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# A Case Study of Highly Effective Transfer School Principals Serving Low-Income African American Students in an Urban Setting

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# A Case Study of Highly Effective Transfer School Principals Serving Low-Income African American Students in an Urban Setting

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this case study was to examine highly effective transfer school principals serving low-income African American students in an urban setting. Transfer high schools in New York City, which are a form of continuation schools, were created as a means of re-engaging and retaining students who have not benefitted from external motivators found in the traditional setting. Understanding the problems that this unique population faces, it is important that the leaders of these schools be highly effective, transformational leaders who possess the characteristics and traits needed to ensure student success. Based on the data gathered, this research study found that among the most important strategies to improve graduation rates among African American students involved the school principal having a clear vision for student success, collaborating with all stakeholders, modeling best practices and providing ongoing feedback for the purpose of monitoring and making adjustments. It was found that these strategies were successful when implemented in transfer school communities serving a high population of low income African American students. Schools that have been designated as serving a large population of low income students are considered Title I schools. The funding from Title I provides supplemental instruction for students who are economically disadvantaged or at risk of failing to meet state standards. The schools that have been identified for the purposes of this study have been designated as Title I schools.

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A Case Study of Highly Effective Transfer School Principals Serving Low-Income African  
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By

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## **Dedication**

“With God, all things are possible.” Matthew 19:26. I first dedicate this to God because without him, this would not have been possible. I thank him for giving me the strength and guidance to get through the process of completing my dissertation. Second, I would like to dedicate this to my husband Nga and my children Nazir and Nyah for their selfless sacrifices, their support and encouragement. The time that was required to complete my dissertation often took me away from you all and I am thankful for your understanding. To my parents, siblings, family, friends, colleagues, professors, Cohort “super” 7 and mentors...there are not words other than, “it takes a village.” Each of you played such an important role in this process and I am forever grateful for your contributions. I would like to thank my chair, Dr. Robert Siebert for guiding me through this process and pushing me out of my comfort zone. I would like to also thank my committee member Dr. Mary Bediako for your feedback and support. I am also appreciative of the principals, teachers and support staff who participated in this study. Finally, this is dedicated to the low income students of color attending alternative schools across the country who may not have been successful in a traditional school setting, but flourished in their new settings due to the tireless sacrifices and commitment of the school leaders.

To Grandma Sinnie Mae Dennis...this is for you.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Katwona Dennis-Warren is a transfer school principal with the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE). She has served in the role of teacher, instructional specialist, assistant principal and principal over the last 20 years. Mrs. Warren earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1996 from The State University of New York at Stony Brook. She also earned her Masters of Arts degree in 1997 from the State University of New York at Stony Brook. In 2003, she earned both her Master of Arts in Teaching Degree from Brooklyn College and her certification as a school building and district leader from the College of St. Rose. Mrs. Warren began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College at The College of New Rochelle in the spring of 2015 and successfully defended her dissertation in August 2017. Her research entitled “A case study of highly effective transfer school principals serving low-income African-American students” was conducted under the direction of Dr. Robert Siebert and Dr. Mary Bediako.

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this case study was to examine highly effective transfer school principals serving low-income African American students in an urban setting. Transfer high schools in New York City, which are a form of continuation schools, were created as a means of re-engaging and retaining students who have not benefitted from external motivators found in the traditional setting. Understanding the problems that this unique population faces, it is important that the leaders of these schools be highly effective, transformational leaders who possess the characteristics and traits needed to ensure student success.

Based on the data gathered, this research study found that among the most important strategies to improve graduation rates among African American students involved the school principal having a clear vision for student success, collaborating with all stakeholders, modeling best practices and providing ongoing feedback for the purpose of monitoring and making adjustments. It was found that these strategies were successful when implemented in transfer school communities serving a high population of low income African American students. Schools that have been designated as serving a large population of low income students are considered Title I schools. The funding from Title I provides supplemental instruction for students who are economically disadvantaged or at risk of failing to meet state standards. The schools that have been identified for the purposes of this study have been designated as Title I schools.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

When students enter school for the first time, we expect them to be excited, motivated, and hopeful about what lies ahead. They come to school with smiles on their faces and a passion for learning. Unfortunately for some, somewhere between elementary school and high school, change occurs. The excitement disappears, the motivation is replaced with disinterest, and the hope that they would complete the journey that they started 10 or more years earlier has essentially vanished. While this affects students across the country and around the world in varied cultures, races and ethnic backgrounds, there is research to support that this happens at a particularly higher rate among low-income, African American, high school students in urban settings. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), the high school graduation rate for African Americans in 2014 was 73% in comparison to Whites who graduated at a rate of 87% and Asians who graduated at a rate of 89%.

This unfortunate pattern is also highlighted by Greene (2001) regarding the high school graduation rates in the United States in which he shared that “some of the states with the best overall graduation rates . . . have some of the worst graduation rates for African American students” (p. 3). This would lead one to question why the high school graduation rate is disproportionately lower for African American students in comparison to their White and Asian counterparts as noted in the publication written by Villavicencio, Bhattacharya, and Guidry (2013).

A possible answer was offered by Cokley, McClain, Jones, and Johnson (2011), who looked at student success through the lens of how one's racial identity is related to his or her academic achievement when speaking of African American adolescents. According to the article written by Cokley et al. (2011), the research showed that there was a "correlation between academic self-concept and grade point average" (Cokley et al., 2011, p.56). This article identified three possible reasons as evidence to support the relationship between the students' self-esteem and his or her academic outcomes. The first reason is "attributing negative outcomes to stigmatization" (Cokley et al., 2011, p.56). The second reason is described as "devaluing outcomes on which the individual's group fares poorly or is perceived by others to fare poorly" (Cokley et al., 2011, p. 56). Finally, the third reason was that students made "in group social comparisons to similarly stigmatized individuals rather than out-group comparisons" (Cokley et al., 2011, p. 56).

Gullan, Hoffman, and Leff (2011) echoed the sentiments of Cokley et al. (2011) when Gullan et al. stated that "those who effectively develop their identity demonstrate commitment to societal standards and those who do not are likely to reflect mainstream values and beliefs, potentially leading to destructive behaviors and negative affiliations" (Gullan et al., 2011, p. 29). Based on their argument, students who are unsuccessful in an otherwise successful school environment demonstrate a lack of success because they have not committed to "societal standards." Gullan et al. (2011) go on to say that "adolescent identity development has linked a coherent sense of oneself and one's place in the world with school attendance, graduation, and academic achievement, particularly for youth who are members of non-dominant racial/ethnic groups" (p. 29).

While traditional high schools have proven to be successful with many students, according to the New York State Education Department (NYSED, 2015), African American students are consistently graduating at a lower rate than their peers. African American students graduated from traditional New York City Schools at a 65% graduation rate in comparison to their White peers who graduated at an 88% rate and their Asian peers who graduated at an 85% rate, showing a clear disparity in the rate of success within the traditional Grades 9-12 setting. In the traditional high school setting, the graduation rate is based on the 4-year cohort. Each year that a student graduates after their 4<sup>th</sup> year in a traditional school, the school's data is negatively impacted. While the state, city, and local districts have tried to address the disparities in graduation rates among different ethnic groups, they have done so with limited success.

According to the *New York Times* article dated January 12, 2016, New York State education officials have pushed to create more ways for students to demonstrate they are qualified to graduate. Instead of requiring students to pass one Regents exam in math, English, science and two in social studies, the Regents said in 2014 that students could swap the second social studies exam for an approved alternative, like a language exam or an assessment of vocational skills, such as accounting or hospitality management.” (Harris, 2016, p. A23)

Despite the efforts on the part of the state to increase the graduation rate, the article points out that “a double-digit gap remained in city schools: 85% of Asian students graduated, as did 82% of Whites, while Black and Hispanic students graduated at a rate of 65.4% and 64% respectively” (Harris, 2016, p. A23).

According to Ruebel, Ruebel, and O’Laughlin (2001) “One of the most promising approaches for addressing the needs of dropouts, as well as students struggling in traditional schools and considering dropping out, is placement in an alternative school program” (p. 58). They go on to say that “some of the contributing factors to alternative school success include “smaller school and class size, more individualized attention from teachers, nontraditional and varied curricula . . . ” (Ruebel et al., 2001, p. 59). Raywid (1994) remarked that,

Despite the ambiguities and the emergence of multiple alternatives, two enduring consistencies have characterized alternative schools from the start: they have been designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally served by the regular program, and, consequently have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization, programs and environments. (p. 26)

Alternatives, outside of the public education system, were among the first options to traditional schooling and their emergence inspired a movement of reform within the public schools beginning in the latter half of the 1960s (Lange & Sletten, 2002). As noted by Young (1990), using the characteristics of alternative schools outside of public education, educators within the public school system designed their own alternatives to conventional education with the advent of *open schools*. These schools were characterized by parent, student, and teacher choice; autonomy in learning and pace; non-competitive evaluation; and a child-centered approach. The existence of the open schools greatly influenced the creation of public alternatives at all levels of education, including the following:

- Schools without walls – emphasized community-based learning; individuals within the community were brought in to teach students.
- Schools within a school – intended to make large high schools into smaller communities of belonging; individual groups were designed to meet educational needs and interests of students.
- Multicultural schools – designed to integrate culture and ethnicity into the curriculum; some had a diverse student body and some catered to a specific ethnic group.
- Continuation schools – used as an option for those who were failing in the regular school system because of issues such as dropout, pregnancy, failing grades; these schools were less competitive and more individualized.
- Learning centers – intended to meet particular student needs by including special resources, such as vocational education, in the school setting.
- Fundamental schools – emphasized a back to basics approach in reaction to the lack of academic rigor perceived in the free schools.
- Magnet schools – developed in response to the need for racial integration; offered a curriculum that emphasized themes meant to attract diverse groups of students from a range of racial and cultural backgrounds (Young, 1990).

Transfer high schools in New York City, which are a form of continuation schools, were created as a means of re-engaging and retaining students who have not benefitted from external motivators found in the traditional setting such as clubs, sports teams, and other incentive programs. Having their start in the early 1990s as a subcomponent of alternative schools, they emerged as a result of policy shifts in the New

York City Department of Education, which focused on small schools that partnered with community based organizations with the purpose of addressing the needs of overaged and under-credited students. Their mission was to afford students additional opportunities for graduation. These schools inspired students so that their chances for success could potentially increase. Eligibility requirements for enrollment into a transfer high school include the following criteria:

- Students are typically at least 16 with a history of low attendance.
- Students are typically recommended by a traditional school.
- Students have to go through an intake process which includes the completion of an application and interview and an assessment to inform class placement.

Transfer high schools have a special mission to serve a particularly challenging group of students whose history makes academic success problematic at best, but they do not compromise on academic rigor. Transfer schools have multiple systems in place to prepare students for the rigors of college and careers which include the incorporation of advanced placement courses, College Now classes, paid internships and college preparatory courses. According to NYCDOE (2005), characteristics of the transfer school model include academic rigor and, full time high school programs that re-engage students who have dropped out of school, who are overaged, or who have fallen behind in their credits. To address some of the deficits that their students arrive with, the school community provides workshops to support academic and personal goals, tutoring and Regents preparation services, participation in extra-curricular activities, and preparation for the rigors of college and careers. Students are also provided with counseling, job and



career development workshops, small class sizes, and one-on-one relationships with at least one adult in the building. Perhaps, most importantly, transfer schools provide more time. Transfer schools are allowed more time to graduate students as a part of the 6-year cohort. They provide two additional years for students to get on track and graduate. It also allows their schools to receive credit for successfully graduating those students. The data associated with each cohort is based on the year that students enter high school, with the exception of those who are entering the country for the first time. In those cases their cohort is based on the year of enrollment. When looking at the graduation rate of African American graduates, they span between 4 and 6 years after entering high school, the 4-year graduation rate for African American students is 65%, the 5-year rate is 72% (2010 cohort) and the 6-year rate is 73% (2009 cohort) (Burman & Beattie, 2015).

African American students make up the largest racial/ethnic group in transfer high schools. These students are over-represented in transfer schools when compared to their representation in traditional schools. African American students make up approximately 27.1% of the New York City public school population. However, in the borough of Brooklyn, which was the location of this research; African American students represent 39.2% of the transfer school population (New York City Department of Education [NYCDOE], 2017b).

The fact that transfer schools have high representations of African American students, some of whom have a history of disconnection or misidentifications with school, presents a number of distinct challenges. One challenge is that even if these students attend a relatively successful school like a transfer school, they could still struggle academically if they do not identify with being successful or do not have an

adult with whom they could connect. Another challenge they face is a result of negative prior experiences. Many of these students associate success with groups outside of their own, leaving them with little or no desire to aspire towards attainable goals that are well within their reach. This population has a unique set of circumstances that could potentially impede their chances for success, which is a strong argument for why they should have a school leader in an educational setting that not only understands their circumstances, but possesses the particular skills, traits, characteristics, and resources to support these students and improve their chances for success.

In the article written by Grantham and Ford (2003), it states that “for Black youth, racial identity has a significant impact on achievement, motivation, and attitudes towards school” (p. 20). It could be maintained that by understanding student identity development and its contributing factors, school leaders can make pivotal decisions about school systems and structures to support this sometimes overlooked population.

As a transfer school principal, the first priority of the school leader is to focus on the needs of the students. As a part of addressing those needs, they must look to the resources around them to determine how to utilize those resources to achieve the desired outcome. In order to move all stakeholders in the same direction, the leader must have a vision that everyone believes in and is willing to work towards. Once that is accomplished, the leader must treat those around him or her as leaders, seek their opinions, and give value to their input as leaders who are invested in the success of the school community.

There is data to suggest that some principals are more effective and make better decisions than others. In both traditional and transfer high schools, some school leaders

produce better student outcomes in comparison to their peers; this occurrence has been the topic for much research and discussion over the years. While there have been multiple theories to explain the phenomena of successful school leaders, many researchers conclude that the most successful principals display the traits and characteristics of transformational leaders. Transformational school leaders make decisions and implement programs that should be considered for replication in all high school settings. They think differently, make decisions differently, and are able to effectively manage all of the factors that contribute to student success, which include the parents, community, peers, and school community as a whole. These transformational leaders also possess the characteristics of effective school leaders, as defined by Lezotte (1991) in his effective school research.

When considering the characteristics of an effective school leader, Lezotte (1991) identified what he referred to as correlates of effective schools. The seven correlates identified by Lezotte (1991) include,

- Having a safe and orderly environment
- Having a climate of high expectations for success
- Instructional leadership
- Having a clear and focused mission
- Providing opportunities to learn and providing students with time on task
- Frequently monitoring of student progress
- Having home-school relations

Leithwood (1994) echoed some of the correlates identified by Lezotte (1991) when he identified seven key characteristics or dimensions associated with the effective school leader. The dimensions include,

- Creating a productive school culture,
- Building school vision and establishing goals,
- Providing intellectual stimulation,
- Offering individualized support,
- Modeling best practices and important organizational values
- Demonstrating high-performance expectations, and
- Developing structures to foster participation in school decisions.

Kouzes and Posner (2007), following the lead of Burns (1978), added to the list of ideal leadership qualities when they identified the characteristics of a transformational leader. Those characteristics include,

- Modeling leadership by publicly defining their values and by living them with integrity.
- Inspiring others and create a shared vision by understanding the hopes, dreams, and values of their followers.
- Challenging the process and create change by recognizing and supporting innovation.
- Enabling others to lead through the distribution of power to team members and reduce the power distance between the follower and the leader.
- Encouraging stakeholders by knowing, appreciating, and celebrating them.

A strong case can be made that the most effective school leaders merge both correlates proposed by Lezotte (1991) and Leithwood (1994), and add the characteristics of transformational leadership to improve student outcomes.

Do the most successful transfer high school principals embody and display transformational, and effective leadership characteristics? While virtually all transfer high schools have improved upon the performance of traditional schools in regard to graduation rates for African American students, why do only a few transfer schools significantly and continuously exceed their peer schools in this vital metric of student success? Could the answer reside in the principal's office? Given their unique challenges, do they go beyond the correlates and characteristics identified by Lezotte (1991), Leithwood (1994), and others? If so, what can we learn from the most successful transfer school principals that will inform practices for both traditional and other transfer school principals?

### **Problem Statement**

Past experiences filled with negativity and distrust have multiple effects on adolescents, particularly those who identify as African American. One's socioeconomic status, self-identity, parents, peers, and school environment have been identified as contributing factors to those negative experiences. When these factors are combined, academic success can prove to be significantly challenging for students, particularly in a setting where they have historically been made to feel like they were not "good enough." The result of these experiences could end with be disengaged students who feel a need to put up a guard against the institution of school.

While there is research to support effective practices among charter and traditional school leaders, there is no research that specifically focuses on the role of the most effective transfer school leaders in promoting and fostering student success. By conducting a case study of the most successful transfer schools and their principals, we were able to shed light on how their characteristics, behaviors and decisions helped African American students succeed. With over 50 schools in New York City, transfer high schools serve the largest cohort of previously unsuccessful African American students in New York City. Through this research, we have turned a lens on the principals of the most effective of these schools to learn how the decisions they made led to higher graduation rates among African American students. The hope of this researcher is to reveal those best practices other transfer high school principals can see and replicate. Given the very special challenge of transfer high schools, these practices should be of great interest to any high school principal in New York City.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine the characteristics, practices, and behaviors of the most effective transfer school leaders, so that the findings can be replicated and shared with all transfer high school principals and indeed, with traditional high school leaders. Specifically, this research focused on the African American student population in these schools and how these principals addressed the particular needs of this population.

This study also examined the most successful transfer high school leaders, their leadership characteristics, their behaviors, and their decision making compared to the characteristics of transformational and effective school leaders as defined by Lezotte

(1991), Leithwood (1994) and Burns (1978). It also focused on the unique challenges that they faced in order to achieve the goals of both engaging and retaining previously unsuccessful African American students from the moment they entered the transfer school setting until they successfully graduated.

### **Significance of Study**

A key component of the No Child Left Behind (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) reform is the incorporation of more accountability for school principals. The metrics by which schools are measured were developed with traditional schools in mind. Transfer and alternative schools were an afterthought. However, transfer schools are held to many of the same standards as traditional schools with minimal adjustments made to the initial requirements, even though their hill is much steeper to climb.

Given this greater challenge, this researcher hypothesized that the most successful transfer school principals possess a unique leadership skillset that could be beneficial if replicated and shared with other transfer, alternative, and traditional school principals. This study adds to the literature on successful principals by exploring the cases of leaders of highly effective transfer schools. Specifically, this researcher examined the decisions they made and how those decisions resulted in positive outcomes for African American students, particularly in areas where other transfer school leaders have not demonstrated success. The purpose of this study was designed to impact how educational policies are developed and shift how principal training programs are implemented to support aspiring transfer, alternative, and traditional school leaders. Potentially, this study will prompt schools to take a closer look at their African American students and the unique set of circumstances that may be standing in the way of their success. More pointedly, it is the

researchers hope that this study may result in fewer transfer schools. If the leadership practices of the very best principals can be effectively replicated in traditional school settings, the typical transfer high school student may not need an alternative setting or more time to graduate.

### **Theoretical Framework**

There are many theories that speak specifically to the attributes of an effective leader and how those attributes can be used to bring about organizational change.

According to Northouse (2007), there is the leadership style theory, which focuses on the task-centered leader. This leader's primary focus is to ensure that the noted tasks are carried out which will allow the organization to run effectively. Northouse also speaks about the relationship-centered leader. This leader both builds trust and ensures that tasks are completed based on the relationships formed with his or her employees.

Another kind of leader is the situational leader. This leader adjusts his or her style based on what the situation calls for (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In addition, there is the transactional leader associated with the transactional leadership theory. This leader serves as one who engages in the exchange of rewards or discipline based on the outcomes of those in subordinate positions (Bass, 2008). Finally, there is the transformational leader, the term originally coined by Burns in 1978, which is based on the leader transforming his or her followers into leaders (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

After a review of all key theories, the transformational leadership theory was identified as a framework that would be best suited to look at the decisions that an effective school leader makes. This theory supports the idea that the effective leader, as defined by Lezotte (1991) and Leithwood (1994), builds leadership capacity and skills in



those around him or her. It can serve as an effective framework for examining two of the most successful leaders of transfer high schools.

Burns (1978), defined leadership as “leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations – the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations – of both leaders and followers” (p. 460). Burns (1978) specifically identified one type of leadership as being transformative in nature, which occurs when, one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality. Their purposes, which might have started out as separate, but related, as in the case of transactional leadership, become fused. (p. 461)

He goes on to say that “the function of leadership is to engage followers, not merely to activate them, to commingle needs and aspirations and goals in a common enterprise, and in the process to make better citizens of both leaders and followers” (Burns, 1978, p. 462).

According to Ghasabeh, Soosay, and Reaiche (2015), the transformational leadership theory, “emphasizes satisfying basic needs and meeting higher desires through inspiring followers to provide newer solutions and create a better workplace” (p. 462). When looking at this theory through the lens of a transfer school setting, the principal as the leader of the building, is responsible for empowering and inspiring teachers and other school employees to be leaders in the school community and to replicate the characteristics of the school leader to positively impact students within the school community.

Kruger, Witziers and Slegers (2007) further support the impact of this transformational leadership theory when they posit that this theory “has a positive impact on teacher motivation, professional growth, and on a variety of organizational conditions, including school culture, contributing to educational change in schools” (p. 16). In a transfer school setting, with each student having a unique set of personal circumstances and challenges, it could be argued that managing that range of challenges for one leader, without the buy-in of the community and key stakeholders, could limit the possibility of making every student successful. However, when multiple people have been inspired and motivated to serve in a leadership capacity working towards the same goal, the chance for success for all increases exponentially (Burns, 1978).

According to Castanheira and Costa (2011), transformational leadership has three basic functions. Those functions include serving the needs of others, empowering them, and inspiring followers to achieve great success. Transformational leaders are also charismatic leaders who set a vision while instilling trust, confidence, and pride in those with whom they work. Finally, they stimulate followers intellectually and treat them as leaders (Castanheira & Costa, 2011).

Kouzes and Posner (2007) identified five key behaviors that are exhibited as characteristics of a transformational leader. The first of the characteristics includes modeling leadership by publicly defining one’s values and by living them with integrity. Kouzes and Posner go on to say those transformational leaders inspire others and create a shared vision by understanding the hopes, dreams, and values of their followers. Transformational leaders also challenge the process and create change by recognizing and supporting innovation. In addition, they enable others to lead through the

distribution of power to team members and reduce the power distance between the follower and the leader. Finally, Kouzes and Posner (2007) posit that transformational leaders encourage stakeholders by knowing, appreciating, and celebrating them.

### **Research Questions**

1. Are the behaviors, traits and characteristics of the most successful transfer school principals transformational and effective as defined by Burns (1978), Lezotte (1991) and Leithwood (1994)?
2. What are the defining characteristics of the school cultures as created by these leaders?
3. Can the higher graduation rates among African Americans in the most successful transfer high schools be attributed to the behaviors, characteristics, and decision making of the school principal?

### **Definition of Terms**

*Transfer schools* – Small, academically rigorous, full-time high schools designed to re-engage students who have dropped out or who have fallen behind in credits.

*Overaged* – Students who are one or more grade levels behind their peer group.

*Under-credited* – Students who do not meet the minimum credit requirement to be considered a part of a designated grade level.

*African American* – Citizens or residents of the United States with total or partial ancestry from any of the Black racial groups of Africa.

*Principal's pool* – Developed and implemented to positively impact student achievement by ensuring that strong leaders are considered for principal roles. The principal candidate pool is one of the first steps before a candidate is eligible to apply for

a principalship in New York City, as outlined in Chancellor’s Regulation 30 (NYCDOE, 2017a).

*Chancellor’s Regulation 30* – Regulation that governs the selection and appointment of school principals and assistant principals.

*Low-income* – Those earning less than twice the federal poverty line.

*Urban* – Densely developed territory that encompasses residential, commercial, and other non-residential land uses.

*Title I* – Title I provides federal funding to schools that serve an area with high poverty. The funding is meant to help students who are at risk of falling behind academically. The funding provides supplemental instruction for students who are economically disadvantaged or at risk of failing to meet state standards.

*Cohort* – A generational group as defined in demographics, statistics, or market research.

*No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB, 2002) – A federal law established in 2002, also known as Public Law 107–110, NCLB was approved by the 107th United States Congress “to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind.” (NCLB, 2002, p. 1).

## **Summary**

There is notable research that demonstrates how the decisions made by school leaders impact student outcomes. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) posit that “leadership has significant effects on student learning, second only to the effects of the quality of curriculum and teachers’ instruction” (p.2). This study provides data on three highly successful transfer school principals and how their work has been pivotal in addressing

the needs of African American students who may not have been successful in a traditional school setting. Examining the day to day activities of these transfer school principals through the lens of transformational leadership theory has shown how their practices empowered and inspired staff members, yielding improved outcomes for students who had not demonstrated success in traditional school settings.

It is through this case study of the traits, characteristics and behaviors of transformational transfer school leaders, in addition to their decision making process, that we have been able to determine their impact on student success. By determining and replicating best practices, principal preparation programs can better train and prepare principals for transfer and traditional schools across New York City and New York State.

### **Summary of Remaining Chapters**

In this chapter, I outlined the problem of there being no research that reflected the practices of highly effective transfer school leaders. I also provided the theoretical framework, the significance and purpose of this study, key terms and research questions of this study.

In Chapter 2, a brief historical overview of transfer schools is provided. In Chapter 3, the methodology and procedures used in this study are discussed. Chapter 4 provides data analysis and findings of the study. In Chapter 5 provides implications, limitations and recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction and Purpose**

Why is the high school graduation rate disproportionately lower for African American students in comparison to their White and Asian counterparts? Some may argue economic disparities, a lower skill set or even that they are simply apathetic. Despite the lower graduation rate in comparison to their peers, there are a significant number of African Americans who earn their high school diplomas through the transfer school process, leading one to consider the factors that contribute to this occurrence.

The New York City Department of Education defines transfer high schools as “small, academically rigorous, full-time high schools designed to re-engage students who have dropped out or who have fallen behind in credits” (NYCDOE, 2005, p. 4). Transfer schools are very important, particularly in communities with a history of high dropout rates, because they afford students opportunities to achieve academic success. The characteristics, traits, and decision making of the leaders within transfer school communities play a key role in the success of their students, specifically their low-income African American students. This review of literature focused on African American students and the barriers and impediments to their learning. It also examined the reforms, strategies, and structures developed to promote African American student engagement. Finally, reviewed the literature on effective principals and leadership theories.

## **African American Students – Barriers and Impediments to Learning**

According to Rendon (2014) “It is argued that growing up in disadvantaged contexts truncates educational attainment and work prospects” (p. 170). Cokley et al. (2011) looked at student success through the lens of how one’s racial identity is related to their academic achievement when speaking of African American adolescents. According to Cokley et al. (2011), the research showed that there was a “correlation between academic self-concept and grade point average” (p.56). This article identified three possible reasons for the relationship between the students’ self-esteem and his or her academic outcomes. The first was, “attributing negative outcomes to stigmatization” (Cokley et al., 2011, p.56). The second was, “devaluing outcomes on which the individual’s group fares poorly or is perceived by others to fare poorly” (Cokley et al., 2011, p. 56). Finally, it was found that students made “in-group social comparisons to similarly stigmatized individuals rather than out-group comparisons” (Cokley et al., 2011, p. 56).

Gullan et al. (2011) explored student identification from the opposite end of the spectrum. Gullan et al. (2011) explored the concept of idea development and how the “achievement of a coherent and strong sense of self is critical to positive academic outcomes for urban minority youth” (p. 29). Thus, how one identifies himself or herself is a determining factor in one’s academic success.

Gullan et al. (2011) stated that “those who effectively develop their identity demonstrate commitment to societal standards and those who do not are likely to reflect mainstream values and beliefs, potentially leading to destructive behaviors and negative affiliations” (p. 29). Based on this, it could be argued that students who are unsuccessful

in an otherwise successful school environment demonstrate a lack of success because they have not committed to societal standards. Gullan et al. (2011) go on to say that “adolescent identity development has linked a coherent sense of oneself and one’s place in the world with school attendance, graduation, and academic achievement, particularly for youth who are members of non-dominant racial/ethnic groups” (p. 29). By understanding the process behind students’ identity development or understanding the process behind it, schools can develop systems and structures to support this sometimes overlooked population.

Hurd, Zimmerman, Sanchez and Caldwell (2012) conducted a longitudinal study in which they explored the idea of “natural mentors, racial identity, and educational attainment among African American adolescents” (p. 1196). As a part of their research, they looked at how “feeling connected to other African Americans may help African American adolescents reject the negative perceptions of their group held by members of other racial and ethnic groups” (p. 1196). Hurd et al. (2012) go on to say that “relationships with natural mentors may foster resilience among academically at-risk African American adolescents by promoting more positive racial identity beliefs and strengthening their beliefs in the importance of school for future success” (p. 1210). They also found that “participants who reported having a natural mentor at any time since the age of 14 had a greater likelihood of completing high school and attending college” (Hurd et al., 2012, p. 1199).

How one identifies oneself in relationship to others and the larger social context is an important component of one’s perspective on life. In the article by Grantham and Ford (2003), it is stated that “for Black youth, racial identity has a significant impact on



achievement, motivation, and attitudes towards school” (p. 20). They go on to say that “gifted minority children find themselves in a dilemma in which they must choose between academic success and social acceptance” (p. 22). This may lead to student underachieving out of fear of being accused of “acting White” (p. 20). This could explain why students who have the ability to be successful in a thriving school community fail to meet requirements for graduation. According to Grantham and Ford (2003), “teachers tend not to refer Black students for screening and placement in gifted programs” (p. 19). They attribute this to the teachers’ failure to understand “culturally diverse students and thus, focus on Black students’ differences and weaknesses rather than strengths” (Grantham & Ford, 2003, p. 19). When African American adolescents begin to form mental images of how they are perceived, not only from their peers, but the world around them, they begin to respond to those perceptions both socially and academically.

Prior experiences, interactions with others, and how those experiences and interactions inform how those students interact with the institution of school, continue to be the key factors in determining success. Matthews, Banerjee and Lauermann (2014) conducted a cross-sectional survey in which they examined “whether self-regulated learning (SRL) mediates two distinct dimensions of academic identity (i.e. value and belonging) and mastery orientation” (p. 2335). They posited that as students get older and begin to think critically about themselves and their place in the world, their “perceptions of the self and identity formed during adolescence have powerful implications for long-term educational and career-related outcomes” (Matthews et al., 2014, p. 2335). They go on to say that “African American and Latino adolescents in

urban schools often contend with unique social challenges and cultural stigma that can influence their self-perceptions and academic motivation” (Matthews et al., 2014, p. 2355).

When adolescents begin to associate themselves with or accept the degraded depiction of this fabricated culture as their own, they begin to take on the characteristics of one who associates African American culture with low academic achievement. As noted in the article written by Matthews et al. (2014), “*African American and Latino Males*, compared to their female and White American counterparts were most likely to nominate low-achieving and poorly behaved peers as someone they admire and respect, suggesting a devaluing of achievement” (p. 2357). When they fall into these roles, there is also an increase in mistrust. Somers, Owens and Piliawsky (2008) continued to support this argument in the article *Individual and Social Factors Related to Urban African American Adolescents’ School Performance*, in which it is argued that “African American children are keenly aware of the stereotypes associated with their race. This awareness can have an effect on the self-concepts of African American children, thus having an effect on their school performance” (p. 2).

### **Reforms, Strategies and Structures to Promote Student Engagement**

Yeager et al. (2014) addressed the impact of school systems and supports on student success by speaking about how children begin to develop mistrust based on the experiences that they may or may not have had in a particular setting. They stated that,

As children grow into adolescents, they are increasingly aware of widely held negative stereotypes about their group and they become capable of generalizing from personal experiences with bias to assessments of the

fairness of the social system as a whole. . . . By middle adolescents (7-10 grade) many minority students have relatively stronger expectations of being treated fairly by their teachers, compared with their expectations as elementary school children. (Yeager et al., 2014, p.805)

As a solution, Yeager et al. (2014) suggested that teachers communicate high standards to students with the assurance that the students have the potential to reach those standards. As a result, there will be an increase in trust and an improvement in the academic behavior of African American adolescents.

In addition to communicating high expectations to students, the literature also suggests that an alternative means of challenging and engaging students be identified. Tomlinson (2015) recommended that we challenge and engage students by “teaching for excellence in academically diverse classrooms” (p. 203). Tomlinson (2015) spoke about what Haberman (1991) coined as the *pedagogy of poverty*, which is pedagogy that involves “low-level, fact-based, drilled-oriented” (p. 204) instruction. This is in comparison to what Hodges (2001) coined as *pedagogy of plenty*, which speaks to “meaning-rich curriculum, problem-focused learning, high relevance, high engagement in discussion, high relevance and authentic tasks” (p. 204). Tomlinson (2015) noted that “students who regularly experience a pedagogy of poverty are not only disproportionately poor during their school years, but are also being schooled for a future of poverty” (p. 204). She contrasted this to the pedagogy of plenty students who are “not only disproportionately more affluent or privileged during their school years, but are also being schooled for a future of plenty” (Tomlinson, 2015, p. 204). When students are aware that they are not being engaged and are being provided with poor pedagogy, the

end result is a tendency to disconnect. To combat this, Tomlinson (2015) suggested *teaching up*, which challenges teachers to “begin by creating tasks that represent effective challenge for advanced or high-end learners and then to differentiate or scaffold learning in ways that support a very broad range of students” (p. 205).

Another strategy that is argued by Li and Lerner (2012) is to look at the “inter-relations of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive school engagement” (p. 20). Li and Lerner (2012) argued that “behavioral characteristics, such as the amount of participation in academic work, including attendance, time spent on academic activities, or the intensity of effort, alone are inadequate indicators of engagement” (p. 20). They suggested that students be engaged behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively under the umbrella of school engagement as a whole, thus taking the position that student engagement should take on a multifaceted approach to allow more opportunities for success.

Yonezawa, Jones and Joselowsky (2009) supported this argument. As a part of their research, they discussed the “historical concept of engagement, more specifically, its shift from a uni-dimensional to multidimensional concept, and suggest that research concentrate on better understanding the interplay among setting and identity when examining issues of youth engagement” (p. 191). As a part of their study, they explored the work of Newmann and Wehlage (1993) who posited that in order to be truly engaged, students had to “construct meaning and produce knowledge, use disciplined inquiry to construct meaning and to aim their work toward production of discourse, products, and performances that have value or meaning beyond success in school” (p. 195). In order to do this, however, they speak of a shift that must take place, a shift from the

unidimensional to the multidimensional context. One key concept that they address as a part of the shift is considering “issues of youth identity . . . some of which have racial and cultural tones (that) can shape how they interact with one another and adults” (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993, p. 199).

Miller-Cribbs, Cronen, Davis and Johnson (2002) complimented the idea of looking at student engagement through the lens of race and culture. As a part of their argument, they referred to Ogbu’s (1995) oppositional culture theory, which suggests that, “African American youth have lower motivation and engagement because they do not perceive equal opportunity and because they react against the dominant culture” (p. 160). Miller-Cribbs et al. (2002) argued that the way to address the low level of motivation and engagement is to analyze student attitudes about school completion, perceptions of significant others, barriers to success, school variables, and student perceptions of intervention. As a part of their research, they concluded that their study did not “support the notion that academic engagement is explained solely by Ogbu’s oppositional culture” (Miller-Cribbs et al., 2002, p. 171). They suggested instead, that “academic engagement is a more complex phenomenon, influenced by a wide variety of personal, familial, school, and community factors” (Miller-Cribbs et al., 2002, pp. 171-172).

Wiggin (2008) echoed this argument in his qualitative study. Wiggin (2008) stated that “as a result of scholarly adoption of the oppositional paradigm, there are high achieving African American students who are being overlooked in the research” (p. 321). He continued on to say that “some African American students respond to racial oppression by using academic success as agency and motivation for a collective Black

struggle,” (Wiggan, 2008, p. 321) which is an argument for how African Americans can be intrinsically motivated to succeed. With regard to external motivators, the students who were interviewed in Wiggan’s (2008) study highlighted factors including, engaging versus disengaging pedagogy, having caring teachers, public school financial reform, participating in extracurricular activities and state scholarships as performance incentives.

The research of Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), indicated that “traditional schools are lacking the personal relationships that alternative schools often provide” (p. 105). They continued their argument by adding that the educational system in the United States created alternative schools for the purpose of decreasing the number of students who were both at-risk and leaving school prior to graduation. As a part of the alternative school model, they would utilize methods that were unconventional in comparison to the methods that may have been found in a traditional school setting. They found that most of the students who attended alternative or transfer schools had been unsuccessful in traditional school programs, which was reflected in their low grades, behavioral problems and truancy.

As a part of their research conducted by Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), they had students compare their experiences in a traditional high school to their experiences in an alternative school. Students shared that in their prior schools, they had poor teacher relationships, a lack of safety, overly rigid authority, and problems with peer relationships. In contrast, they stated that their experiences in the alternative school setting provided positive teacher relationships, opportunities for maturing and responsibility, an understanding of social issues, and better peer relationships with a supportive atmosphere. It was concluded that students in the alternative school setting

benefitted from being in that setting and “achieved at a level that they could not have accomplished in their traditional schools” (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011, p. 113).

School systems continue to resurface as a means of engaging and re-engaging the disengaged student. In the study conducted by Nicholson and Putwain (2015) they found that the strategies that fostered student engagement included having a low student to teacher ratio and treating students with respect. Students also valued behavioral management that was non-punitive and offered flexible means of learning. In addition, student engagement was connected to teachers providing relevant material while conveying a belief to students that academic success is possible.

According to Ruebel et al. (2001), “One of the most promising approaches for addressing the needs of dropouts, as well as students struggling in traditional schools and considering dropping out, is placement in an alternative school program” (p. 58). Ruebel et al. (2001) go on to say that some of the contributing factors to alternative school success include “smaller school and class size, more individualized attention from teachers, nontraditional and varied curricula” (p. 59). While there is research to support several methods of school support, the research shows that it can exist in multiple forms and still show evidence of success.

Tomlinson and Jarvis (2014) conducted a qualitative study in which they looked at how teachers “contributed to the academic success of minority students of high potential from economically disadvantaged backgrounds” (p. 199). As a part of their study, they looked at the *discontinuity paradigm*, which highlights how “underachievement can be attributed to the failure of teachers and schools from the dominant culture to offer culturally responsive curriculum and instruction that

acknowledges and values diverse perspectives” (Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2014, p. 194).

They found that teachers who were most effective put forth genuine effort to understand their students’ experiences and perspectives, including cultural and family experiences.

According to Somers and Piliawsky (2004), utilizing additional resources such as tutoring and enrichment programs which allow students to connect to a caring adult also help to provide adolescents with key supports needed to continue in school.

Lind (2013) contributed to this argument as a part of her action research entitled *What Builds Student Capacity in an Alternative High School Setting*. As a part of her research, she found that students tended to thrive in school settings where relationships with members of the community were healthy and the students were not judged based on their prior actions, but were allowed to take risks and engage with staff members and their peers at a high level. They also thrived when they were given the responsibility and freedom to think critically as they transitioned and matured into adults.

### **Principals and Leadership Theories**

In both traditional and transfer high schools, some school leaders produce better student outcomes in comparison to their peers; this occurrence has been the topic for much research and discussion over the years. While there have been multiple theories to explain the phenomena of successful school leaders, many researchers conclude that the most successful principals display the traits and characteristics of effective and transformational leaders (Burns, 1978; Leithwood, 1991; Lezotte 1994).

When considering the characteristics of an effective school leader, Lezotte (1991) identified what he referred to as correlates of effective schools. The seven correlates identified by Lezotte include having,



- A safe and orderly environment
- A climate of high expectations for success
- Instructional leadership
- A clear and focused mission
- Opportunities to learn and providing students with time on task
- Frequent monitoring of student progress
- Home-school relations

Leithwood (1994) echoed some of the correlates identified by Lezotte (1991) when he identified seven key characteristics or dimensions associated with the effective school leaders. The dimensions included,

- Building school vision and establishing goals,
- Creating a productive school culture,
- Providing intellectual stimulation,
- Offering individualized support,
- Modeling best practices and important organizational values
- Demonstrating high-performance expectations, and
- Developing structures to foster participation in school decisions.

When placed in this most challenging environment, transformational school leaders demonstrate the correlates identified by both Lezotte (1991) and Leithwood (1994). Research tells us that principals who fail to execute these leadership characteristics or effectively transfer these pivotal skills to teachers and other staff members are ineffective in promoting successful student outcomes. Although there is no research that specifically references transfer schools, can we extrapolate from the works

of Lezotte (1991) and Leithwood (1994) that transfer high school principals who demonstrate these characteristics are more effective at closing the gap for African American students?

There are many theories that speak specifically to the attributes of an effective leader and how those attributes can be used to bring about organizational change. According to Northouse (2007), there is the leadership style theory, which focuses on the task-centered leader. This leader's primary focus is to ensure that the noted tasks are carried out, which will allow the organization to run effectively. Northouse (2007) also spoke about the relationship-centered leader. This leader both builds trust and ensures that tasks are completed based on the relationships formed with his or her employees.

Another kind of leader is the situational leader. This leader adjusts his or her style based on what the situation calls for (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In addition, there is the transactional leader associated with the transactional leadership theory. This leader serves as one who engages in the exchange of rewards or discipline based on the outcomes of those in subordinate positions (Bass, 2008). Finally, there is the transformational leader, originally coined by Burns in 1978, which is based on the leader's ability to transform into leaders, those who follow him or her (Bass & Riggio, 2006)

Burns (1978), defined leadership as "leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations – the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations – of both leaders and followers" (p. 460). He specifically identified one type of leadership as being transformative in nature, which Burns (1978) said,

Occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality. Their purposes, which might have started out as separate, but related, as in the case of transactional leadership, become fused. (p. 461)

Burns (1978) goes on to say that “the function of leadership is to engage followers, not merely to activate them, to commingle needs and aspirations and goals in a common enterprise, and in the process to make better citizens of both leaders and followers” (p. 462).

Bass (1999) echoed many of the characteristics identified by Burns (1978). Bass (1999) posited that the transformational leader,

- Has a conscious goal whereby the leader develops followers into leaders
- Has a development plan in his /her head about each follower
- Stimulates challenge as opposed to suppressing it when it arises
- Is deeply trusted and exhibits the moral perspective to warrant such trust
- Has an ability to be vulnerable and to self-sacrifice in ways that builds tremendous trust among followers along with ownership in the form of identification with the leader’s mission or cause
- Has a willingness to self-sacrifice that is often associated with similar patterns of self-sacrifice among their followers in a sort of dominoes effect
- Works to leave behind an organization, community, or even society that is better positioned to succeed than when they first began their work. (p. 51)

According to Ghasabeh et al. (2015) the transformational leadership theory, “emphasizes satisfying basic needs and meeting higher desires through inspiring

followers to provide newer solutions and create a better workplace” (p. 462). Kruger et al. (2007) further supported the impact of this transformational leadership theory when they posited that this theory “has a positive impact on teacher motivation, professional growth, and on a variety of organizational conditions, including school culture, contributing to educational change in schools” (p. 16). In a transfer school setting, with each student having a unique set of personal circumstances and challenges, it could be argued that managing that range of challenges for one leader, without the buy-in of the community and key stakeholders, could limit the possibility of making every student successful. However, when multiple people have been inspired and motivated to serve in a leadership capacity working toward the same goal as noted by Burns (1978), the chance for success for all increases exponentially.

According to Castanheira and Costa (2011), transformational leadership has three basic functions. Those functions include, (a) serving the needs of others, (b) empowering them, and (c) inspiring followers to achieve great success. Transformational leaders are also charismatic leaders who set a vision while instilling trust, confidence, and pride in those with whom they work. Finally, they stimulate followers intellectually and treat them as leaders. As a transfer school principal, the first priority of the school leader is to focus on the needs of the students. As a part of addressing those needs, they must look to the resources around them to determine how to utilize those resources to achieve the desired outcome. In order to move all stakeholders in the same direction, the leader must have a vision that everyone believes in and is willing to work toward. Once that is accomplished, the leader must treat those around him or her as leaders, seek their

opinions, and give value to their input as leaders who are invested in the success of the school community.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) identified five key behaviors that are exhibited as characteristics of a transformational leader. The first of the characteristics includes modeling leadership by publicly defining one's values and by living them with integrity. Kouzes and Posner go on to say those transformational leaders inspire others and create a shared vision by understanding the hopes, dreams, and values of their followers. Transformational leaders also challenge the process and create change by recognizing and supporting innovation. In addition, they enable others to lead through the distribution of power to team members and by reducing the power distance between the follower and the leader. Finally, Kouzes and Posner (2007) posited that transformational leaders encourage stakeholders by knowing, appreciating, and celebrating them.

The transformational leadership theory was identified as a framework that would be best suited to look at the decisions that an effective school leader makes and the impact those decisions have on student success. This theory is not only associated with the practices of an effective leader as noted by Leithwood (1994) and Lezotte (1991), but also with the decisions the leader makes to build leadership skills in those around them. As such, this theory serves as an effective framework for examining two of the most successful leaders of transfer high schools.

## **Summary**

The research reviewed in Chapter 2 focused on the social, psychological, and educational factors that impact the school performance of low-income African American students. This chapter specifically focused on African American students and the barriers

and impediments to their learning, and the reforms, strategies, and structures to promote African American student engagement.

Perhaps the most important factor in breaking down barriers is the decision making of leaders in these settings. The leaders in schools that are designed to address the needs of this unique population must first possess the characteristics of highly effective leaders. They must be transformational leaders who can both identify and develop other leaders within their school communities and finally, they must have a vision for the school in addition to specific goals for improving student outcomes. By identifying the barriers that negatively impact African American student learning and having systems in place to address these barriers, which includes having a highly effective school leader, the process can begin of closing the gap between the success rate of African American students and their peers.

In Chapter 3, instruments have been identified and methods have been explored to determine the behaviors, traits, and characteristics of leaders who have demonstrated success with low income African American students in New York City transfer schools. The ultimate goal is to replicate these characteristics to improve outcomes in alternative and traditional school settings throughout New York State and across the country.

## **Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology**

### **Introduction**

While there is research to support effective practices among principals of traditional and charter schools, there is no research that has focused on a specific category of alternative schools in New York City called transfer schools. These schools serve over 39% of overaged, under-credited, low income African American students. Over its history, the transfer school model has proven to be successful in raising the graduation rate of African American students. But some transfer high schools have consistently outperformed their peer group schools. By conducting a case study of the most successful schools and their principals, we have begun to shed light on how the decisions that school leaders make can empower all stakeholders on behalf of student success. We also learned more about methods of supporting and motivating teachers, parents, and students to commit to the continuous improvement of their community.

According to Balbach (1999), “the purpose of a case study is to study intensely one set (or unit) of something – programs, cities, counties, worksites – as a distinct whole” (p. 3). Creswell (2013) noted that, “case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system . . . over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (p. 97). By conducting a case study, the researcher has been able to provide a comprehensive picture of the subject being studied through multiple sources of information including observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and

reports. Documents and reports may include archival data which could encompass school records, communiques, flyers, and manuscripts (Creswell, 2013).

Creswell (2013) also posited that “a qualitative case study can be composed to illustrate a unique case, a case that has unusual interest in and of itself and needs to be described and detailed” (p. 98). Creswell (2013) goes on to say that, “qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry (which allows for) the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study” (p. 44). Effective school leaders in a unique circumstance such as a transfer school required a detailed study that could potentially be used for replication purposes. The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to illustrate how transformational school leaders make decisions that result in student success at a high rate in comparison to their peer groups. For the purposes of this study the researcher focused on highly effective transfer high school leaders that serve a population of 80% or more overaged, under-credited, low-income, African American students.

The case study was selected because it afforded the researcher an opportunity to take an in-depth look at best practices of the school leader and other leaders in the school community through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, document review, and data analysis. In order to see how the effective school leader operates within his or her element, observations were also conducted. Because this study examined the best practices of the most effective transfer school principals in a low-income urban setting, the *observer as participant observation type* was utilized. This afforded the researcher the opportunity to note important phenomenon in the field setting by utilizing the five senses of the observer (Angrosino, 2007).



## **Research Context**

The study was conducted specific schools within the New York City Department of Education, which is the largest school district in New York State and the United States, serving 1.1 million students from varied socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural groups. Within the New York City public school system there is an alternative high school model and transfer high schools are a subcomponent of that model. Transfer schools serve overaged, under-credited students who are at least 2 years off track in comparison to their peers. According to New York City's Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation (NYSED, 2005), "nearly all high school dropouts in New York City have a history of being overaged and under-credited" (p.2). Seventy eight percent of the 70,000 overaged and under-credited students are enrolled in traditional high schools and 16% are enrolled in programs such as transfer schools (NYSED, 2005) The transfer high school model shows tremendous recuperative power for these overaged, under-credited students. According to the New York City Accountability Data for the 2009 cohort, the 6-year graduation rate for transfer school students which encompasses transfer school data reflected a 74.7% graduation rate in comparison to a 61.3% graduation rate if students remain in traditional or comprehensive high schools (NYCDOE, 2009).

According to a study conducted by the Alliance for Excellent Education (2017), the New York City student population attending alternate school settings, known as multiple pathway to graduation settings, (such as transfer schools) can be broken down as follows: "86% are Hispanic or African American; 83% are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch; 16% are English Language Learners; and 11% are students with disabilities" (p.10).

On average, a transfer school leader serves a population of approximately 200 to 300 overaged, under-credited students who are primarily low-income minorities who have demonstrated limited success in the traditional school model. Most transfer schools are provided with additional resources to support student success such as community based organizations (CBOs) that focus on improving student attendance along with programs such as Learning to Work (LTW), which exposes students to internship opportunities as a part of the college and career readiness framework.

### **Research Participants**

Within the DOE, three school leaders were selected from the top 10 performing transfer high schools based on the school's credit accumulation, graduation rate, and college and career readiness data. The principals participated in interviews based on the New York City Department of Education School Leadership Competency Continuum. Questions posed to principals were based on Leithwood's (1994) core leadership best practices and Lezotte's (1991) key characteristics of effective school leaders. Questions were also posed based on Burns' (1978) transformational leadership theory.

Transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978) is defined as leadership that develops relationships and engages others. The relationships and engagement motivates and empowers followers to exceed prior performance expectations. To check for alignment between Burns' transformational leadership theory and effective leadership practices, teachers and other members of the school community who have taken on leadership roles were interviewed to identify the relationships, if any, between transformational leadership practices, effective leadership practices, and student outcomes. (Bass, 1999) posited that consistently modeling transformational leadership

practices results in followers mirroring the practices of the leaders, thus maximizing organizational effectiveness. As a part of this case study, an observation of the principals and other identified leaders in both school settings was conducted. Comparisons of best practices were made based on the data collected from all schools.

Each of the principals came into their roles as transfer school leaders in different ways. PP1 served as an assistant principal in a transfer school for 7 years before transitioning into the role of principal. PP2, along with her assistant principal submitted a proposal that was ultimately approved by the New York City Department of Education to start a transfer high school. Finally, PP3 was formerly a teacher and assistant principal in a traditional high school, but transitioned to being a transfer school principal where she has served in that role for 14 years.

The confidentiality of all participants was maintained through removal of personal identifying information and the use of pseudonyms. Confidentiality was also maintained by coding the names of the school communities. No information that identifies the participants was shared. Before conducting the case study, the participants were given an informed consent letter. They were given the opportunity to ask any questions that they had involving the study. No interviews were conducted until after the participants signed the consent form. No reimbursements were provided to participants as all travel related and additional expenses were incurred by the researcher.

The St. John Fisher College (SJFC) handbook on the Ed.D. in Executive Leadership states that the “dissertation committee under the direction of the chair oversees the progress, content, defense, methodology, and completion of each assigned candidate’s dissertation proposal and dissertation” (SJFC, 2017, p. 5). As noted on the St. John

Fisher website, “The IRB committee protects the rights of human subjects involved in research at Fisher. The IRB review proposals for research to ensure that confidentiality, informed consent, and safety are guaranteed” (SJFC, 2017, p.2). All activities were monitored based on the guidelines and periodic check-ins from the dissertation committee. Activities were also monitored based on IRB approval from the Department of Education and St. John Fisher College to ensure that all subjects involved in the research were protected.

### **Instruments Used in Data Collection**

For the purposes of this research, three of the 10 top performing transfer high schools were identified as the cases or unit of study. The instruments of data collection included semi-structured interviews, focus groups and observations of principals. According to Mertens and Wilson (2012), “case studies focus on a complex context and try to understand a particular object or case” (p. 331). As a part of the case study, Yin (2009) suggested utilizing a design which includes identifying evaluation questions, specifying the unit of analysis, establishing a logical connection between the data and the propositions, and developing criteria for interpreting the results.

Data was gathered from the following six sources:

1. Data was analyzed based on documents collected from the Department of Education (NYCDOE, 2017a). Those documents provided demographic data, economic status based on eligibility for free and reduced lunches, credit accumulation, Regents examination pass rates and graduation rates.
2. Principals were provided with the DOE’s School Leadership Competency Continuum so that they could self-assess their leadership capabilities.

3. Based on the principals' responses, questions were developed and semi-structured interviews were conducted, which took approximately 45 minutes in length.
4. Members of the school community, which included school leaders, teachers and support staff in the school community also participated in a focus group, data from which was juxtaposed to the principals' data to check for alignment.
5. Internal school documents were also reviewed and correlated to all other data to help explain and/or develop significant themes and trends.
6. Participants were observed within the school setting as a final means of data gathering.

All data was initially coded using a-priori based on previously conducted research that identified specific characteristics that school principals possessed, how school principals identified and developed other leaders within their school community, and the relationships that exist between students and members of the school community. Emerging codes were also developed based on the analysis of data collection from all sources. According to Saldana (2016), "Values Coding is the application of codes to qualitative data that reflect a participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview" (p. 131). Because the researcher examined the behaviors, traits, and characteristics of highly effective school leaders, which are based on their values, attitudes and belief, values coding was also utilized to code interview data.

As a part of his research, Blake (2015) determined that "because a qualitative case study involves a detailed description of setting and individuals, and produces richer and

more dense [data] in the transcribed text, not all the data was analyzed” (p. 66). Blake “employed a process called ‘winnow’ in which he desegregated the data into salient points” (p. 66). This researcher also employed the winnow process to desegregate and discard data based on reoccurring themes related to principal leadership practices.

Creswell (2013) references several means of validating qualitative data. The methods noted here were utilized to validate the findings of the research:

1. Observation - building trust with participants, learning the culture, and checking for misinformation that stems from distortions introduced by the researcher or informants.
2. Member checking – the researcher solicits participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations.

The trustworthiness of the data was validated by having the participants review the interview transcripts to ensure that the statements given were in alignment with what was recorded; this process is what is referred to as member checking. In addition, data was gathered from several sources such as interviews, observations, and research to justify themes that emerged. Transcriptions from audiotapes was also used as a means of checking for interview and data gathering accuracy.

### **Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis**

Principals were asked to rate themselves based on the New York City School Leadership Competency Continuum. Based on how the principals rated themselves, follow-up questions were posed so that they could elaborate on their responses. Teachers and other members of the school such as school social workers, community partners, and support staff participated in focus groups in which they responded to questions based on

the responses of the principal as a means of checking alignment with the principals' responses. Questions posed to the focus group sought to determine if the principals' decisions were in alignment with the characteristics of highly effective leadership practices. Questions also sought to confirm if the principal consistently and purposefully identified and developed potential leaders within the school community to improve student outcomes, which is in alignment with the characteristics of transformational leaders as noted by Burns (1978).

### **Summary**

Selecting the ideal research methodology is a key component of the dissertation process. The qualitative research design of this study effectively informed the problem statement which addressed the fact that while there is research to support effective practices among traditional school leaders, there is no research that specifically focuses on the role of the most effective transfer school leaders in promoting and fostering student success. The qualitative design also provides answers to the research questions which include:

1. Are the behaviors, traits and characteristics of the most successful transfer school principals transformational and effective as defined by Burns (1978), Lezotte (1991) and Leithwood (1994)?
2. What are the defining characteristics of the school cultures as created by these leaders?
3. Can the higher graduation rates among African Americans in the most successful transfer high schools be attributed to the behaviors, characteristics, and decision making of the school principal?

In order to inform the research questions, as a part of the literature review, the following areas of focus were explored:

- The barriers and impediments to learning for African American students.
- Reforms, strategies, and structures to promote African American student engagement
- Principals and leadership theories.

These topics were examined as a means of providing a foundation for the research and to inform the development of interview and focus group questions for participants.

In addition to informing question development, the research methodology was used to add credibility to other related research and increase the likelihood of the data being utilized by future researchers. The research methodology was also used to show how the instruments were used to collect and analyze the data. The final component of the research was used to confirm the trustworthiness of the data and to show how the data was being maintained in addition to how the data was used to address the research questions. Finally, the selection and credibility of the design in addition to the steps for ensuring the confidentiality of all participants was discussed.



## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

The primary purpose of this study was to identify and learn about the characteristics, traits, beliefs, and best practices of highly effective transfer high school leaders serving a large population of low income African American students in a high need urban setting. Transfer schools were created to address the needs of overaged and under-credited students who were not successful in a traditional school setting. While transfer schools support students who are representative of a multitude of racial and ethnic groups, the focus of this study was on African American students, because the research showed that this group was successful at a lower rate in comparison to their peers. The problem addressed in this study is that while there is research to support effective practices among traditional school leaders, there is no research that specifically focuses on the role of the most effective transfer school leaders in promoting and fostering student success.

The research questions that addressed this problem were:

1. Are the behaviors, traits, and characteristics of the most successful transfer school principals transformational and effective as defined by Burns (1978), Lezotte (1991), and Leithwood (1994)?
2. What are the defining characteristics of the school cultures as created by these leaders?

3. Can the higher graduation rates among African Americans in the most successful transfer high schools be attributed to the behaviors, characteristics, and decision making of the school principal?

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

This qualitative case study included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observations by the shadowing of the school principal throughout the entire work day. The researcher specifically focused on the traits, characteristics, and behaviors of effective transformational school leaders. The researcher also sought out best practices that existed in the school communities that may have had an impact on student outcomes.

Participating schools were chosen from the top 10 performing transfer high schools in a specific geographical region with a student population that was at least 80% African American. Performance indicators were graduation rates, Regents test scores and credit accumulation. Once the top 10 schools were identified that met that the criteria, three schools were chosen based on student outcomes and willingness to participate in the study.

An additional data set that was noted was the amount of teacher turnover based on school as there is research to support that the outcomes of students significantly increases when student have consistency within the school setting. According to Laitsch (2004),

Chronic teacher and staff turnover can negatively affect professional development, class size, scheduling, curriculum planning, collegiality, and a variety of other factors, adding a significant degree of chaos and complexity to schoolwide operations and potentially harming student learning across classrooms and teachers. (p.1)

When looking at School A, the percentage of teachers who worked in the school for 3 or more years was 64%, School B had a teacher retention rate of 43%, while School C had a teacher retention rate of 3 or more years at 100% (NYCDOE, 2017c).

The list of participants identified for the study was based on determining the most effective high schools located in the borough of Brooklyn in New York City that had an African American student population of at least 80%. The school success rate was based on the 2015-2016 graduation rates as noted in the New York City Department of Education, 2016).

Table 4.1

*Study Participants*

<u>School</u>	<u>% of African American Students</u>	<u>Graduation Rate</u>
1. Olympus Academy	88.6%	39.8%
2. Brownsville Academy	88.3%	54.1%
3. W.E.B. DuBois H.S.	87.6%	47.5%
4. Research and Service H.S.	86.3%	40.4%
5. Brooklyn Bridge Academy	85.4%	60.6%
6. Brooklyn Democracy H.S.	84.4%	56.4%
7. Metropolitan D.P. H.S.	84.3%	66.4%
8. Bed-Stuy. Prep. H.S.	82.9%	55.2%
9. Brooklyn Academy	81.0%	66.3%
10. East Brooklyn Community	80.7%	56.9%

The rate of success with regards to graduation ranged from 39.8% to 66.4%.

While it can be argued that 39.8% is not considered successful, when looking through the

lens of students who may not have otherwise earned diploma, 39.8% is a statistically significant difference that should be noted. It should also be noted that according to the 2015-16 graduation rates as noted in the New York City Transfer School Quality Report, (NYCDOE, 2016) the average graduation rate for transfer schools was 48% while the combined graduate for the top performing schools was 54.36%. As noted in Table 4.1, these data show that the top 10 performing transfer schools have a 6.38% higher pass rate than the remaining 47 schools combined. This demonstrates how these schools, despite the additional challenge of serving a struggling population still outperform other transfer schools with populations that may not be as challenging.

Of the schools that were identified for this study, based on the 2015-16 School Quality Snapshot (NYCDOE, 2017c) School A was noted as having 18% of their graduates enrolled in college within six months of graduating. School B had a 31% enrollment and School C had an enrollment of 13%. This data serves as further confirmation for how being given the opportunity to enroll in a transfer school can not only have an impact on the rate of graduation, but also the impact on transitioning to college and beyond.

As indicated, data for this qualitative study was gathered from three sources. Those sources included interviews of the principals, focus groups made up of representatives from the administrative teams, pedagogical teams, and support staff and observations of the principals over the course of a school day.

This chapter reports the findings and conclusions from the interviews, focus groups, and observations. The patterns, themes, and trends that emerged after analyzing and comparing all data are presented. The demographic data of all participants is shared

as well. The confidentiality of all participants was protected. Principal participants in this study were identified as PP1, PP2 or PP3. Staff participants were identified as SP1, SP2, and SP3. Table 4.2 indicates the demographic data of the principal participants and Tables 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5 indicate the demographic data of the staff participants at the three schools.

Table 4.2

*Age Group, Experience, Race and Gender of Principal Participants*

Principal Participants/ Years of Experience	Age Group	Race	Gender
PP1 – 6 years	45-54	Black	Female
PP2 – 9 years	35-44	Black	Male
PP3 – 14 years	45-54	White	Female

Table 4.3

*Age Group, Race, and Gender of Staff Participants (School A)*

Staff Participants	Age Group	Race	Gender
SP1	35-44	Black	Male
SP2	35-44	Black	Male
SP3	35-44	White	Male
SP4	45-54	White	Male
SP5	25-34	White	Male
SP6	25-34	Black	Male
SP7	25-34	Black	Female
SP8	25-34	Black	Female
SP9	25-34	White	Male

Table 4.4

*Age Group, Race and Gender of Staff Participants (School B)*

Staff Participants	Age Group	Race	Gender
SP1	45-54	Black	Female
SP2	25-34	Black	Female
SP3	35-44	Black	Male
SP4	35-44	Hispanic	Female
SP5	35-44	Black	Male
SP6	35-44	White	Female
SP7	35-44	Black	Female
SP8	45-54	Black	Female
SP9	35-44	Black	Male
SP10	35-44	Black	Male
SP11	25-34	White	Male
SP12	25-34	White	Female

Table 4.5

*Age Group, Race and Gender of Staff Participants (School C)*

Staff Participants	Age Group	Race	Gender
SP1	45-54	White	Female
SP2	45-54	White	Male
SP3	35-44	Black	Male
SP4	35-44	Black	Female
SP5	35-44	Black	Male
SP6	45-54	Black	Female

In comparison to the demographic data of the principal and staff participants, based on the data gathered from the 2015-16 School Quality Snapshot (NYCDOE, 2017c), it was found that the student data for each school based on gender was as follows:

Table 4.6

*Demographic Data of Schools*

School	Age Group	Males	Females
School A	17-21	60%	40%
School B	17-21	53.97%	46.03%
School C	17-21	56.1%	43.9%

**Research question 1.** Research question 1 asked: Are the behaviors, traits and characteristics of the most successful transfer school principals transformational and effective as defined by Burns (1978), Lezotte (1991), and Leithwood (1994)? When considering the characteristics of an effective school leader, Lezotte (1991) identified what he referred to as correlates of effective schools. The seven correlates identified by Lezotte include,

- Having a safe and orderly environment
- Having a climate of high expectations for success
- Instructional leadership
- Having a clear and focused mission
- Providing opportunities to learn and providing students with time on task
- Frequently monitoring of student progress
- Having home-school relations

Leithwood (1994) echoed some of the correlates identified by Lezotte (1991) when he identified seven key characteristics or dimensions associated with the effective school leaders. The dimensions include,

- Building school vision and establishing goals,
- Creating a productive school culture,
- Providing intellectual stimulation,
- Offering individualized support,
- Modeling best practices and important organizational values
- Demonstrating high-performance expectations, and
- Developing structures to foster participation in school decisions.

In keeping with the same characteristics noted by Lezotte et al. (1978), they defined leadership as “leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations-the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations-of both leaders and followers” (p. 460). They specifically identified one type of leadership as being transformative in nature, which Burns (1978) said “occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” (p.382).

Based on the interviews that were conducted with the most effective transfer school principals, they all agreed that there had to be a level of commitment to the success of students on the part of the principal. It was also noted that there must be supports in place to ensure teacher success. Supports included, but were not limited to allowing teachers to take on additional job responsibilities based on their skill sets or interests. Supports also included building capacity through distributed leadership.



*Principal responses to research question 1.* When speaking about being a transformational leader, principal participant 3 (PP3) shared that, “I believe in really building my staff and having people be responsible for different things,” while principal participant 2 (PP2) posited that, “I believe in building people up, and I think that people want to take on more responsibilities, and people want to be recognized for what they can offer beyond just what they do in the classroom.”

Both principals agreed that teachers should be empowered to make mistakes while receiving supports along the way. The behaviors of both principals were in alignment with Leithwood’s (1994) key characteristics of creating a productive school culture and providing intellectual stimulation.

It is also aligned with what Lind (2013) found as a part of her action research entitled *What Builds Student Capacity in an Alternative High School Setting*. As a part of her research, she determined that students tended to thrive in school settings where relationships with members of the community are healthy and the students are not judged based on their prior actions, but are allowed to take risks and engage with staff members and their peers at a high level. They also thrive when they are given the responsibility and freedom to think critically as they transition and mature into adults. Having a school community where students are allowed to make mistakes and take risks would not be possible if teachers and other members of the school community were not allowed to do the same.

A characteristic of effective transfer school principals also included having high expectations of teachers. Because transfer schools serve a population of students who were not successful in a traditional high school setting, there must be a unique set of

educators in transfer schools who are dedicated to fostering that shift on the part of students from mediocrity to excellence. This is in direct alignment with what Yeager et al. (2014) said about creating a culture of high expectations. Yeager et al. (2014) suggested that teachers communicate high standards to students with the assurance that the students have the potential to reach those standards. As a result, there will be an increase in trust and an improvement in the academic behavior of African American adolescents. Examples of high expectations, as noted by the principals, included building capacity in as many staff as possible, creating a supportive culture and respecting teachers as professionals.

Principals also spoke about the importance of building trust among members of their staff. According to PP1,

They put a lot of trust in my decision making, and I think I do that with my teachers. I try to respect them as professionals and I give them a lot of latitude to call the shots in their classroom. I trust their judgment. I lead in such a way where I try to show them that I trust their judgment and I want to treat them as a professional. I want to give you the latitude to make the decisions that you feel are best for the students based on the data you have gathered...you know...during your experience with them. I just believe everyone should be treated with respect, and that was something that my parents certainly impressed upon me.

When asked about characteristics they believed effective leaders should possess, PP1 stated,

I think they have to be fair. I think that's very important in building trusting relationships, so to be effective you definitely have to be fair. You have to be

transparent. You have to be very clear about your expectations and what you expect from people.

The final characteristic that continued to emerge based on the interviews with the school leaders was to lead by example. Leading by example looked slightly different based on each leader, but they all agreed that that was a characteristic that effective school leaders should exhibit. PP1 shared the following,

I believe effective leaders should be flexible thinkers. I believe they should lead by example. They should be ready to do the dirty work, I think that whatever they're willing to delegate, they should also be willing to do themselves. I believe that they should pay attention to details. I believe they should lead with compassion. They should lead with . . . they should be resilient. Absolutely resilient. And, they should lead with the belief that all students are capable of excelling, just not on the same day and not in the same way.

PP2 stated that effective leaders should,

really be committed to what's your vision of your school community. I think that you need to be definitely committed to what you see. Where do you need the community to be? What are your goals for your school community? It has to be part of your inner core. Your core values and beliefs have to be very closely aligned to the vision of your school. I think, if that's the case, you'll be effective in whatever you do.

PP3 posited that,

Being reflective is really, really important. When things don't go well, you need to sit back and figure out from a systems perspective, where did it fall apart? Then

when things go right, you need to do the same thing like, wow, that really went right, so what made that go right and how can we take that and apply that to other situations and things that are happening in the building?

PP3 went on to say that,

You need to be collaborative. Ultimately, it's a hard line to walk because you want to be collaborative, you want all your stakeholders to have input, but really at the end of the day as the leader, you're the one that needs to make that final decision. I think that that really comes with experience too.

*Focus group responses to research question 1.* The responses of the principals were echoed during the focus group interviews. Participants in the focus groups included a wide range of teachers, administrators and support staff. When asked “How does your principal model leadership within your school community,” responses about principals included the principal having “a true desire to see every child reach his full potential,” “delegating authority,” and being “very knowledgeable about the rules and regulations” (SP11, School B). When speaking about the principal, participants also added that, “She's very detail oriented. It drives me crazy, because I'm not as detail oriented, but she will come into a room, and you know that she's looking for” (SP1, School B). When speaking about her principal, one participant shared that,

There's demo lessons if we need it. She also delegates authority. Several of us have leadership roles in other capacities such as professional development, testing coordinator, that kind of stuff where she empowers the person who's doing the professional development take that leadership job. (SP4, School C)

The responses of focus group members were supported by Kouzes and Posner (2007) who identified five key behaviors that are exhibited as characteristics of a transformational leader. The first of the characteristics included modeling leadership by publicly defining their values and by living them with integrity. Kouzes and Posner also indicated that transformational leaders inspire others and create a shared vision by understanding the hopes, dreams, and values of their followers. Transformational leaders also challenge the process and create change by recognizing and supporting innovation. In addition, they enable others to lead through the distribution of power to team members and reduce the power distance between the follower and the leader. Finally, Kouzes and Posner (2007) posited that transformational leaders encourage stakeholders by knowing, appreciating, and celebrating them.

Because this study sought to find the best practices of the most effective transfer school principals in a low-income urban setting, the observer as participant observation type was utilized. This afforded the researcher the opportunity to note important phenomenon in the field setting by utilizing the five senses of the observer (Angrosino, 2007). The results of the principal observations are as follows:

***Principal observations – research question 1.*** Observations of the principals provided insight into the relationships forged in their schools. The leadership style of PP1 allowed for flexibility for teachers to make mistakes. Trust was reciprocated between the principals and staff members. The principal trusted the judgment of teachers while teachers trusted the decision making of the principal. Although the principal provided teachers with the latitude to make errors, he also had many supports in place to prevent mistakes from reoccurring. PP2 spent the vast majority of the school day visiting

classes. It was his belief that being in classrooms not only sent a clear message to teachers about what he valued, but it also allowed him to collect data that could inform him on how to better support teachers.

When observing PP2, some of the characteristics that were identified included her ability to be patient with her staff members as well as students. She also actively listened to members of her staff when engaged in discussion. PP2 looked at all aspects of her school community through the lens of data. During the observation, the principal entered three different classes and noted the wording of the aim and objective in each class. She noted that in two of the three classes, the questions were written at a low level. Based on her observation, she immediately made a decision to have the lead teacher go into those classrooms to provide support to those teachers as well as provide additional professional development on writing lesson plans.

PP3 took on more of an “in the trenches” approach to her leadership practices. The principal taught a class within her school community, planned and implemented lessons with members of her staff, as well as promoted a culture of sharing best practices throughout the school community. PP3 made a decision that she would take the approach of aligning herself with her school community as opposed to taking on a leader and subordinate stance. Because she chose to take this position, a clear allegiance could be seen between PP3 and members of her school community. The staff did not look at her as “the principal” but as one of them. This allegiance allowed for almost immediate buy-in on the part of the school community when new initiatives were being implemented or when staff members had to take on new roles.

**Research question 2.** Research question 2 asked: What are the defining characteristics of the school cultures as created by these leaders? According to the Glossary of Education Reform, (edglossary.org, 2014)

The term school culture generally refers to the beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and written and unwritten rules that shape and influence every aspect of how a school functions, but the term also encompasses more concrete issues such as the physical and emotional safety of students, the orderliness of classrooms and public spaces, or the degree to which a school embraces and celebrates racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural diversity. (2014, p.1)

Much of what is observed in a school as related to school culture is shaped by the vision, decision making, and daily practices of the school principal.

*Principal responses to research question 2.* With regard to having a vision as to the trajectory of the school community, PP2 spoke about “finding strength in our staff, finding their talent, and building upon that and ensuring that our vision is conveyed through all staff actions”. PP2 went on to say that leaders should be,

really committed to what’s your vision of your school community. I think that you need to be definitely committed to what you see. Where do you need the community to be? What are your goals for your school community? It has to be part of your inner core. Your core values and beliefs have to be very closely aligned to the vision of your school. I think, if that's the case, you'll be effective in whatever you do. What you believe is what you're doing. You have to believe inside, what you want, for your school community. For me, it's not even work. It's what you believe.

PP3 echoed the importance of having a vision when she said,

I think that sometimes we say we want to make this sort of change, and then it doesn't happen because the right kind of support wasn't there or the vision wasn't clear or everybody didn't have buy in. We might've said, "Hey, okay, this is the direction that we're going," and then the train just isn't moving in that direction because one of those different pieces wasn't there. I think that you definitely have to have a very clear vision about the transformation that you want and that you have to have buy in around that vision and that folks need to be supported in doing the work that's required of them to get to where we need to be.

When asked "How are you involved in the day to day decision making in the school?" The overarching theme that emerged across all principals involved having what the principals referred to as a *me, you, us* system of making decisions. It is what some may refer to as the "I do, we do, you do" method of teaching. PP1 stated,

So, my approach to decision making is threefold, if I could say that. There is a, *my* decision. There is a *your* decision, and then there is an *our* decision. I break down all the decision making, I bucket it in one of the three. Things that are...I feel... inherently my decision...I just go about making an executive or unilateral decision about it and just let the chips fall where they may. Sometimes the results are good, sometimes not so good. When they're not good I just have to go back to the drawing board. Where there is a decision, whether it's a teacher or staff member or student, I'll make sure they know that nope, that's strictly your decision. You come up with a decision, tell me what you've decided, and we'll move on from there. Then, [there's] our decision, that's when we get into this,



making decision by committee and we are collectively trying to brainstorm things to figure out what's the best route to go.

PP2 stated,

Well, I guess I'm making sure that I am available to all staff, and making sure touching base with key staff, those three or four key staff members who are responsible for their being in touch with other staff members. So it's kind of like people may not have to debrief with me over a decision, but they have...you know...it's like different levels of availability.

PP3 added, "Every decision...I pretty much...I don't make them all because I do give people the authority to make some decisions, but I often get consulted."

The daily practices of an effective school leader are also key factors in shaping or building the culture of a school community. With regard to their daily practices, school leaders were asked if they micromanage or macro-manage their school communities. There was no clear consensus on how the leaders viewed their leadership styles with regard to being a micromanager or a macro-manager. One principal clearly defined himself as a macro-manager, while another designated herself as a micromanager. The third principal shared that she was a micromanager in her early years as a school leader, but built a level of comfort and confidence over the years, that allowed her to release more responsibility to her staff and ultimately become a macro-manager. Based on their responses, it was found that effective school leaders can have a wide range of styles and still be considered effective. The response of PP1 is as follows:

I would say that I macro-manage. I do not micromanage because it goes back to my own personal leadership style and how my own upbringing has impacted that.

I have to trust my staff to do the right thing, and I have to live it. I can't just say it and not live it, and if I micromanage I'm not living it. However, I always tell them, I'm flexible. I'm a flexible thinker, so I'll give you that latitude to do the right thing, to make the right decisions, to be a professional, to always put your best foot forward for the sake of the students. However, if I see that the right thing is not taking place, I will tolerate it initially to see if there is any self-corrections on the part of the teacher or the staff member. If that doesn't happen then we go into a training mode, right? Okay, so let's see how we can fix this together. What kind of support can I give you to make this better? If that doesn't work after a few times then it's like, oh, how can we terminate this person? How can I get them out of the building? So, it depends. It's always situational. For the most part, I macro-manage and only if the situation calls for it, because someone's not doing the right thing, lack of willingness, lack of a capacity or because we are...we've reached mass critical levels then it's like okay, listen, this is what we're going to do. This is how we're going to do it.

PP2 takes on slightly different perspective, saying that,

I am a micromanager, or we micromanage here. I believe...well... show me what moves students, and then I'm on your bus. If we can show something moves, we are very open to collaborating on that. I guess that...you know...the macro-managing...I do trust few personnel...teachers here with guiding staff, mentoring staff, coaching staff because it's impossible to think that we're gonna be able to do everything, but then we have to have conversations.

PP3 spoke to having a combination of both practices over her years of experience as a school leader stating that,

I'm a macro-manager. I used to be a micromanager, but I've definitely transitioned into macro-management. I'm going to say that it has [been] because the less I micromanage, the more time I had to do what I think really is the important work and should be our full-time work, which is around teaching and learning.

*Focus group responses to research question 2.* The shaping of culture through the decision making of the highly effective transfer school principals was reiterated by members of the focus groups who shared that they look for highly effective leaders who demonstrated,

Integrity, somebody that you can trust, who's trustworthy, who's honest. Honest with the feedback that at the end of the day, when they are going to come and visit you, you're going to be more supportive, coming to help you, not coming to get you, in a way. Also, as far as leadership, they have to understand how adults learn, just like they do the first day from students...you have to approach everyone differently. And then still, hold everybody accountable to a certain standard. (SP3, School B)

The focus group participant went on to say that “she’s constantly focusing on those details, because she has a vision and everything has to fit into that vision. It has to be perfect” (SP3, School B). One participant added that “leadership in this school has very different strengths and weaknesses, but they complement each other well” (SP10, School B). Another participant continued by saying,

I'm constantly working with [one school leader], but there's times I go to [another school leader] for some things. I'm looking to somewhere to be in the balance of all- and then (her) too. [She] is English, so I'm looking around in all three ways. I'm hearing at least three ways to do something. Sometimes I've taken all three, sometimes I've taken one. I have that freedom really to take feedback from the leadership, in a way that displays that I took the feedback but that helps the students, and I get to pick, as a teacher, what I think is going to work best. So, I'm taking things here, I'm taking things there, but that is a part of the culture of the school that I think is very necessary. (SP11, School B)

The shaping of culture based on the decision making of effective leaders is also in alignment with Burns (1978) who said that “the function of leadership is to engage followers, not merely to activate them, to commingle needs and aspirations and goals in a common enterprise, and in the process to make better citizens of both leaders and followers” (p. 462). He also said when multiple people have been inspired and motivated to serve in a leadership capacity working towards the same goal, the chance for success for all increases exponentially (Burns, 1978). When everyone is working toward the same goals, a culture of high expectation is also communicated across the school community, which can have a direct impact on student outcomes, particularly when working with students who may be coming from other instructional settings that have little or no structure or no clear vision about the direction in which the school is going.

***Principal observations – research question 2.*** In the observations it was clear that the principals created a culture that tied all of the school communities together through the relationships that existed among staff members and between staff members

and students. This cultural aspect of having strong ties across all stakeholders was grounded in the decision making of each school leader.

Systems supported by principals included placing teachers in leadership positions, following a *me, you* and *us* decision making process, and providing ongoing feedback from the principal as well as *emerging leaders* within the school community. In his school community, PP1 focused heavily on building capacity. During the observation, several teachers were pointed out as having additional leadership roles within the school community. Those roles involved working closely with their colleagues as well as students. Having these roles not only helped to increase the level of buy-in in the school community, but it also provided the principal with the additional freedom that he needed to allow him to be in the classroom ensuring that his vision of high level instruction was being implemented.

The vision of PP2 was made clear and was conveyed throughout the building through signs posted around the building, discussions as a part of teacher teams, and as noted on artifacts. The principal communicated high expectations for both students and staff members and disrespect was not tolerated. As we walked the school halls, she addressed each student by his or her name and had very specific conversations with them about how they were doing in a particular class. She also inquired about how an incident may have turned out with a teacher. Teachers also knew their students very well and were able to give their colleagues very detailed information about those students when asked. Having these close relationships and a wide range of information about students, informed programs that were put into place as well as how instruction was facilitated across the school community.

PP3 had an open-door policy in which she made herself easily accessible both by students and staff. While observing PP3 in her school setting, she spent the first part of her day in her office responding to e-mails and fielding questions. After the initial part of her day, she spent the other part of her day in the hall speaking to students, going into classroom to see how new strategies were being implemented, or teaching her classes where she continued to build rapport with her students. She strongly encouraged members of her school community to take on leadership roles. In her school, there was a culture of everyone pitching in to get the job done. This culture was completely engrained in the school community; the staff worked to do what was needed because the culture dictated that everything that was being done was in the best interest of students.

**Research question 3.** Research question 3 asked: Can the higher graduation rates among African Americans in the most successful transfer high schools be attributed to the behaviors, characteristics and decision making of the school principal? Research shows that there is a direct relationship between student outcomes and the instructional practices and decisions that are made within a school community. Tomlinson (2015) noted that “students who regularly experience a pedagogy of poverty are not only disproportionately poor during their school years, but are also being schooled for a future of poverty” (p. 204). She contrasted this to the pedagogy of plenty, describing students who are “not only disproportionately more affluent or privileged during their school years, but are also being schooled for a future of plenty” (Tomlinson, 2015, p. 204).

When students are aware that they are not being engaged and are being provided with poor pedagogy, the end result is a tendency to disconnect. To combat this, Tomlinson (2015) suggested “teaching up,” which challenges teachers to “begin by

creating tasks that represent effective challenge for advanced or high-end learners and then to differentiate or scaffold learning in ways that support a very broad range of students” (p. 205).

When school administrators make the decision to implement instruction across the school community that teaches up to students, they are more likely to remain engaged. The higher level of engagement will result in improved student outcomes that can look like a higher rate of credit accumulation and ultimately a higher rate of graduation.

When principals were asked about school-wide systems or initiatives and their impact on student achievement, some common themes emerged. The themes that were overwhelmingly reiterated by all principals included having a vision, supporting collaboration, providing feedback, and modeling instructional best practices. According to Leithwood and Riehl (2003), "Effective educational leaders help their schools to develop or endorse visions that embody the best thinking about teaching and learning. School leaders inspire others to reach for ambitious goals" (p. 3).

Before any collaboration can begin within a school community, it is important that all stakeholders have a shared vision that is primarily shaped by the school leader and that all those involved are moving in the same direction. The uniformity of direction, will then inform the topics of conversations to be held. After the vision is established, the educators can work together and engage in high level conversations in conjunction with modeling best practices and receiving feedback from instructional leaders in the building. With these systems in place, it is more likely that the best practices will be reflected in the classroom, which will have a direct impact on student outcomes.

*Principal responses to research question 3.* When addressing the importance of having a vision within a school community, PP2 posited that one has to,

Really be committed to what's your vision of your school community. I think that you need to be definitely committed to what you see. Where do you need the community to be? What are your goals for your school community? It has to be part of your inner core. Your core values and beliefs have to be very closely aligned to the vision of your school. I think, if that's the case, you'll be effective in whatever you do. What you believe is what you're doing. You have to believe inside, what you want, for your school community. For me, it's not even work. It's what you believe.

She further added that,

Well, I have to realize that I'm always modeling, whether it's being transparent in all communication with staff, students, and families, so transparency, and also making sure that all our decisions are aligned with our schools vision. And that decisions are true to the core values and beliefs. All of my own and our staff, making sure that we're always keeping true to our school goals, and bottom line, our vision. (PP2)

PP3 supported the statements of PP2 when she added that “I think you have to have a strong vision of what you want your school to be, and that would just go with clear expectations.” When referring to collaboration within her school community, PP2 shared that what was most important was the practice of teachers working with teachers. PP2 stated,



That is something that we have to build on continually to always monitor our teacher teams. How are teachers looking at student work together? How are teachers making decisions about their practice to revise lessons, instructional strategies so more students make progress?

PP2 shared that “We have a lot of conversations around what effectiveness looks like. We spend a lot of time norming. It's given me a way to talk about and target teacher practices to become more effective in a much more meaningful way.”

Once all stakeholders have come together to collaborate, it is important that best practices are modeled for teachers so that the expectations are clear about how practices should be implemented. PP2 addressed the implementation of mentoring in her school when she shared that,

We have a lot of talent in this building, so official mentorship, official mentors, and unofficial mentors. Teachers are available to help each other. In addition, a full-time instructional coach. Now, the teachers [are] mentoring each other. I strongly believe we are extremely available to teachers to plan with them and look at student work with them.

PP3 added to that when she stated that “Our biggest resource is each other. I have veteran teachers, and they're very, very good teachers. They share best practices on the regular [regularly]...and we do a lot of professional development together.”

Following the processes of collaboration and modeling best practices, the final step in the sequence would involve observations and feedback provided by the instructional leaders in the building. Park, Takahashi and White (2014) posited that,

Experts on teachers and teaching have identified high quality feedback—feedback that leads to improvements in instruction and student learning—as a crucial lever for driving professional growth and improving the likelihood that new teachers will persist in their careers. (p. 2)

PP1 echoed that when he states that, “I want my teachers to get feedback, not just from me, I want them to hear feedback from other people so I get the teachers involved in that so they can get feedback from their colleagues.” PP1 went on to say that,

I have an open door policy and just like, just recently I told a teacher who's struggling, I said before you put together...before you execute this lesson, why don't you sit with me and let me give you feedback on it prior to... So, I make sure I avail myself to them.

PP2 supported this by saying,

I think what it has done...and I think I... I kind of described it earlier. Where the feedback, the targeted feedback that teachers receive are now coming from these emerging leaders in the school building. At times, especially if it's subject specific, like for a math class. One of my teacher leaders is a math teacher. The feedback has been, I would say, more on point than mine. As a result, when I walk into the classroom of a struggling teacher, I see improvement, which then translates to the students.

She also added that,

At first, I need teachers to be open to feedback from myself, from model teachers, from the coach. Being open to having a conversation about how does this strategy impact students because there's nothing magic, you don't just come up with

something and it automatically works. You have to be willing to go through a process of really looking at who does the strategy work for and how are you evaluating the success of that strategy. Being very open to feedback and to looking at your practice and making revisions to your practice. And being willing to share, which means opening up your classroom and having teachers watch you teach and giving feedback and be willing to answer questions about your practice. Being able to present your findings to the whole school, and to be openly reflective about feedback from somebody who maybe has less experience than you, but has an idea of how to improve upon something. Really, being that lifelong learner. (PP2)

***Focus group responses to research question 3.*** The responses given by focus groups also reflected many of the same themes that were noted by principals. When asked “when you think of school leadership, what comes to mind,” SP11 (School B) responded “a leader who's going to collaborate with the staff for student success.” SP3 (School B) provided an example of what modeling looks like at his school when he stated that,

I'll just pop in, maybe take some notes, see what they're doing, and steal practices that I really like. But also, it's also an opportunity where they've asked me, "What do you think? What do you think of this?" I've given them my feedback from that, giving them the chance to be leaders. I guess...as being the model teachers in that moment, modeling something for me. But then, also me being able to be a leader and saying "Hey, have you thought about doing it this way?"

Focus group members also spoke about receiving feedback from instructional leaders in the school community and its impact on their instructional practice. SP2 (School B) stated that,

I started my first year, and all I knew was the 6-month training I had in middle school, and even with that, I think what I was best at, was taking attendance.

Because that's what I was able to do a lot of times, but over the years I've noticed that with the feedback and also from what (my principal) has given. Like I tell people that I'm in my second year and they don't believe it.

A focus group member from School C shared that he looked at the school leader as one who “empowers the staff and trusts that we're going to do the right thing” (SP 4). SP5 added that leaders have to be “progressive, innovative thinkers.” Finally, participant SP6 noted that when thinking about leadership, she thinks of “somebody who gives positive feedback at all times, but also negative feedback” (SP6).

**Subthemes.** While the themes noted were the primary themes that emerged some subthemes that were noted from principals included commitment, support, high expectations and building capacity.

**Commitment.** When speaking on the topic of commitment, PP2 stated, I guess my leadership style also includes taking our job very seriously, just [being] very committed to the success of our students, treating our students as if they're our own family. What definitely drives my leadership here is my commitment to our students, how we feel about our student's success. I think it drives all our actions, my actions, and how's that connected to how I grew up?

PP1 posited that, “I look at their commitment and their commitment will show itself through their practice. I don't need my teachers to tell me anything about what they believe. Their actions, their practice, will tell me everything I need to know.”

***Support.*** When speaking on the topic of support, PP1 stated,

I think that it's really important in creating a supportive culture to identify folks who can take on those additional roles and then empowering them to do so and supporting them along the way and saying, It's okay to make mistakes. I'm going to give this to you, you might screw it up, but that's okay. Hopefully the next time you won't screw it up, and then we'll just go ahead and get better from there.

PP3 added that,

I do expect perfection, but I also understand that there's room for mistakes and that in order to get there you really have to be supported. I think that's really how I was brought up. My parents were very supportive, but they expected a whole lot from me. They understood that I was going to make mistakes and maybe not do my best all the time, but there was definitely a standard.

***High expectations.*** As noted, a characteristic of effective transfer school principals included having high expectations of teachers. Because transfer schools serve a population of students who were not successful in a traditional high school setting, there must be a unique set of educators in transfer schools who are dedicated to fostering that shift on the part of students from mediocrity to excellence. This is in direct alignment with what Yeager et al. (2014) said about creating a culture of high expectations.

Examples of building a culture of high expectations, as noted by the principals, included building capacity in as many staff as possible, creating a supportive culture, and respecting teachers as professionals. Principals also spoke about the importance of building trust among members of their staff.

***Building capacity.*** When speaking on the topic of building capacity, PP3 noted “I would say my leadership style is distributed. I believe in really building my staff and having people be responsible for different things.” When discussing how capacity is built throughout his school community, PP1 noted that,

It's pretty much distributed between like about four or five individuals, who show not only the willingness but the capacity to get the work done. And who do it with, you know they do it with eagerness and they're very detail oriented.

Sometimes, they do a better job than me. I'm like, all right then.

PP1 went on to say that,

It starts with really identifying strengths and I truly believe everybody has a strength, otherwise they shouldn't be part of our community, but it also includes helping a teacher, a social worker, a guidance counselor, a counselor, a community assistant, our secretary find their strength and find their passion.

When addressing the topic of goal setting, PP3 shared,

I think that we've gotten very good as a staff of figuring out each year what we want to focus on and what that looks like. Traditionally in June, Brooklyn-Queens Day is a day where nobody goes out of the building. It's a tradition that we stay together in the building and we dig into the data. We do a whole day of just needs assessment, figuring out did we get to where we wanted to go this year; if not,

what fell apart, what do we need to change; where do we want to go next year; how do we want to continue it; what's our instructional focus going to be? It's a really powerful day for us, and we've been doing it for several years. That's one way I model transformational leadership...setting aside time to bring everybody together in this work. Then really by the time that we leave that day, our goals for the next year are set.

**African American student success.** All of the themes noted represent key components of a system that must be in place to ensure the success of low income African American students in a low income setting. Research has shown that given one or two more years of academic support significantly increases the graduation rate of African American students. Those additional years are provided to students in a transfer school setting.

Transfer schools are allowed more time to graduate students as a part of the 6-year cohort. They provide two additional years for students to get on track and graduate. When looking at the graduation rate of African American students spanning between 4 and 6 years after entering high school, the 4-year graduation rate for African American students is 65%, the 5-year rate is 72% (2010 cohort) and the 6-year is 73% (2009 cohort) (Burman & Beattie, 2015, p. 30). The study conducted by Burman and Beattie (2015), showed that with an additional 2 years the graduation rate for African American students increased by 8%. This success is as a result of students being given more opportunities to graduate through programs such a transfer schools.

Some transfer school principals shared what many of these success stories looked like in their school communities. PP1 noted that,

I've had some serious, heart wrenching, success stories that were...once graduation comes there's like not a dry eye pretty much in the auditorium. Even I'm up there like...you know. Because it seems so impossible based on what the child brought to the table. I think, to be a transformational leader, you really have to...you have to see what's possible even when you are like enveloped in the impossible. Then, you fight from there.

When addressing college readiness upon graduation, PP2 shared, “We are paying specific attention to who is getting ready to graduate, where are they going, and what [are the] scaffolds. Why are they using these scaffolds and when are they being pulled out.”

Another example of how the characteristics, traits, behaviors and even sheer determination of the principals was reflected in student outcomes was shown when PP2 shared this story:

There was a scholar named...I can't remember his full name but he died maybe within the last 10 years. He wrote a fascinating book about this affluent Black community. More affluent Blacks who lived in a...you know. Affluent Blacks, they were going to a great school. His research showed that even with an affluent black school, in this great school in an affluent community, they were trying to avoid these AP courses like the plague. John, that's his name. He began to list the reasons, because he interviewed them. Interviewed the parents as well. What he uncovered is what I'm experiencing. [Students were saying] “I don't need that, like why do I have to take that? And you can tell them for days all the benefits and, "I just want to graduate, nope, don't want it, don't care, don't." So, it got to a point where I said, "Okay, we're going to stop asking them. Just put them



in it. Just don't ask them, we're not doing that. Just put them in." Since then, there's still a lot of push back but it just takes a lot to... a lot of energy to convince them "no stay, no stay, no stay." One girl said, "I'm not coming to school until you take me out." So, she stayed out. She stayed out of school. I'm not going to lie, I only have a handful of students who are actually proud to be in an AP course. We put all the... what do you call it? We dressed it up nicely and made it seem like, you are selected. Like we sat down as a committee. We looked through every student and you were selected and this is a privilege and this, that, and other and, did I mention you were selected? The results have been uneven. Even for those who are in it, there is still a level of, there's still some pushback, definitely, we still have work to do in terms of addressing the mindset that's associated with that, you know.

Due to the persistence of these transformational leaders, some students were given opportunities to be exposed to high level curriculum, which prepared them for college that they may not have been otherwise exposed to. Despite some of the uphill battles, the evidence is clear that when systems are put into place and implemented by a transformational leader, the impact on the student population can be life changing.

Table 4.7 notes the commonalities between the best practices that emerged from the principal interviews in comparison to how those practices were reflected in the literature as well as the theoretical frameworks. The results are as follows,

Table 4.7

*The Frequency Count of Strategies Implemented by the Principal to Improve Teacher Practices and Student Outcomes.*

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<u>Strategies</u>	Number of Times	Number of Times	Noted in
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	<u>Noted by Participants</u>	<u>Noted in Literature</u>	<u>Framework</u>
Feedback	N= 26	N= 0	No
Vision	N= 14	N= 7	Yes
Collaboration	N= 6	N= 1	Yes
Modeling	N= 8	N= 6	Yes

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*Note:* N=The number of times strategies were mentioned by principals

**Additional findings.** This research study found that among the most important strategies to improve graduation rates among African American students involved the school principal having a clear vision for student success, collaborating with all stakeholders, modeling best practices and providing ongoing feedback for the purpose of monitoring and making adjustments. It was found that these strategies were successful when implemented in transfer school communities serving a high population of low income African American students based on the research. The research showed that this demographic of student was more successful when they had a relationship with an adult in the school community that they could identify with and relate to and were held to high expectations. As noted, when given two additional years of academic support in a transfer school setting, there was an 8% increase in the graduation rate (Burman & Beattie, 2015).

To further support the concept of African American students having relationships with adults and its impact on student outcomes, Hurd et al. (2012) conducted a longitudinal study in which they explored the idea of “Natural mentors, racial identity, and educational attainment among African American adolescents” (p. 1196). As a part of their research, they looked at how “feeling connected to other African Americans may help African American adolescents reject the negative perceptions of their group held by

members of other racial and ethnic groups” (p. 1196). Hurd et.al (2012) go on to say that “relationships with natural mentors may foster resilience among academically at-risk African American adolescents by promoting more positive racial identity beliefs and strengthening their beliefs in the importance of school for future success” (p. 1210). They also found that “participants who reported having a natural mentor at any time since the age of 14 had a greater likelihood of completing high school and attending college” (Hurd et al., 2012, p. 1199).

The demographic data noted in Tables 4.2 and 4.3 showed a consistent pattern of principals hiring staff members that allowed for more of a culturally balanced school setting. Placing adults within the school community such as teachers, administrators and support staff that were more reflective of the student population increased the chances of students making connections with those adults based on the research of Hurd et al. (2012) which could potentially result in “foster(ing) resilience among academically at-risk African American adolescents by promoting more positive racial identity beliefs and strengthening their beliefs in the importance of school for future success” (Hurd et al., 2012, p. 1210). With those pivotal members of the school community within reach, resources, systems and strategies could then be put into place through the decision making of transformational leaders. Those strategies, when effectively employed could potentially help to improve student outcomes.

### **Chapter Summary**

The qualitative data presented in this section were identified based on the patterns of themes, and trends that were supported by the statements of the participants (Creswell, 2013). Throughout the study, the researcher utilized the process of hand coding

(Creswell, 2013) in which participant statements were initially categorized based on how school leaders and members of the focus group responded to questions that were posed during their interviews. Next, the responses were categorized based on the themes that emerged as a result of participant responses and finally, specific themes were highlighted based on how they were aligned with the characteristics, beliefs, traits, and decision making practices of the transformational leaders in addition to their alignment with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

Themes were identified based on the specific terms that were mentioned three or more times by at least two principals and were noted at least once by focus group members; sub-themes resulted when a topic was noted at least three times by one principal and was supported by a member of a focus group in their school or another school.

Chapter 5 will identify implications and limitations of these results along with recommendations for policy makers, and administration of high need, urban high schools. Recommendations for further research are also provided.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This study sought to identify the behaviors, characteristics and traits of highly effective school leaders serving low income African American students. Chapter 5 seeks to discuss the extent to which the data gathered and analyzed in Chapter 4 achieved that goal. This chapter will also explore the implications and limitations of these results along with recommendations for policy makers and administrators of high need urban high schools. Suggestions for further research are also discussed.

The questions that this study sought to answer were as follows:

1. Are the behaviors, traits and characteristics of the most successful transfer school principals transformational and effective as defined by Burns (1978), Lezotte (1991), and Leithwood (1994)?
2. What are the defining characteristics of the school cultures as created by these leaders?
3. Can the higher graduation rates among African Americans in the most successful transfer high schools be attributed to the behaviors, characteristics, and decision making of the school principal?

Research findings were gathered from semi-structured interviews with principals, three focus groups made up of representatives from the administrative team, pedagogical team, and support staff, along with observations of the principals over the course of a school day.

As noted in Chapter 4, it was determined, that highly effective principals serving low-income African American students must incorporate a vision, foster collaboration, provide ongoing feedback, and model instructional best practices within their school communities. The findings also revealed that there had to be a commitment to the success of students on the part of the principal; that there must be supports in place to ensure teacher success; that there had to be high expectations for all stakeholders; and that there had to be systems in place to build capacity through distributed leadership. While these highly effective practices would prove to be effective when serving any demographic, it was found that these strategies proved to be particularly effective when serving low income African American students.

The primary themes that emerged in Chapter 4 were analyzed and interpreted in accordance with technique of *constant comparison*, which is based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To employ this method, the researcher looked for indications of categories in speech and behavior. The categories were named, coded, and compared to find consistencies or patterns within the codes. After emerging codes were determined, the a priori codes were reviewed to identify the values codes embedded in the data. Thematic patterns were viewed through the lens of relevant literature on effective leadership behaviors. This was done to provide a framework for each themes' level of importance as they related to the highly effective practices of transfer school principals serving low income, African American students.

### **Implications**

The themes and subthemes that emerged as a part of the data gathering in addition to the implications for these themes are as follows:

**Theme 1 – having a clearly defined shared vision among all stakeholders in the school community that is shaped by the school leader.** The theme of having a shared vision has significant implications for school leaders but in order to lead, a principal must first, know where he or she wants to go and second, have staff members who are willing to follow. This cannot happen without the leader’s vision and plan for how to engage the school community in the development of a clearly defined shared vision. Once a research based and data driven vision has been developed and agreed upon by all stakeholders, “buy-in” is achieved and the vision becomes more than simply an idea.

According to Leech and Fulton (2008),

One of the most difficult practices, inspiring a shared vision, requires the leader to continuously communicate this vision in such a way as to motivate followers to work toward its achievement. To accomplish this, successful leaders must utilize charismatic leadership strategies and communication to sell the vision to the entire organization. (p. 633)

In order to sell the vision, the leader must believe in the vision and possess the ability to convince others to sustain their commitment to the vision through challenging times and distractions.

Leithwood (1994) identified seven key characteristics or dimensions associated with the effective school leader. One that was particularly noteworthy for the purposes of this theme was building school vision and establishing goals. Kouzes and Posner (2007) also highlighted some of the ideal qualities of a leader when they noted that some of the characteristics of a transformational leader involve, inspiring others and creating a shared

vision by understanding the hopes, dreams, and values of their followers. With the principal also serving in the capacity of instructional leader, it is not only important to understand the direction in which you want to go, but the direction in which the passion of the stakeholders will guide them as well. It will be by understanding the hopes, dreams, and values of those stakeholders that this can be done with fidelity.

**Theme 2 – having a collaborative school community where all stakeholders take part in the decision making process.** Leech and Fulton (2008) posited that “the traditional roles of teachers and principals have changed and improved organizational teamwork is fostered by all members of the learning community assuming decision making roles” (p. 630). A common phrase that is being used in more collaborative planning sessions in school communities is that “the answer is in the room.” Not long ago, this was not the case, particularly in a school setting. All of the major decisions were made primarily by the principal. The exception may have been when the principal made decisions in collaboration with the assistant principal.

Shared decision making (SDM), which can be traced back to the early 90s in the works of Allen and Glickman (1992) caused a seismic shift in how decision making is made at the school level. The implications of SDM for practicing principals as well as for aspiring leaders in principal training programs were huge, as it shifted the paradigm from the principal being the primary and/or sole decision maker within a school community to a model based on collaboration and teamwork involving all stakeholders.

Leithwood (1994) stressed the importance of this concept when he noted the characteristics of highly effective principals which involved developing structures to foster participation in school decisions. Based on the interviews with highly effective



transfer school principals, those structures allowed staff members to make mistakes while implementing new initiatives without the fear of repercussions. They also involved frequent meetings that included all stakeholders, administrators, teachers, parents, students, and support staff. Finally, the structures allowed the school leader to build a culture of collaboration through relationships with members of the school community. They developed a level of comfort with sharing ideas, respectfully disagreeing with the ideas of others, and coming to a consensus that is in the best interest of the school community.

**Theme 3 – providing ongoing, specific and actionable feedback.** Providing specific and actionable feedback to teachers in a timely manner is an essential practice for highly effective school leaders. This is the only means by which teachers will be clear about the expectations of the school leader. It is also a means by which the principal checks to ensure that the teachers are on the right path toward achieving school-wide goals. According to Lia (2016), “When teachers are observed and given meaningful, constructive feedback on their teaching, they have the knowledge to know what adjustments to make to change” (p. 311). Without feedback, teachers are essentially working in a vacuum and they have to use whatever experience they may have to determine if they are on the right path. If for some reason, their judgement leads them in the wrong directions, it could potentially have damaging effects on the students and ultimately on the school community as a whole.

This has significant implications for the principal of a transfer school because many teachers may be dealing with this unique population for the first time and will need ongoing feedback to understand how to support their specific needs. Providing feedback

is also essential because a poor decision on the part of the teacher may lead to a student becoming disengaged.

When speaking about feedback, one focus group member noted that the school leader is someone who should have,

Integrity, somebody that you can trust, who's trustworthy, who's honest, honest with the feedback that at the end of the day, when they're going to come and visit you, they're going to be more supportive coming to help you, not coming to get you, in a way. Also, as far as leadership, they have to understand how adults learn, just like they do the first day [with] students... You have to approach everyone differently. And then still, holding everybody accountable to a certain standard. (SP3, School B)

Brockhart & Moss (2015) noted that “professional learning targets provide a focus for professional feedback. That feedback is best delivered in professional conversations between the teacher and the principal” (p. 25). They go on to say that “feedback should feed teacher learning forward, identifying next steps – next targets – in a journey toward the goal the teacher has selected” (p. 26). This goes back to the second theme of the community having a shared vision. This allows for focus on the target when feedback is given, which allows the teacher and the school leader to collaboratively plan for achieving the larger goal, while meeting smaller goals in increments along the way.

**Theme 4 – modeling best practices.** It has been argued in school leadership circles that leaders cannot assume what members of their school community know and do not know. A highly effective leader has to assume that members of the school community may not fully understand all expectations. The leader must then provide

training and model best practices so that they are able to build capacity in their communities while holding staff members accountable for the implementation of those expectations. This has implications for school leaders, particularly in the transfer school setting, because the expectations will look different in comparison to what is expected within a traditional school. The reason is that transfer school teachers work with students who sometimes bring negative preconceptions from their previous school to the new school community. Changing the mindset of the students may require different strategies on the part of teachers. Because the expectations are different, the school leader must not only tell, but show what is expected. As a result of the school leader having many responsibilities both inside and outside of the school community, he or she may not always be the primary person modeling best practices. This is why building capacity through distributed leadership is key.

Gay (1995) posited that “The best way to ensure that individuals will learn to be good teachers is through practice under the tutelage of others who have established records of success” (p. 103). When modeling best practices, particularly for new teachers in a school community, it is important that the school leader selects an educator who has demonstrated success in the classroom as a model and mentor. This is significant because new teachers must not only understand, they must buy into the culture and vision of the school. Having a highly effective educator model best practices is also important because it is a means by which the school leader is able to replicate best practices across the school community. This will have a positive impact on student outcomes while communicating to the staff that the entire staff is moving in the same direction.

**Sub-theme 1 – commitment to student success.** Commitment to the success of students is a significant finding that has obvious implications for school leaders and all stakeholders who are invested in the success of students. Before any steps can be taken to improve outcomes within a school community, there must first be a belief system in place which accepts that success is attainable with hard work. In addition to commitment to student success, there also has to be a high level of competency and a willingness to make sacrifices, particularly in a transfer school setting, in order to improve student outcomes. According to Cheung (2009), “struggling students in urban secondary classrooms need knowledgeable and committed teachers for academic success” (p. 16). It is not enough for teachers to be committed, they must also be knowledgeable.

I will use Landsberg’s (1996) *will vs. skill* matrix to add further clarification. The teacher who is knowledgeable, but is not committed has the skill, but not the will. While this teacher may be very knowledgeable in pedagogical practice and content, the teacher does not have the level of commitment that is paramount to ensure student success, particularly in a transfer school setting. This teacher will need to be motivated by the school leader and a purposeful effort will have to be made on the part of the leader to build connections between the teacher and the school community.

The teacher who is committed without the knowledge has the will without the skill. This teacher may have the best intentions to move students toward success but not possess the pedagogical or content knowledge he or she will need to bring about the academic change that is critically needed. This teacher will need further guidance and instructional support to build his or her pedagogical skillset.

Cheung (2009) goes on to say that,

Teacher commitment is strongly influenced by variable conditions that are largely controlled and determined by leaders. This is good news because it indicates that issues of commitment are not fixed and unalterable, but can be addressed with focus and effort. (P. 17)

This is particularly important for school leaders because the level of commitment on the part of teachers is largely shaped by the level of commitment that is demonstrated by the school leader.

If the school leader has a fixed mindset, then it is likely that the staff will have a fixed mindset, but if the leader looks at student success through the lens of a growth mindset, then teachers are more likely to display a growth mindset. Because transfer schools serve a unique and sometimes challenging population, it is important that the individuals serving them have an unshakeable commitment to their success and a belief that their efforts can and will bring about change.

**Sub-theme 2 – having supports in place to ensure teacher success.** While all of the themes previously noted are pivotal practices for highly effective leaders to implement within a school community, they would be futile if the leader does not also put support systems in place to ensure teacher success. According to Nayir (2012),

It can be said that one of the key factors ensuring teachers adaptation to developments is teachers' level of commitment to their schools. In this commitment, the teacher is expected to internalize the organizational objectives. The teacher's perception of organizational support is important for him to

internalize the organizational goals, because, teachers feeling supported will contribute more to achieve the objectives of the school. (p. 97)

Essentially, what Nayir (2012) is saying is that teachers must feel like they are being supported in order to buy into and ultimately work toward the goals of the school.

Traditionally, teachers have worked in silos and remained on islands unto themselves.

With the shift in recent years toward more collaborative practices, there has been more of a push by administrators to provide more instructional support. There has also been more of a desire on the part of teachers to be supported.

This has significant implications for highly effective school principals in a transfer school setting because principals must ensure that there are systems in place within their school communities to fully support teachers. If teachers do not feel like they are being supported, they are less likely to support students. Based on principal interviews, support by highly effective school leaders in a transfer school setting may include:

1. Purposely developing a master schedule that allowed for common planning time.
2. Providing mentors to new teachers.
3. Sending teacher offsite for content-specific professional development.
4. Frequently observing teachers, modeling best practice and providing immediate and actionable feedback.
5. Making Professional Learning Communities a part of the school's culture.
6. The administrator having an open-door policy where teachers can feel comfortable engaging in discourse.

7. Providing tangible resources to teachers such as paper and supplies to make the process of planning and instruction less cumbersome.

**Sub-theme 3 – having high expectations for all stakeholders.** As noted, a characteristic of effective transfer school principals includes having high expectations of teachers. Because transfer schools serve a population of students who were not successful in a traditional high school setting, there must be a unique set of educators in transfer schools who are dedicated to fostering that shift on the part of students from mediocrity to excellence and from failure to success. This is in direct alignment with what Yeager et al. (2014) say about creating a culture of high expectations.

Examples of building a culture of high expectations, as noted by the principals, included building capacity in as many staff as possible, creating a supportive culture and respecting teachers as professionals. Principals also spoke about the importance of building trust among members of their staff.

**Sub-theme 4 – building capacity through distributed leadership.** It goes without saying that it would be essentially impossible for a school leader to effectively run a school community without any assistance. The responsibilities of the school leader can run the gamut from meeting with parents to discussing the academic plan for a student, to meeting with a contractor to discuss the most feasible time to install new windows. This could not be done without the buy-in and support of the dedicated members of a school community. This is why building capacity through distributive leadership is so important. By building capacity, specifically related to having strong instructional leaders in place, allows for a sharing of a wide variety of instructional practices. It also allows the principal to address other issues that may arise over the

course of the school day knowing that instructional practices will continue to be implemented throughout the school community, and that students will continue to be challenged in their classrooms without interruption.

According to Johnson (2012),

Specific strategies for increasing instructional capacity include encouraging teachers to work as members of teams, creating differentiated roles for expert teachers to assist and lead colleagues, and developing a career-based pay system that aligns the interests of teachers with the needs of schools. (p. 64)

Bullough (2007) stresses the importance of building capacity by creating teacher teams when he posits that “School reform consists of teacher education and capacity building; powerful teacher education is more than a matter of learning about and practicing promising teaching techniques, it involves engagement in exploring, with others, pressing personal and professional problems and issues” (p. 168).

As new and remediating teachers collaborate and engage with those who have demonstrated instructional success, they will begin to take on many of the leadership qualities of those that they follow, which will build capacity across the school community. Having educators who have demonstrated success serve in a leadership capacity will not only challenge other teachers to improve their personal practices, but increase the likelihood that those teachers will buy into organizational goals and objectives. They will see themselves as playing a pivotal role in the structure as a whole.

With regards to building capacity, Johnson (2012) also mentioned the idea of developing a system for compensating teachers that is in alignment with the teacher’s interests and the needs of the school community. This strategy would prove to be a win-



win situation for both administrators and teachers as the school would be able to capitalize on the skill and expertise that the teacher is sharing with his or her colleagues while the teacher is recognized and financially compensated for his or her mastery.

Building capacity in this manner has significant implications for school leaders serving low income African American students because students who enter a new school community with a preconceived opinion of the school based on their previous experiences will need more individualized attention in order to shift their mindsets. This cannot happen if the responsibility for bringing about the shift solely lies on the school leader. Building capacity within a transfer school setting will increase the number of professionals in the building who are able to provide the individualized support that a transfer student will need to be successful.

### **Limitations**

There are currently 57 transfer schools located in the city of New York. Of the 57 schools, 10 schools were identified as having a population of 80% or more African American students. Of the 10 schools identified, three schools were selected based on their graduation rate, credit accumulation, and Regents exam pass rates. Having a sample size of three schools limited the range of data that could be collected and thus the strategies that were implemented across school communities to increase opportunities for student success. Having a greater number of participants would have expanded the amount of data gathered related to the belief, characteristics, and traits of highly effective transfer school principals serving low income African American students. Having more participants might have also revealed some strategies that were not as successful. These

unsuccessful strategies could have been shared to prevent other schools from replicating the same mistakes.

As the principal of a transfer school that has one of the highest populations of African American students in the city of New York, the position of the researcher was both that of an insider and an outsider who brings prior experience to the research. This has advantages as well as disadvantages. An advantage would be that the researcher already has a rapport with the participants which allowed for a level of comfort and ease during the interview process. Having the experience of being a transfer school principal with a similar population also allowed the researcher to pose more specific and probing follow up questions related to the practices implemented by the school leaders.

A disadvantage is that due to the collegial nature of the relationship between the researcher and the participants, there may have been less of a willingness to be fully transparent about strategies that were not as effective. Additionally, there may have been a lack of willingness to share other problems that may have existed within the school community. To prevent the potential for bias, the researcher worked in conjunction with the dissertation committee to develop questions, limiting subjectivity in participant responses while allowing the researcher to gather the data necessary to answer questions about how to serve this unique population.

Training an interviewer who was not connected to the transfer school community was considered. However, the advantages of the researcher having an in depth knowledge of transfer schools, allowing the researcher the ability to ask more probing questions, outweighed the unintended disadvantages that may have come with utilizing an outside interviewer.

It was the researcher's intention to have an evenly distributed population as a part of the focus group which consisted of three school administrators/leaders, three teachers and three support staff members. Due to limited access to staff, the sample sizes of the focus groups were either smaller than initially anticipated or did not have an even distribution of school leaders, teachers and support staff members. Having a greater number or larger range of participants may have allowed for more diversity in responses. It may have also offered a wider perspective on why the schools were successful through the lens of a variety of experiences.

### **Recommendations**

While all of the best practices noted have proven to be successful in these school communities, it is also important to recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all method for improving outcomes in a school community. While the strategies noted can be employed in any school community, the school leader must also be a reflective practitioner who understands his or her specific community and is able to make adjustments as needed to improve student outcomes. With that said, numerous recommendations emerged from the study.

**Recommendation 1 – having more culturally relevant courses to address and support the demographic of the school community.** Tomlinson and Jarvis (2014) conducted a qualitative study in which they looked at how teachers “contributed to the academic success of minority students of high potential from economically disadvantaged backgrounds” (p. 199). As a part of their study, they looked at the *discontinuity paradigm*, which highlights how “underachievement can be attributed to the failure of teachers and schools from the dominant culture to offer culturally responsive curriculum

and instruction that acknowledges and values diverse perspectives” (Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2014, p. 194). They found that teachers who were most effective put forth genuine effort to understand their students’ experiences and perspectives, including cultural and family experiences.

When school principals were asked “What courses, if any, does your school offer that are aligned up with the makeup of your student population?” PP1 shared that, “we actually ordered a book to run a multicultural English class where we went beyond the so called canon, and we started bringing in works by minority women around the world.” PP2 stated that, “text that is used in courses is culturally relevant to our students and the social justice issues brought up.” While this certainly is a good place to start, it is important that school leaders be more intentional about exposing students to culturally relevant courses. These classes will provide a lens through which students can see themselves and allow them to make connections to people who look like them, have similar backgrounds, are successful in their fields and have had a wide range of experiences. This not only gives students something to aspire to, but begins the process of removing whatever negative connotations they may have held about their own culture or ethnicity due to prior experiences.

**Recommendation 2 – incorporating a transfer school component into principal training programs.** In her article on principal training programs, Gill (2012) notes the following,

Principals who can make a difference, particularly in troubled urban schools, are in a new kind of job, one no longer centered on "books, boilers, and buses." Instead, today's principal needs to focus on improving teaching and learning.

Virtually all states have taken the first step toward bolstering this type of leadership by adopting new learning-centered standards that redefine the principal's role. Some are using those standards to push for long-overdue redesigns of training programs. Urban districts from Boston to San Diego, meanwhile, are working with nonprofits and local universities to develop high-quality training that helps principals succeed--and stay--on the job. Early signs indicate that investing in training may pay dividends to students. Unfortunately, strong principal training programs remain the exception, not the rule. Too often, programs, especially university-based ones where the majority of school leaders are trained, inadequately prepare future principals for the challenges that will face them, most notably in schools with high needs. (p. 25)

The New York City Leadership Academy, which is a product of The Wallace Foundation and also is the foundation of Gill's (2012) article, has had the responsibility over the past 15 years, of training and placing many of the principals who currently serve in leadership positions in New York City. The program's components or requirements as noted on their website include the following:

1. Six-week Summer Intensive, where building administrators work in project teams on a school scenario that reflects actual challenges in New York City schools;
2. Year-long, school-based Residency, with a Leadership Academy-trained mentor principal; and

3. Planning Summer, which assists participants in their transition to becoming principals of New York City public schools (Wallace Foundation, 2017, para. 4).

While the program is geared towards training principals to lead in traditionally low performing schools, the program does not reflect any coursework that specifically prepares principals to enter the transfer school setting.

The Center for Integrated Teacher Education (CITE, 2017), which has had a partnership with the New York City Department of Education through their principal preparation programs going back to the late 90s, has a curriculum that includes the following required courses:

EDA 505 – Introduction to Administration

EDA 590 – Seminar: Critical Issues in Educational Administration & Supervision

EDA 503 – Leadership in Curriculum Development & Revision

EDA 510 – Supervision & Teacher Development

EDA 550 – School Finance

EDA 540 – Education Law

EDA 546/547 – Internship 1 & Internship 2

While this program offers the foundational courses that any aspiring leader would need to transition into a traditional school setting, it does not offer the additional skillset and insights needed to effectively run a transfer school.

While the programs noted are a minute reflection of a wide variety of principal training programs in New York City, they demonstrate how the programs that are placing the largest number of school leaders in New York City public schools are not preparing

them to enter the transfer school setting or specifically serve high need populations. The fact that principals who enter transfer schools must spend at least 6 months ramping up their knowledge of the inner workings of transfer schools speaks volumes about how this learning curve could have an impact on long-term student outcomes. There is also the issue of those at the district level who have not been trained on the unique needs of transfer schools and are, as a result, unable to adequately support these school communities.

Incorporating a course requirement on understanding transfer and alternative schools would decrease the amount of time that a new principal would spend learning about the transfer school community, allowing them more time to focus on supporting teachers, which could significantly improve student outcomes in a shorter time period.

**Recommendation 3 – the school leader must be intentional about building school community and culture in schools serving low income African American students.** Leithwood (1994) identified seven key characteristics or dimensions associated with the effective school leader. One of the dimensions involved creating a productive school culture. Kruger et al. (2007), when speaking about transformational leadership, noted that this style of leadership “has a positive impact on teacher motivation, professional growth, and on a variety of organizational conditions, including school culture, contributing to educational change in schools” (p. 16).

In a 6-year study conducted by Wahlstrom Louis, Leithwood and Anderson (2010), it was found that “leadership is second only to teaching among school-related factors as an influence on student learning” (p.9). It is important that the school leader uses his or her influence to shape a school culture that is focused on improving outcomes

for low income African American students. It is equally important that this culture does not replicate what takes place in traditional school settings as many transfer school students have had negative experiences associated with those settings. The school's culture must be grounded in the school leader's understanding of what the students' value, what ideals they hold to be true, and how they see themselves reflected within the school community.

**Recommendation 4 – the school leader must ensure that there are mentorship programs in place as an additional layer of support for African American students.** According to Dupere, Leventhal, Crosnoe, and Dion (2010), the effects of living in a disadvantaged community can be mediated. Mentoring and tutoring have been lauded as useful tools to improve educational aspirations of at-risk youth, mediating negative environmental influence.

Hurd et al. (2012) further support this recommendation when then they posit that “relationships with natural mentors may foster resilience among academically at-risk African American adolescents by promoting more positive racial identity beliefs and strengthening their beliefs in the importance of school for future success” (p. 1210). They also found that “participants who reported having a natural mentor at any time since the age of 14 had a greater likelihood of completing high school and attending college” (Hurd et al., 2012, p. 1199). The leaders who make pivotal decisions while keeping the demographics of their student population in mind, afford more opportunities for students to be engaged which could result in improved outcomes.

It is important to note, however, that the school leaders be intentional about the implementation of mentorship programs by building partnerships with community based



organizations and purposefully recruiting members of the school community to increase the level of student exposure to mentors, which will increase their chances for success.

**Recommendation 5 – further research is needed on successful alternative school models in other parts of the country or the world.** According to Ruebel et al. (2001), “One of the most promising approaches for addressing the needs of dropouts, as well as students struggling in traditional schools and considering dropping out, is placement in an alternative school program” (p. 58). They go on to say that “some of the contributing factors to alternative school success include smaller school and class size, more individualized attention from teachers, nontraditional and varied curricula...” (p. 59). Raywid (1994) remarks that,

Despite the ambiguities and the emergence of multiple alternatives, two enduring consistencies have characterized alternative schools from the start: they have been designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally served by the regular program, and, consequently have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization, programs and environments. (p. 26)

These characteristics of alternative school would likely hold true in most situations.

However, further research is needed to determine whether effective practices have been identified and are being implemented in other parts of the country or the world that may not have been identified through this study.

## **Conclusion**

Why is there a need to study highly effective leaders who serve in transfer schools where there is a large population of low income African American students? The research tells us that there is a need because this population, despite interventions at the

traditional level, have continued to demonstrate a lower rate of success in comparison to their peers.

Although traditional high schools have proven to be successful with many students, according to NYSED (2015), African American students are consistently graduating at a lower rate than their peers. African American students graduated from traditional New York City Schools at a 65% graduation rate in comparison to their White peers who graduated at an 88% rate and their Asian peers who graduated at an 85% rate, showing a clear disparity in the rate of success within the traditional Grades 9-12 setting. In the traditional high school setting, the graduation rate is based on the 4-year cohort. For each year that a student graduates after their 4<sup>th</sup> year in a traditional school model, the school's data is negatively impacted. While the state, city and local districts have tried to address the disparities in graduation rates among different ethnic groups, they have done so with limited success.

According to a New York Times article dated January 12, 2016:

New York State education officials have pushed to create more ways for students to demonstrate they are qualified to graduate. Instead of requiring students to pass one Regents exam in math, English, science and two in social studies, the Regents said in 2014 that students could exchange the second social studies exam for an approved alternative, like a language exam or an assessment of vocational skills, such as accounting or hospitality management. (Harris, 2016, p. A23)

Despite the efforts on the part of the state to increase the graduation rate, the article points out that “ a double-digit gap remained in city schools: 85 percent of Asian students graduated, as did 82 percent of Whites, while Black and Hispanic students graduated at a

rate of 65.4 percent and 64 percent” respectively (p. A23). In response to these noteworthy disparities, alternative school programs have served and continue to serve as a last opportunity for students to achieve success and earn their high school diplomas.

Alternatives, outside of the public education system, were among the first options to traditional schooling and their emergence inspired a movement of reform within the public schools beginning in the latter half of the 1960s (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Using the characteristics of alternative schools outside of public education, educators within the public school system designed their own alternatives to conventional education with the advent of open schools. These schools were characterized by parent, student, and teacher choice; autonomy in learning and pace; non-competitive evaluation; and a child-centered approach. The existence of the open schools greatly influenced the creation of public alternatives at all levels of education, including the following,

- Schools without walls – emphasized community-based learning; individuals within the community were brought in to teach students.
- Schools within a school – intended to make large high schools into smaller communities of belonging; individual groups were designed to meet educational needs and interests of students.
- Multicultural schools – designed to integrate culture and ethnicity into the curriculum; some had a diverse student body and some catered to a specific ethnic group.
- Continuation schools – used as an option for those who were failing in the regular school system because of issues such as dropout, pregnancy, failing grades; these schools were less competitive and more individualized.

- Learning centers – intended to meet particular student needs by including special resources, such as vocational education, in the school setting.
- Fundamental schools – emphasized a back to basics approach in reaction to the lack of academic rigor perceived in the free schools.
- Magnet schools – developed in response to the need for racial integration; offered a curriculum that emphasized themes meant to attract diverse groups of students from a range of racial and cultural backgrounds (Young, 1990).

Transfer high schools in NYC, which are a form of continuation schools, were created as a means of re-engaging and retaining students who had not benefitted from external motivators found in the traditional setting such as clubs, sports teams, and other incentive programs. Having their start in the early 1990s as a subcomponent of alternative schools, they emerged as a result of policy shifts in the New York City Department of Education, which focused on small schools that partnered with community based organizations with the purpose of addressing the needs of overaged and under-credited students. Their mission was, and continues to be, to afford students additional opportunities for graduation. These schools hoped to inspire students so that their chances for success could potentially increase.

Through this study, it has been revealed that simply enrolling in a transfer school or alternative school program is not enough. The school has to be led by a highly effective transformational leader with the characteristics, traits, and behaviors that will allow them to make the decisions to shift professional practices within their school communities to improve student outcomes. Some key themes that emerged as being implemented in highly effective transfer school communities included the following:

- Theme 1 – Having a clearly defined shared vision among all stakeholders in the school community that is shaped by the school leader.
- Theme 2 – Having a collaborative school community where all stakeholders take part in the decision making process.
- Theme 3 – Providing ongoing, specific and actionable feedback
- Theme 4 – Modeling best practices

Other emerging themes or subthemes that proved to be effective when working with large populations of African American students included the following:

- Sub-theme 1 – Having a commitment to student success
- Sub-theme 2 – Having supports in place to ensure teacher success
- Sub-theme 3 – High expectations for all stakeholders
- Sub-theme 4 - Building capacity through distributed leadership

It will be through the implementation, reflection, and revision of the practices identified in this study that the process can begin of closing the gap between African American students and their peers. It is also the hope of this researcher that with the effective implementation of these practices across traditional school communities, there would no longer be a need for alternative schools.

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## Appendix A

### Principal Interview Protocol

#### Introductory Protocol

*To facilitate note-taking, I would like to audio tape our conversations today. Please sign the release form. For your information, only I will be privy to the tapes which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. In addition, you must sign a form devised to meet our human subject requirements. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) I do not intend to inflict any harm. Thank you for your agreeing to participate.*

*I have planned this interview to last no longer than one hour. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning.*

#### Introduction

You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as a highly-effective transfer school leader. This research project as a whole focuses on the identification of transformational leadership and highly-effective leadership practices in transfer schools that serve a high population of low-income African-American students. The study also aims to identify the traits and characteristics that you possess and how those traits and characteristics may or may not be related to the outcomes in your school community.

#### **A. Interview Background**

How long have you been ...

\_\_\_\_\_ in your present position?

\_\_\_\_\_ at this institution?

Interesting background information on interview:

What is your highest degree? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your field of study? \_\_\_\_\_

What process did you go through to arrive to the position of principal? \_\_\_\_\_

1. How would you describe your leadership style?

Probes: Do you believe that there is a relationship between your leadership style and your upbringing? If so, what is the relationship?

2. What characteristics do you believe effective leaders should possess?

Probe: Do you possess any of those characteristics? If so, what impact do you believe they have on student outcomes?

3. How are you involved in the day to day decision making in the school?

Probe: Would you say that you micro-manage or macro-manage your school and how has that had an impact on student outcomes?

### **B. Institutional Perspective**

1. What strategies have been implemented for improving teaching, learning, and assessment?

Probe: Is it working – why or why not?

2. What resources are available to faculty for improving student outcomes?

3. What rewards does faculty receive from you as a school leader for engaging in innovative teaching/learning and assessment strategies?

Probe: Do you see a widening of the circle of leaders at your school?

4. What innovative or unique initiatives have been implemented at your school to improve student outcomes?

Probe: What is being accomplished through these campus-based initiatives?

### **C. Leadership**

1. What is your definition of a transformational leader?

Probe: How do you model leadership in your school community?

2. How do you identify members of your school community to serve in leadership positions?

Probe: Can you provide some examples of how you build leadership capacity in your school community?

3. How is leadership distributed in your school community?

Probe: How has the distribution of leadership helped to improve student outcomes?

4. How has professional practice improved under your leadership?

#### **D. Addressing Barriers to Student Success**

1. What are some of the major challenges your school faced when implementing new initiatives?

Probes: How were they overcome or is the school still working to overcome them?

2. How has your faculty and staff worked together to build relationships with students?

Probe: Provide examples of how those relationships have impacted student outcomes.

3. How has your school community worked to change student perception of school?

#### **E. Teaching and Learning**

1. Describe how teaching, learning, and assessment practices are improving in your school community

Probe: How do you know? (criteria, evidence)

2. Is the assessment of teaching and learning a major focus of attention and discussion here?

Probe: why or why not? (reasons, influences)

3. What college and/or career courses have been implemented in your school?

Probe: How have rigorous courses had an impact on student outcomes?

4. Are there any particular characteristics that you associate with faculty who take on leadership roles and/or innovative teaching/learning initiatives?

5. What courses, if any does your school offer students that are in alignment with the make-up of your student population? (e.g. culturally relevant courses, social justice courses, etc.)

Probe: What has been the student response to these types of courses?

## **Appendix B**

### **Transformational Leadership Focus Group Questions**

1. When you think of school leadership, what comes to mind?
2. How has your principal modeled leadership within your school?
3. How is leadership distributed throughout your school community?
4. Speak about opportunities that have been provided to members of the faculty to take on leadership roles.
5. In what way has your professional practice improved under the leadership of your principal?
6. How has your principal recognized and supported the innovation or ideas of teachers?
7. How does the principal encourage and celebrate stakeholders in the building?
8. How has the distribution of leadership helped to improve student outcomes?
9. What programs have been put in place to address the specific needs of African-American students?