5-2020

The Identification and the Influence of Urban School Leaders’ Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Behaviors on Leading Urban Social Justice Schools

Eliezer Hernández
EliezerHernandezEdD@gmail.com

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The Identification and the Influence of Urban School Leaders’ Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Behaviors on Leading Urban Social Justice Schools

Abstract
Educational disparities exist in the United States, specifically related to race, socioeconomic status, special education, and English language learners (Milner, 2013). Research shows that school leaders who clearly articulate the vision, the mission, and goals that evolve from personal beliefs based upon perceptions, expectations, and practices lead high achieving urban schools to achieve equitable education for all students. This qualitative phenomenological study, utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology, was designed to gain insights as to how high achieving urban school leaders’ beliefs might be influenced by their lived experiences and how these beliefs are reflected in their leadership practices to model social justice initiatives. This study employed Mezirow’s transformative learning theory for adult learners and Shields’s transformative leadership theory in education. The semi-structured interviews of six school leaders with 129 combined years of experience in urban education were analyzed and the findings revealed two major concepts: meaning perspectives and deep equitable change. Four superordinate themes emerged, including perspectives transformation, school environment, distributive leadership and moral courage. The four subordinate themes discovered included leadership playbook, starting ground up, bottom-up leader, and know better, do better. The implications and recommendations for further studies are discussed.

Document Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
Doctor of Education (EdD)

Department
Executive Leadership

First Supervisor
Cynthia P. Smith, Ed.D.

Second Supervisor
Loretta G. Quigley, Ed.D.

Subject Categories
Education

This dissertation is available at Fisher Digital Publications: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_etd/439
The Identification and the Influence of Urban School Leaders’ Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Behaviors on Leading Urban Social Justice Schools

By

Eliezer Hernández

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by
Cynthia P. Smith, Ed.D., RT (R)

Committee Member
Loretta G. Quigley, Ed.D., RN, CNE

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education
St. John Fisher College

May 2020
Dedication

To God be the Glory! I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Virginia Araujo, who valued education and ensured that her four children had an education. I know that you are looking down from heaven. I know how much you loved school and made the choice to raise your children. Without your guidance and love I would not have made it this far. I finished this doctorate for you. ¡Gracias Mamí!

To my wife, soulmate, and voice of reason, Rina, you have always been there encouraging me to finish strong in whatever I do. Thank you for showing me your love every day. To my two amazing and talented children, Enrique y Mariela, you have supported me through this journey, thank you! When times seemed gloomy, you shined a light of hope and encouraged me through your music or your simple words, “Daddy, finish your dissertation.” I am finally coming home.

To my phenomenal chair, Dr. Cynthia P. Smith, who guided me through this process and challenged me to be the best that I can be. I am forever grateful for your wisdom. To my committee member, Dr. Loretta Quigley, who stepped up and with her quiet leadership, directed me on the right path. To my spiritual advisor, Dr. Linda H. Evans, who always checked in on me throughout my illness and reminded me of God’s mercy and love. To my advisor, Dr. Michael C. Robinson, thank you for leadership and guidance throughout the process. To Dr. Theresa L. Pulos, who developed my scholarly voice and taught the importance to never be satisfied. To Dr. Pacatte, thank you for your guidance.
To my sister and school partner, Rhoda Overstreet-Wilson, we started this journey together and never looked back. Thank you for always being there. To one of the “Lost Boys of Sudan,” my brother and friend, Chol A. Majok, you are an inspiration and a man with a heart of gold. We will forever be connected. To Carol Charles, Aisha Huntley, and Veneilya A. Harden and the DEXL BLT 65, together we are unstoppable! Thank you for the support. To my friend and teammate, Nancy Daoust, who was always the voice of reason and Cindy Steven, our mother hen, thank you! Cohort 5, you taught me a lot. Thank you for the great times I will forever cherish our experiences.

To the St. John Fisher College faculty, thank you for your dedication to education and social justice.
Biographical Sketch

Eliezer Hernández is currently the principal of a bilingual school in an urban school district. Mr. Hernández attended the State University of New York at Oswego where he obtained a Bachelor of Arts in Music in 1996 and a Master’s in Secondary Education with a concentration in Spanish in 1999. He holds a certification in Spanish (7-12) and taught children for 10 years. He received his Certificate of Advanced Studies in School Building Leader and School District Administrator in 2009 from LeMoyne College. Mr. Hernández began his doctoral studies in the Ed.D. program in Executive leadership at St. John Fisher College in May of 2017. Mr. Hernández’s research was in the area of urban school leaders' beliefs under the guidance of Dr. Cynthia P. Smith and received his degree in 2020. You can reach Eliezer Hernández at elihernandez92@hotmail.com.
Abstract

Educational disparities exist in the United States, specifically related to race, socioeconomic status, special education, and English language learners (Milner, 2013). Research shows that school leaders who clearly articulate the vision, the mission, and goals that evolve from personal beliefs based upon perceptions, expectations, and practices lead high achieving urban schools to achieve equitable education for all students.

This qualitative phenomenological study, utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology, was designed to gain insights as to how high achieving urban school leaders’ beliefs might be influenced by their lived experiences and how these beliefs are reflected in their leadership practices to model social justice initiatives. This study employed Mezirow’s transformative learning theory for adult learners and Shields’s transformative leadership theory in education.

The semi-structured interviews of six school leaders with 129 combined years of experience in urban education were analyzed and the findings revealed two major concepts: meaning perspectives and deep equitable change. Four superordinate themes emerged, including perspectives transformation, school environment, distributive leadership and moral courage. The four subordinate themes discovered included leadership playbook, starting ground up, bottom-up leader, and know better, do better. The implications and recommendations for further studies are discussed.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Disproportionality in the United States public school system has been a topic of concern in all U.S. presidential campaigns and tenures since the 1960s (Vinovskis, 2015). Disproportionality can be understood as an over- or underrepresentation of a population or demographic group in a special or gifted education program (National Association for Bilingual Education, 2002). Pollock (2010) outlines three significant factors involved in causing disproportionality among racial/ethnic minority students, which include policies, practices, and beliefs. Leadership scholars believe the focal point of social justice must be framed by the inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes experienced by marginalized groups (Furman, 2012). Social justice actively “engages in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions” (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002, p. 162). Extensive government intervention has been applied to remedy the complex problem of disproportionality in public schools to no avail (McDill & Natriello, 1998).

President Lyndon B. Johnson established the first governmental efforts to combat disproportionality that led to establishing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965. The largest financial component of ESEA was Title I, which provided financial assistance to educational institutions that targeted children from low-income families. Title I required information about programs for the sake of evaluation (Vinovskis, 2015). Information collected from Title I initiatives stated that approximately
60-80% of the students taught by special education teachers were from low socioeconomic backgrounds and consisted of diverse children from lower-income, non-middle-class environments (McDill & Natriello, 1998). Also, the U.S. Office of Education in 1968 identified the narrowing achievement gap between middle-class students and those studied in low-income classifications. However, Title I evaluators concluded that the selected children and schools included in the Title I studies were not inclusive of the most educationally and economically deprived (Dunn, 1968; McDill & Natriello, 1998). Subsequently, the federal government revamped the rules and guidelines of Title I in the 1970s to support the neediest students and families (McDill & Natriello, 1998).

President Jimmy Carter established the Department of Education (DOE) as a cabinet-level position under his administration in 1979. This newly founded DOE provided new mandates for school outcomes. These new outcomes would no longer be based on governmental funding but rather on the construct of achievement. Subsequently, the United States public education system began to focus on the achievement gap. To address this new achievement concept, the state of Oregon implemented minimum compensatory testing in secondary schools to spark higher achievement in 1973, and by 1979, 33 other states had instituted minimum competency testing. Minimum competency tests were initially rigorous and resulted in mass student failures. To counteract this phenomenon, these states reduced the difficulty of the tests, resulting in a failure rate of less than 5% (Vinovskis, 2015).

Title I initiatives shifted to a standards-based reform movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s. President Bill Clinton's educational policies promoted standard-based
reform which eventually led to the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) (Rhodes, 2012). This reform sought to improve education systems by implementing standards, testing, and accountability policies that were aligned with centrally determined standards (Jennings, 2000). Under the NCLB mandate, states adopted academic standards for reading, mathematics, and science, and created assessments framed by these standards (Rhodes, 2012). Furthermore, the NCLB mandated achievement data disaggregated by student subcategory, notably socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, and disabilities (Rhodes, 2012).

Despite these efforts, the problem of disproportionality continues to affect the children who depend on the public education system. Kunjufu (2008) reports that 60% or 6 million students are in special education, which equates to a 42% increase in the last decade. While African American students represent 17% of students in public schools, African Americans represent almost 40% of special education students. Similarly, African American students are underrepresented in gifted programs, which, at 14%, comprises significantly less than their equivalent representation in the general population (Vallas, 2009). The use or misuse of special education is an example of the more extensive practice of failure in urban school districts.

Educational disparities continue to exist in the United States, specifically related to race, socioeconomic status (SES), special education, and English language learners (ELLs) (Milner, 2013). Payne and Brown (2016) reported that within large cities, African American students show 10% and 11% proficiency levels in math and reading, respectively, while White students’ proficiency levels are 47% in math and 41% in reading. Additional research has asserted that African American males experience
academic failure in urban schools including (Moore & Owens, 2008), high dropout rates (Ford, 2010), lower graduation rates (Jackson & Moore, 2006, 2008), and lower test scores (Gallant & Moore, 2008). In addition, African American males have low representation in gifted education and advanced placement courses (Ford, 2013), excessively high participation rates in special education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012a), absenteeism rates, and disciplinary infractions (Barton and Coley, 2010).

Kemerer, Sansom, and Kemerer (2005) define urban schools as learning institutions located in inner-city environments, often populated heterogeneously by race. Such schools serve high minority populations, special education students, English language learners, and a high concentration of students of low socioeconomic status, as defined by the percentage of students who receive free or reduced lunch. In 2006, The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) revised its definition of school locale types. The new “urban-centric” classification system is comprised of four major locale categories. The four categories are city, suburban, town, and rural. Each of these categories has three subcategories, small, midsize, and large. By definition, urban schools are located inside a territory, in an urbanized area inside a principal city with a population range of 50,000 to 250,000 or more (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012a).

The achievement gap is the one defining characteristic between these defined urban students in comparison to the students of other locales. An achievement gap refers to the persistent disparities of educational performance between student groups (Barton and Coley, 2010). Of particular concern is the disparity in the United States’ national standardized-test scores among African American and Latino students as compared to
White students (Barton and Coley, 2010). However, while disparities in test scores rightfully garner much public attention and debate, the achievement gap is much wider as measured by other educational indicators.

The NCES noted that all minority students constitute the majority of students in 63 of the largest school districts in the nation, while Black and Latino students comprise at least 75% of the student population in one-third of these schools (NCES, 2012b). One-third of African American male students attend urban schools, and despite some successes, most urban schools have failed to ensure African American males meet the minimum state standards required in English language arts (ELA) and math assessments (The Council of Great City Schools, 2012). In addition, African American students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged are more at risk of underachieving or dropping out of high school (Wilson, 2010).

The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) program conducted by the NCES reports that the academic achievement of African American and White public-school students has improved over time (NAEP, 2011; NAEP, 2017; Vanneman, Hamilton, Baldwin Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). However, regardless of decades of urban school reform, African American students continue to underperform and underachieve (Holzman, 2010). High school graduation rates for African American students nationwide are approximately 60% compared to 80% for White students (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). More specifically, Holzman (2010) reported that in large urban communities, such as New York City, overall graduation rates are slightly above 50% with African American males graduation rate at 28%. On average, African American students score lower than White students in NYS assessments (NCES, 2011).
NYS assessments results show the level of proficiency students’ demonstrate in each of the subject areas tested, with assigned scores of Level 1 through Level 4. The goal is for 90% of students to score at or above Level 3 (proficient). In 2011, African American students scored 31 points lower than White students in the eighth-grade mathematics assessments (NAEP, 2011).

Moreover, the difference between the basic and proficient achievement levels of the assessment was 37 points (NCES, 2011). In 2017, 81% of African American students scored at the basic level or below proficiency in reading and mathematics, while White students scored 54% at basic or below proficiency in reading and 49% in mathematics (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

A student’s race or ethnicity also appears to affect a student’s classification as disabled (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Students of color are more likely to be relegated to special education classes and thereby disassociated from the mainstream education of their peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Students segregated into special education classrooms often experience deleterious educational effects (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). For example, when key steps for stakeholder inclusion and engagement are not implemented, school leaders may struggle to implement social justice practices (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2016).

Social justice leadership requires school leaders to “make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223). As evident in DeMatthews and Mawhinney’s (2014) study of two principals leading for social justice, these school leaders attempted to create an
inclusive environment for all students by eliminating segregated classrooms of special education students with disabilities. However, an increase in negative student behaviors inhibited inclusionary practices. Consequently, these principals reverted to pulling students out of the inclusive classrooms to provide individual instruction. This pullout model denies students the access to classroom curriculum and create marginalized groups within an already marginalized group. However, DeMatthews (2015) highlights an urban elementary school principal’s ability to create a more inclusive school resulting in a different outcome. When faced with behavioral challenges similar to the DeMatthews and Mawhinney’s (2014) study, the school leader created a discipline committee comprised of teachers that focused on identifying students who needed behavioral support. The committee developed an intervention matrix with all social, emotional, and behavioral services available in the school. Additionally, the inclusion of teachers provided the school leader with teacher buy-in, which assisted the principal to build capacity, create structures that supported all students, and address the deficit perspectives of staff and teachers. Dantley and Tillman (2009) argue that social justice schools “operate in democratic environments because inherent in the fiber of democracy is the celebration of multiple voices, identities, and perspectives of all those in the community” (p. 22). These social justice schools are described as symbiotic processes, a system of mutual benefit and advantage.

The NCES (2018) reports that African Americans represent 20% of students classified with disabilities while comprising only 15.6% of total enrollment across schools in the U.S. Latinos represent 18% of classified students with disabilities and 20% of total enrollment across schools in the United States (NCES, 2018). Rates of disparity
vary across the United States. African American students have a high risk of being classified with a disability in the Northeast, Mountain, and Midwest states, as do Latino students in the New England states, such as Connecticut and Massachusetts (Metropolitan Center for Urban Education, 2009).

**Problem Statement**

The role of school leaders is essential in developing and sustaining effective urban schools by setting a vision, developing people, and redesigning the organization (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Rigby, 2014). Therefore, the problem noted for this study is twofold. First, there is limited empirical evidence on the topic of understanding how urban school leaders’ lived experiences shape beliefs to lead social justice schools. Secondly, there is a lack of understanding of how school leaders' beliefs influence social justice concerns, which may transform educational decision-making practices, creating a more equitable education for all students.

**Theoretical Rationale**

Nelson and Guerra (2014) purport the idea that personal beliefs often maintain discriminatory instructional practices. Guerra and Pazey (2016) contend that if school leaders do not examine their beliefs and biases about social justice inequalities, these leaders will not be able to create and lead social justice schools. Indeed, Rapp, Silent X, and Silent Y (2001) shared that 90% of professors and practicing educational leaders remain committed to emphasize and act upon the technical components of one’s work above the moral, which Scott and Hart (1979) referred to as *technical drifting*. Technical drifters fail to give credence to the cultural, intellectual, and emotional identities of
underrepresented groups. Technical drifters avert situations where their values, leadership styles, and professional goals can be challenged and destroyed. Furthermore, technical drifters use the positionality of power to formally or informally influence their own professional choices (Scott & Hart, 1979).

Given this statistic, transformational leadership is needed whereby leaders bring positive changes in individuals, groups, and teams by inspiring vision, and motivating followers to transcend their self-interests for a collective purpose (Warrick, 2011). School leaders should be required to examine their own stance, especially within the context of their own beliefs and assumptions that considerably dictate these leaders’ day-to-day decision making and responsibilities (Furman, 2012). Fenstermacher (1979) claims that through individuals’ reflection and challenge, adults evaluate and adjust their thinking and transform from “what is subjectively reasonable for them to believe to what is objectively reasonable for them to believe” (p.167). Mezirow’s (1990) transformative adult learning theory lends insight by providing a framework that allows for critical reflection and rational discourse.

Mezirow’s transformative learning theory originally stems from a national study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education in the 1970s. This study involved 83 women who were returning to college through 12 different reentry programs. Mezirow’s research prompted the development of an adult learning theory for adult development, which he called “perspective transformation.” The main premise of the study was to identify components that commonly hindered or assisted in reentry programs (Cagney, 2014). Due to this national study, a transformative learning movement evolved in North American adult education. Mezirow (1990) found that adults are trapped by their own
meaning-making perspectives and are unable to make interpretations of their personal experience free from bias. Mezirow was interested in worldviews and what leads to the changing of particular views of the world. Mezirow (1996) posits that frames of reference are the structures of assumptions through which adults filter and understand experiences. A frame of reference contains cognitive, conative, and emotional components and is comprised of two dimensions: “habits of mind” and “a point of view” (p. 5). Habits of mind are universal, orienting, habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting influenced by assumptions that form a set of codes. These codes may be cultural, educational, social, political or psychological. A point of view, on the other hand, is the complex of feelings; beliefs, judgment, and attitudes adults have regarding specific individuals or groups (p. 5).

Mezirow’s (1996) transformative learning theory refers to past experiences that guide future events based on human communication. The theory describes how people develop and then implement critical self-reflection to reevaluate their beliefs and experiences and over time, to change dysfunctional ways of seeing the world into new beliefs that provoke new action. According to Mezirow (2000), transformative learning involves the experience of a deep shift in the foundations of one’s thoughts, feelings, and actions. This forms a shift of consciousness that arguably alters one’s way of being in the world, perhaps dramatically and permanently. This type of shift involves a person understanding oneself, their relationship with others, and the natural world. Mezirow’s use of transformative learning theory, in terms of how people foster a practice of critical self-reflection to reconsider long-held beliefs and experiences, and perhaps reevaluate
dysfunctional, indeed, problematic, ways of seeing and engaging with the world, is a
critical component of this study.

The three common themes of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory are the
centrality of experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse in the process of
meaning structure transformation. Transformative learning starts with the learner’s
experience. The learner’s experience provides the seed for critical reflection. According
to Mezirow (1996), critical reflection is the distinguishing characteristic of adult learning.
This theme focuses on questioning the integrity of assumptions and beliefs based on the
adult's prior experiences. Critical reflection usually is triggered by an individual’s
consciousness of a contradiction between their thoughts, feelings, and actions. The third
common theme of transformative learning theory is rational discourse. Rational discourse
is the primary means by which such transformation is fostered and implemented. It is
under the auspices of rational discourse that critical examination of experience and
reflection take place. Mezirow (1996) explains that discourse becomes the means for
putting critical reflection in action, and whereby meaning structures are ultimately
transformed. Within these three themes, Mezirow (1990) contends that transformation
often follows a variation of ten phases.

Mezirow (2000) outlined transformative learning as it takes place in some
variation of the following 10 phases:

1. a disorienting dilemma,
2. self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame,
3. a critical assessment of assumptions,
4. recognition that one’s discontent and process of transformation are shared
and that others have negotiated a similar change,

5. exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions,

6. planning of a course of action,

7. acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans,

8. provisionally trying out new roles,

9. building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships,

10. a reintegration into one’s life based on conditions dictated by one’s new perspective (p. 22).

Phases 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and 10 were particularly useful in informing this research.

The evolution of transformative learning occurs in 10 definite phases, which naturally commence with a disorienting dilemma—a life event or incident that a person experiences as a critical situation that cannot be settled by applying prior problem-solving strategies (Moore, 2005). As a result, the person engages in self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame that leads to a critical assessment of assumptions. Mezirow characterized this process as critical reflection. “Reflection is the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 104).

Although this situation can be painful or uncomfortable, the individual recognizes that others have had similar experiences and have undergone a similar process. This can lead a person to consider and explore options for forming new roles, relationships, or actions, followed by a plan of action. This action plan consists of acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan, trying out new roles,
renegotiating relationships, and building competence and self-confidence.

Finally, the reintegration process is completed when the new learning—new attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors—is incorporated into practice, that is, a new, transformed perspective (Moore, 2005, p. 403, emphasis added).

Although Mezirow (1990) contends that transformation often follows a variation of ten phases, depending on the situation and the person involved, some phases may be more emphasized while others may be marginalized. Nonetheless, the process always begins with the disorienting dilemma. The dynamic constructs of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory provides a useful lens through which school leaders' beliefs can be examined to employ educational equity and create high achieving urban school leaders.

Servage (2008) contends that a long-lasting problem with transformative learning theory is its unclear relationship to critical theory. Critics of transformative learning theory have questioned if scholars can call a change “transformative” if it does not lead to social change. If that is not the case, then what is the correct place for critical pedagogy or education emancipation? Shields’s (2010) critical theory approach to leadership-transformative leadership theory addresses this concern. According to Horkheimer (1982), a theory is critical only to the point that it endeavors to liberate people from the conditions that enslave them. Critical theory is developed from the quotidian lives of people, social structures, and cultures (Brown, 2004). Beyer (2001) shares that critical theory aides in understanding the how educational praxis and theory are normalized and how this process of normalization is entwined with the contexts of social, structural, and ideological realities (Beyer, 2001).
Shields (2010) asserts that transformative leadership is grounded in an activist agenda that incorporates a rights-based theory where “every person deserves to be treated with honor, respect and complete attention to a social justice theory of ethics that takes these rights to a societal level” (p. 571). Furthermore, Shields (2011) asserts that transformative leadership starts by interrogating the notions of justice and democracy and not merely a commitment to organizational goals. Transformative leadership theory criticizes unfair practices and then connects education and educational leadership with its broader social context. It is through this transformative lens that educational leaders are able to unpack frameworks of power and privilege. Through a transformative lens, education serves as a means for liberation, for achieving justice, for pursuing organizational advancement, and most importantly, for catalyzing true societal transformation. However, for these to happen, the theory of transformative leadership must be furthered by committed, activist educational leaders who will pose fundamental questions about the purpose of school, what needs to be taught, and who is successful (Shields, 2010, p. 570).

Shields’s (2011) transformative leadership theory consists of eight tenets, which form the foundation and social justice orientation of leadership. The tenets are:

1. the mandate to effect deep and equitable change,
2. the need to deconstruct knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and injustice and to reconstruct them,
3. a focus on emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice,
4. the need to address the inequitable distribution of power,
5. an emphasis on both private and public (individual and collective) good,
6. an emphasis on interdependence, interconnectedness, and global awareness,
7. the necessity of balancing critique with promise, and

Tenets 1, 2, 3, and 8 were particularly useful in informing this research.

Shields (2010) contends, that in order for school leaders to create effective high achieving urban schools, these leaders must recognize existing inequities and accept the need for deep equitable change. Such school leaders will commit to making change happen and will examine and adjust their attitudes, beliefs, values, and assumptions, working to deconstruct and eliminate deficit thinking, redistribute power equitably, focus on democracy, equity, and social justice, and understand the private and public value of education. Furthermore, school leaders will then focus on interdependence, interconnectedness, and global awareness.

Ultimately, Shields (2010) contends that transformative leadership theory will help ground educational leaders in a moral and purposeful approach to their missions. Mezirow (1997) affirms that transformative learning is not an afterthought. Rather, it is the basis for adult education. In fact, the goal of adult education is to help students become more autonomous thinkers by learning to determine their own values, meanings, and purposes rather than to act on those of others. However, school leaders do not serve themselves. Therefore, the personal transformative learning elicits the transformative leadership to promote lasting and equitable change. As such, this study uses Mezirow’s transformative learning theory and Shields’s transformative leadership theory. Each of these theories will provide a useful lens through which the examination of school leaders'
beliefs to employ educational equity to create high achieving students in urban school can occur.

While Mezirow's 10 phases of transformative learning theory provide a process for an individual to examine their own values, meanings, and beliefs, Shields’s eight tenets of transformative leadership theory provide consistent steps toward the aim of social change. Similarly, both theories place a high emphasis on principles and values leading to transformation, both personal and collective. In such an environment, transformation is embedded with a number of factors that lead, synergistically, to the achievement of desired outcomes (Shields, 2010).

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to understand how high achieving urban school leaders’ lived experiences and beliefs influence social justice leadership practice. Kouzes and Posner (2012) assert that becoming an exemplary leader requires one to “fully comprehend the deeply held values—the beliefs, standards, ethics and ideals—that drive you” (p. 48). Leadership is not about charisma, leadership is about behavior (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Furthermore, to gain commitment from constituents, leaders must model desired behaviors for others to emulate in the workplace. Northouse (2018) asserts that the “process whereby a person engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower is transformational leadership” (p. 162).

**Research Questions**

Research questions were designed to guide this qualitative phenomenological study. These research questions were designed to gain insights as to how high achieving,
urban school leaders’ beliefs are influenced by their lived experiences and specifically, how these beliefs are reflected in their leadership practices to model social justice initiatives whereby transforming these urban schools into equitable learning institutions.

As such, this study proposed two research questions:

1. How are the beliefs of high achieving urban school leaders influenced by their lived experiences?
2. How are the beliefs of high achieving urban school leaders reflected in their leadership practices?

**Potential Significance of the Study**

Educational disparities continue to exist in the United States, specifically related to race, socioeconomic status, special education, and English language learners (Milner, 2013). Research shows that school leaders who clearly articulate the vision, the mission, and goals that evolve from personal beliefs based upon perceptions, expectations, and practices lead high achieving urban schools to achieve equitable education for all students (Leithwood et al., 2004). The potential significance of this study resides in its contributions to the body of knowledge through the insights of urban school leaders’ lived experiences which may create future models of exemplary practice. These models may transform educational beliefs that previously hindered improvement efforts. With the significant increase of minority communities across the US estimated to become the majority by the year 2042 (United States Census Bureau, 2013), an increasingly diverse body of students may then experience more equitable learning opportunities by which the achievement gap may be diminished (Leithwood et al., 2004).

**Chapter Summary**
Chapter 1 discusses the phenomenon of disproportionality, the increasing
diversity of racial and ethnic groups of learners, and the resulting achievement gap
between the advantaged and disadvantaged students is at the center of national education
efforts.

Scholars are starting to comprehend the nature of leadership and the direct
practices used by school leaders to attend to social justice issues (Furman, 2012). The
purpose of this study is to gain an understanding as to school leaders' beliefs from lived
experiences, which inform these leaders’ actions and perspectives on social justice. As a
foundational theoretical framework to this study, Mezirow’s transformative learning
theory and Shields’s transformative leadership theory are explored as a conduit for both
understanding and transforming school leaders' current perceptions, perspectives and
beliefs into a social justice model whereby educational equity might be achieved for all
students.

Subsequently, Chapter 2 provides a review of the empirical literature. Chapter 3
discusses the research methodology. Chapter 4 presents the research findings and Chapter
5 discusses the findings, implications, recommendations, and future research.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

The purpose of Chapter 2 is to review empirical literature necessary to the understanding of how urban school leaders form, alter, and implement their beliefs in educational settings. Recent research affirms that the instructional leadership of principals affects what happens in the classroom as well as classroom outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2004). Therefore, these educational leaders’ influences and beliefs are essential factors in school reform (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). However, Nelson and Guerra (2014) maintain that personal beliefs have such a strong impact that even in professional practice, a person’s behavior is more accurately predicted by their personal beliefs than their professional knowledge. Furthermore, Furman (2012) affirms that literature offers few concrete details about the practice of social justice leadership in K-12 schools, and as a result, those skills needed by school leaders to engage in these practices are yet to be identified fully.

Review of Literature

The United States Census Bureau (2013) reported that by the year 2042, minority communities will become the majority of the U.S. population and by 2060, more specifically, the African American and Latino/a populations will comprise 45% of the U.S. population (Boske, Osanloo, & Newcomb, 2017). With the shift in demographics and an increase in immigration, educators must recognize the implications of the increasing racial diversity in public school systems and must be concerned with
disproportionality and social justice practices (Boske et al., 2017). The focal point of social justice is grounded in the experiences of marginalized groups of students towards replacing any identified unjust practice with equitable and culturally appropriate standards, educational opportunities and outcomes (Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007). The nature of leadership and the specific practices needed by educators to attend to social justice equity are only now starting to be understood by school leaders (Furman, 2012).

In addition to assuming all of the administrative demands of the school, the role of principals or school leaders has evolved to include higher expectations to respond to these societal changes to include social justice initiatives. These leaders’ roles also include transforming existing school efforts into those of social justice and equity (Pounder & Merrill, 2001). To create substantive improvements, school leaders require additional leadership skills that exceed what is currently in practice to meet the needs of urban school students (Raskin, Krull, & Thatcher, 2015). In addition to traditional leadership skills in instruction and management, additional knowledge, skills, and attitudes regarding cultural competency and bias-free educational environments are paramount to creating transformational social justice reform in schools (Jones & Ringler, 2017).

Despite all the well-documented disparities in urban schools across the United States, there is little empirical evidence of high achieving urban schools. While educational research emphasizes the academic underachievement of students in urban settings (Garrett, Antrop-González, & Vélez, 2010), gap closing schools and high achieving urban schools research will best reveal how the beliefs of school leaders can positively contribute to academic excellence. Therefore, the research categories for this
study are the achievement in urban schools, leaders' beliefs and assumptions about
gender, race, and ability, and the awareness and subsequent implementation of the
transformative learning theory into educators' professional practices.

**Student achievement in urban schools.** Closing the achievement gap is
generally regarded to be one of the major challenges facing the United States public
education system. The achievement gap is also one of the top priorities identified by
elected officials, policymakers, educators, and others involved in the education system
(The Glossary of Education Reform, 2013). There are various gaps in education—learning
gap, opportunity gap, and the achievement gap. The learning gap refers to the disparity of
what students learn and what they are expected to learn. The opportunity gap refers how
“race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English proficiency, community wealth, familial
situations, or other factors contribute to or perpetuate lower educational aspirations,
achievement, and attainment for certain groups of students” (The Glossary of Education
Reform, 2013, para. 1). However, this study focuses on the achievement gap. The term
“achievement gap” refers to any significant and persistent disparity in academic
performance or educational attainment between different groups of students, such as race,
etnicity, socioeconomic variances or other discrepancies (The Glossary of Education
Reform, 2013, para. 1).

The increasing practice of using educational data by schools and government
agencies to track the academic achievement and educational attainment of students has
disclosed achievement gaps determined over the past decades (The Glossary of Education
Reform, 2013). This disclosure has not only raised awareness of existing achievement
gaps, but provided a close examination of student achievement, especially students at the

Scheurich and Skrla (2003) point out that society will rely on educators’ ability to ensure successful outcomes for students of color. The nation’s future and resiliency are dependent on each school’s ability to close the achievement gap, attend to the needs of all learners, and improve the quality of education in the local community (Darling-Hammond, Kohn, Meier, Sizer, & Wood, 2004). Researchers have begun to study recognized achieving urban schools to better identify and study the characteristics that enhance achievement in these schools.

Since 2003, the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee (SCEOC) has provided annual reports that note some of the elementary and middle schools that have closed the achievement gap for one or more groups of historically underachieving students in South Carolina. Utilizing the state’s Palmetto Achievement Challenge Tests (PACT) in English language arts and mathematics, the SCEOC compared the achievement levels of African Americans, Latinos, and students receiving free or reduced lunch, to that of White or full-paid lunch students (Monrad et al., 2007). Schools eligible for the EOC study needed to have PACT scores for at least one subgroup of historically underachieving groups. Furthermore, the subgroup and the all students group had to meet the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) objectives under the NCLB act. For four consecutive years, the EOC provided this report. In 2003, 87 elementary schools were recognized for closing the achievement gap. In 2004, 110 schools were identified, and in 2005, 132
schools were recognized for closing the gap out of 500 schools in the study (Monrad et al., 2007).

In 2006, the EOC reported that 138 schools in South Carolina had one or more groups of historically underachieving students close the achievement gap according to the PACT standards in ELA, math, or both subtests. More specifically, 32 schools out of 138 were noted for closing the achievement gap for four consecutive years (2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006). The study examined school report card indicators and school climate survey data collected from students, teachers, and parents. In order to distinguish between gap-closing elementary schools and other schools, outcome measures were examined for 500 schools and the 26 gap-closing schools (Monrad et al., 2007).

The Monrad et al. (2007) study revealed that gap-closing schools demonstrated more positive achievement indicators than other schools. For instance, 38% of gap-closing schools had excellent ratings on their report cards, compared to only 9% of the other schools. Furthermore, the gap-closing schools did not have below average or unsatisfactory absolute ratings, while other schools had 20% below average or unsatisfactory ratings (Monrad et al., 2007). As a result, more AYP objectives were met by schools with the most favorable school climate. Positive-climated schools met 84.4% of their AYP objectives, while schools with lower ratings only met 31% of their AYP objectives. The relationship between student performance on the PACT and the school climate followed similar patterns. Gap-closing schools maintain an instructional environment that supports high achievement, but also create positive school climates that support high student performance (Monrad et al., 2007). According to Wentworth, Kessler, & Darling-Hammond (2013), school districts understand which schools do a
better job in supporting student achievement by analyzing student test scores, collecting informal evidence from students, teachers, and parents as well as examining other measures of success.

The Wentworth et al. (2013) case study of four San Francisco schools showed steady growth in student achievement and shortening the achievement gaps among Blacks, Latinos, and ELL students. Of note, tenured school leaders at these schools supported the development of policies and practices over a period of time. The four schools—Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy, San Francisco Community School, Sheridan Elementary, and Edward R. Taylor Elementary had large populations of students of color ranging from 65% to 95% and large numbers of low-income students. Three of these schools served more than two-thirds of low-income students and 48% at the other school. Limited English Proficient (LEP) students ranged from 10% to 63% across the schools. All the schools had achieved California's Academic Performance Index (API) score of 800 (Wentworth et al., 2013).

The study noted that demographical changes within the four schools were also associated with the achievement level. In two schools, from 2009-2012, scores increased as their low-income students changed relatively little, decreasing from 48% to 47%, and proportions of English language learners decreased from 10% to 8% in one school. The second school garnered an increase of low-income students from 75% to 79% and a decrease in English language learners from 63% to 59% (Wentworth et al., 2013). The two schools with a significant increase of socioeconomically disadvantaged students and English language learners experienced a decrease in these students’ test scores. In one school, enrollment of low-income students increased from 62% to 69% and the LEP
students increased from 32% to 42% from 2009 to 2012. Although there was a dip in the API scores, in the 2011-2012 school year, the school began to see an increase in API scores (Wentworth et al., 2013).

Overall, the Wentworth et al. (2013) study revealed shared characteristics demonstrated by the four schools—staffing, professional development practices, curriculum and teaching strategies, and approaches to allocating resources—that led to these outcomes. States across the US identify their criteria for academic performance. This research is focused on New York State school leaders, however, understanding the academic achievement of students of color in urban settings across the nation can be helpful.

The New York State Commissioner of Education (2018) identified high achieving urban schools as learning institutions that have made the AYP in English language arts and mathematics assessments for all subgroups of students on all measures for which the school is accountable. These high achieving schools do not have significant gaps in student performance and do not have gaps on accountability measures between other subgroups (New York State Commissioner of Education, 2018).

Dubbed 90/90/90 Schools, these institutions must meet specific criteria. Ninety percent of students must be eligible for free or reduced lunches and must be comprised of more than 90% ethnic minorities. Additionally, 90% of these students must meet or achieve high academic standards, based on independently conducted tests of academic achievement (Reeves, 2004).

The 90/90/90 Schools case study was conducted over 4 years (2007-2011) with data analyses for more than 130,000 students in 228 schools. The geographical locations
ranged from inner-city urban schools to suburban and rural schools (Reeves, 2004). This
case study aimed to identify a shared set of behaviors demonstrated by the leaders and
teachers in high-achieving schools. This research focused on schools with high minority
populations and high economic disadvantages. Additionally, the study identified five
common characteristics of high-achieving schools. These characteristics focused on
academic achievement, creating and providing clear curriculum choices with frequent
assessment of student progress and multiple opportunities for improvement. In addition,
an emphasis on nonfiction writing and collaboratively scoring student work was the focus
of high-achieving schools (Reeves, 2004).

The 90/90/90 Schools study, however, is far from the only research study
conducted on high achieving urban schools. Reeves (2004) referenced two other studies
conducted on high-poverty, high achieving urban schools. Carter (2000), an expert on No
Excuses schools, shares a conservative viewpoint, while Haycock (2001) provides a
politically liberal viewpoint. In 1998, the Education Trust created and administered a
survey to 1,200 schools identified by their state as high-achieving or most improved
schools with poverty levels over 50%, with 366 elementary and secondary schools
responding. These schools served poor urban and rural areas. The findings revealed that
the high-achieving, high poverty schools extensively used state standards to design
curriculum and instruction, assess student work, and evaluate teachers. More instructional
time was devoted to reading and mathematics to support students in meeting the
standards. Educational funds dedicated to supporting professional development focused
on fostering improved instructional practices. School leaders implemented
comprehensive systems to monitor individual student progress and provide extra support
to students when needed. Also, school leaders focused their efforts to include parents to assist the students in meeting the standards. In addition, state and district systems were in place and which establish and maintain accountability for staff in schools (Barth et al., 1999).

Carter (2000) studied the success of 21 high-performing, high-poverty schools, determining that their success is the result of hard work, sound practical teaching philosophies, and successful, reproducible leadership strategies. Carter (2000) emphasizes that learning from best practices of high-performing schools and holding all schools serving low-income students accountable to No Excuses standard of excellence should be the nation’s top priority. Most of the high-achieving schools in the study were public schools. While Carter (2000) emphasizes that the study is not anti-public schools, it does however provide serious criticism of the current structure of public education.

The schools in this study held all students, of all races, all income levels, and all abilities to high standards and high expectations, and then ensured that all students were successful. No Excuses principals, as Carter (2000) refers, dismissed the ideology of victimhood that controls most public discussion of race and academic achievement. Following rigorous courses and assessments tests, these school leaders ensured the academic success of all Blacks, Latinos, and all income level students (Carter, 2000). While understanding that some students learn differently, these No Excuses school leaders made certain that all students master key subjects, especially reading, math, and fluency in the English language. These No Excuse school leaders in high-performing schools regard testing as an instrument of diagnosis and not of discrimination (Carter, 2000) and as such, test regularly.
Moreover, No Excuses school leaders believed that social promotion was not beneficial to students and did not hesitate to mandate students to repeat grades to master the material. The study revealed that teachers were held to the same high standards as students. If educators are unable to achieve high performance among low-income students, even after receiving training from master teachers, these educators were dismissed. Carter (2000) contends that leading a high-poverty school is one of the most critical leadership positions in America. Carter (2000) suggests that recruiting excellent school leaders for high-poverty schools is one way to increase opportunities for low-income students. What these high-performing, high-poverty schools have in common is excellent leadership.

According to Carter (2000), these No Excuses schools shared seven common traits. School leaders had autonomy in decision-making. These school leaders actively worked with parents to make the home a center for learning. School leaders used measurable goals to establish a culture of achievement and create a rigorous and regular testing environment leads to continuous student achievement. Master teachers brought out the best in a faculty. The effective practices of high-performing, high-poverty schools highlight what needs to be changed in the way schools train their teachers, test students, teach children, involve parents, and utilize fiscal resources (Carter, 2000).

These 21 No Excuses high performing schools spanned the nation. Four of the schools were located in New York State, while others were from California, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, and Texas. Carter (2000) points out that dozens of low-income schools across the nation are showing that poverty is not necessarily a viable reason for academic failure. In fact, Johnson and Asera (1999)
studied nine urban elementary schools which served low socioeconomic students of color. Each of these urban elementary schools achieved positive academic results. The academic achievement of these nine Title I schools surpassed most schools in their respective states and the nation. Whereas these schools shared these high achieving commonalities, these schools varied in student enrollments, grade spans, ethnicity, rates of improvement, and school reform models.

Despite these differences, multiple schools, according to Johnson and Asera (1999), used similar change strategies to help their students achieve high levels of academic success. These strategies included determining an important and visible goal and attaining it, focusing energy on services by cultivating students’ sense of responsibility for school-appropriate behavior and facilitating an environment in which students are likely, and able, to behave well. In addition, Johnson and Asera (1999) share that fostering a communal sense of responsibility would help gain the confidence and respect of parents and all stakeholders. Equally important is ensuring that teachers have the resources and training necessary to teach and creating opportunities for teachers to work, plan, and learn together. The alignment of instruction to standards and assessments, creating additional time for instruction, and increasing the instructional leadership within schools are strategies that support student achievement. Finally, the findings indicate that school leaders and staff must persist through any, and all, encountered difficulties, setbacks, and failures (Johnson & Asera, 1999).

All of these strategies require intentional policies, systems-wide change, the allocation of resources, and active leadership. As such, Johnson and Asera (1999) recommended creating policies that strengthen legislation and provide technical
assistance to encourage schools to increase parental involvement and to support educators with consistent professional development. Creating system-wide change by establishing clear and measurable, as well as rigorous, accountability provisions and ensuring that these provisions include strategies to build capacity and to provide support to these schools are critical. Systems-wide change will include infusing the tenets of comprehensive school reform into other federal education programs and providing schools adequate flexibility, and support to use that flexibility well. In order to implement these strategies, channeling resources in such ways that they confer additional instructional leadership to schools and ensure resources for increasing instructional time are necessary. Finally, enriching school leaders’ capacity to provide instructional leadership to further support instructional and learning improvements in high-poverty schools (Johnson & Asera, 1999).

Ragland, Clubine, Constable, and Smith (2002) studied five high-achieving, high-poverty elementary schools in Texas. Texas schools developed a standards-based accountability system, which provided an abundance of data on schools for this study. In addition, Texas has a considerable number of high-performing, high-poverty elementary schools. Such schools are measured by attendance rates and student performance in the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). The TAAS measures student mastery in reading and mathematics in third through sixth grade and writing in fourth grade. A Spanish-version is offered in the same grades and subjects. For a school to achieve Recognized Status, 80% of the students who take the TAAS in reading, writing, and mathematics, must pass. In addition, 80% of the subgroups within the schools must pass all TAAS tests and student attendance must be 90% (Ragland et al., 2002).
The five schools selected for the Ragland et al. (2002) study had at least 60% of their student population qualifying for free or reduced lunch in the National School Lunch Program, with more than 88% at three of the schools. This data is well over the required 40% considered for a Title I school (Ragland et al., 2002). This study revealed that despite variations of grade spans, enrollment, and demographics, the schools shared many similarities in strategies to strengthen academic performance. The findings also indicated that these schools embraced the belief that all students can be academically successful by creating a culture of student-centered learning. Faculty and staff regularly communicated across teaching areas and programs and were eager to learn from one another. As a result, the staff used student assessment data to identify areas where students could improve and where individual teaching strategies could be adjusted to meet students' needs. In addition, faculty and staff viewed parents as critical partners to student success. Educators persisted in addressing academic barriers to learning by collaborating with colleagues in identifying solutions to barriers and participating in school-wide intervention strategies. Furthermore, while special education services were appreciated, educators still considered referrals for these services as a last resort, preferring a shared view of special education as a way to integrate students into the regular education program (Ragland et al., 2002). These educators’ beliefs, behaviors, and practices provided opportunities for students to be successful.

Beliefs and assumptions. Though scholars have been researching the beliefs of educators for more than 60 years (Fives & Buehl, 2012), the primary goal—to identify a clear psychological understanding of beliefs, which could explain and predict differences in educators' practices, outcomes, and experiences—has proven elusive. Despite the vast
Empirical research on educators' beliefs, scholars have not clearly defined the term “belief.” This lack of clear definition has seriously limited explanatory and predictive potential. Nevertheless, the literature strongly suggests that educators’ beliefs matter (Fives & Buehl, 2012).

Empirical and theoretical research acknowledges that educators’ beliefs exist as a system. Unlike knowledge systems, belief systems are groups of beliefs that do not require consensus. “They are relatively static, and when they change it is not because of sound reasoning but more likely because of a conversion or gestalt shift” (Nespor, 1987, p. 321). Within a system, Rokeach (1968) contends that some beliefs may be more central, and that beliefs are the more difficult to change. Indeed, belief systems are far more influential than knowledge in determining how individuals tackle tasks and problems and are a stronger predictor of behavior (Nespor, 1987). However, the real question is how that system is formed. Bryan (2003) and Mansour (2008) both operate under a constructivist perspective. In other words, these researchers’ studies are based upon the premise that human beings construct a system of beliefs, meaning, and purpose from their experiences.

Bryan (2003) studied the belief systems of preservice science teachers as these teachers began field education training. Unlike Mansour (2008), Bryan (2003) focused the study strictly on the educational beliefs preservice teachers and found the system to be highly complex. After identifying six categories of beliefs, Bryan (2003) grouped these beliefs into two categories: foundational beliefs and dualistic beliefs. The foundational beliefs encompassed teachers deeply rooted resilient beliefs about the value and goals of science, the nature of scientific knowledge, and control in the classroom.
(Bryan, 2003). These foundational beliefs support individual teacher’s dualistic beliefs, identified as indecisive views regarding how children learn science, and student and teacher roles (Bryan, 2003).

Mansour (2008) adopted a social-cultural constructivist perspective using an interpretive approach of 10 educators' beliefs and practices. This study focused on educators teaching in the areas of science, technology, and society, and sought to examine these teachers' interpretations of experiences during instructional time in the classroom. The findings suggest that educators' personal religious beliefs and experiences profoundly shaped their professional beliefs and practices. Based on data analysis, the study proposed that the beliefs of educators are best understood as a contextualized system. In that system are religious beliefs, social context, experiences, identity, and teaching and learning beliefs. Although this study was limited to one group, its contribution to ongoing research was significant by allowing a broad, holistic consideration and understanding of teachers' experiences beyond a school setting (Fives & Buehl, 2012).

Fives and Buehl’s (2012) review of over 745 articles led these researchers to identify seven general research topics about beliefs which were development, diversity, knowledge, self, schools, vested parties, and teacher preparation. These topics examined beliefs in relation to practice and change. Fives and Buehl (2012) identified a lack of agreement concerning the nature and practice of educators’ beliefs. These studies also found a disagreement as to whether a change in belief can be triggered by an intervention of some sort (Fives & Buehl, 2012). Among the articles, Fives and Buehl (2012) discovered a clear and well-developed definition of educators’ beliefs. Fives and Buehl
(2012) note, however, that the difficulty is getting scholars and researchers to define consistently and “use terms within and across fields that examine these constructs” (p. 473). Generally, the current research frames the debate over beliefs through the several lenses such as implicit and explicit nature, their stability over time, whether they are situational or generalizable, how they might correlate with knowledge, and how, or whether, they exist only individually or in the context of larger (Fives & Buehl, 2012).

The first significant debate is whether beliefs are conscious (explicit) or unaware (implicit). Beliefs that guide an educator's behavior and influence interpretation of teaching experiences outside conscious awareness are considered implicit (Fives & Buehl, 2012). Nespor (1987) argues that, because beliefs are a priori implicit, they are beyond the control of the educator and are not influenced by personal reflective practices. Other scholars disagree and suggest that some beliefs are explicit and thus malleable. Dewey (1986) contends that beliefs call for intellectual and practical commitment. Dewey writes, “Beliefs… involve precisely this commitment and consequently sooner or later they demand our investigation to find out upon what ground they rest” (Dewey, 1933, p. 117). This perspective on beliefs emphasizes a conscious, and thereby, explicit, nature that requires justification to sustain the beliefs (Fives & Buehl, 2012).

Scholars are also divided on whether beliefs are fundamentally stable or dynamic (Thompson, 1992). Research evidence appears to support both ways of thinking. Those researchers who identify beliefs as stable note that many beliefs are resistant to change even after some form of intervention (Fives & Buehl, 2012). This disagreement largely hinges on whether beliefs are seen as contextual or generalizable across situations. Researchers have studied the degree to which educators’ beliefs vary or remain consistent
across different contexts or settings. Those more inclined to view beliefs as dynamic point out that, while an educator may hold on to a specific belief, that belief can shift as the educator learns from within a new and specific context (Fives & Buehl, 2012).

That shift, however, can be difficult to accomplish. According to studies, educators often think of their beliefs as generalizable and not contextually based (Bryan, 2003; Mansour, 2008; Buehl & Fives, 2009). Thus, educators also tend to think of their beliefs as connected with knowledge, viewing their expertise as more objective than subjective. Educators also attributed their knowledge about teaching to a number of sources, including formal education, observational learning, and research findings (Buehl & Fives, 2009). Fives and Buehl (2012), however, assert that beliefs are better regarded as integrated systems and not as decontextualized, objective knowledge. Those systems are often entrenched (Bryan, 2003; Mansour, 2008) and consist of beliefs about self, pedagogy, knowledge (domain specific and general), and students (individually and in general), including their ability to learn, their developmental processes, cultures, languages, and socioeconomic statuses (Fives & Buehl, 2012).

Nelson and Guerra (2014) contend that while a rigorous curriculum, high-quality instruction, and active parent engagement are characteristics of successful schools, a focus on educators’ beliefs must be a part of current reform models and school improvement initiatives. Relying on personal beliefs over professional knowledge is a problem, especially when reviewing research on beliefs related to educating diverse learners (Nelson & Guerra, 2014). The stereotypes and negative beliefs about people of color and people living in poverty are well documented in the United States. Moreover, numerous researchers have also found that educators often hold negative beliefs about
students and their families whose backgrounds may be diverse or unfamiliar culturally, linguistically, and economically from the teacher (Daniel-White, 2002; García & Guerra, 2004; Love & Kruger, 2005; Quiocio & Daoud, 2006; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006; Zarate, 2007). This tendency to regard certain students, or groups of students, as inherently deficient is referred to as deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010) and has been well documented in academic literature (e.g., Brown, 2011; Castagno, 2008; Menchaca, 1997; McIntyre, Hulan, & Maher, 2010; Watson, Charner-Laird, & Kirkpatrick, 2006).

Nelson and Guerra (2014) examined the beliefs of educators about their diverse populations of students and their families. Nelson and Guerra’s study was comprised of 111 teachers and school leaders. This study found that while most of the participants seemed to have at least some modest awareness of cultural differences, these participants also held to several deficit beliefs about diverse students and their families (Nelson & Guerra, 2014).

Overall, 80 of the 111 participants, or 72%, exhibited at least one deficit belief about students and families of diverse backgrounds (Nelson & Guerra, 2014). In addition, two of the categories revealed a distinct difference between teachers and educational leaders. Whereas 55% of teachers had a general awareness of culture, only 38% of educational leaders demonstrated that same awareness. Furthermore, 32, or 44%, of these educational leaders were categorized as holding little awareness as compared to 11, or 29% of the teacher participants. This data suggests that educational leaders have less cultural understanding than teachers (Nelson & Guerra, 2014).

Nevertheless, the study reveals that most educators, whether leaders or teachers, need improvement in cultural awareness. While a majority of educators appeared to have
a general awareness of culture, the majority of participants appear to carry deficit beliefs about diverse students and these students’ families (Nelson & Guerra, 2014). The opportunity to transform these deficit beliefs and other forms of existing mental congestion in order to adapt to new paradigms and new beliefs towards creating successful, urban social justice learning centers, is a lofty but achievable goal.

**Transformative learning theory.** Snyder (2008) reviewed 10 empirical qualitative articles to understand how researchers used Mezirow's transformative learning theory as a practical tool for measuring the transformative process. The studies were conducted in higher education and professional education settings. Snyder (2008) highlights that all 10 studies used some form of qualitative analysis, and four also used quantitative methods. Most of the studies relied on qualitative interviewing methods: five used participant self-report data; five used questionnaires or surveys; and three used journaling as a data source. Several of the studies were considered longitudinal, ranging from a 3-month semester to a 5-year educational program (Snyder, 2008).

These 10 studies made similar assumptions. The researchers concluded that transformation was beneficial and an essential part of the learning process. Transformative theory was utilized to define what participants of these studies were experiencing (Snyder, 2008). Fetherston and Kelly (2007) assert that transformative learning involves shifts in understanding of knowledge, the world, and ourselves. Reflection is key to the achievement of transformation. Furthermore, transformation is a process that begins with experience(s) or information that disrupt current understanding. Therefore, teaching with an aim toward transformation necessarily involves creating spaces for critical engagement and dialogue. Finally, the concept of transformative
learning also resonates with the pedagogy for conflict transformation (Fetherston & Kelly, 2007). These five assumptions were explicitly or implicitly expressed in most of the studies (Snyder, 2008).

Transformational change is not possible without a deep understanding of context. Brown (2005) examined the role of context in transformation. The study examined 40 preservice school leaders who took an experiential course designed to cultivate an understanding of, and commitment to, social justice and equity. Brown (2005) used Mezirow's three elements of context, discourse, and reflective thinking when studying the ways in which the three factors shaped the students' learning. According to Brown (2005), adult education includes a set of activities or experiences that engage adults and lead to changes in thinking, values, and behavior. The cornerstone of the field of adult learning lies in the learner, the learning process, and the context of learning (Brown, 2005).

Brown's (2005) focus on experiential learning and careful analysis allowed the researcher to identify contexts that were both more and less effective in terms of transformative learning. Brown provided this learning experience through an activity, which required the participants to interact with other professionals outside of their own educational expertise. The participants were then required to reflect and write on their experiences by paying particular attention to their own biases and assumptions. The goal was to cultivate just-meaning decision making for school leaders. The curriculum designed by Brown was an attempt to create a potential shift in how people think. Brown (2005) affirmed, “transformative learning leads to a new way of seeing” (p. 23) and these findings assert that transformative learning theory is an appropriate framework if the goal
is to change the beliefs of the participants. Recall that transformative learning researchers (Mezirow, 1978; Cranton & Carusetta, 2004; Taylor, 2003; Brown, 2005) affirmed that beliefs drive professional decision-making, findings that were corroborated by this study.

If Brown's focus was context, then Lundgren and Poell's (2016) focus was critical reflection. These researchers reviewed 12 research studies on critical reflection based on Mezirow's definition. Critically reflecting on one's own practices is usually seen as a means to gain new perspectives in the day-to-day activities of working professionals (Lundgren & Poell, 2016). Critical reflection practices have been researched in different domains of human resource development and the adult learning spectrum. Researchers have looked at leadership development (Muir, 2014; Nesbit, 2012) in management and entrepreneurial learning (Franz, 2010), in medical and health professional education (Keevers & Treleaven, 2011; Wald, Borkan, Taylor, Anthony & Reis, 2012), in higher education (Kreber & Castleden, 2009), in correctional institution education (Behan, 2007), in team formation (Schippers, Den Hartog, & Koopman, 2007), and among individuals in the workplace (van Woerkom, 2003, 2004).

Lundgren and Poell's (2016) goal was to review Mezirow's conceptual work on critical reflection and to analyze how critical reflection is operationalized. Specifically, they aimed to understand how critical reflection had been theoretically operationalized and how levels of reflection, along with their outcomes, were assessed. According to Lundgren and Poell (2016), reflection can be defined as “the activity of exploring or examining an issue of concern and considering it in relation to personal experiences, whereas levels of reflection describe different categories of this activity, often ordered in
a hierarchical way” (p. 5). Critical reflection represents the highest category of the “levels of reflection” hierarchy (Lundgren & Poell, 2016).

The study analyzed a variety of research approaches that are commonly used in operationalizing critical reflection. Lundgren and Poell (2016) examined these approaches according to the aim of this study, research design, data collection method, and setting. The 12 studies examined by Lundgren and Poell (2016) were categorized into three types of aims. Three studies (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004; Kember et al., 1999; Kember et al., 2000) focused on developing a new instrument or conceptual model to study and assess reflection. Three other studies (Bell, Kelton, McDonagh, Mladenovic, & Morrison, 2011; Kreber, 2005; Wallman, Lindblad, Hall, Lundmark, & Ring, 2008) focused on testing or evaluating an existing coding scheme. The third aim, which included the other six studies (Chirema, 2007; Kitchenham, 2006; Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2009; Liimatainen, Poskiparta, Karhila, & Sjögren, 2001; Peltier, Hay, & Drago, 2005; Richardson & Maltby, 1995), examined an existing scheme and then added to the scheme in order to adapt it to the purpose of the study. Lundgren and Poell (2016) contend that the different types of aims are comparable with Bloom's (1956) taxonomy. Applying Bloom's taxonomy revised version, (Krathwohl, 2002; Lundgren & Poell, 2016) suggest that the first three studies would be categorized as “creating,” the next three studies would be categorized as “applying,” and the last six studies would be somewhere between “analyzing” and “evaluating” (p. 14).

The research designs varied across the 12 studies. Eight studies used a cross-sectional design. Two studies used a longitudinal approach, which lasted 3 years. The final two studies were also cross-sectional in design but with the intent to develop a
research instrument. Regarding data collection, seven of 12 studies based their findings on journal entries, diaries, reflection essays, or rationale statements. Some of these studies used interviews or questionnaires, and two studies used a questionnaire to collect data. The 12 studies varied in their learning environments. Six were derived from medical education, which spanned nursing, pharmacy, and health sciences, while the remaining studies incorporated teacher, business, elementary, and higher education or professional development (Lundgren & Poell, 2016).

Lundgren and Poell’s (2016) findings show little agreement about the operationalization of reflection in adult education. These researchers thereby proposed four improvements achieved by integrating different critical reflection traditions, using multiple data collection pathways, opting for thematic embedding, and attending to feelings. Lundgren and Poell (2016) also contend that implementing these improvements will help stimulate closer alignment of approaches in critical reflection research across adult education and human resource development.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter 2 posits that research demonstrates school leaders’ beliefs may profoundly shape their perceptions, judgments, and practices (Brown, 2004). The disparity between African American and Latino students as compared to White students in the US, especially in urban areas, continues to grow (Barton & Coley, 2010). However, research from high-achieving urban schools reveals the commonality is excellent leadership (Carter, 2000). Therefore, attention to the beliefs of school leaders should be a focus in educational research and can inform educational practices in urban schools (Brown, 2005). Various scholars (Ayers, Hunt & Quinn, 1998; Cochran-Smith,
1998; Oakes & Lipton, 1999) have argued that school leaders must enter the field to do more than the day-to-day activities of administration and should work for social change and social justice (Brown, 2005).

School leaders' decisions are widely influenced by their personal life history, which shapes their beliefs (Guerra & Pazey, 2016). Despite Fives and Buehl’s (2012) findings of disagreement as to whether a change in belief can be triggered by an intervention of some sort, Mezirow’s (2000) transformative learning theory provides a useful lens through which beliefs can be examined. Mezirow (2003) asserts that adults amass and form a body of assumptions from experiences acquired throughout their life trajectory, which act as a frame of reference for how they view their world. These frames of reference shape how adults come to understand their experiences. Mezirow (2000) contends that informed decisions require an awareness of the source and context of one’s knowledge, values, and feelings, as well as critical reflection on the efficacy of their held assumptions. The reasoning behind most of what adults know and believe their values and feelings to be relies on embedded, and indeed, implicit, biographical, historical, and cultural contexts (Mezirow, 2000).

To address the critics of transformative learning theory and its lack for leading to social change, Shields (2010) critical theory approach to leadership-transformative leadership theory addresses the concern. Transformative leadership is grounded in an activist agenda and starts with questions of justice and democracy and not a commitment to organizational goals (Shields, 2011). Transformative leadership theory censures unfair practices and connects education and educational leadership with broader social contexts in which it is embedded. It is through this transformative lens that educational leaders
will be able to address social justice issues. Transformative leadership theory will help ground the educational leader in a moral and purposeful approach to leadership (Shields, 2010).

Whereas more information was needed regarding how various beliefs of school leaders are reflected in their leadership practices, Chapter 3 discusses the qualitative phenomenological research methodology that was utilized towards identifying urban school leaders' beliefs and how these beliefs were influenced by the leader’s lived experiences. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of qualitative data. Chapter 5 connects the data to previous research and explores future research opportunities and recommendations for school leaders to lead high achieving urban schools.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

Although the views of social justice, the sources of injustice in schools, and educators' responsibility toward these injustices are often conflicting, the data are clear that portions of the public education population frequently encounter inequitable treatment (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Scheurich & Laible, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999). Students of color and underrepresented groups are well known to exhibit lower achievement test scores, deal with low teacher expectations, and face disparities in the allocation of resources when compared to White, middle-class students (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olsen, 2001; Banks, 1997; Delpit, 1995; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Ortiz, 1997). As a result, scholars propose a critical review of educational systems in terms of social justice criteria based on access to resources, race-based privilege, culture, political and institutional power, gender, sexual orientation, language, background, ability, and socioeconomic position (Cochran-Smith et al., 1999; Grogan, 2000; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1995; Shields & Oberg, 2000). Such a proposal requires a close examination of personal beliefs combined with a critical analysis of professional behavior (Brown, 2004).

Since the instructional leadership of principals affects what happens in the classroom as well as classroom outcomes, these educational leaders’ influences and beliefs are essential factors in school reform (Brown 2004). Despite all the well-documented disparities in urban schools across the United States, there is empirical
evidence of high achieving urban schools. While educational research often emphasizes student underachievement in urban settings (Garrett, Antrop-González, & Vélez, 2010), high achieving urban schools research will best reveal how the beliefs of school leaders can positively contribute to academic excellence.

School leaders have an essential role in cultivating and sustaining effective urban schools (Louis et al., 2010). While the literature demonstrates that beliefs are reliable predictors of individual behavior, and those beliefs shape the individual’s perception and practices, understanding the nature of these beliefs is crucial to comprehending a school leader's decisions, choices, and effectiveness regarding issues of diversity, social justice and equity (Brown, 2004). The process of awareness begins with a critical examination of a school leader’s beliefs, and how those beliefs influence their everyday decision-making.

As such, the research design for this study was a qualitative method that used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Larkin and Thompson (2012) define interpretative phenomenological analysis as one that employs a particular psychological focus on how people make sense of their lived experiences. IPA allows the researcher to gather detailed and reflective, first-person rationale from the participants. Successful IPA studies capture and reflect upon the essential beliefs and concerns of the participants and suggest an interpretation of the information and may use psychological concepts to go beyond those interpretations (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). IPA is an appropriate approach when the researcher is inquiring about how individuals perceive a particular situation and how these make sense of their personal and social world (Smith & Osborn, 2004).

Larkin and Thompson (2012) describe phenomenology as the philosophical study of “being” (p.100). Phenomenology has two important historical phases: the
transcendental and the hermeneutic, or existential. Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology aims to discern essential core structures of experiences through a methodological process and Husserl's phenomenology focused on transcending everyday assumptions (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). However, IPA draws upon later readings of the phenomenology created by Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who suggest that one's observation always comes from somewhere. Heidegger (1962) explains that people are not capable of disentangling from their involvement in the world and their relationships with others. Merleau-Ponty (1965) shares that people are always “embodied too” (p. 100). Heidegger (1962) emphasizes “worldly and embodied nature of our existence suggest that phenomenological inquiry is a situated enterprise” (p. 100).

Conducting qualitative research for this study has several advantages. Silverman (2016) shares that a qualitative study provides detailed description that utilizes new practices from the research descriptions and allows the opportunity to gain interest from the findings. Phenomenological studies focus on a person's perception(s) and how the person talks about objects and events, instead of describing the phenomena by an already created categorical, conceptual, and scientific criterion (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Therefore, this study attempted to find how the beliefs of high achieving urban school leaders were influenced by their lived experiences and how these school leaders’ changed beliefs are reflected in their leadership practices by using an interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) contend that research questions should determine the method used. This qualitative phenomenology study proposed two research questions:
1. How are the beliefs of high achieving urban school leaders influenced by their lived experiences?

2. How are the beliefs of high achieving urban school leaders reflected in their leadership practices?

Research Context

The setting for this study was New York State (NYS), specifically, achieving urban schools as defined by the NYS standards. In the June 2019 press release, the Commissioner of Education of the State of New York identified 562 high achieving and high progress schools in New York State. “Recognition schools” are identified under the New York State Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Plan. These 2018-2019 recognition schools have high academic achievement, student growth and graduation rate, and have made progress during the 2017-2018 school year. The recognition schools made adequate yearly progress for all subgroups of students on all measures for which the school is accountable and these students did not have significant gaps in performance and accountability measures between other subgroups. Of these identified achieving schools, 241 are located in New York City, 280 are located in the rest of the state, and 41 are public charter schools. Furthermore, 131 schools were identified as “reward schools” the previous year under the NCLB Act (New York State Department of Education [NYSDOE], 2019). Recognition schools are identified as the top performing schools under ESSA for performance, student growth, and/or graduation rate, whereas reward schools have met or exceeded either the school or state measures of interim progress for English language arts and mathematics, rates of chronic absenteeism, and college, career, and civic readiness and have met the federally required 95% participation rate in the
English language arts and mathematics assessments (NYS Department of Education, 2019).

The identified recognition schools are composed of 328 elementary-middle schools and 234 high schools. According to the NYS Department of Education, 117 schools are average needs, three are urban/suburban/high needs, 14 are high rural needs, and 241 of the total 562 were identified in NYC. The remaining 187 schools were charter, large city, and low needs schools (NYSDOE, 2019).

The NYS Department of Education serves 2,622,879 students in public education. Of the 4,784 schools, 351 are charter schools. In 2019, the New York State School Report Card for grades 3-8, revealed that 45% of all students were proficient in English language arts (ELA) and 47% of all students were proficient in mathematics. The ethnicity data shows a significant gap between Black (35%) and White (51%) students in ELA. In mathematics, Blacks scored 32% proficiency and White students 56%. Latinos students scored 36% proficiency in ELA and 35% in math. Other subgroups, such as English language learners, have an alarming proficiency rate of 9% in ELA and 17% in math, and students with disabilities have garnered a 14% proficiency rate in ELA and 16% on math (NYS Department of Education, 2019).

Research Participants

The study population for this research project was school leaders who were currently serving or who had served as principals in kindergarten through Grade 12 schools (K-12) located in New York State. The qualification of participants included having functioned as a school leader in an underachieving urban K-12 school, which later became an achieving school as described by NY State Department of Education.
Additionally, these school leaders were required to have acquired three or more years of experience working in an urban setting.

In fact, Bernard (2002) emphasizes that the researcher must identify the study of need and find people who are willing to provide the information by benefit of their knowledge or experience. Creswell and Plano (2011) agree that researchers must identify expert individuals or groups who are knowledgeable about the phenomenon of interest.

Unlike convenience sampling whereby the first available primary data source is used for the research without additional requirements (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012), purposeful sampling involves identifying and selecting participants who are knowledgeable or experienced with the phenomenon under study, based on the judgement of the researcher (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Purposive sampling strategies promote understanding of the individuals’ or groups' experiences (Devers & Frankel, 2000). Purposive sampling can also develop theories and concepts. The greatest outcome of purposive sampling is when the sampling represents unusual manifestations of the phenomenon of interest (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therefore, a purposive sample technique was used for this research study. After receiving approval from St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix A), the researcher initially used professional networks to identify individuals for the study to acquire qualified participants through purposive sampling.

The research participant identification consisted of two phases. During Phase 1, the researcher obtained permission from the St. John Fisher College Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership (DEXL) to send a letter to current students and graduates of the DEXL Program who were principals serving in urban school districts (Appendix B).
Current school leaders from the Syracuse City School District were excluded from participation to avoid researcher conflict of interest. An invitation letter (Appendix C) was sent to three potential participants. Since Phase 1 failed to provide sufficient responses, 29 letters were sent to selected superintendents and assistant superintendents, and the researcher’s professional network (Appendix D) soliciting their support in identifying principals or school leaders who met the criteria for the study.

To identify school leaders in distant communities, snowball sampling was also appropriate for this study. Snowball sampling, as described by Marshall (1996), is a research sampling method where the participants refer the researcher to others who may be able to contribute or participate in the study. Snowball sampling often helps researchers find and recruit participants that otherwise might be difficult to identify (Marshall, 1996). As a result, participants were asked to refer other potential participants to the study. The referrals yielded four potential participants for which an invitation letter was sent to these school leaders. Once the participant expressed interest and was qualified as a viable participant, a participation letter (Appendix E), and an informed consent form (Appendix F) were distributed to the participants in the study. Morse (1994) suggests that a phenomenological study should have at least six participants, while Creswell (1998) recommends five to 25. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) propose that saturation is met with a minimum of 12 participants in homogeneous groups. However, IPA studies require small sample sizes to ensure the quality, rather than the quantity, of the data will permit in-depth analysis (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). To be sure, sufficient numbers of participants vary depending on the aims, level, context, time, and resources of the
researcher’s inquiry (Smith et al., 2009). As such, this study aimed to interview five to eight participants.

**Instruments Used in Data Collection**

There are various advantages to using face-to-face interviews as a method for collecting data. Interviews are appropriate to explore the beliefs, attitudes, values, and motives of the participant (Louise Barriball & While, 1994). Specifically, IPA analyzes in detail how participants make sense of a particular phenomenon in their world. Therefore, IPA requires a flexible data collection instrument. While IPA data is collected in various ways, such as personal accounts and diaries, most IPA studies use semi-structured interviews (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The researcher was the main instrument for data collection for this study. As such, the researcher obtained training and was certified by Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative to conduct ethical research. When conducting IPA studies, the researcher must have analytical acuity to be able to make sense of the participants’ lived experiences or phenomenon in order to interpret and analyze the data (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The researcher, who is currently an urban K-12 school leader, is immersed in this topic and as such was able to make sense and interpret the participants’ lived experiences.

One-on-one interviews provided an opportunity for an in-depth discussion with the participants; allowing the researcher to establish both rapport and opportunities to expand on areas of interests. For that reason, a semi-structured interview was the instrument needed to gather the information on the personal beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of urban school leaders. Smith and Osborn’s (2007) proposed interview
protocol was used when conducting semi-structured interviews within the IPA framework:

- Attempt to establish rapport with the participant,
- The ordering of the questions is less important,
- The interviewer is freer to probe interesting areas that arise,
- The interview can follow the participant’s interests or concerns (p. 58).

The researcher constructed questions for the interview process based on Mezirow’s transformative learning theory and Shields transformative leadership theory (Appendix G). Questions were created in a specific manner to elicit participants’ responses. Questions were modified in light of the participants' responses allowing for more inquiry about interesting and important areas which arose (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The semi-structured interview process allowed for a set of questions with an interview schedule. Smith and Osborn (2007) recommend that the interviewer begin with the most general possible question and build to more robust responses as the interview continues. If the participants have difficulty, or do not understand a question as evidenced by too-brief or unrelated responses, the interviewer can engage a prompt to elicit more specific responses. A successful interview will likely include inquiries and responses that range from more general and specific levels (Smith & Osborn, 2007). When conducting interviews, the researcher started with broad questions and later honed on specific questions allowing for more probing questions about the topic or phenomenon (Smith & Osborn, 2007). In short, by asking questions in this increasingly refined way, the researcher allows the open-ended nature of the questions to create space for respondents to offer their perspectives before they are guided toward the more specific questions that
are of particular interest to the researcher (Smith & Osborn, 2007). If the interview begins with these specific questions, the interview will produce biased data (Smith & Osborn, 2007). To prepare for the interviews, the researcher conducted a pilot with a colleague to test the questions for clarity and understanding. As a result, the researcher made modifications to the questions and provided a detailed definition of the term “disorienting dilemma.” For this study the researcher was looking at how the learning impacted the leadership. The interview protocol was done in a logical sequence to connect the adult learning to leadership practices.

Typically, semi-structured interviews will last one hour or more and may become very intense and involved. Smith and Osborn (2007) suggest that the interview is not interrupted and recommend audio recording the interviews to capture the rich data in full. Therefore, the interviews were audio recorded.

Online technologies are becoming more commonly used as research aids in academia (Illingworth, 2001). With New York State covering 47,126 square miles (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), using some online technology aids to conduct interviews was needed. Using Skype and other online technology as research tools for qualitative studies, allows the opportunity to go beyond geographical boundaries (Rowley, 2012). For this study, four of the six participants were interviewed through the Zoom platform (Rowley, 2012) which enabled the researcher to conduct face-to-face interviews and allowed the capture of facial recognition and emotional expressions of the participants. The Zoom platform cloud feature was used to ensure the interviews were properly recorded. The interviews were professionally transcribed and permanently deleted from the cloud after
the participants had the opportunity to review the transcript for the accuracy of information.

**Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis**

IPA methodology is predicated on the assumption that the analyst is interested in learning about the participant's psychological world, including its beliefs and constructs that frame responses, or the researcher believes the participant’s story can represent a part of their identity (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Regardless of the reason, deep understanding is vital, and the goal is to attempt to understand the depth and meanings of a participant’s responses, rather than quantifying frequency of particular responses or phrasings. Trying to capture and make sense of the participant's mental and social world is complicated and must be achieved through sustained engagement with the text, that is, participants’ responses, and a deep process of interpretation (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Therefore, Smith and Osborn (2007) encourage the researcher to engage in an interpretive relationship with the transcript of the interviews.

The data collection was audio recorded interviews. The participants were digitally audio recorded so that the researcher could listen carefully to the responses for later coding and enable the data to be transcribed. This study used a digital recorder and an iPad, which facilitated the transcription. The audio portion was also captured on the cloud by the Zoom software.

**Transcription and review of the data.** Smith and Osborn (2007) suggest that transcribing takes a long time and the researcher needs to allow at least 5 to 8 hours for each interview hour if the researcher is transcribing the interview. For expediency concerns, the recordings were transcribed word for word by the professional transcription
service Rev.com. Once professionally transcribed, the researcher was able to listen carefully to the participant’s responses noting pauses, laughter, sadness, and tone of voice. A member check followed in the form of the researcher returning individual participant transcripts for review and approval. Providing participants with their individual transcript allowed for accuracy, validation, and reliability. In addition, the participants reviewed the transcripts for any identifiable information. Once the participants validated the transcripts, the four interviews conducted via Zoom were removed from the cloud. To protect confidentiality, all identifiable information was removed to protect the participants. Additionally, participants selected pseudonyms prior to the start of the interview. Any school referenced was also given a pseudonym in this dissertation.

**Data analysis.** Alase (2017) points out that new and novice researchers conducting a qualitative study struggle the most during the data coding process. In fact, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) claim that qualitative research methodology is one of those methodologies that are “time-consuming, labor-intensive, and both imaginatively and emotionally demanding” (p. 42). According to Alase (2017), a researcher must first read the interview transcripts several times. In order to analyze the data, the researcher reviewed each individual transcript several times and used the left-hand margin to annotate any interesting or significant information received from the participant (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The first stage of analysis in IPA is to read and reread the transcript to become as familiar as possible with the account (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

**Developing emerging themes.** The initial notes made were transformed into short phrases that captured quality within the text (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The themes
refined the responses to incrementally higher level of abstraction, invoking more psychological and academic terminology (Smith & Osborn, 2007). This process of notes transforming into themes happened throughout the entire transcript.

Once the emergent superordinate and subordinate themes were identified and listed, the researcher then looked for connections between all identified themes (Smith & Osborn, 2007). A superordinate theme is a group of emergent themes that can be grouped together and can apply to each participant in the study (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) do not define the term subordinate theme concisely. For the purpose of this study the researcher defines subordinate theme as lower order of rank and can evolved from specific participant responses. Although a subordinate theme is important; it is not an overarching or major theme.

The initial list of themes was created in chronological order based on the order of the questions in the transcript. The next step involved more logical and theoretical ordering, as the researcher tried to make sense of the connections between themes that were emerging (Smith & Osborn, 2007). As a result, four superordinate themes emerged followed by four subordinate themes. The analysis of the findings was organized into concepts, superordinate themes, and subordinate themes. Smith and Osborn (2007) point out that in IPA studies, higher levels of convergence may be observed across what might appear to be distinct cases, and thus the process pushes the analysis to an even higher level. As a final step, the researcher sought to connect the themes to a higher level of analysis by developing two concepts related to the two theoretical frameworks which guided this study. The themes were organized and presented in a table format as recommended by Smith and Osborn (2007). Throughout the process, the researcher
continued to refer to the research questions in order to identify themes relating to how urban school leaders' personal beliefs influence their ability to lead for social justice.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter described the qualitative method of inquiry for the IPA based study of school leaders’ beliefs, attitudes and behaviors for leading social justice urban schools. An overview of the IPA design was described and assisted in providing reflective first-person accounts of school leader’s beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that led to creating high achieving urban schools in NYS. The research instruments, data collection and data analysis methods were described. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews with six urban school leaders in New York State. Chapter 5 will connect the qualitative data to previous research and explore future research opportunities and recommendations for school leaders to lead high achieving urban schools.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to gain insight into how high achieving urban school leaders’ personal beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors were influenced by their lived experiences and how these beliefs were reflected in their leadership practices in leading urban social justice schools in New York State. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used and six female school leaders participated in the study. The process of awareness begins with a critical examination of school leaders' own beliefs, and how those beliefs influence their everyday decision-making. IPA allowed the researcher to gather detailed and reflective, first-person rationale from the participants (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

Purposive sampling was used to assist in identifying school leaders through a qualified criterion. To identify school leaders in distant communities, snowball sampling was also used for this study. Since snowball sampling often helps researchers find and recruit participants that otherwise might be difficult to identify (Marshall, 1996), the participants were asked to refer other potential participants to the study. The data collected reflected six female urban school leaders with 129 years of combined experience in leading urban public schools in New York State and as such, were considered experts in the field of K-12 education. These school leaders served in urban schools that were not initially meeting the educational needs of all students and subgroups but later became high achieving schools during their tenure. The participants
selected pseudonym prior to the start of the interview. Demographically, participants
Lucy and Lynn self-identified as White, Cynthia and Lola self-identified as Latinas, and
Ruby and Stella self-identified as African American. Ages ranged from 36 to 65 years
old. Four of the six participants worked in multiple urban school districts as
administrators and two worked in suburban school districts prior to working in an urban
district.

This chapter presents an analysis of qualitative data gathered through semi-
structured interviews using open-ended questions that derived from Mezirow’s
transformative learning theory and Shields’s transformative leadership theory. Lewis-
Beck, Bryman and Futing (2004) define constant comparison as a “data-analytic process
whereby each interpretation and finding is compared with existing findings as it emerges
from the data analysis” (p. 2). As a result, a comparison will be made to the existing data
on high achieving urban school leader’s leadership practices.

School leaders' decisions are widely influenced by their personal life history,
which shape their beliefs (Guerra & Pazey, 2016). Personal beliefs present such a strong
influence that even among trained professionals, such personal beliefs serve to predict
behavior at a greater rate than any relevant professional training (Nelson & Guerra,
2014). While adults have the capacity to become critically reflexive about their beliefs,
they also need to develop skills, insights, and dispositions essential to such a practice of
reflection (Mezirow, 2003).

Due to the dynamic constructs of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, this
theory provided a useful lens through which school leaders' beliefs can be examined to
employ educational equity and create high achieving urban school leaders. This study
focused on the following transformative learning theory phases: a disorienting dilemma; self-reflection with feelings of guilt or shame; a critical assessment of assumptions; planning a course of action; acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan; and the reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective. Mezirow’s transformative learning theory is a catalyst for personal change. However, Shields’s theory of transformative leadership theory is the propelling force with which personal change impacts the world. The following transformative leadership theory tenets were utilized: the mandate to effect deep and equitable change; the need to deconstruct knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and injustice and to reconstruct them; and the call to exhibit moral courage (Shields, 2010).

**Research Questions**

This qualitative phenomenology study presents findings from this study based on the following two questions:

1. How are the beliefs of high achieving urban school leaders influenced by their lived experiences?
2. How are the beliefs of high achieving urban school leaders reflected in their leadership practices?

The researcher captured and reflected upon the essential beliefs and concerns of six urban school leaders. In accordance with IPA, following is the researcher’s interpretation of the interviews with six female urban school leaders in New York State.

**Data Analysis and Findings**

To analyze the findings of this study, the researcher engaged in an interpretative relationship with the transcripts of each participant. The analysis of the findings is
organized by concepts, superordinate themes, and subordinate themes related to the
study. A superordinate theme is a construct which normally can apply to each participant
in the study, however, it can be manifested in different ways (Smith et al., 2009). The
superordinate themes in this study were illustrated in each of the participants. The
subordinate themes in this study evolved from specific participant responses. Smith and
Osborn (2007) point out that in IPA studies, higher level of convergence may be
observed across apparently distinct cases, and thereby refining the analysis even further.
The “resulting analysis respects both theoretical convergence but also, within that,
individual characteristic in how that convergence is manifested” (p. 75). As a result, the
researcher sought to connect the themes to a higher level of analysis by developing two
concepts, “meaning perspective” and “deep equitable change.” These two concepts are
related to the two theoretical frameworks which guided this study.

The superordinate themes emerged from the two concepts and are connected to
Mezirow’s transformative learning theory of adult learning and Shields’s transformative
leadership theory. Table 4.1 delineates two concepts, four superordinate themes, and four
subordinate themes which emerged during the analysis of the transcripts. The two
concepts were: a) meaning perspective and b) deep equitable change. The four
superordinate themes identified were: a) perspective transformation; b) school
environment; c) distributive leadership; and d) moral courage. The subordinate themes
were a) no leadership playbook; b) starting ground up; c) bottom up leader; and d) know
better, do better.
Table 4.1

*Summary of Concepts, Superordinate, and Subordinate Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Superordinate Theme</th>
<th>Subordinate Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meaning Perspective</td>
<td>Theme 1: Perspective transformation</td>
<td>No leadership playbook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theme 2: School environment</td>
<td>Starting ground up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep equitable change</td>
<td>Theme 3: Distributive leadership</td>
<td>Bottom up leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theme 4: Moral courage</td>
<td>Know better, do better</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Concept 1: meaning perspectives.** The first concept, meaning perspectives, emerged as a broad category related to the participants’ lived experiences. Mezirow (1978) defines meaning perspectives as “the psychological structures within which one locates and defines oneself and their relationships” (p.7). This concept is directly linked to the school leaders lived experiences which shaped their beliefs, behaviors and attitudes. The two superordinate themes that emerged from the concept of meaning perspective were “perspective transformation” and “school environment.” The two subordinate themes that emerged from the superordinate theme were: “no leadership playbook” and “starting ground up.”

**Theme 1: perspective transformation.** This superordinate theme emerged from the participants’ lived experiences and its relation to Mezirow’s meaning perspectives. All of the participants shared a disorienting dilemma which led to a significant transformation in their personal development as school leaders in an urban school. Disorienting dilemmas are understood as a critical aspect of transformative learning.
Within Mezirow’s model of an ideal-typical learning process, disorienting dilemmas serve as a kind of initiation into a transformative learning experience, and which often manifest as a crisis that challenges long-held assumptions, and if all proceeds as hypothesized, will yield transformed beliefs (Taylor, 2000).

According to Moore (2005), a disorienting dilemma is a situation that a person experiences as a critical challenge to their worldview, or even status quo, that cannot be resolved with previously effective problem-solving strategies. School leaders are trained to address many day-to-day issues in a school building. However, there are times when a school leader is confronted with situations that they are unable to solve with the expert training they received. The subordinate theme of “no leadership playbook” emerged from participants searching in their leadership toolbox for a solution to their dilemma. The participants in this study described their struggles navigating through a life altering event that resulted in the school leader engaging in self-examination. This self-examination was often met with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame that led to a critical reassessment of the school leaders’ assumptions (Mezirow, 2000).

As a second-year elementary principal Stella was confronted with a staff member’s inappropriate behavior toward a special education student. As Stella recalled her dilemma, she paused several times to be able to tell her story:

I think that the most challenging part of being a principal is when you're confronted with a situation and you know you have to do the right thing you have to make sure that you protect the children at all cost.

Knowing her moral responsibility and professional duty to protect all children, Stella followed the standard process of reporting any harm being done to children under
her supervision. She pursued justice for her student. However, her internal conflict came shortly after as she describes receiving threats of physical harm to her and her family.

Stella’s voice level increased as she shared the horrific experience she encountered:

And one of the things that I felt I had to overcome with the faculty and staff. And what happened with the faculty is that they turned on me because many of them trusted this teacher assistant because they allow their children to spend time with him. And so, it was hard for them to believe that this guy could've been doing something to one of our students, one of our special education student that was inappropriate. And because they believed in him even though all the evidence pointed to that he had done something inappropriate and I had to take it all the way through the court system to ensure he would not be able to work around children again.

As a leader and mandated reporter, Stella understood the importance of protecting all the children in her care. What she struggled with was what came later. As Stella described her disorienting dilemma, she paused and became emotional as she continued to share her experience:

I started receiving threats, and hostile phone calls to my home. I started receiving threats, talking about my child, my son, about myself. And I felt it was related to this gentleman who was a teacher assistant and I think he was having people call my home to harass me. And I would say that there is nothing in the leadership playbook to teach you about dealing with extreme adversity when in a leadership role. Especially when you experience hostility when making difficult and unpopular decisions that your faculty and staff refuse to understand. And how I
handle that though, at first, I tried to ignore the attitudes and I tried to over-
explain.

Similarly, Ruby’s experience as a school leader and her belief in supporting
teachers and students was tested. Ruby had the distinct opportunity to start a new school
which meant she had to hire all the staff. As Ruby shared her beliefs when hiring
teachers, she seemed perplexed as to why she experienced what she did:

When you hire people, you hire them believing in the interview process that they
will believe in your mission and vision. You're bringing on people. I think
sometimes people don't understand or realize, as leaders, we hire people because
we feel like we can trust them, right? We feel like they're going to believe and
carry our mission and vision and do what's right. No one ever hires anyone to do
harm in any way.

Within Ruby’s first year as a school leader in NYC, she dealt with a disorienting
dilemma and had to navigate a way to overcome it. Believing that people are well
intentioned, Ruby was surprised by what she experienced next. As Ruby recalled her
experience, she moved in her seat with discomfort:

I had a very disturbing time with a staff member who I hired, who was struggling
mightily in the classroom. It was evident, our children were getting physically
hurt, the management was poor, and because of that, there was no real instruction
going on. All these supports were put in place with this teacher and it wasn't
getting better. It wasn't getting better. A decision had to be made whether to
continue her employment or not. As I was speaking to her, I said, “Here are all of
the supports, here's what's working, here's what's not. Here's your ownership in it.
Here's where your responsibility comes in on this because it can't be all of the outside pieces.” Long story short, [pauses, shakes head] I get a letter in the mail from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), that she was suing me and bringing charges against me for discrimination based on age discrimination and based on religion. She was Jewish which I didn't know her religion because we never had a conversation about that. In her eyes, she saw my addressing the challenges as an attack. In turn, she was going to retaliate! I was devastated! First, I had never been charged with any form of discrimination, but being a woman of color myself, I know what it looks like, right? I'm thinking to myself, “Huh?” and I felt that that was a form of a deflection from what the real issue was, but it also was so insulting to me because it came out of nowhere!

As Ruby told her story she struggled in trying to make sense of the incident. She continued to navigate through her lived experience and search for a reason as to why that was happening. Ultimately, Ruby reflected on her lived experiences as a Black woman to attempt to make sense of what had happened to her:

I guess that was her way of protecting herself and I didn't know how to navigate that. It made me sick to my stomach because I'm doing my job, I'm expecting you to do yours, I have systems in place for you to do your job effectively, but I couldn't change her perception of my addressing or calling out what needed to be addressed. It got ugly! It got very ugly to the point where her husband contacted the school and was making threats! It was just unbelievable, and it went on for months. It went on for months because you have to go through the process and I had to go through the process. I almost felt as if when you're being accused of
something that you know is not who you are and your character is being
challenged or attacked, I didn't have any prior problem-solving skills to address
someone accusing me of being discriminatory. I didn't know how to navigate that
and I just had to let the process take place, the interviews that the EEOC or
whatever did. I had to let all of that speak for itself, my communications via
email, the things that I put up. I had to defend myself and my character and my
integrity. [In a raised voice] It was one thing to call me Ms. Ruby, the principal,
but you are calling me Ms. Ruby, the child of Sheila and Roy, how do you
navigate that? How do you navigate that? That for me and the length of time that
it took, it's almost like being accused clearly of something devastating that's not
and how do you prove that? [Continuing with a sense of relief] I had to let my
actions and my communications speak for themselves and thank God, things had
always been kept very professional. I had paper trails and everything else and
that's what really helped me….She was hell bent on how dare I and I was almost
feeling as if it was discriminatory because it was almost as if, How dare I as a
Black woman say that what you're doing in the classroom as a White woman?
because I again, I didn't know what her religion was because there was no need
for me to know that. I don't ask people what their religions are. It doesn't matter.
You are what appears to be a White woman. Clearly, I'm a woman of color and
that's that, but it was almost as if, how dare I attack or address her? She felt it was
an attack…. I felt it was my professional responsibility to address when what's
happening in the classroom is not conducive to learning or at the children. It
almost felt like this reciprocated, ‘Who do you think you are?’ and then it went that route. It was challenging to say the least.

Like Ruby, Cynthia explained her experience as a Latina woman in a middle-level leadership position in NYC after serving as a teacher and school leader. Despite growing up and working in a diverse community, Cynthia was aware of different types of biases:

Well, during my time in both school communities, not only was it a culture component but it was also gender. So, there were gender biases, many microaggressions from subordinates as well as supervisors, where they engaged in assumptions about who I was in the work, just because I looked the way I look, I come from where I come from and I grew up where I grew up. And so, there were a lot of ways that those microaggressions and the biases showed up.

Cynthia describes her dilemma with a supervisor who questioned her decision when she was focused on improving the graduation rate in the schools’ she supervised. As Cynthia recalled her disturbing experience, her voice cracked with frustration and confusion as to why she was being questioned about her decisions to improve the graduation rate in her school:

For example, I had a White male supervisor that was concerned about something that was reported by the director of special education at the district. And the concern was that “Set” was not on the Student Program during the day. Although I had shared with the director of special education my rationale for not doing so programmatically and doing it at the time of the day that I was doing it, programming those courses first, nonetheless, I was reported to the big boss. The big boss came, the deputy superintendent that supervises me. And at that point,
White male, he basically came very forceful and wanted to understand why I made that decision, although I had already explained it to the director of special education that it wasn't reported in the way that I explained it. So, for me, my understanding is that “Sets” are a non-credit bearing courses for kids that are over age for the grade and already are falling behind. I was either offering pushing sets or sets at the end of the school day, as a course of study for them to get the additional supports and modifications and then two points into their coursework that they needed. And therefore, they would have more time and the faculty member that conducted the set, that team of set teachers would stay for an hour of overtime to support the students. So, it was a model that was going to support young people. It was also going to give the faculty more time and to have greater impact and leverage with the kids as evidenced by the student achievement outcome.

While Stella’s, Ruby’s, and Cynthia’s internal conflicts were connected to staff, Lucy’s, Lynn’s, and Lola’s perspective transformations presented differently. As a first-year principal in an urban setting, Lucy was presented with a challenging situation that she had never experienced before. Lucy’s leadership was challenged shortly after starting at her new school. When explaining her dilemma, Lucy moved in her seat trying to find a comfortable way to share this difficult experience:

As principal at Brooke Elementary, I had a particularly challenging student who had a lot of external factors that were influencing him in school, and then also some internal things that he was dealing with to the point where he was very violent toward others but also toward himself with self-harm daily…. There's one
particular incident that occurred at school was the time where he actually was trying to harm himself and actually did physically harm himself and we needed to get in contact with the family. Grandma had custody of him, she refused to come to the school and was being very verbally aggressive on the phone. I ended up having to make some phone calls to be able to transport the child home. Ultimately, we were met with making a recommendation that he be taken to the hospital. And transported the child home to the house where the grandmother actually was verbally and physically attacking me! So, in that instance, knowing what the child was going through and what happened, once I got to the home, I had to go back and make a decision about what the next steps would be, what the action steps would be as a result of what had occurred. The child was harming himself, but before he harmed himself, he also had harmed other students and staff in the building. And then once his grandmother had put her hands on me and law enforcement actually became involved, it became a really tough decision. Because ultimately, I wanted to make a decision that was in the best interest of the child. But the grandmother was saying he wasn't coming back there. She wasn't coming to the school again. She didn't want him there. I later found out that grandma had a drug addiction and I never had experience with that before.

Like Lucy, Lola became principal of a turnaround school in Upstate New York. After serving as an assistant principal for 1 year, she was promoted to the principalship of a dual language school in an urban school district. As a turnaround school leader, she received training through the Innovation Zone to prepare her for her new leadership role.
Lola appeared frustrated when sharing the injustices that she experienced as a school leader:

I'm dealing with, I would say a dilemma right now. Which is something that I dealt with in my previous district as well. But here, currently where I'm at is, there's…. As I explained to you, we're a district and so we have kids that live in this area who come to this school and our schools, right? We have six elementary schools. Then with the remaining seats we open it up to kids in surrounding districts. So, if they want to come to our schools, they have to apply for an inter district transfer. We get a lot of kids from neighboring districts that, a lot of these kids come from poverty. There are a lot of our English as a New Language kids and everything else. What happens is that the schools up north, let's just say, they fill their seats with kids with a certain demographic. Then schools on the south, we fill our seats with a certain demographic, right? So, schools on the north are very, very White. Schools on the south are very, very diverse. [With frustration] Because it's almost like the community does a really good job at moving into certain areas so that all the White kids go to one school and then all the Brown kids go to these other schools. So, my internal mass struggle is that I see that I'm dealing with a lot more discipline. I have a high special education case load. I'm dealing with a lot of other issues that those schools up north don't necessarily deal with! But if we had a system, that was a little bit more inclusive, then we would be spreading all of the challenging students across the district. You walk in my school and you'll see Black and Brown kids. But you walk into schools up north, you see all White kids, but we're all in the same district. So, why do all the White
kids get placed there and all the Brown kids get placed here? I mean, when I was a principal in New York City (NYC), it was the same. Very similar, in that all the kids that went to the school, where it was a school, they lived in that residential area. So, all of the kids in that area went to that school. There was a lot of kids in poverty and with poverty comes a lot of issues.

Lynn’s internal conflict manifested itself in a different way than the other five participants. Prior to transitioning to an urban school district, Lynn considered herself to be a successful music teacher. She knew the content and was very skilled at teaching and reaching her children. When she arrived at Denver Middle School, she experienced a disorienting dilemma. When describing her internal conflict, she began blushing as if she was embarrassed that this had happened to her. Lynn explained:

So, actually, the first day of teaching at Denver Middle School, I actually came home and called my father and said, “It doesn't matter that I've taught, that I have any experience at all. I am starting from scratch,” because I was classically trained and I taught music. So, there was a way that I perceived that music should be taught and right on basically day one I was like, “Oh, there's no way I'm going to reach and teach the kids that I have in front of me if I am so attached to the way that I teach that I make them come to me.” I recognized that in my content, I could apply the same concepts and the same sort of essential questions to any kind of music. So, I really started getting to work at, all right, so I can teach rhythm and I don't have to teach it this way and I can teach melody or theme or any of the components that I would teach in terms of music, I can teach it through anything.
So, I really went at trying to make sure that what I was teaching was relevant to the kids that were in front of me.

Lynn reflected on her dilemma and shared her previous experience as a classical music teacher and what she needed to do differently:

Well, I think, well, obviously, the experience that I had of teaching children that predominantly looked like me and in the community that I was raised in, I had one lens and it was all I saw was this is the way that teaching and learning should happen. It's how I taught. It's how I was taught. It's how I learned. So, that's the way it's supposed to happen. I just realized on that very first day getting to know the kids that I had in my classroom that they could care less. That it wasn't about them wanting to get to know me, that I had to come to them, that it was really about me proving to them that I was worth their investment of time and energy. I came over time to realize that that had a lot to do with patterns of people leaving and things, and I didn't know that on that first day. All I knew on the first day was, yeah, my way isn't going to cut it, that I have to change to fit them. They don't have to change to fit me. So, that was really just my first takeaway. Then I learned through time spent and watching the sad thing that happens when there are no quality people to fill those teaching spots and kids don't get what they deserve in terms of the high-quality education that we're promising them because often, we have to put people in front of them that aren't skillful and that are learning by doing. I recognized that I had enough experience behind me that I could make all of the changes that I needed to make to my own behavior. I wasn't having to learn my content. All I had to learn different was a new delivery and
that I could do that and I could make that adjustment in order to give the kids who's... You have to teach the kids who are in front of you and I was watching some of my colleague’s express frustration that kids weren't interested in learning. Somehow, these kids aren't, right? I always say if these kids can't, then it's our job to teach them. So, you have to really be able to teach the kids who are sitting in the seats in front of you, not some kids that you wish came to school instead. For me that first day was like I'm not going to spend my time thinking that I wish I was someplace else. This is where I am and I'm going to figure out how to make sure that I'm relevant to the kids who are sitting in front of me.

The absences of a leadership playbook challenged the school leaders to search elsewhere to navigate through their disorienting dilemma. Nonetheless, their individual struggles led to self-examination of their assumptions, which led to a perspective transformation for each of the participants. As a result, these participants realized that their leadership playbook did not have the answers to their internal conflict. Despite all the rigorous leadership training, the participants had to learn to navigate through a difficult time to solve their individual dilemma. The participants transformation prepared them to plan a course of action to lead a social justice school.

**Theme 2: school environment.** The superordinate theme of school environment was identified from interview questions related to Mezirow’s phases of meaning perspective. School leaders who focus on creating and developing the school’s culture, as a learning environment is essential to improving teacher morale and student achievement (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009). These school leaders quickly realized that the school environment in their respective buildings was a priority if they wanted to develop a high
achieving school. For example, Lola recalled the sense of urgency they had to ensure the school was performing academically. As Lola shared her story, she leaned forward in her seat and in a high pitch voice expressed the sense of urgency she had:

I walked in and the kids had proficiency levels at 3% and 2%. I mean, we were literally starting ground up. We were restarting the dual language program from scratch. It was a turnaround school, 90% of the staff had been turned around. [The adopted turnaround model for this school required 90% of the current staff to leave the building.] There were only very few staff members that the kids knew. Discipline was [widens her eyes], the behaviors were out of control! Kids were running in the halls; they were attacking us! I mean day one. So, there was a lot that we had to do in terms of turning the school around to get those numbers to rise. So, the first place where we focused on was school culture and climate.

Lola shared an example of the culture and behaviors of students and adults in her school building. She recalls a particular incident where the teacher’s response to a student was not culturally responsive:

For example, once I had a (White) teacher say to a Black child, “I am going to call the cops on you if you don’t behave, I am going to call the cops on you!” The teacher continued to tell the child, “I don't know what to do with you. You don't listen. I'm just going to call the cops.” The family was very upset because, it was during that time where a lot of police brutality was happening and a lot of Black people were getting killed. So, African American families and people of color in general are afraid of the police. I explained to her, I'm like, “While I support you, that child was misbehaving, you can't tell Black kids you're going to call the
police on them because of these reasons.” [In a frustrated voice] That was definitely a challenge of my values as well, I would say. Not that teachers weren't trying, but there were a lot of distractions and it was just very easy to become distracted. There was a lot of noise and a lot of interruption going on.

Like Lola, Lucy focused on building a culture and climate that was appropriate for students, staff, families, and the community. As part of Lucy’s interview for her a principalship in an urban school district in Upstate New York, she visited the school she was hired to lead. Lucy describes her arrival at Brooke Elementary as a place that was chaotic and needed immediate change. In a sad, quiet voice Lucy explains:

So, when I first arrived again, I talked a little bit about how it just didn't feel like an inviting place to be. There were many, many students not attending class, whether they were roaming halls, running in the halls, hiding in different places throughout the school, avoiding work at any cost. Also, avoiding relationships at any cost really because not only were they avoiding the work, but they also weren't engaging in any positive social interaction with others. [With a high-pitched voice] There was lot of violent and aggressive behavior, a lot of vulgar and inappropriate language and gestures! A very, just chaotic environment which presented as very stressful for staff, for families, for students and it really just…there just wasn’t a lot of teaching and learning going on.

Lucy shared that Brooke Elementary School did not have walls to divide the classrooms. This presented an issue of concentration and focus for students. Lucy further explained the disconnect between students and staff. She sat up in her chair and in a confident voice shared:
I think one of the major things was just the culture and climate of the building. So, kids were doing things that the teachers felt were inappropriate. [Shoulders dropping and disappointed voice] Honestly, teachers didn't want a lot of the kids in class and the kids knew it. So, just walking into the building, it didn't feel like an inviting place. It didn't feel like there were procedures being implemented and followed by the students. It didn't look like the staff were excited to be there and it didn't look like the kids were excited to be there. So, it just didn't feel like a fun place like a school should feel like. And I think immediately anyone walking in could feel it. [With conviction] And I knew that a school needed to be a place where kids wanted to come, and teachers want it to be. So, we had a lot of work to do to develop a team that could really work to create engaging classroom environments, create clear procedures and processes for expectations throughout the school, not just for the kids but for the adults as well.

Lynn was challenged with a deficit mindset staff that also negatively affected the culture and climate of the school. Lynn explains that there is a distinct difference when you are a teacher and have the courageous conversation with a teacher. However, when you are a school leader and try to have that conversation with teachers, things are quite different:

So, I think that has two different sides. I think there's the teacher side when you are peer to peer and then I think that there's the administrator side, when you are talking to another administrator. As the school leader, I remember having a pretty passionate conversation with a teacher who was saying “These kids just don't, and these kids just can't.” Those things that for me had become triggers. [She nods her
head and looks up with frustration] These kids can't was an indicator to me of something more that adults could be doing, but maybe couldn't see at the time. So, as a colleague, I could have a really passionate conversation that might have even sounded a little argumentative. But when I was a leader, you can't have those kinds of conversations because then people get, they say that you're mean or you're intimidating or that you're, I don't know, any list of words. I've been called almost all of them. So, when I was at Francis Elementary, I was charged with evaluating only tenured teachers, but some that had some very strong views about what they thought kids should be doing...particularly children with special needs and lot of perceptions like these kids just can't do this. “This is all they can do!” So, we're talking about fourth graders that are maybe on a kindergarten level and there's not really a solid plan for how to move the child. [Passionately] I really bumped up against this inability to communicate in a way that met someone, another adult where they were because I was so passionate about what kids should be getting. . . . That was really hard for me because again, this adult perception then was that I didn't have their back or I wasn't supportive of the adults because I was so kid focused. [Pause] So, I had to really work at that communication piece because that continued to be a theme of how passionate I was about what was right for kids, but that adults can only change as much as their feelings will allow them to. So, when you're pushing up against someone's armor-when they armor up and they're feeling defensive, you can't really get to change. So, it took me quite a while to realize that I had to really love adults in the same way I was passionate about loving kids, and that was a really hard lesson for me to learn.
Lynn also reflected on her leadership style, and how to meet the needs of her staff and students. In her reflection, she realized the importance of inspiring her staff:

So, a lot of it I think for me has to do with learning about my own style and how other people perceive my style. So, I perceive my own style as just I get stuff done, right? [With a strong, confident voice] Who doesn't want somebody who gets stuff done and who's really direct and who can just tell you that this is the way that we have to do it and I have a plan? So, let's go! [Lowering her voice] Actually, about 70% of the world doesn't want that kind of person because it is too much change too fast. So, I've really had to learn that people want to be inspired and when they're inspired, then they can grow at their own pace and they can reach towards high goals, but that there has to be this real balance of seeing humanity in people seeing their own, they're doing the best that they can.

Everyone comes to work well intentioned. Sometimes, we're not intentional, but we are mostly well intentioned. I have to really work hard still to phrase things in a way that doesn't make people feel like I'm saying I could do it better. A colleague suggested that I read “Leadership and Self-Deception,” which I read and actually saw myself in a different way through reading that book. [Voice cracking] It kind of played back all of these times where I had bumped up against someone feeling like I just was being disrespectful or I was being rude or I was being too direct or I was being arrogant. Because I didn't know how to speak to their heart, I had relied on positional authority to carry the weight of the message.

Lynn also learned a cultural lesson after addressing a teaching assistant (TA) she supervised as a vice principal:
I think about an experience that I had when I was a vice principal and I had a TA that needed to be counseled. [Shaking her head] She got very angry and she was African American and it became an issue that I was a White administrator and she was an African American. The principal was African American, and I asked the principal to sit in. At the time I felt completely right and being just very direct. This was the problem, this shouldn't have happened, and this is what I need you to do moving forward. I felt like that was really the safe place to speak from.

[Pausing to reflect on what she now knows] As I learned about my style, other people, how that's perceived, I would have played that very, very differently. If that were to happen today, I would have that conversation in a completely different way because I really just, I hid behind my armor of, “No I'm the boss and so I said so,” like when you say to your kids, “Well, I'm the parent and that's why.” I was using that positional authority as an armor. I had to learn going into being a principal that actually, yes, I'm the boss, but I'm nothing if people don't respect me, care about me, want to follow me, any of those things. So, it became my mission to fix my face, to shift the way that I came across, to fix the way that people perceived me. I'm not saying that I got really good at it because I think I'm a lot better now than I even was then at understanding how leaning into relationships is more important, that when the work gets hard, it's more important to lean into the relationships then to just go back to, “But this is what we're doing.” It's more important to lean in when it's really, really tough. I look at that a little bit differently now because I definitely think turning around that school put all of us through the wringer. It was emotionally draining for everybody and I
think I could've done a better job of really supporting the emotional health of the adults, which would have just been better for them. I think that we made great gains for kids, but I think sometimes I put kids even more ahead of adults and then adults aren't there to do the work. Then that relates to turnover and things like that because people just burn out. I hope that answered your question.

After successfully opening two schools, turning a closing school to a high achieving school in NYC and now removing a school from receivership in Upstate NY, Ruby still continues to challenge the fixed mindsets of staff members who are not culturally responsive to students and families in urban settings:

I had a situation earlier this year as a matter of fact, first day of school where a teacher was having a negative interaction with a student. The student didn't know the teacher. Some of our children who have historically been challenging, it may be that much more difficult to build relationships with them. If you put the time and the effort into it, even though they might try to push you away for a while because I think I was called the B-word for a full year because they're accustomed to being maybe abandoned or seeing just a cycle of people in and out, in and out and so they're not going to give or allow you to build trust with them right away.

This particular teacher, I heard the interaction. First day of school, the teacher stated that they wouldn't contact the home of the child. My question to the teacher was, “Have you already made a connection to the home just to introduce yourself before you called the home with something negative about their child?” The teacher said, “No, I had not.” I said, “Well, I recommend that you do that first.” Then the teacher said, “Well, what about a letter?” I said, “That's fine as well.”
Anything that allows you to introduce yourself, do that first before we start with calling parents. That's not going to go well even with the parents. That's their child and they're going to take offense to that.” Then the teacher said to me, “Well, do you think they can read?” I said, “Who?” The teacher said, “The parents.” I said, “Do I think that they can read? Read what?” She was like, “Well, if I send the letter, do you think that they can read?” I said, “Well, what would make you assume that they couldn't?” The comment was, “Well, I worked in another school on the Southside and many of the parents couldn't read.” The challenges that you'll face is now addressing a mindset like the teacher who asked me if the parents of that child could read. [In a loud voice] In that moment, I had to walk away. I had to have a restorative conference, but I couldn't do it in that moment because it wasn't…..

At the time, Ruby was taken by surprise and had to walk away so that she could remain professional. However, Ruby knew she had to address this mindset and ensure that the teacher understood what was wrong with the statement she made. After pausing and repositioning herself back in her seat, Ruby said:

What I had gotten and digested from that clearly placed me in my feelings and all kinds of things, I wanted to just let come out of my mouth, but I had to understand my role and what I was dealing with. I said, “You know what? In hindsight, I can take that and make that an opportunity.” But in the meantime, in that moment, I needed to come out. Some of the challenges around social justice implementation is now taking and addressing people of varied mindsets and trying to see where they're coming from. Even with that teacher, I think the teacher obviously heard
themselves and tried to clean it up like, “No, I didn't mean it like that.” [In a firm voice] “No, it came out how it was meant to come out, but we'll deal with it at another time.” About a day later, a day or two later, I set up a restorative conference with that teacher and I needed someone to help me navigate that. I had a separate restorative coach do it. In sitting with that person, that person had felt that they had a child, a teacher had a child, the child has special needs. I hadn't always felt as if she was supported as a parent of a child with special needs and how things would come. She understood where it came off or how it sounded, but that was a mindset that now I had to navigate where I saw even harm, verbal harm being done to children. Sometimes, we're faced with these obstacles and we have to either coach people through it who want to see the best or we have to coach them out. I've been faced with some challenges around what I think is the right thing to do for children and making the right decisions. Some people may not buy into it, they may not see that.

When identifying social justice challenges within the school, Ruby stated that “not everyone on your staff, and I don't care where you are, is going to genuinely truly believe that they're not bringing their stuff, their biases.” This was evident in Stella’s and Cynthia’s experiences with English language learners in their respective buildings. Stella was challenged with her personal assumptions about students in her building. She had to work to overcome those assumptions and ensure all students were included in their school:

I think that occurred when I was assigned to become principal of J-W school. We had 26 languages—from different places—26 languages in the school, all within
one school. And the common denominator for the students was poverty. Right? [With a perplexed look] But one of the things that I did not understand at the time, was that I didn't have a strong understanding of cultures, different cultures. I had children from one town in Bosnia. I had children from Asian communities, I had children from various African countries. And all of them had their own culture and nuances. [With a look of disappointment and tone of despair] The educational courses taught me a universalistic approach to teach all children the same. Just understand that every child is supposed to accelerate. And I had to change my mindset because that experience of having all those different children, speaking all those different languages coming from a global community, coming into one school, myself and my educators, we had to reframe our thinking. [Projecting confidence and excitement] We had to reeducate ourselves to understand that it’s not about equality for children, it’s about equity for children. And so, when we start looking at equity, you are really looking at the individual person and looking deeply into what they need. And my experience, as a principal was highly transformational for me, as not just an educator, but as a leader in the educational arena.

Like Stella, Cynthia shared difficulty understanding the needs of her English language learners which affected the school environment for students and staff. With a sense of shame, Cynthia talks about not knowing the cultural differences of her students and staff:

So, here I was, the school leader of this community with many, many different languages, students of many different languages. And, of course, who knew? I
didn't understand or know all of these cultures. And so, here I was seeking to understand and not to be understood. But I didn't know what I didn't know. So, I thought the Asian community was a very united community with a very homogeneous connected, look out for one another, have each other's back kind of community. [With a perplexed look] So here I was, I had this team of Asian faculty that spoke Mandarin. As I walked around the school and went into the classroom and connected with faculty and kids, I believed everything was okay. Of course, I inherited my Asian children, my Asian young people and one of them becomes my Asian friend. And so, he becomes the advocate and spokesperson for the children. And what I learned from this student? This young person was so bright and basically said to me, he says, “You know she doesn't like us, right?” And I say, “Who are you talking about?” He says, “The teacher.” So, this was their native language arts teacher. She only spoke Mandarin. Any young person that spoke Cantonese or Fuzhounese, she discriminated against them? Here was the breaking down of my personal beliefs and assumptions about the Asian community and how they show up in my thinking process. And so, he basically says, “Ma'am, I am Fuzhounese.” And the people from Pujan are like the Black people in America. He says, “From Shanghainese.” Which is where the teacher's from, they don't like people that are not from Shanghai. So, there was an immediate like aha! moment for me. And at which point I said, “Okay, so how could I fix this? How can I help you?” He says, “Well, Miss, you must bring a teacher that is Fuzhounese or can speak Fuzhounese or Cantonese that will help students that do not just speak Mandarin.” I said, “Okay, go on, let's try to find
these folks that can help you with your learning and will make you feel good at school.” Long and behold, they started the journey of trying to find some remedy for kids while trying to address faculty members and the claims that the students were bringing forth and it was just very interesting learning that at times what is portrayed. Again, the perception and that is portrayed that there is this unified community that is always looking out for one another, that is always working together, that is always engaging in support of each other, that it wasn't necessarily what I thought it was. That the ugly green monster raised his head and here we were having to deal with the problem of practice in supporting of the service of the Asian students in the school community.

Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory phases begin with a critical incident followed by the person engaging in self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame that leads to a critical assessment of assumptions. Each of the participants in this study shared a critical incident in their lives that caused a self-examination of their feelings as well as a critical assessment of their assumptions. However, Mezirow contends that although the process of reflection can be painful or uncomfortable, the person realizes that others have gone through a similar process. This process typically compels an individual to consider ways to create new roles, relationships, or actions which are followed by an action plan (Moore, 2005). Shields (2010) contends that transformative leaders must understand and accept the mandate for deep and equitable change if they are to create socially just schools.

**Concept 2: Deep equitable change.** A second concept, deep equitable change, emerged as a broad category related to the participants leadership practices. Shields
(2011) contends that in order to begin the process of deep and equitable change, reconstructing our own images of students and family’s abilities, and creating opportunities for full participation in every decision and activity of the school, is essential. The two superordinate themes that emerged from the concept of deep equitable change were “distributive leadership” and “moral courage.” The subordinate themes that emerged were “bottom up leader” and “know better, do better.”

**Theme 3: distributive leadership.** The superordinate theme of distributive leadership emerged from interview questions related to leadership practices. Kouzes and Posner (2012) assert that if leaders want to gain commitment from constituents, leaders must model the desired behaviors for others to emulate in the workplace. The six participants in this study shared that distributive leadership was the catalyst for changing the school culture and climate and creating a community of educators and learners. Lucy shared that as a vice principal she learned to support the vision of the principal in that school by working collaboratively to meet the schools’ goals. However, as principal of Brooke Elementary Lucy shared the following:

> I really had to become the leader that created a team in that school with a lot of shared leadership and shared decision-making. And really in a priority school, I had to work really hard with that team to create the vision for the school and get everybody on board and really to buy in. So that was really my job as the leader, to really hear everyone at the table and involve as many stakeholders as possible, which I had not had to do before as a vice principal. And then really work with those teams, facilitating the work to really create systems and procedures of exactly how we wanted everything running to be able to meet our goals and really
implement and message that vision, not just in the school community but throughout the district as well.

In addition to including all the stakeholders and creating teams of teachers and staff to participate in the creation of school wide systems, Lucy ensured that all staff understood what distributive leadership looked like at Brooke Elementary. Lucy looked straight at the researcher and in a soft voice explained:

I think the biggest part is again, upfront and not having the buy-in or people being negative about it. I think a lot of times with that negativity, without even trying, staff can be very hesitant some of them said, “It’s going to be too much work,” or “They don’t want to give consequences to the kids.” We had a small number of staff who really believed that kids do this, that the students should just be punished. The staff really wanted a punishment instead of an opportunity for the child to learn and become better. [With a firm voice and confident body posture]

That was a big barrier for us. And it was a lot of work. That work is still continuing because the biggest part of that, I think for me in terms of overcoming some of that was that distributive leadership-really going around and identifying key teachers who believed in the work, to really lead a lot of that work, sit on teams. So that anything we were doing; it wasn't that I was doing it. It’s that this large group of all of your peers, feels that this work is important. . . . And even tapping some people who were the negative people and bringing them on board.

“We really need your help with this and it’s okay if you think something might not work or you have, but we need to work together because we owe it to the kids and we want to make this community a better place in this school.” So really
overcoming just some of that negativity and making them part of the work, but then making sure that they're listened to. So, if we're inviting you to the table, we actually want to hear what you have to say and making it a collaborative effort and not just me implementing something in the school. I think that's key and it would be with any initiative, but it's what helped really overcome a lot of that negative energy. Distributive leadership is something that I think sometimes people don't see the power in it.

Lucy and Lola also worked well with their staff to ensure there was student growth and teacher buy-in. With confidence in her voice, Lola shares that she is a bottom up leader. Lola repeated herself several times emphasizing that she believes in distributive leadership and behaves in that manner:

I would say I am a very relational leader and I value collaboration, connections. I value people. That drives everything I do. It’s not research that's driving me, it’s people, kids, families, connections, that’s what drives me to do what's right for the kids in the community. That’s just how I am. I think that’s what sets me apart from other type of leaders, is that I’m a very bottom up leader. If you don't like a bottom up leader, if you’re not looking for a bottom up leader, then I’m not going to be the right principal for you. I’m very transparent when I’m interviewing for jobs or whatever. I involve everybody. Everybody has a say. I take everybody’s feedback, parents, kids, teachers. I’m not a top down leader. I’m never ever going to say, “Well, we're going to do it like this and that's it” So, if you’re looking for that type of leader, that’s not me, because I’m not that type of leader.
While Lola considers herself as a bottom up leader, she realizes that there are certain things she needs to implement for her students to be successful. Lola describes how she wanted the teachers to agree on committing to doing other things and continued to work with teachers to reach a common ground. As a distributive leader, Lola also shared that there are specific things on which a leader will be firm and other things not at all. As Lola pounded her fists together, she shared:

I mean like recently there was a decision that my teachers fought me tooth and nail on. I was like fine, whatever. I let it go. Because they had said yes to one other big area. They said yes to dual language, but no to . . . . They said yes to dual language and they said no to . . . . Right now, we’re a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) status school and I wanted to apply for platinum status, and they felt like I was pushing them too hard. Because they’re already doing the work. They’re already doing dual language, they're doing Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), they’re already doing PBIS tier II and I was pushing them to do PBIS tier III. “I'm like, we can do this. I know we can,” but they’re like, “Not this year, next year. Give us a little. Give us a break.” I said, “Fine.” I said, that’s not the sword I’m going to die on. Because they already said yes to dual language and yes to AVID and yes to PBIS tier II.

You know what I mean?

Without realizing the process of leadership, as a teacher, Lynn was given leadership opportunities. She shared that the vice principal and principal at the time included her in leadership roles throughout the building. After obtaining her Certificate of Advanced Study (CAS), which is required in NYS to become a school administrator, she
used that same approach as a school leader by working with her staff. However, Lynn
didn’t know that it was distributive leadership at the time. She simply did what she had
learned from her previous school leaders. As Lynn described her experience, in a very
serious and grateful voice, she shared:

I think I had some sort of innate…I was on the right track-ness, but I worked with
two incredible leadership coaches in my first year of turnaround who I don't think
I would have gone as far as I did without really, really. . . . I invested heavily in
their feedback and they invested in my development. [Looking surprised] The
Chief Academic Officer in the district and I have talked about this kind of
regularly because some of the things that I've brought back to the table to share
back with the district, she said, “How did you get this? Or how did you learn
this?” I said, “You gave me coaches. I used the coaches.” Not everybody used
them in the same way that I did, I think. I really took apart what is it that you are
good at and what is it that I need to grow in and where is this goal that I have to
get and how are we going to get me able to lead everybody to get there? E.G. was
incredible at really giving me guidance and feedback, and L.K. The two of them
really partnered together to wrap around me and make sure that I had the right
ways of thinking so that when I was putting things back into either my leaders or
my staff or into the plan or into developing my teachers that everything was
aligned. So, I think that having that strategic thought partner who really can keep
pushing you, that for me was really hugely important.

Northouse (2018) asserts that even the best of school leaders need assistance in
making decisions. Lynn knew that as a first-year leader that she needed support in
leading the school building. She leaned on her two instructional coaches allowing her to
develop a shared leadership environment. Ruby’s experience with distributive leadership
was quite different. As a turnaround principal in NYC, Ruby was hired to shut down a
school. She was required to interview every teacher that applied for a job as part of the
restructure process for the school. Without any emotions, Ruby began explaining her
experience as a first-year principal:

I went in to shut the school down. I was in there from March and I'm interviewing
every single teacher because the teacher’s union told every single person to apply
(by applying, teachers would have the opportunity to stay at the school and not be
moved to a different school). Then, I was required to interview everyone who
applied. The unions from the teacher's union to the leadership union, the teacher’s
union was saying that this was being done illegally and so, the teachers union
sued the city. [Voice rising] I guess the New York City Department of Education
thought that they were going to win and that was not the case. That year, all of the
people, and you had to get rid of half because that was part of the model and you
can retain the other half. [Eyes wide] The people who were let go for various
reasons and it was clear that people were going to have to be let go, some people
were so angry they damaged property, their classrooms. They tore up computers!
They were ANGRY!!! That day, I remember getting on a flight, going to Miami
to hang out with friends for the weekend and I get a call and, in the call, they
stated, “The city lost the lawsuit. The unions won. All of those people who were
let go have a right to return and you're still the principal.” [With a sense of
urgency] That August, what happened was that everybody who was let go
returned. Now, I have to live with all these people who now are like, “Yeah, look at us now.” I am like, “Okay, how can I possibly get through this?” In hindsight, I don't know if I was semi-numb to it or what I kept saying to myself, how am I going to get all these people to come back and actually work when they know that they weren't “wanted” because that’s how they're looking at it? They didn’t look at it as the process of 50% of people had to go and we had to see whose mindset and whose belief system would fit best with where the direction it was going in. We really had to address or I had to address, it wasn’t about a want, it wasn’t about that you weren’t valued or whatever, but it was about the process. So, what are we committed to doing because now we're back at this? We should never have been in a situation where it got to that point!

Clearly, Ruby had to find a way to work with her staff if she wanted to accomplish her goals and ensure every student was successful. She shared how she was able to overcome those dark times and make the necessary changes by going back to valuing people and including them in the decisions. In a low voice, Ruby leaned back on her chair, realizing that she had already experienced this struggle and had overcame it. She continued:

Getting back to valuing people and asking people, “Where do you think you're most effective? What did you want to do that you felt you were being hindered and couldn't do?” because at that point, people were able to make choices. The same way when I came in this turnaround model, I had to meet with every single teacher because I also needed to know who the teachers in the building value the most, so I can get that person with me to help guide me in navigating because
they value that person's voice, right? That’s how I navigated that. I put people where they wanted to be. If they didn't want to be in a certain position, then I would ask them, “Well, do you think you're best suited for this position?” Some teachers adjusted and excelled in the positions. It was shocking because I don’t think that this situation only happened to me. There were 22 of us that had to deal with this situation. I will tell you I have no idea. I have no idea how I navigated it, but it was painful, that whole summer, just having to know that I had to return and figure out a plan on how to address that. [With a sense of assurance] I don't think anyone had really been through anything or something like that, but it worked. We got back and some of the people who had just been Debbie Downers and were stuck, they felt valued and they started contributing. We had to put people in leadership roles and have them like, “Okay, you're in charge of this and you’re going to be reporting to this.” They weren’t just teachers anymore, but valued contributors to instruction. It ended up working out. Shocking, but it ended up working out. [With a surprised look] Then the year after that, I went and I opened up another school and a lot of them came with me. A lot of them came with me to open the school!

I think a sign of awesome or great leadership is when the ship runs and the captain is absent. I would tell my staff that all the time, they go, “Oh, when you went to that Principals Academy, they cut up really bad.” I replied to the staff and said, “You know what? I’m sad because it means that I haven’t done a good job because this school should run like a well-oiled machine in my absence.” So, what's happening is, I’ve created a dependent culture here and that's not okay.
Leadership-wise, that is my opinion because you can get so cocky or whatever and think, “Oh, they need me.” You know what I mean? A sign of good leadership is if that ship runs without you being there because you've instilled a foundation that is solid and you've distributed leadership and you hold people accountable in me. They do it and then they keep doing it in your absence. Then once it keeps doing, that's the sign of good leadership in my opinion.

Cynthia’s distributive leadership style was a little different. With a veteran staff that was ranked high in the community, her approach was geared towards creating a collaborative learning environment to become better educated about ways to support the students and families. With a confident voice, Cynthia spoke about her school:

So, in my first school some of my teachers from that community where we were, ranked third in the city. In closing the achievement gap, we had the highest graduation rate in the district. We were ranked seventh in the city, number one in our district and number three in the borough of Brooklyn. And so, one of the things that supported the mindset shift of that faculty was the Professional Learning Communities (PLC) where we had several book studies. The books, *Fires in the Bathroom* and *Other People’s Children* by Lisa Delpit. And when working with the faculty around the understanding that young people here, the ones that come to us every day, we had the moral imperative and the moral responsibility to educate them. School leaders in the district were reading the book *Moral Imperative* by Michael Fullan at the time. We (educators) had the responsibility to educate other people's children to the levels that we would want our own educated and understanding that we have to make sure that young people
feel good. So, through the professional learning communities, the mindset shifted substantially, and we talked a lot about, No Child Left Behind. How we were funded 100% of school dollars to address the needs of 100% of our children. And so, those conversations supported us in moving that leverage, the 93% graduation rate that we had in a building that was notoriously on average 20%.

After 25 years in the classroom, Stella began her school principalship as a Vice Principal of Curriculum Instruction. She describes the experience as “marvelous” because she had people supporting her and they all had a common shared vision. Stella refers to the way she leads as abundant leadership:

And what I learned throughout my experiences is that you really have to be a great listener, an active listener for people, you have to love building relationships with other people, you have to believe that everyone, whether they're the teacher, the custodian, the secretary, everyone is value-add to the organization. And so, I felt like I maintained an open-door policy and then people could talk to me and I can talk to them and we share our real stories. When we put our hearts and minds into the communication process, trust between me and them grew and when you have trust between individuals nothing is impossible. So, my principal leadership, any leadership that I have done, I've always called it abundant leadership. That means that anyone can lead at any point in time in the building and that we all had something to contribute. I firmly believe in that and that's what I modeled.

Kouzes and Posner (2012) assert that leaders must facilitate action by fostering collaboration, building trust and supportive relationships, and strengthening others by encouraging self-determination and competence. Dantley and Tillman (2009) argue that
social justice schools “operate in democratic environments because inherent in the fiber of democracy is the celebration of multiple voices, identities, and perspectives of all those in the community” (p. 22). All six participants displayed distributive leadership through collaboration with staff, parents and the school community. The six school leaders worked to build trust and relationships by seeking input from staff and by harnessing their staff’s strengths to better support student achievement.

**Theme 4: moral courage.** The superordinate theme of moral courage emerged from interview questions related to leadership practices. Shields (2010) defines moral courage as the willingness to take a stand that may require extreme emotional or social discomfort, the ability to tolerate tension, and to engage in activism and advocacy. Transformative leadership commences with posing questions of justice and democracy and critiques inequitable practices (Shields, 2010). The subordinate theme that emerged “know better, do better” represented all the participants call to action for social justice. All six participants described their challenges in implementing social justice by sharing a critical time when they had to confront the structured environment in order to close the achievement gap in their respective schools. As Ruby talked about the school conditions, her monotone voice emphasized her disdain for the repetitive cycle of public education:

> To me, this day-to-day schooling is a fixed environment. You get the students out of that norm, that day to day. We walk in at 7:35. We leave at 3:10. I go to this period, this period, this period, the schedule and I followed this, this, this, this and this, right? This monotonous approach is dreadful for our students. [In a lively voice] But then you take this child out of this environment. You put the students a few hours away in another state, right? This is what we've done every year, we
take a group of students and put them in a hotel room and tell them, “You got to get up and meet us here at this time. You need to be prompt. You need to make sure that your clothes are folded. You got to make sure that you've eaten this breakfast that's served at this time. You got to show up or you're not going to eat.” And watch them navigate something that's not their norm, it's a beautiful thing to see how the independence and how they apply these things as early as middle school.

Ruby shared that she believed she understood poverty. After leaving NYC and working in a smaller urban city, she learned a very important lesson:

Coming from a large city to a smaller city, I thought I understood poverty. Poverty and where I came from is not the poverty that I have experienced in my shift coming from a large city to a smaller city. Just coming from a trip from Africa, poverty there looks different than poverty here, poverty in a larger city. When you have your life experiences in general, you think the poverty that you've grown up with or seen is poverty until you get into a different environment. How people navigate that in various settings is different. When I came from the large city to this city, my ignorance, I assumed that if we'd go on a trip and the trip costs a dollar for kids that parents can pay a dollar, it's a dollar. My response was, “It’s a dollar. Who doesn’t have a dollar?” People looked at me like, “Some people don’t.” I’m like, “Huh? What do you mean?” The ignorance, [with a perplexed look] “It's a dollar,” but people were really looking at me like, “How dare you?” and it wasn’t until I really realized and actually started visiting some of the homes that some really didn't have a dollar. [Pounding her fists together]
Really, for me, “How dare I? How dare I?” You just assume that everyone has that. Not everybody has a dollar. A dollar in one place may be easier to obtain than a dollar in another place, but who the hell was I to sit there and just assume that may not have been a challenge for some. I had my personal beliefs based on my upbringing, but the way they looked at me in my response, I was humbled in that moment. Now having the opportunity and like I said, just coming back from Africa and visiting a village, I'm sure they wouldn't have a dollar there either, but interestingly enough, making the best out of it. That dollar didn’t define them and they were making the best with whatever resources they had. I'm thinking, “Who couldn’t have a dollar?” but that was my experience and I was bringing that into my decision making and I was judging and I got checked quickly. It was a learning experience for me because I had to begin to think differently. I had to think differently.

For Ruby, this was eye opening and she needed to do something about it. As a result, Ruby made a decision to support her families and students differently. In her previous position, Ruby had autonomy for her school budget. In this new school, it was a little different and she found innovative ways to ensure her families were taken care of.

With a sense of pride, Ruby continued to share her story:

For example, one of the things that I realized is we talk about this dollar, “But if people didn’t have that, then some people didn't even have some of the basic essentials that they needed or their family needed, so what can I do? Okay, the school has a budget. I’m going to take $15,000, $20,000 out of my budget and I’m going to get the Mobile Food Bank of Central New York. (The Food bank
provides food to families in need. The truck pulls up to the school and hands out the necessary groceries to the families attending.) I'm going to have them come every other week to support our families. That lack of access to nutrition and food and things like that will not be a hindrance as to why my students will, one, not able to come to school, two, because there’s hunger issue or whatever the case.

What decision can I make and we’re talking about social justice? Use my resources now to engage the community in ways that they know that they can trust me and know that I’m doing what’s needed to collaboratively support them. That’s one of the things I started to do. It’s a huge chunk of money, but to know that I can go outside when families are all lined up and interact with them, then take a box of food myself just to let them know that you don't have to be poor to want to have the basic essentials for your family. We all have the right to that. We all have the right to it. Even as they're standing out there, I’m getting my box as well because there's no hierarchy or anything like that. This is as a community what we have the right to. Things like that were some like a decision that I made.

Another decision that I made, especially when I came to the current school that I’m in, getting the children out of their community and to expose them to other places. What I saw in my community and my growing up was what I knew. It wasn’t until I went elsewhere and I realized things are different in other places. They also have a right to see something different than what they know, because to me, that’s the best education experience. We can push all kinds of books in their faces. I just sat and the kids say, “Oh, Miss, you look so dark. Where did you go?” and I say, “Africa.” “You went to Africa,” so they’re thinking Africa is just
Africa. I said, “Here, let me show you the continent and let me show you the
countries that I went to,” and then, “Well, what did you see?” Now, I’m showing
them the pictures and I'm showing them my experience and the story and they're
living through this and now they're spreading this, “Ms. Ruby went to Africa.”
They're asking questions. Yeah, do I think that... When we take students to New
York or Philly or Boston, I’ve gone on the trip, when they get, in other
environments, you should see how their eyes get big and they look and they want
to look at how people are living. They want to see, “Oh, they have a train system
here,” because we don't have a train system where we live. “Oh, we're going to
get on the train?” “Yeah.” To me that’s when they come back different. They
come back different from just the experience and they have a right to have those
experiences.

Ruby was leading a receivership school that was labeled a “community school.”
The community school status gave the school money to operate and create a community
environment for families. With Ruby’s previous experience, she was prepared to replicate
and develop new things in her new school:

Well, it is how I allocate funds, what I allocate funds for, what I find to be
important that children be exposed to. The business of school has been what has
been since the industrial time, the structure of it. If it’s a community school, then
the community is working in the school, taking care of our tribe so to speak, our
children. The decisions that I’ve made over the years and opening schools in
turnaround schools has been, “How do I really, one, make sure that our school
population is represented?” How I've used the budget to get creative and making
sure that there are opportunities, access for children to go, to see, to explore, to visit college campuses, everything that we're preparing them for, to be exposed to various careers and things, to the arts, to everything. As a leader, I’ve made decisions and they may not always be received well and so I have to get creative. Well, you know what? In all the years that I’ve been a leader, I’ve said to our students, “You’re going to visit at least four colleges, even if college is not your thing, you're going to visit at least four colleges. You’re going to be exposed to a career day and you're going to be able to ask and speak to people in various careers that you know are of interest to you that you think that you might be interested in down the line.”

Coming into the school, we always had an overnight trip if not an overnight trip or overnight weekend someplace. When I was in the larger city, we would take them out to Connecticut. We would go overnight or for two nights in a camping area. They had a dance and all of that other stuff. They got to explore nature. You want to expose them to everything that they see or learn in the classroom. You always want to take kids some place fun. Historically in the past, places like Six Flags or whatever. That’s science. I’ve been faced here with the challenge of, because as a science teacher I always figured out how to make that trip aligned to physics. “How are you in a roller coaster going at a certain speed and you don't fall out?” That’s physics, right? They always had like a Math and Science Day and I always found a way to get that cool trip in because it was around math and science. I've been faced with challenges of they're not going to pay for that. Why not? Why not? It is science. They’re going to go and they're
going to have fun and all of that other stuff and even fun things have learning behind it. I’ve been faced with that. Every year, I'm faced with that even to this day. The other piece is those days that you get to go on trips with students that are just genuinely fun, and I’m sure you've experienced it, it’s a really good day because they see you having fun, you see them having fun.

Cynthia’s experience as a high school principal was a little different. She realized that the graduation rate was 28% and needed to rise. In order to do so, she restructured the day to ensure students were present during their core subjects. Cynthia had to find a way to stand up to her supervisor and inform him of state regulations. In a frustrated voice, Cynthia began her story:

In light of the fact that Commissioner's Regulation Part 100.5 is very clear, my supervisor who was a deputy superintendent, questioned me about a decision I made. I had to explain to him that ‘Set’ was a non-credit bearing course. And so the minute I said “Well, if you want me to change—and I will—but understand that when the kids can't graduate on time as long as you put it in writing, I’ll be able to share with the parents and I’ll give the parents your email and they can go to your office.” But kids don’t get a credit for set as a first, second, third, even at ninth period, they don’t get a credit. So, I’m not trying to do that during the day. I'm trying to get the core curriculum in and sets is their option. And they can choose to attend or not and that’s nor here nor there, because it’s a non-credit bearing course. And so, where are we going with this? And why do I have to spend my day or days explaining myself about a decision, a sound decision that’s good for students? [Pauses, then continues in a calm voice.] I always wondered; this is
years later almost 20 years later from that experience. I was wondering, had I
looked like him would he be questioning me to the level that I was questioned,
that I had gone through the amount of scrutiny that I went through?

As a result, students were present in school. They took advantage of the courses
available to them and the graduation rate rose to 93%. The excitement didn’t last long as
Cynthia and her students’ success were questioned. Cynthia looked at the researcher and
in disbelief, shared how she and her students were treated:

We were accused of cheating and all kinds of craziness! And of course, all of that
was unsubstantiated but nevertheless, we endured. I felt like I was in the middle
of that movie “Stand and Deliver.” And I also said, “If this school was not an
issue with Brownsville, Brooklyn, would you be accusing me of cheating?” [With
certainty] Yeah, it always reminds me of what my mother always says, “Because
you're a woman and because you’re Black, Latina you will have to work three
times as hard to gain what people work three times less to gain. But don’t let that
discourage you. You keep moving ahead.

Cynthia continued to share that as a Latina woman born and raised in NYC, she
understood the struggles her students experienced on a daily basis. Cynthia believed that
regardless of the trials that continued to test her dedication she still pushed forward:

Yeah, well, listen, it hasn't been easy. When you know better, you do better. The
journey has been intense. Listen, that’s why I get up every day and come in. It’s
the young people that we serve because I was one of those kids. Yeah. If
somebody didn’t do it for me, I wouldn't be here. If somebody didn't believe, I
wouldn't be here. So, I’m excited to be here and stand up for the kids that look like me all day, every day and “30 times on Sunday” as mommy would say.

Lynn realized gaps in the curriculum and began to collaborate with her teachers. This was crucial if the school wanted to see the students succeed in the NYS assessments. Lynn shares how she strategically changed instruction to meet the needs of all her students. In a confident voice, Lynn began to share:

So, one of the things I got in the most trouble for was we were doing a lot of analysis of what is happening. Why are kids not progressing? So, in terms of math, we were looking at pre-K-5 and all of the standards and the modules and we were like, “Our data is showing us that we are having a crisis at fourth grade.” Kids come to fourth grade and they don't know how to do two-digit, three-digit anything. Right? I was like, holy moly. The math teachers or the fourth-grade teachers are saying, “We're spending so much time re-teaching this and they should have gotten it.” So, it seems so simple to be able to say, but it wasn’t simple to come up with. We were all together and I said, “I want everyone to be honest. Kindergarten, do you finish all your modules?” They were like, “No.” “First grade, do you finish all your modules?” “No. “Second grade, do you finish all of yours?” “No.” “Third grade, do you finish all of yours?” “No,” and there is no place value taught in third grade. So, no wonder we have a crisis at fourth grade.

So, all right. This is whereas a turnaround principal I was very successful because I didn't ask first. I just did things. It's also how the district has no idea how to scale up what it was that I did because I would do the things that were
right for my building, but then they (school district) couldn’t systematize them across the district. So, what we (teachers) decided to do was we looked at all of the modules, we took them all apart, and we made changes in time of year that things would be taught. So, in kindergarten, we took the last module and we moved it so that all of addition and subtraction would be taught together. We took the geometry module that was sort of in the middle of the year—just randomly stuck there—and we asked the enrichment teachers to teach that. So, that allowed kindergarten to actually get through everything that they needed to get through.

So, first grade didn't have to basically start from scratch and then we did similar things. We made adjustments in first and second and then in third, we put in the supplemental materials to make sure that there was preparation for fourth grade and this place value issue. Where we got spoken to, for lack of a better term, was that the print shop couldn't handle the print request of printing the modules out of order, to which I said, “Fine, I’ll print them here,” because it seemed like such a ridiculous barrier that no, I’m not going to do that. We made a couple of decisions, instructional decisions around ELA, again, that I didn’t ask about, I just did because we found that the district written curriculum was not rigorous enough and didn't have enough writing and wasn't connected enough to where we needed our kids to move. So, we used the modules. So, we basically substituted out two modules for each grade, third, fourth, and fifth. I just did it and I didn’t ask anyone. Then again, that that becomes difficult. It becomes difficult to scale up. So, when the district is trying to ask, “What are best practices and what's happening here?” and you're saying, “Well, basically, I’m doing my
own thing,” that I should’ve done that a little differently in terms of my communication. But in terms of instruction, it was the right thing for kids.

We also aligned, we did a lot of stuff with enrichment that made it very purposeful and targeted. One of the most important things I think that we did, though, was we took the next generation science standards and we rolled them into science instruction and then we aligned our entire scope and sequence for pre-K to five around the themes and enrichments. We moved the Full Option Science System (FOSS) kits so that everything was aligned. So, our scope and sequence in our school was our schools and the scope and sequence didn't look like anybody else's because everything was aligned and was thematic. So, kids were actually learning about force in enrichment before there was any instruction in the classroom by the classroom teachers. Along with that shift, I did talk to my union representative about this one. I actually had learned my lesson from the hand slapping before, but we went to 1 month of science, 1 month of social studies instead of the 2 weeks on, 2 weeks off. So, we did month-by-month and that allowed us to again align all of the enrichment themes to the science and social studies. So, we did a whole bunch of work around doing what was needed in terms of instruction.

Like Lynn, Lola brought her school from 2% in ELA scores to 15% in 4 years. Lola was implementing a dual language program and knew that she had to fight to bring equity to the program:

I had a dual language program over there in New York, I felt like I always had to fight for the program and fight for what I knew was best for the program and what
I knew was best for the kids and best practices. Sometimes when you’re trying to be a champion for what you know is right, comes off as not maybe combative or not willing to bend. But I feel like when you’re a dual language administrator, you have to fight. You have to fight the district on space. You have the fight on curriculum. You have to fight for assessments. Because it’s a whole different beast in addition to just regular benchmarks in monolingual classrooms. So, in order to have a well-run program, there's things that you need.

I think sometimes that was a big rub for some. . . . I’m trying to do what's best for my school, but at the same time I want to work with district staff and be supportive and being collaborative and not piss people off. But it’s hard to do both and not make people uncomfortable. I guess sometimes you have to do that. But I think you need to…. It's like in a relationship you have to pick and choose your battles. That was something that I did. I was very strategic on what I was going to do. This is the sword I'm going to die on. These are the ones that I'm not going to. That's something I would talk to my staff. Either I can complain about this or I can complain about this. Where do you guys want me to go? I would ask them for their support, because I can't complain about everything. We have to learn how to work with some things and compromise and what's the one thing that we really need to have a successful program and kind of just go from there. It’s being strategic. It’s just playing politics constantly and being…. 

Where I was in New York, I was the only Latina principal, female Latina principal for a long time. Then, I think the year before I left, we had one that was added. So, you don't want to be too loud, but you want to make a little noise, you
know? So, for example, in growing the dual language program, we’re looking at space, right? We’re looking at a continuum. We had to look at, do we want to do partner classrooms or do we want to do classrooms where it’s the same teacher teach both language, English and Spanish, or do they want the Spanish teacher teach Spanish all day and the English teacher teach English all day and they just swap, right, midday? Well when you're doing those classrooms, when you're doing that model, you're going to have more dual-language classrooms. That means that you’re going to affect staffing, right? You may need more staffing that speaks Spanish and hold those credentials. On the flip side, we also had our self-contained special education classrooms like (12:1:1). You have to decide, we have to decide who we want to grow the program and the continuum of special education classrooms. So, what we decided was that we were going to do the partner classrooms at a later time. So, that we can grow the continuum of our special ed students, because it’s the right thing to do for the students, so that our special education students wouldn’t have to be bounced to another school. So, we went with a K-1 and a (grade) 2-3 and a (grade) 4-5 continuum with our 12:1:1 classes. Basically, it’s like you sacrifice one thing for the other, but what’s the bigger priority here? For us it was, okay, we’re a dual language school.

However, our students in special education and those 12:1:1 classes to deserve have consistency in their lives. It’s not fair to those babies to have to be shipped around to other schools with other administrators and teachers and environment and they already have significant disabilities. When I left, we were in the double-digits. I mean it took years, but when I left, we were in the teens. I
believe we were like 14, 15%. I mean to get in those numbers we had to target specific students and push them. I will say with personalized instruction. I will say that having leaders that you respect, like for example, I worked…. My superintendent and my directors or executive directors, I felt like if they were strong and they were coaching me and they were pushing me, I was pushing my staff. I think when some of the leadership changed out, I think I still pushed my staff, but I don’t think I pushed them as hard as when I had someone who was like really challenging me and pushing me to grow. I think that’s a must, especially when you’re looking at social justice and doing what's right for kids. I think principals too, like we need people who are developing and challenging us and the minute that you don’t, I think everybody just falls into what they think is the right thing to do for their own school. I think that's when I feel like I kind of started to do the mama bear thing. This is my school and I'm doing what's best for my school. I think I didn’t realize how much power I had over my school until I left. Because once I left then all of a sudden, they were doing all kinds of things. That would have never happened if I was the principal there. It was like, I felt like I have so much. I felt like I was untouchable in some ways, because they weren’t able to touch certain things because I had my whole staff behind me and supporting me and we were all working in the same direction. They were, if I said no, my staff was like, “Well, we support her.” I said yes, they were like, “We support her.” I think it’s amazing how much of an impact a leader has on a staff. Stella’s defiance provoked the social justice teachers in her school to stand up for their students. As a first-year principal, she refused to follow the already created system.
and, ultimately, made a decision that benefitted her students and families. She appeared to be proud of what she did. Her head held high and with a strong voice Stella started to explain:

I took over the school in 1999 and during that summer I walked the building, I looked at the building and I said, I looked at the interior and I said, “The school must become a sanctuary for children.” I didn’t like the physical appearance of the building. It was depressing. So, one of the things I did was create with my husband and my son. They helped me create a portfolio. We took pictures of all the things that were wrong in the building. I put a portfolio together and then I took it to central office, to the deputy superintendent of facilities. Well, once you send out portfolios like that and you and the secretaries see, word spreads like wildfire and “Everybody starts talking, right?” So, facilities comes out and meets with me and they say, “Well, you’re not on the list, and this and that and the other.” And I said, “Well, I’m a new principal here. This is June of 1999 and before my teachers and the children come back, this place has to become a sanctuary. It has to look like a sanctuary. It has to look like a place that children want to walk into and families will want to send their children to this school.”

So, what happened was I recruited family and friends and I contacted some of the teachers who worked in the building and introduced myself as the new principal and said, “I need to change the physical environment of the school.” I also sent them the book, *Who Moved My Cheese?* as a way to introduce myself to the faculty and staff. “I want it to be a beautiful welcoming place for the students.” And that's what we did. We took all summer and when the teachers
came back in August at my first faculty meeting. During the very first faculty meeting, all the employees at the school were all walking around the building. They couldn't believe how the cafeteria looked. They couldn't believe how the walls and the hallways, how everything was transformed to look so beautiful. And they looked at me very strangely in the faculty meeting and then I looked at all of them and I stood before them and I said, “Many of you have been in this school for over 10 years. Tell me why you accepted the physical conditions of the building?” I said, “It was only a small group of people, very small group of people. This is a big school but look what we were able to accomplish within six to seven weeks.” I said, “Imagine if all 65 of you say it, I'm not going to accept this.” I said, “Central office told me that I couldn't get painters. I couldn't have this because I wasn't on the schedule yet. The school wasn't on the schedule yet.” I said, “Did I sit and wait for them to give me permission? I did what I felt was right for the school for all of you. So, when you walk into this school, you feel good about this place. You feel like this is a place that is worthy, that our children are worthy of a beautiful environment.” And do you know what one of the music teachers said, I’ll never forget it. The meeting ended and people were still talking about how they couldn't believe how great the school looked. And he said to me, with tears in his eyes, “Mrs. Stella, never again.” I said, “What did you mean by never again?” He said, “Never again will I accept the conditions that were accepted in the school.” He said, “You were right.” He said, “You prove to us through actions, words and deeds that we don’t have to accept this. So, when you said, what did I do to move it?” I didn’t just speak it with words but by everyday
actions of leading and showing them what my expectations were for them and myself. The expectations I have for myself helped them to believe that we can be something better than what currently existed. And my whole belief was that schools must become sanctuaries for children. And so, we believe that. And so, we lived it.

Stella did not stop there. She transformed the school building and made it a sanctuary and then she tackled instruction. Stella recognized the struggles she went through in getting the students what they deserved and acknowledged the hard work her teachers did to do more than turn the school around they were able to transform the school. Stella continued to make decisions that were best for children. She shared:

Let me tell you about an instructional decision I had to make that the district wasn’t supportive of, but I knew it was the right thing. Because we had students that spoke so many different languages in the school. The school was designed where special ed kids over here, English language learner kids over here, American traditional students over here. They were separated and I explained to the teachers that we had to integrate our children. The children had to engage with American children. The children had to learn with the American children and the district at the time, the director of the English language learners program truly believed that the all the children who spoke different languages should all be housed in one classroom with one teacher and isolated from the other American kids who spoke fluent English. It made no sense to me. I believe in integration of our children and integration of our teachers and our teachers needed to team teach. And so, we started team teaching and integrating
our special education, our ELA and our general education student population.
And that's what I believed. That's why our achievement started soaring because
we started seeing that we each had particular strengths as educators and we
combined our strengths, the students learning accelerated. We no longer defined
our students by their educational labels.

Stella realized that she needed to challenge the mindset of staff and district
personnel in order to ensure all her students were successful. She talks about the
pushback she received and how she got through it:

I didn't force the teachers to do team teach. What we did, teachers who were
willing to team teach liked it, they started first and when other people start seeing
how successful they were then everybody wanted to start doing it. That's how we
created the instructional change. I never forced any teacher and said, “This is
what we must do.” What we did, I found a few volunteers to show the way. And
once we show the way everybody loves success. So, that's how success happens.
Because people want to be a part of that success. So, we modeled it first. And If
you believe that, then people come on board. But sometimes you have to show
people. You cannot tell them it is about show.

Lucy’s experience as a school leader was a little different from the other five
participants. As a principal for 5 years in an urban setting, she learned to navigate the
system behind the scenes. Lucy is a quiet, behind the scenes, disruptive innovator:

So, part of being strategic, number one, having those individual meetings with
people and really hearing what they have to say. Then you’re having small group
meetings with people, really taking the time to visit and observe without being
critical so that the decisions are really coming from realistic data and not only from what you're hearing from people being really strategic about what staff were tapped to kind of be part of the team and the planning and the rollout. And again, some of them were people who were really strong and some of them were not purposely so that they were part of that work and really had to dig into that. Being really strategic about when we’re rolling it out, who we were pairing with who and what the options were. So, we did face-to-face. We had options for online learning for staff so that we were meeting different learning styles of the staff that were involved. Being really strategic about making sure we had parents at the table wanting their input, their feedback, really wanting to make sure that they bought in and they were supporting it to. The distributive leadership is something that I think sometimes people don't see the power in it, but part of being a really strategic leader is creating the plan or the agenda or the overview and giving roles to certain other staff. But you're still driving the ship, if you will, right? However, the teachers think they're coming up with it all. So, it's really being a mastermind behind which requires you to be really highly organized. You really have to know what's going on. You really have to listen to people, and then the people that you tap for those leadership positions need to really know what your vision is and be brought into it, but that you're also putting in that time with them in advance so that they're moving your work for you. And the staff, they are part of it, but they think they’re running the whole show and it just empowers them in a way that makes it so much more successful.
Each participant shared their experience with navigating the district or school structures that delayed student progress and growth. The participants believed in taking action to provide their school community with the essentials needed to be successful. Without hesitation, these disruptive leaders challenged the establishment to create meaningful change. As a result, their schools closed the achievement gap.

**Interpretative analysis.** The six participants in this study shared their experiences in creating successful urban schools in New York State public schools. The superordinate themes and subordinate themes provided insight into school leaders beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Mezirow’s transformative learning theory and Shields’s transformative leadership theory guided this study. The two theories provided a lens for the examination of school leaders’ beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors and how school leaders’ leadership practices reflected in creating and leading successful social justice urban schools.

**Meaning perspective.** The six participants experienced various disorienting dilemmas throughout their careers, which caused them to self-examine their actions with feelings of guilt or shame. As a result, the six participants underwent a critical assessment of their personal assumptions. After examining their assumptions, these school leaders reconstructed their personal frame of reference, formed a new perspective, acquired the knowledge and skills needed, and implemented a plan to lead their schools.

**Perspective transformation.** The school leaders in this study described professional experiences that caused them to reflect on their assumptions. Perspective transformation is described as a process in which a person becomes consciously aware of their perceptions, understandings, and feelings about the world, and thus, is able to shift
their assumptions to be more inclusive and centralized (Mezirow, 1990). For example, Lynn’s focus was on loving her students. Lynn’s assumption that staff understood her passion for student success was met with push back from the staff. However, when she realized the staff push back was perceived a different way, Lynn learned to “love adults” in her school as well. This change in Lynn’s assumptions allowed her to reframe her belief and support her staff. The six participants’ experiences led them to a personal struggle of their beliefs. Ultimately, as school leaders, these experiences led them to make changes to improve their schools.

**No leadership playbook.** School leaders must go through rigorous training to become principals. Institutions of higher education take pride in their school administrators and school district certification programs. However, as the school leaders in this study shared their disorienting dilemma, they were unable to find a solution to their problem from their leadership toolkit. As a result, the school leaders learned to navigate through the uncomfortable situation and adjusted their approach. Subsequently, the six participants in this study created a new leadership playbook.

**School environment.** After experiencing a personal transformation, these six school leaders realized that attending to their school environment was crucial to the success of their school. Addressing student behaviors and mistrust between the school community as well as challenging the deficit mindsets of students, teachers, and families proved to be a first step in creating a safe learning environment for all stakeholders.

**Starting ground up.** School leaders in this study shared their need to start from the ground up by creating processes and procedures in the schools. The school leaders incorporated research-based strategies they learned through professional development.
By starting from the ground up, school leaders were able to look at all facets of their school and make the necessary changes.

**Deep equitable change.** Despite overcoming various challenging tests and addressing school environments, these school leaders needed to build trust and provide meaningful equitable change in their schools. To do this, deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge frameworks in the school community was vital to creating social justice urban schools. Ultimately, the school leaders demonstrated the importance of having the moral courage to stand up for inequitable educational systemic structures that hindered the progress of implementing a social justice agenda.

**Distributive leadership.** The six participants demonstrated their ability to build trust with their staff by including them in decision making. Two out of six participants included their English as a New Language (ENL) students to make the necessary changes. Equally important, all the school leaders were strategic in creating a shared leadership environment. Knowing who to pull to the side and have encouraging conversations and who to plant the seed prior to the meeting were strategic steps implemented by these school leaders.

**Bottom up leader.** One school leader referred to distributive leadership as abundant leadership. Another school leader called herself a relational leader. While Lynn did not refer to distributive leadership in the traditional way of including the entire staff, Lynn learned to rely on her instructional coaches who created the necessary environment to include the school community. As a result, Lynn’s understanding of being a distributive leader became apparent as she reflected on how the school leaders included
her when she was a teacher. Overall, the school leaders in this study realized the importance of being a strategic bottom up leader.

**Moral courage.** School leaders have some autonomy in decisions regarding their respective buildings. As evident by the six participants, they had the liberty to interact with their stakeholders, set the vision and mission, and provide professional development for their staff. However, the systemic structures in their school districts prohibited the school leaders to lead with a social justice agenda. That is until each individual participant had the moral courage to break the systemic barriers that hindered their schools’ progress. This action propelled their respective schools to make the necessary academic achievement.

**Know better, do better.** The school leaders in these high achieving urban schools had a moral imperative to act on what was right for their school community. Each of the participants actions was met with opposition from supervisors or stakeholders. However, as the participants shared their reasons for taking action, each talked about the importance of supporting their students and families. The underlining subordinate theme of “when you know better, you do better” emerged.

**Summary of Results**

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study was to gain insight into how high achieving urban school leaders’ personal beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors were influenced by their lived experiences and how these beliefs were reflected in their leadership practices in leading urban social justice schools in New York State. Specifically, meaning perspective and deep equitable change were used to understand how school leaders’ beliefs influenced their leadership practices in leading public urban
schools in NYS. This chapter presents the results and data analysis from the participants which incorporates Mezirow’s transformative learning theory and Shields’s transformative leadership theory.

The results from the data analysis yielded four superordinate themes and four subordinate themes. The superordinate themes were a) perspective transformation, b) school environment, c) distributive leadership, and d) disruptive innovation. The subordinate themes were a) no leadership playbook, b) starting ground up, c) bottom up leader, and d) know better, do better. The concept that arose under the categories of meaning perspective were directly related to Mezirow’s transformative learning theory of a disorienting dilemma. Each of the participants shared an internal conflict that they were unable to resolve from their leadership playbook. Therefore, they had to seek other ways to overcome and resolve their dilemma. The concept that emerged from the category of leadership practices were directly related to Shields’s transformative leadership theory were the participants questioned inequitable practices and created the necessary changes to benefit the students and families.

Chapter 5 will summarize the study, reiterate its significance for school leader’s beliefs and practices for social justice, discuss limitations of the study, and provide recommendations for future research. Additionally, Chapter 5 will provide implications of the findings and make recommendations for the future for school leaders in K-12 urban education.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Researchers contend that effective school leaders take responsibility for their learning, assess their beliefs and assumptions, and understand the structural and fundamental nature of schools (Brown, 2004). In essence, these leaders transform the systems and structures that hinder improvement efforts in urban schools (Leithwood et al., 2004). In addition to the traditional leadership, instructional and management skills, school leaders need to lead a school, Jones and Ringler (2017) note that contemporary school leaders in urban settings need more knowledge, skills, and attitudes about cultural competency and bias-free educational environments.

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis study was to gain insight into how high achieving urban school leaders’ personal beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors were influenced by their lived experiences and how these beliefs were reflected in their leadership practices in leading urban social justice schools in New York State. Very few studies examine school leader’s beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, which lead to creating social justice urban schools. Therefore, the goal of this study is to offer a contribution to the literature regarding school leaders’ beliefs in leading urban schools by describing how the lived experiences and actions of six urban school leaders transformed low performing urban schools into high achieving urban schools in New York State.
The researcher utilized semi-structured open-ended questions that addressed the following research questions:

1. How are the beliefs of high achieving urban school leaders influenced by their lived experiences?
2. How are the beliefs of high achieving urban school leaders reflected in their leadership practices?

The theoretical framework from both Mezirow’s transformative learning theory and Shields’s transformative leadership theory guided the formation of the interview questions for this study. In essence, examining adult learning and how the new learning translates into leadership practices for social justice is fundamental to this study. When using Mezirow’s transformative learning theory the researcher attempted to elicit a general account of the participants’ disorienting dilemma, their self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame, a critical assessment of their assumptions, and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. Equally important, Shields’s transformative leadership theory was used to elicit participants need to effect equitable change, deconstruct knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and injustice, and exhibit a call for moral courage as a school leader. Mezirow’s transformative learning theory was a catalyst to Shields transformative leadership theory.

The first phase of the research process involved identifying six urban school leaders, who had 3 or more years of experience leading a low-performing urban school, which then became a high achieving school in New York State. The second phase of the research included face-to-face semi-structured interviews with six participants who were selected based on qualifying criteria, which excluded potential participants from the
Syracuse City School District, charter, and private schools in NYS due to variances and intake population methods.

Data analysis consisted of transcription, reading and rereading, initial noting, developing emerging themes, and the identification of connections and patterns based on Mezirow’s transformative learning theory and Shields’s transformative leadership theory. The two concepts that emerged from the analysis of school leaders’ personal beliefs and leadership practices derived from the two theoretical frameworks. The four superordinate and subordinate themes encompassed an array of factors that transformed school leaders’ beliefs and actions for creating social justice schools.

The final chapter of this study summarizes the connection between school leaders’ beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in creating social justice urban schools. This chapter addresses the implications of the findings and provides recommendations for K-12 school leaders, public school districts, and social justice education. Finally, the chapter will detail the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

**Implications of Findings**

In this study, six K-12 public school leaders shared their lived experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors during their leadership tenure in urban schools in New York State. The findings from the lived experiences of these school leaders aligned to the theoretical frameworks used for this study. The two concepts that emerged from the analysis of school leaders’ personal beliefs and leadership practices were *meaning perspective* and *deep equitable change*. This phenomenological study identified the common meaning perspective of the school leaders lived experiences and their need for creating deep equitable change in their schools. The superordinate themes that emerged
from the two concepts were a) perspective transformation, b) school environment, c) distributive leadership, and d) moral courage. The subordinate themes were a) no leadership playbook, b) starting ground up, c) bottom up leader, and d) know better, do better. Figure 5.1 depicts the concepts and themes that emerged from the data and the connections to the theoretical frameworks that guided this study.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 5.1.** Concepts, Themes, and Theoretical Frameworks.

This study is unique in that it uses two theoretical frameworks to examine school leaders beliefs that lead to leadership practices. Mezirow’s transformative learning theory provides a framework for educators to challenge their internal biases and have an internal exchange and understanding which leads to a new perspective transformation. Shields’s transformative leadership theory allows school leaders the ability to transform their personal learning into professional leadership practices and social justice action.
Depending on a school leaders’ personal experiences, different encounters of various disorienting dilemmas challenged their personal assumptions which in turn, led to transformational leadership practices. These school leaders ultimately exhibit a call for deep and equitable change to lead social justice schools. The transformative learning to transformative leadership process is continuous throughout a school leaders career.

Transformative learning theory provides a path to a new way of learning and transformative leadership theory allows school leaders the ability to inculcate social justice leadership practices. Dunn (1987) contends that there is an existential ontological connection between personal beliefs and public behaviors. Perchance, the real test of congruence between personal understandings and individual and/or collective public responsibility is the level to which any conversation about social justice spurs people to a different kind of activism. Shields’s transformative leadership theory calls for school leaders to have moral courage to take action. Therefore, this study integrates Mezirow’s transformative learning theory and Shields’s transformative leadership theory.

The data analysis of this study revealed that the personal beliefs of six school leaders were influenced by their lived experiences. Subsequently, when these beliefs were met with disorienting dilemmas, the school leaders found themselves navigating through uncharted territories. After a self-examination and a critical assessment of their assumptions, these school leaders were able to acquire new knowledge and skills, plan a course of action and implement a plan. As a result, these school leaders proved to be successful in closing the achievement gap in their schools. The superordinate themes that emerged under the concept of meaning perspective were that school leaders who
experience disorienting dilemmas and found ways to overcome them, underwent a perspective transformation.

**Perspective transformation.** The superordinate theme of perspective transformation led to various shared experiences that made school leaders aware of their own assumptions. Mezirow (1978) described perspective transformation as the process of how adult learners might change their meaning structures. Perspective transformation is the process of becoming aware the assumptions that have come to structure, or arguably, constrain, the ways in which the world is perceived, understood, and even experienced. According to Mezirow and Associates (2000), perspective transformation reformulates assumptions to encourage more inclusive and insightful perspective, one that is flexible and permeable, and able to integrate disparate and even challenging perspectives, that undergird decisions from a more open perspective. Inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspectives are cognitively and emotionally advanced perspectives that adults can choose when they are motivated to understand the meaning of their experience.

Participants began the interview describing a disorienting dilemma that caused each to search internally for a way to address their internal conflict. With 129 years of combined experience as educators, each of the participants were confronted with situations that required a different approach. Each of the participants’ lived experiences conflicted with their dilemma causing each to critically self-reflect on prior assumptions. As a result, following Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, each of the participants experienced a “personal transformation” (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 105).

Research suggests that school leaders should be required to examine their own stance, especially within the context of their own beliefs and assumptions that
considerably dictate their day-to-day decision-making and responsibilities (Furman, 2012). In fact, Fenstermacher (1979) claims that through individuals’ reflection and self-challenge, they reconsider and alter their thinking and transform from “what is subjectively reasonable for them to believe to what is objectively reasonable for them to believe” (p. 167). The findings of this study exacerbate the power of transformative learning into the power of transformative leadership. Leadership that challenges perspectives and beliefs to create new learning. As new social justice issues arise, learning and leadership is ongoing.

As the participants reflected on their assumptions about students, staff, and different cultures, they realized the importance of critically assessing their beliefs to serve their school community. As a young student, Lucy watched how children were disciplined differently. As a result, years later Lucy reflected that as a principal she conducts detailed investigations when addressing student behaviors. This set high expectations for teachers to have culturally responsive behavior expectations in their classrooms. In addition, Lucy created a detailed academic and behavioral referral process in her building to support the teachers and students.

Lynn’s assumption that adults understood her passion for the work provided a different outcome resulting her need to “love the adults” in the school. As a Latina principal, Lola believed she was a champion for her students and families and realized that she was perceived as combative which prompted her to become aware of the staff’s perception of her, thereby changing her leadership approach with the staff. Cynthia found herself trying to understand why there were cultural differences within the Asian community in her school. Cynthia soon realized that she needed to address the disparity
and blatant discrimination that was happening to the Asian population in her school. After assessing her assumptions, Cynthia planned a course of action that included her students being empowered.

Ruby’s assumptions led her to get a deeper understanding of what poverty looks like for her students. Having worked in two urban school districts she assumed that every student could afford a dollar. To her dismay, Ruby found that her children and families could not afford a dollar to go on field trips. As a result, Ruby took the time to learn and visit her families and reallocated school resources to support her families.

**No leadership playbook.** School leaders undergo rigorous training to become administrators. Colleges and universities that prepare school leaders have accredited certification programs. Yet when the school leaders in this study shared their disorienting dilemma, they struggled to identify a quick solution to their professional dilemma. Despite all the preparation programs and professional development received within their respective districts, these school leaders experienced the absence of a leadership playbook. As the most experienced school leader of all the participants interviewed, Stella realized that all the educational courses taught her a universalistic approach to teach all children the same, which she understood that every student is supposed to accelerate, not taking into account the students’ culture and individual needs. Therefore, Stella, along with the other participants in this study, were able to add to an already incomplete leadership playbook.

**School environment.** The superordinate theme of school environment led to school leaders creating a safe environment for their students, staff and families. In Mezirow’s (1978) definition of meaning perspectives, school leaders can “reconstruct
their personal frame of reference, their self-concept, goals and criteria for evaluating change” (p. 7). As a result, new priorities for action can occur. The school leaders in this study addressed the school environment from student behaviors to teacher and staff deficit mindsets that hindered progress in their schools. After assessing their school environment, each participant shared how they worked to change the school’s culture and climate by setting high expectations for all stakeholders and creating a vision for their schools.

Lynn focused on challenging and changing the adult deficit mindsets that hindered the student progress and affected the culture and climate of the school. After addressing individual staff members, Lynn reflected on her leadership style and the importance of inspiring her staff. As a school leader Lynn struggled to understand teacher’s personal beliefs of school leaders and how she was feeding into that stereotype. As Lynn grappled to understand the teacher’s pushback, she realized she needed to “love adults” in the same manner she loved her students. This realization alone, allowed Lynn to change her behavior resulting in better communication and collaboration with her staff.

Like Lynn, Lola also focused on appropriate interactions with students and staff by engaging families and educating staff on culturally relevant education. Lola challenged a teacher’s deficit mindset when addressing a student of color and threatening to call the police because of his behavior. The teacher’s lack of cultural understanding of the community she was serving perpetuated the continued mistrust for teachers in urban communities. However, Lola’s social justice understanding provided the teacher with a learning opportunity to understand the families she was serving.
Even though Ruby had experience in urban settings, she was also challenged with
deficit mindsets of staff toward her families. While it took Ruby a day to address a
teacher’s belief of parents not being able to read, Ruby understood she needed to be
strategic in addressing the situation. After having a restorative conference with the
teacher, she was able to explain to the teacher the inappropriate adult beliefs of families
in the community.

As a first-year principal, Lucy conveyed that the building did not seem inviting to
people and worked to make the necessary changes. She noticed students avoiding work
and not being engaged. Lucy created teams that assisted in changing the culture and
climate in the building and outlining clear procedures for everyone.

When Cynthia became a school leader, she soon realized that the job was all
about adults, what they need, and how they learn. As the participants reflected on what
they needed to do, they all shared that they started from the ground up in building the
school. Each of the participants examined their understanding of what a school looks and
feels like and worked toward creating that environment.

Overall, these school leaders sought the need to make changes in the day-to-day
operation of the school by focusing on the school environment. Researchers contend that
a form of social justice leadership is exemplified by cultivating school environments
where students and families are genuinely cared for (Dantley & Tillman 2009; Goldfarb
& Grinberg 2002). Furthermore, research postulate that social justice leaders create
inclusive communities and environments and refuse the traditional models for educating
historically marginalized populations (Brown, 2004; Theoharis, 2009).
**Starting ground up.** Addressing student behaviors, mistrust between the school community, and challenging the deficit mindsets of students, teachers, and families is not easy. School leaders who inherit low performing schools realize the need to address many inequities in their schools. As evident by the six school leaders focus on creating a culture and climate where all stakeholders were valued was important to start changing the school’s culture. The school leaders’ previous training prepared them to implement research-based strategies and ensure structures, protocols, and procedures were established. This required them to abandon all existing systems and start from the ground up.

Perspective transformation experiences help adult learners incorporate new information into new understandings and perspectives (Cranton, 2000). They apply new knowledge to their lives. These learners become consciously aware of how new ideas and information can impact their beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and ways of understanding. The profound changes they experienced are often significant steps to a lifelong journey of creating social justice urban schools. This is evident by the success of the six school leaders in this study. Two participants shared that their experiences in urban settings differ from their personal upbringing as a result, they had to learn how to navigate the cultural difference. Four participants shared that being women of color came with a unique set of beliefs and assumptions of their ability to lead, which, at times manifested with self-doubt and sense of belonging.

Ruby reflected on her feelings toward the way a parent approached her in the office and requested to speak to the principal. Despite previous interactions she had with Ruby, the parent was dismissive and requested to meet with the “White principal.”
Ruby’s frustration was a reminder of her daily lived experiences as a Black school leader. However, she was able to reassure the parent that she was speaking to the principal and that there was only one principal in the building.

Ultimately, the four participants of color came to the realization that each has an important role as school leaders to ensure students that look like them do not have those experiences. Lynn’s lived experiences with the way her special needs child was treated at school, expressed her belief that school leaders and adults should teach all school children as if these children were their own family. This new transformation allowed all of the participants to lead their schools and attend to all needs of their students and adults. Each participant did this without a leadership playbook.

School leaders' decisions are widely influenced by their personal life history, which shapes their beliefs (Guerra & Pazey, 2016). Mezirow (2000) contends that informed decisions require not only awareness of the source and context of one’s knowledge, values, and feelings but also demands critical reflection on the effectiveness of their assumptions. The reasoning behind most of what adults know and believe, their values and feelings, rely on the embedded biographical, historical, and cultural context (Mezirow, 2000).

Mezirow (2003) asserts that adults amass and form a body of assumptions from experiences acquired throughout their life trajectory, which act as a frame of reference for how they view their world. These frames of reference shape how adults come to understand their experiences. Furthermore, İzmirli and Yurdakul (2014) affirm that an individual’s experiences lead to making decisions about events, and as a consequence of those decisions, when confronted with a similar situation, may react differently.
The six participants’ beliefs were tested throughout their time as principal of their schools. The school leaders experienced a transformation that allowed them to learn and create a positive mindset environment in their schools. In essence, the school leaders lived experiences shaped their beliefs. The school leaders’ beliefs were also challenged by their personal assumptions. These school leaders were able to overcome their assumptions and create a new perspective. This new perspective provided them with the opportunity to make changes to better support their work as school leaders. All the participants shared that each had a profound experience with one teacher that impacted their life.

**Distributive leadership.** The superordinate theme distributive leadership led school leaders to build a sense of ownership among all the stakeholders in the school community. Transformational leadership is the process of engaging with others and creating connections that elevates the levels of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower (Northouse, 2018, p. 162). The participants in this study fostered distributive leadership among the staff, students, families, and the community.

Lola is a relational leader. She values the relationships between her staff, students, families, and the community. While Lola adamantly believed in creating relationships and was not a top down leader, she was also strategic in her approach. As a dual language principal, she learned to negotiate with her staff to ensure all students were receiving an appropriate education. Lola understood the priorities of her building and was able to skillfully and strategically move her staff to accomplishing those goals.

As a new principal in a large urban school district, Lynn leaned on to her instructional coaches to move instruction in her building. Realizing her lack of
understanding of elementary education, she was able to learn while leading a building. As the leader, she collaboratively implemented the vision, mission, and goals of her building, and allowed her instructional coaches to lead the instructional initiatives. Understanding your capabilities as a leader is extremely important. As a result, Lynn was able to learn and lead her school from single digit achievement in ELA and math to double digits in 4 years.

With 25 years of teacher experience, Stella understood that being a great active listener was key in building capacity in her school. Stella called it abundant leadership. She believed and modeled that everyone in her building had “value-add” to the school. Stella believed that anyone can lead at any point in time and that everyone had something to contribute to the organization.

Ruby’s experience demanded a different approach as a distributive leader. After dismissing 50% of her staff due to a district restructuring of the school, the staff returned. Ruby found a way to reach her staff by strategically meeting with every staff member and asking them where they would be most effective. However, Ruby had honest and open conversations with everyone and supported the teachers in finding a better home for themselves if they were unable to fulfill the expectations outlined for the school. Ruby did this by going back to valuing people. Each individual staff member had a leadership responsibility to fulfill in the school. This allowed the staff to feel empowered and valued. Shields (2018) acknowledges that leadership is a shared effort, and accomplishing the promised outcomes requires leaders to create communities.

Cynthia embarked on providing meaningful professional development to her veteran staff to better support the students and families. Cynthia’s distributive leadership
came with a strategy to educate her staff and get the buy-in she needed to move the
school forward. The collaboration shifted the staff mindset to become better facilitators
of learning. This included the teachers attending to 100% of the student’s needs.
Cynthia’s commitment to shared decision-making allowed her to bring a failing school
with a 28% graduation rate to 93% graduation rate.

An example of distributive leadership is noted in the DeMatthews’ (2015) study
when an elementary school principal included the staff in creating a plan to support the
behavioral challenges the school was experiencing with special education students. As a
result, the committee was able to create a plan that continued with integrating special
education students in general education classroom. Unlike DeMatthews and
Mawhinney’s (2014) study, the principals in these schools reverted back to the exclusion
of special education students in general education classes.

**Bottom up leader.** Part of the school leaders’ strategies was creating a vision,
mission, and goals for the building which guided their work. For Lucy, this strategy
allowed her to constantly refer to the established vision, mission, and goals of the
building. This way the staff, students, and families knew what was expected. However,
creating that vision, mission, and goals required being strategic as a leader. Lucy reached
out to staff members and coached them to lead the work. Being strategic allowed her to
build teacher capacity from the ground up. Lucy understood the power of distributive
leadership was in building every person in the building to capacity.

**Moral courage.** The data analysis of this study also revealed that the leadership
practices of the six school leaders surpassed the traditional management and instructional
practices of school leaders. As a result, these leaders proved to be successful in closing
the achievement gap in their schools. One common thread that emerged from the data analysis was the school leaders’ moral courage to challenge the systemic inequities that hindered their schools progress. This moral courage or “moral imperative” as described by Rivera-McCutchen (2014) provides the key component to creating social justice urban schools. The final step in creating high achieving schools is for leaders to have the moral courage to take action no matter the cost. However, where does this sense of moral courage evolve from? What is the prescription that school leaders should follow? This study revealed that school leaders lived experiences shape their beliefs through creating safe environments for students, staff and families. However, these characteristics are not enough to create thriving urban schools. This study also revealed the need for school leaders to create a bottom up leadership where all stakeholders take an active participation in accomplishing the school vision, mission, and goals. Nonetheless, as evident by these school leaders, the approach is strategic and well intention. And, even then, it is not enough to transform failing urban schools into high performing, high achieving schools.

Shields’s transformative leadership theory calls for school leaders to have the moral courage to address inequitable educational barriers that hinder the achievement of all students. Unlike the principals in the Carter’s (2000) study who had the autonomy to make curricular changes, redirect funding to meet the needs of the building, and hire and fire teachers, the school leaders in this study did not have that autonomy. However, Carter (2000) points out that public school principals still had to navigate through various policies, curricular mandates, and budget requirements as oppose to the private and
The six public school leaders in this study defied the rules and policies in place in their school districts to ensure their students received an appropriate education.

The superordinate theme moral courage led school leaders to address the inequities in their school. Shields (2010) defines moral courage as the willingness to take a stand that may require deep discomfort, to endure tension, and to engage in activism and advocacy. All participants in this study shared a time when they showed the necessary courage to stand up for what was right in spite of how their supervisors would react.

Stella understood the importance of creating a different environment for her students, families and staff. As a first-year principal, she defied the district policies and transformed her building. However, Stella did not stop there. On the first day of school she stood in front of her staff and asked them “why” they allowed the conditions of the building to go for so long. From that moment forward, she empowered her staff to be champions for their students and families.

Lola’s experience in having to “fight” for a dual language program provided the families and student with the opportunity to an equal education. Supporting dual language in a state where English language arts assessments are so important shows the commitment Lola had to her families. This work required Lola to challenge staff and district mindsets on dual language students’ ability to be successful while at the same time, advocating for a robust Spanish language arts curriculum for the students and teachers.

Lucy’s defiance and bold decision to change the district curriculum was met with resistance from the district but was later accepted when she achieved the results the
district wanted. The district then attempted to replicate her work but was unable to systematize it. Ruby understood students needed to practice what they were taught and pushed forward to ensure students were able to go on field trips outside the community.

According to Shields (2018), transformative leadership requires the school leader to have a clear sense of the values and beliefs that strengthen their own identity, be willing to take stands that may demand moral courage, to tolerate tension, and, to some degree, engage in activism and advocacy. Furthermore, to be truly transformative, the processes of leadership must be linked to the ends of equity, inclusion, and social justice.

**Know better, do better.** School leaders are scrutinize for their day-to-day management of their schools. Attending to all facets of a school is important and something school leaders fall short in addressing the inequities that our public, urban schools face every day. School leaders in this study were aware of the inequities and took action steps to address them. Despite the potential fallout of their actions, these leaders remained steadfast and addressed the needs of the students and families. Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) shares that social justice leadership is actively engaging in “reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness” (p. 162).

The findings of this study revealed the resilience, courageous and moral obligation the school leaders had to do what was right for their school community. Including having to let go of staff members that are not performing at the necessary level needed to educate our most vulnerable population. Consequently, social justice leaders, actively work to support and improve educators’ pedagogy, so that all students have equitable opportunities to learn and succeed.
Leadership. School leaders are faced with many challenges, deficit mindsets, curricular decisions, lack of resources, systemic structures, inequities, and much more. Bolman and Deal (2017) present a four frame model which can diversify school leaders’ practices. Sometimes, these individuals needed to be an inspiring leader, at times a political leader or an empathetic leader, and equally important, at other times, a social justice leader who is a champion for all students and families. Bolman and Deal (2017) describe the structural frame as a task-oriented frame. These Four Frames of Leadership are focused on the “how” of change, concentrating on strategy, setting measurable goals, clarifying tasks, organizational structure and reporting, establishing metrics and deadlines, processes, protocols, and procedures. The foundation of the frame is that an appropriately delegated roles and responsibilities will minimize distractions caused by interpersonal conflict and tension and will maximize people’s performance on the job. School leaders in this study focused on the school environment. Each worked to address deficit mindsets, set a vision for the school, and set school wide structures, policies and procedures. In addition, these school leaders focused on the school culture and climate by attending to student discipline, staff communication and expectations. Understanding Bolman and Deal’s (2017) structural frame could assist school leaders in setting long lasting structures. The structural frame supports the school environment superordinate theme of this study.

Bolman and Deal’s (2017) human resource frame and symbolic frame supports the superordinate theme of distributive leadership. The human resource frame places more emphasis on peoples’ needs. It emphasizes the relationship between the employees and the organization. This frame gives the employees the power and opportunity to
perform their jobs well, and provides opportunities for personal growth, which results in job satisfaction (Bolman & Deal, 2017). When Ruby began the school year, she found a way to empower her teachers by coaching them into positions where they would benefit the organization. Lynn used her instructional coaches to lead her building and build a strong working relationship with the teachers.

In Bolman and Deal’s (2017) symbolic frame, school leaders have an opportunity to address the need people have for a sense of purpose and meaning in their work. Motivating and inspiring people as well as making the organization’s direction feel significant and distinctive are central to this frame. It creates a motivating vision and recognizes excellent performance through celebrations. This frame highlights a kind of tribal valence in contemporary organizations. The school leaders shared their experiences with getting teachers in leadership roles to better support the organizations goals. When educators in these schools were included in the decision making, they were more invested in making the school better and supporting student growth. Lola worked closely with her staff in making decisions to implement several programs in the school. Incorporating Bolman and Deal’s human resource frame and symbolic frames could assist school leaders in developing authentic leadership within their building.

Finally, the Political frame addresses the problem of conflicting agendas among individuals and interest groups. This may be particularly true when budgets are limited and the organization faces difficult choices. The frame provides opportunity for coalition building, conflict resolution work, and power base building to support the leader’s initiatives. A good leader is a strong advocate and negotiator who understands politics and is comfortable with conflict that may arise from the non-traditional approaches
(Bolman & Deal, 2017). The school leaders in this study exemplified moral courage by confronting and changing the inequities in their schools. The school leaders strategically worked with their staff to get the results they needed for their students. One school leader advocated for her dual language program, while another changed the curriculum to meet the needs of the students. Using Bolman and Deal’s (2017) political frame could provide different strategies to novice school leaders working in urban schools. The political frame supports the moral courage superordinate theme of this study.

**Limitations**

The primary goal of this research was to gain insight in how school leaders’ beliefs influenced their leadership practices to lead urban social justice schools. The IPA study provided the opportunity to uncover the lived experiences of school leaders’ beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in leading high achieving urban schools in NYS. However, the study did have some limitations.

Data was collected from high achieving urban school leaders in New York State. A purposeful sample of six school leaders volunteered for the study. IPA aims to elicit rich, detailed, first-person accounts of experiences related to the phenomenon of interest (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). All of these self-selected participants were female, voiding the study of the male perspective. Because the study was limited to K-12 public school leaders in NYS, charter and private schools’ experiences were not included. Another limitation this study revealed was the distinct difference between face-to-face, in person meetings to that of Zoom. Despite the friendly atmosphere, the Zoom interviews appeared impersonal with two participants. Occasionally, participants answered questions in duality: sometimes referring to their role as a teacher and at other times, answering the
question as the school leader. The possibility of participant bias due to the nature of the questions in the semi-structured face-to-face interviews was not explored. To minimize bias, participants were given the option to decline to answer any questions or opt out of the study at any time without repercussions.

Smith et al. (2009) state that IPA is not a recommended research methodology for novice researchers due to the complexity and voluminous data collection, interpretation of robust data and the analyzation process. Although the researcher shares a similar role as a school leader, the researcher must interpret the lived experiences of others and conduct in depth analysis without personal bias. The researcher was limited by programmatic constraints due to an abbreviated, accelerated program of study. Additionally, the researcher coded all of data without the assistance of a software program which may have produced additional themes. Lastly, the researcher conducted member checks by providing the participants the opportunity to verify the transcripts.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations are based on the themes, analyses, and conclusions drawn from this study. These recommendations are suggestions that may be used by current and future school leaders, practitioners, and policy makers as these leaders work to address personal beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in creating and leading social justice urban schools. Although school leaders’ responsibilities continue to evolve, the research can provide insight to current school leaders’ that are lacking advocacy.

**Recommendations for public school districts.** School districts should review their hiring and onboarding practices, as well as the in-service training offered to school leaders to reinforce the districts collective professional beliefs. Urban school districts
should pay particular attention to the personal beliefs and prior training experiences school leaders bring to the school building. Districts must establish an expectation for a set of professional beliefs to inform practice. School districts often gamble when hiring teachers and school leaders to educate America’s most vulnerable population. More specifically, school districts should implement the research-based methods for assessing underlying competencies outlined by the Behavioral Event Interview (BEI) process. The BEI is one of the most effective techniques for assessing management behavior. By using an interview format, an individual’s sequence of thoughts and feelings may be noted and which may directly relate to effective performance but which may not be directly observable. This study sought to examine how school leaders’ beliefs transformed into leadership action. The BEI process requires potential candidates to describe past events in rich detail and allows the interviewer to score the responses that relate to each of the pre-determined competencies. This research-based competency protocol provides the district with the interviewees behavioral patterns for the competency being examined. BEI can be used in combination with other screening methods the district may already have in place.

Public Impact (2017) recommends that school districts with high population of disadvantaged students use two specific competencies, the Cultural Engagement (CE) and Belief in Learning Potential (BLP). CE is described as “noticing, anticipating, and acting to meet people’s practical and emotional needs, considering the possible effect of culture, past experiences, or personal characteristics—including race, gender, sexual orientation, religious, economic, and/or other backgrounds—in order to create positive impact on individuals and groups” (Public Impact, 2017, p. 4). BLP is described as the
school leader having “a belief that all students, regardless of circumstances, can learn at levels higher than their current achievement indicates” (Public Impact, 2017, p. 4).

School districts that utilize BEI will be able to identify deficit mindsets of potential educators and school leaders. Competencies are more powerful when used to select potential school leaders who already have the skills for the position. As a result, the district will then be able to decide on the level of support the school leader needs and how to support them through professional development and various culturally responsive education trainings or ultimately decide to screen them out. Public school districts that already have culturally responsive education professional development for their staff should consider having pre and post professional development to examine if the transformative learning leads to transformative leadership practices and allow the opportunity to support the transformation through further coaching and modeling.

**Recommendations for K-12 school leaders.** The findings in this study reveal the importance of having proper professional development and a sense for understanding the nuances of urban education. Novice school leaders learning to navigate their leadership roles should use instructional coaches as leaders to build the instructional capacity in the school. School leaders should take on substantive changes such as curriculum alignment every year to address the instructional gaps and curriculum not covered the previous year. Equally important, school leaders must ensure the implementation of culturally relevant curriculum. School leaders should focus on reviewing, identifying and eliminating inequitable practices that hinder student achievement in their building. More specifically, the integration of special education students into general education classrooms, ensuring English language learners have access to the curriculum in their native language as they
work to acquire the English language. By ensuring that ELLs have access to the
curriculum in their native language will assist in eliminating the learning gap, the
opportunity gap and ultimately, the achievement gap for ELLs.

School leaders need to learn how to respond to deep and equitable changes and
have the moral courage to stand up for students and families in urban settings by
replacing deficit perspectives of students and families. School leaders must actively and
explicitly unmask and undo the oppressive systems that interfere with student success.
School leaders should collaborate to mentor and support each other in addressing
inequities in their schools through culturally responsive educational workshops and
support groups. By providing embedded culturally responsive professional development
for staff school leaders can examine the transition of learning to classroom action and
behavior among the staff and follow up as needed.

As evident in this study, school leaders must employ a distributive leadership
mindset to ensure all stakeholders are active participants in the school community.
Creating such an environment will require school leaders to be strategic in their approach
while at the same time coaching individuals into leadership roles. School leaders must
also develop school environments that are physically, emotionally and intellectually safe
for all stakeholders. Creating a safe environment where all stakeholders have a clear
vision of the goals is paramount to building high achieving, high performing urban social
justice schools.

**Recommendations for social justice in education.** Understanding and
implementing how to achieve equity in education is paramount to K-12 public education.
Furthermore, reviewing and eliminating inequitable policies and procedures in K-12
public schools is essential in creating social justice schools. Shields’s (2010) transformative leadership theory provides a framework to address inequities in education. Shields (2010) contends that unless the educational system is transformed by creating equitable, inclusive, and socially just schools and until all students from whatever backgrounds have equal opportunities to participate, thrive, and succeed, national social and economic unrest will continue to challenge the well-being of our democratic society. Therefore, adopting a social justice framework has the potential to disturb the traditional systemic management models in our K-12 educational institutions. While social justice leaders are under continuous pressure and high expectations of an increasingly accountability-driven educational environment, Miller and Martin (2014) caution that school leaders with a social justice mindset have the potential to fall into leadership patterns where their practices do not reflect the social justice tenets.

Consequently, school leaders must avoid the pitfalls of inequitable leadership patterns by adding a social justice component to their already existing leadership playbook. While school leaders undergo extensive training to prepare them for the leadership role in public education, many school leaders are left to navigate the social justice component needed in public schools, especially urban settings. Novice or season school leaders must continue to develop their leadership playbook with an emphasis on social justice leadership. The leadership playbook will capture the school leaders’ plans and strategies in addressing the school’s inequalities that affect positive student outcomes. By creating a social justice component to the leadership playbook other school leaders can learn from previous practices and address the injustices that stifle progress in urban schools.
Recommendations for future research. Based on the findings, the limitations of the study, and the literature on school leaders’ beliefs, the researcher has identified six recommendations for future research. Expand research to include charter and private schools. Regardless of the selection process that charter and private schools have, examining the school leaders’ beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors for leading urban schools would provide more information for creating social justice schools. Conduct a comparison study between urban and suburban school leaders’ beliefs in leading high achieving schools. While this study is focused specifically on urban school districts, doing a comparison to examine school leaders’ beliefs could provide useful information of the mindsets and practices of the school leaders. Conducting a study that includes a male perspective in a study may yield different results. Having a male perspective may provide a different viewpoint that this study may not have offered. Examine school district leaders beliefs on creating and supporting urban school districts. As noted in this study, the participants had to defy systemic protocols set by school district officials. Examine school boards’ perspectives on social justice initiatives. Lastly, replicate this study with more participants in order to gain more insight on school leaders transforming learning to leadership practices for social justice.

Conclusion

Despite educational disparities in the United States public school systems a topic of concern in all U.S. presidential campaigns since the 1960s (Vinovskis, 2015), educational disparities continue to exist in the United States, specifically related to race, socioeconomic status, special education, and English language learners (Milner, 2013). Within large cities, African American student’s proficiency levels differ by 37% in math
and 30% in reading to that of White students (Payne and Brown, 2016). Furthermore, the United States Census Bureau (2013) reported that by the year 2042, minority communities will become the majority of the U.S. population and by 2060, more specifically, the African American and Latino/a populations will comprise 45% of the U.S. population (Boske, Osanloo, & Newcomb, 2017). Pollock (2010) asserts that there are three significant factors involved in causing disproportionality among racial/ethnic minority students, which include policies, practices, and beliefs (Pollock, 2010).

As noted above, personal beliefs are so powerful that even among trained professionals, personal beliefs serve as a greater predictor of a person’s behavior than professional knowledge (Nelson & Guerra, 2014). Guerra and Pazey (2016) posit that school leaders' decisions are widely influenced by their personal life history, which shape their beliefs. The instructional leadership of school leaders affects what happens in the classroom as well as the classroom outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2004). If school leaders do not examine their beliefs and biases about social justice inequalities, these leaders will not be able to create and lead social justice schools (Guerra & Pazey, 2016). Therefore, these educational leaders' influences and beliefs are essential factors in school reform (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014).

Theoharis (2007) claims that while there is research in the field about social justice and leadership, there is a lack of research on how to address the ways in which leaders depict social justice, the resistance, and how leaders pursue equity. Therefore, an equitable and inclusive education for all students becomes the essential component of social justice leadership. Most importantly, examining the personal beliefs of school leaders in urban schools is paramount to closing the achievement gap. Despite these
concerns, research shows that school leaders who clearly articulate the vision, mission, and goals that evolve from personal beliefs based upon perceptions, expectations, and practices lead high achieving urban schools to achieve equitable education for all students (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Research such as the 90/90/90 Schools case study on high achieving urban schools identified five common characteristics of high-achieving schools. These characteristics focused on academic achievement, creating and providing clear curriculum choices with regular assessments of academic progress as well as abundant opportunities for improvement, an emphasis on nonfiction writing, and collaboratively scoring student work (Reeves, 2004). Other research studied the success of 21 high-performing, high-poverty schools (Carter, 2000). These schools that achieved success as a result of hard work, sound practical teaching philosophies, and successful leadership strategies that can be reproduced. Carter (2000) emphasizes that learning from best practices of high-performing schools and holding all schools serving low-income students accountable to No Excuses standard of excellence should be the nation’s top priority.

This study sought to identify and gain insight on high performing school leaders’ beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in leading social justice schools in New York State. After conducting six semi-structured interviews with successful school leaders in urban school districts across New York State, Mezirow’s transformative learning theory and Shields’s transformative leadership theory were instrumental in identifying the characteristics of successful urban school leaders. The two theoretical frameworks to examine school leaders beliefs that lead to leadership practices. Mezirow’s transformative learning theory provides a framework for educators to challenge their internal biases and have an internal
exchange which leads to a new perspective transformation. Shields’s transformative leadership theory allows school leaders the ability to transform their personal learning into professional leadership practices and social justice action. The transformative learning to transformative leadership process is continuous throughout a school leaders career.

The findings in this study reveal that when school leaders’ beliefs are challenged through a disorienting dilemma, they experience a transformation. Theses transformations led the school leaders to add their social justice leadership playbook. The six school leaders in this study created positive learning environments by addressing the deficit mindsets of students, teachers, parents, and the community. As each school leader focused on the school environment, the school leaders began from the ground up by setting the vision, mission, goals, and procedures for their respective schools. The high achieving school leaders exemplified a distributive leadership mindset where all stakeholders were included in the decision making of the school. Nonetheless, the process was strategic and goal oriented.

The final characteristic that the study reveals is moral courage. The school leaders found unique ways to make the necessary changes in their buildings that supported students. However, the systemic structures in public education continue to hinder the necessary progress needed for our urban schools to have a chance to close the achievement gap. If this is the case, what is next? What measures should courageous school leaders take in order to close the achievement gap once and for all? Shields transformative leadership theory provides a road map for social justice leadership. Overall, school leaders must exhibit the moral courage to take action in dismantling all
unjust systems that hinder progress in urban schools. One way to start is by continuing to inspire school leaders to do what is right for students and families and not worry about the political fallout of leading a school. As evident by these school leaders moral courage, each of them defied the structures that interfered with student success and achieved the necessary outcomes. As a result, each of these school leaders were later praised and used as exemplar for closing the achievement gap in their schools.

As the global economy becomes more competitive and the rigor of state assessments increases, principals are faced with new pressures that they have never experienced before. School leaders must be multifaceted and versatile enough to handle all aspects of the educational environment. Most importantly, school leaders must challenge their assumptions and lead with moral courage (Shields, 2014).
References


DeMatthews, D., & Mawhinney, H. (2014). Social justice leadership and inclusion:
Exploring challenges in an urban district struggling to address inequities. 
*Educational Administration Quarterly, 50*(5), 844-881.


Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval

January 31, 2020

File No: 4073-02/02020-02

Eilean Hernandez
St. John Fisher College

Dear Eilean,

Thank you for submitting your research proposal to the Institutional Review Board.

I am pleased to inform you that the Board has approved your Exempt Review project, "The Identification and the Influence of Urban School Leaders' Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Behaviors on Leading Urban Social Justice Schools."

Following federal guidelines, research related records should be maintained in a secure area for three years following the completion of the project at which time they may be destroyed.

Should you have any questions about this process or your responsibilities, please contact me at [contact information redacted].

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Eileen Lynd-Balta, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

[Contact information]
Appendix B

Email to Current and Graduate Students of the DEXL Program

February 2020

Dear Graduates and current students of the St. John Fisher College DEXL Program,

My name is Eliezer Hernández and I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at St. John Fisher College under the supervision of Dr. Cynthia P. Smith. This letter is an invitation for you to recommend potential participants for my study. The following information explains the purpose of the study.

**Title of Study**: The Identification and the Influence of Urban School Leaders' Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Behaviors on Leading Urban Social Justice Schools

**Purpose of Study**: The purpose of this study is to gain insight into how high achieving; urban school leaders' beliefs are influenced by their lived experiences and how these beliefs are reflected in their leadership practices. The results of the study will be used to inform the existing literature of the strategies school leaders can implement in order to create and lead social justice schools.

To participate in the study, the participant must meet the following criteria:

- **Currently are or have been a School Leader at an NYS school with grades K – 12**;
- **Have three (3) or more years serving as a school leader**;
- **Experience working in an urban setting as defined by NYS**: Urban schools are located in inner-city and are often populated heterogeneous by race and serve high minority populations, special education students, English language learners, and a high population of students of low socioeconomic status that are designated by the percentage of students who receive free or reduce lunch (Kemerer, Sansom, & Kemerer, 2005);
- **Has served in a school that was not achieving and later became an achieving urban school during their tenure**: New York State Commissioner of Education (2018) identified achieving urban schools as learning institutions that have made the AYP in English language arts and mathematics assessments for all subgroups of students on all measures for which the school is accountable. These achieving schools do not have significant gaps in student performance and do not have gaps and accountability measures between other subgroups (NYS Commissioner of Education, 2018).
• School leaders from the Syracuse City School District are excluded from the study;
• Charter and Private schools are excluded due to variances and intake population methods.

I want to assure you that this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Institutional Review Board at St. John Fisher College. I hope that the results of my study will benefit future school leaders in leading social justice schools.

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information, please contact me at (315) 529-2260, or by e-mail: eh00100@sjfc.edu. You can contact my supervisor Dr. Cynthia P. Smith by phone: [redacted] or by e-mail: csmithedd@gmail.com.

Sincerely,

Eliezer Hernández
Doctoral Candidate
Doctoral Program in Executive Leadership
St. John Fisher College
Rochester, New York
Appendix C

Invitation Letter

February 2020

Dear Courageous School Leader

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study I am conducting as part of my doctoral degree in the Department of Education at St. John Fisher College under the supervision of Dr. Cynthia P. Smith. I would like to provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement will entail if you decide to participate.

Title of the study: The Identification and the Influence of Urban School Leaders’ Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Behaviors on Leading Urban Social Justice Schools

The purpose of this study is to gain insight as to how high achieving, urban school leaders’ beliefs are influenced by their lived experiences and how these beliefs are reflected in their leadership practices. The results of the study will be used to inform the existing body of literature of identifying strategies K-12 school leaders can implement in order to create and lead social just schools. I am interested in learning about what strategies you might have used to overcome personal beliefs, which led to producing a high achieving urban school.

Participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately one hour in length to take place in a mutually agreed upon location. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions. Furthermore, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences by advising the researcher. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to facilitate collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis. Shortly after the interview has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points that you wish. In addition, you will review the transcripts for any identifiable information. All identifiable information will be removed to protect your identity. All information you provide is considered completely confidential. Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study. Data collected during this study will be retained in a locked cabinet in my home office and destroyed no later than January 2023.

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information, please contact me at (315) 529-2260, or by e-mail: eh00100@sjfc.edu. You can
contact my supervisor Dr. Cynthia P. Smith by phone: [redacted], or by e-mail: csmithedd@gmail.com.

I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Institutional Review Board at St. John Fisher College. However, the final decision to participate is yours. I hope that the results of my study will benefit future school leaders in leading social justice schools.

I will call you in one week to discuss your participation in this study and/or if you would like to discuss the details of this project. Please forward this invitation to others who might be interested.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Eliezer Hernández
Doctoral Candidate
Doctoral Program in Executive Leadership
St. John Fisher College
Rochester, New York
Appendix D

Introduction Letter to Superintendents, Assistant Superintendents, and Professional Network

February 2020

My name is Eliezer Hernández and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Education at St. John Fisher College under the supervision of Dr. Cynthia P. Smith. As I prepare for my study, I would like your support in identifying potential participants in NYS. The following information explains the purpose of the study.

Title of Study: The Identification and the Influence of Urban School Leaders’ Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Behaviors on Leading Urban Social Justice Schools

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this study is to gain insight as to how high achieving; urban school leaders’ beliefs are influenced by their lived experiences and how these beliefs are reflected in their leadership practices. The results of the study will be used to inform the existing literature of the strategies school leaders can implement in order to create and lead social just schools.

To participate in the study, the participant must meet the following criteria:

- Currently are or have been a School Leader at an NYS school with grades K – 12;
- Have three (3) or more years serving as a school leader;
- Experience working in an urban setting as defined by NYS:
  Urban schools are located in inner-city and are often populated heterogeneous by race and serve high minority populations, special education students, English language learners, and a high population of students of low socioeconomic status that are designated by the percentage of students who receive free or reduce lunch (Kemerer, Sansom, & Kemerer, 2005);
- Has served in a school that was not achieving and later became an achieving urban school during their tenure:

  The New York State Commissioner of Education (2018) identified achieving urban schools as learning institutions that have made the AYP in English language arts and mathematics assessments for all subgroups of students on all measures for which the school is accountable. These achieving schools do not have significant gaps in student performance and do not have gaps and accountability measures between other subgroups (NYS Commissioner of Education, 2018).
• School leaders from the Syracuse School District are excluded from the study;
• Charter and Private schools are excluded due to variances and intake population methods.

I want to assure you that this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Institutional Review Board at St. John Fisher College. I hope that the results of my study will benefit future school leaders in leading social justice schools.

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information, please contact me at (315) 529-2260, or by e-mail: eh00100@sjfc.edu. You can contact my supervisor Dr. Cynthia P. Smith by phone: (585) 469-1679, or by e-mail: csmithedd@gmail.com.

Sincerely,

Eliezer Hernández
Doctoral Candidate
Doctoral Program in Executive Leadership
St. John Fisher College
Rochester, New York
Appendix E

Participant Letter

February 2020

Dear Participant:

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my dissertation study on school leader’s beliefs. Your professional position as a school leader in a high achieving urban school makes you an ideal candidate for this study. In our conversation, I hope to focus on your experience as a social justice school leader in your current or former role.

I have been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. John Fisher College, in Rochester, NY, to conduct research for my doctoral degree in the Executive Leadership. The study will focus on the lived experiences of high achieving urban school leaders and how these experiences were put into practice.

Our conversation will be recorded with a digital application called Rev. The interview will be transcribed, analyzed and coded along with other interviews from other school leaders. All recordings and transcribed manuscripts will be kept in a secure location to protect your privacy. I will keep all names, any identifying information, and interview notes completely confidential.

Participation in this study is voluntary. However, I believe the interview will feel more like a conversation between two colleagues. The attached consent form describes the risks and benefits of participating in the study.

I plan to complete my dissertation study in April 2020.

As a thank you, I will provide an electronic copy of the completed dissertation upon request. Again, thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Eliezer Hernández
Doctoral Candidate
Doctoral Program in Executive Leadership
St. John Fisher College
Rochester, New York
Appendix F
St. John Fisher College
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Study: The Identification and the Influence of Urban School Leaders’ Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Behaviors on Leading Urban Social Justice Schools

Name of researcher: Eliezer Hernández, 315-529-2260
Faculty Supervisors: Dissertation Chair: Cynthia P. Smith, Ed.D. RT (R), Committee Member: Loretta G. Quigley, Ed.D.,

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this study is to gain insight into how high achieving; urban school leaders’ beliefs were influenced by their lived experiences and how these beliefs are reflected in their leadership practices. The results of the study will be used to inform the existing literature of the strategies school leaders can implement in order to create and lead social just schools.

Place of study: Interviews will occur in a mutually agreed location in New York State or via Zoom. Participation in this study will require participants to consent to being audio-recorded.

Length of participation: One interview lasting no more than 60 minutes.

Method of data collection: All interviews will be audio-recorded and some notes will be taken during the interview as a debrief for the researcher. The purpose for the note taking will be to capture any nonverbal or environmental data.

Risks and benefits: The expected risks and benefits of this study are explained below. We believe this study has no more than minimal risk. Minimal risk exists, as the probability of and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during routine tests. Participants will be audio-recorded during interviews. There are no additional anticipated emotional or physical risks associated with participating in this study. The expected benefits will be that each participant will receive a final electronic copy of the dissertation once released by St. John Fisher College upon request.

Method for protecting confidentiality/privacy: All consent is voluntary. Pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants. Participants name and identifying information will remain confidential and will not appear in transcripts, analysis, or the final study. Written transcripts will be stored in a locked cabinet accessible only to the researcher for a period
of three years after the successful defense of the dissertation and then shredded. As volunteers in the study, any participant can choose to answer any, all or none of the interview questions, and may withdraw consent to participate at any time and for any reason.

**Your rights:** As a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that may be advantages to you.
5. Be informed of the results of the study.

I have read the above, received a copy of this form, and I agree to participate in the above-named study.

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<th>Print Name (Participant)</th>
<th>Signature (Participant)</th>
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<th>Name (Investigator)</th>
<th>Signature (Investigator)</th>
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If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher above. If you experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, please contact your health care provider or local crisis provider.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study and/or if you experience any physical or emotional discomfort, you can contact Jill Rathbun by phone at 585-385-8012 or by email at irb@sjfc.edu.

All digital audio recordings and transcriptions of interviews will be maintained using a private, locked, and password-protected file and password-protected computer stored securely in the private home of the principal researcher. Electronic files will include assigned identity codes and pseudonyms; they will not include actual names or any information that could personally identify or connect participants to this study. Other materials, including notes or paper files related to data collection and analysis will be stored securely in unmarked boxes, locked inside a cabinet in the private home of the principal researcher. Only the researcher will have access to electronic or paper records.

This researcher will keep the digitally recorded audio data for a period of five years following publication of the dissertation. Signed informed consent documents will be kept for five years after publication. All paper records will be crosscut shredded and professionally delivered for incineration. Electronic records will be cleared, purged, and destroyed from the hard drive and all devices such that restoring data is not possible.
Appendix G

Interview Protocol

Study Title: The Identification and the Influence of Urban School Leaders' Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Behaviors on Leading Urban Social Justice Schools

Date of Interview: _________________
Time of Interview: _________________
Location of Interview: _______________________
Interviewee: _______________________________

Review purpose of the study: The purpose of this study is to gain insight into how high achieving; urban school leaders’ beliefs were influenced by their lived experiences and how these beliefs are reflected in their leadership practices. The results of the study will be used to inform the existing literature of the strategies school leaders can implement in order to create and lead social just schools.

Review participant rights: Participation in this study is voluntary. You can withdraw your participation in the study at any point by simply informing the researcher that you no longer want to participate. There will be no repercussions from withdrawing from the study.

Interview Questions:
1. Tell me a little about yourself?

2. Describe your experience as a school leader?

3. Describe a time in your life when you had a disorienting dilemma/internal conflict about another culture? A disorienting dilemma is a life event or incident that a person experiences as a critical situation that cannot be settled by applying prior problem-solving strategies (Moore, 2005).

4. How have your lived experiences cultivated an understanding of, and commitment to, social justice and equity?

5. Can you share a time when your personal beliefs provoked a critical assessment about your assumptions?

6. Resulting from this critical assessment, how did you acquire knowledge and skills for implementing social justice action? (details)
7. Describe how these newly acquired knowledge and skills are reflected in your leadership practices?

8. Describe your challenges of implementing social justice characteristics in your school?

9. Can you describe a time when you changed the policies, practices and beliefs that hindered improvements in your school? What was the outcome?

Alignment to the Research Questions:

1. How are the beliefs of high achieving urban school leaders influenced by their lived experiences? Questions: 2, 3, 4, 5

2. How are the beliefs of high achieving urban school leaders reflected in their leadership practices? Questions: 6, 7, 8, 9

Please be advised that during the course of the interview subsequent questions may be asked as a follow-up to an answer, to clarify, or to probe deeper. You do not have to answer any question you are opposed too.

Close interview: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

Follow-up call/email: The recording of this interview will be professionally transcribed. Once the transcription is ready, I can share with you a copy and encourage you to review to ensure accuracy and intent. I encourage you to let me know if there are areas you would like to clarify. We can do so over email or set up a call. If I do not hear from you, I will assume that you approve the transcript and your answers represent your intent.

Next steps: Data will be collected and analyzed during winter of 2020. The study will be finalized in spring 2020 and once approved, an electronic copy of the dissertation will be sent to you upon request.