about something, it ain't going to go as good as you thought it was, and you know what, it's not as bad as you think it is.

Participant Ten's advice implies that each day is a new day. Celebrate success and recognize downfalls, but do not let them define you or paralyze you to moving forward with the work.

15. Ride the Wave

Principals juggle numerous responsibilities and can often see opportunities for improvement in each area. Participant Ten warns about making too many changes too quickly.

It's a huge ship that doesn't turn on a dime. It's very incremental, very small things over time I think make the most difference. You ride the wave; you don't try to completely change the wave.

Similar to the adage “go slow to go fast,” Participant Ten encourages patience and perseverance.

Conclusions

The role of the public-school principal has transformed and expanded over time such that the mental, physical, and cognitive demands to do the job well have made the position less attractive and more difficult to retain leaders. Yet, there does exist about twenty-five percent of principals who do remain at their schools longer than the average tenure. There is a gap in the literature that explains why those leaders stay at a school for a minimum of five years.

Rather than only consider the research recommendations to support principals, this study went to those who have experienced longevity to discover the influences. The results identified six traits, or characteristics, of leaders who remained as the principal at their Title I school for five or more years. Three additional characteristics were found as potential influences to longevity; these require additional study to determine the strength of their influence. All of the traits are more experiential in nature and point to qualities or experiences of the candidates. This speaks to a specific portrait of this type of leader that should be used when identifying candidates for hire. It goes beyond individuals who merely want to do the job to those with a deeper internal sense of purpose rooted in life

experiences. If the goal of a school system is to increase tenure of principals in schools with high numbers of students from poverty, the traits identified in this study could be used to identify and recruit candidates to hire into the profession, then to nurture and support throughout the leader's tenure.

APPENDIX SECTION

Appendix A

Recruitment Email/Phone Script

Phone Script

“Hello, my name is Michelle Cavazos. I am a graduate student at Texas State University. I am conducting a research study about principals who stay at the same campus for five or more years as the leader. I am calling to ask if you would be willing to let me interview you. It should take about 60-90 minutes to complete the interview.

If you would be interested in participating in this interview, we can set up a time now or you can let me know when a good time would be to schedule it.

(If interested, I will set up a date and time and will provide the participant my contact information.)

I have you scheduled for an interview on _____. If you have questions, I can be reached at xxx-xxx-xxxx or mmc164@txstate.edu.

Thank you for your help; I look forward to our conversation.

(If not interested, I will end the call.)

Thank you for your time.

Email Script

Hello, my name is Michelle Cavazos. I am a graduate student at Texas State University. I am conducting a research study about principals who stay at the same campus for five or more years as the leader. I am emailing to ask if you would be willing to let me interview you. It should take about 60-90 minutes to complete the interview.

If you would be interested in participating in this interview, we can set up a time now or you can let me know when a good time would be to schedule it.

Thanks,

Michelle

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Start Time:

End Time:

Date:

Place:

Participant Number:

Interview topic: Title I Principals in Texas Public Schools: What Makes Them Stay
At The Same School for Five or More Years?

Interview purpose: Gain an understanding of the reasons public school principals at
Title I campuses in Texas stay at the same school for five or more
years

Interview type: Semi structured conversational interview

Introduction:

Good morning/afternoon/evening. How are you? I'm looking forward to learning from
you! Thank you for this opportunity to help me learn more about the reasons principals
stay at the same school for five or more years. The research indicates that you are in the
minority; over 70% of principals leave within three years. I want to learn more from

principals who have stayed at their campuses to determine if there are any commonalities or not.

Are you ready to start the interview? If so, I will begin the audio recording.

Today is (state the date) and it is (time). I am here with Participant number (____) and we are meeting at (_____).

I'm going to read the consent form with you and see if you have any questions.

(read form)

Is there anything I can clarify for you?

Please sign the consent form. Here is a copy for your personal files.

Let's get started...I will ask you a series of questions to gain an understanding about what led to you leading the same campus for 5 or more years.

Please feel free to ask me to repeat a question or give further explanation, if needed.

1. Please begin by telling me about yourself and your background.
 - a. Age?
 - b. Gender identification?
 - c. Ethnicity?

2. Tell me about your school experience as a child.
3. Tell me about your route to education.
 - a. What did you teach? For how long?
 - b. What did you get your undergraduate degree in? Where? Masters? Where?
4. What led you to your current position?
 - a. Where is that located?
 - b. What type of system would you consider that: urban, suburban, or rural?
 - c. What level of school is that? (grade span)
 - d. How many students do you serve?
5. How long have you been there?
6. Was your school's Title 1 status a factor in your decision to work there? If so, how?
7. What associations do you have with the term "Title 1?" When you think of a Title 1 school, what is that school like? How would you describe it?
8. What reasons keep you coming back each year?
 - a. What external factors may contribute (things the district does or does not do?)
 - b. What internal factors may contribute (factors inside or about the school?)
 - c. What personal factors may contribute (factors within you)?
 - d. Have you had opportunities to move schools or positions? If so, why did you choose to stay?
9. How long do you plan to stay?

10. Why do you do what you do? What makes your job rewarding?
11. What do you find most challenging about your position?
12. What does your district do that makes you want to come back each year?
13. What do you wish your district would do?
14. Where do you see yourself in five years? Why?
15. What are your long-term plans for your career? Why?
16. In your opinion, what role does leadership play in student achievement?
17. What role does longevity of the principal play, if any, on a campus?
18. What are three pieces of advice would you give to principals that could increase their longevity in the position?
19. Is there any other information you would like to share with me today? In particular, is there any reason you have stayed in your position that I have not yet asked about? Is there anything I did not ask in the interview and that you consider important to add to our conversation today?

Thank you for your time and participation. If you think of anything after our interview that you would like to share, please contact me on my cell at xxx-xxx-xxxx or via email at mcavazos7318@gmail.com. You have helped my growth as a researcher.

The time is now:

(Turn off recorder.)

Appendix C

INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: **Title I Principals in Texas Public Schools: What Makes Them Stay Five or More Years?**

Researcher: **Michelle Cavazos**

Dissertation Chair: **Dr. Rolf Straubhaar**

This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this research study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. I encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

You are invited to participate in my research study to learn more about the reasons public school principals at Title I campuses in Texas stay at the same school for five or more years. The information gathered will be used to complete my dissertation. The information could also inform district policies and practices to recruit, hire, and retain principals at Title I schools. You are being asked to participate because you have served as the principal of a Title I public school in Texas for five or more years.

PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in one interview within the next two to four weeks at a mutually agreed-upon location of your choice. The interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes. During the interview, you will be asked questions regarding your pathway to the principalship and your thoughts and reflections regarding your experiences. The interview will be audio-recorded and I may take notes, as well.

RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

In the event that some of the interview questions make you uncomfortable or upset, you are always free to decline to answer or to stop your participation at any time. Should you feel discomfort after participating, you may contact free, confidential, anonymous counseling services via the Crisis Call Center at 775-784-8090. They are available 24/7.

BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information that you provide information that could inform district policies, procedures, and/or practices regarding principal hiring, support, and retention. It could also inform leadership preparation programs.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record

private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team and the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is completed and then destroyed.

PAYMENT/COMPENSATION

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

QUESTIONS

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Michelle Cavazos at xxx-xxx-xxxx or mmc164@txstate.edu.

This project was approved by the Texas State IRB on [date]. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-716-2652 – (dgobert@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - (meg201@txstate.edu).

DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time.

Your participation in this research project will be recorded using audio recording devices. Recordings will assist with accurately documenting your responses. You have the right to refuse the audio recording. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to audio recording (please initial):

Yes _____ No _____

Study Participant

Signature of Study Participant

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

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