

RUNNING HEAD: LEADING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

LEADING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE:  
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES OF K-8 URBAN PRINCIPALS

By

JUAIL L. GOODE

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Dr. Beth C. Rubin

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Dr. Catherine A. Lugg

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Dr. Jermaine J. Monk

New Brunswick, New Jersey

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ABSTRACT

Urban public schools have unique challenges that require dedicated, passionate, and resilient school leaders. These leaders must remain focused and committed to confront educational disparities (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Policy makers devise educational initiatives to hold school principals accountable and place enormous pressures on them to increase student performance (Farver & Holt, 2015; Spillane & Hunt, 2010; Warren & Higbee, 2007). These school leaders are also expected to make significant changes within limited time frames (Lambert, 2002). The shift of school leaders from manager to change agent requires educational leadership scholars' analysis of prevailing assumptions about the world in which we live and how issues of social injustice influence the educational outcomes of certain populations of students. The field's understanding the role that schools play in responding to issues of discrimination, inequities, and social injustice would help to uncover the professional learning that an urban school leader needs in order to be effective in their role. Focusing professional development efforts solely on raising test scores, results in underdeveloped urban principals. Underdeveloped school leaders will instead, reproduce inequities unless there are intentional and deliberate efforts to confront systems of oppression within school and society (Khalifa, 2018). This study will examine current professional development experiences of urban principals and how they lead for social justice to lay the groundwork for creating professional learning opportunities that build urban principals' awareness and amplify their voices as advocates for social justice.

## LEADING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you, God, for my life and gifts that you have given me. I just want to hear you say,

*“Well done, good and faithful servant!” – Matthew 25:23*

As early as I could remember, I would spend hours in my bedroom, teaching and reprimanding my teddy bears and invisible students. The gift of teaching has been a major part of me. I am thankful each and every teacher I ever had. I’ve had some who encouraged me and others who have forced me consider better ways of teaching.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband Raymond Goode, IV and my daughters Laila and Lauren. Ray, you have been the best father that our girls could have asked for. In my absence, you have truly filled the gap. Thank you.

Laila and Lauren, I pray that you will look at this accomplishment as something I am very proud of. But, my absolute greatest accomplishment is being your mother. You both are strong and beautiful. Remember, with God all things are possible. Thank you for being patient and taking this ride with me. I love you girls more than you know.

Be encouraged and press forward...always.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Urban public schools have unique challenges that require dedicated, passionate, and resilient school leaders. These leaders must remain focused and committed to confront educational disparities (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Policy makers devise educational initiatives to hold school principals accountable and place enormous pressures on them to increase student performance (Farver & Holt, 2015; Spillane & Hunt, 2010; Warren & Higbee, 2007). These school leaders are also expected to make significant changes within limited time frames (Lambert, 2002).

The job of a principal is challenging and complex. In addition to an emphasis on student achievement, principals historically spend the largest percentage of the day on unscheduled meetings, desk work, organizational and student issues (Kmetz & Willower, 1982). Weick (1996) used a metaphor of a firefighter to illustrate the complexities of being a principal which includes: principals taking the blame for situations that occur (heat), making decisions that may result in being hurt (getting burned) and dealing with situations that may blow out of proportion (explosions). To further complicate their role, urban principals are expected to lead diverse populations of students that might be experiencing tensions both within and outside of their communities (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006). To this end, urban school leaders have extremely stressful jobs which has resulted in high turnover within the field (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Mitgang, 2012). Urban school leaders are also publicly monitored and scrutinized for their performance (Cambrone-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Houle, 2006). Educational leadership researchers have grappled with the need to enhance the professional learning experiences of practicing urban principals as a method for support and retention.

University-based educational leadership preparation programs have been charged with filling this gap. Urban schools, in particular, have been encouraged to partner their principals with university faculty for long-term professional development experiences that recognize educational disparities and the lack of resources within urban schools (National Staff Development Council, 2000; US Department of Education, 2011). Even more scrutiny has been placed upon educational programs and how they prepare of aspiring school leaders. School leadership, which has traditionally focused solely on principals' roles as managers and instructional leaders, has been challenged to include school leaders who function as change agents for equitable practices (Gray & Lewis, 2013; Larson & Barton, 2013).

The shift of school leaders from manager to change agent requires the analysis of prevailing assumptions about the world in which we live and how issues of social injustice influence the educational outcomes of certain populations of students. This is particularly critical to understanding urban school leadership. Theoharis (2007) has examined school leadership preparation programs and advocates for the inclusion of topics of social justice as it relates to school leadership. This has not been an easy feat. First, in order to understand the dynamics of leadership for social justice, there needs to be a clear definition of social justice (Bogotch, 2002). Researchers have also failed to come to a consensus when defining what qualifies as "urban" schools (Milner, 2010). The understanding of both these terms would allow the field to more closely examine the layers of inequity in order to develop urban school leaders for social justice.

Defining these terms are only the beginning of the examination of the lack of professional development for social justice school leadership. Understanding the role that schools play in responding to issues of discrimination, inequities, and social injustice would help to uncover the

professional learning that an urban school leader needs in order to be effective in their role. Focusing professional development efforts solely on raising test scores, results in underdeveloped urban principals. Underdeveloped school leaders will instead, reproduce inequities unless there is intentional and deliberate efforts to confront systems of oppression within school and society (Khalifa, 2018).

As a self-employed professional development provider and education consultant, I am always in search of better ways to support urban schools. My work with school principals has been a reactive relationship. They connect to express a need, and I provide solutions. Generally speaking, many of these solutions have been instructional, operational and managerial. Although I believe that I am an advocate for social justice leadership, I've grappled with my own contribution as a leader for social justice as well as how to best support principals due to the gaps in their professional development. This study will examine the current professional development experiences of an intentionally selected group of nine urban principals and how these educators lead for social justice in order to inform the field of professional learning experiences needed to equip, empower and sustain school leaders as social justice advocates within their schools and communities.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to more fully understand the professional development experiences of K-8 urban principals in relation to issues of social justice and to identify areas of professional development that are necessary for building principals' capacities as social justice leaders. I define professional development as formal or informal learning opportunities that urban principals engage in whether mandatory or voluntary and leadership for

social justice as the promotion of equitable access to education with consciousness of class and race. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the professional development experiences of K-8 urban principals?
2. How do urban principals define leadership for social justice and the challenges they have in relation to this goal?
3. How have their professional development experiences assisted K-8 urban principals to improve as leaders for social justice?
4. What kinds of professional development do K-8 urban principals say would assist them to as social justice leaders?
5. What do principals' experiences and reflections suggest for the design of a professional development model focused on improving the capacities of principals as social justice leaders?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study will employ critical and interpretive lenses to examine the experiences of urban school principals as it relates to professional development and social justice. The intersection of the critical and interpretive frames will be used to construct new understandings of the meaning of social justice leadership and the professional development that is needed for urban principals to lead for social justice. The critical and interpretive frame considers the elements of power between the larger context of racial and socioeconomic inequities and how these factors influence the educational setting that serves those with less power (Mehan, 1992; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Rubin, 2010).

The next chapter, the literature review, will provide an overview of the methods in which principals are engaged in professional development experiences. The literature review will also

explore the challenges experienced in the field of education as it relates to establishing a common language for “urban” and “social justice.” This chapter will conclude with an examination of social justice leadership in practice. Chapter three will explain the research methods, setting and a detailed description of the sample for this phenomenological qualitative study. This chapter also includes my research data collection procedures, data analysis plan and addresses my positionality in regard to how my experiences influence my perspective. Chapters four, five and six present research findings along with an interpretation: chapter four offers an analysis of the layers of social justice leadership and the complexity of serving as a leader for social justice; chapter five focuses on the concept of courageous leadership and the occurrence of engaging in courageous conversations with teachers and other stakeholders; chapter six explores the overall dissatisfaction of principal professional development experiences due to a number of factors including the lack of differentiation. Finally, chapter seven describes how urban school leaders continue to function as leaders of social justice and offers contributions to advance the field.



## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Social, economic and political influences inflict enormous pressures on urban schools and their principals. In response to educational opportunity gaps, states have increased school accountability processes for leadership (Warren & Higbee, 2007). Principals seem to be key to instructional improvement, and greatly impacting student learning (Leithwood, Seashore, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom, 2004). Principals may also have a greater effect on student achievement than teachers in urban schools in particular, which have been known to be influenced by effective principals (Ikemoto et al., 2014). Students of color and poor children showed significant academic improvements in schools led by principals who were strong instructional leaders (Grogan & Andrews, 2002).

This study will examine the professional development experiences of K-8 urban principals as it relates to their capacity to lead for social justice. The literature review is organized into three major themes. First the literature review explores principal professional development in a very basic overview of approaches used to engage school leaders. The review then investigates the challenges within the field of education of developing a common language for the terms “urban” and “social justice.” Finally, the review of relevant research will weave together leadership and social justice through the examination of the existing research on leading for social justice and how it looks in practice.

### **Principal Professional Development**

**School leaders developed but not sustained.** Historically, the educational field has looked to school leadership programs to prepare aspiring principals. Gray and Lewis (2013) found that school leadership preparation programs have been making great strides in helping aspiring school principals develop their leadership skills. However, after principals have

assumed their roles as school leaders, they are offered very little support for sustainability.

Grimsom, Loeb and Master (2013) found that “practitioners have little guidance for how they might develop or improve instructional leadership within their schools” (p. 433). Brown (2016) found that when existing principals were offered guidance, it was infrequent and isolated. Principals worked in isolation and randomly had the opportunity to form relationships and cross school boundaries (Furman, 2002).

The overall lack of focus and attention to dedicated to providing principals professional development opportunities that are sustainable has plagued the field of educational leadership for over thirty years. Caldwell (1986) reviewed principal professional development research and found that seventy-five percent of professional development has been designed specifically for teachers. For the most part, when compared to teacher professional development, principal professional development has been consistently ignored by professional development research as well as school reform efforts. Cistone and Stevenson (2000) advocated for improvement in this area, reporting that principal professional development is critical for providing leadership to their schools.

Unfortunately, the responsibility of building and sustaining school leaders has been largely placed on the shoulders of education administration programs. Walker, Mitchel and Turner (1999) attest, “It is clear that educational administration programs at the college level cannot adequately prepare administrators for such complex roles, and therefore the need for continuous professional development experiences become paramount” (p. 21). Luckily, some school districts, state agencies and professional school leadership associations have recognized the need for systems to enhance principal learning in response to changes in education and society, years after they have achieved their certification as a principal. The next section will

describe several favorable and unfavorable approaches to principal professional development in the form of district partnerships, coaching consultants and principal supervisors.

**Variations of principal professional development.** Principals frequently receive professional development through established school district partnerships with universities. Tilford's (2010) study examined what occurs when principals become partners with universities to create Professional Development Schools (PDS). Three principals were studied to gather their perceptions partnering with PDS schools. Their findings suggest specific attributes for effective collaborations. For instance, principals must be open and willing to engage in these partnerships to improve their schools. Secondly, Tilford found that principals must recognize PDS partnerships as playing a pivotal role in improving schools. Similarly, over a three-year period, professional development networks were found to leave a lasting positive impact on capacity building for leadership (Rieckhoff & Larsen, 2012). This particular partnership researched by Reickhoff and Larsen (2012) resulted in the provision of critical support for principals in regard to "sustainable professional development, attainment of school improvement goals, and school-wide change" (p. 34). Research declares that there is value in having school leaders learn from current and former practitioners. Nevertheless, the value of these experiences has yielded conflicting effects. Research within this field has also found that some principals do not thrive in these partnerships.

The most profound barrier with university partnerships was the disconnect between practitioner (principal) and researcher (professor). For example, Walker et al.'s (1999) research studied principals who engaged in PDS partnerships. Some principals felt that "university personnel were arrogant and devalued their experiences and beliefs" (Walker et al., 1999, p. 21). Even further, personal conflicts often colored the engagement between principals and university

personnel. There were instances when assistant superintendents were not in agreement with the professional development offered to principals.

Walker (1999) asserts that universities were also frustrated with the challenge of navigating the politics of district personnel and university partners within the Institute. In some cases, central office may act as a barrier for principal participation. Central office may not fully support ideas presented by university partnerships and cause principals to feel discouraged. In one instance, a university partner suggested practices that a principal was reluctant to implement. When the principal considered how central office would respond he stated, “I know I would never be supported. As soon as someone complained, I would be told to back off--stop the project” (Williamson, 2000, p. 17). These tensions can make university partnerships stressful and unrealistic. In sum, Walker et al., (1999) found that university partnership professional development initiatives needed to be both adopted and disseminated from central office in order for maximum compliance.

Secondly, some principals may receive professional development through coaching. Urban principals in particular, are leaving the profession at alarming rates (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In response, school districts have resorted to principal coaching as a means of developing and sustaining principals. Huff, Preston and Goldring (2013) define the principal coaching phenomenon as “a helping relationship between (1) a client with managerial authority in an organization and (2) a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioral techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals, within a formally defined cooperative agreement” (p. 515).

Peterson (2002) found that coaching principals resulted in improved practices due to the immediate feedback, modeling and sharing of resources. Job-embedded professional

development in the form of coaching for principals has the potential to be valuable, timely learning experiences. Fullan's (2000) research supported this finding and suggested that principals should focus on coaching and fostering collegial work environments with on-going opportunities for on-site, on-demand professional learning. Leadership coaching has been identified as a new part of educational leadership as it provides supports to principals based on their unique needs (Warren & Kelsen, 2013). Farver and Holt (2015) have expanded the notion of leadership coaching. They found that urban principals benefited from engaging in confidential conversations about their goals, the planning it entails, and discussing potential solutions (Farver & Holt, 2015). Even further, research has highlighted this approach as a method to improve student achievement. Warren and Kelsen's (2013) research revealed that as administrators in two urban schools received leadership coaching; student knowledge, dispositions and skills increased.

Similar to the barriers found in university partnerships, challenges also arise based upon who is providing the coaching of principals. Williamson (2000) found that several obstacles occur when school districts utilize district personnel in the role as principal supervisors. These staff persons have a dual role of coaching principals and working as their supervisor. There are several drawbacks to this approach. A survey conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools (2013) asked for information about urban principals' professional development experiences. Supervisors were assigned to schools and worked directly with principals to meet their immediate areas of need. While serving in the capacity of principal supervisors, they reported that professional development efforts were often sidelined by principal supervisors' time constraints and competing interests by the district. More specifically, the principal supervisor's roles and responsibilities were blurred because of district mandated expectations.

For instance, “principal supervisors are being asked to be instructional leaders and to provide support to their principals by visiting classrooms, interpreting and reviewing performance data” (Casserly, 2013, p. 29). These acquired job duties by the principal supervisors do not provide professional development to the principal. Instead, the principal supervisors are simply completing duties required by the principals. The common theme across these studies raises awareness and amplifies the need to examine the challenges of different types of professional development in order to design meaningful principal professional learning opportunities.

**Effective components of principal professional development.** Expanding on the specific approaches to principal professional development, there is also a need to closely examine the components that make these professional learning engagements coherent, applicable, and effective. This section will explore effective, researched elements of professional development including establishing a well-defined purpose, engagement that is relative to their work, integration of technology with collaboration and reflection.

To begin, Kelley and Peterson (2000) found that professional development should be designed with a clear and meaningful purpose. Whether it involves training on a specific program or a general theme, these objectives must be clearly articulated to the school leaders involved. Principals also desire to be presented a well-developed agenda that is shared with them for input (Walker et al., 1999). Williamson (2000) reported that principals desire opportunities to make the work meaningful to their practice. When presented with experiences that aren’t intellectually challenging, principals can become resistant.

Urban principals in particular, desire to engage in professional development experiences that are related to their roles as urban leaders (Walker et al., 1999). Walker et al., (1999) analyzed groups of urban principals and the focus of their professional development. They

found that groups of principals who engaged in instructional leadership professional development, had more favorable experiences than any other leadership cohort. This was due to cohort members experiencing a direct connection between the topic being presented and their role as principal (Walker et al., 1999). Principals felt that the information shared was both practical and relevant.

Existing research also suggests that there should be an element of reflection to engage principals in a multitude of approaches in order to digest the information presented. Personal reflections as well as reflective exercises with others are of great value to school principals (Williamson, 2000). More specifically, principals who were required to review feedback reports and self-monitor their progress with conversations regarding report interpretations scored higher in the quality of program delivery than coaches who had general conversations and set general goals (Huff et al., 2013).

The environment where the learning takes place is also an important need of principals. These spaces must be comfortable for all parties with access to technology. Additionally, principals reported a need to review materials before, during and after training sessions via technological platforms. Peterson's (2002) research supports the careful usage and integration of technology to support web-based learning, virtual and video mentoring.

Principal professional development sessions were also found to be more effective when they are offered over a period of time for members of the cohort to fully engage and develop collaboratively, rather than isolated events without follow-up (Walker et al., 1999). Collaborative experiences offer a positive culture for participants which was found to build a commitment among stakeholders. Williamson (2000) studied the impact of professional development on urban middle school principals. The study found that the development of a

community of learners was essential. Although the initial meetings were tenuous, once trust was established, conversations became freer and less guarded. The cohorts also removed the feeling of isolation often experienced by school principals. Principals acknowledged that members of their cohorts faced similar issues. “One principal remarked during a debriefing, “I thought it was just me or our district. What a relief to know we all face the same problem. Now we can get to work on it together” (Williamson, 2000, p. 12). Principals were found to be recommitted to their work and reenergized by collaborative sessions.

Many of these learning cohorts and collaborative sessions serve as professional learning communities for principals. Hipp and Weber’s (2008) research examined the experience of urban professional learning communities. Having “high-powered principals in the same room could lead to a competitive rather than a collaborative spirit, so it was important to establish supportive structures and processes that would create a safe and open climate, drawing out the best from each member” (Hipp & Weber, 2008, p. 53). Their research found that creating environments of supportive and shared practices yielded a positive learning community focused on improving the experiences of urban leaders.

Nevertheless, engaging a group of principals in workshops meant to improve their effectiveness is not easy. Traditionally, principals are viewed as the person with all the answers and publicly exposing their deficiencies and areas of improvement is not something often celebrated. For this reason, principals prefer to work in cohorts based upon the years in their profession for veteran and new principals (Walker et al., 1999). In contrast, Tilford (2010) found that “veteran principals and novices alike can make valuable contributions to the partnership” of professional development sessions (p. 67). It should be noted that professional development



collaborative sessions can easily become griping sessions with side conversations and disengaged participants filtered with judgmental statements (Williamson, 2000).

In summary, there are consistent findings based on the topic of effective components of professional development. Scholars have argued that it is critically necessary for principal professional development to be engaging and aligned with their needs. The inclusion of their particular needs also fosters collaborative experiences which have been researched to be more likely applied to their practice. While researchers report the synergies of effective professional development components, research fails to acknowledge and explain if these elements need to be adjusted for urban school leaders in particular. Research is also limited within the scope of addressing the elements of equity and education as it relates to effective professional development for urban principals who are leading unique schools with concentrated poverty and student mobility (Wallace & Chuon, 2014).

### **Defining Urban**

To fully conceptualize the notion of specialized, differentiated professional development services for urban principals as compared with those in other school settings, it is critically important to explore how the term “urban” is defined within the field of educational leadership. The field lacks clarity when designating the usage of the term urban. Without a definition, it is virtually impossible to clearly define problems experienced by urban school leaders and limits the creation of solutions. Broadly defining urban as a pseudonym for poor, black or brown results in the lack of advancement and progression to address the challenges experienced by those who lead and attend urban schools. This section will explore inconsistent definitions of the term urban and a researcher’s attempt to establish a shared definition of urban within the field of education.

**Conflicting definitions in research.** In educational research literature, the terms urban, diverse and high needs have all been used to explain particular groups of students. Anderson and Tillman's (2013) research challenges the vague and often misconstrued usage of these terms. They found that the usage of the term "diverse" has been used to describe schools as non-White and non-native speaking. In addition, describing schools as "urban" has been synonymous with "high-needs," which also refers to low-performing students functioning with limited resources (Anderson & Tillman, 2013).

Jacob (2007) further challenges this misuse of terminology by exposing the unfortunate reality that Americans visualize urban schools as dilapidated school buildings attended by poor, African American and Hispanic children. Educational researchers use the term "urban" frequently and very loosely to describe different school settings.

**Establishing a shared meaning.** Milner (2012) addresses the misuse of the term "urban," and advocates for a well-developed, shared definition. The lack of understanding of the term complicates the field's discussion of inequities in education and focuses more on the "shortcomings of students and parents in the school" (Milner, 2012, p. 558). This means if urban students and parents are perceived as poor, student underperformance is not the issue of the school, but rather the blame is placed on the communities in which the students reside, and underperformance is viewed as a dysfunction. To address this, Milner (2012) provides three interrelated, conceptual frames for the definition of urban schools in attempt to build our capacity to investigate problems and design specific solutions:

*Urban intensive-* These schools are those that are concentrated in large, metropolitan cities across the United States, such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Atlanta.

*Urban emergent-* These schools are those that are typically located in large cities but not as large as the major cities. They typically have some of the same characteristics and sometimes challenges as urban intensive schools and districts in terms of resources, qualification of teachers, and academic development of students. Examples of such cities are Nashville, Tennessee, Austin, Texas, Columbus, Ohio, and Charlotte, North Carolina.

*Urban characteristic-* These schools are those that are not located in big cities but may be beginning to experience increases in challenges that are sometimes associated with urban contexts such as an increase in English language learners in a community. These schools may be located in what might be considered rural or even suburban areas (p. 560).

The conceptual frames for defining the term “urban” challenges the field to no longer use the term as a proxy for race and socioeconomic status. Furthermore, by providing this framework, it allows for more specific approaches to support urban schools. This means that policymakers, district officials, administrators, and teachers would have a clearer sense of how to approach challenges based upon how the factors within the community intersect with the challenges found within the schools (Milner, et. al, 2015).

It should be noted that researchers Leonardo and Hunter (2009) argue that the definitions for “urban” should be more focused upon issues of power, race, and class. These were three components that were not included in Milner’s (2015) conceptual frames of urban. The exclusion of power, race and class raises concerns in regard to how urban school leaders may advocate for students within their schools. This leads to the next discussion of social justice and how researchers have attempted to incorporate power, race and class with educational leadership.

### **Social Justice Leadership**

Similar to the lack of refinement in developing a definition for urban, the same challenge exists for defining social justice, especially within the context of educational leadership.

Defining the practice of social justice leadership within the context of schools is particularly important because urban school leaders generally work with marginalized populations and often are expected to fight against the reproduction of inequities. Social justice leadership may also include addressing issues of injustice, challenging biases and thriving in inequitable settings. This section will explore conflicting definitions of social justice, what it means to lead for social justice, how school leaders are groomed into social justice leaders and how it looks in practice.

**Defining social justice.** Numerous interpretations of social justice have resulted in confusion with defining the term, rather than actually addressing the challenges of advocating for those who are experiencing social injustice (Bogotch, 2002). Jean-Marie, Normore and Brooks (2009) contend that the term social justice has a foundation in both the fields of social work and theology. Nevertheless, due to economic gaps, increased testing pressure and educator accountability, the topic of social justice has entered the field of educational administration (Shields, 2003).

For this reason, researchers have proposed a call of action. Leadership programs that consider themselves advocates for social justice call for the development of a common language that is inclusive of fairness, impartiality and competence (Shoho, Merchant & Lugg, 2005). As inequities within urban school districts have resulted in educational opportunity gaps that impact historically underrepresented groups, scholars have begun to examine social justice and have sought to define it in their terms. Karpinski and Lugg's (2006) study addressed this flaw in educational research. Prior to engaging in their study that explored the tensions with social

justice, equity and educational administration, they had to first define social justice within their context of study. They defined leadership for social justice in their study as “so pursuing policies, practices, and politics (educational, social, and economic – see Anyon, 2005) that enhance the lifetime opportunities for all children, particularly those children who have been historically marginalized” (Karpinski & Lugg, 2006, p. 279).

Kose (2007) expanded on this definition, coining the phrase “socially just learning,” entailing equitable student learning along with the inclusion of personal development. For Kose, socially just classrooms include the following five components: (1) rigorous subject matter content; (2) differentiated pedagogy in which the teachers design a learning environment and engagement to meet the needs of all students; (3) ethic of care captures the positive relationships between all learners which is essential for effective pedagogy; (4) equitable inclusion speaks to the notion of students being treated fairly based on individual needs and lastly is the (5) social reconstructionist pedagogy.

Caring and empathy was also included in Shields’ (2004) notion of socially-just learning environments. According to Shields (2004), social justice educators must be committed to strengthening interconnections between relationships and learning while valuing social justice and excellence in academics. “Optimistic education attends carefully to those who are generally the least successful, the most marginalized, and the most disadvantaged in our education system” (Shields, 2004, p. 125). Without this component, educators are limiting students’ access to opportunities for success (Shields, 2004). Based on the realization that schools are socially based institutions, educational research and practitioners must consider social justice inequities in rights, freedoms and belief systems as it relates to education (Turhan, 2010).

Current definitions of social justice education are also limited by their lack of inclusion of issues of ecojustice within education (Bowers, 2001; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004). Furman and Gruenewald state, “from an ecological perspective, most discourses on social justice are incomplete because they are concerned exclusively with human beings and fail to acknowledge the interdependence of social and ecological systems” (2004, p. 52). While social justice concerns are critical, there remains a need for a deeper understanding of how ecological and cultural conflicts influence education (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004).

Whether addressing social justice from a social work, theological, or ecological perspective, the challenge remains: urban school leaders are responsible for promoting learning within environments where the students are poorly-served and marginalized. As principals continue to influence student achievement, teacher’s instruction and teacher’s professional learning, leading for social justice remains a critical area of need (Drago-Severson, 2012).

**Leading for social justice.** Researchers have begun to challenge the field of education to consider the impact of leading for social justice. The absence of social justice principal leadership results in the unlikely situation that schools will be transformed into systems that offer equitable learning experiences for all students (Kose, 2007). Leading for social justice is defined as causing a disruption to the arrangement that promotes and fosters marginalization and exclusion of a certain population (Gerwartz, 1998). Theoharis (2007) examined the experiences of educational leaders who resist social injustices within their schools. He defines school leaders for social justice as principals that “make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and their historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice and vision” (p. 223). These leaders are very different than traditional models of effective school leadership.

According to Theoharis, there is a difference between being a good leader and a social justice leader. In his autoethnographic study he interviewed principals as well as included his own experiences as a principal leading for social justice. He asserts that good leaders work endless hard, long hours to improve their schools by providing learning opportunities for all students, collaborates with the community and leads quality professional development experiences for their staff. On the other hand, a leader who ends segregated programs for students, views data in an equitable manner and ensures that professional development has a central premise of collaborating to examine practice in regard to race, class, disability and gender is a principal who is functioning as leader for social justice (Theoharis, 2007).

Rivera-McCutchen (2014) also found stark differences between effective leaders and leaders focused on equity and social justice. She found that effective leaders would be reactive to social justice issues while social justice leaders would take a proactive, preventative approach to the same issues. These leaders would approach social justice from the position of analysis and critique while balancing their internal belief systems (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014.). These leaders must be developed into creative, reflective practitioners who could examine complex job duties and interactions with academics, operations, talent management and school programs through a social justice lens (Karpinski & Lugg, 2006). Rivera-McCutchen's (2014) research yielded interesting findings as it relates to recruitment and retention of educators. In addition to the standard requirements for the role, leaders for social justice recruited with the consciousness of ensuring that candidates were not only aligned with the school's vision, but they also valued diversity in experience, background and demographics. In this case, social justice leaders vetted candidates beyond their content knowledge and credentials.

Rivera-McCutchen (2014) also interviewed social justice-leading principals to explore elements of their practice. Equity and taking a stand against injustice were the common themes. This led to her understanding of “social justice leadership as a mindset that requires action to right what has been made wrong” (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014, p. 749). Social justice leadership is also defined as a moral action that is necessary for purposeful leadership, and failure to address differences, injustices and disadvantaged practices due to race, ethnicity and culture is a disservice (Shields, 2004). Leaders who were interviewed and found to lead with a social justice mindset were fueled by morality and did not attribute their actions to learning experiences gained through formal leadership programs (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014). This finding raises concerns about leadership programs’ ability to “highlight inequities and aid students in identifying their own biases and assumptions in order to build the capacity of future generations of social justice leaders so that they may avoid the pitfalls of reproducing the very conditions the decry” (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014, p. 750). This leads to the examination of leadership programs that address issues of social justice.

**Developing leaders for social justice.** Leadership programs have historically been designed to train aspiring school leaders, who were majority white males, in the role of top-down managers who are skilled in administration and not focused on promoting caring relationships within schools (Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Murphy, 2006). Marshall (2004) credits the push for standards and credentialing as the reason for the gross negligence of social justice. Although the shift to school leader licensure prompted advancements in preparation programs, rigid leadership performance standards failed to address the school leader’s ability to adequately support the social needs of students as well as their families (Evans, 2007). The standards focus has resulted in leadership programs aligning admission and curriculum to meet standards addressed on high-



stakes licensure exams (Cambrone-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005). Even further, culminating internship program requirements are deficient in preparing leaders to address social justice concerns and lack a robust description of leadership within communities (Jean-Marie, Normore & Brooks, 2009). Jean-Marie, Normore and Brooks' (2009) examined school leader internships conducted by the Southern Regional Education Board (2007). Their findings indicated that interns generally engaged in tasks that did not include elements of social responsibility to equip them in making changes to conditions and social order. They engaged in tasks such as attending school board meetings and shadowing principals.

Researchers have proposed the design of programs that immerse students in settings in which they must take action to face inequities and thus providing a broader reconceptualization of leading for social justice (Marshall, 2004; Cambrone-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005). Brown (2004) affirms that the practice of immersing students in experiences outside of their social environment, results in a culture shock in which they reflect on their own attitudes and how their own social environment influenced and molded them. She promotes this idea by the concept of leadership action through praxis and states that education leadership programs should institute service learning or community-based learning as a method of deepening understanding, building capacity and fostering civic responsibility. Additionally, the usage of activist action plans engages future leaders in the developmental process of first evaluating current social issues within the school and then determining the social action needed to remediate the issue (Brown, 2004). This improved level of understanding would produce transformative, reflective practitioners. According to Cambrone-McCabe and McCarthy (2005), there would be a shift in the "mental model of what it means to be a school leader rather than a school administrator" (p. 209). The shifting and reconceptualization of school leadership roles described would extend

beyond education preparation programs and would impact schools as well as educational policy makers (Cambrone-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005).

It should be noted that this approach is not broadly accepted. Usdan (2002) questions this shift, the impact it would have on schools, and whether schools have the capacity to elicit such a change. “If the criteria for success have changed in terms of our expectations of school administrators, how can we meaningfully reshape the substance and role of preparatory programs? If principals and superintendents are to be assessed on the basis of their ability to raise test scores, how can the jobs be constructively and realistically reconfigured?” (Usdan, 2002, p. 302).

Practices and the exploration of social justice is discussed infrequently within leadership programs (Marshall, 2004). Exploring root causes and methods to address social justice issues pale in comparison to traditional school leadership topics such as finance, organizational management and school law (Lugg & Shoho, 2006). Consequently, efforts have been focused on raising awareness of injustice and equipping these future leaders with the skills to make improvements (Karpinski & Lugg, 2006, p. 280). Brown (2004) argues that school leaders are responsible for social justice leadership. Professors must align their teaching, course content, curriculum and policies to include societal issues of power while helping future school leaders understand the implications of educational practices and policies that have historically benefited the dominant culture (Brown, 2004). Social justice must be viewed as an educational intervention that should be interwoven within leadership preparation programs to instill and promote democracy and educational equity (Bogotch, 2005; Marshall & Olivia, 2006; Young & Mountford, 2006). Educational leadership programs must engage, agitate, and disturb beliefs that are engrained within entitlement and privilege (Tillman et al., 2006). Additionally, parent

participation and community leadership must not be ignored (Khalifa, 2016). The promotion of leadership preparation programs that minimize or mute discussions of race, culture and community are in fact, reproducing inequities (Khalifa, Gooden & Davis, 2016). This heightens the need to closely examine the practice of leadership for social justice.

**Social justice leadership in practice.** Our field offers frameworks and literature on social justice leadership to help practitioners formulate an understanding of the qualities of social justice leaders in action. However, these efforts have become overly saturated with verbal imaginations of social justice leadership in practice because of the disconnect between the theoretical framework and the reality of practice within schools (Dantley et al., 2008; Rivera-McCutchen, 2014). To this end, researchers have begun to study school leadership in action. Research has explored what social justice leadership looks like as well as the common leadership traits found among these principals.

Theoharis' (2008) interviews with principals who led for social justice established the concept of arrogant humility which captures a complex dichotomy of personal attributes. First, these leaders possess a strength and unwavering commitment to the vision of leading for social justice. On the other hand, these leaders are transparent in their communication by vocalizing their mistakes as well as questioning and reflecting on whether their leadership practices are producing a change. In addition to principals reflecting on their own practice, principals have also held their teachers to a higher standard of reflection. This includes challenging teachers with exclusionary practices such as singling students out or placing students in the hallways during instructional time (Khalifa, 2018). Notwithstanding, these polar perspectives, Rivera-McCutchen's (2014) research presents similar findings as it relates to open communication for the purpose of social justice leadership.

Reflective, transparent exercises in which both the principal and staff engage in open communication about their mindsets, challenges and student expectations were a common theme amongst principals. Honest communication was the key to building teacher empathy and making the notion of fighting injustice not just a belief, but an action (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014). These leaders are passionate about their vision and have high expectations for students (Theoharis, 2008; Rivera-McCutchen, 2014). Culturally relevant school leadership (CRSL) also advocates for leadership that addresses low academic performance as a result of low teacher expectations for students of color (Khalifa, Gooden & Davis, 2016). These authors affirm that low academic performance for minority students is the result of educators' low expectations. It is a pervasive cycle that continues to plague schools that serve minority students for generations.

Rivera-McCutchen's (2014) research addresses social justice leadership as it relates to curriculum and instruction. These examples illustrate the existing gap in research which fails to differentiate how principals who wear their hearts on their sleeves, are active in the community and communicate high expectations, fail to appear to be any different than leaders for social justice. Rivera-McCutchen's (2014) research cites specific practices such as leaders examining and restructuring courses and educational programming in order to prevent instances of prejudice. Urban school leaders, in particular, must have a willingness to engage with the community. Khalifa (2012) coins this phenomenon as a school - community overlap. This overlap consists of the expansion of school leader's interest in test scores, to more community focused, non-traditional issues such as safety within the neighborhoods and employment. In essence, this overlap invites the communities into the schools. This approach is strongly based upon leadership practices of Black school principals who functioned as trustworthy, community-based advocates before the Brown vs. Board of Education decision (Khalifa, 2012).

Practical examples of leadership for social justice is very scarce in the field and needs to be further examined. These examples become even more necessary as traditional education leadership programs continue to ignore the practice of leading for social justice, which in turn, has resulted in unjust and inequitable school systems (Turhan, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Urban principals, in particular, would benefit from being exposed to social justice leadership to build capacity and improve their perception of social justice leadership in action.

In all, I have presented the existing research on principal professional development, challenges with defining the terms urban and social justice, as well as examples of social justice leadership in practice. This study expands on these complexities with the inclusion of how issues of power, race, and class influence the educational settings along with how urban principals lead for social justice within these inequitable learning environments. The news lens will inform principal preparation programs and professional development providers of the content and process of the learning engagements that are needed to build and sustain urban school leaders for social justice.

### **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN**

#### **Methodology**

This section details the research methodology of this dissertation. A phenomenological qualitative study focused on the common experiences that urban principals have in regard to professional development. A qualitative study was appropriate because it includes a thorough examination that explored the broad concept of principal professional development to more detailed experiences within the context of leading for social justice. An interview study was most appropriate to gather individual perceptions how professional development influences their ability to lead for social justice. In addition, I explored the challenges of leading for social justice experienced by urban K-8 principals in an effort to inform the design of professional development experiences.

#### **Setting**

This study focused on principals of K-8 urban schools in the State of New Jersey. According to jointly prepared and jointly released reports of the Institute on Education Law and Policy at Rutgers-Newark (IELP) and the Civil Rights Project at UCLA (CRP), the State of New Jersey functions with two grossly different educational systems. New Jersey has been labeled as having “apartheid schools” which has less than 1 percent of white students and “intensely segregated schools” with 10 percent or fewer white students. They found that these schools are located within urban school districts and are operating well below wealthy, non-black, Latino and poor populations (Tractenburg, 2013).

Milner (2012) states that urban schools experience challenges in resources, qualified educators and student achievement. The schools in this study have experienced an influx of challenges typically found in urban intensive and urban emergent schools (Milner, 2012). Milner

(2012) defines urban intensive as schools located in large, densely populated, major cities within the United States. Urban emergent refers to schools located in cities that are not major metropolis but experience urban school challenges.

### **Sample**

Nine urban school principals participated in this study. The participants were men and women of varying ages and years of experience in the field of education. These urban principals worked within large and small districts with the inclusion of traditional public and charter schools. Using purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013), my target population were principals within schools of the following variations: K-8, K-4, K-5, and 6-8. No high schools were included in this study. High school principals were excluded because most high schools have department chairs who function in different capacities to support high school principals. Elementary and middle schools rarely have an abundance of personnel to serve as administrative leaders. For the purpose of my study, I gathered the perceptions of urban principals who were primary leaders within their schools. Principals from varying levels of experience were included in this study, regardless of race and gender (see Table 1). All of the 9 principals were leading in New Jersey urban public schools: 3 from K-5 schools, 2 from 6-8 middle schools, and 4 from K-8 schools. They ranged from mid-30's to early 50's and had between 5 and 20 years of administrative experience. One principal is White, the rest were African-American; and there were 3 men and 6 women. The following pseudonyms were used for the principals: Karen, Nia, John, Cindy, Joan, Bill, Mark, Keisha and Shirley. The next section includes information about these leaders.

Karen was an African-American female in her mid 40's who spent most of her career in the same school district. She was an alternate route teacher who was educated in the same

district where she serves as principal. Nia was an African-American female in her mid 40's who also spent most of her career in the same school district where she served as principal. She was an Assistant Principal for over 7 years and was serving in her first year as a principal. Nia began working in her district because of her family's connection to the city in which her school was located. John was an African-American male in his early 50's. He served in several administrative roles within his district. He began his teaching career in his district and was a few years away from retirement. Cindy was an African-American female in her early 40's. She served as a principal in the same district where she was born, raised and attended school. Cindy served 7 years as a school principal in a school where she once was a teacher. Joan was an African-American female in her late 40's. She had a background in both traditional public and charter schools. She was also leading in the same district where she was born, raised and attended school. Bill was a White male in his late 40's. Like John, he was a principal in a school district where he never attended or was familiar. He participated in a program after college which introduced him to the school district where he led. Mark was an African American male in his late 50's. Mark held several principal positions in different school districts and led a small charter school. He was also close to retirement because he began teaching shortly after graduating from college. Both Shirley and Keisha we African-American females in her mid 40's who were leading schools where they served as teachers and instructional coaches. They both were born and raised in a neighboring urban school district. The participants were included in Table 1 along with school setting information to provide context to their work.



Table 1. School Setting Information

Principal	Gender/Age	School Level	Setting Classification	Years as Principal	School Type
Karen*	Female/45	6-8	Urban Emergent	4	Traditional Public
Nia*	Female/46	6-8	Urban Emergent	1	Traditional Public
John	Male/51	K-8	Urban Intensive	16	Traditional Public
Cindy*	Female/41	K-8	Urban Emergent	7	Charter
Joan	Female/49	K-8	Urban Intensive	9	Charter
Bill	Male/46	K-5	Urban Emergent	10	Traditional Public
Mark	Male/50	K-5	Urban Emergent	15	Charter
Keisha	Female/46	K-5	Urban Emergent	5	Traditional Public
Shirley*	Female/45	K-8	Urban Intensive	10	Traditional Public

*Note.* Principals with \* were also focus group participants.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data were collected over a 12-week period, and consisted of nine interviews, two focus groups, and analysis of artifacts, including professional development agenda and notes. The interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed by a transcription service. I also hand-wrote notes to capture specific areas that required prompting or clarification so that adjustments could be made to the protocol for future interviews. These data

were coded during the interview process. Interview responses were categorized as major themes, sub themes, definitions and quotes for descriptive indicators. I also requested to review relevant documents during this phase of the research, including a list of professional development topics that serve as artifacts from principal professional learning experiences.

Secondly, I engaged participants in focus groups for a group interview to discuss challenges that they had in common (Patton, 2002). Three principals were invited to participate in each focus group. During focus group session 1, one principal did not attend, leaving two participants. The same occurred during focus group session 2. Three principals were invited, and one principal did not attend, resulting in two principals in focus group session 2. Each session lasted between 45 minutes to 1 ½ hours. I offered two semi-structured focus group sessions to accommodate principals' availability. All participants were recruited via an emailed invitation or phone call. The questions were structured around the topics of defining urban education and social justice, professional development experiences, social justice leadership in action, and discussions about power. Focus groups for this study were held in a conference room within the Old City Public Library and New City Public Library. Focus group members' conversations were digitally recorded and transcribed by a transcription service.

The principal researcher was the primary researcher. The semi-structured format provided the interviewer the flexibility to follow "a general plan and decides, as the interview progresses, what questions and comments to use in order to lead the interviewee toward the interviewer's objectives" (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2015, p.118). A protocol was created consisting of questions to ensure that I was being "clear about what was being asked and helps the interviewee to respond appropriately" (Patton, 2002, p. 348). The interview explored the types of professional development these principals had received, how these professional development

experiences included social justice leadership as well as the participants perceived as essential professional development for them to build their capacity as leaders for social justice.

Principals were assured that their participation and identities were confidential. An alias was used for each person interviewed.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

I used Dedoose, an online platform for analyzing qualitative data, to analyze the data. Drawing from Charmaz's (2006) definition of qualitative coding, I read through the transcripts while making mental notes and a few written memos of the emerging themes based upon the responses. Transcripts and coding from the interviews and focus groups were analyzed along with the review of artifacts to determine themes across the data. Codes such as "leadership," "equity" "community involvement", and "uncomfortable conversations" were established for organizational purposes. I also engaged in the coding process by "naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43).

I used the line by line coding method as also described by Charmaz (2006). Based on the nature of the interviews, I applied a focused coding method to explore responses that I may have had a hard time categorizing (eg. effective qualities of professional development). The line by line method was effective for initial coding and during my second and third coding reviews, I considered how phrases may help to gather the ideas with more clarity while resisting the need to incorporate the organization of themes (eg. social justice advocacy) as discussed by Charmaz (2006). During the second and third rounds of coding, I paid close attention to the ideas presented by participants in regard to the complexity of social justice and was able to notice patterns of themes (eg. challenges with social justice). I used the same approach when coding

the focus group transcripts and artifacts offered by principals to describe their professional development (pd) sessions (ie. ways to improve PD, venues for PD, frequency of PD).

As a safeguard, I engaged in a self-check to ensure that I was coding to meet the design of the conceptual framework. This was done by using the following questions:

“Do these concepts help you understand what the data indicate? If so, how do they help?

Can you explicate what is happening in this line or segment of data with these concepts?

Can you adequately interpret this segment of data without these concepts? What do they add?”

(Charmaz, 2006, p. 68).

### **Trustworthiness**

In addition to self-checking, I engaged in the triangulation of data, member checking as well as peer review. These procedures ensured that the findings were accurate (Creswell, 2009). Reviewing data from different sources allowed for themes to emerge (Creswell, 2009). Prior to the final data analysis, I engaged in member checking. I contacted the participants and shared their interview transcript on a Google document. Most importantly, I also shared with them my interpretations of what was recorded on the transcript. This gave the participants a chance to review what they said, add more information or edit something that they may have said as well as clarify questions or ideas that may have been misunderstood or misinterpreted (Creswell, 2009). Peer review methods were utilized to allow qualitative research practitioners who are not familiar with my specific content area to review and challenge the methods I utilized for data collection, analysis as well as findings. I sat with two qualitative researchers who are my peers on separate occasions. First, I read to them my purpose statement and answered any questions they had about my topic. I spoke about my methods, data and shared my coding on the Dedoose platform. We engaged in conversations where they challenged my interpretation, offered

feedback, raised questions and listened as I spoke about my findings. During and after each session, I took notes to keep myself reminded of their feedback and how it made me feel as the principal investigator.

### **Positionality**

I am an urban educator who was educated in an urban setting. Unlike many of my peers, I have been fortunate to overcome the challenges associated with poor expectations of education, often experienced in urban settings. For this reason, I have devoted the last 16 years of my career working to improve inequities in education. My career began as a teacher in a large urban district in New Jersey. My personal experiences combined with the experiences of my former students, and colleagues have exposed me to the multi-dimensional layers of educational disparities and the need to take a firm stance to integrate social justice into urban schools to promote advocacy.

I currently work as an educational consultant within urban school districts. My work is done in collaboration with urban school educators. As a supportive colleague to urban school principals, I am aware of the endless challenges they face. Many of them vent to me and my work is centered around supporting them with instructional and organizational concerns, so that they may focus on immediate social justice needs within their schools. The benefits of this positionality is that my support role allowed the study participants to feel very comfortable with me and open to sharing experiences. A challenge of this relationship may place me too close to their experiences and in turn, may make me feel as if I know their experiences and perceptions although I am not working in the role of principal. To combat this, I only interviewed two principals with whom I was familiar with. Additionally, I reminded myself that this study is about their perceptions and not mine because I have a very limited vantage point regardless of

what they may share with me. I am not the principal, they are, and it is my job to learn and report their experiences...not critique or alter.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### “There's Layers to This Social Justice Thing”

This chapter describes the study participants’ understandings of social justice leadership as it relates to their work within their school setting. To best understand the setting in which principals in this study were school leaders, the first section of this chapter presents how principals defined their urban setting. The second section of this chapter will present participants’ perceptions of social justice leadership as a multi-layered phenomenon which was dependent upon their ability to: (a) know, understand and respond to the financial needs of students and families; (b) know, understand and advocate for students based on their needs; (c) collaborate with the community (d) gather data about parents and students and (e) understand parents’ perceptions and barriers of school.

#### **Introduction: Defining the Urban Setting**

Prior to engaging in a discussion on social justice leadership, principals were asked to describe their school setting in detail. All participants in this study casually defined their school community as “urban” and there were several variations of how “urban” was defined. In all, it was found that principals’ definitions of an urban community was based on their experience and limited to their perception of where their school was located. The following section will highlight the variations of the term “urban” based upon participants’ perceptions. Keisha offered:

I think, I just think city. I think, demographic mostly African American children. Maybe Spanish speaking children but really, it's probably more economic than anything else. But even though as you know, we find different levels of economic abilities or status even our community.

Keisha's response included the suggestion that although people reside in the same urban setting, their socio-economic status may vary. Keisha also stated that the population was homogeneous with a few members of the community who were of another race and spoke a different language.

While Keisha included race in her definition of urban, Karen said, "I don't think that it [urban] has a race to it." Instead, Karen's interpretation of urban included elements of the size of the city. Karen described urban as:

...a densely populated area...city. So, I guess we are considered large. So, in terms of our physical size, we are small 'cause we are only six miles. But in terms of population, we are densely populated...where kids and their parents probably live more like in an apartment dwelling.

Karen's interpretation contrasted greatly from Cindy's definition of urban. Cindy described an urban community as a place "where multiple families live in one house together," rather than an apartment building as Karen suggested. However, much like Karen, Cindy also described her school as being located in an urban small city that is one square mile.

Nia strongly affirmed that the way that she defined urban was based upon her personal experience. Nia stated:

...it's really reflective of my experience. So, when I hear urban, I think immediately about my district. Predominantly, African American, working class, low income. You know...having, you know, different issues in the home like instability or transient students.

Nia's definition of urban included an explanation of the race of students and touched on the economic status of those within the community. Nia also spoke about the challenges that families faced in their home that ultimately filtered into the schools. She expressed that her homes that



were found to be unstable had students who would enter or leave school randomly during the school year.

Bill also included transient populations in his definition of urban. Bill stated, “Urban school populations are usually more. So, maybe there is a larger, higher population of more transient students...we tend to have students that move in and out more regularly and sometimes it's compounded with income.” Bill’s definition of urban suggested that the transient population deals with financial challenges that might be the cause for this constant movement and less stable living situations. Cindy and Shirley’s definition of urban also included income. During their focus group, they reported that 95% or more of their students were on free or reduced lunch. For this reason, they felt it was important to include low-income in their definition of urban.

Overall, principals’ varying definitions of urban were based upon their immediate experience and/or the explanation of characteristics in which their particular school was located. For instance, some principals’ definitions included factors of race, touched upon the language spoken, size of the city, transient student populations and socio-economic status. Much like the findings in this study, the disparate understandings of the term “urban” have been studied by researchers in the field of educational leadership. For example, Anderson and Tillman’s (2013) research has drawn attention to the lack of a formal definition for “urban.” They found that words such as “high needs” have been used interchangeably with urban. No participant used the term high needs, but as noted above, participants included race in their definitions, saying that both African-American and Hispanic students attended their schools. One participant vehemently stated that urban “does not have a race.” Like Jacob’s (2007) research, this participant’s response challenged the misuse of the term urban because it resulted in Americans

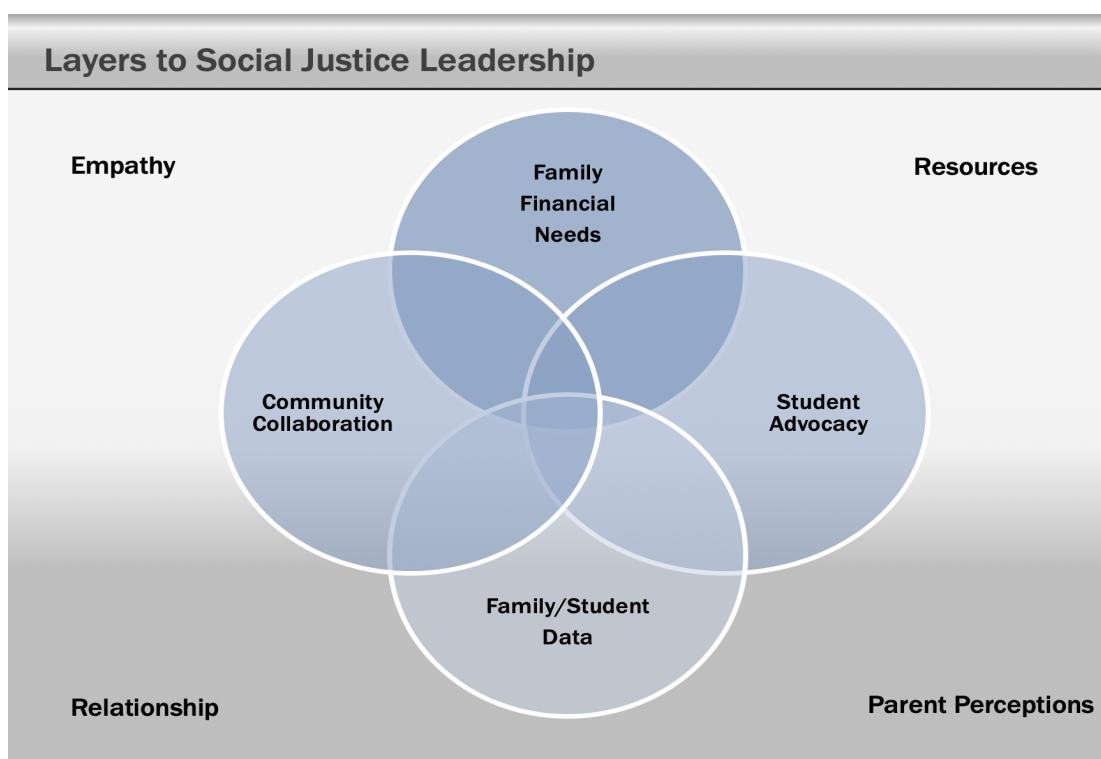
visualizing urban schools as dilapidated school buildings attended by poor, African American and Hispanic children.

The findings presented indicate that much like Milner's (2012) research stated, there is a variety of understandings and uses of the term "urban." While participants discussed the income levels of the families, none of the 9 participants interviewed, discussed limitations in school resources, qualified teachers, or student performance as Milner (2012) suggested should be included. Lastly, none of the participants included defined the terms in the context of their urban communities being plagued by issues of power, race and class as Hunter (2009) argued should be included in definitions of urban. Exploring the perceptions of principals in regard to how they define their school's community was essential to understanding how they led for social justice. The next section will explore, in greater detail, the multiple layers of social justice leadership.

### **Social Justice Leadership Layers**

Throughout the study, principals struggled to find the words to capture the dimensions of leading for social justice. When Cindy was asked to explain how social justice related to her work as a school principal, she stated, "There's layers to this social justice thing." Nia added, "If we're about social justice, we need to dig below the layers and figure out specifics about our community that we teach." The sentiment of a layered, complicated way of understanding school leadership for social justice involves the understanding of not only what occurs within the school, but also outside of the school. Cindy continued, "It is a web of topics which include key functions in a school. You have to include connections to your community, teachers, students, parents...and so much more."

While the participating principals voiced the complexities of social justice leadership, there was a common thread in these perceptions. All participants included the following aspects of social justice leadership in their reflections responding to: the financial and economic needs of families, the varying needs of individual students, the benefits and challenges of community-school partnerships as well as the challenges of gathering data while being flexible when addressing the needs of parents. Figure 1 offers visual of the most common aspects of social justice leadership as described. This figure shows the relationship, overlap and interdependence of this complex phenomenon of social justice leadership.



**Figure 1.** Layers of Social Justice Leadership

### **Leadership for Social Justice:**

#### **Knowing, Understanding and Responding to the Financial Needs of Students and Families**

Principals in this study discussed how they noticed class and economic disparities within their school and felt that it was their responsibility to address this need. This section presents

how principals viewed upon their ability to know, understand and respond to the financial needs of their students and families as a layer of social justice leadership.

Principals mentioned the times that they helped students who did not have the financial means to purchase items for school. John spoke about having students in his school who could not afford to purchase materials and school supplies. He stated that he often gave students money to purchase materials for projects, while other parents were able to buy materials without an issue. He described social justice leadership as his ability to respond to these financial needs. When John was asked what funding source provided the money for supplies John said:

I give them my own money because I think of what it would be like if I was that kid's parent and I didn't have money. I still would want my child to learn so that he's able to go out in the world and get a job. But if I haven't taught him about turning in projects and dealing with people, how is he going to learn? I still need the projects to be turned in because I want the parents to be able to work with their children.

John explained the importance of being able to support students financially in order for them to meet expectations in the classroom which would translate to skills they would need to master in order to be successful in life. He felt that the student having what they needed was essential not only for getting an assignment complete, but also for the student to do well in the future, despite the student's financial need. Many principals new that the financial needs that many students faced were challenges experienced by the community as a whole. Karen felt that the economic disparities within the school was the reflection economic disparities within the community.

Karen mentioned:

There are some sections in our city where professionals live and are for the majority,

homeowners. Everybody's not have notes. Are rich people here in the city? Probably not.

But some parents are better able to manage financial obligations than others.

Karen observed that the needs of her parents varied although students were from the same community. She also found that some families were able to handle financial hardships, better than others. This was not a challenge that was experienced in Karen's school alone. Shirley, a principal from a different district, described similar economic disparities within her school. Recently, her district modified how they enrolled students. This change resulted in major shifts to her student demographics because students no longer attended their neighborhood schools. This was particularly different for Shirley because she had economic disparities and challenges within her school that she had not experienced prior to changes enrollment. Shirley said:

We have students from all over the city now. In the past, we had students who were from this community...walking distance. Parents were working parents living and owning their houses. But, due to changes in how students are enrolled, we have students from all over and some have more needs than others.

Shirley spoke about how a shift occurred within her student population and noticed first hand that students' needs varied greatly. This shift has resulted in her district engaging school leaders in professional learning sessions for them to explore how to best support students in their buildings whose families may be experiencing financial challenges. Shirley said that the training changed the way that she understood the financial strain experienced by her families. Shirley said:

The majority of the student population is low poverty. They [professional development providers] actually gave us a simulation and we each were given a family with a certain income. It's actually something that I want to do with my staff. Plus, you experience

some of the things that our parents actually go through. It's not an excuse as to why some of our parents act the way they act or, but you know, this helps us to be a little bit more understanding. It was really good. You know, for me to say that, it was really, really good. The simulation took us through the weeks in a month and we had a certain amount of money for each week. And, you know, you've got the money, you have to pay your rent. That's all you have. Then we had to go to the social services department, we had to go to the community for help. We had to go to a pawn shop to make ends meet.... I think it just brought more to awareness being a little bit more understanding or a little bit more patient with our families.

Shirley's experience helped her to imagine the challenges that families face. This experience impacted the way that she engaged with families with a higher level of understanding and patience. Shirley's district engaged principals in a professional development session which simulated the challenges that parents and students within their schools face. However, other participants within this study were left to their own devices when learning about the financial challenges experienced by their families. Nevertheless, participants in the study reported that there was value in knowing the financial challenges that parents face, even if their district failed to educate them on the best means to handle them.

Nia shared:

And we don't talk about class enough in our district.... I don't think that we do. We act like everybody's Black Girl Magic and everybody's swinging and doing okay. But meanwhile, we have parents who come in and transfer their kids out because they can't afford apartments in our districts anymore or parents who really have a hard time coming up with \$50 for whatever activity.

Nia's explanation of the phrase "Black Girl Magic" meant that there was a certain expectation in the African American culture that Black girls (or women) can do anything, are strong, powerful and limitless. Nia brought up this phenomenon as a way of explaining that every family was not thriving the same way that others may have perceived them to be. She felt that her district could do a better job with educating principals on how to handle financial challenges when they arise. Nia felt that there were some families who were struggling and might not be able to see the "magic" or hope because of financial trouble. Nia felt that it was important for schools to spend time exploring these challenges as a means to better support families.

When Nia was asked how she handled students not having funds for events, Nia explained, "everything we have to do, we have to do in increments. Like we can't just say \$50 is due tomorrow, bring your money in. We got to do it over a whole year, bring \$5 or \$10, a dollar, whatever you can do." Nia adjusted how parents paid for activities because of her knowledge and understanding of the economic constraints of her students' families. In all, participants in the study shared that finding out the financial needs of their families was important in order to lead for social justice because every family had different needs.

While some principals felt it was their obligation to use their own funds to meet the financial needs of students, others made adjustments in advance, such as changing payment arrangements in order to work with the financial strains experienced by families. This directly relates to Rivera-McCutchen's (2014) definition of leaders focused on equity and social justice. She found that social justice leaders would take a proactive, preventative approach to address disparities by changing policies that had been in place within their school districts. According to Karpinski and Lugg (2006), this approach to leadership for social justice challenged practices and increases opportunities for poor children and families.

**Leadership for Social Justice:****Knowing, Understanding and Advocating for Students Based on Their Needs**

In addition to financial constraints, principals in this study explained that leadership for social justice greatly rested upon their ability to take time to learn about the challenges that students may have experienced at home and how these challenges might influence certain behaviors at school. This knowledge and understanding helped them to advocate for students and better support them. Joan gave the example of how the lack of knowledge about a student's background resulted in a poor teacher perception about the parent. Joan commented:

Teachers complain about the student not doing homework and the parent not following up but, what it came down to was that the teacher was ultimately concerned but all she knew was what she was seeing on the surface. He [the student] wasn't doing homework, the kid is always taking food home at the end of the day and the teacher immediately made the accusation that the parent wasn't a good parent and at the time I was really able to share that there were a lot of things going on outside of the child's control, just because of some background information I knew. Basically around a certain time of the month, there wasn't really a lot of food left in the house and they didn't have a washer and dryer in the house. When it came to the homework situation, the parent was trying to work two or three jobs and didn't really have the time to follow up with the child's work. It's something that teachers definitely need to consider before just handing out a consequence, there's so much more you need to look at. Until educators can put that in perspective they are going to miss out on a lot of great kids.

Joan's example illustrated what happens when teachers may not fully understand student behavior and how it might be linked to challenges experienced at home. Joan's knowledge of



the student's home life helped her to advocate for the student and address negative perceptions of teachers who may not be aware of those challenges. As a principal, leading for social justice, she felt that this level of advocacy was critical. Principals recognized that advocacy could only be done when they took time to learn about individual student needs. Cindy shared a similar situation when the knowledge of her student helped her to better understand what the student was experiencing. Cindy stated:

I had a student who has just made up this horrible accusation that someone was going to shoot up the school. The school calls the police and it comes up that the student fabricated the whole story. So, who's making sure we're looking at what happened with that student? It turns out, in this situation, the student was just removed from the home with the parent and he's now staying with the grandmother. He doesn't have clean uniforms, he's kind of all over the place and truthfully looking for attention and that gets missed. If you don't take that extra step, it would be an injustice to not consider the background of said student and work with someone that can walk him through some strategies to help support him, give him some tools for him to help himself to the best of his ability because when schools don't take that extra step it becomes an injustice to that child.

Cindy felt that it was necessary to support this student, rather than penalize him to the fullest extent. She even felt that it was important to give the students methods to cope with his situation and attributed the experiences that he had at home as a potential reason for the infraction. Like Cindy, participants in the study expressed a great sense of empathy when relating with students and ensuring that there were strategies for support in place to help students navigate through challenging situations. When John was asked how he handled issues that may be sensitive for

students, he stated that he does it by “creating a solution for the problem to make sure I don't embarrass them but make sure I address their needs.” John’s approach to meeting the needs of students was very similar to engaging in schoolwide academic needs assessments. When asked how he addressed the needs of students in his school, John shared that it all could not be done at once. John offered:

People don’t get that sometimes. They’re like we need all these needs addressed at once and sometimes it's impossible, so you have to prioritize. So that's why every year I do a needs assessment based on the data and say here is where we are weak. Just like if we are weak from K-6 in literacy and math I have to prioritize. The same works for students’ emotional and financial needs. We have to prioritize.

John, as well as other principals in this study, spoke about the importance of meeting the academic needs as well as the individual needs of students. Focusing on the academics alone provides one view of the challenge. He suggested that students’ needs should be carefully addressed based on the areas of great concern. He explained that he does this yearly and felt a sense of satisfaction with this approach. But, it begins with knowing the needs of the student. Knowing about the challenges that students face outside of school can sometimes become very difficult situations for a school leader. Joan mentioned:

It’s very hard to have students who come to school hungry and then expect them to meet a certain expectation. Sometimes people ignore the fact that we have a number of students who are coming from poverty-stricken homes so in order to address certain issues we have to address that. If we’re talking about equality, it would have to be equality across the board.

Joan empathized with students and recognized advocacy as a practice of ensuring equality for students based on challenges they may be experiencing and treating the need that students may be experiencing on a case by case basis. Shields (2004) conducted a study and spoke of educators having a heightened level of advocacy as those who were creating a socially-just learning environment. According to Shields (2004) these settings thrive because they include the characteristics of caring and empathy. Principals within this study who spoke of the importance of knowing the needs of students and advocating for them, whether financial or emotional, is social justice leadership in action. Once principals learned the needs of students, then they shared them openly and honestly with teachers and this resulted in communication which builds teacher empathy and fights injustice (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014). In all, principals shared that social justice leadership in action involves learning about individual student needs and being sensitive to how their needs experienced outside of schools filter into schools. The notion of the outside interactions leads us to the next finding of social justice leadership which is the nurturing of relationships with partners within the community to better support the challenges experienced by the students and families that they serve.

### **Leadership for Social Justice: Collaborating with the Community**

Principals in this study described urban school leadership for social justice as an effort that could not be completed in isolation from the community. This next section will present the participants' belief in the need to collaborate with members of the community as an essential part of leading for social justice. Joan stated, "If the community isn't invested, then it isn't going to matter to our scholars no matter how invested we are." Joan emphasized that community involvement within the schools was a critical component for her leadership. She expressed that there was an interdependence of the school and community in order for her to be a successful

leader for social justice. The absence of the community, as Joan described, would make this effort unsuccessful. John also felt that community involvement not only benefited the schools, but also had the potential to improve economic outcomes for students. John discussed the consequences of excluding the community and described how this disconnect could result in students being further marginalized as it relates to students gaining career opportunities. John stated:

It's easy to build something if the mayor and the superintendent are on the same page. You may bring [a major company] and whatever downtown but that doesn't mean our students are going to get these jobs.

John felt that regardless of the proximity of students to potential employment opportunities, if the schools were not working in collaboration with the community, students would not benefit. Even further, John's ability to lead for social justice was not only reliant upon his work within the school as a principal but was also based upon higher levels of school administration's work on building relationships with the community. He felt that the mayor and superintendent of schools would have to join forces to make this happen. John provided ways in which schools could work more collaboratively with the community. John commented:

Sometimes you have to build your own system to show people that it works. If they take the high school kids who get out at 3pm, have them work with the high school custodians, clean the buildings, teach them how to be custodians, take boilers apart, they will have the skills to get jobs. Or even better, imagine if the high school had plumbing or electrical courses and the city gave them an old building to work on. Imagine when they sold it, the school could send them a bill and pay the kids for their hours that they worked on it. The children and the city benefit from that. But if they aren't on the

same page you are not going to have that flow.

John's approach to schools working in collaboration with the community, presented a mutually beneficial outcome for both students and the community. His example illustrated how his perception of leadership for social justice included the concept of students' access to employment, thus resulting in financial benefits and economic empowerment. John also emphasized the importance of students being career ready based on the city's utilization of resources for the benefit of students.

While John's primary focus of community collaboration with schools resulted in career opportunities, exploration and financial gain for students, Nia felt that communities working with schools would result in positive benefits for student safety. Nia said:

I had a parent who, this year, her child was followed to school and was approached by someone that was trying to solicit, you know, trying to get her. He offered her money and everything. She was afraid, and she ran. The parent was very upset and asked, "What is the district doing?" But that's not something the district would be able to handle without really collaborating with the whole city. They could have a blue light system when the students felt afraid. They could run into a store and have a safe haven. That would be great because safety is a big issue at the middle school. But that would be a school and community effort.

Nia's experience of her student being solicited by a perpetrator while walking home from school, resulted in her voicing the need for better school and community relations which would make students and parents feel safer. Nia felt that the design of a program to protect her students could not be done without district-wide and community-based interventions such as the blue light

system she discussed. Again, this level of advocacy would have to be done outside of the school walls and requires coordination and collaboration within higher levels of leadership.

### **Challenges of Community Partnerships**

While some principals voiced the need for community collaborations to be done by higher levels of administration, others shared challenges they faced when attempting to partner with members of the community. Principals within the study spoke about the lack of community involvement from two distinct perspectives. The first dealt with community members reluctantly partnering with schools, while the other perspective dealt mainly with principals being reluctant to engage with members of the community. For instance, Joan designed a program to bring members of the community into her school. The purpose was for community members to engage in conversations about how students can work together to make their communities better. This was not an easy feat. Joan said:

It was very hard to get people, so you come up with these ideas of things that you can do to support children, but you may not get the buy-in that you need and that bothers me more. I reached out to judges, lawyers, community members and asked them if they could come in and talk to students that looked like them...and talk about their background and what we can't do to make this world a better place or what is it that they need so that students could support them. And you don't get the commitment as much as you think you would.

Joan made efforts to connect with members of the community and found that the community was not always receptive and responsive.

Mark also experienced challenges with community engagement but found that the lack of collaboration was due to the hesitance of school leaders, rather than of the community. Mark explained,

I've seen administrators who you can usually see the game plan. They come in and they identify a buffer and that person will be a buffer between them and staff and them and the community. They tend to be far off, remain in their office, don't interact with staff or the community and they use the buffer to be the mediator between the two. And they come into these urban areas simply as an employment opportunity until a better one comes along. But they aren't there with the best interest of the community at heart. They strive to appear to lead but, not actually be leaders for the community.

Mark explained cases where leaders strategically utilized staff members to function as liaisons in an effort to limit interactions with the community. These leaders did not see their roles of school leaders as opportunities to bridge the gap between the schools and communities. Khalifa's (2012) researched these phenomena known as a school-community overlaps which recognized school leaders as a community advocates committed to service beyond the school walls with the infusion of communities into the schools. As Khalifa's (2016) research stated, community leadership must not be ignored.

### **Leading for Social Justice: Challenges of Gathering Data About Parents and Students**

To recap, from the perspective of these principals, leadership for social justice involves the knowledge, understanding and supportive advocacy of addressing economic needs, and individual student challenges while collaborating with the community as a partner. These leadership actions for social justice require principals to develop methods in which they may learn about specific needs of both parents and students. The final section of the findings

presents the challenges experienced by principals when they attempted to gather these data about families' needs. It also presents strategies that principals employed when overcoming this challenge.

To begin, several principals discussed gathering data about how to best support their families through the usage of surveys. Karen, in particular, expressed the importance of using surveys to gain information about parents. However, Karen worked within a district that did not administer parent surveys. She said:

You know what I realized that we don't do? A parent survey, like a district-wide parent survey, that's really meaningful. That's going to give us the kind of data to really help us move the school...like what's a real obstacle, why are our parents having issues coming to meetings after work hours? And although the district doesn't give a parent survey, I did give a parent survey...the districts should give a parent survey and we could all ask the same general questions and then make it more specific to each of our schools.

Karen spoke about the need for district-administered surveys that would help school leaders to best understand the needs of her parents. She also emphasized that there was a need to customize these surveys so that they may fit the specific needs of the school that she leads.

In addition to surveys, Nia thought that her district would benefit from other methods to better understand the parents that they serve. Nia stated:

What is our community really like? What is the educational level, how much of a difference are we really making? We might come up with all the right questions and maybe have focus groups and really get to know our parents. This district keeps putting it on building principals to engage parents. It's really difficult to figure out..what's what. I think it would be good to have an understanding of what needs our community has and



what would be considered social justice for our given community. Like, what are the issues that really bother parents?

Nia expressed frustration with her district and felt that they could do a better job with engaging parents. She mentioned focus groups as a way to hear directly from parents in order to learn more about the community in which their school was located. Nia felt that this gathering of information was essential for understanding areas that really cause parents challenges.

Principals spoke about how valuable gathering data about parents helped them understand the barriers of parental involvement. For instance, Nia's observations of parents' schedules, helped her to better engage parents. Nia stated:

We have a lot of swing shift parents. So swing shift parents, that's a big deal and that makes a difference so that you can have things during the school day, you know?

Gathering data about parents' working hours, helped Nia to decide when to host events in which parents were invited to attend. Being flexible to meet the needs of parents was something that Karen also discussed. Karen spoke about systems that she has in place to encourage parents to freely visit the school. Karen said:

There's a very strong connection between home and school...it's an open-door policy so parents can come in as they need to whether they're invited to come to a particular event or activity. Even if they just want to come in to follow the child throughout the school day. We're very hands on and we encourage our parents to really participate in the teaching and learning process.

When asked how she maintains these systems for positive parent engagement, Karen shared:

My parents asked me for a yearlong calendar and I didn't give it to them. They wanted me to put all the meetings within the year [on calendar] and the reason that I did not do

this is sometimes we have to change things and that's beyond our control. So, you don't want to put it out there, then you have to change it. And then they're like, but I already took that day off! So, what I do is make a calendar at the beginning of each month. I'll make a robo call saying the parent meeting is on this day, this time, whatever. I do it every month and it's [parent meeting] always like the second week or the third week. So that will give them enough time to make arrangements.

Karen avoids sharing parent event calendars in too far of an advance. Her fear is that events may be canceled, and parents would not have received notice. Instead, having parents potentially miss a day of work, Karen felt that it was better for parents to receive automated, robo calls along with an announcement of events as the date draws near.

In all, principals spoke about the importance of understanding parents' scheduling needs as a means for positive engagement, thus making it easier to connect with them. Even further, Bill emphasized the importance of building connections with parents in order to understand the needs of the parent as well as the student. Bill shared why he felt that engaging parents was important. Bill stated, "I try to get them involved...and hopefully it helps us to understand the whole child rather than just academic. It helps to make the connection with parents. You can't do one without the other." Bill felt that there was an interdependence between educating the students and engaging parents. However, there are challenges that principals must be mindful of when fostering these relationships.

### **Leading for Social Justice: Understanding Parents' Perceptions and Barriers of School**

Aside from gathering data about parents for engagement, principals voiced that leading for social justice also involves building an understanding of the barriers that parents have as it relates to schools. Some barriers are based on parents' perceptions while others are directly

linked to a specific encounter within the school. This section will present the findings for both of these areas.

Nia provided an example of barriers that parents had with the school because of their own schooling experiences. Nia reflected on parents within her school community and stated:

How many parents of students went through the same educational system? Because that, that means a lot. For example, we're in a school right now where we have parents that have come here for middle school that have a negative connotation of us.

Nia felt that it was necessary to gather parents' perceptions of the school because it would place her in a better position of service and appropriately respond to their needs. She spoke about leading a school within a community where parents may have also attended. Nia expressed how parents' experiences within the school may influence how they interact with staff members as well as leadership. In other words, prior negative schooling experiences may result in negative interactions.

Along with perceptions that parents may have because they attended the same school in which their child attends, John shared the importance of learning and understanding parents' beliefs about school in general because these beliefs may also influence students. John said:

Parents are the first teachers. So, sometimes you have to look at the have-nots and say...hey, well let's learn why they are have-nots. Let's look at their family structure. Let's look at the mother. Did she graduate from high school? What are her beliefs on education? If they are negative, I have to change her beliefs before she leaves here so that she can educate her child. If I don't change her beliefs about education, it's not going to work...because if the child is fighting against the [school] work, she is going to say don't worry about it you...don't have to do that. You have to make it personal.

John's statement implied that he found it necessary to learn about the education level of his parents, but more specifically, how they value education. He highlighted that this examination and understanding was critical because what the parent believes about schooling, the child will also believe. John reflected on this dynamic and a strong relationship between the parents' beliefs and student achievement. As a principal, he felt that it was his responsibility to educate the parent so that they would be prepared for the students' educational journey. John continued:

You have to make them [parents] value education. I do it by having family nights, where they come in and you tell the kids to run it. Because who runs the household? The kids. Most of the have-not kids run the household. So, if I get them to run or lead a workshop or perform, who's coming to school? The mom. I have to get her in here every chance I get by having the have-nots do most of the performing because I need to get your parent in here to learn. Next, we make a list of websites that can help their child with reading or math, etc... this year our open house was different. Most of the time people get up and talk, but this time the first-grade teacher was up there playing games and things. All the teachers put their class information on a piece of paper that explained how they're going to be graded. We used the 50 minutes explaining how the parents can help their child write better. We turned it into a family night open house. You have to teach parents because they are the ones home with them.

John's engagement with parents involved using traditional events hosted by the school and repurposed as a means of educating parents. Principals across the study felt that they were responsible for fostering positive relationships with parents and these relationships could only be developed once they got to know parents, their barriers and perceptions. Joan stated:

I think that, sometimes you feel like there are students that are not treated equitably and if

parents feel like they can't come in and advocate for their child, is the child really going to get everything they need? All they need meaning, all the needs of the child. There may be some issues that we're not aware of and if we never talk to parent, we'll never know.

Joan found that engaging with parents as partners was critical to advocating for parents and learning the needs of the students.

One principal spoke of the challenges of trying to develop a relationship with a parent in order to understand their unique experiences. Nia shared an encounter she had with a parent when she attempted to resolve a concern, but the parent was not pleased with the manner in which Nia responded. Nia stated:

I feel that as working moms, one of our pressures is wanting to control everything.

Parents in our community seem to want to control school and often take the approach of, "You know what you better do this and better do that" ...I had a parent who called me on a Monday and I spoke to her and sent an email. She didn't like the way I responded to the email, it wasn't to her satisfaction. She went to the board meeting the following day! Then I had the Assistant Superintendent and Superintendent at my school expecting answers.

Nia experienced the frustration of trying to understand and respond to the needs of a parent. Although she had an open-door policy and attempted to communicate with the parent, the parent was not satisfied. Communication barriers might be experienced when principals attempt to foster relationships with parents. Nevertheless, communication is essential when learning about how principals can support and advocate for parents and students.

Principals utilized creative methods to gather information about parents and improve parent engagement. As Brown's (2004) research suggests, these principals recognized data

gathering and needs assessments as methods to evaluate current social issues within the school and then determine the social action needed to remediate the issue. In turn, principals became flexible and creative when navigating barriers that parents may have when interacting with members of the school. Principals saw the needs of parents and students as opportunities for the schools to provide access to resources that are needed, rather than limit students' access (Shields, 2004).

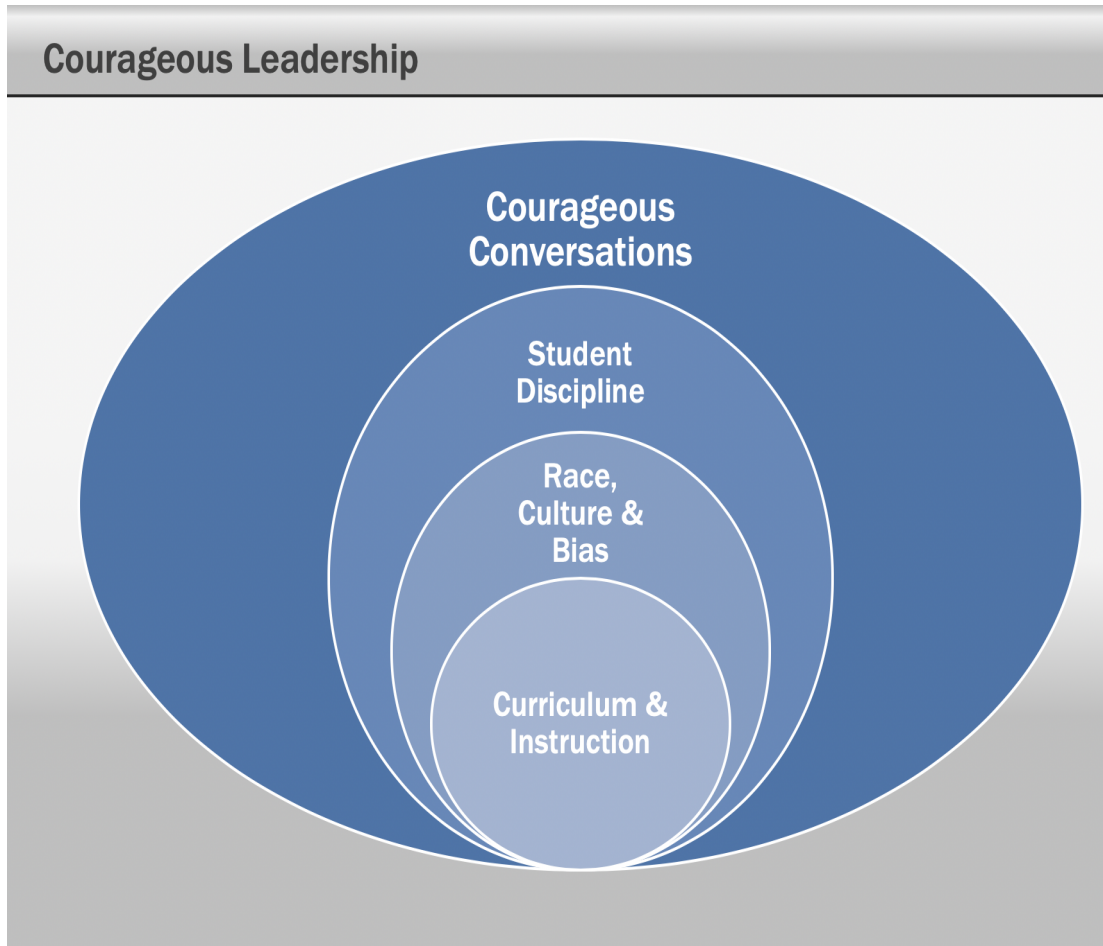
In all, the challenges of dealing with the perceptions and barriers experienced by parents is captured best when the schools make it a priority to learn about the financial needs of students and families. This helps them to make adjustments based on economic factors that might be experienced by the families that they serve. Secondly, the intel of these data equip school leaders to serve as advocates based on the challenges experienced by students within and out of school. Thirdly, school leaders who aspire to bridge the gap between schools and communities may also utilize these data to make connections with community partners in attempt to collaborate and offer services in order to advocate for students while tapping into resources within the community to help facilitate these efforts. Finally, it should be noted that all school leaders voiced a responsibility to assist students in environments that were poorly-served and marginalized (Theoharris 2007).

## **CHAPTER FIVE:**

### **“Courageous Leadership: Leading for Social Justice Takes Guts”**

Principals in this study referenced instances when they had to challenge perceptions of teachers, make corrections due to bias and advocate beyond their role of “principal” while navigating the potential backlash of leading for social justice. Cindy coined these engagements as having “courageous conversations” while Shirley described this level of advocacy as having “guts”- the guts to engage in confrontations, for the benefit of students.

This chapter will describe in detail how urban principals challenged methods of discipline with teachers and law enforcement officials. Secondly, the chapter will also explore conversations involving of race; in which many principals felt the responsibility to engage in uncomfortable, challenging discussions about teacher bias and perceptions. Even further, this chapter will explore how Black principals, in particular, recognized their role as the primary educator for White teachers, by exposing them to their own bias. Courageous conversations about curriculum and instructional practices are also challenged and discussed. The elements of courageous leadership are presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Courageous Leadership

### **Courageous Conversations About Discipline**

Principals in this study reported that they often had conversations with teachers as well as and law officials in regard to discipline and punishments. Principals spoke about the importance of taking students' background and specific situations into consideration before enforcing the rules. This section will begin with principals' descriptions of their courageous conversations with teachers and law enforcement.

Cindy shared one of the many times she had courageous conversations with teachers in regard to the way students were disciplined in accordance with zero tolerance policies. Cindy reflected on her experience and said:



Zero tolerance policies have probably gotten a lot of kids kicked out of schools...you know the teachers truthfully get excited about it [zero tolerance policies] because sometimes they feel that it is going to be a preventative deterrent and it's not. There are kids that are going through a lot at home. When someone is at home with both parents and they are constantly teaching the kid about morals and right from wrong is one thing, but a lot of our kids aren't like that. I've had to explain to teachers that they may be in single parent homes and they may even see mom doing something that isn't the most moral things just to get by.

Cindy explained that teachers often rely on zero tolerance policies as punitive methods of correction, rather than considering the students' home situation and the realization that certain expectations for students may not be instilled within the home. These conversations resulted in Cindy thoroughly explaining why exercising discretion is necessary. Cindy continued:

So, I had to tell the teacher to consider the student. Meaning if the teacher is telling me there's zero tolerance for your cell phone in the classroom but mom told me to keep that phone on me in case she needs to reach me in the middle of the day, are they [students] gonna think about "Oh, its zero tolerance?" No. Meanwhile, staff often feel that the policies are set in stone and the policies support them when punishing a student who is misbehaving.

Cindy shared that zero tolerance policies may provide more of an injustice for students because they are not given the opportunity to voice their opinions or provide explanations. Instead, students are viewed as being non-compliant with no questions asked. Disciplinary action is taken and there is absolutely no room for discussion. For this reason, Cindy as well as other principals spoke about social justice leadership as a necessary means for addressing complex

issues and considering different approaches and perspectives. Cindy's experience shows how principals examine rules with courageous conversations that may lead to discord. Cindy said, "Some of them get upset with me. But, I have to teach them to consider the kids and their situation." Cindy's "guts" when having conversations with teachers allows her to boldly face the consequences of teachers being unhappy with her for the betterment of students.

Joan had a similar experience with her teachers. However, it was not due to zero tolerance policies, but more along the lines of teachers' lack of understanding as to why a student was exhibiting certain behaviors. Joan said:

It's difficult for them to go from saying, "This is the action, here is the consequence" to asking, "Why is this happening and where is it coming from?" I think it's hard for them because a lot of them have no idea where the kids are coming from so when they think of how to discipline and begin to look for supportive measures to help the kids, it's really difficult. I see the lack of connection between a lot of the staff members and the students.

I encourage them to create those relationships, but it doesn't happen.

Joan was visibly frustrated when speaking about teachers' inability to build relationships with students. Joan felt that the lack of connections resulted in teachers enforcing strict methods of discipline. Her courageous conversations with teachers have been centered on her coaching them to learn more about the students and using this knowledge as a means of understanding the best ways that they should be disciplined.

In addition to courageous conversations with teachers, principals in this study also shared experiences and discussions with law officials about enforcing punishments. Nia shared:

On the first day of school, one of my girls got into a fight and it was in front of the

school and the school resource officers had to be involved. This fight definitely tested me on the first day because I knew that this was going to set a tone, and this was my first year as a principal. I made sure that the discipline was strict and swift. Then the officer who came in started talking about city citations for disorderly conduct and failure to supervise citations for the mother. This means that the mom would have to go to court! I stopped for a minute and I asked the officer to go outside [the office] --and I said, "I am very sensitive about the school to prison pipeline. I don't want this child or anybody in the system because of this fight." He was like, "No, no don't worry. The judge usually does it to scare the parent." I just remember having this kind of gut reaction. I don't want this to happen because I don't want this 14-year-old in anybody's database because she had a bad day on her first day of school.

Nia's acknowledgement of the school to prison pipeline and injustices within the criminal justice system for marginalized youth triggered areas of concerns. Nia's relationship with school resource officers helped her to engage in a conversation about her fears. She wanted to ensure that the child who was involved in the fight was not falling into the systemic school to prison pipeline. This bothered her, and she had the guts to engage in a courageous conversation on behalf of her students.

Shirley also shared her experience having courageous conversations with school resource officers. Quite frequently, when officers have to be called into the school for matters that are punishable by law, Shirley takes an approach of advocacy by engaging in courageous conversations with officers. Shirley commented:

I talk to the officer and ask them to let me handle it on school level. First of all, I'm not

the one who really called the police for my students. Most of the time, it's a case where you have the parent that was having an issue with another child and they wanted to press charges. And most of the time when I calmed the situation, it is resolved. But, the police officers have the last word. I just feel like our kids shouldn't have, unless extreme circumstances, our kids shouldn't have a record at twelve or thirteen. You know, most of them learn from the first time and it doesn't happen again. So, I try to approach it in that way.

Shirley explained that she typically did not make calls for law enforcement and would much rather work to settle disputes on the school level. She felt successful when she was able to de-escalate issues without involving the police or law officials. Shirley led for social justice by having the guts to resolve problems so that students did not have criminal records and could avoid the judicial system while learning from their mistakes. When Shirley was asked if she ever experienced conflict with officers when she handled it on the school level, she responded:

No, not that I can think of. I mean, we've had police at the school, most recently it was a student that was a little upset and we thought he left our building, but he actually didn't, so, no. I have her [school resource officer] cell phone number. So, I want to say, for the majority or almost all of the time, she agrees with me. She kind of does the same thing that I do. We tried to keep kids off the record at a young age, you know, tried to give them a chance.

Shirley's relationship with her school's resource officer allowed for her to act as a liaison between the school and criminal justice system. She also shared that she her relationship with the school resource officer because she understood that police and authority may be traumatic for

students of color. Again, both Shirley and the school resource officer recognized that students don't need a criminal history that will haunt them for the rest of their lives.

Nia also built relationships with law officials as a means for advocating for social justice.

Nia stated:

We are very fortunate that our officers are from the community. They serve the community and they serve our kids in a way that is very balanced. I don't think it's overly punitive, but they do expose you to the behaviors that may get you locked up if you don't listen.

Nia commended the officers who work in her community. She felt that there is a good balance of discipline and understanding when engaging with her students. While their approaches were not always punitive, it did work to expose students to the harsh realities of the criminal justice system.

Forming relationships with members of law enforcement while balancing student discipline and social justice is one dimension of the courageous leadership. When discussing policies and student discipline, principals explained that there was a great need for them to address teacher bias to avoid exclusionary practices in which students are singled out (Khalifa, 2018). Many participants spoke of the need to address discipline issues on a case by case basis. This approach is aligned with Kose's (2007) definition of socially-just learning which speaks to equitable inclusion. Failure to address issues of bias reproduce inequities (Khalifa, Gooden & Davis, 2016, Rivera-McCutchen, 2014). The next section will present the findings as it relates to principals having the guts to engage in courageous conversations about race and teacher bias.

**Courageous Conversations About Race, Culture and Bias**

Principals in this study reported that they often have to remind teachers the importance of getting to know their students while remaining aware of the biases that they may have about their students and biases that students may have about their teachers. An urban school leader for social justice is extremely willing to intervene when handling issues of race. These leaders are also heavily involved in educating White teachers about societal racism and the Black experience. Karen shared how issues of race resulted in her having an uncomfortable conversation with one of her teachers. Karen recalled:

A young lady got in trouble in class, she was doing something she shouldn't have been doing and a White teacher corrected her, and she just had sudden outbursts, "I hate you. I hate all White people..." And the teacher was very, very offended. Two other White teachers were very offended as well. I thought that it was inappropriate, but I was not offended because I understood the child's perspective. I had to take the teachers and talk to them away from the child. And I said, number one, you can't take it personal because this is a 12-year-old, you are a grown up. We know that 12-year olds are not always cognizant of the meaning behind their words. Number two, this is a Black child who does not interact with White people. You are the only white people that she ever sees. So, do you really think that she hates all white people? And number three, you have to think about what has been happening to Black bodies in society, in media. So, if you're a Black child, the world is a very scary place for you outside of your home and your immediate community because you see that Black people are being accosted by the police. You see issues of racial violence. Even now in 2019, we're still having hate crimes. We still have people being singled out based on their race. So, if you are a child, you see the world for

what it is, black and white. You don't see the issue behind it. You don't know the historical context, you just know that I'm Black and that I'm powerless against White people. So, what she's saying is also born out of her experiences and the fact that she doesn't really know any other White people except for you two...Just like White people who don't know any Black people and they go by the depictions that they see on TV.

They have a stereotypical image of who Black people are and they don't realize that there are Black professionals. Not all Black people are criminals.

Karen used this opportunity to have a courageous conversation about race while offering teachers the perspective of the student. Karen attempted to educate the teachers on the multiple dimensions of race and presented her ideas as to why the student may have responded the way that she did. Karen voiced the limitations the student had in regard to being exposed to only what is presented on media. She encouraged the teacher to consider how race plays a factor in her world. Additionally, Karen made a reference to how people often generalize races based on their experiences and exposure to the race, whether in real life or through media.

In addition to Karen engaging teachers in discussions about their perceptions of race, Keisha also shared when she had to have a courageous conversation about teachers using derogatory and offensive terms to describe students. These terms have racial undertones that teachers may not be aware of. Keisha shared:

I had to have a conversation with one of the teachers about referring to kids, as “boy or girl,” only because I think that there was just not an understanding that, you know, certain terms are trigger words for our community at times. Another staff member said to a student, "You don't want to be a thug, right?" and the parent was deeply offended, and I had to explain to the teacher...that the word thug is not a word that we take too kindly and

you know, the mom was very angry. The teacher was not able to understand, like legitimately did not get it so, I had to break that down for her.

Keisha had a courageous conversation with teachers about their language and the words that they chose to use when communicating with students. She exposed teachers to understanding that there were underlying meanings and historical undertones to some messaging. She expressed to teachers that some words were offensive and demeaning to the student population. Even further, her conversation expressed a sense of commonality with the student and his family. She felt that it was her responsibility as an urban school principal to discuss issues of race on behalf of Black students to white teachers. When Keisha was asked how she felt after having that conversation and she stated:

I felt proud because I felt like I had to educate her, to help her understand. That's one step from really, really knowing the kids. It was very interesting because you know, she was really, I can see her face that she was shocked. The teacher said, "I didn't call him that." I said, "No, you did not, but do not use that word, because for us, for our community, that's one step away from the n-word."

Keisha along with other participants voiced the need to have conversations that educated teachers about how there were several undertones of race that are communicated through specific actions and language. Nia said, "I know that race is a factor...so I think that having the conversation with the staff member to take a step back and take certain things into consideration before she placed judgement, was very enlightening." Nia felt that it was important to communicate openly with staff about how race influences the way that they may judge and treat students.



It should be noted that principals who were the same race as the teachers that they led also had with staff members. This means the courageous conversations did not only occur when the principal was black, and the teacher was white. Karen shared that being the same race does not always equate to having understanding relationships and treating students fairly. Karen reflected on a conversation that she had with one of her teachers. She said, “I realized that although we're all Black, we all come with different experiences.” She felt that teachers did not take time to learn about the experiences of their students and often made general statements that were offensive.

Cindy also spoke about the importance of connecting with the experiences of students. Cindy believed helping teachers to understand the impact of race and student experiences helps principals to lead for social justice. When Cindy was asked how her race influences her leadership for social justice she replied:

It's more than race...it's experience. I don't really necessarily think it's my race, it's my experiences. So for me, I work in the area I grew up in, so that alone, I think that transcends race. And I do feel just as strong a connection to my Black students as I do my Hispanic students that are going through, you know, similar or even more difficult struggles. So I think that would be true even in a school where it would be predominantly White or any other culture. I know that because of my experiences, I would be connected probably more so to students that have had the same struggles or their parents are struggling just because of my own experiences.

Cindy felt that her race was not as important as her being able to connect with the experiences that her students had while residing in the same city where she was raised.

While race and experiences are major factors in these courageous discussions, principals also emphasized the need for teachers to understand the culture of students. Mark was asked why having conversations with teachers about the culture of the students was important he stated:

I speak to my teachers about the requirement to respect your students enough to take an interest in their cultural background. You have to be especially sensitive to that area. We are in a unique situation because we are surrounded by students of all cultures from all over the world, so it forces you to be sensitive to their cultural differences. You have to have the discipline to not only respect other cultures but understand that there is no such thing as a dominant culture, people can coexist with one another if they have respect for each others culture. I also speak to staff about some situations where groups don't have respect for the cultural contributions that other groups have made, and it causes a schism in the general population. It is my job to expose teachers to that.

Mark's conversations with teachers not only discuss race but also raises the importance of being aware of student's culture. Mark also offered the historical significance of why these discussions are important, mainly because certain populations have been excluded.

Principals in this study spoke about having these conversations with teachers as a means for expanding experiences and reducing teacher bias. Karen stated:

Okay. So there are lot of biases. I had a teacher who says, well I don't do this, and I'm not biased. And I told her, I said, we all have biases, black or white, everyone has a bias. And she was very sincere because she felt like she wasn't prejudice or whatever. I said, I'm not saying you're prejudice, I'm saying that you have inherent biases. We all have biases and we have to be able to talk about issues of race and not get upset.

Karen reassured the teacher that she was not saying that she was prejudice, but instead was educating her that all people have biases. Karen's uncomfortable conversation with this teacher resulted in her becoming upset and defensive. She saw a need for these conversations to continue and become on-going so that they would become a norm.

Principals reported that along with race, they also had courageous conversations about teacher bias and perceptions of student abilities. When asked how she engaged teachers in discussions about having a negative mindset about student performance, Nia shared:

I make sure that my teachers connect with them [students]...I wanted to unpack some of those pieces because there's a lowered expectation for our kids. To me, there's like this apathy especially at the middle school level about our kids like "Oh, you're an 8th grader, you're on third grade reading level. What can I *really* do in a year? I'm not going to really put the effort in." It's difficult because I feel that is how some of the teachers feel and those are the interactions that they have.

Nia shared that teachers often had these discussions privately and she hears about them at a later time; she felt that it was due to the way that her district, in general, discusses students. Nia said:

We're always looking at the lowest subgroup, the lowest achieving, the lowest. So your kids don't have the money, and you don't either. Then that filters down to everyone. So when we talk about homeless try this, oh, that won't work because of this...there's a deficit thinking that I think is reinforced by the external pressures...So it's a constant kind of deficit thinking so when we try to do something new it's like "Oh, that will never work."

Nia felt that the negative talk about students trickled down to the teachers and reproduces deficit thinking. She felt that negative thinking was also something done on the administrative levels.

Due to this trickle down, principals acknowledged that their work was to challenge negative mindsets about students and have conversations with teachers about their bias as it relates to student abilities.

Shirley made it a point to address teacher bias at the onset of the school year. Shirley said:

In the beginning of the year, I just get mad at my teachers for getting angry at students for not having pencils. So every year, I make sure that I address it. Like why are you mad about that? Yeah, they have on a new pair of Jordans and they don't have a pencil, that's not our fight right? We offered the pencils, right? But if our job is to teach the kids, we have no reason to argue about that. So what they don't have a notebook, give them a piece of paper. We still have to do our job and if they need a pencil or piece of paper...that's what we were going to give them. So, sometimes I think it just takes guts to bring teachers to realize that they're focusing on something so small...where the overall goal is to make sure our children are learning.

Shirley's discussions with teachers, challenged their perceptions of students who come to school with expensive clothing but without materials for learning. She reminded the teachers that their job was not to judge and critique students, but to teach them. Shirley was frustrated that she had to have yearly conversations with teachers about them focusing on the wrong things, when student learning should be the most important.

Along with Shirley, Cindy also spoke about shifting negative teacher mindsets and perceptions of students. She shared a courageous conversation she had with a teacher due to teacher bias. Cindy said:

The kids had Pajama Day. And again, I think a lot of teachers don't realize they have a lot of hidden biases. I walked into a classroom and noticed a couple of middle school students that did not have pajamas on and I'm thinking to myself, why wouldn't you want to wear pajamas? You know, you're in middle school and this is your chance not to wear that full professional uniform. And one little boy came to me and he said, "Well, you know, Ms. So and So said that I can't wear sweatpants and that's all I sleep in." In my heart, I just felt bad. I said, "Oh, I wish I would've known." So again, during the staff meeting, I had a conversation with the staff and I said, listen, you know, we need to make sure we're having these conversations. If it requires a student to have a parent give you a call and you need to confirm, that yes, this is what the student sleeps in, then do it. Basically, the teachers were like, I just don't want a kid that's trying to get over. Okay. Granted. But if the kid legitimately only sleeps in sweatpants, that's just so wrong. It's wrong! And again, you have a bias that everybody has the night clothes and pajamas to sleep in and everybody doesn't have that.

Cindy's conversations with teachers brought up the reality of bias. She was very upset to learn that a student missed out on this incentive because of a teacher's bias about a student's lack of having what she felt was proper attire to participate. In other words, all families do not recognize traditional pajamas as Cindy continued, "a kid missed out on a relaxing opportunity that they earned. Good behavior was a criteria for it, but they couldn't participate because they didn't have what the teacher recognized as appropriate, pajamas." Cindy's example served as an excellent example of how she needs to advocate for her students and continue having courageous conversations about teacher bias. According to Theoharis (2007), principals who "make issues of race, class, gender... and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States" are

principals leading for social justice. Participants shared how addressing issues of teacher bias can be uncomfortable and require a moral purpose. Like Rivera-McCutchen's (2014) research, none of the principals in this study attributed their work for social justice based on what they learned formal leadership programs. In fact, none of the principals interviewed or in focus groups mentioned their leadership programs influence of their work at all. Participants also discussed engaging in courageous discussions with teachers about curriculum and instruction. The next section will present the findings related to this topic.

### **Courageous Conversations About Curriculum and Instruction**

Participants expressed the importance of inclusive learning opportunities that are relevant to all learners. Principals also shared that this effort required the support and development of teachers. They recognized that it is important for students to know their history and to identify themselves in the content. Joan spoke about how she led her school in taking a mandated social studies curriculum to another level. Joan said:

In NJ, the AMISTAD law states that children are supposed to be learning about themselves as part of social justice, should be focusing on their culture, things that represent them and then how they go back out into the community and make themselves better people. I led 7th grade teachers in designing opportunities like these for our students. Their classroom read a book called Sarny, and it's about a little girl who is going through a dream of what slavery was like, what it would have been like to be a child during slavery. I advised the teachers to pull pieces out of the book to discuss slavery and what it was about. So when we're reading certain books we have to think how we can pull different things out about the victim of all cultures and have children understand what this is really about.

Joan voiced the need for the exploration of social justice to be multi-dimensional and include other oppressed groups of people. Her conversations with the teachers, transcended into her leading them in the development of activities which was connected to them and their culture. Joan took the NJ required standards and made major changes to the way the material should be taught. As a school principal, she took time from her administrative schedule to ensure that teachers were presenting a learning opportunity that added value and included the voices of the historically oppressed instead of the oppressors.

Karen also spoke about advocating for social justice by using the curriculum as a basis for courageous instruction. Karen found several gaps in social studies and history instruction because it was not tested. When Karen was asked how handles leading a school where social studies and history was not highly weighted, she stated:

Social Studies does not always get a lot of attention that it deserves because they are not really tested so you know like Math, Science and ELA. I challenge my Social Studies teachers to share those issues of African American history, not just in February, it needs to be taught all year...history should be taught accurately...there's no need to sugar-coat it or anything like that. We have to include the issues that have impacted other people also...you don't have to just say black people were enslaved. It is also important to teach the kids that other groups have been oppressed at some point in time as well. Social justice is also teaching empathy and being able to see things from multiple viewpoints not just as adults, but also as children. They need to understand that we have endured...but they also need to understand that in spite of the struggles, people have been able to be successful.

Karen found it necessary to direct the same attention that was devoted to the other

tested subjects to social studies and for students to learn their history. She challenged her teachers with conversations about the learning opportunities that students should engage in. Karen also advocated for teachers to share with students facts about history, despite how controversial or unpopular.

In all, providing opportunities students see themselves in the curriculum as a form of social justice was an echoed across interviews and focus groups, but mainly within the confines of Social Studies. When Mark was asked why this was important he stated, “First and foremost you have to understand your role within a society and the effect that you can have on the education you provide to students you are entrusted with.” Mark’s response indicates that courageous instruction for social justice goes beyond Social Studies and is a moral imperative. Principals also shared that there were some teachers who had a difficult time integrating these learning opportunities into instruction even after the principal engaged in courageous conversations about the importance of lessons about racial injustice.

Cindy shared what happened when a White teacher taught a lesson on segregation. She was uncomfortable with the context of what was discussed. When Cindy was asked how she helped the reluctant teacher, Cindy said that she tried her best to model and encourage her to teach it, but also realized that she needed support in having uncomfortable conversations with students. Cindy said:

So I think just me learning, you know, just becoming a little more well versed in that. If we're going to have, you know, white people working in our school, we need to maybe have some training at the beginning of the year or something like that. Just so it's not, you know, you're in the middle of the year and you feeling like it's the elephant in the room.



So I told her that we need to have those conversations. It needs to be a teachable moment for the kids.

While Cindy struggled with how to engage in conversations with the teacher about the importance of teaching lessons around race, the teacher also felt uncomfortable. Cindy viewed this challenge as opportunities for training in this area to make teachers more comfortable addressing similar topics with students. While this specific teacher was reluctant to have conversations about race with students, Cindy also noted that students often felt uncomfortable engaging in racially-charged lessons.

Nia also felt that making changes to curriculum and instruction was particularly challenging because she is a school leader during the testing era. The testing climate has become a rigid system in which student achievement is solely connected to test scores. Nia said:

I think it's really systemic.... The problems with the curriculum is that schools are such a bureaucracy and there are so many layers, so many competing interests. We think that all of us in education has this view that education is the great equalizer, I think in the past that was true, but I also think that because we are working with the same stale curriculum and the same stale assessments we are in a NCLB mentality, even though its years after NCLB. And we haven't really progressed in our thinking of how we should equip students. So, when I think about my 8th grade students, I'm very concerned about my students graduating from high school...we are still using the same measures and the same curriculum.

Nia felt that since instruction is based upon test scores, principals can only make minor changes to curricula regardless of how much courage they have. Additionally, principals must also consider how what gets taught is ultimately determined by those who are in power. Brown's

(2004) research found that curricula that does not include a discovery of issues of power benefits the dominant culture. Principals spoke about having conversations with teachers about what they taught and making changes to the curriculum, as a means to disrupt the historic marginalization and exclusion of certain populations of students (Gerwirtz, 1998).

Principals spoke about feeling limited and being willing to face persecution and penalty if their courageous efforts backfire. The next section will highlight these findings.

### **Ability to Handle the Repercussions of Courageous Leadership**

Principals have faced different costs for courageous leadership. This has influenced how and if they engage in these efforts. In this study, principals shared some of the consequences and backlash they received as a result of their efforts to lead for social justice. Mark reflected on when he was a principal in less diverse district and wanted to include cultural learning experiences that were not well received by the parents and community. Mark stated:

I've been in school districts where cultural programs weren't allowed. You perform an assembly program only to receive threatening phone calls saying you shouldn't do that here, when all you've done was sing the Black National Anthem...Yes, that's in the 21st century in New Jersey.

Mark expressed the backlash he received when he attempted to make changes within his school and allow students to perform a song that community members found offensive. When Mark was asked how he responded to situations like these he said:

Pray you make it home safe. You realize we still have a way to go. Thankfully it was an older person who made the phone call. So, you can assume it was someone who was raised in a certain time and are set in their ways. If it was a younger person, it would be a little more frightening.

Mark's situation placed him in a space where he was afraid for his life. He found peace in knowing that the caller was older and not a young person with those ideals.

Other principals have voiced concerns or being afraid of a professional death due to the backlash and correction they may receive from administration. For example, Keisha shared how she was afraid to explore specific issues of bias when interviewing teachers. Keisha stated:

I tend not to because I'm always afraid...you have to be very careful with the rights and laws and there's certain questions that I don't ask. When the person comes in, you can kind of get an idea of their own background when you ask other probing questions about their community and where they are from and you know, you can kind of get a sense. I try not to be too specific because I don't want to get sued.

Although Keisha felt that it was important to address issues of bias during interviews, Keisha avoided these questions all together. Keisha avoided issues of teacher bias because of her fear that the candidate may be offended, and it may result in some unintended consequences such as litigation. Mark, on the other hand, felt that it was worth the risk. He felt that having the courage to address these topics was "important and influences the way that we lead."

To avoid the repercussions of courageous leadership, principals in this study had different viewpoints when it came to sharing challenges that were experienced within the school with the entire staff. Keisha felt that sharing challenges with the staff could lead to even greater problems. Keisha stated:

...Sometimes when there's certain things that you may bring up to everyone, depending on what it is, it may cause more harm than good. It was just that particular teacher I thought, needed to be addressed. It was one isolated event. I felt like I didn't see it as a trend, so I did not address it with the entire staff.

Keisha feared what would happen if the entire staff knew about courageous conversations she had with teachers. Even further, she felt that it was best not to share because of the sensitive nature different situations. For example, she feared that sharing instances when teachers may have been biased about students may actually start a trend, or a pattern for more difficult conversations about race, and it may spiral out of control.

Karen also avoided broader discussions with the entire staff because she was afraid of how staff members may respond. Karen said, “My two White teachers become very upset and they get very sensitive when issues of race come up. Very, very sensitive, it's almost like White tears. They say, “It's not me...it's not me.” Karen stated that she has a hard time guiding them when they respond in that way. When asked what teachers meant when they said, “it’s not me,” Karen said that they were expressing that they are not the ones to blame for the injustice that students face. Karen continued, “I really want to say, yeah, it's not you. But you are a beneficiary of White privilege. But I never dropped it down to that level.” Karen avoided sharing her thoughts with teachers about their responses due to her being unsure of how they would perceive it. “The last thing I want is a grievance for discriminatory actions when I really am trying to have an open conversation about bias,” Karen said.

Karen feared the consequences of these conversations and having her motives misunderstood. Misunderstood motives could lead to disciplinary actions. Across all interviews and focus groups, principals expressed that courageous interactions came with a cost that the principal had to be willing to pay.

These courageous interactions were not limited to discussions with teachers. Nia shared an example of a time that she was reprimanded by the Superintendent for advocating for students, Nia stated:

There was a situation, that still surprises me to this day. I was at a school district where the majority of the middle school students have a kind of guarantee at the comprehensive high school. When it came to doing the applications, I really wanted the kids from my school to have a choice in what school they would attend and feel empowered about high school. So we worked really, really hard to educate our kids, educate our and parents and get applications out to all high schools, not just the comprehensive high school. At the time, based on the career reports, technical careers were on the rise and I invited in technical schools for the presentations. My kids applied and did really well. They were coming up to me saying, "I got accepted!" I was so happy! Then came my evaluation. During the evaluation conference, my Assistant Superintendent kinda spanked me on the hand and she said, "Yea, I see that you had the vocational school come to your school." I was proud and said, "Yes!" She said, "Why are you doing that? They can't do that. They are stealing our kids!" She was focused on numbers for enrollment to the high school and my concern was the kids' future. Word got out...high school enrollment had gotten worse and that year our district had the largest number of students going to the vocational school, ever. It's like we were so proud, you know the counselors and I were like great we got our kids in and got spanked on the hands. Souls just crashed. I have to smile about it because I was really hurt. Something I thought was a positive turned out to be a negative.

When Nia was asked would she do it again, considering the repercussions she said:

In a heartbeat! It was what was best for my kids. My kids have more options and that's what it's about. To me, that's more important than our enrollment figures. If we lose 50 kids then I'm sorry, that's what it is!

Nia felt that advocacy for her students was worth the reprimand from her district's leaders. Her experience along with the other participants in this study illustrates how principals make conscious and deliberate efforts to advocate on behalf of their students, even if it is not aligned with the expectations of administration. Nia faced backlash when she simply worked with colleagues to provide the best options for her students. Yet, administrators in her district viewed her actions as being insubordinate. They valued retaining enrollment, rather than providing students the best outcomes for their future. Nia was questioned as whether it was the principal's job to engage in this form of advocacy, and she responded that she would definitely repeat her actions for the sake of her students.

John explained that some principals avoid courageous interactions because of such reprimands, sharing that principals might be reluctant to speak about and advocate for the real needs of students within their schools. John said, "It's simple, people are afraid to talk about it. There are consequences to every action." John expressed that principals often weigh their options and pick their battles.

Mark was asked why he continues to have courageous interactions despite the costs that he could potentially face. He stated that as a school principal, he couldn't afford not to advocate for his students because there are systemic, root causes of the problems experienced today. Mark explained:

The poverty issue for our students relate to the class issues that dictate the quality of education students receive. Even to this day all these years after the Brown decision. Education is still not equal. So as a leader I have to have these conversations. I have to look at the government and funding systems for our schools too because they play a role in why some of these injustices still exist. In order to address these issues you have to

look at everything and it is my job as a school leader to look at root causes to the problems our students face.

Mark felt that engaging in courageous leadership comes with a cost. However, like many principals in this study, the benefits outweigh the risks when considering the issues of power, race, culture, class and curriculum.

Courageous leadership takes guts and, as explored in this study, comes with a cost. Principals shared how they were subject to consequences for actions that they felt were necessary. Some of these necessary actions were having courageous conversations with teachers and law officials about discipline. The balancing of internal beliefs and critiques of inequitable practices is how Rivera-McCutchen (2014) describes the dynamics of social justice leadership. The inequities that many principals discussed in this study involved race as a common thread. School leaders in this study played a major role in educating White staff about Black culture while challenging their perceptions. Many of these conversations were uncomfortable and the principals recognized the potential for these conversations as well as their actions to result in repercussions. Urban principal leadership requires courage and an in-depth analysis of all the systems in schooling from discipline, bias, curriculum and instruction in a social justice lens (Karpinski & Lugg, 2006).

## CHAPTER SIX:

### “Our PD is Like Listening to Charlie Brown's Teacher”

The third major finding of this study was that school leaders found their professional learning experiences to be dissatisfying. Principals were mandated to attend sessions, as frequently as once per month, and left feeling as if their needs were not met. This section describes participants' perceptions of professional development as useless. The first part of this chapter will explore how principals felt their professional development sessions were weak in the areas of differentiation, skill development, engagement, and that they failed to include their voice. The second part of the chapter will describe the quality professional development experiences that these principals said would like to engage in to build their capacities as leaders for social justice.

#### **Lack of Audience Differentiation**

Participants reported that they were mandated to attend professional development sessions on at least once per month if they worked for school districts and less frequently if they worked in charter schools. Many of these sessions were held with one audience comprising of all school principals within the district. Keisha, who leads a K-5 building within a school district stated that the professional development sessions that she was required to attend within her district, engages principals of elementary, middle and high school at the same time. Keisha found this to be a distraction because “sometimes there are things that are specific to the high school and an elementary school principal should not be there.” For example, Keisha recalled a session where time was spent discussing graduation requirements, for a lengthy amount of time. When asked how she and other elementary school leaders respond to when they are engaged in sessions that are not applicable to them, she said that although they are usually frustrated, they



utilize these sessions as a time to catch up on paperwork and respond to emails. She continued by saying that she realized that her district did not have the capacity to offer sessions separately and organizing numerous sessions would be very challenging for central office staff. Keisha asked, "...how do you differentiate for all of the number of administrations we have?" Keisha blames limitations of central office capacity as the reasoning for sessions that are not differentiated based on the audience.

Contrary to Keisha, who expressed challenges with the logistics and planning of principal professional development, John believed that his district failed to differentiate content based on the audience simply because facilitators did not want to plan. He felt districts found it easier to engage principals at once and around the same topic. John said:

...it [differentiated professional development] requires you to plan more, now you are planning for five groups instead of one.... five would take me 6 months [to plan]! So it's a lot more work now, but we have to do it, or we have to do walk throughs where we come through and we said, "Ok this is what we noticed looking at all the walkthrough data. Now as a group we gonna give you some PD on it because we see that these things are common in everyone's building." Now, we are going to listen because we know; yes that is a gap in my building. If you are going to do a whole group, you have to have some type of data to say this is needed because we looked at 20-30 schools and here's a gap. But we don't have that data! You are just doing something that's random like, "Okay we have 10 new principals, and this came up." At least say to those who this learning doesn't apply to, "Don't come for that period!" That's what we're saying...you are giving us all the same thing as though we all need the same thing, and we don't!

John's remarks demonstrated his frustration and provided an example of how his district could make changes to make professional learning content applicable to all participants. He suggested that the professional development engagements become directly linked to areas of improvements that were observed within school buildings. He thought that using data as a method for tailoring content is better than random professional development opportunities that were not connected to the needs of all principals.

In addition to district-based professional development, State-mandated professional development sessions also fail to differentiate sessions based upon the audience in attendance. Nia shared her experience with attending a mandatory professional development session at the State's County offices. Nia said:

I've always felt like the same way that we should differentiate for teachers, we need to differentiate for our administrators.... I went to a school law workshop a few years back and it was predominately suburban administrators. It focused on their needs with parent over-involvement issues, so it was a different take on it. We are not trying to chase parents away, we are trying to get parents into the building!

While Nia's response emphasizes the need for professional development to be tailored differently for suburban and urban principals, principals within urban districts have stark differences in the areas in which they need development. Nia's experience showed that State professional development sessions did not take into consideration that parental over-involvement was not a phenomenon experienced by all the school leaders in attendance. Nia was asked if she believed that professional development should be differentiated for urban and suburban principals she offered:

I don't even think it should be the same within the same district, so you know how I feel about that. There are some of the larger issues that impact our day today which are so different.

This echoes the experiences of the other principals and confirms that principals' needs vary within the district as well as outside the district. Failure to customize professional development content based upon the school leaders' needs and the needs of their students is one layer of the phenomenon of useless professional development. A growing body of research expands on leadership coaching as a method for differentiation in order to respond to principals' unique needs (Warren & Kelsen, 2013; Farver & Holt, 2015). Yet, the professional development experiences that is mandated for participants in this study is in need of major improvements in terms of differentiation (Cistone and Stevenson, 2000).

### **Lack of Skill Development and Engagement**

Along with the lack of differentiation, participants in this study voiced the need for professional development that lent opportunities for engagement and specific skill development. In terms of engagement, principals viewed poorly designed training sessions as opportunities to do other work. Karen stated:

Our PD is not very useful. It's like listening to Charlie Brown's teacher. So, you listen to it, you hear things, take a couple of notes and then you kind of put it away, you know...you don't use it again until someone's asking you about it.

Karen explained how she made the best of professional development sessions and utilized it as time to get caught up on her administrative responsibilities. She has mastered the art of multi-tasking between the training course and her own "to-do lists." Ironically, professional development sessions for principals have also been coined as "to-do lists."

Participants in this study stated that professional development is often saturated with mandates and directives without answers. John said that his monthly principal professional development sessions are “run more like agenda meetings where dates and deliverables were announced.” Over the last 20 years of John’s leadership tenure within his district, he reported a major shift in the quality of professional development within the past 7 to 8 years. John was asked what has contributed to the shift and he stated that it was largely attributed to changes in district leadership and leadership agendas. I asked how that differed from professional development sessions that he received in the past. John stated that professional development sessions used to offer answers to his problems. Now he finds himself, “on the internet during these meetings looking for something to read to address this problem.” This shows that professional development is not centered around solving problems, providing resources and involving principals in quality discussions. Bill echoed John’s experiences, adding:

The purpose is supposed to be for professional development. But a lot of times it can be a top-down review over a lot of things that need to be done in the building and may be an overview of a policy...but no real on actual strategy or way to implement it.

Bill felt that the professional development sessions served as meetings to discuss items that the district wanted principals to complete. They were not opportunities to learn about specific techniques to get these tasks done. These events were simply structured to disseminate information, basically like a checklist.

Agenda-based sessions were not limited to districts-sponsored professional development sessions. Cindy spoke of numerous State-led sessions in which “they [facilitators] just explained

memorandums from the Department of Education.” These responses indicate that principals were required to attend sessions that are labeled professional development which lack in skill development, but actually function as meetings that are filled with district and state mandates, expectations as well as deliverables for school leaders. Professional development that is centered on mandates fail to provide principals with tools and resources for solving problems.

Karen said:

Well, let me be completely transparent (paused) as an administrator, I believe that there is not enough meaningful professional development for administrators. So, we have a lot of things that we receive that relates compliance, how to do things, you need to do this to make sure we are following mandates. But, in terms of developing yourself as a leader, those PD experiences are not good. Unless you seek them out yourself, I do not believe that you have many opportunities.

Karen’s response indicates that principals are left to their own devices for finding professional learning experiences to meet their needs or finding answers to problems, themselves. Keisha had similar experiences. She also spoke of finding professional development outside of mandated events, which were instrumental in her own development in order to effectively lead her school. She said that all school leaders have not been able to adapt to the lack of quality professional development. Keisha said, “I figured it out, but some other people didn’t.”

Nia expressed a need for professional development to provide answers instead of directives. She explained that professional development rarely provided opportunities to share and solve problems. Nia said:

Professional development offered to school leaders where they talk about data, they present it on a PowerPoint and then they keep it moving--there are no recommendations.

It's not like, curriculum is sitting next to us and says, "Ok, let's talk about this, what will we do with this?" No, it's so standards based without unpacking the standards.

Nia emphasized the need to discuss problems rather than presenting challenges and moving forward without strategies. This results in principals feeling less prepared and developed. When Mark was asked about his participation during professional development sessions, he said that some sessions are formatted to avoid principals from "zoning out". Mark said, "usually the facilitators try to make sure they have activities that force you to be engaged...whether it's breaking you into groups or having you present something. So you have to be involved, even if you don't want to." Of the eight participants interviewed in focus groups or individual sessions, all eight expressed disdain with the way they are engaged during professional development.

Participants were asked whether they were afforded the opportunity to voice their evaluative feedback to professional development facilitators in reference to improvements that could be made to make sessions more engaging and useful. Nia shared her experience of what happened when she provided feedback to her district in regard to improvements she thought was necessary to enhance principal professional development experiences. Her recommendation was rooted in her observation of newly hired principals having a difficult time adjusting to the culture of the organization. She was pleased to find that the district created a professional development session, specifically for addressing this area by providing an overview of the district to new school principals. Ironically, when Nia was promoted to a school principal from a vice-principal, she was required to attend this session, even though she was not new to the district. Nia stated:

My district decided to do a new administrator training which is fantastic...if you are a brand-new administrator...I've been there more than 20 years and I can tell you

everyone's names in each building and central office. So, I don't need to know the workings of the organization. Yet, I was required to attend.

On the other hand, principals were not always forthcoming with evaluative feedback. Shirley shared that she did not provide feedback because surveys were presented at an inconvenient time. Shirley said, "To be honest, they pass it out while I am packing up to leave. By that time, I am ready to go home." In contrast, Mark would be willing to share feedback but felt that it was not beneficial to his career. When asked whether principals shared their experiences of professional development with district facilitators, Mark stated:

Most people are hesitant because it has your name in there [surveys]. So, they know who sent it, so we just roll with it. But, you do see a lot of people vocally telling them to differentiate it [professional development] but it doesn't happen...you have to have a person in charge that's able to make those adjustments.

From Mark's perspective, voicing opinions about district mandated professional development resulted in school leaders feeling uncomfortable due to the repercussions, therefore, voices are seldom heard.

Principals shared that they provided feedback to district leadership feedback and it was not acted on. The format for professional development sessions remained the same. When Karen was asked why she thought that practices were not changed based on the feedback from principals, she shared:

It [changes in professional development format] requires risk taking and we are not really risky type people. So you're saying that you want us to do this and you want us to be innovative but it's almost like sometimes you're handcuffed with how far can this really go...I just think that people had to realize that sometimes we have to change, and that

failure occurs also. Nobody wants to acknowledge the part about the failure, they just want everything to be successful right away and that's not how it goes.

Karen and other principals felt that school districts provided professional development sessions that were based on expectations for improvement, but they also felt limited and afraid to take risks. Taking risks and addressing topics that may be challenging was something that districts seldomly did. Only two of the ten principals interviewed provided an example of professional development that discussed issues of race, class and inequities. Since participants felt that their voices were muted in terms of offering feedback to improve professional development sessions and their ability to lead for social justice, principals were asked to provide their ideas ways of professional development sessions could be improved based on engagement and collegial relationships. Urban principals in this study have participated in professional development on a consistent basis. The frequency of engagement does not correlate with the quality of their professional learning experiences. Principals provided detailed examples of professional development that they received. Research suggests that the best form of principal professional development should be through regular participation in coaching sessions (Fullan, 2000; Peterson, 2002; Huff, Preston & Goldring, 2013). These types of engagements with school leaders have been found particularly helpful to urban school principals as a method of improving student achievement (Warren & Kelsen; 2013). Participants described professional development sessions which failed to meet their individual and complex needs as school leaders in order to best support their students. A rich body of research suggests that principals are key to instructional improvement and changes are necessary (Leithwood, Seashore, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).



### Ideal Professional Development for Social Justice Development



**Figure 3.** Ideal Professional Development for Social Justice Leadership

All principals in the study felt that it was important to define social justice before engaging in a professional development session about leading for social justice. Karen stated:

We need to know what social justice is and what it means to us because a lot of terms are not fully understood. Like saying that we have Blacks in our schools. We have to start by talking about the different kinds of black people that we have in the district because I think oftentimes people look at black people as not multidimensional. And the same way that Black people have many dimensions, social justice does too. So we need to explore all the dimensions of social justice.

Karen and other principals thought that discussing definition for social justice was essential mainly because every school did not define it the same way. Cindy thought that hearing definitions from principals would be necessary. Cindy said:

The first PD [professional development] should just talk about how you need to take into consideration that social justice for students is not going to look the same for the teachers or the principals. So I think it's important to get our feedback first, that should be the first tier. Seeing what our understanding of social justice is and getting an example, then getting feedback from the workshop facilitators...so it would be a multi-tiered PD because it is a multi-tiered issue. It is not something that can happen in one shot. From there the principal would lay out a framework to best meet the needs of their school.

Cindy explained that professional development on the topic of social justice should allow principals an opportunity to customize efforts based on the school. When discussing the needs of the school, principals thought it was critical for professional development to include the needs of the student population as well. Failure to include students in the design of principal professional development sessions would not be effective.

Joan reflected on a professional development session that was given to school leaders in her district. Joan said:

She [facilitator] didn't get the data from my school to see what the population of students were or how we support different students. She just gave a general overview of what social justice is. We did some quick activities around it and that's it. So what happens next? If we are trying to build children, and build highly effective teachers why wouldn't she learn about our students' needs? That's why we need professional development that understands the challenges that our school community faces.

Joan's professional development was not based upon the unique needs of her school. In fact, the professional development facilitator did not include any data about her students. Instead, the professional development session on a topic as complicated as social justice resulted in a few

handouts and activities. Joan felt that the session was disconnected to her needs and the needs of the students that she serves.

In addition to knowing about students, Joan and other principals highlighted the importance of learning about the community, which includes parents. Keisha stated that “professional development should help us to look at the makeup of the community that these principals would service”. The focus of the community also includes professional development sessions that help principals learn about parent’s needs. Shirley reflected on professional development she attended in her district. “The PD was not just focusing on the child or about what the child is going through...but it also included what the parents were going through.”

All principals stated that they enjoyed professional development sessions that included learning simulations such as role plays and opportunities to learn from and with colleagues.

Cindy stated:

Having an opportunity for principals to come together, because principals don't really get the chance to congregate especially in charter schools. That's really something that's missed. But having that opportunity to come together with the principals, a full day session and a follow up would be best.

The importance of professional development with opportunities for follow-up was echoed by all participants. John said:

I think PD’s should always involve something else, a next step. So even when we have consultants, or someone come in and they support us, going in the classrooms and seeing it from the lens of a student or seeing it from a selected group of students, that's always better for me. Now I can see how to support that teacher or even further, how to support

myself. Like, how do we help this particular kid or what drives them to do certain things?

John's example highlights follow-up in which the principal is able to apply knowledge that was learned during the professional development session. Coming together to share knowledge and experiences with other principals was another element of quality professional development that participants shared. Nia stated that the best professional development sessions are the sessions where there is a "room full of principals, with no assistant principals and there are no supervisors. Everyone in that room is just the principal." When Nia was asked why the separation was important she stated that watching a principal and becoming a principal are two totally different experiences. Nia continued, "I've been in the AP role for so long and watched the Principal from the sidelines but, it's completely different when you step into the role of the principal. We need a safe space."

In addition to working alongside principals, all participants stated that they would value the opportunity to see principals in action at their other schools. John shared how visiting another school helps his development. John said:

Even though I was a principal in this district, they had a program years ago allowed us to visit a few schools in NY and Boston where we could observe and compare and take away and how we could support our schools. To me, this was the PD that was most beneficial because I was able to see a school that was similar to the one I'm in now and see the challenges that the principal was facing. They had the same compilation of students, the same number of teachers and I thought that was very powerful to be able to go out and visit other schools that were similar to yours and be able to work with people and see what it is we need to do next....I thought it was powerful to see someone who

had the same experience as yours, the same student population as yours , that's always more helpful to me than a sit down or walk away from a workshop and you don't remember what happened. So to me, PD should always be some type of connection between, yes you want to read and analyze things, but you also want to get in those classrooms and focus on the dynamic between the students and teachers and focus on the students since those are the people that we want to help.

In addition to working with colleagues' principals voiced the need to get immediate feedback from coaches and engage in job-embedded conversations. John shared his ideas of how this could work with principals. John said:

This is truly job-embedded professional development. So imagine the coach or supervisor walks through the building with you and gives you feedback on the side. Not written, just verbal feedback during your interactions with teachers. That would help us because we would be able to do things right now and if we do that so much, it will come second nature. But you have to determine which way principals would like the format.

Some principals may want written feedback and not real time coaching.

John's example of coaching from a supervisor allows for principals to get feedback immediately. He also noted that it was important for principal supervisors to know the style that the principal prefers best. The perceptions and recommendations for improved professional development sessions do not align with the professional development that they receive. Nevertheless, the recommendations offered by principals align to research-based best practices found in the field.

Although Cistone and Stevenson (2000) advocated for improved professional development for school leaders due to it being critical for providing leadership within their schools, principals reported that professional development over the years has either remained the

same or gotten worse. There was one outlier. Of the nine principals interviewed, one principal stated that her professional development experience had greatly improved over the last few months. This was attributed to a change in leadership within her district. The last professional development session she attended offered a simulation that helped her to understand the financial needs of her parents.

Even with the recent enhancement, the outlier's experience along with other participants in this study did not mention professional learning opportunities for self-reflection, collaboration with members of a cohort, trust-building exercises or the inclusion of technology as research suggests is essential for urban principals in particular (Williamson, 2000; Peterson, 2002; Hipp & Weber, 2008). Although one of the ten participants engaged in a webinar professional development, the technology of self-paced learning, virtual discussions and video coaching were not included (Peterson, 2002).

Principals in this study offered what they consider ideal opportunities for professional development. First, they valued having professional development with some type of follow-up, rather than the isolated fragmented events that they currently receive from their district (Walker et al., 1999). Secondly, principals said that professional development would be more effective if they had the opportunity to engage in sessions with a community of colleagues. Principals stated that these sessions would help them to feel less guarded and supported (Williamson, 2000; Hipp & Weber, 2008). Lastly, principals voiced the need for feedback and coaching for leading unique schools with concentrated poverty and student mobility (Wallace & Chuon, 2014). In conclusion, the professional development experiences shared by urban K-8 principals in this study offer a bleak outlook for the way that we support urban school leaders who are working as change agents for equitable practices (Gray & Lewis, 2013; Larson & Barton, 2013).

**CHAPTER SEVEN:****OVERVIEW OF STUDY, IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSION****Overview of Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to more fully understand the professional development experiences of K-8 urban principals in relation to issues of social justice, and to identify areas of professional development needed to build principals' capacities to lead for social justice. This study employed a critical and interpretive lens to examine the experiences of urban school principals as it relates to professional development and social justice. The intersection of the critical and interpretive frames was used to construct new understandings of the meaning of social justice leadership and the professional development that is needed for urban principals to lead for social justice.

As stated previously, urban school principals are under great scrutiny and accountability for closing achievement gaps (Warren & Higbee, 2007). Principal professional development has been given very low attention and the field is grappling with the understanding of providing meaningful professional development experiences for urban principals in particular. Even further, social injustice continues to plague communities in which these principals lead. For this reason, the perceptions of urban school principals were examined in this study to help "make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and their historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice and vision" (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223). Considering these complexities along with incorporating the elements of effective professional development, this study investigated urban principals' perceptions of leading for social justice.

A qualitative study was employed because it allowed for a thorough examination that explored the broad concept of principal professional development to more detailed experiences within the context of leading for social justice. The data collection from focus groups and interviews focused on the common experiences that urban principals have in regard to professional development and explored the challenges of leading for social justice experienced by urban K-8 principals in an effort to inform the design of professional development experiences. Nine principals participated in this study. The participants were men and women of varying ages and years of experience. These urban principals worked within large and small districts with the inclusion of traditional public and charter schools. I gathered the perceptions of urban principals from all levels of experience and regardless of gender and who were the primary leaders within their schools. The participants' ages ranged from mid-30's to early 50's.

Implications for further research and limitations will be discussed in this chapter.

### **Implications**

Historically, principal professional development has been a topic that has been ignored and teacher professional development has remained on the forefront (Caldwell, 1986). Despite being placed on the back burner as something that requires immediate attention, principals face enormous pressures for student achievement in a high-stakes testing culture (Warren & Higbee, 2007). Even further, social ills has made school leadership even more challenging, particularly for those who lead in impoverished, marginalized communities that are grossly underfunded. Urban principals in particular are forced to balance the needs of students, teachers, parents and communities without proper coaching, guidance and resources.

There are several implications that emerged from this research which can inform principal preparation programs, policy makers, district leaders, professional development



providers to be more intentional and responsive to the needs of urban school leaders.

Additionally, these implications can inform researchers and community leaders of gaps within our educational systems that may be reproducing educational inequities. First, like research conducted by Bogotch (2002), principals shared that leading for social justice has many layers and moving parts. When describing their experiences with social justice leadership, many of them struggled to find the words to best describe their efforts. It was almost as if they knew what it was but was having a hard time articulating it. While Theoharis (2007) researched this phenomenon and conducted interviews to explore specific examples of social justice leadership, Drago-Severson's (2012) research supports the critical need for this form of leadership. This study further amplifies this need and informs our field of the absolute priority to create and educate practitioners on a formal definition for social justice leadership as well as the actions of social justice leaders.

The same is true for exploring the varying understandings and uses of the term "urban." To add to the extant research by Jacob (2007) which challenges the misuse of the term, there are some very important questions that should be added to these discussions. Our field must discuss: How future leaders are defining the term and why they define it in that way? How does the way they define "urban" influence the work that they do? Does the way they define the term provide them access to service the urban schools differently? Conversely, does it limit their service? Addressing these questions along with their implicit bias must be explored. Principals are most equipped to effectively do the work if they first understand the term and if our programs provided opportunities for them to conceptualize and experience it in practice. This level of engagement expands well beyond rudimentary licensure requirements (Cambrone-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005). Our higher education leadership programs should work in concert with the

higher education social service departments to collaborate on programs, events and discussions in which educators are challenged to foster relationships and work in with those who aspire to serve within urban communities. This would allow both fields to work in tandem to address some community challenges and how these experiences ultimately filter into the schools.

Secondly, education policy makers must also see the exploration and familiarization of these terms as an opportunity to integrate the components introduced above into school leadership certification exams as well as student practicums. Proficiency in this area should be a requirement for all school leaders, regardless of the ideal community in which they intend to lead. Furthering Brown's (2004) research that has proposed the design of programs in which students are immersed in experiences outside of their social environment, this study suggests the requirement for all students to serve within an urban district for half of the semester within their licensing State. Again, it is important that the Department of Education clearly define "urban schools" to prevent error or avoidance among students.

In addition to making changes in licensure requirements, school districts should also integrate components of social justice leadership to principal evaluation tools. This would address Usdan's (2002) research which addressed concerns of principals' evaluations being based solely upon improving test scores without the integration of the leadership for social justice. The inclusion of social justice leadership observable practices within an evaluation tool would communicate the importance of leadership for social justice and promote on-going conversations among all levels of leadership.

The results of this study also indicate that there could be enhanced efforts for promoting social justice leadership on the school district level. Of the responses given, principals in this study expressed a challenge with getting to the root of the needs of parents. While there are

numerous parent surveys, this finding implies the need for the development of a common assessment that could be administered in urban schools. The recommended tool would include elements of understanding the community, parents as well as the needs of the students. These data could then be analyzed by all stakeholders to determine the best methods for supporting the schools with a community-based social justice mindset.

Additionally, participants shared that social justice leadership was about having courageous conversations about discipline, race, bias and curriculum. The finding that echoed from all participants was the level of discomfort that principals felt when having conversations about implicit bias and race relations. Principals who identified as Black also discussed experiences when White teachers were defensive when discussing matters of race. Sociologists defined the “outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation” as white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 54). This informs our field that there is an on-going need for professional development on this topic to best equip school leaders with the skills necessary to best educate staff members who may be experiencing this phenomenon.

Comprehensive learning simulations in which staff, parents and students can engage in conversations would also be beneficial. The only method to improve relations is to have on-going, practical conversations. On a district and community level, these can take place as town hall meetings hosted at the schools to encourage open dialogue. It must be noted that isolated events that do not include follow-up and collaborative discussions will not enhance these relationships. Instead, these talks must be deliberate and purposeful with the objective of fostering relationships for improved interdependence between the school and community.

Last but not least, principals overwhelmingly voiced the need for professional development that was differentiated and incorporated collegial work as illustrated in their recommendations offered in Figure 3. This finding conveys the reality that there is a need for a major professional development overhaul. The following example will help to illustrate this salient implication.

During an interview with a participant named Nia, lamented the challenges she had as an urban middle school principal. She stated that the regular methods of instruction were no longer engaging her students. She blamed it on the digital age that we are living in. She continued by saying that she felt that there was a desperate need for change because students were wired differently and needed to be taught differently. She stated that she watched a documentary about how Apple changed the way that they serviced their customers. She went on to give an explanation of how the stores have been redesigned and customers now had premium access. Customers could now touch the items and the product shifted to the basis for the customer experience.

This anecdote rings true to our field's professional development experiences. There is need for a rebirth, rejuvenation and renewal of the way that we engage educators. Research supports this redesign with opportunities for coaching, reflection and differentiation (Farver & Holt, 2015; Warren & Kelsen, 2013). However, the research does not include effective documentation systems for principals to archive professional development experiences with self-reflections. As principals complain about the lack of engagement during professional development, it could be implied that they reproduce the same experiences for their teachers. Consequently, these disconnected engagements may also be experienced by the students, thus

reproducing this phenomenon. It is time for a conscious and deliberate revolution to the way that we provide professional learning experiences for all educators.

### **Limitations of the Current Study**

The major limitation of this study was the relatively small sample size of nine urban K-8 principals. Additionally, as I included only their perceptions I cannot comment on whether the principals actually implemented the strategies that they said that they employed to lead for social justice. Research with a larger sample size along with surveys or interviews from teachers to substantiate principals' leadership practices is encouraged to expand the study. Additionally, the principals interviewed were leaders in traditional public or charter schools in urban areas. Social justice issue is an issue of the larger society. For this reason, it would be beneficial for further studies to expand research to include private schools, suburban and rural schools to see how leaders respond to their levels of injustice that impact their communities.

Secondly, when principals were asked to provide artifacts of professional development sessions that they attended, none of the participants had a centralized list, folder or documentation of attendance. The lack of organization suggests to the field that a process for documenting sessions are needed. Along the lines with professional development documentation, a more in-depth examination of the principal preparation programs is needed to examine how principal perceptions of social justice leadership was influenced by their programs.

Lastly, the sample of principals were limited to the State of New Jersey. Further research should explore cities and states that have been visibly subject to issues of race, class and injustice such as Flint Michigan (water crisis), Ferguson, Missouri (nationally publicized police shooting of unarmed Black man) and Charlottesville, VA (deadly White supremacist rally), to name a few. These studies should gather perceptions of school leaders as to how they lead for social justice

and the type of professional development their district has provided in this effort, considering the issues of social justice.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to more fully understand the professional development experiences of K-8 urban principals in relation to issues of social justice, and to identify areas of professional development needed to build principals' capacities to lead for social justice. This study employed critical and interpretive lenses to examine the experiences of urban school principals as it relates to professional development and social justice. New understandings of the meaning of social justice leadership and the professional development that is needed for urban principals to lead for social justice was gleaned from this study.

A qualitative study was used for a thorough examination that of broad concept of principal professional development to more detailed experiences within the context of leading for social justice. The data collection from focus groups and interviews focused the common experiences that urban principals have in regard to professional development and explored the challenges of leading for social justice experienced by urban K-8 principals in an effort to inform the design of professional development experiences. Although principals offered information that was consistent with the leadership research that suggests that urban principals' benefit from engaging professional development experiences (Farver & Holt, 2015), participants' perceptions show that there are gaps in the research that supports urban principal professional development for social justice.

This study not only suggests the reimagining of professional development experiences, but also an in-depth engagement of principals serving as community-based advocates who build relationships with parents, act as a support to teachers and students as well as engage in

courageous forms of leadership. It is clear that principals are in need of guidance with handling injustices that plague society and filter into schools. The field is also in need of a shift from reprimanding school leaders for practicing autonomy to make decisions that benefit their students to recognizing and building systems to support them. These systems must include members of the community to work in tandem with school leaders and not isolation, resources for supporting marginalized, impoverished families and tools for dialogue about issues of race, class and power.

On a personal note, this study has transformed me into professional development provider who is leading for social justice. As a reflective practitioner, I was challenged and convicted by the findings in this study. While principals shared their experiences and voiced areas of need, I asked myself, “Have I supported principals with navigating the layers of social justice? Have I encouraged and modeled courageous conversations based upon student advocacy? What role have I played, or neglected to play, with building relationships within my schools and communities? How often have I simply provided a reactive, unbalanced solution based upon quick fixes, rather than long-term solutions that truly move school and families forward?” These questions have caused me to pause within my business. I began to ask myself and challenge our firm to consider if we too, were reproducing inequities in education due to our negligence of addressing issues race, class and power.

My reflections have proved, like many of our colleagues in the field, while I may have positive intentions, failure to integrate discussions of social justice leadership makes me a typical professional development provider that was doing “business as usual.” This “pause” resulted in a total rebranding of my firm. By exploring the perceptions of principals and their unique challenges, I’ve transformed into a scholarly practitioner who does the proactive work to move

all stakeholders forward. Forward thinking involves alignment, movement and integration of the full living experiences of students, teachers, principals, families and community. This study was a life-alerting event. My work will never be the same.



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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Hello, my name is Juail Goode and I am conducting a study to learn more about the professional learning that K-8 urban principals receive. I am also interested in learning what professional development K-8 urban principals need to build their capacity as school leaders for social justice. This interview will be recorded and will take approximately 45 minutes. May I have your permission to record? Your name and any identifying information will not be used. If there are any questions that you aren't comfortable with answering, please let me know. Additionally, if you have any questions during our interview, please feel free to stop the interview and ask. Do you have any questions before we begin? ...Again, I want to thank you for your time. I have a few questions to ask you about your professional learning experience and perceptions as a K-8 urban school principal and your specific needs.

## Interview Questions:

1. Tell me a little about yourself. What led you to your current position as principal?

Now I would like to speak to you about your professional development (PD) experiences. PD or professional learning is not limited to traditional professional development seminars, lectures or workshops. These may also include school visits, mentoring and job-embedded professional development.

Take a moment and reflect on the professional development that you have received in the past three years.

2. Tell me about a professional development experience you had that was particularly helpful.
3. Tell me about a particularly unhelpful professional development session. What happened?

Now I would like to discuss with you your perceptions of leading for social justice.

1. When you hear the term urban school, how do you define urban?
2. Some may say that professional development for school principals should be the same regardless if you are an urban or suburban principal. What are your thoughts?
3. What does social justice mean to you?
4. Explain your understanding of leading for social justice.
5. Tell me about the biggest challenge of social justice at your school.
6. Tell me about professional development that was helpful for you to lead for social justice.

\*Some people say that there is a between being a good leader and being a leader for social justice. Explain how you feel about this.

Imagine you were able to design a professional development experience for urban K-8 principals. Explain what PD for leading for social justice would look like? (from start to finish- please share all components of the process).

a. Where do you think you could use additional learning...preparation...experience?

\*Some principals may say that they do not have the time to invest in social justice--what's your take on that?

b. Describe a time that you felt successful at addressing a social justice issue.

c. Explain how social justice leadership influences how you interact with the community, staff, students and hiring practices.

Research Question	Interview Question
What are the professional development experiences of K-8 urban principals?	<p>Tell me a little about yourself. What lead you to your current position as principal?</p> <p>Take a moment and reflect on the professional development that you have received in the past three years.</p> <p>Tell me about a professional development experience you had that was particularly helpful.</p> <p>Tell me about a particularly unhelpful professional development session. What happened?</p> <p>When you hear the term urban school, how do you define urban?</p>
How do urban principals define leadership for social justice and the challenges they have in relation to this goal?	<p>Some may say that professional development for school principals should be the same regardless if you are an urban or suburban principal. What are your thoughts?</p> <p>What does social justice mean to you?</p> <p>Explain your understanding of leading for social justice.</p> <p>Tell me about the biggest challenge of social justice at your school.</p> <p>Tell me about professional development that was helpful for you to lead for social justice.</p> <p>Some people say that there is a between being a good leader and being a leader for social justice. Explain how you feel about this.</p> <p>Some principals may say that they do not have the time to invest in social justice--what's your take on that?</p> <p>Describe a time that you felt successful at addressing a social justice issue.</p> <p>Explain how social justice leadership influences how you interact with the community, staff, students and hiring practices.</p>
How have their professional development experiences assisted K-8 urban	Tell me about professional development that was helpful for you to lead for social justice.

principals to improve their role as leaders for social justice?	
What kinds of professional development do K-8 urban principals say would assist them to promote social justice leadership?	Imagine you were able to design a professional development experience for urban K-8 principals. Explain what PD for leading for social justice would look like? (from start to finish-please share all components of the process).
What do principal experiences and needs suggest for the design of a professional development intervention model focused on improving the capacity of principals as social justice leaders?	Where do you think you could use additional learning...preparation...experience?



**Arts & Sciences IRB -  
New Brunswick**  
335 George Street  
Suite 3100, 3rd Floor  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901  
Phone: 732-235-2866

**Health Sciences IRB -  
New Brunswick/Piscataway**  
335 George Street  
Suite 3100, 3rd Floor  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901  
Phone: 732-235-9806

**Health Sciences IRB -  
Newark**  
65 Bergen Street  
Suite 511, 5th Floor  
Newark, NJ 07107  
Phone: 973-972-3608

DHHS Federal Wide Assurance Identifier: FWA00003913

IRB Chair Person: Beverly Tepper

IRB Director: Michelle Watkinson

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#### STUDY PROFILE

Study ID:

[Pro2018000158](#)

Title:

Urban K-8 Principal Professional Development for Leading for Social Justice

Principal Investigator:	Juail Goode	Study Coordinator:	Beth Rubin
Co-Investigator(s):	There are no items to display	Other Study Staff:	There are no items to display
Sponsor:	There are no items to display	Approval Cycle:	Twelve Months
Risk Determination:	Minimal Risk	Device Determination:	Not Applicable
Review Type:	Expedited	Expedited Category:	(6) (7)
		Exempt Category:	There are no items to display