PRINCIPALS’ PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTIONS
IN DIVERSIFYING SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

by

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Date

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation in loving memory of my mother, Mary L. Bloodsaw, who began this journey with me in the physical world, implanting her repertoire of constant prayers, words of encouragement, and unconditional love which sustains me today in the spiritual world. Thank you mom for igniting the spark and keeping it lit to see me through this journey for I am reminded that God is always on my side and my steps are ordered by Him.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication .......................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgments .............................................................................................................. iii

List of Tables ....................................................................................................................... xvi

Chapter 1  Rationale for the Study ...................................................................................... 1

Chapter 2  Framing the Study of Principals’ Perceptions ....................................................... 4

   Introduction ................................................................................................................... 4

   Cultural Challenges ...................................................................................................... 4

   Evolving School Culture .............................................................................................. 10

      Critical Pedagogy ...................................................................................................... 10

      Popular Culture in Urban Education ...................................................................... 14

      Loud Black Students .............................................................................................. 20

      Student Tardiness .................................................................................................. 24

   Leading for Change ...................................................................................................... 26

      Understanding School Culture ............................................................................... 26

      Roles of Principals ................................................................................................. 27

   Summary ..................................................................................................................... 31

Chapter 3 Research Methodology ....................................................................................... 32

   Introduction ................................................................................................................ 32

   Research Paradigm ..................................................................................................... 33

   Participants ................................................................................................................ 34

   Data Collection ......................................................................................................... 36
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Go Slow to Go Fast</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance Working In-On the School</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice to District Administration</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Beth</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-Student Demographics</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Proficiency</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revelations of Teacher-Student Interactions</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Teacher Viewpoint</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustration with Student Behavior</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Insensitivity</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Revelations</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Practices</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Mentoring</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice to Aspiring Principals</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice to District Administration</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Charles</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-Student Demographics</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Proficiency</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revelations of Teacher-Student Interactions</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Teacher Viewpoint</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Beth</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-Student Demographics</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Proficiency</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revelations of Teacher-Student Interactions</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Teacher Viewpoint</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustration with Student Behavior</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Insensitivity</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Revelations</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Practices</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Mentoring</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice to Aspiring Principals</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice to District Administration</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustration with Student Behavior</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume: Those Loud Black Kids</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Tardiness</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegally Enrolled</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Student Viewpoint</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Survival</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Revelations</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Practices</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focusing on Reading</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embracing Technology</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking About Race</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice to Novice Principals</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice to District Administrators</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Donna</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-Student Demographics</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revelations of Teacher-Student Interactions</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Teacher Viewpoint</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Insensitivity</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baiting Students</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removing Students from Class</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Student Viewpoint</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustration with Student Motivation</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustration with Student Behavior</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Insensitivity</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Interaction</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Tardiness</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegally Enrolled</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume: Those Loud Black Kids</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Student Viewpoint</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Survival</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singled Out or Targeted</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Proficiency</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Revelations</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Practices</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homogenous Language Arts Class</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice to Aspiring Principals</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice to District Administrators</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Xavier</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-Student Demographics</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Proficiency</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revelations of Teacher-Student Interactions</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Teacher Viewpoint</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustration with Student Motivation</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustration with Student Behavior</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Tardiness</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegally Enrolled</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume: Those Loud Black Kids</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Student Viewpoint</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Survival</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Revelations</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Practices</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Assimilation</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice to Aspiring Principals</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice to District Administrators</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Yancy</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-Student Demographics</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Proficiency</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revelations of Teacher-Student Interactions</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Teacher Viewpoint</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustration with Student Behavior</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustration with Teacher Evaluation</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volume: Those Loud Black Kids</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Student Viewpoint</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Advice to District Administrators .................................................................................. 189
Similarities and Differences across the Principals ......................................................... 190
Background ...................................................................................................................... 190
Teacher-Student Demographics ..................................................................................... 191
Academic Proficiency ...................................................................................................... 192
Adam & Donna vs. Vince & Zora .................................................................................... 192
Adam & Vince vs. Donna & Zora .................................................................................... 194
Revelations of Teacher-Student Interactions ................................................................. 195
The Teacher Viewpoint .................................................................................................... 195
Frustration with Student Motivation ............................................................................... 196
Frustration with Student Behavior ................................................................................ 198
Cultural Insensitivity ...................................................................................................... 199
Student Tardiness .......................................................................................................... 201
Volume: Those Loud Black Kids ................................................................................... 202
The Student Viewpoint ................................................................................................... 203
Student Survival ............................................................................................................ 203
Singled Out or Targeted ................................................................................................. 204
Chapter 5 Discussion of Findings .................................................................................. 206
Principal Revelations ...................................................................................................... 206
Leadership Practices ...................................................................................................... 206
Professional Development .............................................................................................. 207
Advice to Aspiring Principals ......................................................................................... 208
Advice to District Administrators .................................................................................. 209
Relating Findings to Previous Literature ................................................................. 211

Academic Proficiency and Teacher Retention.......................................................... 211

Revelations about Teacher-Students Interactions ...................................................... 215

Stereotypes & Cultural Insensitivity ........................................................................... 216

Disenfranchised by Socioeconomics .......................................................................... 218

Student Motivation ..................................................................................................... 219

Student Survival Behavior .......................................................................................... 220

Volume: Those Loud Black Kids ................................................................................ 221

Student Tardiness ....................................................................................................... 224

Principals’ Leadership Challenges .............................................................................. 226

Leadership Practices .................................................................................................. 227

Professional Development .......................................................................................... 227

Advice to Aspiring Principals ..................................................................................... 229

Advice to District Administrators ............................................................................... 229

Limitations ................................................................................................................... 231

Possibilities of Future Research .................................................................................. 231

Implications and Recommendations .......................................................................... 232

Reflection ..................................................................................................................... 233

Appendix A Interview Guides ..................................................................................... 236

Appendix B IRB Protocol ............................................................................................ 240

References .................................................................................................................... 243

Abstract ....................................................................................................................... 246
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Participants’ Demographics ........................................................................................................... 41
Table 2 Demographic Trend of Student Enrollment & Distance from Urban Core ......................... 43
Table 3 2012-2013 Mathematics MEAP Comparison of Suburban and Urban Core .................. 45
Table 4 2012-2013 Reading MEAP Comparison of Suburban and Urban Core ............................... 46
CHAPTER 1

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Public education in the United States ideally offers all students the right to an equal educational opportunity with highly qualified teachers. Yet, educational inequity and social injustice exist. With the proportion of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse steadily increasing, public education is experiencing a new reality to which many educators and school districts are ill-equipped to react (Cooper 2009). For example, while some school districts are (finally) coming to grips with addressing relationships, inequalities, and cultural differences among African Americans and Whites, new differences are emerging as Latino, Asian, and other minorities migrate into school systems. Schools in the suburbs across the U.S. are becoming more diverse, as families relocate from urban areas or from other countries in hopes of finding a better education and life for their children. These shifting demographics bring with them tensions surrounding social interactions.

Consider, for instance, circumstances in a predominantly White, yet very diverse, suburban middle school in Michigan that included White, African American, Chaldean (a disfavored Christian religious minority in Iraq), Asian, and Latino students. A White female teacher reported frequent discipline issues with one of her African-American female students. The teacher wrote discipline referrals to administration describing the student’s behavior as confrontational, angry, and discourteous. The student told me, her principal, that she did not like the teacher, stopped caring about the referrals and willingly accepted the consequences associated with violating the student code of conduct. As an African American administrator, I was baffled because I could not understand why this young lady did not like this teacher and why she did not show any sentiment towards the teacher or sorrow for the consequences associated with the student code of conduct.
violations. The student said to me that this teacher offended her *every day*, the moment she walked into the classroom.

Not understanding what was happening, I asked the student to explain. The student informed me there were only a few African American students in the class and the teacher would regularly use the terms “you people” whenever she addressed the class or disliked what was perceived as a lack of effort made by “some” or “all” of the students. The student interpreted the teacher’s actions as an indication that the students were the ones with the problem, such as inferring that they did not care about their education or they did not have any motivation for school.

Now, I understood. Unfortunately, the teacher’s phrase “you people” is a racially loaded phrase, one routinely perceived, especially in the African American community, as disrespectful and highly offensive, an alternative to using the “N” word for some. I discussed this with the teacher, who was apologetic and remorseful, and admitted that she did not realize she was offending this young lady on a regular basis. In time, the student and teacher developed a tolerable working relationship after the teacher stopped the offensive behavior.

Seeing all-too-many of these kinds of misunderstandings and resulting difficulties, I became interested in how changing school demographic shifts impinge on school leaders’ roles, especially how such leaders might lead in ways that change school cultures to become both more aware of, and welcoming to, diverse students and the communities from which they come. Because teachers are not mandated to participate in culturally sensitive, diversity-oriented teacher education programs upon earning their certification, school principals are ideally situated in schools not only to see how these social interactions between teachers and students play out on a routine basis, but also hold responsibility for orchestrating changes to improve their schools.
Thus, this study examines the experiences of school principals working in diversifying schools/districts, with a focus on teacher-student social interactions and the principals’ approaches to school leadership.

In Chapter 2, I develop a scholarly framework to guide the research project.
CHAPTER 2

FRAMING THE STUDY OF PRINCIPALS’ PERCEPTIONS

Introduction

The scholarly framework for guiding this research project begins with a review of the literature about diversifying public schools and the troublesome interactions between an overwhelmingly White teaching force and a student body increasingly comprised of children of color, then turns to approaches for shifting school culture so that it welcomes and represents the children it serves, and finally takes up the issue of school leadership in rapidly diversifying schools.

Cultural Challenges

According to Howard (2006), public education in America is “faced with three simultaneous statistical realities: (1) our teacher force is mostly White, (2) our student population is highly diverse and growing in children of color, and (3) children of color are precisely the students most at risk of being caught on the negative end of the achievement gap” (p. 4). These statistical realities are not a new situation, but a continuing trend, along with the gaps or disparities in achievement among the children of color and their White counterparts. As McIntyre (1997) noted in her recap, in 1992, 88% of the teaching force was White, and at that time a diverse student population of African Americans, Asian Americans, Arab Americans, and Native Americans was growing. Scholars have long called for teachers being adequately prepared by their teacher education programs to understand the implications of a diversifying student body (McIntyre, 1997, p. 5). Without such preparation, teachers lack cultural competence, which holds promise to allow them to embrace diversity.

McIntyre (1997) specifically studied White teachers who tended to form their understandings of diverse communities while growing up, and often their perceptions of people of
color relied on stereotypes. McIntyre maintained that because White people live in a system of whiteness or white privilege, the idea of racism is generally undetectable by those who benefit from white privileges. White people do not view themselves as racists, yet, hints to the contrary emerge from the way they talk and act towards people of color (p. xi). To draw attention to the unspoken racial affiliation of being White in U.S. society (and privileges that flow from it), McIntyre defined whiteness as “a system and ideology of white dominance that marginalizes and oppresses people of color, ensuring existing privileges for white people in this country” (p. 3). As schools diversify, McIntyre argued that teachers must learn to understand cultural differences and realize that their upbringing may be quite different from the students who are sitting in their classrooms.

As an example of cultural differences, Anderson (1999) illustrated the myriad ways that students of color often “code-switch” by matching their behavior to a particular context (school, neighborhood, church, salon/barbershop), moving between two ends of a spectrum in the urban Black community termed “decent” and “street.” Here, being respected proves central to motivating actions and reactions, and it becomes important that Blacks not be viewed as weak among their peers or family members. The code provides a set of informal rules that generally guarantee respect in a forceful or violent way, and police have little influence within this street justice system where each holds personal responsibility for their own safety, and an “eye for an eye” attitude prevails (p. 10). When respect is an issue, a student cannot simply walk away from an action deemed disrespectful because to retain one’s sense of self requires some form of retaliation. When teacher-student interactions are viewed through the code-of-the-street model of enculturated behavior, a student who feels intimidated or offended by a teacher responds in ways that seem highly likely to violate student codes of conduct in most schools.
Delpit (1995) recalled a parallel philosophy in the scholarly works of Carter G. Woodson’s the *Mis-Education of the Negro* written in 1933 [almost 80 years later] that African American students must not only learn the European mainstream language [and ways of life], but must also learn the language of their own culture [and its sets of accepted practices] in order to be adequately prepared as an educated class (p. 163). Simply offering an opportunity affiliated with mainstream ways of life is no guarantee that all students will learn the ways of mainstream life. In fact, Anderson (1999) found that education is not a priority in “street” families and students who want to get an education are viewed as sell-outs if they strive for an education.

With the adjacency of “decent” and “street” families, students from “decent” families often result to “code-switching” (p. 36). Characteristically, students from “street” families have a difficult time code-switching because they have little exposure to mainstream society and may demonstrate little to no consideration for other people. With limited financial resources, limited education, and limited understandings about setting priorities and about the consequences associated with making poor decisions, it is not uncommon to witness frustration over their finances including bills, food, and needed medications (p. 45). At times, street families exhibit jealousy and animosity towards their own family members (p. 60). Outside the home, children learn and apply their life experiences based on what they have observed in the home: cursing, talking abusively, and witnessing aggression or violence (p. 69). Clearly, students from these roots often have little in common with their teachers, and may be at odds with the sort of education offered in their schools, especially when such students are targeted as the problem, rather than accepted as people who have a way of life that is barely understood in their school and rarely accepted.
The decent family (Anderson, 1999), on the other hand, has hope for the future and tends to associate themselves with mainstream society and overarching institutions linked to their neighborhoods, such as schools and churches. Boys may play on the little league football team and girls may participate in Girl Scout troops, if such programs are offered in their neighborhoods, schools, or churches. In decent families, the man is generally the head of the household and uses strict child-rearing practices. The parents try to model for their children how to be polite and considerate of others, but may have to code switch and “get ignorant” at times if they feel it is necessary to give a perception that they can be violent (p. 42). However, the majority of decent families are single mothers with more than one child.

Although the mothers of the decent families make every effort to keep their kids out the streets, they are faced with disadvantages for their sons and daughters when it comes to their children being tested by the men of the streets. The men of the streets test the sons by persistently attempting to draw the sons into the streets and they test the daughters by attempting to date them (p. 43). The attraction for sons can be the illegally acquired money that comes from selling drugs or stealing cars, while the draw for daughters can be material things that make them feel cared for and loved.

Although some decent families relocate to the suburbs in an effort to make a better life for their families, their personal experiences and beliefs make it difficult to fully accept a culture and environment that are vastly different. According to Delpit (1995), children of color face bias and ignorance in many schools because “we live in a society that nurtures and maintains stereotypes” (p. xiii). Anderson (1999) found that stereotypes are sometimes perpetuated within the Black community because there is a perception that “you think you are better than me because you are
studying or I am viewed as the enemy for not dropping out of school and wanting a better life” (p. 56).

Delpit (1995) also reported on different communities’ interpretations of Philadelphia’s adoption of a writing-process project for the state. The focus for literacy was on fluency and creativity and not whether the writings by students were correct (p. 15), which White teachers found wonderful. Minority teachers, on the other hand, felt that the project was racist (intended to keep Black children down) because the ideas of Black teachers were excluded (p. 17). Basically, Black teachers felt that Black students already wrote with fluency and creativity through rap songs, jump-roping chants, and cheers, but worried that students were not doing well in the oral and written forms demanded by mainstream society (p. 18).

Delpit suggested that progressive White teachers wanted to help Black students find their voice as they searched for their own songs, whereas Black teachers would hear the songs of the students loud and clear, but wanted to teach the students how to harmonize their song with the rest of the world (p. 18). This illustrative example highlights not only how teachers with different community affiliations interpret decisions about schooling using the lens of their community and its needs, but also the different implications of such decisions for students who have different educational needs growing out of their community affiliations. In fact, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), there is a long-standing academic achievement gap associated with students’ social class, race/ethnicity, language status, and special needs. Closing these gaps has been given central prominence in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Singleton and Linton (2006) defined three factors that are not only critical but also necessary for school systems to embrace in order “to close the racial achievement gap: passion, practice and persistence” (p. 6). Delpit (1995) wrote that it is not the instruction but the attitude
lying beneath the instruction. “When teachers do not understand the potential of the students they teach, they will underteach them no matter what the methodology” (1995, p. 175). Singleton and Linton (2006) wrote that passion is crucial and found that the very best educator will fail if there is no passion. They also found that administrators and teachers who were capable of teaching students of all races were passionate about their work (p. 11). Passion implies a great sense of pride and high expectations for everyone. Educators who are not passionate may portray overall toxic characteristics of negativity, hopelessness, and disappointment with low expectations towards students in general and students of color in particular (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

According to Muhammad (2009), school culture is a complicated mixture of “history, psychology, sociology, economics, and political science” that is determined by beliefs, rituals, and norms (p. 17). In an effort to transform school culture, Muhammad studied factors that stimulated a toxic school culture where some teachers did not believe in student academic ability, yet students may not have been intrinsically motivated either. Muhammad expressed the following realities associated with student motivation: 1) Students are a product of their environment and cannot choose their parents or socioeconomic status; 2) Student resistance is based on experiences where damaging experiences must be replaced by positive ones; and, 3) Student inexperience and lack of maturity does not allow them to understand the consequences associated with academic failure and student achievement (p.24). Thus, academic interest and student achievement should not be left up to the sole responsibility of students, but rather a collaborated effort supported by parents and educators.

Many factors affecting school culture were brought to the forefront after No Child Left Behind forced school districts to scrutinize data from standardized test scores, the qualifications of staff, and school funding. “No Child Left Behind mandates the school as the responsible
party…this is very different from the traditional belief that students and their families were primarily responsible for the effectiveness of education” (Muhammad, 2009, p. 17). In essence, by holding school districts accountable, transforming school culture involves educational leaders intervening to improve teacher-student interactions from negative interactions to positive ones.

Thus, I began to wonder about the kinds of teacher-student interactions that principals participating in this study have experienced, how the negative ones have been defused, and how school staff make sense of the students they serve and the communities they come from.

Unfortunately, closing the racial achievement gap for students of color in toxic environments has proven quite difficult because cultural change is slow and works to change aspects of school life that are not decided upon, but simply taken for granted. One approach to shifting a school culture to make it more welcoming to members of diverse communities is critical pedagogy.

Evolving School Culture

Two proposals for shifting school culture emerge in the literature about schooling: 1) the use of critical pedagogy; and 2) using popular cultural to motivate learning in schools. Additionally, two concerns emerged in the literature that challenged schooling: 1) loud Black students; and 2) student tardiness.

Critical Pedagogy

One approach to shifting school cultures involves employing critical pedagogy, a movement in education that unpacks school practices and asks deep questions about how such practices set the stage for elevating some vantage points, and communities, at the expense of others. According to Morrell (2000), the methods of critical pedagogy and cultural studies show how students use representations of popular culture to construct meaning of their lives by understanding their own
realities (p. 4). Critical pedagogy offers a method to learning through dialoguing and reflecting, which is a way of viewing social injustice and revealing how this injustice has caused problems in the lives of young people who live in impoverished conditions. The dialogue and reflection allow for empowerment to meet the needs of students.

Bringing students’ out-of-school lives into classrooms continued to emerge as a central part of critical pedagogy. Leard and Lashua (2006) wrote that disenfranchised students benefit from opportunities to explore their own cultural and social realities, especially drawing on their own presumptions to guide suitable solutions to classroom learning activities (p. 245). Students who are creatively engaged with popular culture feel more in control of their own cultural identity, which allows them to shape their language, style and self into something new and meaningful. Students are capable of representing their own stories in the classroom. These methods highlighted how bringing students’ out-of-school selves into classrooms improves active engagement, which empowers students by putting things into context that each child finds meaningful. Such learning activities enable children to act more purposefully and to change their way of thinking and become more productive (Leard & Lashua, 2006, p. 261). Bringing themselves into the school provides ways for teachers to learn about their students and their students’ home communities, and having these understandings made evident in schools begins the process of shifting a school culture.

Educators persistently seek innovative ways to empower students who have been marginalized via lower standards, disenfranchised from a quality education, or oppressed by an imbalanced educational system. For instance, Morrell (2000) wanted students to be able to use popular culture as a vehicle to understand or break down or critique a traditional curriculum. Such an approach provides a counterhegemonic curriculum for students, one that empowers students to actively oppose the status quo that has left them with inferior educations (p. 3). Morrell’s approach
echoes the scholarship of others in that the only way people can be freed from oppression is by first identifying the oppression and then by understanding that oppression is a fact that can be altered. When using critical pedagogy to examine schools from a historical and sociopolitical perspective, it was founded that teaching was the channel used to generate social change (p. 4). In fact, it was argued that understanding their own oppression can only transpire when students are given the opportunity to talk about and analyze the current social structure with their views and intellect being accepted and respected (p. 4).

Over time, critical pedagogy emerged as a complex interaction of students and teachers in classrooms. For instance, Morrell (2000) cited the 1983 works of Giroux who found critical pedagogy to be “…the reconstruction of social imagination in the service of human freedom” where both students and teachers engage in various traditions and the cultural politics supported by those traditions (p. 4). In addition, the major goal of critical pedagogy is to foster critical thinking skills as well as the ingenuity to alter the prevailing social order and to empower students to recognize their surroundings and circumstances as well as encourage them to change social order as needed (p. 4). Thus, critical pedagogy can be viewed as a tool for students to overcome the disenfranchised status of second-class citizens they have grown accustomed to throughout their educational experience (p. 4).

Furthermore, according to Morrell (2000), critical pedagogy is related to critical literacy, because it gives students the ability to read, write and analyze texts, as well as develop understandings about the underlying contexts associated with them (p. 4). Critical literacy provides a way for students to make the connections between canonical texts (those ensuring the status quo) and the various components of popular culture, by identifying the power struggles that currently exist in their lives with the content that exists in traditional literary texts, some of which are
thousands of years old. Lacking such a critique allows for one social class to culturally dominate another by “controlling the content of cultural forms and major institutions,” which is defined as hegemony (p. 4).

Ironically, the oppressed class was often oblivious to the impact that hegemony had on their thinking because of the power, control, and influence of the dominant class. Thus, the oppressed class was taught and expected to think this way, while the dominant culture used the institution of the education system to safeguard their supremacy (p. 5). The use of an institutionalized education system by the dominant class calls to mind the Willie Lynch letter of 1712 that was used to control slaves. In the Lynch letter, slave owners or others in the dominant class used power, control and influence to deny an education to slaves, which provided a new layer of oppression onto slavery, and made slaves mentally weak. When such dominance goes unchallenged, then the oppression is perpetuated generation after generation. Thus, though education has been thought central to a democracy of the people, it has been used in political ways since the country’s founding.

Morrell (2000) contended that education is far from neutral, and in fact that schooling and teaching are political in nature (p. 5). Accepting the standard curriculum in an unexamined way leaves the hegemonic traditions of the dominant class in place. The choices of curriculum, the strategies of teaching, and the facts associated with subjects like science and history promote the superiority of the dominant class at the cost of the underclass. In other words, the oppressed class is not only destined to fail, but failure is made to seem normal, and the cause of a particular student’s failure is deflected away from the educational system itself (p. 5).

Morrell’s students were encouraged to question what has formerly been viewed as fact and to also question the current condition of the educational system. When the educational system is
questioned, sometimes the critique is devalued by claims that the critique is a form of popular culture. Thus, in order for the current educational system to make a difference in the lives of students who resist and struggle with education, the system must attempt to understand popular culture and cultural forms (p. 6), and use these to change educational systems.

In fact, some argue that one powerful way to shift educational systems is through using popular culture in learning providing ways for students to bring themselves into the curriculum.

**Popular Culture in Urban Education**

Today, youth culture has been heavily influenced by “music, film, television, video games, and the Internet” (Dimitriadis, 2004, p. xi), and these influences emerge in schools through the ways students give meaning to events there. For instance, Dyson (2003) found that after viewing or listening to media, children organized what they heard into a variety of genres such as “stories, rap, songs and informational pieces” and they made those genres personally meaningful by adapting them as they grew up, and via socializing with family and friends. Because some kids became entranced while watching a movie, Dyson wondered how a movie might be used for educational purposes to shape the imagination of kids (p. 328). Thus, media and youth culture are linked in ways that some argue would enhance learning if students were allowed to bring those facets of their lives into classrooms.

When Morrell (2000) began teaching, he noticed that his almost entirely African American students had a look of fear and insecurity on their faces whenever he assigned “an extensive novel, play or poetic work” (p. 3). Nevertheless, he also noticed that whenever the elements of popular culture existed, the same students exhibited the necessary critical and analytical skills they needed to confront canonical texts. Because of this, Morrell focused on qualitative results in the learning
activities he organized, instead of on quantitative results. That is, Morrell looked for evidence of enthusiasm and stimulating discussions.

Morrell (2000) discovered ways students used popular culture texts and related them to their own personal lives. For example, in the movie “A Time to Kill,” Carl Lee, an African American man, was placed on trial for murdering the two White men who raped his daughter. Although the story and the characters were fictional, the racism and justice that this movie portrayed were issues that the students could relate to emotionally, by becoming upset or by cheering, due to similar issues or experiences they had encountered in their own lives. During subsequent class discussion, all of the students were able to share stories of how they were victims of racial violence or how they have been the underdog at one time or another (p. 15). Morrell found that, “Their willingness to identify with this text enables them to be able to bridge with the film text and to embrace the text at another level” (p. 16).

Similarly, Dyson (2003) conducted an ethnographic study of African American students in the first grade by intentionally manipulating popular cultural material in order to determine how students made sense of the literary world around them. Cultural material allowed students to develop their literary practices through the social and symbolic artifacts that were in their personal lives (p. 328). As noted above, many students learned their literary practices by watching movies and by categorizing the voices into genres like “stories, raps, inspirational songs, and informational text,” which they relate to their environment (Dyson, 2003, p. 329).

Hill (2009) took another approach. He referred to his field of study as Hip-Hop-Based Education (HHBE). Although research in HHBE has been demonstrated to be favorable in learning environments, it is not considered a contemporary educational policy (p. 2). Hill (2009) found that when HHBE became an official part of a curriculum, students began to identify themselves
differently. Here, students focused on the language practices of African American youth who consumed and produced popular culture and on how White middle-class youth strategically talk about hip-hop in order to become authentic members of an imaginary hip-hop community (p. 5).

HHBE built on the earlier work of Carol Lee who advocated instruction that makes connections between the knowledge of the student and the subject that the student is learning (p. 8). Lee’s experimental group used culturally relevant texts for literature sources, while students received instruction in small groups. Students in the experimental group made significant gains in literal and inferential reading compared to the control group (p. 8). Lee’s quantitative findings complemented qualitative research findings reporting “how culturally relevant classroom interventions positively contribute to student confidence, curricular engagement and teacher-student relationships” (p. 8).

As Hill wrote summarizing the work of theoretical, empirical, and practical research, HHBE scholars have shown how “interventions with hip hop have expanded prior knowledge…,” “intensified student engagement…,” and “increased critical consciousness” (Hill, 2009, p. 10). In addition, HHBE has allowed for a form of youth identity (p. 11). Hill allowed the students to spend time identifying, challenging, performing, and canonizing what was meant by real. Three students in particular classified themselves as “Hip-Hop Heads” or just “Heads” for short because they spent the majority of their time discussing music and debating over the real artists verses the fake ones (p. 32). By identifying the real, students in the Hip-Hop Lit class made a distinction between “rap” and “hip-hop.” Many did not consider the text of rap to be authentic. It was not real. The text of Hip-hop, on the other hand was real, it was authentic (p. 33). For example, although Eve is a successful rap artist, the Heads do not consider the context of her lyrics worthy of discussion. Therefore, they do not consider her a Hip-Hop artist. She is not real.
Josh, one of the students, further challenged notions of authenticity, because to him *real* is associated with being “street,” the actual trials of “Black” folks in the neighborhood (p. 35). Rap created by White boys or people in the suburbs is not *real*. Students in the class who were performing the *real* deliberately dressed and responded a certain way to maintain their hip-hop credentials. They did not want others to see them agreeing with artists they liked but who they did not consider *real*. According to Hill (2009), “the Head’s authenticity performances became a means by which to affirm and assert their own in-school and out-of-school identities as authentic members of a hip-hop community” (p. 38). For many of the students, canonizing the *real* meant glorifying the artists they liked. Hill noticed that the text that he selected reflected his own personal tastes, which made him realize that the curricula selected generally “respond to the interests, experiences, and general orientation of the teacher rather than the student” (p. 39).

Because much of the text that Hill used was in the form of narratives that students had to interpret, Hill classified them as local narratives, cautionary narratives, and oppositional narratives. A local narrative meant one where the texts mention “specific cities, area codes, neighborhoods, housing projects,“ and so on (p. 40). For instance when Nas and Jay-z (both hip-hop artists) makes reference to Queensbridge and March Housing Projects in Queens and Brooklyn, respectively, many students become more actively engaged and talkative, because they could relate (p. 40). In other words, the local narratives enhance the believability, which increases student motivation and engagement. According to critical race theorists, local narratives allow demoralized people to recognize the experiences they have in common (p. 41). Keisha, one of the students wrote, “we like it because we could see ourselves in it…it’s like we see ourselves in the story” (p. 41). Such local narratives are referred to as “Africeture,” “the practice of people of African descent writing
themselves into existence” (p. 41). Through this type of narrative, students view themselves as being worthy individuals in the public sector.

Cautionary narratives include texts that follow a particular pattern: a problem is identified in the story, the character makes a problematic choice, and the result of that choice leads to an undesirable outcome (p. 42). For example, in the text “I Refuse Limitations” by Goodie Mob, Cee-Loo chooses to sell drugs to escape poverty and lack of employment opportunities. This choice causes him to get arrested and convicted, resulting in his girlfriend and child fending for themselves (p. 42). The students, through inference and interpretation, discovered that the cautionary narratives leave them with a moral-of-the-story-is… impression.

Finally, most of the texts in the Hip-Hop Lit class provided oppositional narratives where “characters resisted, often successfully, dominant authority and norms” (p. 44). For example, Jay-Z bragged about his success as a drug dealer and constantly outsmarting the criminal justice system. For the students, Jay-Z was able to sidestep the law.

Although Hill’s Hip-Hop Lit class provided a different way of learning literature and it was open to all gender and races, students referred to it as the “Black People Class.” Black students felt the class belonged to them, while White students felt like outsiders. Black students felt like they could be themselves in Hip-Hop Lit and they did not have to talk “White” like in the other classes. In addition, teachers even had misconceptions. One of the White teachers was confused as to how Hill, in the district, could get away with designing a class specifically for Black students when, in actuality, the Hip Hop Lit class was designed for a diverse student body and for using texts that all students could relate to.

The students told personal narratives which became a form of “wounded healing” where people shared their scars that provided a sense of healing for themselves and for others (p. 65).
The wounded healing became therapeutic and produced new possibilities, but at first with some hesitation. Initially, the students did not want to share their stories because according to Jay, “If my enemies is in here and I don’t even know it, how I’m gon’ tell them [something] that they could use against me?” (p. 66)

Personal disclosure was the most difficult form of wounded healing because students took a gamble by sharing their stories, but the classroom unexpectedly became a safe and sacred place. The classroom became a place of healing through the acts of co-signing and challenging. Co-signing served two purposes. One, it validated the truth behind a story because students gave non-verbal cues and interjections of agreement. Second, it encouraged the speaker to keep speaking (p. 71). The act of challenging was less personalized because it was ideological with many beliefs about the world that were expressed through hip-hop. According to Hill (2009), “Through this practice, students would engage in closer readings of the texts, as well as sustained analyses of the issues raised in class” (p. 74).

Healing existed when members of the Hip-Hop Lit class would find various levels of scholarship, liberation, encouragement, understanding, and evaluation within the class community for the wounds that were either personal or ideological (p. 74). Lisa, one of the students said, “Sometimes it feel good just to get it off your chest” (p. 75). And Dorene co-signed by saying, “sometimes I don’t need nobody to say nothing. I just need get something off my chest… (baby father)…Just talking about how he hurt me made me feel better” (p. 75).

Hill (2009) wondered if the students wanted to get things off their chests more often. Lisa and Dorene were a little reluctant. Lisa responded, “Yes and no. I be trying but it’s hard because even though it feel good…you can’t just say it anywhere. I can say it in here because I know
everybody…” (p. 75). The Hip-Hop Lit class became a place where their personal business could be attended to, replied to and shielded.

Although students became motivated through activities that were geared towards cultural relevance, critical pedagogy—getting students to think analytically through reading, writing, or discussions—proved difficult when little trust existed among students and with their teachers. Literacy was enhanced when students were able to break down those barriers, if they were able to trust their teachers and their classmates. Often, students resisted the openness required, depending on the level of trust that was built into the classroom setting.

Critical pedagogy suggests an approach that explicitly brings students’ sense of the world—their take on themselves and on popular culture—into the classroom. The use of HHBE, for instance, provides one model for opening conversations that broaden what counts as appropriate knowledge in schools, and ultimately serves to enrich the culture of the schools in ways that are consonant with the lives of the students they serve.

However, as students make sense of the world, sometimes their excitement and cultural differences get in the way of their educational opportunities because the perceptions of their behavior are misinterpreted. One misinterpretation is the volume of African American students.

Loud Black Students

In Fordham’s (1993) study, “Those Loud Black Girls”: (Black) Women, Silence, and Gender “Passing” in the Academy, an African American social studies teacher, Ms. Evans, explained that the phrase, “Oh, those loud Black girls!” would be emitted after frustration from “a confrontation in which the teacher’s sense of authority had been threatened by an attitude of defiance on the part of a group of Black girls in a classroom or corridor” (p. 9). In Lei’s (2003) study, a White, Jewish female teacher, Ms. Corwin, believed that the “loud” and “visible”
perceptions of the African American girls stemmed from their behavior in the hall. Although the behavior of the girls was not good, the behavior was not quite bad enough to break the school rules either (Fordham, 1993).

Ms. Evans went on to report that she recalled being a Black student in a predominantly White high school, yet she was not identified as a “loud Black girl” (Fordham, 1993). Ms. Corwin made it clear that not all Black females were loud, but it was easy to generalize the entire group because many of them were loud (Lei, 2003). As a matter of fact, because Evans was a hard working quiet student who did not demand attention, she was virtually invisible and considered about an average student academically until teachers noted that she was the sibling of a male student that excelled academically years earlier at the same high school (Fordham, 1993). In fact, Fordham did not use loudness in the traditional context of “noisiness, shrillness, flashiness, ostentatiousness, and so on,” but rather, she used loudness “as a metaphor of proclaiming African-American women’s existence, their collective denial of, and resistance to, their socially proclaimed powerlessness, or ‘nothingness’” (p. 25). Once word spread that she was the sibling of a former excellent student, Ms. Evans was no longer ignored and teachers began expecting more out of her. Additionally, the high-achieving quiet students were able to ignore being baited “into physical or verbal confrontations” by loud classmates.

Morris (2007) conducted an ethnographic study entitled, “Ladies” or “Loudies”? Perceptions and Experiences of Girls in the Classroom. The study was of a middle school “located in a predominantly poor and working-class area,” led by an African American female principal with a teaching staff of approximately 66% African American, 33% White, and “a handful of Latino and Asian American teachers” (p.494). The diverse student body was “46% African
American, 43% Latino, 7% Asian American, and 3% White.” Morris found that the African American girls were very loud and often overshadowed discussions in the classrooms.

Lei (2003), conducted a similar study entitled *(Un)Necessary Toughness?: Those “Loud Black Girls” and Those “Quiet Asian Boys,”* specifically focusing on the two populations, African American girls and Southeast Asian American boys, in a public high school located in mid-sized Midwestern city. In 1990, the high school was predominantly White, but, due to transfer students from surrounding cities and an influx of refugees, the African American and Southeast Asian Americans, increased by 1997-98. With the increase, the image of the Black girls was considered aggressive with lots of attitude, while the Asian boys were considered quiet and unnoticed (Lei, 2003).

Morris (2007) defined *intersectionality* as the combination of race, class, and gender “because individuals do not experience them in isolation” (p. 491). Morris observed that African American girls were loud and outspoken. Similarly, Lei described how teachers found the girls as “loud” and “visible,” along with being “aggressive” with lots of “attitude” (p.162). They did not have qualms about speaking up in the classrooms or physically retaliating when boys were playfully hitting them (Morris, 2007). Although the culture of the classrooms sometimes appeared to be unruly, the African American girls cared about their grades and often outperformed the boys academically. In reality, Fordham (1993) found that of the students in the high school she studied, the African American females were the more successful academically than many of their counterparts, yet they were invisible and reluctant to actively participate by their own doing. By silencing themselves, the high achieving African American females limit their success “because it conceals their female voice and the resulting gender expectations” (Fordham, 1993, p. 23). Being silent and invisible also “isolates and alienates black girls from their more communal and popular
underachieving female cohorts” (p. 24). However, teachers negatively perceived the girls as loud and assertive individuals who challenged authority by blurting out answers and inappropriately asking questions.

In one teacher-student interaction, Morris reported how a math teacher, Ms. Harris, referenced the terms *radius* and *diameter* in a drawing when out of nowhere, one of the African American girls, Celia, blurted out, “Why didn’t you put circumference?” (p. 502). Undoubtedly, Celia was previously taught radius, diameter, and circumference simultaneously and questioned the teacher based on background knowledge, yet, the teacher felt challenged and that the question was inappropriate despite being about math. Ms. Harris stopped teaching and told Celia to teach the class but the classmates responded by yelling “no” because they wanted the teacher to continue (Morris, 2007). The reaction of the teacher and classmates caused Celia to completely shut down by putting her head down and becoming totally disengaged. Regrettably, “the African-American female’s survival ‘out there’ is largely dependent upon her ability to live a life saturated with conflict, confusion, estrangement, isolation and a plethora of unmarked beginnings and endings, jump starts and failures” (Fordham, 1993, p. 24).

In addition to the perception of African American girls being too loud and assertive, Morris (2007) found teachers who described the girls as students who think they are adults by wanting to be in control of the classrooms. In another teacher-student interaction, the teacher, Ms. Duncan, shared with Morris that she was going to get a particular student out of her classroom because she “just can’t take it anymore” (p. 502). Ms. Duncan perceived that many of the African American girls wanted authority over her in the classroom. However, when Morris elaborated how Ms. Collins discussed controlling image that stereotypes African American matriarch. The matriarch is negatively perceived as “overly aggressive and dominant” (Morris, 2007, p. 503). However, an
African American male teacher, Mr. Neal, shared with Morris, that black girls will defend themselves by being combative as a mere form of survival because the system does not support them (p. 506).

Although the volume of girls were perceived as loud and combative by some teachers, getting to class on time was perceived as another problem by teachers. As a matter of fact, some argued that student tardiness and low socio-economics may be directly related to student achievement.

Student Tardiness

While studies have been done on student tardiness and how being tardiness or absenteeism may impact student achievement, Farrar (2010) found that students who are tardy not only miss instruction but they also distract their classmates. Morrissey, Hutchison and Winsler (2013) also reported that when students are late to school, they “fail to benefit from teacher instruction and modeling, peer interactions, and other activities designed to scaffold learning” (p. 742). Additionally, Farrar suggested that the causes of tardiness include, “poverty, dysfunctional and chaotic families, drug and alcohol abuse, negative attitudes towards school resulting in…an increase in shoplifting and other community petty theft crimes” (p. 27). When low-income families live in low-income areas, getting to and from school safely becomes an issue if students have to walk through neighborhoods that are violent and infested by gangs and drugs.

Morrissey, Hutchison and Winsler (2013) explained how students who were late to school or late to class were likely from low-income families rather than high-income families. Students from low-income families tend to have a parent or parents who work non-traditional hours where work hours and work days may fluctuate. Parents who have fluctuating work schedules force students to rely more on themselves than on parents when preparing for school. However, Nelson
(1998) found that issues related to transportation, health problems, sleeping patterns, and family problems were a few reasons provided as to why students were tardy to school.

In addition, Tyre, Feuerborn, and Peirce (2011) reported that when students arrived five to fifteen minutes late to class, teachers found themselves continuously starting and restarting instruction. When class was restarted, the amount of instructional time lost over the course of a school year was infinitely accelerated, suggesting “that expectations related to punctuality are unclear and consequences for tardiness are not implemented or are not effective” (p. 132). Common areas like the hallway should have been actively monitored by staff as a school-wide initiative urging students to get to class. By getting to class on time, instructional time and student time on academic task would be increased.

Thus, I began to wonder to what extent teachers viewed tardiness and loud volume of African American students as distractors to learning and teacher-student interactions. I also began to wonder to what extent the teachers—in schools where the educational leaders who participate in this study serve—are encouraged to take up critical pedagogy practices and what principals might be doing to promote teachers’ taking advantage of students’ vantage point on the world, using their affiliations with popular culture, in particular, and their cultural perspectives.

Taken together, these studies (Dyson, 2003; Hill, 2009; Leard & Lashua, 2006; Morrell, 2000; Fordham, 1993; Lei, 2003; Morris, 2007) raise prickly questions about how principals lead in such a way to help teachers foster learning in classroom settings that intentionally disrupts the deeply enculturated notions of “proper” schooling, given the wariness of students toward one another and toward their teachers.
Leading for Change

Leading for change proves a highly contextual activity. This section begins by further setting the stage for understanding the schooling circumstances within which educational leaders must lead. Then, the discussion turns to what seem to be reasonable goals for leaders working to transform their schools.

Understanding School Culture

Social factors impinge on the work of teachers and on the make-up of the teaching workforce, and hence on the work of educational leaders. Educators and educational leaders work in inequitable socioeconomic and educational conditions, as measured by standardized curriculums and standardized tests, but Cummins (2001) suggested that educators (and it seems reasonable to add educational leaders) are not without power and can choose the way they establish relationships with their students. Educators have the option of choosing the way they deliver instruction, the way they interact with students, and the way they establish cultural connections.

Just as educators define who they are through life experiences, students go through a similar process of defining their identity as they interact with educators, peers, and family. Through the various interactions, the unique characteristics of students begin to flourish and identities between teachers and students are negotiated as they work together (Cummins, 2001). Ladson-Billings (1994) found two things that attributed to the success of teachers: 1) experience; and, 2) a transformation in their lives that forced them to reflect on how they taught (p. viii). Thus, “curriculum and instruction focused on empowerment, understood as the collaborative creation of power, start by acknowledging the cultural, linguistic, imaginative, and intellectual resources that children [and teachers and administrators] bring to school” (p. 653). Cummins (2001) suggested a triangular framework of interactions between educators and students:
It seems reasonable to expect educational leaders to be involved in helping to foster a school-wide community conducive to such productive teacher-student interactions.

Yet, as the diverse student population continues to increase, the number of people entering into teacher education programs continues to decrease, resulting in a teacher shortage. This teacher shortage is influenced by premature retirements, minimal wages, tense working conditions, and student behavior concerns, among other factors (Tillman, 2005, p. 601). Despite the growing diversity of the student population, the overwhelming majority of the teaching force and also the principals are White, and there is an extreme shortage of minority teachers (p. 210). In fact, the number of African Americans entering teacher education programs has also declined, a situation made worse when many leave their teaching position in urban school districts three to five years after being hired (p. 210). Even with the shortage of African American teachers and ultimately educational leaders or administrators, there is still a need for moral and ethical guidance through transformative leadership practices.

Roles of Principals

Leading a school requires principals to have transformative practices that are critical in nature. Jun (2011) reported that a critical perspective examines current practices “to determine whether they are equitable and promote social justice” (p. 239). When leaders reflect on their personal beliefs that do not promote equity and social justice while concurrently acknowledging areas in their school that need redirection, a component of transformative leadership is being
practiced (Jun, 2011). Likewise, when educators, staff, and the community rethink and reevaluate the traditional ways of doing things, better democratically informed decisions can be made (Jun, 2011).

Along with informed decisions, principals have to make a conscious effort to retain quality teachers who have the best interest of students at hand. The retention of highly qualified teachers in urban school districts is crucial to maintaining teaching stability and student achievement (Tillman, 2005), and principals have key roles in teacher retention. Keeping first-year teachers proves central to their retention. Mentoring has been recognized as one strategy for addressing retention, especially for African American teachers in urban districts (Tillman, 2005). Such mentoring follows three central themes (Tillman, 2005). The first theme focuses on mentoring to enhance both professional and personal competence. Professional competence and development includes instructional strategies, classroom management, and building relationships with students, staff, and parents, while personal competence includes a sense of self, the teacher’s role in the community, the view of teaching as a career, and the decision to remain in the profession (p. 614). The second theme focuses on mentoring to transmit the culture of the educational setting by learning to adjust and becoming a part of the teaching society (p. 614). The third theme focuses on “mentoring as a catalyst for transformative leadership, [which] emerged from data analysis” (Tillman, 2005, p. 614). In fact, transformative leaders cross-examine current policies and procedures that adversely affect the learning environment, the competence of teachers, and the achievement of students (Dantley & Tillman, 2006).

Cooper (2009) suggested that although standardized tests are used to hold educators accountable for academic achievement, educators are faced—due to the increased diversity at schools—“with significant social and cultural challenges that lie far beyond the scope of
standardized assessment” (p. 695). Some suggest that as the student body changes demographically, educational leaders must prepare themselves to serve as “cultural change agents—educators armed with the knowledge, strategies, support, and courage to make curriculum, instruction, student engagement, and family partnerships culturally responsive” (Cooper, 2009). In an effort to seek equal educational opportunities, these educational leaders become partially involved in going against the status quo, challenging principles, practices, and traditions that are often avoided in school transformations. Additionally, these leaders are empathetic. The care they exhibit in a school can actually set the tone or culture of a building that fosters a sense of community (Jun, 2011). Leaders who pursue social justice are regarded as “equity-oriented leaders—leaders who wish to provide equal educational opportunity and a high-quality education to all students regardless of socioeconomic and cultural background” (Cooper, 2009).

Cooper (2009) framed her analysis of transformative educational leadership with reflecting on self, analyzing schools systematically, and confronting inequities that align with circumstances like race, class, and language. Dantley and Tillman (2006) agreed that transformative leaders are cognizant of self, passionate, courageous, committed, and risk-takers. Leaders who strive for social justice not only challenge the deficit thinking of others, but they also oppose “inequitable educational practices that are widely implemented and underscrutinized” (Cooper, 2009). Transformative leaders become liaisons who make attempts to create a caring environment for all stakeholders: students, parents, teachers, the organization, and the community.

When taking into consideration the best ways to lead schools that are changing demographically, Cooper (2009) also considered the 1999 works of Cornell West. Writing in the critical tradition, West identified difference as a new form of cultural politics, taking into
consideration ideologies that are culturally biased, politics that favor separatism, and Anglocentric norms that support dominant privileges. West’s cultural politics of difference aligns with transformative educational leadership because they are both efforts to move towards the ideology of social justice (Cooper, 2009). Separatist politics has been connected to cultural prejudices, unawareness, and misunderstanding in prevailing notions of constantly changing transformation (Cooper, 2009). Thus, these notions of difference suggest an important component that principals must understand in their own schools, if evolving the culture is expected. Principals must understand the notion of transforming their leadership practices.

According to Shields (2010), the term transformative leadership is a theory of its own despite sharing commonalities with transactional leadership and transformational leadership theories. Shields summarizes the transactional leadership theory as a form of mutual transactions or trades and referenced the similarities of Burns (1978) as a means of leading via bartering like working more hours in order to earn more money (p. 564). On the other hand, the transformational leadership theory is summarized as a focus on improving “organizational qualities, dimensions, and effectiveness” (p.564). Likewise, Shields again referenced Burns (1978) who suggested that transformational leadership is concerned with the outcome or end-results like “liberty, justice, equality” once a leader identifies and manipulates the various needs of followers (p.564). Finally, transformative leadership theory is summarized by Shields as an entanglement of justice (equality) and democracy (governed by people), confronting the manipulation of power accompanied by privilege that sustains inequality and injustice (p.564).

Ultimately, educational leaders are situated in ways that not only provide them a vantage point on the social interactions between and among teachers and students, but also give them responsibilities for ensuring the function of the schools they lead. Transformative leaders
demonstrate an interest in shifting the cultures of their schools in ways that promote teacher retention through mentoring and other supports, eliminate deficit thinking, and guarantee that all students are served. Thus, I began to wonder how current educational leaders interested in promoting social justice and in educating all students went about that, and to what extent the promise of transformative leadership might be borne out in their leadership practices.

Summary

In summary, the research framework guiding this study emerged from scholarship about the education culture shock, about the need for evolving school cultures, and about leading for change. Three broad research questions emerged from this scholarship:

1. What kinds of troublesome teacher-student interactions have principals participating in this study dealt with, and what does this say about how school staff make sense of the students they serve and about the communities from which students come?

2. To what extent, and in what ways, might teachers—in schools where the educational leaders participating in this study serve—take up critical pedagogy practices and what might principals be doing to promote teachers’ taking advantage of students’ vantage point on the world, using their affiliations with popular culture, in particular?

3. How might current educational leaders, those interested in promoting social justice and in educating all students, go about leading, and to what extent might the promise of transformative leadership be borne out in their leadership practices?

Chapter Three describes the research methodology used to carry out this study.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this qualitative research study, I borrow from the research cycle suggested by Spradley (1980) to principals’ experiences in public school systems where culturally and linguistically diverse student populations are rapidly growing. In fact, this study will investigate how teachers and educational leaders respond to the culture shock or differences in education, as indicated in teacher-student interactions and possibly through teachers’ use of critical pedagogy and of popular culture to stimulate learning in school. The study will also examine the challenges educational leaders face with teaching staff and how principals might overcome these challenges. The collection of data and the analysis of data are not mutually exclusive and work hand-in-hand in Spradley’s research cycle. The research cycle that Spradley (1980) refers to consists of five primary components: asking questions, collecting data, recording data, analyzing data, and writing preliminary findings, which may lead to more questions, and repeating the cycle, in this case with individual interviews, then with a group interview. In essence, once data are collected from the initial questions, more questions are naturally generated throughout the data collection process, which subsequent data-collection and analysis activities allow answering.

As detailed below, an interpretivist perspective melded to a critical approach (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999) will seek the point of view of several principals. By talking to multiple principals, it will be possible to uncover a range of perspectives recorded in the interviews. Interpretivist analysis will guide following patterns in the data (Spradley, 1980): domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, and componential analysis. Once all the data are collected from the various forms of interviews, I reflect from the perspective of both a participant and an observer (Schensul,
These methodological choices help ensure the quality of the findings, which meet standards for trustworthiness, as explained later (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Research Paradigm**

The research will follow an interpretivist paradigm and seek to understand complex circumstances from the vantage point of insiders, or those closest to the situation under study. The interpretivist paradigm, also referred to as phenomenological or constructivist paradigm (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), assumes that reality is socially constructed, and can be understood through the cognitive and mental views of the participants (p. 48). Sociology and anthropology researchers often use this paradigm. Taking reality to be a social construction allows me to understand the world of principals and the day-to-day events they encounter from their vantage point. I am able to see through the lens of the principals and to understand their interactions over time with diverse cultures in the social settings of schools. In addition, the interpretivist paradigm builds on the notion that people construct meaning individually and collectively through daily activities or rituals, after school or evening events, and artifacts used or produced by participants whose views are subject to change.

In addition, a critical paradigm or perspective will also be used. This perspective emerges from a rich research literature demonstrating a systematic inequitable distribution of power, whether along gender, class, culture, race, or ethnicity lines, power relations, that influence and govern the policies and procedures of schools (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 46). In fact, power relations can politically, economically, socially, and culturally influence the vantage point of participants (either directly or indirectly) (p. 45). Critical theory allows revealing inequalities in a system and attempts to find ways to overcome the inequitable distribution of power and resources held by dominant cultures. Such challenges to the status quo occur during the diversifying of
suburban schools, whether through the migration of students out of urban areas or the influx of recent immigrants (e.g., Davidson, 1997).

However, much of the critical theory research about rapidly diversifying schools focuses on students and/or on teachers. This study will instead focus on principals, who have a unique vantage point to see troublesome teacher-student interactions, to appreciate how teachers are responding to changes in their schools, and on their own leadership practices.

Participants

All participants were principals in rapidly diversifying suburban middle schools, ranging from grades 6 through 8, where the student body was changing from predominantly White to a mixture of other ethnicities over a ten-year span. Principals, instead of teachers, were selected because principals, as educational leaders, are responsible for overseeing the professional growth and development of teachers once they complete their teacher education programs. The inclusion criteria for the participants began by looking at published data and demographic trends of the Annual Education Reports (AER) provided by the Michigan Department of Education (www.mischooldata.org) of rapidly diversifying suburban schools between the 2002-2003 and 2012-2013 school years. This report provides information about the demographics of the students, the data assessment of students, and the proficiency of students in an urban core versus a suburban county in the state of Michigan.

The recruitment of the participants for this study was equitable in terms of gender and diversity by including nine principals between the ages of 40 and 62 who voluntarily agreed to partake. An attempt was made to recruit a diverse sample of principals, encompassing both women and men, as well as White and Black principals of suburban middle schools. Such a sample of participants attempted to meet the criteria of the Wayne State University Human Investigation
Committee (HIC) Policy/Procedure (WSU HIC, 2009), because it embeds “diversity of ethnicity, socio-economic status, and gender.” In addition, the research design “helps to assure that a variety of groups have an opportunity to participate in and/or benefit from a research study, and no one group is made to bear the majority of the burdens inherent by participating” (WSU HIC, 2009). All applicable policies and procedures of the Wayne State University Institutional Review Board were followed in conducting this research.

Nine principals were recruited using a snowball sample. Here, the first person in the sample suggests another person who was qualified and might be interested. As exploratory research, sufficient participants were enrolled to provide a wide range of perspectives and to gauge the central issues related to the research questions. Potential participants were each contacted by phone. The phone conversation described the goals of the research study, the procedures, time demands, confidentiality practices, and that participation was voluntary. Recruitment continued until sufficient participants were found. A professional associate in a suburban district was the first person contacted\(^1\). Participants signed an informed consent form at the time of the first interview, which covered research procedures, the privacy and confidentiality rights of participants, the costs, the compensation, benefits, and voluntary nature of the research. A master list of names and contact information (phone numbers and personal, not work, email addresses) of all the participants was securely stored in a locked file cabinet located in my home office. In addition, an electronic master list of participants was kept on a password-protected laptop to which I was the only person with access.

\(^1\) Though I have been a suburban principal, I was an urban teacher during this research.
Data Collection

Data collection encompassed individual and group interviews that were held in private locations that were convenient for the participants. Both interviews were guided by previously formulated questions and consisted of open-ended responses. One 90-minute face-to-face in-depth, open-ended interview was completed with each of the principals. The interview allowed interviewees to provide detailed answers in a way comfortable to them, but also provided the interviewer with sufficient control to keep the interview focused. According to LeCompte et al. (1999), in-depth open-ended interviewing allows for all facets of a topic to be explored with responses left up to the discretion of the interviewee because there are no alternative choices and no right or wrong answers.

I used primarily three types in interview questions designed to get rich detailed accounts of events and social circumstances. Narratives of experience allow interviewees to tell their story without interruption from beginning to end (Schensul et al., 1999). Domain elicitation items (Schensul et al., 1999) provide participants with opportunities to detail implicit understandings and explain how they think about, and organize, their world. Key event items (Schensul et al., 1999) return interviewees to a specific event and give them opportunities to explain how that event unfolded and how different actors in the event gave meaning to it. The individual interview centered on 1) getting background information about the participant as a principal and 2) discussing their work as a principal along four dimensions—a) kinds of troublesome teacher-student interactions they deal with, b) approaches their teachers use, c) inclusive practices they promote, and d) their mentoring of teachers and other professional development strategies. Appendix A contains the individual interview guide. These interviews were audio-taped and
transcribed word for word with pseudonyms replacing all proper nouns in the transcripts, and the tapes destroyed after the dissertation was successfully defended.

In addition, one 90-minute focus group interview, with four of the nine principals, was conducted in order to perform member checking, and to fill gaps and sort out confusions. Appendix A contains the group interview guide.

Data Analysis

This research followed interpretivist analysis strategies, which preserve the meanings insiders or principals give to their world—how they interpret their world, the people in it, and the events there. This analysis was inductive in nature and sought patterns of sameness (semantic domains), patterns of order (taxonomic analysis), and patterns of nuanced variation (componential analysis). According to Spradley (1980), domain analysis seeks patterns of sameness where included terms are linked by a semantic relationship to one cover term (or category name). For example, in an educational setting, included terms like teacher, principal, athletic coach, or music director can be linked by the semantic relationship of is a kind of school personnel where school personnel is the cover term or category name. I searched for patterns of sameness during the interviews with principals, completing an exhaustive search for all included terms in a given domain, as well as used a full range of semantic relationships to uncover the full ranges of domains in the data.

Additionally, taxonomic analysis seeks the ordering of patterns in the data – how large domains are subdivided into sub-domains, how sub-domains relate to one another, how domains related to one another. This provided the structure for writing my findings (Spradley, 1980). Componential analysis seeks patterns of difference or variation in the data. Interpretivists seek to
understand how participants understand their world overall or for most participants, but also to understand how things may vary in nuanced ways.

Trustworthiness

The quality of qualitative research is established by criteria that Lincoln and Guba (1985) term credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Taken together these criteria ensure the trustworthiness of a study. Credibility is essential because it addresses whether the findings represent the perspectives from the vantage point of the participants. The 90-minute individual interviews along with group interview allowed for a triangulation of sources where multiple participants were interviewed at different times, which allowed for multiple opportunities to get at the same issues and to seek corroboration of preliminary findings. Member checks in the group interview, allowed asking the participants questions in order to check my analysis and corroborate understanding represented in the preliminary findings. During this time, participants were asked to provide additional details to fill in gaps, queried about events or circumstances that were confusing in the analysis of individual interviews, as well as given the opportunity to check whether their realities were adequately represented in order to correct erroneous interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, negative case analysis was also conducted wherein data were read repeatedly to rule out competing explanations.

Transferability refers to the extent to which one’s research findings might be applicable in another setting. This is not something that the researcher of a study can ascertain, but a judgment that a subsequent reader of one’s findings must make. The original researcher can, however, provide a rich thick description of the circumstances where the principals lead. These descriptions enable readers to interpret the findings and draw conclusion about how relevant and sensible a transfer to other circumstances might be (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Dependability and confirmability come via following a systematic research process and having the methodologist (dissertation chair, in this case) conduct a research audit using the audit trail—a way to identify data quotes in the findings, follow those through the analysis worksheets, and connect them to the raw data.

In terms of neutrality, I kept a researcher journal. Here, I not only kept a log of research activities to provide a clear record of the process followed. I also noted potential findings, those I thought were emerging and that I needed to double-check in the data and via analysis. Here, maintaining a record of my own sense of emerging findings, and keeping these in view, reduced the potential of researcher bias from creeping into the findings. This journal also served as a place where I could converse with myself about my impact on research participants and their impact on me. This final strategy helped me to remember that doing interview research is a socially constructed activity, one where I must interact with principals whose circumstances differ from mine, whose views I may not share, and whose approaches I might not find appropriate. The important thing is that I know when I am reacting to research participants and that I strive to remain neutral in my interactions with them, and that I seek to understand their leadership circumstances, views, and approaches.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine principals’ perceptions of teacher-student interactions in culturally diverse suburban schools. An informed understanding of a diverse school climate would allow aspiring principals, as well as novice and veteran principals, to lead from a more enlightened perspective in terms of promoting social justice through transformative leadership practices. This chapter characterizes the significant findings from the perspective of nine participants through individual interviews and one group interview that was conducted with four of the nine participants from the individual interviews. The findings materialized as a result of this study included:

1. The profile of the majority and minority participants and their years of service in education.
2. The demographic changes of teachers and students in relation to the distance from the urban core.
3. The academic proficiency of students in the urban core versus the suburban county.
4. The revelations of the troublesome teacher-student interactions from the point of view of the teacher and the student.
5. The revelations of the principals in their leadership practices and their advice to aspiring principals and district administration.
6. The similarities and differences of the participants, the teacher-student interactions, and the advice offered to aspiring principals and administration.
Subsequently, the discussion of the major findings with elements that endorse and expound upon each finding is presented. A wide range of perspectives are documented by way of *triangulation* because “information on the same topic from different data sources is critical to the validity and reliability of ethnographic research” (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 144). The perspectives afford the reader a chance to better understand the authenticity of each participant. Allowing the participants to speak for themselves through explanatory quotes taken from interview transcriptions makes an effort to depict various perspectives by seizing the richness and density that the topics entail (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 155). When applicable, the group interview interchanges are combined with the individual interviews to amplify the discussion.

**Participants’ Profile Summary**

Nine principals from public middle schools located in suburbs near an *urban core* in the U.S. Midwest participated in this research. Participants came from school districts serving varying cultural perspectives. In order to recognize the individualities of the participants in a snapshot (Table 1), the White principals will be identified as the *majority participants* while the African American and Native American principals will be identified as the *minority participants*.

**Table 1 Participants’ Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years of Educational Experience</th>
<th>Years as Principal</th>
<th>Distance from Urban Core (Miles)</th>
<th>Percent of White Teachers (In school)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Majority</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vince</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yancy</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zora</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To protect the confidentiality of participants, all proper nouns have been replaced with pseudonyms. In addition, to help the reader keep track of the ethnicity of the participants, the majority participants have been given pseudonyms that begin with letters from the beginning of the alphabet (A-D) and minority participants have been given pseudonyms that begin with letters from the end of the alphabet (V-Z). The majority and minority participants, respectively, are also listed according to the farthest distance in miles from the urban core as shown in Table 1.

Illustrated below, Table 2 summarizes the school demographics of student enrollment, while Tables 3 and 4 compare student proficiency in mathematics and reading, respectively, for grades six, seven, and eight. In order to maintain confidentiality, the school proficiency data for individual participants were not isolated. The data for the multiple suburban schools were viewed as a county, while the data for the urban core was viewed as a district. Additionally, the academic proficiency for students in the urban core was compared to the proficiency of students in the suburban county middle schools that were located within a 35 mile radius of the urban core. The suburban middle school located 50 miles from the urban core was not in the same county as the middle schools located within the 35 mile radius. Therefore, the data for the middle school 50 miles outside of the urban core were not included.

Teacher-Student Demographics and Academic Proficiency

The two major subgroups contributing to diversity in this study were the increased enrollment of African American students and economically disadvantaged students (Table 2). The overall student enrollment covered a ten year span beginning with the 2002-2003 school year and ending with the 2012-2013 school year. In the 2002-2003 school year, student enrollment for the nine participants ranged from 615 to 996 students. However, by 2012-2013, where data were available, as overall student enrollment decreased, the enrollment for African American students
increased. For Principal Charles and Principal Xavier, the increased student enrollment of 960 and 748, respectively, looks deceiving and was the result of middle schools closing because the districts had to reorganize due to significant declines in student enrollment (IC, 6/27/13, p.2 & IX, 6/20/13, p.2). Although economically disadvantaged enrollment covered a seven year span beginning the 2006-2007 school year when the data for this subgroup first became available through MI School Data, by 2012-2013, enrollment for the economically disadvantaged increased.

**Table 2 Demographic Trend of Student Enrollment & Distance from Urban Core**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Grade Levels 2012-2013</th>
<th>Student Enrollment 2002-2003</th>
<th>Student Enrollment 2012-2013</th>
<th>% African American 2002-2003</th>
<th>% African American 2012-2013</th>
<th>% Economically Disadvantaged 2006-2007*</th>
<th>% Economically Disadvantaged 2012-2013</th>
<th>Distance from Urban Core (Miles)**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Majority</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>895</td>
<td>860</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>901</td>
<td>805</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>7-8</td>
<td>782</td>
<td>960</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna***</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>83.1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vince****</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>&lt;1.0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>748</td>
<td>735</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>7-8</td>
<td>693</td>
<td>748</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yancy</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>820</td>
<td>811</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zora</td>
<td>7-8</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>62.0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Dashes indicate that the data were not available.  
*The first year of data reported by mischooldata.org for Economically Disadvantaged  
**Distance taken from Google Maps  
***Building changed from 6-8 to K-8 in 2012-2013, student enrollment data represents grades 6-8 only  
****School changed to elementary; data are average of current middle schools from school improvement plans and www.city-data.com/school (from mischooldata.org)

The increased enrollment of African American and economically disadvantaged students supported the parents’ desire to give their children a “better education” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 9) by migrating from the urban core to the suburbs. With that migration came the disaggregation of standardized test scores to measure academic proficiency of student performance in mathematics, reading, writing, social studies and science. Only the data for mathematics and reading are being used because all students in grades six through eight were tested in these two content areas. Testing

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2 Citations to data follow a convention indicating the kind of data (I = Interview followed by the initial of the pseudonym A-D or V-Z, GI = Group Interview), date and page of cited quote.
in the areas of writing, science and social studies varied by grade level and was not available for each grade.

Tables 3 and 4 show the results of the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) for 2012-2013 and indicate the academic proficiency of African American and economically disadvantaged students who live in the urban core verses the proficiency of students who live in the suburbs. According to MI School Data, student performance was described in four levels: advanced (level 1), proficient (level 2), partially proficient (level 3), and not proficient (level 4). Students performing at the first two levels (advanced and proficient) were considered \textit{proficient}, while students performing at the last two levels (partially proficient and not proficient) were considered \textit{not proficient}.

In mathematics (Table 3), after taking the average of \textit{all students}, less than 13\% (13.6, 13.2, 11.1, for grades 6, 7, and 8) of total students in the urban core were proficient, while more than 51\% (54.5, 52.7, 47.7, for grades 6, 7, and 8) of total students in the suburban county were proficient. Likewise, in reading, less than 42\% (45.3, 33.0, 45.8, for grades 6, 7, and 8) of total students in the urban core were proficient, while 73\% (75.3, 70.5, 73.2, for grades 6, 7, and 8) of total students in the suburban county were proficient. In essence, close to 87\% (100 – 13) of students from the urban core were failing mathematics and 58\% (100 – 42) were failing reading.

According to the consensus of the group participants, parents relocating to the country or migrating from the urban core wanted to provide their children with a safe school environment as well as a better education (GI, 7/23/14, p. 9). The student proficiency scores in Tables 3 and 4 support the ideology of a better education because the average test scores of all students from the suburban county out-performed the students from the urban core in both mathematics and reading. However, less than 10\% of the African American or economically disadvantaged subgroups were
advanced proficient in the urban core. With the exception of sixth grade reading, less than 10% of these two subgroups were advanced proficient in the suburban county as well. The lack of proficiency by the African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups suggests that the gaps in learning were not isolated to those who were from the urban core, but rather it was a growing epidemic that school systems struggle to address, even in the suburbs (IA, 6/25/13, p. 3). The gaps in achievement identified by the MEAP was consistent with the gaps identified by the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) where African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups were outperformed by their White counterparts (2013).

**Table 3 2012-2013 Mathematics MEAP Comparison of Suburban and Urban Core**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgroups</th>
<th>All Students 6</th>
<th>African Am. 6</th>
<th>White 6</th>
<th>Econ. Adv. 6</th>
<th>All Students 7</th>
<th>African Am. 7</th>
<th>White 7</th>
<th>Econ. Adv. 7</th>
<th>All Students 8</th>
<th>African Am. 8</th>
<th>White 8</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Suburban County</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total % Proficient (1) &amp; (2)</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>21.6</td>
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<td>26.5</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>55.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>% Proficient</td>
<td>Advanced (1)</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>&lt;10</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proficient (2)</td>
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<td>21.7</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>46.6</td>
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<td>15.9</td>
<td>13.4</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>24.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total % Proficient (1) &amp; (2)</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>13.3</td>
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<td>13.2</td>
<td>12.2</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>68.3</td>
<td>70.5</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Some percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.
(from mischooldata.org)
Background of Majority and Minority Participants

In this section, the nine participants as well as the troublesome teacher-student interactions were expounded upon in alphabetical order according to the majority or minority classifications and their distance from the urban core as identified in Table 1. The four majority (White) participants were listed in order by letters A to D. The principal’s name that began with letter A was listed first and was farthest from the urban core while the principal whose name began with the letter D was closest to the urban core. Likewise, the five minority (four African American and one Native American) participants were listed in order by letters V to Z. The principal’s name that began with the letter V was farthest from the urban core, while the principal whose name began with the letter Z was closest to the urban core.

Principal Adam

The first of the majority participants was Principal Adam who began by describing his journey taken to become a principal. At the middle school Adam served, the ethnicity of the teaching staff was predominantly White, while student enrollment was majority White a small
enrollment of African American and economically disadvantaged students who contributed to the achievement gap. Additionally, the perceptions of the frustrations associated with motivation and behavior was from the vantage points of both the teachers and the students. Based on experience as principal, Adam’s advice to aspiring principals and district administrators varied and ranged from taking time to make decisions to seeking input from those in the trenches.

Background

Principal Adam was a 40 years old White male with 16 years of experience in education which includes the three years he has served as principal. His educational career began as a technology teacher in a suburban middle school and was encouraged by his principal to participate in an academy for aspiring principals. The academy provided Adam with three internship opportunities: 1) within his school district for a month, 2) outside his school district for two weeks, and 3) in an inner-city school with a predominantly African American student body for a year.

After six years in the classroom, Adam procured an assistant principal position in a neighboring district where he served an additional seven years in two separate middle schools before becoming principal. The middle school in the northern part of his district had fewer discipline problems than the middle school located in the southern part of his district, closer to the urban core. Although the job responsibilities were similar, “there was just less discipline and I’m not sure if because more of it was handled in the classroom or there was differences in student behavior” (IA, 6/25/13, p. 1). As a result, Adam was able to engage in more school endeavors outside his typical administrative role by implementing extra school activities like field trips (IA, 6/25/13, p. 2).
Teacher-Student Demographics

Principal Adam’s middle school was located 35 miles from the urban core with a predominantly White teaching staff in the 2012-2013 school year. “We are about 99% Caucasian with one Hispanic teacher” (IA, 6/25/13, p. 2). Because 98% of the teaching staff were veteran or tenured by completing their designated probationary period, he had few probationary or novice teachers who needed to be paired with mentors “just for some of the nuts and bolts type of questions” (IA, 6/25/13, p. 7). The age range of the majority of staff was in their “early 40’s to mid-50’s” leaving a few eligible for retirement with “less than 2% in their 20’s” and “only 2% in their 30’s” (IA, 6/25/13, p. 2). In addition, teacher retention was high. “The majority of my staff has been with this building since it opened [in the late 1990’s], no body leaves” (IA, 6/25/13, p. 2).

Principal Adam’s middle school was a grades 6-8 building that served a predominantly White student body (Table 2). In the 2002-2003 school year, student enrollment was 895 and by 2012-2013 that number decreased to 860. However, the African American enrollment increased from 1.1% in 2002-2003 to 5.4% by 2012-2013.

We are, as far as [student] race goes, predominately White. I would say about 82 to 85% Caucasian. We have a five to seven percent Hispanic population; a five to eight percent Asian population and the same for African American population, about five to seven percent. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 2)

In terms of economically disadvantaged, Adam’s building was one of four middle schools in the district that was eligible to offer a free and reduced lunch program. In the 2006-2007 school year, 12.8% of student enrollment was classified as economically disadvantaged. By 2012-2013, the economically disadvantaged increased to 30% of the enrollment which Adam believed was attributed to the changes in family income.

I think [the demographic changes are] attributed to not so much the caliber of kids that are moving in but the financial situation of many families. As the salary range to become
qualified changes, more and more families are just qualifying for [free and reduced lunch], opposed to a bulk of new students moving into my school. That demographic trend has been that way and hasn’t changed much. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 2-3)

Over the ten year span, overall student enrollment decreased by 35 students (895 – 860). However, as total student enrollment decreased, the enrollment for African American increased by 4.3% (5.4 – 1.1), while over the seven year span the economically disadvantaged enrollment more than doubled by 17.6% (30.4 – 12.8). Thus, the greatest demographic change, which was also confirmed by Adam when financial situations of families changed, was attributed to the economically disadvantaged not race. However, this change brought about an academic achievement gap among the high and low performing students.

Academic Proficiency

Like many schools, concerns about gaps in learning were an issue at Adam’s school among the African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups (the lowest performing students) and the White subgroup (the highest performing students). The staff struggled with addressing that gap, despite the resources and the differentiated instructional strategies.

My concern, much like many other schools, is our achievement gap. What does that gap look like between our highest and lowest performing kids? We struggle with closing that gap. We share similar struggles with the other schools in our area as well as around the state. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 3)

In essence, as student demographics change from a predominantly White, homogeneous, subgroup, to more heterogeneous subgroups that included but was not limited to African American and economically disadvantaged, the overall academic proficiency for all students in Adam’s school decreased, which was indicated by his struggle with closing the achievement gap. This suggests that the predominantly White teaching staff which was once familiar with teaching a homogeneous student body was not familiar with the cultural learning needs of the growing
heterogeneous student body, which at times resulted in teacher-student interactions that were frustrating.

Revelations of Teacher-Student Interactions

While teachers may not have been familiar with the growing heterogeneous student body, concerns about teacher frustration became an issue at Principal Adam’s school. From the perspective of teachers who maintained high expectations for their students, frustrations grew because expectations were not being met by some of the students.

The Teacher Viewpoint

Some of the frustration was caused by what teachers’ perceived as a lack of student motivation and poor student behavior. The perception of teachers was some students did not value education.

Frustration with Student Motivation

The lack of student motivation was a concern that Adam found as a frustration for teachers during various times throughout the school year. According to Adam, “Those students that persistently lack motivation are persistently low academic achievers” (IA, 6/25/13, p. 3). At times, this lack of motivation coupled with frustration caused teachers to bump heads with students or not see eye to eye in valuing education.

I see signs throughout the building during different times of the year, especially, before a vacation or a long break of teacher frustration as high because student motivation is low. That tends to be a tough combination. Students are lacking motivation and teachers are frustrated with students not trying their hardest. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 3)

Despite complaints about students not trying their hardest, teachers and students bumped heads because teachers knew students needed to learn certain material. Conversely, students did not value education the way teachers valued the content they were teaching, so in the “little fourteen year old world, you’re not thinking you need to know this” (IA, 6/25/13, p. 3). Adam did
not see any signs of teachers “bumping heads with students because of any kind of [race],
economic situation, because you are at a disadvantage [or] because I don’t like you” (IA, 6/25/13,
p. 3). He saw teachers bumping heads as having “everything to do with us as educators knowing
where kids need to be and how they are performing” (IA, 6/25/13, p. 3). Although teachers viewed
a lack of motivation as students not understanding the benefits of being educated, Adam viewed
the lack of motivation as potentially being a student who made a poor selection of friends or parents
who did not value education.

I think the biggest thing with low motivation is just not understanding the value of the
grade level or class that you’re in. Not understanding how it equates to your quality world.
Low motivation sometimes could be not having a good peer group or set of parents that
value education. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 4)

Because Adam believed that there was some type of disconnect in the “quality world” of
some students, he did not see them understanding the rationale behind the importance of education.
For some students, why would they put forth effort in something that was not of value to them?

Whatever the disconnect is with the child’s quality world, I don’t see them needing to
understand why school is important. If it’s not going to be important than I don’t see why
he would want to put forth the effort. From a kid’s perspective, if they don’t see the value
of what they are doing than they are not going to do it. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 4).

Ultimately, the presumption of staff is that low motivation was potentially the result of
poor home life where education may not have been valued by parents. However, motivation is like
a drive or an ambition based on exposure or experiences that are related to interest. Therefore, it
is not that parents devalue education, it may simply be the reality that parents lack exposure to the
advantages an education can offer because their educational experience may not have been the
best. If families relocate from an urban to a suburban area because they hear the school systems
are better, the parents may not necessarily know how the schools are better which could be the
disconnect the Adam made reference to because parents cannot effectively communicate the
concept of motivation if they know nothing about it. Nevertheless, the act of relocating suggests
that education is indeed valued. Despite the disconnect, teachers were frustrated with the behavior of some students.

Frustration with Student Behavior

The rationale behind certain types of student behavior that violated the student code of conduct was another frustration of teachers that concerned Principal Adam. According to Adam, the student code of conduct had four levels of violations: Level I violations affected student learning like a chronic lack of supplies, disruptive behavior, tardiness or use of profanity; Level II violations affected the learning of others like verbal abuse, bullying, horse-playing, or insubordination towards adults; Level III violations consisted of unlawful behavior like fighting, verbal threats to hurt someone, or online harassment; and Level IV violations consisted of illegal behavior like possession of a weapon, arson, physical assaults, or possession of drugs/alcohol (IA, 6/25/13, p. 2). Although student code of conduct violations occurred in the school, the majority of the violations were Level I, where students lacked bringing supplies or were disruptive.

I think [I have had] more Level I type violations where students are not bringing a pencil and misbehaving in class, all the way to your level four, recommendation for expulsion. In my tenure as an administrator, I have had a few marijuana busts, cigarettes and alcohol. Those are those potential three and four level violations. I have never had an arson or gun. I have had a few knives, I had a knife over 3 inches. I don’t care what building you are in or what district you’re in, you’re going to have the discipline. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 2).

Although student code of conduct violations occurred in school, the Level I violations caused the most frustration for teachers. Violations like, “The student forgot to bring his/her pencil for the 20th time” (IA, 6/25/13, p. 4). Teacher frustration due to lack of supplies, suggested that some teachers have not learned how to pick and choose their battles. Instead of getting frustrated with students for not having a pencil, teachers could come up with an alternative such as having a supply of pencils on the desk that students could borrow by trading something of value that belongs to the students like a wristband or belt. Ideally, that valued item is designed to make students
remember to return the pencil. In essence, teaching and learning should not stop just because students do not have something to write with. Even though having supplies shows responsibility on behalf of students, public education is ultimately an expense for the public, not the student.

*The Student Viewpoint*

Just as teachers were frustrated with student motivation and behavior, some students were frustrated with teacher expectations and personal struggles that did not pertain to school. Because teachers needed to maintain pacing in the curricula, the needs of students were sometimes not taken into consideration or simply overlooked.

**Student Survival**

As teachers struggled with teaching students the curricula, Principal Adam found that some students came to school trying to survive external factors that were not related to academics. Students were trying to survive or cope with undesirable environments or experiences by acting out because they were either provoked or upset with home, classmates, or something written online (IA, 6/25/13, p. 5). According to Adam, there were some unintentional underlying rationales for some students who acted out in school.

I don’t believe that there is any kid, and I have almost 900 in my building, that wakes up in the morning wanting to be a bad or nasty kid to his/her teacher. Even the class clown, they are trying to get at something when they are being goofy or they are being silly. Do they really want to go to school and be rude, vulgar, or nasty in front of a teacher? I don’t think anybody does. I think sometimes they are provoked and maybe they are put into that position, because maybe they are upset with something at home, or they are upset with something that happened with a classmate or something online happened. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 5)

As Adam reported, students do not just wake up in the mornings wanting to be bad or nasty, yet teachers do not always understand the realities faced by some students. When students act out in school, their actions suggest that students were simply trying to survive or cope with personal challenges the best way they knew how. When challenges build up at home, with classmates or
online, some students reacted by talking back to teachers, by covering it up with laughter as the class clown, or by being mean to classmates in the form of bullying or the inappropriate use of language. Ultimately, teachers need to understand that the content or curricula covered in the classroom may not necessarily be a priority for students when their minds are monopolized by external factors or distractors associated with home, classmates, or social media. In lieu of discipline referrals, simply talking to students could help refocus and redirect attention back on the curriculum.

Principal Revelations

While it was important for teachers to take time to understand the point of view of students, as an educational leader, it was equally important for principals to understand the point of view of teachers. For Principal Adam, leadership practices, professional development, and advice for aspiring principals and central office administration came with the territory of being an administrator.

Leadership Practices

Because teachers are responsible for educating students, as an educational leader, Principal Adam felt that it was important to have supportive practices in place to encourage teachers personally and professionally. Teachers were supported personally by using tactics to boost morale and professionally by using strategies to strengthen curricula.

Teacher Morale

As an educational leader, concerns about teacher morale became an issue that Principal Adam wanted to keep in the forefront of his leadership practices. In an effort to maintain positive culture, climate, and morale in school, Principal Adam found ways to incorporate gestures of appreciation like feeding teachers during staff meetings or providing breakfast once a month (IA,
Adam associated various forms of teacher appreciation to bank accounts where deposits and withdrawals can be made.

Showing appreciation was synonymous to deposits that were placed into an *emotional bank account*, a concept derived by Stephen Covey (1998) in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. The idea was to keep making deposits by showing appreciation because you never know when a large withdrawal or difficult conversation will have to be made regarding teacher performance.

Happy teachers, mean happy kids. Keep ‘em happy! Things like giving pizza during a staff meeting or providing a staff breakfast once a month, those will always help. However, it’s going to take more from administrators to keep teachers happy because if you are going to have an honest conversation with somebody that’s not really doing [his or her] job very well, you better have a lot of deposits into the emotional bank account before you take a big withdrawal. I try to keep my teachers happy. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 5)

The gestures of appreciation suggest that Principal Adam valued the work ethic of teachers with an understanding that difficult conversations come with the territory of being a principal. However, the delivery of those conversations was preceded by the vast deposits of appreciation which laid a foundation in building trusting relationships and allowing for open honest communication. Nevertheless, as data continues to drive teacher accountability, difficult conversations with teachers are inevitable.

Curricula Support

Along with the support of teacher morale, Principal Adam found that he also had to support the curricula that by being visible throughout the building and by serving as liaison between teachers and central office colleagues, which included the superintendent as well as the district’s curriculum coordinators (IA, 6/25/13, p. 5). According to Adam, visibility went beyond sitting in the office and involved being in the halls as well as in the classrooms. Although the pacing of the curricula varied when Adam visited classrooms, he could tell if the curriculum was being followed and if teachers who taught the same grade and content area were collaborating.
[To] support curriculum you have to be visible. Visible transcends into many things [like] being visible in a classroom and seeing an eighth grade English class being taught and then a day later going down the hall and seeing another eighth grade English class being taught; right away I can tell if number one, the curriculum sequence is being followed. Number two, if they are collaborating. Within a given week I should see a very similar lesson in English class one [and] in the second English class down the hall. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 5)

Even though the pacing of English lessons may vary slightly in order to complement the instructional strategies of teachers, Adam believed that as principal “you cannot do the job sitting in the office,” (IA, 6/25/13, p. 5) you have to be visible so that teachers know you are watching. He also believed that the principal has to serve as the liaison by communicating the best practices or latest research trends between the teachers and the district’s central office curriculum coordinators. While the teachers focused on the classroom, curriculum coordinators focused on the latest trends. And when teachers voiced concerns about implementing the latest trends, Adam conveyed those concerns back to the coordinators.

The second thing that I think and use to support curriculum comes with a liaison of information between the teachers and central office. Central office absolutely has the vision. They have time to research [and] do the studies of the best practices for kids! They relay that to me and my job is to relay that back to the teachers because I think that sometimes the best of our best teachers, they are so dedicated to the classroom and what they are doing and trying to follow the sequencing of the pacing of a curriculum that they don’t necessarily go out and research any new methodologies, the latest trend. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 5-6)

In reference to latest trends, Adam gave an example of a reading and writing initiative that the district curriculum coordinators spent weeks on researching for the middle schools. The coordinators initially rolled out the initiative by relaying the concepts to the principals at a principals’ meeting. The principals then relayed the initiatives to the teachers at a staff meeting, which was later followed by a curriculum meeting consisting of lead teachers and department chairs. Because of the time invested in researching the latest trends, coordinators would push to implement initiatives despite resistance by some teachers.
At the middle school level, why would we have coordinators pushing that [reading and writing initiative] so much, yet have teachers resisting that? Well it’s because the coordinators have spent hours, and days, and weeks researching the best methodologies. Teachers don’t have time to do that because they are teaching kids. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 5-6)

Serving as a liaison between teachers and central office coordinators was not the only way Adam supported and shared information with staff. He also shared information via email by forwarding articles or hyperlinks that applied to specific content area teachers like mathematics, science, social studies, and English, or specific elective teachers like art, band, physical education, Spanish, and orchestra (IA, 6/25/13, p. 6).

Another way I support curriculum is that I share with my staff the latest research and trends of education, whether that is short emails, whether that is sending a hyper link, whether that is cutting and pasting from an article and saying, “Hey man I thought about you when I read this article.” It all goes together, but you can’t do any of it without being visible. If you don’t know what’s going on in the classrooms then you better not say that you know much about curriculum, because you just don’t. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 6)

Although supporting the curriculum involved being visible in the classrooms and serving as a liaison, the support by Principal Adam suggested that teachers were more inclined to keep up with the curriculum pacing guides and collaborate with content area colleagues. The ongoing collaboration suggested that teachers were holding themselves accountable because no one wants to look bad among colleagues or in front of the principal who was prone to walk into classrooms at any time. In addition, by knowing the curriculum, Adam was able to share latest research trends that he came across outside of the research done by the central office curriculum coordinators. Being abreast of the latest research trends and being able to share that information with pertinent staff make for a well-respected administrator.

*Professional Development*

In order to stay abreast of the latest research trends in education, Principal Adam was concerned with personal growth as an educational leader and found that he had to model what he preached to teachers by actively participating in professional growth and development
opportunities as an administrator. Participating in professional development included being actively involved with district and county level committees, as well as being transparent so teachers were aware that the principal was out of the building for professional development purposes and not for personal agendas that neglected job responsibilities.

Personally, I stay very active. Number one, you do it because you’re supposed to and it’s good for the profession. Number two, you are modelling for teachers. I am a firm believer that I should be active in district committees, county committees and possibly at the local ISD [intermediate school district]. The teachers don’t like when you are out of the building but when the secretary can say, “Yeah, he’s at [the ISD] today because he’s doing a coaching session on how to be a better principal.” I think they respect that. If I preach professional development to them, then I better be doing it myself. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 6)

While professional development was important to Principal Adam, it was equally important and expected of staff. Although professional development was required by the state, Adam did not only approve worthwhile professional development opportunities but he also asked follow-up questions to show that he valued the work and initiative of staff outside the classroom.

As far as professional development [P.D.] for my teachers, I expect it, as it’s required by the state. I’m kind of a stickler when it comes to the P.D. I approve but asking follow up questions and letting them know that “Hey, I need to approve four hours for you because you went to this workshop, can you tell me a little about it?” That idea that you model it and you talk to them about the professional development, I think shows you value the outside work that they are trying to do to get better as teachers. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 6)

Along with valuing the work of teachers outside of the classroom, the opportunities for professional development were unlimited. At the beginning of each school year, Principal Adam organized a staff retreat as well as a technology conference that provided training on the implementation of past and present district technologies. In addition, he supported professional development on the county and state levels whenever feasible.

As far as providing the opportunity, we have a plethora. I do a staff retreat and a technology conference that I usually bring in a speaker for. I always am supporting my teachers going to professional development at the county level. I try sending them to state conferences. I do whatever I can if someone is showing an interest in wanting to do something and there is a financial attachment to it. I try to do my best to make sure they can go. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 6)
Personal as well as the professional growth and development of self and staff suggest that Principal Adam was an advocate of ongoing learning or “sharpening the saw” as Stephen Covey (1989) calls it in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, where constant effort was made for growth and improvement. In addition, the staff retreat and technology training at the beginning of the school year suggest that technology was an important part of the curricula and the training gave teachers the opportunity to take refreshers or to learn new technologies prior to the physical arrival of students the first day of school.

*Advice to Aspiring Principals*

Serving as principal is often a job where you learn as you go because every day can be a new day of adventure when dealing with students. However, as people aspire to become principals, Principal Adam offered two major pieces of advice: 1) take your time by going slow before moving fast, and 2) balance working in and on the school.

*Go Slow to Go Fast*

Becoming adequately prepared as an administrator has been an ongoing learning experience for Principal Adam. In three years as principal, Adam discovered that aspiring principals or those new to the role should not move too fast. They should move slowly by taking their time when making school-wide decisions.

You better go slow to go fast! That’s my number one advice. Even in my short career, I watched some people very good at what they do, go too fast. I took over for a principal [that] was well loved. After being assistant principal for four years, I had a folder full of ideas and I just kept my mouth closed. Although I was in a building that already knew the staff for four years, I did not make any major changes for my first full year. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 7)

If there [are] any young administrators out there that are going to look at this advice; there is something to be said with age, especially if you have an older staff and you’re a young person. You have to build up and they have to know that you’re confident and that you’re not just coming in because you wanna be the “hot shot.” It’s important that you, go slow, to go fast. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 7)
As a new administrator, taking the time to make changes allows relationships to cultivate with staff who had been teaching in the same location for years. For young principals, cultivation gives staff the ability to see if the principal was confident to stand by decisions, and it also allowed staff to determine if the principal was there to truly lead or there to hold the title of principal.

Balance Working In-On the School

Although Principal Adam’s number one advice was to go slow to go fast, his number two advice was to balance working in the school with working on the school. Adam compared working in the school to endeavors that required physical involvement like supervising students, talking to parents, performing teacher evaluations, and creating the master schedule (IA, 6/25/13, p. 7).

My number two advice, is that a principal has to balance working in the school, and working on the school. I will give you an example: Working in the school, are things like, supervising the lunchroom, doing your evaluations, making sure your master schedule is built, and talking to the parents. You’re part of the school, you’re doing it [physically]. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 7)

However, working on the school were endeavors that required the conceptual involvement of the principal by making sure the overall cosmetics and first impression of the school were attractive to people walking onto the premises. The cosmetics included things like sprucing up the athletic areas, showcasing awards, displaying a positive slogan, or laying a nice rug (IA, 6/25/13, p. 7-8).

Working on the school could be looking at that with an eye and saying, “When people come into this building, what do they look at for the first time? Should there be an awards area? Should there be a positive saying or phrase? Should there be a showcase when people come into the door? Should there be a nice rug?” If you were to Google principal ideas, you would come up with things they do to work on the school. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 7-8)

The two pieces of advice that Principal Adam offered to those new to administrative roles suggest that novice principals should take their time making changes and should balance working in and on the building. Moving too fast can be a turnoff. In buildings with veteran teachers, it is common for the teachers to have been in the building far longer than the principal has been an
administrator. In other words, veteran staff watch principals come and go. If teachers are in a building where the turnover rate for principals is high, then staff probably do not take new principals seriously and they are not eager to start new initiatives, especially if the principal beginning the initiative is not going to be there to watch the initiative come into fruition. Thus, moving too fast could equate to a lack of buy-in and initiative fatigue where there are constantly new ideas being implemented but there is never an end result because the principal who started the initiative is no long the leader of the school, resulting in a waste of time, energy, and effort on behalf of the teachers.

Advice to District Administration

Like for aspiring and novice administrators, Principal Adam also had advice for central office administrators in the district. Concerns with central office’s ability to move the district forward by taking into consideration the ideas of principals became an issue for Adam. Because the principals were the ones in the trenches of working in the schools, sharing ideas on how to roll out an initiative in order to meet the goal of the district would be an ideal consideration.

Central office assumes a critical role in moving a district forward, for them that is working on the district. I would say my advice would be, as they balance their ideas to move us forward, we cannot forget to ask the people’s [principal’s] opinions in the trenches. In other words if I’m running a building, I need to support their ideas for new initiatives but I feel I should be able to offer an opinion about how those initiatives should be rolled out. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 8)

Adam compared rolling out a district-wide initiative to rolling out a building-wide student of the month initiative in the school by asking teachers for their input. Instead of springing a building-wide initiative on the teachers and telling them that a student of the month will be recognized, the professional courtesy of asking the best time to recognize students would be ideal, allowing for buy-in and belief in that initiative (IA, 6/25/13, p. 8). Taking instructional time into
consideration, would it be best to recognize students first hour, during lunch, or by pulling them out of class?

It’s no different than what I do to my teachers. I want a student of the month initiative; I need to go to my teachers and say, “How would you like me to recognize students? Do you want me to pull them out of first hour? Do you want me to pull them out of lunch hour? Do you not want me to pull them at all?” That’s getting my initiative done yet respecting the teachers. Now, I just move that up a level [to central office] and is it my job to carry out the superintendent’s mission and goals. That’s what I want to do, but at the same time, I want to offer how that should be done so I believe in what they want to do. My advice would be don’t forget to listen to those of us in the trenches on how things should work. (IA, 6/25/13, p. 8)

Principal Adam’s advice on having the ability to provide input to district administration suggests ownership and buy-in of an initiative. Because people value the things that they own, they take care of those things that are important without an upheaval. Likewise, when principals and teachers are allowed to provide input on district-wide and building-wide initiatives, respectively, then they are likely to support the initiative with minimal backlash because it creates a sense of ownership with that initiative. In addition, the ability to offer input or an opinion sends the message that one is valued as a professional even if the input or opinion cannot be used.

Principal Beth

The second majority participant was Principal Beth who retired but had a first-hand account of the predominantly White middle school that rapidly transformed to an ethnically diverse student body within a two-year span. Beth described the journey she took to become a principal along with the demographics of her teaching staff, the enrollment of the African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups, and the academic proficiency of students. In addition, Beth reported troublesome teacher-student interactions where frustrations with student behavior and cultural insensitivity were interconnected due to a lack of cultural understanding. As a result of her experiences, Beth offered advice to aspiring principals and district administrators on being culturally sensitive yet persistent.
Background

Principal Beth was a 65 years old White female who retired in 2009 after 32 years in education with 11 of those years served as principal. Despite being retired, Beth works as a consultant to novice principals in a suburban county. She grew up in the northwest part of an urban area where ethnic diversity was a norm. Ironically, Beth had an intuition since junior high school that she was going to be an educator. Although her parents were not college educated, they gave her an option of becoming a teacher or a nurse upon graduating from high school. Her career option was rather easy: “I said I can’t stand blood so I will become a teacher” (IB, 3/24/14, p. 1). Initially, Beth planned on becoming a Physical Education teacher but ended up teaching Home Economics. She landed her first teaching job as a Home Economics teacher in a brand new suburban high school and later became department chair, which required administrative responsibilities. After seven years of teaching, Beth took a couple of years off for child care and returned to teaching Home Economics at a middle school in another district for four more years, became Vocational Director for five years, and then interim assistant principal for one year. Despite having a “wonderful experience, it was not a diverse community at all.” Because “everyone was pretty much the same ethnicity [and the] same income group…I decided… I was really ready to take on the role of assistant principal somewhere else” (IB, 3/24/14, p. 2).

Subsequent to interviewing in 12 districts, Beth secured an assistant principal position in an innovative suburban district. Even though “I grew up in a diverse neighborhood school,” this particular middle school “was where my training really began amongst [the] most diverse population I had ever worked in” (IB, 3/24/14, p. 2). Beth’s new school district was quickly expanding with new neighborhoods, which meant more families, more kids and more schools.

[We were] exploding at the time, adding thousands of students a year so we [the district] went from 15,000 to 17,000 at its peak in a matter of a couple of years. The builders where
building, the neighborhoods were expanding and two new middle schools were built. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 2)

The middle school that Beth was appointed to, prior to the 2002-2003 school year, was already diverse but became even more diverse after the district reconfigured the boundaries that purposely routed students to the new middle schools. Ultimately, Beth served the most diverse middle school in the district.

The middle school I landed in had a very diverse population and it became even more diverse. Because it was a lot of re-districting involved, our middle school ended up being the most diverse: socially, economically, population, ethnicity, everything. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 2)

Although Beth’s school had the most diverse student body, the African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups contributed to the greatest change. However, the teaching staff remained homogeneous, all White, which suggests that the changing student demographics were uncharted territory for most staff.

Teacher-Student Demographics

Principal Beth’s middle school was located 33 miles outside of the urban core. In the 2012-2013 school year, despite having a heterogeneous student body, Beth’s teaching staff was 100% White (Table 2) which included nearly 70 staff members who were classified as certified and non-certified like paraprofessionals. “Of my teacher population, we ran about 50 certified teachers and about 15-20 non-certified” (IB, 3/24/14, p. 7). One of her greatest concerns was trying to figure out how she was going to merge the cultures, while safeguarding the comfort level of staff with a diverse student body. Beth asked herself the following questions:

How are [we] all going to get along? What kind of programs are we putting in to establish ourselves? What are we doing with the teachers in terms of diversity and where their comfort level is or not? When I really reflect back, I never look[ed] at it as a color issue, it was always such a blend of different ethnicities, my intent was let’s just merge these cultures. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 3)
Referencing Table 2, overall student enrollment decreased from 901 students in the 2002-2003 school year to 805 in the 2012-2013 school. Despite the decrease in the overall student enrollment, the African American enrollment in Beth’s school tripled over the ten-year span from 5.9% to 17.6%, while the economically disadvantaged enrollment more than doubled in the seven-year span from 16.4% to 36.2%. Although the student body was identified as being predominantly White, the district did not have a demographic subgroup to properly classify students from the Middle East, which meant the Chaldean (Christians from Iraq) students were classified as White in the district’s database. “Michigan has the largest [Chaldean] population in the United States besides California specifically Los Angeles, I think I have that right” (IB, 3/24/14, p. 3).

In short, as overall student enrollment decreased, the African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups increased. However, the Chaldean population being classified as White suggests that the actual number of White students was skewed which would lower the actual enrollment of White students reported. Thus, if the enrollment of White students decreased as the enrollment of African American, Chaldean and economically disadvantaged increased, then the cultural differences and the interactions associated with those differences would also increase because the student body was no longer made up of a homogeneous culture, but rather a plethora of cultures.

Academic Proficiency

As the school began to shift culturally, concerns about the academic needs of students began to shift as well, which became an issue that Principal Beth had to address. The shift included student groups that Beth identified as being on three different academic levels. One group consisted of “the highly motivated, over achiever students,” the second consisted of the “middle group” or the average learners that needed hands-on guidance, and the third group was the “special
needs group” (IB, 3/24/14, p. 7). Beth defined the special needs group as “our behavior problems students who were new to the community that were just lost because this was something just so new. The community was so different and new to them” (IB, 3/24/14, p. 7).

Because the students were new to the school and the community, adjusting to the middle school culture was a difficult learning curve for the special needs, behavior problem students. The behavior problems suggest that students had to find an outlet to camouflage struggling with the curriculum, fitting in with classmates, and adapting to teacher and classroom expectations. However, cultural differences created its share of challenges and teacher-student interactions were directly impacted by those challenges.

Revelations of Teacher-Student Interactions

As the cultural differences increased, the challenges associated with those differences also increased, which was a concern that became an issue for Principal Beth. “We are middle school so middle school in and of itself, just the age and hormonal issues, was really challenging” (IB, 3/24/14, p. 3). Take the hormonal issues of middle schoolers coupled with the cultural differences, then challenges can sometimes evolve into interactions that are misunderstood.

The Teacher Viewpoint

Challenges that evolved were perceived by teachers as inappropriate student behavior that should have potentially resulted in discipline referrals to administration as far as the teachers were concerned. Nonetheless, according to Principal Beth, there were some instances when teachers were in the wrong by escalating interactions with students that could have been handled differently.

Frustration with Student Behavior

The perception of inappropriate student behavior and how teachers handled that behavior was an issue that Principal Beth had to address with teachers. One particular teacher overreacted
and put a student out of the class for talking out loud during a lesson and getting out of her seat without permission. However, Beth felt like the aggressive response by the teacher was troublesome and escalated or triggered the actions of the student by not wanting the kid to speak or move during instruction. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 5-6)

Ok here is an example, a student is in the classroom talking out loud while the teacher is using the overhead projector doing a lesson in front of the students. The girl speaks out of turn, the teacher asks her to stop talking and she does it again and gets up out of her seat and walks around disrupting the teacher. The teacher “literally” throws her out of the room and says, “Go down to the office. Get out of my classroom!” (IB, 3/24/14, p. 5)

Because the student was put out of class, Beth took into consideration the reputation of the teacher who sent the student to the office. This particular teacher was unbending and “if the kid wasn’t doing what the teacher wanted exactly in that little box, the teacher escalated” the problem (IB, 3/24/14, p. 5). Meanwhile, the student did not think that her behavior was bad enough to get kicked out of class because other teachers did not react to her behavior in this manner (IB, 3/24/14, p. 5).

In my opinion, the teacher escalated it. After class the teacher writes a referral and marches down to the office and now I have two hot bodies. I have an angry teacher and a student who doesn’t think what she did was “so bad.” I have to repair this relationship. I have to ask myself this question, “Is the teacher famous for escalating the situation and am I letting the child go easy on this one?” I have to do that because it is all about this relationship because this girl’s going to be back in class and also there might be some cultural differences along the way. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 5)

Beth felt that the teacher escalated the interaction causing the student to be sent to the office, which suggests that this particular teacher has not taken the time to get to know her students to nurture a relationship. Perhaps, a simple conversation of pulling the student aside regarding classroom expectations could have prevented the student from talking out loud, getting out of her seat, and missing instruction. Also, being uncompromising suggests that the teacher was authoritative and expected students to adhere to her commands because she was “in charge,” completely disregarding cultural differences and practices that some students were accustomed to.
Because of the heterogeneous mixture of students, one size or set of rules cannot fit all and teachers need to be able to recognize and acknowledge those needs and cultural differences.

Cultural Insensitivity

The unwillingness to understand cultural differences became another concern for Principal Beth. “It is not a top-down thing all the time” where the teacher is always right or whatever the teacher says the student must do (IB, 3/24/14, p. 5). If a student challenges a teacher in any way then that teacher feels disrespected not taking into consideration that the student may feel equally disrespected. Per Beth, “I have history with some teachers who have chosen not to get it, the part about the child feels disrespected” (IB, 3/24/14, p. 5).

Despite infinite attempts to talk with teachers about defusing negative interactions and finding alternative ways to address students without public reprimand, Beth would discipline students for being insubordinate but occasionally she would have to reprimand teachers as well.

With this particular teacher it did not matter. It was always a situation. Sometimes it was a mild punishment for the students. Sometimes it was a conversation and a reprimand for a teacher who continually would do the same thing. Under those circumstances I might recommend teacher training. I might expect the teacher to re-read a book or join one of our book clubs in the building that was helping with student discipline and/or relationships. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 5)

Although Beth had to occasionally reprimand teachers while attempting to reason with them, there were also times when she had to reprimand or reason with students, explaining how behavior that may be acceptable in one teacher’s class may not be acceptable in another teacher’s class. In an attempt to keep from suspending students, Beth would provide explanations in order to help students understand that all teachers do not think alike and may respond to student behavior differently (IB, 3/24/14, p. 5).

Sometimes it was a meeting with the student to explain, you might be able to do this in teacher A’s class but you can’t do this in teachers B’s. She is teaching through a different lens. You have to figure it out. In the situation I just described, I’m trying everything
possible not to suspend this child. The teacher could have done a different job and resulted in a different product in the end. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 5-6)

Teachers who are uncompromising and react to student behavior by reprimanding the student in an authoritative tone in front of an entire class suggest being entitled to respect. Although the teacher does not want to be disrespected, some teachers fail to consider that in return the student does not want to be disrespected either. However, the power struggle associated with the sense of entitlement concludes with a no-win situation. The teacher does not win because one cannot force respect by using disrespect and the student does not win because reacting towards the teacher can result in a disciplinary consequence while not reacting can cause frustration. Ultimately, no one wins because instruction is compromised by the teacher not being able to teach and the student not being able to learn.

Principal Revelations

Despite the revelations between the teachers and the students, Principal Beth had revelations that as an educational leader, practices needed to be in place to maintain a positive teaching environment, including mentoring new teachers. Other practices included professional development that focused on diversity training and advice to aspiring principals with emphasis on diversity and extending open invitations to district administrators for building visits.

Leadership Practices

As cultural differences continued to emerge, Principal Beth used the desire to maintain a positive school culture and welcome feedback to help guide her leadership practices. For example, the overall culture of the building was an ongoing concern that Principal Beth continuously acknowledged. “If you have a poor culture in the building you have a sad place and people are angry and mad” (IB, 3/24/14, p. 8). In her years as principal, Beth made sure that she and her
administrative team (deans and assistant principals) worked on culture by recognizing teacher accomplishments and honoring various holidays.

What was I doing with the culture of the building? In my years that I was there, I had 9 or 10 deans and assistant principals. We always worked on culture. What were we doing for the various holidays? How were we recognizing the teachers? There are so many things that come under culture; the relationship peace was huge with me for my building. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 8)

According to Beth, providing a good culture and comfort zone for teachers passed on to the students (IB, 3/24/14, p. 8). In addition, a good culture made teachers comfortable in how they treated others, in how they perceived their work place, and in how they volunteered to assist the principal with administrative duties (IB, 3/24/14, p. 8). Helping administratively allowed teachers to view the operation of the school through an administrative lens or angle. “I think sometimes when they saw it through an administrative lens; they were a little bit more compassionate in the overall operation” (IB, 3/24/14, p. 8).

Additionally, as Principal Beth acknowledged culture, she also welcomed feedback from teachers and parents through a variety of methods. Providing a level of comfort to staff, students, and parents was important.

I’m really big on feedback. We used a variety of different strategies or tools to get feedback from teachers and parents on culture. When you have a good culture that culture and comfort zone come back to the kids. It’s how comfortable they [teachers] are, how they are going to treat other people, how they perceive their own work place, that’s huge. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 8)

Providing a good building culture coupled with feedback from teachers and parents (key players) suggest that Beth was an administrator who valued culture, diversity, and the opinion of the key players. Attempting to keep teachers happy potentially avoided the likelihood of a sad environment with mad and angry people. Valuing the happiness of teachers and taking time to gather feedback suggest that Beth was an educational leader who sought on-going learner opportunities for personal growth and development. In addition, sharing growth and development
experiences with struggling and novice teachers was a practice Beth continued to use with new teachers through mentoring.

Teacher Mentoring

Along with ongoing learning, providing support for new teachers through mentoring was an issue that Principal Beth did not want to fall short on. Because mentoring was an important part of the teacher evaluation process, Beth paired novice teachers with veteran teachers by grade level and content area in order to learn the policies and procedures associated with the job (IB, 3/24/14, p. 8).

There is always a mentoring program through our evaluation process. We always attached [new teachers] to maybe another person in the building. Everyone worked on a team. They also worked on grade level teams, two to five people, and on content teams which was their area of subject matter. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 8)

By pairing novice teachers during their first years of teaching with veteran teachers, they were encouraged to visit the classrooms of their colleagues and to observe the routine practices as well as classroom management techniques. The opportunity to collaborate allowed for a creative flow of ideas that Beth welcomed as long as those ideas were in the best interest of the students.

In the first couple of years, we would always encourage teachers going in and visiting other classrooms to see how they operated, how they did with kids in different situations. We tried to make it as collaborative as possible giving them open opportunities and I was very open and welcoming to any idea that’s gonna make a teacher a better teacher. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 8)

Supporting new teachers and giving them opportunities to collaborate as well as the leeway of trying new ideas suggest that Beth was an innovative and transformative administrator who welcomed change. Because the student body was becoming more and more diverse, the days of operating a classroom without taking into consideration the cultural differences of students were few and far between. A good teacher will not only recognize differences among the various cultures in the classroom but will also strategically plan lessons that will allow the cultural
differences to emerge. In actuality, mentoring can have a double impact. The novice teachers can share new technologies or the latest trends in education while the veteran teachers can share the policies, procedures, and instructional strategies techniques.

*Professional Development*

While mentoring new teachers was an important leadership practice, ongoing diversity training for a predominantly homogenous teaching staff was equally important and a concern that Principal Beth wanted to improve. With a combination of working-class parents, single family homes, and parents from the urban core wanting a better educational system for their children, the once homogeneous population was quickly changing (IB, 3/24/14, p. 6).

There was all kinds of diversity training offered. We had a gentleman who was very well known [from the] ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union], one of the big organizations with diversity so they were doing all kinds of training around the state. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 6)

Although diversity training was readily available, teachers familiar with teaching one way and one group of students struggled with the blend of transitioning cultures, as the student body became more diverse. As diversity increased, the transitioning years were very difficult for middle-aged veteran teachers that Beth referred to as “standby or guard teachers” (IB, 3/24/14, p. 7). The standby or guard teachers were the ones who stood in front of the class and guarded or defended one way of teaching without deviating to differentiate instruction.

For some of these standby or guard teachers it was a very difficult period of years. They were struggling, and I am talking about the ones who are probably over 40 or 50, because they grew up in an environment teaching one way to one group of kids. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 7)

Even though teaching a particular way while wrestling with diversity was one struggle, learning to differentiate instruction was another struggle. Differentiating instructions by changing from a single way of teaching for years to a flexible way of teaching was a change that the some teachers embraced, while others rejected. According to Beth, the ones who embraced the changes “got it,” while the ones who struggled with the changes had a difficult time multitasking or
teaching the three different learning groups, the highly motivated, the middle group, and the special needs group (IB, 3/24/14, p. 7). Beth was able to identify the ones who got it with the ability to differentiate versus the ones who struggled.

Diversity and differentiation, those two were merging. The wow factor was some teachers really “got it” and some didn’t. It’s not going to be too difficult to see the ones that didn’t merge the two; that didn’t have the ability to have two or three different lesson plans going on with a different twist to it with the three groups of student you are trying to teach. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 7)

Despite trying to merge diversity and differentiation, Beth identified a 10% factor for the ones who struggled. Although the majority of the teachers adhered to the guidelines set forth by the training, the 10% factor were the ones who did not get it and were not easy to work with. In addition, they were the ones who occupied the majority of Beth’s time for talking to or reprimanding.

For the most part, it was great but I always use the 10% factor. The 10% that didn’t get it, that weren’t easy to work with are the ones I was always having to interface with or talk with or discipline. Generally our teachers were great with diverse populations, did well and they followed the directives and guidelines for any kind of training, but as a principal you’re always dealing with that small group that takes up most of your time. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 7)

With the merge of diversity and differentiation, the majority of Beth’s teachers were able to adapt to the changes that were needed to address the learning needs and skill levels of the three academic groups, the highly motivated, the middle group, and the special needs group. However, that 10% of teachers who did not adapt suggests that there was either an unwillingness to adapt or an inability to adapt. Those who were unwilling to adapt chose to maintain one style or teaching strategy with a one size fits all mentality and were insensitive to the learning needs of students. Whereas, those with the inability to adapt lacked the skills, struggled with the ability to multitask or teach more than one skill level or academic group at a time.
Advice to Aspiring Principals

As the diverse student body continued to grow in the school, remaining conscious of the diversity component was an ongoing concern for Principal Beth. Thus, she would advise aspiring or new principals in a diverse school setting to keep in mind that “you are working the diversity piece every day” in various forms (IB, 3/24/14, p. 8). Diversity could come in form of working with students, parents, athletics, or the band, “it’s a part of everything” (IB, 3/24/14, p. 8). It could be in the form of a dinner with an ethnic theme and attached to a school program.

I remember the first couple of years we had a very large Asian population. I happened to have a number of Asian parents. They did a dinner one night attached to a program. All the different cultures have so many things to offer. You have so many opportunities to share. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 8).

Along with recognizing experiences that the diverse cultures had to offer, Beth also advised new principals to take the time to recognize people for the contributions made throughout the school year by making deposits of appreciation. Beth was a proponent of Stephen Covey (1989) who compared relationships to making deposits by showing appreciation or making withdrawals by not showing appreciation. By not recognizing the efforts of teachers, that would be considered a huge withdrawal on behalf of the principal.

You have to recognize people. I would highly recommend to a new principal to [give] recognition through the year, the beginning of every school year and at the end, even in the middle, for all the things they do. It’s a huge withdrawal if you don’t do that and a tremendous deposit if you do. Those [withdrawal and deposit] are Covey terms. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 8)

Providing opportunities to share cultural perspectives and recognizing the hard work and effort of students, parents, and teachers suggest that Principal Beth respects cultural differences, as well as the feelings and emotions of people. The conscious effort to recognize feelings and emotions or the human side of people suggests significant deposits, which can be beneficial in the long run when withdrawals or unfavorable decisions must be made.
Advice to District Administration

Just as Beth had advice for aspiring principals, she also had advice for district administrators on gaining the pulse of the building that evolved out of concerns from when she was principal. In order to gain the pulse of the building, Principal Beth felt that district administrators should make frequent visits to the school buildings. However, to help encourage those visits, persistent invitations should be initiated by building principals. Establishing a date on the busy calendar of district administrators lends itself to helping that visit come into fruition. Beth explained,

My advice is the principals have to continually have administration in the building for programs and in the classroom to see what your building is like because if you don’t make it happen, it’s not going to happen. That’s the only way they see the diversity. They have to be present. (IB, 3/24/14, p. 9)

Because district administrators performed an ongoing juggling act with the entire district, Principal Beth also advised new principals to be persistent in asking district administration for whatever was needed by principals in order to maintain their buildings. Asking for support that included additional resources or support staff should be composed in a variety of ways, verbal, written, and electronically. “When you [principals] have a need, you tell them [district administrator] what you want a whole bunch of ways and you don’t give up. You just keep re-writing and resending it” (IB, 3/24/14, p. 9).

Although Principal Beth’s advice for district administrators was to get a pulse of the schools by physically visiting the buildings, the advice was ultimately directed towards principals in making those visits happen. By encouraging principals to initiate building visits through invitations suggests that the likelihood of follow-through on behalf of district administrators. In addition, whenever principals needed resources or support staff, the act of persistently asking suggests that the squeaky wheel gets the oil. In other words, the more you ask, the more district
administrators will attempt to meet those needs because they do not want to keep hearing the same request over and over again.

Principal Charles

The third of the majority participants was Principal Charles whose journey of becoming a principal included teaching multiple subjects. Although the ethnicity of his teaching staff was majority White, the student body was rather diverse and changed significantly after schools were forced to consolidate. The consolidation attributed to troubling teacher-student interactions primarily between White teachers and African American students due to cultural differences associated with getting to class on time and being loud in the hallways. The cultural challenges led professional development initiatives that forced staff to talk about race. Because of the challenges, Charles advised aspiring principals and district administrators to make getting to know the stakeholders a priority.

Background

Principal Charles was a 49 years old White male who began his 25-year educational journey, nine as principal, by earning an elementary certification in English and mathematics. He was initially hired as a ninth grade high school mathematics teacher “and then they transitioned to a middle school and I became a sixth grade general you name it teacher. I taught math, English, social studies, science under that K-8 All Cert” (IC, 6/27/13, p. 1). After earning a Master’s Degree in Leadership, Charles participated in a year-long internship for principals and was hired in a dual role “where I was half administrator, half teacher” (IC, 6/27/13, p. 1). The half administrator role was similar to being a Dean of Students where he had a shared responsibility of handling discipline issues for over 500 of the 1000 plus middle school students in grades 6, 7 and 8. This two-year role ultimately prepared Charles for the assistant principal position in a different suburban school
district. In the new district, Charles served as an assistant principal for five years along with “a number of other things” (IC, 6/27/13, p.1) or job responsibilities before becoming principal.

In addition, Charles has had formal diversity training by attending conferences as well as professional development provided by the district. As a principal, his “mantra [was] we need to understand people so that you can move them forward” academically (IC, 6/27/13, p. 15-16). Charles also understood that everybody was not the same and wanted the teachers to recognize the differences by not turning a blind eye to the differences by saying “I don’t see color.”

Everybody isn’t the same. I used to have a teacher who did that color-blind thing about how, “I don’t see color.” How can you not (chuckling in disbelief)? I mean recognize the color. If you think that is what you should say, fine, but I’m different, you’re different, she’s different, what do you see? (IC, 6/27/13, p. 15-16)

Attending diversity training and acknowledging the differences suggested that Charles was a principal who valued personal growth as well as the culture differences of the students and staff in his building. Thus, the training allowed Charles as an educational leader to adjust to the demographics of the school.

Teacher-Student Demographics

Principal Charles’s school was located 22 miles outside of the urban core. In the 2012-2013 school year, Charles guesstimated having around 50 staff members (GI, 7/23/14, p. 1), ten of which were male. The staff was relatively diverse consisting of White, African American, Chaldean, and Asian teachers primarily “because of the bilingual program” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 2). Nearly 76% of the teaching staff was White, five were African American (one male), “I’ve got a number of Middle Eastern, just Chaldean teachers, about five, a few Asian, Chinese, about two, and not enough men” (IC, 6/27/13, p.3-4). Compared to the district as a whole, Charles had a fairly diverse staff age 30 and above with the average years of service ranging from 15 to 20 years of classroom experience (GI, 7/23/14, p. 2). Nevertheless, when district budget cuts caused changes
and shifts in job assignments, the efforts made in hiring minorities were defeated by seniority where the last hired were either the first moved, laid off or even fired.

Our staff, it’s relatively diverse. We are probably one of the more diverse staffs in the district, but unfortunately, a lot of the efforts that [we] did when I first got here, hiring a lot of minority teachers, and then [the district has] gone through a lot of change and shifting and when seniority was the marker, they were the ones that got moved. (IC, 6/27/13, p.3)

Although the district forced some staff to be reassigned to other building locations, Charles blamed himself for the move of a couple of African American female teachers because one ended up at the elementary while the other ended up as the assistant principal at another elementary school, after he helped develop their leadership skills. “I guess it’s my fault because I developed [them]” (IC, 6/27/13, p.3).

Over a ten year span, the 2002-2003 enrollment of 782 students increased by 2012-2013 to 960. That increase was due to budget cuts that influenced the decision to reconfigure the district and close several elementary and middle schools where the grades 6-8 buildings changed to 7-8 buildings (IC, 6/27/13, p.4). The middle schools that closed were forced to send kids to the middle schools that remained open. Despite the changes, the average class size remained around 29 students (GI. 7/23/14, p.2).

As the district changed, the enrollment for African American and economically disadvantaged also changed. Over the ten year span, African American enrollment grew from 12.3% to 27.9%, while the economically disadvantage grew from 17.7% to 28.5%. Additional changes that contributed to the diverse student body were the special education and the bilingual or English Language Learners (ELL) programs that were housed in the building. The ELL program enrolled students who were new to the country and did not speak English. Charles expressed that students who were bilingual “that come with zero English, they come here,” to this building (IC, 6/27/13, p.12).
The ELL program was unique because it required the appropriate support staff for the students who could not speak English. Also, the ELL enrollment fluctuated depending upon the time of year the families of bilingual students arrived or departed the United States. At the beginning of the school year, Charles could start off with four students in the ELL program, but by the end of the school year that number could increase to 25.

Just for the ELL Program, I’ve got a Science teacher, a Social Studies teacher and a Math/English teacher. The Math/English one is the home base for the kids but it’s zero English. So each of those classes only have three or four kids in it. But that’s where it starts. By the time the end of the year comes along, I might have twenty-five. (CI, 6/27/13, p. 13)

Although the enrollment of ELL varied throughout the school year, the mere presence of ELL contributed not only to the diversity in the student body but also to the diversity of the staff. In spite of the staff being predominately White, the diverse staff suggests that Charles had a staff that mirrored the population of the students they served. The staff that served the ELL was able to support their needs linguistically across the curricula in not only English and mathematics but also in science and social studies. In addition, the average years of service ranging from 15 to 20 years suggests that teacher retention was high despite budget-inflicted changes. Nevertheless, the factors that have had the greatest impact on diversity were the African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups.

Academic Proficiency

While the African American and economically disadvantaged enrollments grew, concerns about the gaps in learning also grew. Principal Charles recognized that the African American males in particular were struggling academically. In an effort to learn successful strategies and increase the achievement level of African American males, a group of teachers volunteered to do a book study that specifically focused on this group. Although a select group of teachers took the initiative to act upon the need, having more teachers involved would have been ideal.
We have a committee or a group of teachers that did a book study basically focusing on African American males and trying to increase that level of achievement of that particular group [through] successful strategies. The teachers recognized it but I’d like to have more teachers involved. You always have the group that are motivated and then you also have the group that’s not as much. (GI, 7/23/14, p. 8)

Although a select group of teachers took the initiative to learn successful strategies to help increase the achievement of African American males, the idea of learning strategies suggests that cultural awareness had to play a key role into implementing the initiative. Understanding the learning styles such as audio or visual would allow teachers to differentiate instruction in order to better meet the needs of the African American males. The ability to discern what works best for the males could potentially be beneficial to all learners as teachers and students continue to interact.

Revelations of Teacher-Student Interactions

Even though a select group of teachers took the initiative to find strategies that would help the achievement of African American males, Principal Charles discovered that some teachers were frustrated with student behavior, volume and tardiness. Nevertheless, troublesome interactions were triggered by perceptions and frustrations on behalf of both, teachers and students.

The Teacher Viewpoint

The teacher perceptions as well as frustrations of students primarily stemmed from the lack of academic performance, coupled with diminishing student behavior and the ability to get to class on time along with blaring volume in the hallways and in the classrooms. Principal Charles reported that “when they [students] lack the skills, they lack the motivation and then they turn their focus elsewhere, typically not toward the school” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 11). At times, poor behavior was a cover up or coping mechanism for students who lacked the necessary skills to be academically successful.
Frustration with Student Behavior

Even though teachers were frustrated with the behavior of students who turned their focus away from school, the issue of finding ways to refocus the students was a concern that Principal Charles attempted to address by “trying to provide for them the access to whatever it is that they’re lacking” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 11). Along with the importance of building relationships, Charles encouraged the teachers to help the students “connect to the school in some way” by having activities that students cared about (GI, 7/23/14, p. 11). An activity that many students cared about was sports. In order for students to participate in any sport, they must meet the academic eligibility requirements. Often the sport was the incentive that encouraged students to meet those requirements during the athletic season. Charles reported that,

Building relationships is important as well and we try to help them connect to the school in some way. You try to have activities and different things that they can care about other than school. You have kids that [are] athletes so when they’re in season, they do better, that’s very typical. The seasons are short [and] you try to provide for them the support that they need so that they can find success. Success breeds success. (GI, 7/23/14, p. 11)

Principal Charles indicated that it was typical for students to do better behaviorally during their athletic season. Making a conscious decision to behave better suggests that students are motivated by activities that interest them. Thus, if teachers made a conscious effort to design lessons or at the very least embed activities that were of interest to the unfocused students who were causing the frustration, then perhaps frustration levels would diminish. Nonetheless, along with the frustration regarding a lack of focus, loud volume was another frustration.

Volume: Those Loud Black Kids

For Principal Charles, a troublesome teacher-student interaction and frustration that teachers faced with some of the African American students dealt with volume, which he specifically attributed to diversity and cultural misunderstandings. According to Charles, the cultural changes in his building were attributed to diversity because the students were moving from
an urban core environment to a suburban environment where school culture and expectations were
different. Charles explained,

It is diversity just because it’s a misunderstanding or a changing; it’s the demographic yes, but it’s also, where the students are coming from. You’ve got families that may have started in [the urban core] starting to move west and they just keep on moving west. (IC, 6/27/13, p. 7)

The students’ perceptions, personal experiences, and practices of how school was run and operated in the urban core was quite different than the teachers’ perceptions, experiences, and practices of how school was run and operated in the suburbs. In addition, the teacher expectations in the suburbs were not synonymous with the experiences that the students were accustomed to in the urban core. “The students often come with a notion of what school is supposed to be or how school should run or be operated and it isn’t necessarily what our staff believes” (IC, 6/27/13, p. 7). For example, the “general volume is one of the things our staff really struggle with” (IC, 6/27/13, p. 8).

When Charles referenced the general volume, he was specifically referring to the African American girls. While the girls were in the hallway “carrying on their business” talking and laughing about a range of girlie things, the volume was a problem for some teachers, while others were not fazed by it.

Our African American girls are loud (chuckling). There is no quiet about them. It bothers some and it doesn’t bother others and when they are in the hallway they are carrying on their business and they’re loud! (IC, 6/27/13, p. 8)

In terms of addressing the volume, while chuckling, Charles reported that, “It depends on the teacher” (IC, 6/27/13, p. 8). The volume problem bubbled into frustration for some of the teachers and instead of finding a solution, they complained about it in the teachers’ lounge and viewed the behavior as a sign of disrespect because teacher strategies that once worked in the past no longer worked (IC, 6/27/13, p. 9). For example, teachers may have been comfortable saying,
“Hey, tone it down” but the problem was “as with many things, they think they are going to get a result like, (snapping finger), like that!” (IC, 6/27/13, p. 10).

The things [strategies] they have used in the past that typically worked [no longer work]. They see it as a disrespect, because the behavior doesn’t change. It could just be that when you have something engrained in your culture, and that’s who you are, you’re not gonna change. I mean you can try and guide them, and that’s what we’re supposed to do right? It’s a learning institution, it’s not just about academics. (IC, 6/27/13, p. 9)

However, when teachers attempted to guide students, the strategies attempted did not work well the first time around. According to Principal Charles, they had to be persistent. “You’re gonna have to continue and continue and continue” (IC, 6/27/13, p. 10) following through with students. While some teachers were persistent, others were not.

The reality is you’re going to have some [teachers] that are far better at following through with what they are supposed to do than others. And so, when you are in the hallway, you don’t have every teacher there, you have some of the teachers there. The some of the teachers that are there are getting frustrated with the fact that all of the teachers aren’t there. That’s a different problem all together. (IC, 6/27/13, p. 10)

Despite the complaints in the staff lounge along with a lack of instant results from strategies that worked in the past, “a few African American teachers have taken it upon themselves to educate some of their colleagues” (IC, 6/27/13, p. 8) with possible solutions on how to address the students. With the African American boys in particular, teachers needed to speak to them without appearing intimidated because pampering them was not going to work. Charles reported that the African American teachers would say, “Don’t coddle them [the boys]! Make sure you put them in their place because that’s the way it happens at home” (IC, 6/27/13, p. 8).

Awkwardly, when African American boys were loud, some of the White teachers who attempted to put students in their place were intimidated, backed off and felt the need to be gentle. However, an African American teacher who had been around longer than Principal Charles insisted that you stand your ground and not back down. Charles explained,
Unfortunately when a young [black] man is loud, it’s intimidating and so people will back off from that thinking we need to be gentler. [But] “No!” That’s one teacher whose been around a little longer than I have here and she’s like, “Don’t back down from them. Tell ‘em what’s what and then they go on” [doing] what is expected of them. (IC, 6/27/13, p. 8)

Although the strategy of not backing down may have worked for some kids, Principal Charles was not interested in focusing only on the African American students but he also became concerned about focusing on strategies that would work for all students. In supporting this effort, he was able to take advantage of an opportunity that allowed him to secure a facilitator who shared strategies staff could use with African American boys.

What we have discovered is that we need to be educated on what works for [not] just our African American kids but with all our students, specifically with our growing population. We had [a facilitator] from [the intermediate school district who] came and spoke with staff. Granted it was [voluntary] after school; I was elated. I had 35 staff here that came in on their first Friday off to hear what works with African American boys. (IC, 6/27/13, p. 8)

The unfamiliarity that teachers where experiencing with the cultural demographics or characteristics associated with students from the urban core suggests that the changing student body resulted in uncharted territory for some teachers. For example, the practices of walking quietly in the hall or sitting quietly at a desk with a notebook open and pencil out ready to learn may be ideal and expected in one culture but quite different in another culture. If a student from the urban core is accustomed to talking loud in the halls and upon entering the classroom, then the student will likely carry that same loud talking characteristic to a suburban school simply because that has been that student’s experience.

Student Tardiness

Another frustration that teachers faced with African American students was tardiness. Being on time to school or to class was an issue that Principal Charles had to address. Nevertheless, Charles attributed some of the tardiness related to student experiences based on
where they came from or what some stereotypically referenced being late as “CPT or Colored People’s Time” (GI, 7/23/14, p.10). He believed that tardiness was an acceptable practice for some students and in some schools, but it had become a problem in his school. Charles explained,

Like being in class on time. I am somebody who believes that you don’t just make some stuff up, at some point this was acceptable to students that they are not in class when they are supposed to be. And, it’s becoming more problematic that students are not thinking they need to be in class, and quite often, when you look out into the hallways it’s a single color that’s doing that. (IC, 6/27/13, p. 7)

Although Charles did not want to single out a particular ethnic group, when asked, he specifically referenced the single color in the hallways as some of the African American students who are not only late to class, but were also arriving late to school. “Coming to school tardy is a problem we have been trying to find solutions to. We have made home visits trying to find out why aren’t you getting to class on time or school on time” (IC, 6/27/13, p. 8). A few reasons were speculated as to why the students were arriving late to school and aligned with group interview discussions. It was believed that some do not actually live in the district and were being driven from other municipalities on a daily basis (GI, 2/23/14, p. 9). The ones not living in the district may be using the address of a third party via a sworn affidavit to confirm residency (IC, 6/27/13, p. 7) or there may be joint custody issues where one parent may live in the district, while the other parent lives outside of the district (GI, 2/23/14, p. 9). Charles explained,

We have an African American population, I don’t like to generalize, it isn’t all of them by any means and it’s [being late] not only just to all the classes it’s also to school. We have guesses as to why students are not on time to school and some of that has to do with because we don’t believe that some of them live here. They are being driven here or they are using a third party affidavit to say that they live with their aunt but they really don’t. They are using it to not be at the school where they are actually assigned to. Going to classes late is like worse at the beginning of the year but it does take a little bit of work to convince them that they need to be prepared, on time, and ready to go. (IC, 6/27/13, p. 7)

Charles also discovered that being on time was defined differently by teachers and students.
students on time meant standing at the door by the time the bell rings (GI, 7/23/14, p.11). In the group interview, participants agreed that “for a lot of your White teachers it [being on time] means by the time the bell rings, I’m seated and you’re ready to go” (GI, 7/23/14, p.11).

In essence, when students are not in their seats ready to learn teachers are frustrated because it goes against the traditional teaching model associated with mainstream White middle class teachers where it is an expectation and a White cultural affiliation that students are in their seats ready to learn in wait of instruction. Although being late to school or class was an issue, Principal Charles had an additional speculation as to why students were late.

Additionally, Charles speculated that getting to school on time was also about a mentality that he truly could not explain, even with the African Americans who were legally resided within the boundaries of the district. Although approximately 28% of student enrollment was African Americans, his “morning tardy line is 95% African American” (GI, 7/23/14, p.10). Because Charles could not rationalize why the African American students were regularly late, he speculated that “a lot of them choose not to get up and get on the bus” at 6:40 in the morning when school had a 7:25 a.m. start time (GI, 7/23/14, p.10). Thus, they chose to get dropped off.

When we went through this transition [of consolidating schools], the school got larger by 150 kids give or take, not a single walker was gained. They were all bused in and I went from 9 buses to 22 buses, yet my drop off line tripled. It’s ridiculous how big my drop off line is and I know that they’re not walkers. I mean they all have a bus to ride. They don’t want to get on the buses at a quarter to 7:00 [AM]. The earliest [bus] maybe 6:40 [AM]. (GI, 7/23/14, p.10)

Here, staff’s presumptions about students seemed not to match realities. On the one hand, staff attributed tardiness, especially for the first hour class, to African American students’ “cheating” the system by not living in the district, meaning longer drives to attend. Such presumptions stereotype African American students as youth who do not deserve to be educated in this building. However, as Charles noted, when school consolidations occurred and
demographics changed, more and more students lived far enough from school to ride a bus, but a lower proportion seemed to be taking this socially unacceptable (to teens) mode of transportation. Plus, riding the bus to school required an earlier departure from home – an unpleasant situation for most teens, who opted to be dropped off at school.

While buses run in a timely fashion linked to school schedules, family autos appeared to lag the school start time by waiting in the drop-off line that Charles noted as tripling in length. Curiously, no one mentioned that the school start time might be too early for effective learning by teens. The district’s choices about schedules and the size of the attendance areas appear to play as much a part in being late to school as other factors, while staff’s miscasting African American student as youth who should not be in this school signaled that their preferred solution might be to remove African American students.

Illegally Enrolled

The speculations of not living in the district became a concern that Principal Charles inadvertently had to address because there were some students who truly did not live in the district which potentially affected the funding associated with the per pupil enrollment. In states where school funding depended on the number of students enrolled, the more students enrolled on count day, the more money each school received. As long as students resided in a district, funding for those students would be received but once students left the district, the funding also left. For Charles, the funding allocation was tricky.

You’re kind of torn because now with the way that we receive funding, and if we’re counting them, we don’t have any reason to not believe that they’re a resident, we get the money for them. When we kick them out, we don’t get the money anymore. (GI, 7/23/14, p. 9)

Although Charles did not specify how many students may not have been legally enrolled, the African American students seemed to be targeted while the quantity appeared to be less than a
handful. However, the inclination of staff was to stereotype all African American youth as being illegally enrolled. Notice that this attitude leads to the possibility of not putting too much effort into their education, since they really do not “deserve” to be in this school. Youth are cast not as students, but as scofflaws.

Unfortunately, the illegal enrollment often goes unnoticed until it is brought to the attention of administration by a third party, when mail is returned to the school without a forwarding address, or when something negative happens behaviorally and the student is investigated (GI, 7/23/14, p. 9). Nevertheless, the ideology of school funding being attached to student enrollment suggests that finding illegally enrolled students is not a high priority for the school or the district when money determines resources, yet it is a priority for teachers who do not want African American students in the school when they are presumed as having poor behavior.

The Student Viewpoint

Although teachers struggled and had frustrations associated with loud African American students and tardiness, students also had struggles and frustrations. Because the vantage point of student were sometimes overlooked by teachers, adjusting to a new school environment was difficult for some students. Finding ways to survive, feeling singled out, and trying to measure up academically were struggles that African American students from the urban core had to cope with.

Student Survival

Coming from an urban core culture with one way of doing things and walking into a suburban culture with a different way of doing things could be intimidating for students who were trying to figure out how to fit in. Principal Charles found that intimidation caused some students to act out in a negative manner in order to cope with or survive the adjustment. He viewed the
acting out or survival behavior as a means of covering up the fact that a student may not be able to measure up academically (GI, 7/23/14, p. 7).

In the past, students attempted to survive the course of the day by acting like the class clown. Nowadays, some students attempt to survive the course of the day in a disrespectful manner by pushing and shoving peers in a comedic nature, blurting out while the teacher is talking, or being confrontational with the teacher (GI, 7/23/14, p. 7). However, instead of making people laugh, the behavior “comes off in more violent ways, pushing and shoving” with the intended comedic interactions among peers and staff often resulting in disrespectful behavior (GI, 7/23/14, p. 7). Charles shared his take on the alternatives students used in order to survive in an unfamiliar environment.

[Students seemed to think] if I can’t measure up academically, then I have to find a way to measure up. In the past you might find that [behavior] as a class clown or somebody acting out like that, now it’s a lot of disrespectful behavior. A lot of disrespect towards each other and sometimes student to staff but it’s towards each other. You know the pecking order, where do I fit? (GI, 7/23/14, p. 7)

Acting out in order to survive an unfamiliar environment suggests that students are trying to cover up their inadequacies. Coming from urban core schools where curriculum may be less challenging than the curriculum in suburban middle schools implies that students from the urban core may have deficit or low skills compared to their suburban counterparts, yet teachers presume students are not motivated. Oddly, no one mentioned that having low skills can be embarrassing for a new urban core middle school student trying to fit in and no one mentioned implementing an orientation process to help students adjust. The embarrassment can cause students to redirect the attention off of themselves academically by acting as a class clown or by disrespectsing teachers and peers for fear of having their low skills outed among peers.
Principal Revelations

Just as teachers made discoveries about the changing clientele of students they served and as students made discoveries about themselves trying to survive unfamiliar territories, Principal Charles made discoveries about his leadership practices by relying on the expertise of staff and professional development needs of staff by examining the data. Additionally, his advice aspiring principals and district administration was to have the courage to talk about race.

Leadership Practices

Because of the variables associated with education like curriculum, school improvement, and professional development, trying to be an expert in each area became a challenge that Principal Charles had to face. Charles acknowledged that he was not an expert and faced that challenge by relying on input from teacher leaders who he declared as his team of experts.

My philosophy very much is that I’m not an expert at anything. I’ve got a dream team of experts and I rely on my teacher leaders in order to tell me what it is that they need, and they do. (IC, 6/27/13, p. 14)

He relied on the professional learning teams (P.L.T.’s) to guide the school improvement plan by looking at data within the various departments to assess the needs of students. Once the needs were assessed, Charles provided staff with resources and professional development opportunities to support those needs.

[The] school improvement plan is very much driven by my P.L.T.’s. The departments say this is what we need. Because they look at data they know their kids. As a result, we have in place a plan that moves them forward and my philosophy is I’m a support. I provide them an opportunity to get what they need. (IC, 6/27/13, p. 14)

In addition, Charles was not a top-down administrator who gave directives to staff. As an educational leader, he believed in working side by side with staff and providing support and resources as needed in order to breed success.
As an instructional leader, my philosophy is that I work with you side by side rather than telling you what you need to do and provide the supports and the resources that they need in order to be successful. (IC, 6/27/13, p. 14)

Working side by side with staff suggests the Principal Charles was a leader who valued the expertise and opinion of his teacher leaders. By understanding that staff were the experts in their perspective fields suggests that Charles was not intimidated in his role as principal by the teachers whom he referred to as his dream team. Being able to depend on a dream team suggests a mutual level of trust and respect among colleagues when making decisions in the best interest of the students served.

**Professional Development**

In taking the lead from teachers who disaggregated student achievement data, focusing on reading, embracing technology, and talking about race became building-wide concerns that Principal Charles chose to address through professional development opportunities.

**Focusing on Reading**

Because the initiatives were building-wide, the reading focus expanded into reading across the curriculum in order to include the content area teachers (IC, 6/27/13, p. 14). For teachers who were unfamiliar with reading strategies, instructional coaches were available to assist as needed.

They are now focusing on reading across the curriculum. We have instructional coaches, which are pretty nice. One of them is a reading expert and she has been training our science and social studies guys. Reading for information, all different skills and strategies that they can do to help their kids be more successful. That’s been the focus. (IC, 6/27/13, p. 14)

After analyzing data, often the focus was on mathematics and reading. However, to focus on reading with instructional coaches or reading experts to support the training of science and social studies teachers suggests that value was no longer on the content areas of mathematics and reading only. Although reading is important, being able to apply those skills outside of the reading
classroom, across the curriculum, can be a difficult school-wide initiative if teachers do not have support, trust, and the right resources.

Embracing Technology

Even though reading was one focus, getting teachers to embrace technology and integrate it into instructional practices was another concern that Charles wanted to address. The district as a whole purchased Smart Projectors for the middle and high schools and using this technology was a learning curve for some teachers. In some instances students were more comfortable with technology than the teachers (IC, 6/27/13, p. 14).

Integration of technology has also been a focus, we just as a school, as a district, the secondary schools just got brand new Smart Projectors. They are trying to learn how to use them. To not be afraid of the technology. (IC, 6/27/13, p. 14)

By learning to embrace technology, teachers can gain the interest of some students by simply asking for help. Asking students for help suggests that the teacher is human and does not know everything. When a student knows something that a teacher does not know, sometimes a student earns bragging rights or gets a little cocky by knowing more than the teacher, which can be an ego booster or a motivator for a struggling student.

Talking About Race

While reading was one concern, gaining the courage to talk about difficult topics like race was another concern Principal Charles had to address. A professional development session with a facilitator from the intermediate school district created a platform for staff to have “courageous conversations” by learning how to talk openly about troubling issues (IC, 6/27/13, p. 8). The idea was to have conversations in order to find solutions instead of keeping issues bottled up.

We have done all kind of things to have people understand that don’t be afraid of it [courageous conversations], whatever is troubling us and hopefully find a solution, but if you don’t talk about it you’re not going to. (IC, 6/27/13, p. 8)
Being able to talk openly about difficult topics like race suggests that staff had a safe and trusting environment. Maybe, but teachers made very racist moves relative to tardiness, and no one called them on it, or even seemed to notice how the staff attitude about “illegal” attendance might lead to a disregard for students’ learning. Additionally, parents’ intuition about racist behavior may forbid students from riding the bus or walking to school out of fear of safety. Although race is a very delicate topic, most people do not want to be misinterpreted as being racist, so they shy away from bringing up issues of concern. However, when talking about race, people must learn and understand the cultural dynamics associated with race. For example, in the African American culture, families with several people in the home are often loud in an effort to be heard. Thus, when African American students come to school, that loudness carries over in the hallways and classrooms with excitement. If that cultural characteristic is unknown, then that loudness can easily be misinterpreted as being rude and disrespectful by those who are not African American.

Advice to Novice Principals

In addition to providing professional development opportunities for staff, as a professional courtesy, Principal Charles advised aspiring and new principals to “get to know your staff and your students” by “seeing them” in their element (IC, 6/27/13, p. 15).

Seeing them in their classrooms, seeing them in the hallways, seeing them at lunch. See their interactions with their students formally and informally. It’s important to know who it is that you can go to. (IC, 6/27/13, p. 15)

Once new principals know which staff members they can turn to for certain types of information, principals can take advantage of that information by using it to support staff or team members who may be struggling. Through professional learning teams (P.L.T’s), teachers were able to collaborate on academic and non-academic initiatives.

So you can take that information to say, “I see that you’re struggling, have you thought about talking to so and so.” The P.L.T.’s started to kick up again and the connection with each other is growing again which is nice. (IC, 6/27/13, p. 15)
Because budget cuts forced the common planning period that was used for teaming or collaborating to be taken away, staff held a grudge so working together had become a struggle but now it is an expectation.

We used to have teaming, more like a common planning time for teams but that went away with budget cuts about eight years ago. They have kind of had a chip on their shoulder because of that so bringing back the concept of working together has been a struggle. Now it just seems very much like at this point an expectation that they work together and it’s not just about academics it’s about how they deal with students, how they interact with each other. (IC, 6/27/13, p. 15)

Getting to know the staff is a two way street because, in return, the staff gets to know the principal. A very seasoned staff have this “preconceived notion of how” the building is supposed to be run yet “sometimes they can become a little disillusioned if it doesn’t match their belief” (IC, 6/27/13, p. 15). However, allowing staff to learn the principal creates an opportunity to build trust, especially if intentions are transparent and change needs to occur. Although change can be difficult for seasoned staff, establishing trust will allow for a mutual transition, rather than a resistant one.

Advice to District Administrators

Like the advice Principal Charles had for new principals in getting to know the staff and students, he echoed similar advice to district administrators by getting to know principals and minority stakeholders. For Charles, communication was important and he wanted district administration to have discussions on diversity where information could later be shared in an effort to find solutions to problems. The district no longer had a diversity committee.

What I would like to see is what we used to do, have those conversations with each other. We do not have a formal diversity committee where interested individuals come to talk and have discussions. We haven’t for a couple of years and I don’t know why. (IC, 6/27/13, p. 16)

Although there was a minority parent group, it did not draw enough people to make an impact. “The [minority parent group] is great but if only five people go [to meetings] and you
don’t come back and share then how is that information worthwhile to anybody? I would like to re-introduce that” (IC, 6/27/13, p. 16).

You gotta get away from this “admiring the problem.” It takes a different amount of admiration, for different people, before they look for a solution for whatever that problem is. Still there is complaining and looking at the problem and saying, “Damn, this stinks,” instead of saying, “What can I do, what can we do, how can we work forward so that we can find success for all?” (IC, 6/27/13, p. 16)

Even though Principal Charles’s advice for district administrators was to have more communication with principals and minority parents, the advice was intended for district administrators to ignite conversations on diversity, which would suggest that the district was aware that a need existed. When stakeholders scrambled for time, divided between work, family, and activities, the district should find creative ways to maintain the interest of stakeholders. If agendas are clearly defined and visions are of value, people will participate.

Principal Donna

The fourth and final majority participant was Principal Donna whose journey of becoming a principal did not start out in education; nevertheless, it was filled with lots of transition once she began the educational career path. Of the participants, Donna was the closest to the urban core, had one of the most ethnically diverse teaching staff as well as the highest enrollment of economically disadvantaged students. The teacher-student interactions reported by Donna were very troubling, ranging from a student being told to go “dumpster-diving” to students being baited for negative reactions. Because teachers struggled with classroom management, Donna encouraged professional development initiatives that supported the individual needs of teachers along with curriculum. Although Donna advised aspiring principals to get to know all the aspects associated with the school including building relationships with stakeholders, she advised district administrators to allow principals to have a say in selecting or removing staff.
Background

Principal Donna was a White female with 28 years in education with eight of those years as principal. Although Donna was 62 years old, she came into education via a “circuitous route” (ID, 1/30/14, p. 1). Donna had actually earned a degree in Social Work but changed careers and began as a para-professional in an urban school district. After earning her teacher certification in high school English and Social Studies, the assistant principal took Donna under her wing and encouraged her to go into administration.

Upon the completion of her educational leadership requirements, Donna became a department head, followed by assistant principal, then principal. Subsequently, Donna’s first principal assignment was at a middle school for one year, followed by a grades K-8 building for two years, high school for three years, then back to a brand new school where she currently dwells. “So I’ve had leadership experience at every level.” The level changes were the result of school closures. (Laughing) “I’m starting to feel like, The Closer” (ID, 1/30/14, p. 1) from the television series where a police detective discover unique ways to close cases.

For Donna, the new middle school came about “because two schools closed and were merged into one” (ID, 1/30/14, p. 2). In an effort to merge the two schools, “You had a lot of that territoriality and trying to establish dominance” (ID, 1/30/14, p. 2). In addition, she felt that the diversity was attributed to the boundaries that her particular building resided in. “I think because we are kind of bordering several different neighborhoods and actually the school does not even sit within our school boundaries, which is really weird” (ID, 1/30/14, p. 2). Nevertheless, Donna was passionate about the school and the community she served.
Teacher-Student Demographics

Principal Donna’s school was located seven miles from the urban core. In the 2012-2013 school year, Donna had a diverse staff consisting of White, African American, Latino and Arabic teachers. Approximately 78% of her teaching staff was White, with “eight or nine African American teachers, probably eight or nine that speak Spanish,” and two Arabic teachers (ID, 1/30/14, p. 7-8).

Because this was a new building with grades K-8, the entire student enrollment in the 2012-2013 school year consisted of 870 students (ID, 1/30/14, p. 1); however, the grades 6-8 enrollment consisted of 216 students (Table 2). The ten-year comparison data for student enrollment, prior to the 2012-2013 school year, did not exist. The African American enrollment for that year was at 20%, while the economically disadvantaged student enrollment was practically school-wide at 83.1%. The student enrollment, like the staff, was very diverse with a make-up of White, Latino, African American, and Arabic. “We are in a diverse community here” (ID, 1/30/14, p. 1).

Revelations of Teacher-Student Interactions

Although Principal Donna was responsible for opening a new building with a diverse staff and a diverse student body, she reported a few troubling interactions between teachers and students. The troublesome teacher-student interactions that she reported included teachers who lacked cultural sensitivity, teachers who baited students by being intentional in their actions, and students who confronted peers.

The Teacher Viewpoint

Often, teachers felt empowered and entitled to set forth rules and expectations for students without taking into consideration the perspective of students, their parents, or administration. By
failing to acknowledge the perspective of others, coupled with a lack of sensitivity, expected outcomes were not favorable.

Cultural Insensitivity

The unwillingness to understand cultural differences along with the lack of being flexible was a concern for Principal Donna. Donna had some teachers who believed that everything students did in class should have been implemented according to the classroom rules. From writing their name correctly on a page to standing in a straight line, the rules could not be broken or modified. Although Donna was in the building closest to the urban core, she did not interpret most of the problems she witnessed as diversity issues, but rather as a lack of cultural competence for some teachers (ID, 1/30/14, p.4).

I’m not sure that most of the problems I have seen have had to deal with diversity. My gut feeling is we just have some folks who, at least some teachers, let me think, how do I want to phrase this? We have some students who are coming with huge challenges, that may be rooted in their ethnicity or their culture but I think we’ve got some teachers who are so unbending, not receptive to some of those cultural needs, just really unbending, that expect more from the kids, maybe, than their willing to do themselves. (ID, 1/30/14, p.4)

Donna recalled one interaction that involved a special needs student but could not recall if the student had ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) or a specific learning disability (ID, 1/30/14, p.4). Nevertheless, the student who had repeated the same grade was taller than her classmates and was expected to follow certain rules. Because the student would forget to put her name on her paper, this teacher would throw the paper in the trash. One day, the teacher literally told the student to go “dumpster diving” if she wanted her paper out of the trash (ID, 1/30/14, p.4). “So you’ve got this great big tall girl who happens to be White in a class with a White teacher and the teacher is absolutely unbending, nit-picks everything the kid does or doesn’t do” (ID, 1/30/14, p.4). Although this teacher has had multiple meetings with the parents and was aware of this child’s history and special needs, the teacher refused to accommodate her.
If this kid doesn’t put her name in the right spot on her paper, the teacher sometimes will ball it up, sometimes just drop it in the recycle bin and actually told the child that if she wanted that paper back she had to go dumpster diving. Completely and totally unbending. (ID, 1/30/14, p.4)

The incident was brought to the attention of the Principal Donna after receiving a disturbing phone call from the angry parent.

The parent called threatening to beat the shit out of the teacher. Usually what they say is, “I want my kid out of that classroom.” That child probably has no more control over her issue, her disability, which could be because parent drug use or alcohol abuse or whatever. But looks like mom’s trying to get it together. Again, she’s the biggest kid in the class. She stands out. She’s loud. She is really active but why would you pour fuel on the fire? Why would you escalate instead of de-escalate? (ID, 1/30/14, p.5)

Although telling the special needs child to go dumpster diving was insensitive and demeaning, and angered that child as well as the parent, the teacher did not see anything wrong with the comment when Principal Donna informed her that the parent was upset. The insensitivity of the teacher was that of a tunnel vision mentality where the dynamics of class was viewed through her personal lens and not taking into consideration the lens or reality of the student or the parent. The phrase “dumpster dive” is offensive because it insinuates the low socioeconomic status of poor or homeless people who scavenge through dumpsters for basic necessities like food or clothing. The action of the teacher suggests a selfish sense of superiority and authoritative entitlement where the teacher made certain demands because she was in charge. Like Principal Donna expressed, the student probably lacked self-control due to potential substance abuse by the parent. Nevertheless, instead of belittling a child that a teacher knew had issues, the teacher could have at the very least held on to the paper and reminded the student to write her name on the paper, instead of insensitively telling the student to go dumpster diving.

Baiting Students

When teachers do not see anything wrong with their actions or word choices, Principal Donna expressed another concern where she believed that some teachers deliberately “bait
students.” Teachers bait students by intentionally saying something negative in order to get a rise or a negative reaction out of the student. Some students may ignore the comments, while others will reciprocate the teachers’ negative energy by responding inappropriately. The negative response by the student often leads to a verbal battle initiated and escalated by the teacher’s poor choice of words. However, the student is the one who is generally disciplined, often suspended, for being insubordinate.

Despite the fact that one student had problems following rules that could be attributed to her learning disabilities, the oddness in this is that the same unbending teacher who told the special needs student to go dumpster diving to get her nameless paper out the trash had problems in following rules herself. Yet, because she was an adult who may have had family issues, the teacher felt that she was entitled to the principal understanding her issues (ID, 1/30/14, p.4).

It always amazes me when adults, there’s something going on and I see something that really shouldn’t be happening [i.e. frequently late to work], the adult will want some slack because of all of these things that are going on…my mother’s ill, my child’s ill, my car broke down, blah, blah, blah, blah… and they automatically expect my acceptance of them. But, when a kid comes to school with those same identical issues, they’re absolutely unbending and unwilling to accept. And we know from being in schools for so long that every kid’s story is different, just like every adults’ story is different. I say at every staff meeting, “All of God’s children got issues.” (ID, 1/30/14, p.4)

Principal Donna shared another case where “a young man who happened to be an African American” returned to her building from a charter school where a 504 Plan had been in place (ID, 1/30/14, p.5). A 504 Plan accommodates general education students who have health issues, but do not qualify for special education services. For example, a 504 Plan will allow a student to turn in homework late because that student may have been hospitalized. Thus, the student with a 504 Plan will not be penalized academically for missing school. The young man appeared to be “highly intelligent” and the father explained to the principal and the teacher that his son had “challenges”
and that the 504 Plan currently in place had been requested from his previous charter school (ID, 1/30/14, p. 5).

The teacher of an ethnicity other than, ok not White, not Black, but just absolutely, again, unbending with the kid. Nit-picks the kid to pieces and then when he [the boy] reacts negatively, she just lowers the hammer. So it’s like, you bait them by not being understanding of some of their challenges and just hammer them when they don’t meet whatever your expectations are. I’m sure you know that that’s one of the toughest things about being a school leader. You walk this tight rope all the time and you can’t just keep going to folks saying, “Obviously you’re racist!” You can’t throw the race card at every instance but so often, if you dig deep enough, all God’s children got issues, whatever they are. (ID, 1/30/14, p. 5)

Although Donna is a White principal and the teacher who nit-picked the African American boy was neither Black nor White, Donna could not help but wonder if that teacher was indeed racist. When a father takes the time to forewarn both the principal and the teacher about his son’s challenges, the parent is being proactive. The father could have sent his son to school without any warnings and the teacher would have had to figure out that the kid had issues on her own. Here, the teacher presumes a sense of entitlement because the teacher values his personal needs over than the need of the student.

Nevertheless, Principal Donna’s statement, “All of God’s children got issues” suggests that no one is perfect because everyone, kids and adults, will face challenges in life at some point. However, just as teachers wanted the principal to cut them some slack, it would appear that the principal’s gesture would model for the teachers on cutting students some slack by accommodating students with special needs.

Removing Students from Class

Along with teachers who baited students, Principal Donna was concerned with teachers who were in constant contact with parents to complain or to get students removed from class. However, Donna realized that if struggling students were removed from certain classes, then the
achievement data for the teacher would look pretty good compared to the teachers who would receive that struggling student (ID, 1/30/14, p. 9).

Anybody can be a good teacher if you have all good students. If you drive out the kids who are struggling, your data’s going to look pretty. And it shouldn’t be. One of my biggest surprises is Ms. Danish, national board certified. No parents like her. Most of the kids you talk to they just say she yells. (ID, 1/30/14, p. 9)

Mrs. Dumpling alienates parents like crazy. That’s the one who told the kid to go dumpster diving. Really? There was a [different] parent, that dad, three times I talked him out of moving his kid out of her classroom and finally I had to throw in the towel. (ID, 1/30/14, p. 9)

Although Principal Donna tried to discourage removing kids from class, at some point she had to give in to the parent’s request, especially if the parent felt like the child did not have a chance in the class.

You can only go so far. If you feel strongly that your kid doesn’t have a chance in that classroom. I had parents last year who approached me like that with Ms. Danish, but they were not forceful parents so I was able to keep [the kid in the class]. And now I am so sorry I didn’t move this one kid because she had it in for this kid. Hind sight is 20/20. The kid struggled, finally just got an IEP, he happens to be Hispanic. (ID, 1/30/14, p. 10)

Another parent who worked at McDonalds had a child who was hearing impaired and in Ms. Danish’s class. One day while at the drive-thru, the parent told Principal Donna that her child had to come out of that class (ID, 1/30/14, p. 10).

I have a hearing impaired student’s parent who works at McDonalds. I go to in the morning to get my oatmeal. “Mrs. Donna, I gotta come and talk to you. My baby’s gotta come out of that classroom.” Ms. Danish threatens [kids] all the time. Maybe that’s her way but it’s not fitting with the way of this community. It’s not working. (ID, 1/30/14, p. 10)

One of the male teachers, Mr. Donuts, had classroom management issues and irritated parents to a point where one parent literally wanted to strangle him for calling her house so much about the behavior of her child. (ID, 1/30/14, p. 10).

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3 The pseudonym for teachers will begin with the same letter as the participant who referenced them and will be associated with food.
He [Mr. Donuts] struggles with classroom management. It doesn’t matter the ethnicity. He just has no classroom management. He’s irritating parents because you can’t control him and now you’re going to call me [the parent] every single day from the classroom. So that’s two kids we lost because of classroom management. (ID, 1/30/14, p. 10)

Obviously, these teachers had a common link, the lack of classroom management skills. Because the teachers could not handle the kids, calling parents was likely a short term fix by threatening the kids to behave. However, as the phone calls became constant, teachers relinquished their power to parents or administration and the students recognized that. Nevertheless, if parents became more and more irritated by the teachers, one could only imagine how their kids were being treated. When different parents from different ethnic backgrounds constantly complained about the same teachers to administration and they all asked that their child be removed from that teachers’ class, then the problem is not the children, the problem is the teacher.

*The Student Viewpoint*

In addition to the challenges teachers faced with students, there are also challenges that students faced with each other. Challenges students faced included a form of survival from being picked on, retaliating using words, or fighting.

**Student Survival**

When students were picked on or pushed around by peers, Principal Donna found that students would retaliate by confronting their peers. Retaliation was used to survive after being fed up from being picked on or by hearing words that triggered a response or pushed a button. Donna recalled an incident that occurred with four male students. The one White boy was jumped by the other three boys or attackers who were Black, bi-racial, and White for allegedly saying, “f--- yo mama!” Unbeknownst to the boy that was jumped, his comment triggered a response because the mother of the attackers were either dead, impaired, or out of touch with reality (ID, 1/30/14, p. 5).

Another kid, who happened to be absent of color, he’s so pale that he punched a kid in the mouth, but the kid he punched in the mouth was also White. It spill[ed] over [from] the
classroom, just getting off the bus on the way home. There was no teacher immediately involved, but somebody was pushing the kid around. You want diversity, in the group of three kids who picked on this one kid, one was African American, one was bi-racial or multi-racial, and one was White. (ID, 1/30/14, p. 5)

And the kid who got popped in the mouth and knocked down happened to be White but I guess the phrase was “f--- yo mama!” said generally to all three attackers. One kid’s mom was dead, one kid’s mom is impaired, and the other kid’s mom is present in the home but not maybe the best example of what most of us want to see as motherhood. So, sometimes you think that that diversity plays into it, sometimes not. Sometimes it’s just “is what it is.” I mean that’s a different one but when it comes back to school, you’re looking at the effect in three different classrooms. (ID, 1/30/14, p. 5)

Undoubtedly, the boy who got popped in the mouth made a blanket statement out of anger, not knowing anything about the mothers of his attackers. However, the aftermath of making a “yo mama” statement when a mother is dead, impaired, or not mentally present in the home suggests that the attackers were given ammunition to retaliate. Although the incident happened off school grounds, Principal Donna did not state the precautions she had to take upon the students returning to school but interventions were necessary.

Principal Revelations

Although there were troubling interactions between teachers and students, Principal Donna found ways to redirect those interactions through leadership practices that included collaboration and professional development in specific content areas. In addition, her years of experience in education warranted advice to aspiring principals by getting to know every aspect of the school and being visible. For district administrators, Donna advice was to allow principals to have input when it came to staffing their buildings.

Leadership Practices

Because there were some teachers who struggled in specific areas like classroom management and curriculum, as an educational leader, Principal Donna was concerned and encouraged teachers to collaborate by reaching out to their colleagues. She recalled how it was
common practice at one time for teachers to work alone. They would go in their classrooms and shut the door, but Donna encouraged teachers to not be afraid to ask colleagues for help (ID, 1/30/14, p. 8).

I encourage teachers to be wise enough that if they struggle with a specific concept to reach out to their peers, their colleagues because maybe that’s a strength for somebody else. For so long we would go into classrooms and close doors and that was your kingdom, my kingdom and you kept people out. I think we do have to have a broader reach and a broader scope because we can’t all know everything even though we’re expected to. So my advice is don’t be afraid to reach out. (ID, 1/30/14, p. 8)

Along with promoting collaboration, Principal Donna also promoted whatever the district endorsed in terms of curriculum. “As far as curriculum, I do kind of promote the company line that the district has purchased these things [various educational resources] and we’re going to kind of follow those guidelines” (ID, 1/30/14, p. 8). The district used to provide the teacher textbook editions along with the aligning ancillaries to support the curriculum. However, the implementation of the curriculum was left up to the interpretation and discretion of the teacher. “They’d throw you a TE [teacher edition] and you’d have to interpret” it (ID, 1/30/14, p. 8).

My advice is to always take what’s given to us as a district, because we’ve paid big bucks for them. Combine the curriculum with the pacing charts and those directives from curricula areas. Have a decent plan, not a play-functionary [fake] lesson plan but a way of how you’re going to teach. Use all the sources that you can. Now there’s all these online resources. I always believed you use what you’ve got, can’t always cry about what you don’t have. (ID, 1/30/14, p. 8)

Although the district now offered a pacing guide for the various curricular areas like math, science, social studies, and English, the related ancillaries were structured to meet the multiple learning needs of students through differentiation by providing teachers with alternative ways to teach a concept (ID, 1/30/14, p. 8). Principal Donna expressed that the job itself of teaching students had not changed much over the years, but the tools teachers used to teach had.

Our job hasn’t changed that much over the years. You still have to educate kids but the tools that we have are different. Differentiation is the biggest key and I think the fact that many of the curriculums are coming with ways to reteach because not all of us know 50
ways to teach something. It’s just that we’ve got a lot of tools out there, use the ones that will help. (ID, 1/30/14, p. 8)

As an English teacher, I would try different ways of incorporating writing because some kids, you say “writing,” they freak out. And, trying to promote grammar, use grammar, teach grammar, that’s like watching paint dry. Even with the simple things, tenses and adverbs, adjectives and all things. (ID, 1/30/14, p. 8)

Encouraging teachers to use district purchased curricula items suggests that Principal Donna backs the overall curricula expectations dictated by the district; however, she does not limit staff ability to differentiate instruction with the use of additional resources. With the learning challenges that many students face, differentiation should be an expectation and used as frequently as possible to help students along the way. In addition, collaborating with colleagues and setting aside the mentality of working in isolation could be beneficial with the onset of differentiated instruction.

*Professional Development*

While leadership practices supported collaboration and curriculum, professional development opportunities were on a rise. Principal Donna reported that the curricular areas of science and social studies were basically ignored for many years primarily due to AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) (ID, 1/30/14, p. 9) that was under the guidelines of No Child Left Behind (2001) which required proficiency to be measured in mathematics and reading. Because AYP was the school’s report card or performance indicator, the district spent many years focusing on ELA (English Language Arts) and mathematics. However, efforts were made to improve curricula in the various content areas, so professional development opportunities were increasing.

I think now as a district we do very well [in professional development]. I can remember the days when really there was nothing offered in the district. I think we’ve got some strong leaders in the curriculum areas and the content areas now. [The science coordinator] is like dynamite and that’s one of the best ones going on. If you have folks like [the science coordinator] who are really still focused on those students in the classroom level, I think that’s where you’re going to see some huge growth, plus we need it. (ID, 1/30/14, p. 9).
By focusing on ELA and mathematics, the district’s overall academic proficiency in science and social studies was neglected. Principal Donna compared the ignoring of science and social studies to sticking a knife in the heart of the teachers who taught those subjects (ID, 1/30/14, p. 9).

Science is our lowest thing right now. We spent so many years on ELA and Math. Social Studies is taking on the challenges of Science because we ignored them for the last what, seven years, eight years? It’s like they didn’t even count. Everything had to be with AYP and ELA and Math. Forget everything else. We [the district] kind of stuck a knife in the heart of Science and Social Studies [teachers]. As an English slash Social Studies teacher, I believe the Social Studies is kind of the glue that bring all the pieces together. (ID, 1/30/14, p. 9)

As an educational leader, Principal Donna had to have a pulse on every aspect of her school (curriculum, standardized test data, staff, students, parents, building operations, the list goes on) with academic proficiency being a high priority. Although the district focused on ELA and mathematics for years, being a social studies teacher and being ignored by the district suggested that Donna recognized the years of neglect with social studies and science. The problem associated with neglecting these content areas implies that it will take years to recover. In addition, as curriculum changes and new teaching strategies emerge, a learning curve for teachers will also emerge which means additional teacher training and professional development along with associated cost.

Advice to Aspiring Principals

While the implementation of an enhanced curriculum can be a learning curve, being a new principal can also be a learning curve. Because of this, Principal Donna advised new principals to “get to know” the various aspects of the school before trying to make changes, be visible, assess the data, and build relationships (ID, 1/30/14, p. 9).

Get to know the school before you try to change the school. Get to know the folks, get to know the people, get to know the community, be visible and really assess. Data only tells
you the numbers. It's the relationships, you gotta start building relationships with people to get that overall feel for the building. (ID, 1/30/14, p. 9)

Getting to know the people lends itself to launching relationships and building trust with the people and community. Once relationships and trust are established, people are generally receptive to change given justifiable rationales. In addition, relationships built on trust precipitates a sense of value. When people feel valued, they take ownership and pride in interpreting data and in determining the actions or prescriptions needed to respond to the data.

Advice to District Administrators

In addition to advising new principals, Principal Donna advised district administrators to allow principals to have input when it comes to staffing a building. Although student enrollment regulates the number of staff assigned to a building, principals would like their voices to be heard by district administrators instead of being forced to gain or lose staff without a say. Having the flexibility to move staff would give principals the opportunity to transfer a teacher rather than jeopardize a teacher’s livelihood through a poor evaluation because the teacher is not a good fit for the school (ID, 1/30/14, p. 11).

I would like a little more flexibility in being able to move staff around. When you know it’s not a good fit, don’t saddle us with three or four years. Because it’s not a good fit, we have to rate somebody un-sat [unsatisfactory]. I think that’s sad because in the right environment, somebody may be okay but if it’s not a good fit no matter what you do and how much support, it’s just going to be an uphill battle the whole time. (ID, 1/30/14, p. 11)

Being in a teaching environment that is not a good fit is like being in a bad marriage and going through a divorce with irreconcilable differences. Although the marriage may no longer be a positive relationship with a lot of tension under one roof, a divorce or separation of environments may be in the best interest of both parties. Separation does not mean either party is a bad person or would unveil the same problems in a new relationship. It simply means change or an opportunity
for a fresh start. Like a divorce, sometimes the marriage between a staff and school are not meant to be and the principal would simply like to have a say in that.

Principal Vince

The fifth participant, representing the first of the minority participants, was Principal Vince who pursued law school prior to pursuing a career in education and becoming a principal. Vince reported challenges encountered with an all-White teaching staff along with the challenges faced by the small enrollment of African American students who were virtually considered invisible. Additionally, Vince advised aspiring principals to truly reflect and chew over the potential dynamics associated with a predominantly White school system where White parents do not want their children being disciplined by a Black man. His advice to district administrators was simply to diversify staff through the hiring process.

Background

Principal Vince was a 54 years old Africa American male who attended law school prior to becoming an educator of 17 years. He served four of those years as principal. Prior to working on a legal defense team, Vince had never been inside a jail, let alone, a police car. “The first time I went to the jail [to visit a client], I couldn’t go inside, I was scared, I was terrified, I was overwhelmed” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 2). Vince was “responsible for 254 poor souls who could not afford an attorney. It was a very humbling situation because 90% to 95% of our caseload was African American males between ages 20-30” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 2).

Vince’s passion to become an educator and advocate for students grew out of his experience from the caseloads of representing African American males caught up in the judicial system.

I saw just how deflating it was emotionally, psychologically, and I’m thinking, “Wow, if I could catch these guys before they get into trouble, I would have a much better opportunity
to impact their lives then after the fact.” And so, I said, “Maybe I should be a teacher.” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 2)

This deflating experience was instrumental in leading Vince to participate in an urban core, community based, program while earning his teacher certification in social studies. The program focused on getting African American males to remain in the classroom by establishing a partnership with urban core schools (IV, 7/2/13, p. 2). While in the program, Vince gained teaching experience by substitute teaching for two years and teaching “two years in college as a graduate assistant” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 2). Upon completing the program, a teaching position was guaranteed and preferential status was given in terms of pay by not starting at the bottom tier of the pay scale (IV, 7/2/13, p. 2).

While matriculating into a doctoral program, a member of Vince’s cohort informed him that, “she worked for a district that was looking to integrate and they needed African Americans.” She asked if he would be interested, but once she told him where it was located, “I said absolutely not because it was a district that was known to be completely homogenous” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 2). In other words, the district was predominantly White and Vince blatantly stated, “I didn’t want to integrate anything” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 2). Nevertheless, after digesting the thought for a while, Vince ran the idea by his dissertation chair and her response to him was, “White kids need to know how to respect African American authority” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 2). Likewise, African American students in all-White districts also needed to see people of color in authoritative roles.

Teacher-Student Demographics

Not only was Principal Vince’s middle school the farthest from the urban core, 50 miles, but it also had an all-White teaching staff of about 70, not including Vince. In addition, the student enrollment of 996 students in the 2002-2003 school year was predominantly White, while enrollment for African American students that same year was less than one percent. Because
Vince’s building transitioned from a middle school to an elementary school prior to economically disadvantaged data being made available in 2006-2007, data for enrollment over time were not available. However, based on the data provided by the school improvement plans of the combined middle schools in 2013-2014, the economically disadvantaged enrollment was approximately 26.8%. Although, the 26.8% came from the middle schools’ average of the 2013-2014 school improvement plans, the average enrollment of economically disadvantaged was probably in the same range for 2012-2013. In addition, the enrollment of African American students of the middle schools combined in that same district in 2012-2013 remained less one percent (mischooldata.org), which suggests that this school farthest from the urban core in this study did not have a growing population of African American students.

Revelations of Teacher-Student Interactions

When only a handful of African American students attend an all-White institution, the students can be easily overlooked and ignored. Because the students were basically invisible, the actions of some teachers were insensitive in regards to African American culture.

Volume: Those Quiet Black Students

Stemming from the low enrollment of African American students, Principal Vince found that the few who were in class were quiet and either overlooked or ignored by many of the White teachers. The African American students did not have any behavioral concerns. “Unless they [the Black kids] squeaked, they got no attention. They [the teachers] overlooked them, ignored [them]” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 7).

Well you know, none of the black kids were behavior problems. I mean never. If there was a situation, it was always somebody else. They [teachers] treated them as if they were invisible. (IV, 7/2/13, p. 7)

Ironically, the perceptions or stereotypes in the all-White environment were often triggered by television, due to a lack of personal interactions with African Americans who were out-
numbered in the community. Principal Vince indicated that White people “know” about African Americans based on what they see and hear on television (IV, 7/2/13, p. 4).

They [White people] know what is through television. They knew Jay-Z, hip hop, and break dancing. That was Black! That was their degree of understanding if they knew the words to a rap song. They thought they were right there but [by] the same token they were telling these [African American] kids by the unspoken word that they were not part of the mainstream culture. (IV, 7/2/13, p. 4)

In addition to being estranged from mainstream culture, Principal Vince revealed that the African American students in his school were raised by White families, but he did not specify if they were adopted (IV, 7/2/13, p. 3). Although the African American students were practically invisible, they were “trying their darnedest to be White for the most part because they wanted to fit in” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 7). However, “when you are outnumbered like less than 1% of the population” cultural differences can cause barriers that some students may elect to shy away from (IV, 7/2/13, p. 7). For example, the difference in White people’s hair verses Black people’s hair was a determining factor as to whether or not African American students would participate in activities like sports. “Well here’s the thing, with our [Black] hair, we don’t get in the shower, wash our hair, and let it blow in the breeze” due to the texture of the hair curling up tightly when wet [it] unlike White hair that remains straight (IV, 7/2/13, p. 7).

To avoid the hassle of having to explain to their White counterparts why African Americans do not wash their hair every time they showered, Principal Vince expressed that some African American students simply shied away from participating in activities all together.

When they [Whites] don’t see you washing your hair, Black kids shied away from things they knew they would have to broach the subject of why. So they didn’t go out for sports teams. They tried to suppress any differences that they may have. Unfortunately, at a juncture in their lives where they should have been testing the waters of interest and ability, they always played it really, really safe staying by the wall. They didn’t want to be seen as being outside the mainstream. Like I said, everybody treated them like they were invisible anyway. (IV, 7/2/13, p. 7).
Being the only African American student in a class or on an athletic team and having to explain cultural differences about things like hair could be very uncomfortable for a middle school student who already stood out by race. When Black hair is in its natural state, without a chemical treatment like a perm, the curl texture varies from loose waves to extremely curly or kinky once dampened. White hair, on the other hand, in its natural state will remain straight when dampened. However, when hair is chemically treated with a perm, the natural texture of the hair is alternated, causing the opposite effect for Black and White hair. A perm causes the natural curly Black hair to become straight, and causes the naturally straight White hair to become curly. Ultimately, because washing hair for most African Americans is not part of a daily regiment, it could be perceived by White teachers and White peers that African American students are not clean.

Cultural Insensitivity

Although some African American students made a conscious effort to fit in, Principal Vince recognized that one teacher in particular did not make conscious efforts to welcome them. When Vince walked into the classroom of a White male social studies teacher who decorated his classroom with a variety of artifacts including flags, Vince was not only in disbelief but he was also highly offended by the sight of one flag that hung and what it represented. Being culturally insensitive to students by displaying offensive artifacts was a problem that Vince wanted to address. “I had one teacher who had the Confederate flag flying in his room” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 4). The mere presence of the Confederate flag had Vince in bewilderment, which created a tense conversation that was directed towards the teacher being culturally insensitive to the African American race. As far as the teacher could perceive, “it’s just a flag” simply an artifact that was no different than the American and British flags that hang next to it (IV, 7/2/13, p. 4). Nonetheless, Vince viewed that particular flag differently.
That’s a flag we fought against. I want it down. He [the teacher] said you can’t tell me what to take down in my room. I said, yes I can but I explained, this represents slavery which is the ultimate crime you can commit against a human being with regards to how we [African Americans] are viewed, how we are treated. It conjures up a whole multitude of things that I have to still overcome in the 21st century so realistically it has no place unless you are teaching about that era in history. (IV, 7/2/13, p. 4)

Though the teacher was not teaching that era in history, the flag was a horrible reminder of how slaves (African Americans) were treated in the South by plantation owners, the free labor, the dehumanization, the physical abuse, the discrimination, the racism, the lack of respect for people who did not share the same skin color (IV, 7/2/13, p. 4-5). To Vince, that flag, without saying one word, spoke volumes on how that teacher potentially viewed people of color (IV, 7/2/13, p. 4-5). This caused Vince to internally question how that teacher viewed him as a man and how that teacher would view his son or any child of color that sat in his classroom (IV, 7/2/13, p. 4-5). Would that child be treated fairly? Vince let his feelings be known to the teacher that,

I quite frankly, I am highly offended to walk in here and see it because of what it represents. When I walk in and see the Confederate flag hanging over the threshold, you know, that speaks volumes about how you potentially view me and will treat me and my child. (IV, 7/2/13, p. 4-5)

Although it took a great deal of coercing and the teacher being called into the office by Vince’s White administrative counterpart, the teacher eventually took down the flag and Vince was able to coexist with the teacher. However, the teacher was told by one of his family members to relay a message to Vince disapproving the removal of the flag. The teacher echoed, “She told me to tell you that she thinks you are a jerk for having me take down the flag” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 5). Vince retorted, “I invite her to come into the 21st century if she doesn’t mind” and described the behavior of the teacher and family member as lacking cultural sensitivity and having a “redneck” mentality (IV, 7/2/13, p. 5).

[The] average White redneck [is] somebody that feels they are entitled, that nobody else’s opinions matter. They can do pretty much what they want because they are an American
citizen whether it violates the law or not. They feel like they have an inalienable right to pursue happiness on whatever level they please. (IV, 7/2/13, p. 5)

You know it’s funny because this guy [teacher] was your average White redneck but he was an educator and I think all teachers who are born to do what they do because they have the heart. This guy, I think, had the capabilities of being fair and even handed. He was just a product of where he came from and what he had been exposed to. (IV, 7/2/13, p. 5)

Even though the lack of cultural sensitivity by this teacher did not represent the beliefs of the staff as a whole, it suggested that in homogeneous communities the ability to view different cultural perspectives aside of one’s own culture perspective is not a common practice, lending itself to White privilege or a sense of entitlement where there are no boundaries. For a family member to tell the male teacher to relay the message that Principal Vince was a “jerk” and for that teacher to actually repeat those words to the principal suggests that there was a blatant lack of respect without boundaries or filters when it came to speaking to a Black person in a leadership position. The teacher had absolutely no respect for Principal Vince’s position as principal and no respect for him as a person who happened to be African American. The actions of the teacher, disrespecting the position and the person, was a clear indication that the teacher was racist, maybe out of ignorance or out of choice, but nonetheless racist.

The Student Viewpoint

Ultimately, trying to blend into a predominantly White school can feel awkward from the point of view of an African American student who may be the only person of color in a class or in the school. Blending in by sitting quietly in the class or walking quietly through the halls to avoid drawing attention was the alternative to trying to survive in an all-White environment.

Student Survival

Concerns about the perception of self for African American students were an issue that Principal Vince expressed when students in his building wanted to remain under the radar by not drawing attention themselves. Because these students did not want to embarrass themselves in the
predominantly White environment for fear of being talked about, labeled, or stereotyped by peers and teachers, they gave Vince affection from across the room in a nonverbal coded language that only he and the African American students could understand. Vince reported:

It appeared that the majority of the Black kids, they were glad to have me but they sort of kept their distance because it was as if they were afraid to embrace me [when] they saw their White peers because kids just want to fit in. They did not want to do anything that was going to be out of character. (IV, 7/2/13, p. 3)

They would smile and wave to me and…give me affection from across the room. If we were walking down the hall and it was just us in the hallway, they would really acknowledge my presence. If we were in where the rest of the kids were, they would sort of ignore me. (IV, 7/2/13, p. 3)

Although the rules of engagement were never formerly communicated between the Principal Vince and African American students, nonverbal acknowledgment suggests the rules were mutually understood, executed through facial expressions and body language. A slight nod of the head, eye contact, or smile was Vince’s way of reciprocating nonverbal communication, providing feedback, and acknowledging African American students who did not want personal attention from the “Black” principal. Attempting to blend with an all-White teaching staff and student body, remaining under the radar, and keeping a distance by giving affection from across the room suggests that Principal Vince was intuitive and sensitive to the needs of the African American students’ desire to survive or cope in an uncomfortable environment. However, the White staff was completely insensitive by not acknowledging the presence of African American students.

The ability to ignore African American students by pretending they did not exist in classrooms was a blatant act of discrimination as well as a blatant disregard for the oath of certified educators who were professionally obligated to teach all students. Failure to embrace African American students in the classroom is a failure to educate them with the presumption that they do
not deserve to be educated. The sad reality is that the transparent actions of teachers are recognized by the very students who are simply trying to blend in to an objectionable environment.

Principal Revelations

From being overlooked and ignored to simply trying to survive, the district as a whole had some growing to do in the area of cultural competence or the ability to understand and interact with people from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, professional development and advice to new principals and district administration were a part of the discoveries that Principal Vince encountered.

*Professional Development*

After learning that the district had a violation that brought in the Department of Justice (DOJ) team of about 6 members, Principal Vince was concerned about race relations in his building and in the district. Although the terms of the violation were not revealed, a member from the DOJ investigative team encouraged Vince to help facilitate the investigation consisting of principals and teachers that oddly lead into a cultural competency session (IV, 7/2/13, p. 8).

I don’t know what the violation was exactly, however, the Department of Justice sent a team in to investigate. There was a black guy on the team, he was the senior person. When he saw me, we made eye contact. He said, “I need someone to stand up and lead this effort and ultimately guide the direction of this horse so we can have our questions answered.” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 8)

The senior DOJ person did not want to be present because he did not want any of the participants to change their responses, but according to Vince, “it ultimately turned into a session regarding culture competency and understanding. It was amazing I will never forget that day. It was amazing what they [White employees] didn’t know” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 8).

One of the things employees wanted to know was why people did not want to move into their community and why their community had “such a bad reputation” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 8). Because Vince was helping to facilitate, he alluded that one reason for the bad reputation was due to a once
well-known person in the community that was allegedly “anti-African American” and “hated all things that [were] not White.” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 8). This person was purportedly a part of the Klu Klux Klan and led colonies that lynched Blacks and “bombed buses.” It was “a place with a horrible reputation of human rights violations” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 8).

A second reason for the bad reputation was because of the employees’ lack of understanding in recruiting people of color. Vince felt like the district did not go “through the correct process or advance through the correct avenues in order to show [that they were] willing to transition from [their] historical position” of hating African Americans (IV, 7/2/13, p. 8). Vince questioned the district’s recruitment efforts.

When you go to recruitment fairs, if you want Black people, do you go to where Black people are? If you want to recruit African Americans, do you ever go to HBCU’s? They sat there with a blank expression on their face wondering what is an HBCU. I said, “Historical Black College and University, places like Howard University, Spellman [College], Morehouse [College] to name a few. (IV, 7/2/13, p. 8)

After naming a few of the HBCU’s, the employees questioned the location of the HBCU’s. Vince thought to himself, “Ok that is why you never go [to the HBCS’s], you don’t know where they are” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 8). In addition, Vince quickly learned that the participants did not even know that HBCU’s even existed. Like Brandeis University, affiliated with the Jewish community, and the University of Notre Dame, affiliated with the Catholic community, HBCU’s were affiliated with the African American community to give African Americans “an opportunity to excel and support our matriculation through higher education also” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 8). To Vince, knowing about Brandeis and Notre Dame but not knowing about HBCU’s “speaks volumes” about the dynamics of the community he was serving (IV, 7/2/13, p. 8).

A third reason for the bad reputation was the people in the community made little effort to interact with people outside the boundaries of this community (IV, 7/2/13, p. 8). Vince gave the example of what a counselor shared when she went to college.
She said, a significant portion of people had been friendly toward her [but] when she told them she was from [this community], they started staying away from her. She said, “I started being treated as if I were racist by regular White people.”

Instead of trying to get the people from school to see that she was not the racist person they perceived her to be, she said, “Well, I felt real bad after a while [because] that sort of made me angry [so] I started hanging out with my friends [from the community]. I just wanted to be comfortable, liked and accepted” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 8). According to Vince, by resorting back to her “cocoon,” the counselor “shrunk [her] circle of influence rather than broadening it to show these people you are not what they think you [are]” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 8). Resorting back to a cocoon or the shell of a community with a bad reputation suggests the unwillingness to accept differences or change. Because the Department of Justice initiated the investigation and was listening to the dialog led by Principal Vince, the employees were forced to hear truths and realities that many of them were probably oblivious to and uncomfortable with.

*Advice to Aspiring Principals*

Coming into a homogeneous community where cultural support was non-existent and being the only representative of the African American race, Principal Vince advised new principals “to really look in yourself and ask yourself if you can handle the effects of integrating a situation because it’s more than a notion” (IV, 7/2/13, p. 9). Being in an all-White environment, the issue of not being liked was a realization for Vince because “there are those that don’t care for us just because we exist” and understanding why was a difficult pill to swallow (IV, 7/2/13, p. 9).

As the recipients of racism in the historical context, it’s really hard to see why people don’t like you or us [African Americans]. Somehow you think maybe sometime, somewhere, somehow, something happened to them [Caucasians] and the person on the other side [the villain] happened to be African American and so they just blame everybody [all African Americans] for it. (IV, 7/2/13, p. 9)

Along with not being liked, White parents expressed to the Superintendent that they did not want Vince to discipline their children or even talk to their children without parent presence.
They don’t want us disciplining their children. I had people who harboured such resentment and they did not want me to intervene in any disciplinary interventions with their children under any circumstances. They felt that I could not talk to their child without them being there and they told this [to] the superintendent. (IV, 7/2/13, p. 9)

When the superintendent asked Vince how he felt about White parents not wanting him to discipline their children, let alone talk to them without a parent being present, Vince did not want to force the issue or make anyone feel uncomfortable.

I don’t want to force myself on anybody. All I want is the same respect as any other administrator in this the district. If there is a parent that feels like they can’t get a fair shake from me, far be it from me to enforce my authority on them or their child. Let them go someplace or to someone where they feel they can have a better outcome and not have to worry whether or not my prejudice against them is driving me to make a decision that their child is uncomfortable with or they are uncomfortable with. (IV, 7/2/13, p. 9)

While trying to convince the Superintendent that he would respect the wishes of parents, Principal Vince was constantly being disrespected as an administrator and as a Black man. Additionally, instead of supporting Vince, the district let him down.

You know, it’s just amazing to have them [the district] come and tell me, “Look, you are a Black man in a White man’s world.” At the end, the district didn’t protect me. I had to step outside of the district in order to get support. It was just amazing. (IV, 7/2/13, p. 9)

Although Principal Vince was subjected to an unsuspected wave of controversy, he maintained his professionalism at all times. To be hired in under the mindset of attending to the responsibilities defined by the job description which included handling discipline, yet to be unapologetically told that White parents do not want him disciplining their children or talking to them without a parent, clearly suggested that racism was still alive and well in the 21st century. Thus, Principal Vince’s advice to novice principals of really looking in the mirror to determine if you have the makeup for enduring the controversy that comes with the territory of being principal in a homogeneous environment comes from his personal experience. The job of principal in and of itself is demanding: curriculum, staff, students, parents, building maintenance, plus the
unexpected, but adding racial tension for an African American principal is another burden that the
White counterparts do not have to endure.

Advice to District Administrators

While Principal Vince advised aspiring principals to look in the mirror, his advice for
district administrators was to make a conscious effort to hire staff who mirrored the student body.
By having minority representatives on staff, students have a spokesperson to make them feel
comfortable should the need arise (IV, 7/2/13, p. 9).

The advice I would give them is, it’s important to have the represented school population
reflect the community they serve. They cannot afford to be all White if their population is
changing. They need some minority representation to make everyone feel comfortable
should something happen that makes them uncomfortable. Once the people feel
comfortable, the way you do business and what you look likes tends to subside. (IV, 7/2/13,
p. 9)

Although the color of one’s skin should not matter when it comes to educating students,
the idea of having a person that looks like the students served lends itself to a better equipped staff
in terms of understanding students from a cultural perspective when unfamiliar issues arise.
Because people sometimes fear what they do not understand, they sometimes react based on
stereotypes or perceptions of what they have seen or heard.

I had people come into my office and look at me and say, “Oh, the monkey can talk, I’m
amazed!” They are amazed that the words coming out of my mouth makes sense, that I’m
not scratching. They can’t believe it because they are ignorant enough to believe everything
they heard. That’s a sad situation [and] it really puts their children at a disadvantage. You
end up going off to college saying you are from a place that nobody wants to be your friend.
(IV, 7/2/13, p. 9)

As principal of the middle school farthest from the urban core, Principal Vince endured
racial challenges that were disheartening to hear about. The fact racial challenges still exist serves
as a testament and reality aspiring administrators need to grapple with, potentially facing blatant
(or subtle) racism that is embedded in homogenous communities. Awareness can help aspiring
administrators make more informed decisions prior to walking into an environment where they
may get ambushed and they may not be psychologically prepared to confront. One could conclude that some homogenous communities have a long way to go in welcoming cultural differences especially where decades of racist beliefs about African Americans and other minorities have been implanted generation after generation.

Principal Wendy

The sixth participant, representing the second of the minority participants, was Principal Wendy who began her educational career in the South coming from an elementary background prior to becoming a middle school principal. Although the majority of the teaching staff was White, there was a large minority enrollment which made up the majority of students. While the teacher frustrations were associated with the perceptions of African American students being tardy, illegally enrolled, and loud, the student frustrations were associated with trying to blend in while feeling targeted by staff. However, to initiate change regarding race related issues, Wendy planted seeds with key teachers to promote her agenda. A key piece of advice Wendy offered aspiring principals and district administrators was to get to know the stakeholders.

Background

Principal Wendy, age 46, was an African American female with 23 years of educational experience including seven years as principal. She grew up in the South in an area where attending schools with different cultures was a norm. Ironically, while attending an HBCU (historically Black college and university), her experiences changed from dealing with many cultures to dealing with only one, the African American culture, which was like a culture shock, “that’s when I learned more about myself as a Black person” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 14).

Wendy began her teaching career in the south in 1989 and taught in Jamaica for three years prior to relocating to Michigan where she taught fifth grade for one year in the district she currently
serves. A middle school principal hired her over the phone as his new assistant principal the following year. However, for Wendy, there was just one major concern; middle school was a huge learning curve. “I have my Master’s in Elementary Education, my Specialist in Educational Leadership, and my Bachelors is in Elementary Education…I had to learn middle school. I know elementary” (IW, 6/28/14, p. 1).

After serving her first week as assistant principal, Wendy went back to the principal and said, “I don’t think I can do this.” Wendy came from an elementary background where teachers taught all content areas (reading, writing, mathematics, science, social studies, etc.), the opposite of middle school where most teachers taught only one content area unless they had a dual certification and taught a combination of content areas like mathematics and science or English and social studies. When a middle school teacher denounced teaching more than one content area, Wendy was really agitated coming from a background where teachers were responsible for teaching all content areas. As a matter of fact, when a teacher said, “I’m a math teacher, I’m a reading teacher…that bothered me…oh, I did not like it…that drove me crazy” (IW, 6/28/14, p. 1).

Wendy also had to learn how to adjust to middle school students and their physical changes; “when those hormones start kicking in, I’m like, what is going on with these kids?” (IW, 6/28/14, p. 1). Once Wendy began to really learn and understand middle school, two and one-half years went by and she became interim principal, then ultimately principal, after her predecessor became an associate superintendent. Growing up in a diverse school setting, Wendy immediately recognized that she was not only an African American principal, but she was also the only African American adult in her building.

So it’s very interesting coming to the building where I was the only Black person in the building. I went home and I told my husband at the time, I said, “Usually there’s a custodian
or somebody in the cafeteria or teacher…nothing…I said there’s nobody…I am it. I’m the only one.” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 14)

Being the only adult of color when she first arrived in the building suggests that Principal Wendy was in touch with reality and recognized that she had to be mindful of actions and decisions made with an all-White staff which was a learning curve. Growing up in a diverse community, attending an HBCU, and leading a predominantly White institution suggest that Wendy was nurtured by her experiences. Nonetheless, despite being the only African American adult in the building, she had to be careful in her approach of managing staff, students and parents. However, being in this position enabled Wendy to witness the transitioning enrollment of the student body over the years, both racially and socioeconomically.

Teacher-Student Demographics

Principal Wendy’s school was located 25 miles from the urban core. By 2012-2013, she was no longer the only staff of color. Of the 46 teachers on staff, approximately 90% were White. The district had a one-year buy-out that allowed the vast majority of eligible staff to retire, permitting Wendy to hire additional staff (GI. 7/23/14, p.2). Although the average years of service for teachers was about 20 years, one teacher had been there for 39 years. “I had one teacher that was in the same building for 39 years. Thirty-nine years, I’m like, seriously” (GI. 7/23/14, p.2)? The 20-year teaching average for staff suggests that the teacher placement was fairly stagnant, because once they hired into the district or a building, they stayed (IW, 6/28/14, p. 2). Nevertheless, after the buy-out opened the doors for hiring additional staff, the age range of teachers was 25 to 60, resulting in a mixture of novice and veteran teachers.

While the teaching staff was gradually growing in diversity, overall student enrollment was gradually declining. In 2002-2003, total student enrollment was around 748 but ten years later in 2012-2013 enrollment declined to 735 with an average class size of roughly 28 to 29 students (GI.
According to Wendy, by the end of the year, the school was projected to lose 250 students (GI, 7/23/14, p. 3). Despite the total enrollment decline, the diverse student enrollment was accelerating. The African American student enrollment nearly doubled over a ten-year span, from 23.9% in 2002-2003 to 39.1% in 2012-2013. Likewise, the economically disadvantaged enrollment more than doubled from 10.4% to 25.4% in seven years. In addition, the Chaldean enrollment was comparable to the African American enrollment; however, the district classified Chaldeans as White, because the district did not have a separate category to distinguish the Chaldean enrollment in the district’s demographic data base.

At the end of last year [2012], we were 36% African American, and if you extrapolate the Chaldean population out of the White population, we’re about equally 36% Chaldean as well. So [this] middle school really is a large minority-majority building. That’s because Chaldean just isn’t listed and they’re just classified as White. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 2)

Subsequently, by classifying Chaldean as White in the district database, Principal Wendy’s building could easily be misconstrued as having a predominantly White student body to those who read the annual school report and are unfamiliar with the demographics of the building and community. If 36% of the students are African American and 36% are Chaldean, then 72% of the building represents a large minority student body. In essence, the White subgroup ultimately became the minority which supports Principal Wendy expression, “it is a large minority-majority building” with predominantly African American and Chaldean students, resulting in cultural and academic challenges.

Revelations of Teacher-Student Interactions

Despite the nationwide gap in achievement among subgroups, teachers and students interactions went beyond teachers being frustrated with student motivation and behavior. There were cultural insensitivities exhibited by some teachers and there were some instances where
teachers displayed mute interactions. Students were judged for being tardy to school or class, being enrolled illegally, and for being loud.

_The Teacher Viewpoint_

From the perspective of teachers, trying to understand the dynamics of students from diverse backgrounds and connecting with them, brought on a frustration that some teachers personalized. The reasons for the frustrations varied, however, practices were put in place to help motivate students and to help improve the behavior of struggling students.

_Frustration with Student Motivation_

As an alternative to being frustrated with student motivation and determination, Principal Wendy was concerned about students who did not fit the profile of being college-bound because their parents either lacked the resources or had little education themselves. Thus, Wendy and staff implemented a Determination Program that not only encouraged first generation college students but also identified middle school students who were “underrepresented in high school AP (advanced placement) classes” that had the potential of doing well based on their ability and determination (IW, 6/28/14, p. 3). According to Wendy, the Determination Program was designed and intended for determined individuals who were “first generation of college going students but in a district like [ours] you are expected to go to college [because] you are coming from a family where both parents have been to college” (IW, 6/28/14, p. 3). However, college-bound expectations were not necessarily engrained in families from the urban core.

The Determination Program, with the support of teachers, taught African American and economically disadvantaged students how to advocate for themselves and speak up to teachers in order to take advanced classes. Principal Wendy gave an example of an African American male student, she called Anthony, who started out taking a reading support class in sixth grade but
wanted out by seventh grade. Through determination and with the help of teacher, Mr. Waffles, the same student was taken out of the reading support class and recommended to take an advanced mathematics class that students traditionally had to test into.

Here is one kid, I will call him Anthony. Anthony was a self-motivated student but pretty quiet. Mr. Waffles helped him find his voice. He taught him how to advocate for himself with his teachers. Anthony was in a reading support class in sixth grade. In seventh grade they wanted him back in the program. Anthony would talk to the AP [assistant principal] about this [class] being so easy for him. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 3)

Although the support staff wanted Anthony to remain in the reading program for seventh grade, the Determination Program had given the once quiet Anthony the courage to talk to the assistant principal about no longer wanting to be in the class because it was “so easy for him” (IW, 6/28/14, p. 3). Even though the parents did not know how the system of the reading program worked, Mr. Waffles helped both Anthony and his parents advocate so he no longer had to participate in the program.

He didn’t really want to be in that class so Mr. Waffles helped advocate and he helped his parents advocate. Even though his parents are college graduates, they didn’t know that [reading] system or know enough to say, I don’t want my child in there. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 3)

After advocating to get Anthony out of the reading program, Mr. Waffles continued working with and advocating for Anthony in mathematics. The excitement Mr. Waffles had was so positive that he insisted Anthony be placed in advanced math for eighth grade without taking the placement test.

So working with Anthony, before school, after school, Mr. Waffles is like, “Wendy, this kid has it.” He would get so excited about Anthony and by the time he said, “I want him in advanced math.” We put him in advanced math. Now mind you, our kids test for math to go to advanced math. Anthony was a solid B student in regular math. Mr. Waffles worked with him, helped him, and one of the other math teachers worked with him, helped him. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 3)

Anthony was a success story. Despite being a “solid B student in regular math,” Anthony pushed himself, while Mr. Waffles and other teachers continued working with him (IW, 6/28/14,
p. 3). He did well in advanced math in eighth grade. In high school, Anthony continued in the Determination Program, graduated with honors, and is attending Bowling Green State University (IW, 6/28/14, p. 3).

Here is a kid that, guess what, in advanced math, did well. Just graduated from high school. He was doing so well as a 9th grader. He had a 4.0. He was like, “I learned what to do to learn to be successful so he wanted to take a leadership class. Just the relationship Mr. Waffles built with him in terms of helping him find his voice and advocate and navigate school. Here is a kid in the district that is bringing our scores down [through the] state assessment every year, graduated high school with honors, and is going to Bowling Green. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 3)

Despite the reading support and regular mathematics classes in middle school, Anthony was a success story, because the Determination Program taught him how to self-advocate. In addition, starting the program in middle school and taking advanced mathematics by grade eight suggests that it was not too late to reach students academically with the proper support and guidance. Although Anthony was a middle school student who initially brought the overall district scores down in state assessments as a sixth grader, he ultimately graduated high school with honors via hard work and determination. While Anthony was a student that teachers were able to reach academically by connecting to and building a relationship with, there were some students that teachers struggled to reach.

Frustration with Student Behavior

One on the main causes of frustration that Principal Wendy recognized was that teachers made the mistake of personalizing not being able to connect with students. Frustration became personal when teachers would say students did not like them, instead of trying to find something with which students were able to identify (GI, 7/23/14, p.11).

What I’ve seen with frustration of teachers is they’ve personalized it. That it’s more about, “the kid doesn’t like me.” Don’t personalize it! What’s something that you can find to latch on to and begin to build that relationship with the student? It may be non-academic, maybe that’s where your focus needs to be. (GI, 7/23/14, p.11)
The idea of finding something non-academic to focus on lends itself to building a relationship of trust.

The curriculum piece will come. Just try to build that relationship piece first because kids will, when they see that you’re truly sincere and care about them, they will go out of their way. It may take you a little time with some based on their experiences and it may be more than just you working on that same thing with a kid. Again, going back to that trust level and whatever experiences they’ve had in their past, but finding something and not personalizing it. (GI, 7/23/14, p.11).

In Wendy’s mind, students will generally “go out of their way” to please a teacher they trust, but trusting relationships take time to cultivate and often depend on the prior experiences of students. And, once these relationships are built, learning will follow.

To personalize not being liked by students suggest that teachers are ill-equipped to handle multiple temperaments associated with a growing diverse student body. Instead of placing focusing on presumptions of not being liked by students, teachers should focus on the professional obligation of educating students. Although educating students is the primary obligation, the development of character is a by-product because of the amount of face-time shared with students on a daily basis. However, during teacher-student face-time, students feed off energy generated by teachers, be it positive or negative. Personalizing and giving off the energy of not feeling like is sensed by students who prey on the vulnerability of teachers and intentionally push their buttons. As professional educators, being liked or disliked comes with the territory, but more importantly being disliked should force teachers to monitor themselves for social cues that trigger students’ detached attitudes towards teachers. Those triggers suggest students’ lack of trust in teachers and teacher-student relationships should to be reexamined to facilitate learning.

Cultural Insensitivity

Along with earning student trust, the lack of teachers’ understanding cultural differences concerned Principal Wendy. Wendy recalled a teacher, Ms. Wheat, who had her share of “run-ins
with the students over the years” (IW, 6/28/14, p. 3-4). Ms. Wheat tried to make African American students feel more comfortable in her classroom by using a vernacular that she “thought” would make her “hip” with the African American students (IW, 6/28/14, p. 3-4). Unfortunately, Ms. Wheat’s poor choice of words and lack of cultural sensitivity backfired when she told a kid that he was “acting like a monkey.”

Ms. Wheat said to a little [African American] boy in a condescending manner that he was, “Acting like a monkey.” Did she not try to change the words? I told Ms. Wheat, “At no time is it ok to refer to him or any other kid in this manner.” The way she tried to spin it was a big mess. The whole union was involved. The way she…tried to spin it was, “I was trying to make it a positive.” There is no way to make this positive, so we ended up [with] her apologizing to the student and family. She did get some disciplinary actions. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 3-4)

Although, Ms. Wheat received disciplinary actions for the monkey comment, parents were content with the way the issue was handled by Principal Wendy. In addition, the teacher apologized for her actions.

They [the parents] felt I handled it. They were comfortable with what I had handled and the disciplinary actions. Even though they didn’t know what those actions were, they were comfortable with that and the apology in front of them to their son. She was moved, part between us [the middle school] and a high school. She always felt like “I’m hip, I’m this” but Mr. Waffles was “hip.” He was a cool teacher but he wasn’t condescending or used that type of language, but her interactions were more condescending to the kids and they did not appreciate it at all. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 4)

Because Ms. Wheat felt like she was hip, it was brought to Principal Wendy’s attention by students that she constantly tried to “act Black” and she treated African American students noticeably different than the way she treated other students. “She is always trying to ‘act Black’ you know like talking down to us and the way she’d address them would be different than she addressed others” (IW, 6/28/14, p. 3-4). Ms. Wheat would use slang with the African American students, but not with the other students. In addition, she would try to address the students as if she was their age but this made the students feel uncomfortable because the principal did not speak this way. Principal Wendy elaborated,
She was so inappropriate and these were the kids talking [about] the teacher. She felt like that was her way of relating, as if she was their age. Like, “You all know, if your momma was here.” Using terms like that. They always felt like, “She can’t talk to us like that. She doesn’t know us that way. Ms. Wendy, you are Black and you don’t talk to us like that, so why does she feel like she can talk to us the way she does?” Using a lot of slang with them, they felt like she doesn’t use it with anybody else, why does she use it with us? (IW, 6/28/14, p. 4)

From accusing the boy of acting like a monkey to using slang, the actions of Ms. Wheat suggest that she lacked cultural sensitivity and assumed African American students would appreciate her use of slang. Ms. Wheat’s assumptions seemed to be guided by stereotypes that stimulated fabricated behavior. Because students found Ms. Wheat’s vernacular to be offensive, she was not relating to the students, which ultimately discouraged relationships as opposed to building them. Ms. Wheat would have gained the respect of students simply by being herself instead concocting a person she presumed students wanted her to be.

No Interaction

Even though one teacher overplayed her actions to relate to the African American students by using slang, there were a few teachers who did the opposite and attempted no interactions at all. Instead of saying something culturally inappropriate to students, Principal Wendy discovered that some teachers did not display outward interactions, but they complained about African American students to colleagues (IW, 6/28/14, p. 4).

I think their interaction was “no interaction.” You know less is more to them. There were a couple others that never got to where it was inappropriate in terms of their language but their expectations, [what] they tolerated or what they did not tolerate from students. If a student got into trouble in this class over here [other teachers knew]. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 4)

Although those few teachers may not have had any obvious inappropriate interactions, students were often the topic of discussions in the staff lounge or during hall duty while students were passing from one class to another. Students found out quickly that their teachers were talking
about them because the teachers would reference, in front of the entire class, the trouble in a previous class (IW, 6/28/14, p. 4). Principal Wendy shared,

I even had my band teacher say, “I heard what you did in this person’s class.” It made the kid feel like, and it happened to be an African American kid, “Why are they talking about me like that?” For the adult to say this in front of the class, sometimes we are our own worst enemies. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 4)

For a teacher to say in front of an entire class that he “heard” what a student did in another class was unfair to the student. Because the student happened to be African American, the student felt singled-out and could not understand why teachers were talking about him. If the role switched where the principal singled-out teachers in front of colleagues, the principal would probably face a grievance for violating confidentiality. It is important that teachers remember that students, despite their race, have feelings too and deserve to be treated fairly. Also, there are policies and regulations that provide privacy about student matters, and it is irresponsible to speak out of turn – such as in front of other students – about students’ misbehaviors.

Student Tardiness

While fairness towards the treatment of students was an issue that teachers needed to work on, student tardies to school and to class was another issue. According to Wendy, “It’s a huge issue, yes. We have found the African American students who’ve had the habitual tardies, have one address on paper and are coming from other areas which is taking them a long time to get [to school]” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 8-9). From the group interview, Principal Charles piggybacked on Wendy’s comment by adding,

It could be legitimate because they live with one parent and they’re in the district because of the other. And it could be because they’re not. We do have some residences that have like nine families claiming it as their address, I mean, we have discovered that. (GI, 7/23/14, p. 9)

According to Wendy, “Somehow all of them lease too,” primarily because families are in search of affordable housing as well as a safe and quality education for their kids (GI, 7/23/14, p.
9). Group participant, Principal Xavier, concurred that “parents are driving them up for all the right reasons, these schools are safe, they’re going to give you [a] better education but a lot of times kids don’t want to get up at 6 o’clock in the morning” to catch the school bus (GI, 7/23/14, p. 9).

Because students may not want to wake up an extra hour and a half earlier in the mornings to catch the school bus, having to depend on parents for transportation lends itself to speculation as to why some African American students are not getting to school on time. Even though students may be legitimately enrolled, tardiness to school may be attributed to dual custody issues where one parent lives in the district and the other parent lives outside the district, causing a longer, inconvenient commute on days students are with the parent outside of the district. Nevertheless, there are instances where some students are illegally enrolled by false residency documents.

Illegally Enrolled

Although students were entitled to receive public education in the municipality in which they reside, there were times when families falsified residency documents, which was a concern that Principal Wendy addressed when the issue came to her attention. When the district became aware of the false residency, it was the districts’ discretion to allow the student to complete the marking period, the semester, or the school year (GI, 7/23/14, p. 9). The most common determining factor as to whether a student could remain in school was student behavior. Students who behaved appropriately and performed well academically were generally allowed to complete the school year, while students who behaved poorly were asked to leave immediately (GI, 7/23/14, p. 9).

Group participant Charles interjected, “Quite often, the district will then say you can stay through the end of the year” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 9). In addition, Wendy’s district asked for the principals’ input.

What do we want to do? Do you want him or her to leave now or you want them to finish up the card marking? And nine times out of ten based on behavior, that’s going to dictate
whether you are there the rest of that card marking or you’re gone immediately. (GI, 7/23/14, p. 9).

Even though principals were allowed to recommend whether a student could complete the semester or school year, the per pupil funding allowance that was allocated to each school based on the number of students enrolled often influenced the principal’s decision to allow students to remain or leave (GI, 7/23/14, p. 9). Because more students enrolled meant more money allocated to schools, often principals recommended students remain in school until the end of the year if student behavior was not an issue.

Volume: Those Loud Black Kids

While student behavior may not have been an issue for some of the falsely enrolled students, the loud volume and cultural differences of the African American students became an issue that Principal Wendy had to get staff to understand. Wendy used her family of three (self, husband and son) as an example to explain how her house was probably not as loud as the traditional African American home that was filled with lots of kids (GI, 7/23/14, p.10). However, in her cousin’s home across the street, that had about 8 people, everyone was trying to be heard in conversations, so it was loud (GI, 7/23/14, p.10).

In addition, while walking and observing in the cafeteria during lunch duty, Wendy recognized that Chaldean students were also loud sitting at the lunch tables. The students were talking, laughing, and simply trying to be heard by peers (GI, 7/23/14, p.10). In lieu of jumping to conclusions about students behaving poorly in the cafeteria, Wendy questioned why the students were loud.

I give the example of going into the cafeteria. You would see, everyone seated but it sounds really loud in there. Are they loud because they’re being disrespectful? No, they’re all just trying to be heard. But what stands out the most is that table over there is the loudest. Maybe someone just cracked a “yo momma joke” and everyone just burst out in laughter. You know their experiences are the conversation. (GI, 7/23/14, p.10)
The phrase “their experiences are the conversation” stood out because students talked about what they knew or experienced. The students talked about the teachers they liked or disliked, what happened in class, the opposite sex, jokes, sports, home, the list was endless (GI, 7/23/14, p.10). Because the loud cafeteria was a part of feeding and managing hundreds middle school students at one time (GI, 7/23/14, p.10), Wendy addressed the issue and moved on, instead of hovering over and making students feel uncomfortable.

Every once in a while if they turn the volume up, that’s okay, all I do is say to them, “come on, bring it down,” that’s it, and keep it moving. You don’t have to stand there and belabour it because the longer you belabour it then that’s when all those feelings of “you’re harping on me or that you are bashing me but what about everyone else.” Yea, the cafeteria is loud but you know what, your voice just went up, just bring it down, bring it down! (GI, 7/23/14, p.10)

Although the cafeteria may have been loud, Principal Wendy was able to decipher whether the volume was due to student altercations or excitement. Understanding that African American and Chaldean families are culturally loud and getting staff to acknowledge the cultural differences lends itself to a more enlightened staff. By being enlightened, staff are less likely to mistake loudness for inappropriate behavior or insubordination.

*The Student Viewpoint*

As staff were learning to acknowledge the cultural differences of a diverse student body, students from urban core cultures were learning to transition to unfamiliar suburban cultures. The viewpoints held by the transitioning students ranged from feelings of survival to feelings of being singled out or targeted.

**Student Survival**

Coming from an urban core school to a suburban school was a transition that some students struggled to survive. During the group interview, Principal Wendy characterized survival behavior
as students trying to rationalize a series of unanswered questions in regards to fitting in, belonging, measuring up, and covering up the exterior to camouflage the interior (GI, 7/23/14, p. 7).

Where do I fit? Where do I belong? How do I establish some safety for myself in terms of, I may not measure up or having that attitude of feeling that I don’t measure up? I’m going to cover up, my exterior is going to be very different than what I’m feeling interiorly. (GI, 7/23/14, p. 7)

While students from the urban core were trying to fit in, ironically, Principal Wendy found a reversal where the established African Americans kids who originated in the district “are beginning to take on the mind-set or behaviors of” the new kids entering the district (GI, 7/23/14, p. 7). In the past, the new kids would take “on the mind-set of what’s already established,” but the roles have reversed, because “the established kids don’t look so different than the kids who’ve just come in” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 7).

Despite the role reversal with some of the established kids conforming to the behaviors of the new kids, overall, covering up the exterior suggests that students put on a front like acting hard or pretending to be tough as a safety precaution despite really being scared or feeling like they cannot measure up. Covering up could also include talking loud among peers in order to redirect the attention away from the perception of not measuring up or giving the perception that a person is hard. Nevertheless, talking loud was an attention grabber, causing students to feel singled out or targeted by adults who took issue with loud volume.

Singly Out or Targeted

While African American students were trying to establish how to fit in, Principal Wendy expressed concerns that some students “felt like they were being singled out” by staff and “expectations were not the same” for all students (IW, 6/28/14, p. 2). Wendy shared an example of three different groups of students being loud in the halls. Although the Jewish students were not
as loud, students noticed how teachers would likely address the African American and Chaldean minority students only (IW, 6/28/14, p. 2).

If a group of African American kids, a group of Chaldean kids, and a group of Jewish kids was in the hall, nine times out of ten the teachers are going to go to the other two groups [African American and Chaldean]. And that one group [Jewish] that may not be that loud, there is nothing ever said and kids [African Americans] would always say, “So what about those other [Jewish] kids?” But [teacher], “I’m telling you guys, you all need to move.” (IW, 6/28/14, p. 2)

When teachers consistently addressed minority students about being loud in the hall or by telling them to move along, students recognized patterns of teacher inconsistencies. Students also recognized when teacher expectations and treatments differed towards various groups of students. Staff treating students differently because of their race suggests that they were not fair in their educational practices and lends itself to potential tension and being called racists.

Academic Proficiency

The increased African American and economically disadvantaged enrollment emitted student achievement data that Wendy disaggregated and shared with staff to drive school improvement initiatives. In an effort to not offend her predominantly White staff, Wendy carefully presented data in reference to gaps in learning among the subgroups (GI, 7/23/14, p.1). She had to make sure teachers understood that they were addressing the message about the data, not a perceived message about race or “a Black principal saying, ‘No we [the White staff] are not doing a good job with the Black kids,’” when in essence there is a nationwide gap in achievement among subgroups (IW, 6/28/14, p. 2). This gap supports the data under the suburban counties in Tables 3 and 4, mathematics and reading, respectively, where the African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups perform significantly lower than their White counterparts.
Principal Revelations

As teachers became more informed about the students they served in terms of culture, time and volume, Principal Wendy became more informed through her leadership practices. In addition, Wendy’s experiences enabled her to offer advice to novice principals as well as district administrators.

Leadership Practices

While allowing teachers to initiate and implement initiatives or changes in their teaching practices, Principal Wendy used a back door or seed planting approach as a leadership practice because talking about race related issues as a Black female to a predominantly White staff was like walking into uncharted territories. In Wendy’s mind, district and staff were not prepared for the change (IW, 6/28/14, p. 6). Through trial and error, she learned to use small groups of staff to advocate change. For example, when one of the authors of Courageous Conversations about Race (Singleton & Linton, 2006) came in to supplement the building-wide book study, teachers were uncomfortable with his “in your face” approach (IW, 6/28/14, p. 6).

I would always talk to the Assistant Superintendent about the demographics and how things have changed and teachers weren’t prepared for that change, yet the district hadn’t changed anything either. So we began to have those conversations and we did that whole book study on Courageous Conversations. The author from that came in. That was kind of a flaw. He was in your face kind of approach. His approach was not what teachers were ready for so we had to take a step back. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 6)

Because the “in your face” approach was uncomfortable for teachers, Principal Wendy used a back door approach by planting seeds with key teachers through one-on-one conversations. Planting seeds eliminated the top-down leadership approach because the initiatives became peer-led.

[The] approach began with smaller groups of teachers, having those personal conversations with them. So leading from the back where planting the seed with key people and helping them lead it so it is not top-down, that it is more like grass root[s] where we have to get this taken care of, not a Wendy initiative. This is what is best for kids. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 6)
As an example, when Wendy wanted to implement that special Determination Program in her building that not only held high expectations for African American students but also held students accountable academically through hard work and determination, she planted the seed with key teachers. Before this program could come to fruition, she had a dialogue with key people on her school improvement team in order to avoid the top-down approach. Collaboratively, they devised a plan to present the program to staff.

My key school improvement people, being able to have some of those uncomfortable conversations with them with regards to student data and helping them, how do we frame this for staff? Looking at the data and being able to frame it so that they’re not hearing “my voice.” They can actually look at the data and listen to what the data is saying, “not what Wendy is saying.”

When the key people presented the Determination Program to staff, Wendy stood in the back to show support, because she knew that had it been a top-down initiative it was going to be a whole lot of push back (IW, 6/28/14, p. 6). Although the program was initially questioned, the key people were able to provide the rationale.

In the initial reactions, “Why are we doing this for these [Black] kids?” These are the kids who get left behind. These are the kids who are average students, who if pushed, given the right tools, can be above average and exceptional students. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 6)

Although staff eventually agreed to implement the Determination Program, Principal Wendy admitted that “there was some hand-picked people because of their work ethic and their passion to certain [things] in the building” (IW, 6/28/14, p. 6). Despite hand-picking staff, Principal Wendy classified her leadership style as a combination of collaborative and situational depending on the agenda item.

So I would say for me, I am more a collaborative type leader and it’s situational. I have my non-negotiables and there are times I am going to be out in the forefront leading this or there are times I am going to support teachers and working with them for them to lead it. It depends on what it is and where we are as a building. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 6)
Even though Principal Wendy had some non-negotiables as a leader, her combination leadership practices of being collaborative and situational suggested that she was not only mindful of doing what was best for kids but she also was mindful of doing what was best for staff in order to get the productivity that she needed to address the achievement gap. Getting buy-in by staff suggests that Wendy valued building trusting relationships with staff the way she valued staff building trusting relationships with students.

*Professional Development*

Although Principal Wendy’s leadership practices were situational, her professional development approach was very intentional in changing the way business was previously done to breed different results. Wendy acknowledged that teachers had “to be very intentional and teachers needed to become much more focused with the approach because the results [were] showing we can’t continue to do business the way we have if we’re looking to change the results” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 8). An example of being intentional and focused was the homogeneous language art classes.

In terms of professional development, it was like pockets of teachers who took on certain things. One that stands out to me that we really worked a lot with is when we established the boys and girls language arts class. That spark came from a teacher with more concerns with the boys. We can’t do one without the other, so we’ll bring the girls along too but her being very intentional in that what she was seeing happening in that class and other teachers becoming more interested. (GI, 7/23/14, p. 8)

Even though the implementation of the language arts classes could not solely focus on the boys without bringing the girls along too, Ms. Wasabi’s instructional practices used to engage boys became “the mystery in the building” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 8). She was able engage certain boys to do work in her class while the same boys did absolutely nothing in other classes.

So how is it that he’s doing this over here but I can’t get him to even get in class on time or he just sits there and does nothing? What she was doing in terms of engaging the kids, instruction in classroom, began to kind of become like the mystery in the building. Everyone wants to find out how’s he successful here and try to mimic or mirror that. (GI, 7/23/14, p. 8)
In addition to intentionally focusing on the homogenous language arts classes was the intentional focus on the special Determination Program where high expectations and accountability became the goal that not only encouraged first generation African American college students but it also encouraged all students.

When we moved with [the Determination Program], the thing that came out of that really helped not only our minority kids but all kids in terms of just how do we do things better and create those learning experiences? Taking teachers through that training really helped us a lot too because we’re [group interview participants] in districts where college is a culture that’s already there. The mind-set is “you will go to college” but helping kids who have moved into the district, their mind-sets may not be there because their parents may not have gone so here’s their first introduction too. Here’s our pathway and here’s how we’re going to do it. (GI, 7/23/14, p. 8)

As a result of professional development being very intentional to help address the achievement gap, the homogeneous language arts classes along with the Determination Program not only benefited African American students but the strategies acquired also benefited all students. With professional development being driven by teachers, implementation of the initiatives were collaboratively owned by teachers instead of being micromanaged and mandated by the principal.

Homogenous Language Arts Class

By not understanding achievement data, Principal Wendy became concerned when teachers initially blamed themselves for the poor academic achievement of African American students and taking that blame personally. However, as “they got over the feeling of taking the data personal,” it became the teachers’ “moral responsibility and obligation to teach kids” and they wanted to know how they were going to go about teaching them (IW, 6/28/14, p. 4). One teacher, Ms. Wasabi who was White, took the initiative to do something about the achievement gap by starting a book club with four additional teachers. They read Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap by Alfred Tatum.
We broke up into book clubs and what’s his name, Tatum, I believe is his last name. I had one teacher, she read one of his books and a core group of 4 other teachers read the book teaching boys. I forget the title of the book. It focuses with reading, teaching reading to African American boys. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 4-5)

After reading the book, Principal Wendy and Ms. Wasabi “would spend a lot of time after school talking about some of the things in terms of looking at the achievement gap” (IW, 6/28/14, p. 4-5). They came up with the idea of strategically implementing homogenous language art classes.

What we came up with was boys’ and girls’ language arts classes but when we looked at our African American boys we were very strategic in who we placed in that class, some high achieving, middle and some struggling, and looking at athletics, the arts and looking at a well-rounded class so that we can really focus in on learning and teaching strategies specific to boys. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 4-5)

Ms. Wasabi elected to teach the all-boys class and read “a lot about African American boys” and strategies that she could use to reach them (IW, 6/28/14, p. 5). She also selected diverse reading material that she thought would interest the boys.

She geared a lot of her books to boys and finding something that was representative. She was very intentional with the books she selected. It wasn’t just African American books but it was just very diverse across her classroom. It all spun out of that achievement gap conversation and her willingness after that [to have] this gender specific language arts class. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 5)

After understanding the data and taking the initiative to learn how to teach African American boys, Ms. Wasabi honored the oath of being a morally responsible and obligated educator by doing whatever was necessary to meet the multiple learning needs of her students. Having an all-boys class, suggests that Ms. Wasabi set her personal beliefs aside and was not intimidated by a class full of adolescent African American boys, which suggest she is a courageous and passionate educator.
Advice to Aspiring Principals

When Principal Wendy discovered that micromanaging was not the best leadership practice for her staff, her advice to aspiring principals was to, “Learn your staff; go slow, to go fast; and, listen to the voices of your students. They are going to tell the story” (IW, 6/28/14, p. 7). In addition to learning the staff and listening to the voices of students, “Learn about the culture that’s coming” by researching as much as possible about the students that are coming (GI, 7/23/14, p. 13). Also, “ask questions by sitting down and having personal conversations with parents and students to try to gain a greater understanding” because so often, parents enroll students but “you don’t have that conversation until something has happened” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 13).

By asking questions of staff and students and taking time to listen, a novice principal can get an overview of the culture of the people served. Making abrupt decisions by not taking into consideration the perspectives of staff, students, or parents can be considered a turn-off for some. Nevertheless, going slow to go fast can serve two purposes by allowing the principal to learn the people served and allowing the people served to learn the principal, which promotes building trusting relationships.

Advice to District Administrators

Simultaneously, Wendy proposed that just as aspiring principals should get to know the staff and students, the district leaders should get to know the stakeholders (community, teachers, students, and parents) by being visible. In order to get people to buy into the mission and vision, district administrators needs to make a connection and make the stakeholders feel valued. By providing opportunities to interact during school, afterschool activities, or sporting events, better relationships are built.

Take time to go into the buildings, interact with our students more, build better relationships with our families. Right now as a district, we don’t have that and that is one
of the things we used to pride ourselves on, those relationships especially when [the minority superintendent] was there. But right now, the superintendent, he is a very nice person but he is from out of state. He has not built those relationships. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 7)

Despite being a nice person, the superintendent had not done anything significant to build relationships with the community. As a result, there was a disconnection within the community as well as a feeling of isolation by its members (IW, 6/28/14, p. 7). Because of the disconnection, families directed their phone calls to Principal Wendy instead of the district.

It feels like such a huge disconnect with everyone. We don’t feel like a community anymore. It feels more isolated than anything else. I get more families now calling me saying, “What should I do?” than I ever had because our district has changed. I feel like we need someone who has the pulse of district, have a hand on the pulse right now. (IW, 6/28/14, p. 7)

With a feeling of isolation and disconnection, the pulse of the district was unknown because no one led the charge in building those relationships with stakeholders. Although the pulse is generally measured by the superintendent, learning the pulse will take time because the superintendent was not only new to the district, he was also new to the state. In essence, the community and the superintendent must experience a mutual learning curve.

Principal Xavier

The seventh participant, and the third minority participant, was Principal Xavier who began his career in business prior to becoming a principal. Although the teaching staff was overwhelmingly White, the African American enrollment quadrupled over a ten-year span while the economically disadvantaged enrollment more than doubled. The troublesome interactions associated with frustrations encountered by teaching staff stemmed from teachers not understanding how to interpret the behavior of Black students being loud and being late to class. However, student frustration stemmed from the struggle associated with transitioning from the urban core where fighting was a norm. Although Xavier relied on teachers leaders to recommend professional development initiatives that related to the changing demographics, his advice to
aspiring principals and district administrators was to prepare for change by embracing it rather than being afraid to talk about it.

Background

Principal Xavier, age 51, was a Native American male with 24 years in education including 8 years as principal. Xavier grew up on the east coast in a military family, lived in an integrated neighborhood, and was bused to integrated schools. Living in a diverse community was a norm for Xavier. “My dad was in the military so I saw all kinds of cultures. [The] military is probably the most diversified organization in the country” (IX, 6/20/13, p. 10). Although Xavier considered himself culturally competent; he was not familiar with the Jewish culture and adjusting instruction around holidays was a learning curve (IX, 6/20/13, p. 10).

Xavier decided on the field of education at the age of 27 after the business he started with a college buddy did not work out. His first teaching experience was on the east coast at an alternative school for juvenile offenders who were from the projects filled with drug dealers, drug addicts, pimps, and prostitutes. “Every single one of them [juvenile offenders] low socio-economics, came from the projects or low income apartment housing, just about all crack dealers in the late 80’s early 90’s when crack was huge, [and] probably 95% African American” (IX, 6/20/13, p. 1).

After teaching at an alternative middle school for three years, Xavier moved to the Midwest and taught mathematics in a predominantly White suburban middle school for six additional years before becoming a dean of students for one year.

The Dean of Students was kind of a quasi-administrative role…I was [a part of the] education teachers’ union, but I didn’t teach any classes. I did discipline and handled athletics and the people treated me like I was an administrator, the teachers did, even though I was on their same level, organizationally. (IX, 6/20/13, p. 1)
After performing as dean of students, Xavier was hired by a neighboring suburban school district where he worked two and one-half years as assistant principal for a middle school. Unexpectedly, the superintendent moved the principal of his middle school to the high school and Xavier became principal (IX, 6/20/13, p. 1). Xavier’s experiences ranging from a predominantly African American alternative program in an urban setting to a predominantly White program in a suburban setting suggest that Xavier probably has had extremely diverse student encounters both culturally and socioeconomically. The cultural awareness developed through these encounters was probably instrumental in understanding the differences in the students and families he served.

**Teacher-Student Demographics**

Principal Xavier’s school was located approximately 23 miles from the urban core. According to Xavier, the teaching staff of about 40 (GI, 7/23/14, p. 1) was “overwhelmingly White,” with two African Americans, one Asian, and one Pakistani teacher (IX, 6/20/13, p. 2). The majority of the staff age range was between 30 and 60, while the oldest was close to 70 years with over 30 years of service (GI. 7/23/14, p.2). Xavier had a veteran staff with the average years of service for the majority of the teachers ranging between 15 and 20 years (GI. 7/23/14, p.2). Per Xavier, “I have a very experienced staff. I have no probationary teachers here at all, zero” (IX, 6/20/13, p. 9). Although Xavier was very supportive of staff, he was not afraid of conflict or addressing teachers who were not working hard or meeting expectations.

> I support my teachers. If somebody’s not good, I’m not afraid to get rid of them. They stand out here because the teachers are so good. If somebody comes in, they don’t work hard, they will be shunned, the other staff notice it and they kind of police themselves because they are very proud of who we are here. I try to make it a place where people want to come and stay. The good teachers want to come and stay and the bad teachers want to leave. If that means getting ugly with people, I don’t care. I’m not afraid of conflict. (IX, 6/20/13, p. 10)

As Xavier supported teachers, he also supported the diverse student body. In 2002-2003, Xavier had around 693 students and by 2012-2013 that number appeared to have increased to 748.
That increase was due to budget cuts forcing the district to close and reconfigure several elementary and middle schools, which moved some students from the closed middle schools to his middle school.

We took the middle schools and went from four middle schools, [grades] 6 through 8, [to] two middle schools of [grades] 7-8 since the populations were going down. That made a big change in the population because what we did we picked up kids that were on the east side of the district, where there’s a lot of apartments. (IX, 6/20/13, p. 2)

Over a ten-year span, the African American student enrollment quadrupled from 6.4% to 25% and over the seven year span the economically disadvantaged more than doubled from 7.7% to 19.9%. Xavier recalled the growth of the economically disadvantaged enrollment in the middle school when he first became employed by the district. “Our socio-economic level, I think when we got here we had five or six [percent] free and reduced lunch kids. Now we are up to like 23%, something like that” (IX, 6/20/13, p. 2). Despite the enrollment, the average class size remained around 27 to 28 students (GI. 7/23/14, p.2)

In addition to the African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups, the enrollment included about 50% White, 20% Asian “mostly Indian, Pakistani, when we say Asian,” a few Japanese kids, and about one or two Hispanic children (IX, 6/20/13, p. 1). When Xavier first arrived, they had a lot of Asian kids but most of the Japanese families moved to a neighboring district that housed a Japanese school (IX, 6/20/13, p. 1). Over the years, Xavier saw a big change demographically and socioeconomically.

The socioeconomics is the biggest change and the African American population has also gotten larger. I think we probably tripled in ten years from 10% to 30%. A lot of [African American] kids moving up from [the urban core], a lot of migration from [the neighboring suburban district]. Those are the two main areas where the kids are migrating from. (IX, 6/20/13, p. 1)

Xavier voiced that the biggest change demographically was socioeconomics although the African American subgroup had grown larger. When Xavier arrived in the district, only five to six
percent of his students received free and reduced lunch; however the data for economically disadvantaged were not public knowledge. By the 2006-2007 school year, the data for the economically disadvantaged subgroup became available through MiSchoolData.org which was around the same time the economy began taking a downward spiral when major corporations started downsizing, causing once well-off people to lose lucrative jobs. By 2012-2013 the economically disadvantaged rose to 19.9%, which suggested that when Xavier started working in the district, the socioeconomic level increased dramatically.

Academic Proficiency

Even though the enrollment of economically disadvantaged increased, Principal Xavier reported that the overall achievement scores for the district had gone down, while the achievement scores for his middle school had remained relatively unchanged (IX, 6/20/13, p. 6). Although achievement scores remained fairly constant, Xavier’s school was identified as a focus school where the largest gap in achievement was between the top 30% and bottom 30% of students based on an average scale score as defined by the Michigan Department of Education. Xavier attributed the sustained scores to the staff who “works very hard on the individual student” (IX, 6/20/13, p. 6).

I went from five or six percent [economically disadvantaged] to 23% in 10 years. Our scores have gone down, as a district. Now at [my school] we haven’t. The only thing I can say is our staff works very hard on the individual student. We’re a focus school. We have a huge, huge gap between our bottom and the top. I think in math, the gap was just ridiculous. (IX, 6/20/13, p. 6)

Principal Xavier rationalized that the average scores were sustained because the scores of the economically advantaged (high income) students from the northern part of the district were able to carry the weight of the scores of the economically disadvantaged (low income) students from the western part of the district. As a matter of fact, writing scores improved (IX, 6/20/13, p. 6).
So average-wise, our test scores haven’t gone down that much. Once we took in the 7th and 8th graders on the northern end of the district, we got a lot of higher income kids. But we got the west of [the districts’ kids] too, so we got some more [low] socioeconomic kids. Our test scores really haven’t gone down, they’ve stayed pretty steady. The writing has improved ‘cause the writing had been so low. The math has stayed the same, reading has stayed the same. (IX, 6/20/13, p. 6)

Although school test scores had been relatively sustained, practices need to be put in place to address the top-bottom achievement gap that categorized Principal Xavier’s building into the focus school status. Despite teachers’ effort to work hard with individual students, based on the trend, the economically disadvantaged subgroup will continue to rise. Therefore, achievement scores by students who live in the northern or high income parts of the district may be unable to balance out the lower scores of economically disadvantaged students.

Revelations of Teacher-Student Interactions

While student achievement remained a struggled, Principal Xavier questioned whether the struggle was because students lacked motivation or simply lacked the skills to be academically proficient. There was also student behavior that baffled teachers and student tardiness that was presumed to be related to culture differences or being illegally enrolled. Likewise, student volume was a cultural difference that teachers learned to understand.

*The Teacher Viewpoint*

Even though teachers worked hard with individual students that struggled, there were still students who struggled which frustrated teachers. Teachers felt like students struggled because they lacked motivation, failed arriving to school or class on time, or grappled with toning down their volume.

Frustration with Student Motivation

While many teachers were frustrated and perceived the notion that students lacked motivation, Principal Xavier became concerned with the notion that students lacked skills rather
than lacked motivation after talking to the school psychologist who shared the works of
psychologist Dr. Ross Greene (GI, 7/23/14, p. 11). “Ross Greene’s philosophy is that you’re not
going to find a kid out there that wants to be a failure, you just don’t. There’s no people out there
that say, ‘I want to fail.’” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 11). However, Xavier, like many teachers, used to say
students lacked motivation.

I have a wonderful school psychologist, who is into Ross Greene and she kind of changed
my mind-set. I was one of those people who had said, “These kids weren’t doing their
homework; they weren’t motivated.” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 11)

Nevertheless, Principal Xavier identified two sets of kids; one set had skills that motivated
them to be successful while the other set did not have skills. The set of kids with the skills knew
there were people available to help them while the set without skills appeared not to care.

You have a set of kids who have a certain set of skills that motivates them to do well
because the kids know they have these skills they can do well with. If they don’t have the
skills, they know they have people who will help them do well in school. And then you
have another set of kids who don’t have the skills to be successful but they don’t know
how to separate their social time from their academic time. (GI, 7/23/14, p. 11)

Although there was a set of kids who may not have had the skills, staff worked with
students who appeared to lack motivation about school by teaching them the necessary skills. By
looking at students “as lacking skills instead of lacking motivation,” teachers could reach kids.

They don’t have the skills and so what we’re working on now with these kids that appear
to be not motivated and don’t care about school, is to give them the skill set. To look at
them as lacking skills instead of lacking motivation. Teachers are starting to buy into it
’cause when you’re seeing some success [in] our intervention classes. We can teach kids,
if your attitude is about skills, not about well they’re not motivated. (GI, 7/23/14, p. 11)

Changing mind-set and looking at students as lacking skills as opposed to lacking
motivation, was an adjustment teachers had to embrace. Because improving skills depend upon
skill building techniques promoted by teacher strategies, teachers can build student skills by
working with the skills they currently possess and adding to those skills. Ideally, once students
have the skills to be successful and they experience that success with favorable test scores, students will likely become intrinsically motivated to continue performing successfully.

Frustration with Student Behavior

As teachers geared their focus toward student skills, they also had to gear their focus toward student behavior in hallways. Although Principal Xavier had a good group of teachers who were “very good at classroom management,” concerns about the increased number of fights among the African American students grew (IX, 6/20/13 p.5).

You know it’s mostly in the hallway. I have a good group of teachers here, who do very good at classroom management and they’re very good at calling parents and letting parents know. But a lot of problems go in the hallway, cafeteria. For example, I’ve had [with] the group of kids I had this year in 8th grade, probably 10 fights this year. (IX, 6/20/13 p.5)

Principal Xavier explained that when teachers see fighting, “it’s all African American kids [which] they haven’t seen that before.” The fighting among African American students caused a perception change for some of the White teachers (IX, 6/20/13 p.5).

I think the most [fights] I’ve ever had here in 10 years are like four but we had 10 this year. That is a lot. I think we had one White kid involved in a fight [but] every single one of them were African American kids and that changes perceptions with some of our White teachers. (IX, 6/20/13 p.5)

Although negatively viewed today, Xavier recalled how in the 1970’s fighting in school was an expected occurrence. As a matter of fact, the assistant principal would give the students boxing gloves so they could finish the fight in the gym (IX, 6/20/13 p.5).

When I was going to school in the 70’s, I remember getting into a fight with a kid and the assistant principal gave us boxing gloves. We went down to the gym and duked it out (laughing). Parents didn’t care back in the day. Now, parents would be appalled but back then that’s just what you did. (IX, 6/20/13 p.5)

Despite being an expected practice back in the day, fighting was a surprise to many of the White teachers. Because the fighting was solely among the African American students, Principal
Xavier could only imagine what the White teachers were saying about those Black economically disadvantaged kids (IX, 6/20/13 p.5).

I think it’s just been a surprise to them and it hurts me because when it’s all African American kids you can imagine, and I haven’t heard this from the teachers, but I imagine in my head, the perception is, “Oh my gosh.” We have a larger population of African American kids, lower socioeconomics, and those mostly are the ones I’m talking about. (IX, 6/20/13 p.5)

However, to counteract the fighting, they made “a lot of parent phone calls whenever we see [or] we hear of conflicts going on to let parents know before it happens” (IX, 6/20/13 p.5). In addition, Xavier and the assistant principal would talk to students as well as follow their social media accounts like Instagram and Twitter (IX, 6/20/13 p.5).

We talk to kids a lot. We try to be as pro-active as possible. I had one of my most popular kids put his Instagram account on my phone because he was being threatened. So I kind of followed his Instagram account. Every now and then I’ll look at it and see what’s going on. And Twitter, these kids put stuff on Twitter. I follow their social media. Me and my assistant principal will get on there and see what’s going on in the school. (IX, 6/20/13 p.5)

Principal Xavier explained that “kids will come tell us stuff” and will give access to their social media accounts because “they want us to see stuff” (IX, 6/20/13 p.5). Xavier admitted gaining access to student social media accounts by telling them to simply put their account on his cell phone so he can monitor them (IX, 6/20/13 p.5). When a student says, “He threatened me.” Xavier would respond,

Well, let me see it. Naw, just put it on mine (principal’s cell phone). Laughing, you know they’re 12 and 13 [years old] so I still have it. I’ve actually taken screen shots and sent stuff home to parents and say you need to see what your kid’s putting on Instagram. Mostly just being pro-active more than anything else. (IX, 6/20/13 p.5)

Along with being pro-active, Principal Xavier was highly visible in the hallways and encouraged teachers to be “visible in the hallways ‘cause kids get in trouble mostly when adults aren’t around” (IX, 6/20/13 p.5-6). Even though being visible was not foolproof, contacting parents
and monitoring social media accounts suggested to students that staff were actively engaged with a watchful eye.

Student Tardiness

Although fighting among African American students may have been a new phenomenon for some White teachers to digest, helping staff make sense of the perception of time in getting to school and class on time by some African Americans was another phenomenon. Principal Xavier had a conversation with some of his White staff about different cultures and learning styles. “I can’t remember where I read this, it was an article or a book, and they talked about on time including the whole CPT (Colored People’s Time), IPT (Indian People’s Time),” and the theory behind being late (GI, 7/23/14, p.11). Xavier recalled reading that the “White European culture” was based on “books, writing everything down” and “clocks” being everywhere on time (GI, 7/23/14, p.11). Unlike the Indian, Chaldean, and African American cultures many generations ago who “[didn’t] have time pieces” and “everything was passed down with words” (GI, 7/23/14, p.11). For cultures that did not rely on timepieces, storytelling was their history books. Coincidentally, “Words-to-words, the vast majority are auditory learners where you have to speak to your children, you can’t just write stuff down, you have to tell them” (GI, 7/23/14, p.11). Based on Xavier’s experiences, time was viewed differently.

Asians have had clocks, the Chinese had clocks, waiting for the Europeans, guess what, they’re always on time. You know, African Americans, indigenous people, Indian people, no clocks, Africans, no clocks, so time is different. (GI, 7/23/14, p.11)

In getting the teachers to understand how time was viewed differently, Xavier gave the example of “Why are my African American kids standing at the door, instead of being inside the classroom like the White kids when the bell rings?” (GI, 7/23/14, p.11). In the perceptions of some African American students, especially those coming from the urban core, standing by the door where the
teacher can see them was considered on time. Whereas the teachers’ perception and assumption of being on time was sitting in your seat with supplies out ready to learn.

Nonetheless, the changing demographics suggests that teacher perceptions have to change in terms of understanding that the techniques used and assumptions made years ago with a homogenous White student body will not necessarily work with a student body that was becoming more and more heterogeneous with vast cultural differences. Ultimately, understanding how time is viewed by other cultures should not be an excuse for tardiness or an acceptable practice. It simply means, teachers should not assume students have a mutual understanding of time, but they should communicate their expectation of time and what being on time looks like so students can meet those expectations. In addition, understanding cultural differences on how time is viewed may be a learning curve for some, understanding how time impact students with dual residency because separated parents live in different municipalities may be an added learning curve for others.

Illegally Enrolled

Although some students spent time living outside the district because of joint custody, other students lived outside the district because they were illegally enrolled. Because of this, the district was perceived as having a non-caring attitude because parents were told by their children that certain students do not live in the district (GI, 7/23/14, p. 9). In addition, whenever poor behavior was exhibited by African American or economically disadvantaged students, a reprimand without a visible consequence like suspension sent a message to onlookers (students, teachers, parents) that nothing was being done to address the issue of being illegally enrolled. As Xavier reported,

The perception in the community is that we don’t care. Kids say, “yeah I live in [the urban core] or I live in here or there,” and nothing happens. Perception of the community also is that’s what’s ruining the school, cause these kids are coming in. (GI, 7/23/14, p. 9)
When illegally enrolled students deliberately verbalized in front of peers, teachers and sometimes administrators that they lived outside the district and actions were not taken to remove them, they were perceived as poorly behaved kids who were ruining and jeopardizing the safety of the schools (GI, 7/23/14, p. 9). Xavier explained, “a good example is that we had a bomb threat at [the] high school and it just perpetuated that perception because they found out that the kid’s address was [in the urban core], his real address” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 9). It was discovered that the kid made the bomb threat on his computer where he was stationed when officials arrested him (GI, 7/23/14, p. 9). Because this controversy was in newspapers, Xavier recalled how “parents come in and it’s a big joke, especially the nice ones because they know that we’re not going to do anything” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 9).

Being illegally enrolled in a district that does not take immediate actions to withdraw students suggests that the district may be taking into consideration per pupil funding where financial allocation is based on student enrollment. On the other hand, when low-income families, from disenfranchised urban core districts, who do not have the financial means to relocate to suburban districts in search of better education and safer schools for their kids, falsifying their address is an indicator that urban core areas are not necessarily equipped in all schools to provide equitable and quality educational opportunities like their suburban counterparts, especially when teacher turnover in urban areas is high and classrooms are overcrowded. However, cultural differences are adjustments that urban core families and students are not accustomed to navigating in suburban schools. While funding is important, unsatisfactory student behavior sometimes get in the way and dictate whether or not an illegally enrolled student is asked to leave immediately. One unsatisfactory behavior problem that staff faced was the loud volume of African American kids.
Volume: Those Loud Black Kids

As African American enrollment increased, so did the volume of the African American students. Principal Xavier recalled that about four or five years ago as demographic changes in his building became significantly noticeable, teachers complained that, “The hallways are so loud” referring to a group of African American kids (IX, 6/20/13, p. 2).

I had to tell them in a staff meeting, “Listen guys, you have your Asian kids who are always going to be your quietest, culturally. Your Black kids are always going to be loudest. And your White kids are going to be somewhere in the middle. That’s just the facts. (IX, 6/20/13, p. 2-3)

Concurring with the participants in the group interview, Principal Xavier questioned the behavior of the students. Were “they just loud” or were they just “laughing and talking” (GI, 7/23/14, p.10)? Growing up in an integrated neighborhood and working in an alternative school, Xavier recalled sharing with his staff that, “Culturally that’s a fact, there is no way you can avoid it,” African American students are just loud (IX, 6/20/13, p. 3). After staff began to mull over it and reflect, “You got a lot of them going, oh, okay, yeah, you’re right” (IX, 6/20/13, p. 3). Once the staff was able to understand this cultural dynamic, it helped tremendously in understanding that “these kids weren’t just being loud to be disrespectful, that’s just how they are. They’re just loud and that’s alright” (IX, 6/20/13, p. 3).

Because Principal Xavier recognized that staff did not understand the dynamics associated with African American student, his proactive approach in acknowledging cultural differences at a staff meeting counteracted potential disciplinary issues. However, being able to distinguish loud behavior as fun and excitement as opposed to obnoxious and disrespectful suggests staff willingness to understand the dynamics of African American culture. Additionally, rather than complain about cultural differences that are not understood, ask questions to understand the vantage points of students as differences occur.
The Student Viewpoint

Just as teachers had to adjust to the differences within the African American culture, likewise, urban core students also had to adjust to the differences within the suburban culture. Student adjustments included finding ways to survive in a new environment and learning to cope with the perception of being singled out.

Student Survival

Principal Xavier expressed how cultures are often night and day for students who transitioned to suburban schools from inner city public schools, especially from urban core schools that were gang infested. Belligerent, fighting, disrespectful behaviors that were not culturally accepted stood out and did not have a place in his school. Principal Xavier referred to fighting to fit in as “survival behavior, a certain way they had to behave at that other [urban core] school to keep themselves safe” (IX, 6/20/13, p. 11). Xavier gave an example of the survival behavior, saying: “A kid coming in acting hard right away trying to establish himself as, ‘You better not mess with me’ or ‘I’m going to kick your ass’ type kid” (IX, 6/20/13, p. 11).

Conversely, in the group interview, participants reported that in some instances the established kids took on the behavior of the new kids by acting hard (GI, 7/23/14, p. 7). According to Principal Xavier, this type of behavior was “a total reversal from where it was 10 years ago” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 7). Nevertheless, the fighting mentality was an urban reality and was considered normal behavior for some urban core students.

While fighting to survive may have been a reality for some students, Principal Xavier expressed how disrespecting authority or adults came with the territory of fighting which was also reality or normal behavior in some urban core schools (IX, 6/20/13, p. 11). Students who witnessed fighting at home or at school on a regular basis, instinctively disrespected authority because
fighting was a routine practice (IX, 6/20/13, p. 11). Nevertheless, as urban core students began adjusting to suburban culture, fighting and disrespecting authority dwindled after a “week or two” upon realizing that fighting was no longer a necessity (IX, 6/20/13, p. 11). Xavier elaborated:

They might see a lot of disrespect from kids at the adults in the building and behave that way just because it’s “normal” to them. It’s not that this kid is a disrespectful kid but that’s just the way it’s been and that’s what this kid has seen. Usually it’ll take a week or two and all of a sudden this kid’s a different kid and the parents go, “Oh my God.” We hear this all the time, “It’s so good here, he likes it or she loves it, the kids are so nice, they’re so friendly.” All of a sudden, the kid isn’t walking around all hard, he’s just blending in the population. (IX, 6/20/13, p. 11)

Oddly, instead of parents’ seeking academic support through tutoring or educational programs after school, some parents pulled their kids out of school and switched to schools that were less challenging academically (IX, 6/20/13, p. 11). Sometimes, they even returned to the urban core. Although this occurrence is uncommon, Xavier confessed,

Educationally, we’ve had parents pull their kids out and said that “you guys are too hard, my kid has too much work. They can’t handle it.” And that’s rare, this doesn’t happen a lot but we have had it. (IX, 6/20/13, p. 11)

Although fighting to survive and disrespecting adults may have been a sense of normalcy for some students from the urban core, their learning to fit in and adjusting to suburban culture was an eye-opening experience for both students and parents. To witness the behavioral transition of students from a fighting mentality of surviving to a peaceful mentality of blending in suggested that students no longer felt threatened or unsafe by the adults and students in their new environment.

Principal Revelations

While teachers and students learned to adjust, the leadership practices of Principal Xavier included being flexible yet supportive as teachers learned to grapple with adaptation by taking advantage of professional development that peaked their interest. Additionally, Xavier’s advised
aspiring principals and district administration to embrace change by not being afraid to face the challenges head-on.

Leadership Practices

Keeping in mind the learning needs of students and supporting the needs of teachers were the motivating forces that guided Principal Xavier’s leadership practices along with being flexible with teacher initiatives, mentoring staff, and keeping class sizes down. (IX, 6/20/13, p. 8). Because teachers were college-educated professionals, Xavier relied on teacher leaders to alert him about issues staff wanted to address (IX, 6/20/13, p. 8).

My approach is whatever’s available on what my teachers have access to. We have a lot of teacher leadership in the building and I have teachers who will come to me and say, “Hey, I saw this or we’d like to do that or we’re having an issue with this, let’s talk about this and let’s do it. We put together a professional development plan. Here’s what we want to work on.” (IX, 6/20/13, p. 8)

Once the demographics started changing, another leadership practice that Principal Xavier found himself doing was mentoring individual teachers by providing support and guidance in cultural competence when African American students or parents were challenging. He recalled stepping in to assist teachers when students were challenging and parents were unreasonable, “if they’ve got a student they’ve tried to reach and they can’t, maybe some unresponsive parents, or maybe parents that are too responsive” (IX, 6/20/13, p. 9).

Other leadership practices that guided Principal Xavier were by keeping class sizes small, keeping parents happy, and keeping parent complaints away from the downtown central office or district administrators (IX, 6/20/13, p. 9). An example of keeping class size down and parents happy was when “the math teachers asked me to make their classes smaller” by adding another section (IX, 6/20/13, p. 9).

[Our district strives to] have a culture of small classrooms. That’s a part of the culture here. I think they try to keep them down because we have so many parents who can afford to send their kids to private schools. 29 [students] is our max and teachers get paid [extra] if
they have over 29. So generally, our classes are right around 29, a large class is around 30, 31 kids. (IX, 6/20/13, p. 9).

Once, Principal Xavier had over 40 students in a Geometry class. District administration initially denied his request to add another section but after a week or two of parent phone calls and complaints downtown, the request was granted (IX, 6/20/13, p. 9).

Say we have like 42 kids taking Geometry, I can’t have [that]. I’m not going to have 42, parents would go crazy. So we’ll split it up 21, 21 and we’ll get support from downtown ‘cause they don’t want to deal with the phone calls either. We tried it one year and they said, “No they were not going to give it to me.” And I said, “Ok, I’m going to make this Geometry class 40 something kids.” About a week, 2 weeks later, they were like, “Ok, we’re gonna [allow the split], do you have anybody there that wants to teach an extra class?” So (laughing), they couldn’t take the phone calls. (IX, 6/20/13, p. 9)

Although Principal Xavier’s leadership practices were dictated by the stakeholders: students, staff, and parents, he prided himself on collaboration and listening to the voices of the people he served. In addition, the ability to carry out leadership practices in such a manner suggests that Xavier was a trusted and respected leader who reciprocated that trust and respect with the stakeholders.

Teacher Assimilation

As students assimilated to suburban school culture, Principal Xavier was concerned about teachers’ assimilating their instructional practices to accommodate the diverse learning needs of students (IX, 6/20/13, p. 7). One assimilation included accommodating African American students who tended to be learners that were more auditory yet, writing, saying and reading worked hand in hand with being auditory (IX, 6/20/13, p. 7).

Well, like we talked about the loudness, people of color being more auditory learners where you’re going to have to write things on the board, you’re going to have to say stuff, you’re going to have to read stuff, you’re going to have to do it a bunch of different ways because you don’t have a 99% majority visual learners now like you used to. You got a lot of auditory learners, and that helped me because that’s how I am. Being Native American, our culture is mostly auditory learners too. (IX, 6/20/13, p. 7)
Because the teachers were “kid-people,” Xavier did not believe that any teacher intentionally came to work with the idea of teaching one particular race of students but rather, they welcomed diversity and admired parents for struggling to provide for their children (IX, 6/20/13, p. 7). At one time, apartment living was very expensive.

I don’t think anybody came out here, “Ooo, I want to work in a place that’s, a bunch of Jewish kids, a bunch of White kids, and a few Asian kids.” I think they understand and admire the parents, a lot of them struggling to get their kids out here because the apartments are expensive. They aren’t as expensive as they used to be. I mean used to be $1500 for a 2-bedroom apartment down the road, now it’s come down to 6, 7, $800. Prices are a lot lower but I think they admire the parents. (IX, 6/20/13, p. 7)

In addition, Principal Xavier thought teachers embraced the challenge of being able to differentiate instruction and their willingness to work with receptive students and parents.

I admire them a lot for the challenges they’ve taken on because with the lower socioeconomics you see a lot more personal problems with the kids, kids being emotionally not there sometimes. I think they are willing to work with the parents [and] with the kids as long as the kids seem receptive. (IX, 6/20/13, p. 7)

Taking on the challenges associated with teaching economically disadvantaged and African American students suggested that teachers were more concerned about educating kids and less concerned about the race of kids. The willingness to differentiate instruction to accommodate the multiple learning needs of students suggested that teachers were passionate about being educators.

Professional Development

While Principal Xavier’s leadership practices were guided by stakeholders, professional development opportunities were guided by teachers or district initiatives. “Whatever comes up or I see a need for, we’ll use [our Intermediate School District]. We use the school district as a whole” on initiatives like cultural competence (IX, 6/20/13, p. 8). “The cultural competence thing, once we started the demographics changing, we did that. The Marzano stuff, the Common Core stuff, we’ve sent teachers to that” (IX, 6/20/13, p. 8). In addition, whenever Xavier came across specific
professional development opportunities that could potentially benefit certain individuals, he recommended it.

If I have teachers who have particular interests or that might have some issues that I think might help them, I might say, “Hey, I have this seminar, this may help you, what do you think?” (IX, 6/20/13, p. 8)

Ultimately, Principal Xavier valued professional development and encouraged teachers to participate, which suggests selflessness on behalf of the building leader who could have justifiably denied teachers being out of the building during instructional time. In addition, being pro-active by allowing professional growth opportunities in areas like cultural competence and differentiation while demographic changes were taking place in his school suggests that Xavier was a leader who welcomed change by proactively preparing for it.

Advice to Aspiring Principals

Just as teachers prepared for change via professional development, Principal Xavier advised novice principals to prepare for change by not being afraid of it and understanding that personal growth and change will come with the territory (GI, 7/23/15, p.13). “Take your education head on. Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid to talk about the changes. Accept them, embrace them” (GI, 7/23/15, p.13). Along with embracing the changes, Xavier encouraged new principals to “learn about the culture that’s coming” do not assume that all students have the resources like computers (GI, 7/23/15, p.13).

Xavier also wanted novice principals to understand that as a person in leadership role, there will be personal growth and personal changes. “There will be change. You will not be who you are right now again. You cannot operate the way you’re operating right now. You just can’t” (GI, 7/23/15, p.13). The way you operate will change because the changing demographics will force personal and operational changes to acknowledge the various cultures.
In the end, with the changing demographics, change is inevitable. Understanding the perspectives of students, staff, parents and the district, lends itself to informed decisions being made in the best interests of all the stakeholders. Additionally, changing and growing as a person makes for a well-rounded leader and a conscious educator who understands multiple perspectives.

Advice to District Administrators

While advice to novice principals was to embrace change, Principal Xavier’s advice to district administrators was to embrace talking about the problems impacted by the socioeconomic and demographic changes on the district as a whole (IX, 6/20/13, p. 11). One problem Xavier would like the district to acknowledge was the overall decreased standardized test scores instead of pretending like socioeconomics and demographics changes are not the cause (IX, 6/20/13, p. 11).

I wish that they would admit and just come out and say the reasons [test scores] are going down is because of the lower socioeconomics that our demographics are changing. Everybody knows it but you don’t say it because it’s not PC (politically correct) to say something like that. (IX, 6/20/13, p. 11)

Although being politically incorrect was a label the district would rather avoid, not acknowledging a problem implied a problem did not exist. Thus, the problem can never be addressed or solved. For example, another problem impacted by the changing socioeconomics and demographics was students moving into the district from the urban core with a fighting and survival behavior. Principal Xavier confessed,

I think they need to admit that we do have some problems, especially at the high school. I know they have some issues with older kids moving in. A 15 or 16 year old moving in from a gang infested high school, all of a sudden, they’re in this new high school, and a certain way they had to behave at that other school to keep themselves safe, that survival behavior, basically, all of a sudden, stands out. (IX, 6/20/13, p. 11)

Even though that survival behavior stood out at the high school, Xavier explained that they did not “have as many issues at the middle school or elementary schools” (IX, 6/20/13, p. 11).
However, they have seen kids move in with that survival behavior but Xavier would pull them into his office to explain that they did not have to watch their back at his school (IX, 6/20/13, p. 11).

We’ll even see that [survival behavior] here. We’ll see a kid that’ll move in the middle of the year and they have this survival behavior. After a week, I’ll even pull’em in [my office] and say, “Hey, you don’t have to watch your back here.” (IX, 6/20/13, p. 11)

In the middle school, Principal Xavier acknowledged problems caused by students with survival behavior and immediately addressed the problems getting them under control. Whereas in the high schools, survival behavior exhibited by students coming from gang infested high schools remained a problem. Although the district wanted to be perceived as politically correct, ironically, the stakeholders knew the problems existed, but not talking openly about the problems implied a cover-up.

Principal Yancy

The eighth participant, and fourth of the minority participants, was Principal Yancy who began his career as a science teacher prior to becoming a principal. Despite being mostly White, Yancy had a relatively diverse teaching staff that somewhat mirrored his student body. However, cultural differences contributed to a lack of understanding on behalf of teachers who interpreted the behavior of African American students as being disrespectful. While the interactions frustrated staff, Yancy recognized that adequate professional development was needed and district administrators needed to understand that adequate resources to support student services was also needed. Therefore, the advice offered to aspiring principals and district administrators was to establish relationships and to embrace change.

Background

Principal Yancy, age 40, was an African American male with 16 years in education including four years as principal. Yancy started his career teaching science to middle school students for seven years. While serving as a teacher, Yancy was often asked to work in the main
office when administrators were out of the building tending to district affairs. This exposure gave him a “better insight into how schools operate and I had an interest in supporting kids at a different level by supporting adults and really focusing on teaching and learning from the office or at an administrative level” (IY, 6/26/13, p. 1). During his seventh year teaching, Yancy was asked to serve as interim assistant principal at the middle school, which gave him a great opportunity to understand the day to day operations of the building, move beyond just managerial duties, and start to become an instructional leader.

While completing his master’s degree in educational administration, Yancy participated in a leadership academy for aspiring principals. Although there was an assistant principal opening at the middle school where he was serving as interim, his mentor made him aware of an opening in a neighboring district. Yancy applied for both but did not land the position where he served as interim. Instead he landed the position at the neighboring middle school. After serving five years as assistant principal who was also in charge of athletics, Yancy became principal once his predecessor retired (IY, 6/26/13, p. 1).

Teacher-Student Demographics

Principal Yancy’s school was located 20 miles from the urban core. While approximately 86% of the teaching staff was White as of 2013, over the course of the years, Yancy made a conscious effort to try to employ a teaching staff that mirrored the diverse student body. Although Yancy hired a few African American, Asian and Chaldean staff, “Our teaching staff diversity does not look like or mirror our student diversity” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 16), which had been a goal for the school.

One thing we are really working on is that our teaching staff mirrors our students. Currently, we have two African American female teachers, a few Asian, both are Japanese. We do have a hand full of Chaldean [a Christian ethnic group from Iraq] female teachers, around three now. The vast majority of the rest are female, White. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 2)
Although most of the teachers were female, Yancy was able to hire an African American male teacher for the first time ever in the history of the building (GI, 7/23/14, p. 16). “That’s what’s been exciting, being able to hire. I’ve hired quite a few teachers now over the past few years” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 17). In addition, Yancy had two African American female counselors and two assistant principals, “one Caucasian female, one African American male” (IY, 6/26/13, p. 2). Yancy felt like diversity was over represented in the office while the teaching staff was underrepresented.

I was able to hire my first ever African American male teacher in this building even though he is only here part-time. So we have some diversity but not enough within the teaching ranks. The office, and administratively, and our counseling department, yes, we’re over represented but in the teaching staff we’re underrepresented. (GI, 7/23/14, p. 16).

Even though staff diversity was underrepresented, the age of staff and years of service was extremely diverse. While novice and veteran staff ranged in age from 22 years to the mid-60s, the years of service ranged from zero to over 30 years (GI, 7/23/14, p. 17). Novice teachers begin their careers on probation. Yancy expressed, “I have quite a number of probationary staff. Probably off the top of my head, I’d say about 14 that have been there five years or less” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 17). Meanwhile, veteran teachers were ending their teaching careers by retiring, which allowed for a nice blend of novice and veteran teachers.

We’ve had quite a few retirements in the past 7-8 years so we’re starting to see a younger generation of teachers coming into the field. But we still have a number of veteran teachers who are close to retirement age or beyond that. It gives a very nice blend so you get the best of both worlds. (GI, 7/23/14, p. 16)

Over the years, as the staff was changing, the student body was also changing, though student enrollment was remaining relatively unchanged. In the 2002-2003 school year, 820 students were enrolled. Ten years later in 2012-2013, enrollment decreased by only nine to 811 students. Nevertheless, the overall student enrollment of African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups increased. In 2002-2003, approximately 13.1% of the student enrollment was African American. By 2012-2013, ten years later, the African American enrollment nearly
doubled to 22.7%. Furthermore, the economically disadvantaged subgroup nearly tripled. In 2006-2007, economically disadvantage represented 4.7% of the student enrollment, which increased to 13.6% in 2012-2013, just seven years later. Although the economically disadvantaged subgroup had the greatest change during a shorter period of time, the average class size was around 28 despite the contractual limit of 32 (GI, 7/23/14, p. 16).

The conscious effort to have staff diversity mirror student diversity suggests that Principal Yancy values the importance of having teachers in the building that students can relate to. It also suggests to families and community members that various cultures are valued by the people who service them despite their socioeconomic status. In addition, the blend of novice and veteran teachers suggests that working collaboratively allows the best of both worlds by blending innovative teaching practices of teachers fresh out of teacher education programs with the wisdom of veteran teachers sharing effective teaching and discipline strategies. Teachers who are open to change will continue to grow and change just as the student body continues to grow and change while teachers who are not open to change will either leave the position or retire.

Academic Proficiency

As the building leader, Principal Yancy was concerned with cultural issues in the building coupled with academic needs in writing and science, which were identified by the MEAP standardized assessment (IY, 6/26/13, p. 6). Although the writing assessment was taken by seventh graders and science was taken by eighth graders, ideally, Yancy hoped that the entire school would embrace both goals. However, Yancy could not see all teachers supporting the science portion of the goal because of perceived unrelated subjects like physical education (IY, 6/26/13, p. 6).

Science is horrible! What can we do around Science? But, my thought is that there was a problem because I don't think all people would get behind the Science goal. I can't see my P.E. [physical education] teachers really buying into this and making this a change but even before we can get there, we have to work on some cultural issues. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 6)
Even though writing and science were academic goals Principal Yancy wanted to address as a building-wide initiative, culture and climate along with student issues became the focus (IY, 6/26/13, p. 6). The focus extends beyond the perceptions that the teachers have regarding culture, climate, and student issues. Yancy personally believed the heart of the focus boiled down to “relationships” (IY, 6/26/13, p. 6).

Culture and climate became a primary focus that we have identified. Cultural and climate go so far beyond just the teacher’s perceptions, because they obviously have some concerns within the building that they want to see improve but, it also takes into account the student issues as well, but I think the heart of it is relationships. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 6)

Although Principal Yancy believed relationships were at the heart of it all, he and the staff were very specific in identifying the goal of culture and climate along with the impact it had on student achievement (IY, 6/26/13, p. 6). According to Yancy, culture and climate was the foundational support that had to be in place before the academic concerns could even be addressed (IY, 6/26/13, p. 6).

We are now being very specific and targeted with making this [culture and climate] our goal. What we are trying to do and why it's important? We have been looking at research as far as how culture and climate directly impact student achievement. What it all comes down to is we need to see our students achieve and doing their best. Before we can get to some of those academic concerns, we have to make sure our culture and climate is in place. Kind of like a foundation or the plate that is going to support everything that we are doing academically. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 6).

In addition to looking at culture and climate, they were implementing specific initiatives surrounding character education and common expectations that are consistent across the building regardless of the classroom students goes into (IY, 6/26/13, p. 6).

We are putting together some specific initiatives that will bring together some character education components that will with students as well as staff. We are trying to get them the support necessary to really help with some common things that no matter what class the child walks into there will be some common expectations that they’ll have. It's in the works right now. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 6)
Having common expectations throughout the building lends itself to developing a culture and climate of norms and practices that will support achievement. Although writing and science were the academic goals, having culture and climate that is conducive to learning will ultimately create an environment where learning can actually take place. However, in order to create a culture and climate, teachers must understand the perceptions of students and students must understand the perceptions of teachers.

Revelations of Teacher-Student Interactions

Although teachers and students had perceptions based on their experiences, a mutual understanding of those perceptions from the teachers’ and students’ point of view, respectively, were essential to developing a culture and climate that could address student achievement.

*The Teacher Viewpoint*

As culture and climate were being addressed, there were some challenges teachers faced regarding student behavior and teacher evaluation based on tone of communication. Nevertheless, becoming acclimated to these challenges was a learning curve and took time.

Frustration with Student Behavior

Despite efforts being made by the teachers to build relationships with students, Principal Yancy believed that there were “some natural difficulties that exist when you really don't understand the culture that you’re dealing with” (IY, 6/26/13, p. 2). Overall, he “thinks teachers truly believe that they are trying to make a difference yet admits that there are some frustrations as well as some challenges” (IY, 6/26/13, p. 2). Certain challenges come from teachers not understanding the cultural make up of African American students by perceiving their behavior as disrespect (IY, 6/26/13, p. 2).

For the most part our staff does a good job of establishing and building a relationship with all of their students regardless of ethnicity or class but I still think there are challenges
there. Challenges in that certain things that I think could be perceived as disrespect, and I'm specifically speaking about our minority children now, African American in particular. Something could be perceived as disrespectful behavior isn't necessarily disrespectful. It's just that lack of a connection or understanding that the teachers have. Therefore, it leads to I think, frustration on both sides and that escalates to a disciplinary situation where a child is being disciplined. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 2)

According to Principal Yancy, when a lack of understanding existed between staff and students, disciplinary concerns were often escalated by teachers who viewed culturally derived student behavior as disrespectful.

Let’s just take this, you see students talking in the hallway and they may be perceived as being extremely loud. The teacher confronts that group of children that are predominately minority students and from there it just escalates into the students being perceived as being disrespectful when these students may just be finding their comfort level with other students. The students are thinking, we are just sitting here talking. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 2)

While the students viewed their behavior as just talking and the teachers viewed their behavior as disrespect, “these different nuances and facets come into play with that social interaction between the person of authority (the teaching staff) and the student. It ends being a referral to the office or some type of disciplinary action” (IY, 6/26/13, p. 2). However, Principal Yancy truly believed that teachers attempted to build “quality relationships” yet they were frustrated when they were “not able to connect with” African American students (IY, 6/26/13, p. 2).

I think they truly believe that they have the best interest of all students in mind when interacting. They are attempting to create quality relationships with each of their students and they feel that they have been successful at that. I think they also feel some frustration sometimes when they are not able to connect with certain groups of students. When I say certain groups I am speaking about minorities again. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 2)

Although teachers were frustrated by not being able to connect with some African American students, the perception of teachers having the best interest of students in mind suggested that teachers were one-sided with their interpretation of creating quality relationships or interactions with students. By being one-sided, teachers did not see the interactions from the
Students’ point of view that being loud was just a way of talking to their peers. Instead, teachers saw the interactions as being disrespectful which often escalated and resulted in disciplinary consequences.

Frustration with Teacher Evaluation

While teachers may have viewed the tone of students as disrespectful, the tone of teachers may have been viewed as disrespectful. During the teacher evaluation process, Principal Yancy became concerned with the tone of a teacher which was upsetting to students, colleagues, and parents (IY, 6/26/13, p. 7). Although the teacher had “some pretty solid lessons,” this teacher lacked building relationships with students, contained classroom management issues, and offended colleagues and parents by the way she communicated (IY, 6/26/13, p. 7).

Through the evaluation process we work with individual teachers, with specific things that we are seeing. There is a teacher for example that when you go into this teacher’s classroom, you see some pretty solid lessons. The one thing that is lacking is the relationship component with students, some classroom management issues as well as some problems with other staff members [and] with parents. It’s all about how this person communicates, tends to just be very black or white and has not found value in the warm fuzzy stuff because they feel like, that’s not what they are here to do. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 7)

Even though the teacher was not a warm fuzzy person, Principal Yancy attempted to work with her by giving a concrete example of how the tone in her emails were upsetting people and that the intended message was getting lost in the delivery.

My message to this person is that if people see you as this cold robotic machine, you are not going to reach people and get the most out of people the way you would want to. So, I have been working with this individual teacher to really help [her] improve and giving concrete examples. When you send this email, to me, this is the way I take it. When you send this email to this parent, they are upset and they are contacting me, this is why. I cannot argue about what you are trying to do, but the message is getting lost in your tone. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 7)

Despite the message getting lost in tone, the teacher evaluation process not only allowed Principal Yancy to witness the actions of the teacher but it also allowed him to provide constructive criticism. In addition, because the tone was in black and white without a warm fuzzy appeal, Yancy
was able to interpret the tone through multiple lenses because of the feedback provided by students, parents, and colleagues. However, getting the teacher to be receptive towards feedback was another challenge that Yancy had to endure and learn to address as an educational leader.

Volume: Those Loud Black Kids

In addition to providing teachers with feedback, Principal Yancy had to get teachers to understand the cultural differences between White teachers and African American students. To White teachers, when African American students were in the hallway “being loud or walking in a group or standing in a group,” not only were they “perceived as being extremely loud” but they were also “perceived as being disrespectful” once confronted by teachers (IY, 6/26/13, p. 2).

According to Principal Yancy, when African American students are loud in the hallway while finding their comfort level among peers, the behavior is escalated by teachers when the behavior is perceived as being disrespectful. However, when students are excited, the increased volume is often the product of the excitement and not a sign of disrespect. Nevertheless, when confronted by authority, it is not uncommon for students to defend themselves when they feel they have done nothing wrong. Unfortunately, attempting to defend themselves caused a domino effect where emotions often took over from being confronted, anger set in followed by disrespect, insubordination, and ultimately disciplinary consequence.

The Student Viewpoint

Just as teachers had their perspectives about students, students had their perspectives about being confronted by teachers then feeling singled out and targeted.

Singled Out or Targeted

Feelings of being “singled out” or “targeted” while socializing with peers in the hallways and classrooms was a finding that became an issue due to the loud voices rendered by African
American students. Principal Yancy reported the perceptions of African American students feeling singled out or targeted while talking and laughing with peers along with feeling like their subgroup was being treated differently and expectations were not the same compared to other subgroups (IY, 6/26/13, p. 3). Principal Yancy indicated:

The students would feel, specifically we will stick to African American students, they feel singled out. They feel if they are in the hallway as a group, their peer group will be targeted by an adult and some kind of negative interaction where they are being challenged to change their behavior or stop doing something. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 3)

Although African American students felt like they were unfairly targeted as a group, being challenged to change their behavior suggested that students had to conform to a culture that they were not accustomed to. Nevertheless, in addition to feeling targeted because of their volume, they also felt targeted by dress code.

**Singled Out by Dress Code**

Along with volume, another example of where African American students felt picked on was dress code. According to Principal Yancy, the dress code rules clearly state that the wearing of stretch pants or leggings must have cover-ups like t-shirts or sweaters long enough to cover the buttocks (IY, 6/26/13, p. 3). However, African American students felt like they were the first ones corrected about certain behavioral concerns or dress codes despite their White counterparts wearing the same type of outfits. For example, if the African American girls wore stretch pants or leggings without the appropriate cover-up then they would be in violation of the school dress code and subjected to a discipline referral to administration (IY, 6/26/13, p. 3).

They would also feel like in the classroom that they might be the first to be corrected when it comes to behavioral concerns [on] something like dress code. We have a specific dress code that primarily affects our female population that might wear clothing that is inappropriate, such as leggings without appropriate cover. The African American girls feel like they are targeted more with the enforcement of such policies. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 3)
Although African American students felt singled out or targeted, students recognized when teachers were being fair and unfair, especially when their group was the only one being addressed. When other subgroups were out of dress code, they were overlooked while African American students wearing the same clothing were targeted and forced to follow school policy. Here, it is presumed that African American students do not follow rules. However, when compliance to follow school dress code is not regulated, students from various subgroups are going to challenge those rules. African American students simply want the rules to apply to everyone, not just to them or a selected few.

Principal Revelations

As the leader in a middle school building, Principal Yancy recognized changes that needed to be made in order to be adequately prepared for a diverse student body. The curricula had to be adjusted along with the mindset of teachers.

Leadership Practices

Principal Yancy addressed concerns associated with curriculum, cultural competence and understanding the changing demographics by using input from central office in order to identify and address their “greatest area of need” through the use of SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely) goals (IY, 6/26/13, p. 5).

The greatest area of need is basically the most important thing at this time that your school needs to work on. You're basically supposed to create a SMART goal around that and you get to that through multiple data that points through standardized tests, surveys. It could be qualitative data, lots of different ways to get to this, and what I chose to do is make it a practice where I believe in shared leadership and reaching out to my teacher leaders and as many people [who] really want to help bring about change in our school. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 5)

Because Principal Yancy believed in a shared leadership approach, he sought the recommendations of the school improvement team, the faculty advisory team, and the character education team (IY, 6/26/13, p. 5).
So, I looked at our three structures, we have a school improvement team, our faculty advisory [team], that's more of a kind of negotiated group of people that really work with issues and concerns around the building, and then, our character education [team]; so I try to A-line these three to be on the same page of helping to give input. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 5)

While Yancy was trying to get all the teams on the same page, he realized that one of the teams, “for lack of a better term, that's the bitch and moan session, for people that want to complain. ‘It stinks in the bathroom, how come we don't have better dryers, um, where are the administrators during passing time?’” (IY, 6/26/13, p. 5). Although the faculty advisory team was primarily plagued with complaints, Yancy admitted, “That's somebody that you definitely want to listen to and you want to address those concerns, but, it's like eating your vegetables, you'd rather go to your dessert first” (IY, 6/26/13, p. 6).

While shared leadership was the preferred approach or leadership practice for Principal Yancy, collaborating with three teams to address the greatest areas of need and building complaints suggests that pleasing everyone could be challenging. Nevertheless, prioritizing the areas of need to accommodate the students lends itself to taking precedence over teacher complaints.

Change Expectations

Expectations for students were a change Principal Yancy recognized that teachers needed to make. In order to do that, Yancy felt that teachers needed to first grapple with their “own prejudices and beliefs” and embrace the ideology of “all means all” (GI, 7/23/14, p. 17). The “nostalgic” or yesteryear teachers yearned for the days when students came to school prepared and ready to learn instead of being willing to meet the students where they were academically (GI, 7/23/14, p. 17). Yancy explained that the expectations and the mindset of the teachers needed to shift.

We have to change expectations for our students and wrestle with our own prejudices and beliefs about the ability for students to succeed. We truly have to wrap ourselves around “all means ALL” and I see quite a few teachers who are very nostalgic for the good old days. They feel like students came prepared and ready. I’ve wrestled with some of my staff
members that they have to be able to meet students where they are. They have to be willing to differentiate their instruction, they have to be willing to find ways to help kids succeed instead of just blaming and saying you know, these kids aren’t prepared, they came from this district, they have parents that don’t care or respond. They just have to really shift in their mind-set. A true paradigm shift. (GI, 7/23/14, p. 17)

In essence, the expectations of teachers that used to work for homogenous groups of students coming to school prepared and ready to learn had to change. The challenges associated with the heterogeneous groups of students suggest that incoming students may not have been taught how to come to school prepared so the mind-set of blaming students and parents have to change to how students can be helped.

*Professional Development*

Despite teacher complaints, Principal Yancy was concerned about the challenges that surrounded providing staff with “adequate professional learning opportunities” as well as the time to collaborate (GI, 7/23/14, p. 17).

I think one of the challenges is making sure staff members have adequate professional learning opportunities, have adequate time to meet and plan, to work collaboratively on differentiation, [and] to work collaboratively on formative assessments. I feel my struggle and my charge is to work with staff to equip them and most importantly provide the time, the training, and also connect that common vision that we hopefully have for success for all students. (GI, 7/23/14, p. 17)

In addition to collaboration, Principal Yancy wanted to make sure staff understood how to interpret data in order to identify students along with their academic levels to determine what they were missing and what they needed help on (GI, 7/23/14, p. 17). In essence, Yancy wanted to,

Have teachers be prepared with data literacy to really start to dive into data and drill down to individual students to see what they are missing and what they can do as far as classroom level. What are you doing as a classroom teacher to help a child when they’re not being successful in understanding and reaching all of the learning outcomes that they have to as an educator? (GI, 7/23/14, p. 17)

For Principal Yancy, professional development involved giving teachers time to collaborate on techniques surrounding differentiation, formative assessments, and analyzing data.
Creating an environment of data literate staff suggests that staff would be better equipped to accommodate students who struggled academically.

Advice to Aspiring Principals

Even though providing professional development opportunities was an important part of Principal Yancy’s leadership practice, building relationships was “the most important thing” for new principals (IY, 6/26/13, p. 8). The relationships should involve the stakeholders (parents, students, and staff) in order to understand the pulse or the culture of the building.

I would say the most important thing is relationships. You need to establish relationships with the parent community, with the students, with the staff and you need to have a very good understanding of the pulse [of the building]…. Those relationships shouldn’t just be based on the kind of people you would like to hang out with outside of school. You really need to connect with all people. The people that are perceived as "Nay-Sayers" or "Rah, Rah, Go Get ‘em, cheerleaders" um everyone you need to be connected with. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 8)

In addition to building relationships, Principal Yancy advised new principals to not only learn the system but to also understand how the system worked by the relationships established with the stakeholders. Establishing relationships and understanding the system were necessary to have in place before attempting “new initiatives” (IY, 6/26/13, p. 8).

You also need to understand the system and learn the work of that system. You need to continue to move things along in a positive direction by getting input and assistance from those stakeholders that you have established these relationships with. That is important before you try to establish any new initiatives. Make sure it's necessary and make sure it doesn't just become some top-down measure but is something that is built up. That the support and all the necessary pieces are in place to make it as effective as possible because you don't want to burn yourself out or waste valued political capital trying to bring forth something that just isn't worth it. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 8)

A final piece of advice Principal Yancy had for new principals was to learn and understand the role of principal. Although leadership is important, understanding “the daily operations of the building” are equally important so that “managerial duties” will not be neglected (IY, 6/26/13, p.
8). Neglecting the daily operations like not having soap in the restrooms can make people unhappy.

I also recommend the ability to really learn an assigned role/responsibility and make sure that it’s truly understood and that it's something that you revisit consistently so that you have an understanding of what is being done. Leadership is important but managerial duties can often be neglected if you only are an instructional leader. You have to understand the daily operations of the building because when those are not being taken care of, you will quickly find out that people are very unhappy. Regardless of whatever great things you are doing to help learning in the classroom. There has to be soap in the dispensers. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 8)

All-in-all, Principal Yancy’s advice of building relationships with stakeholders, understanding how the system works, and learning the essential role of principal suggests that the a person in such role must have the ability to multitask. Being able to multitask lends itself to being a well-rounded leader.

Advice to District Administrators

In addition to the advice for new principals, Principal Yancy’s advice to district administration was to embrace and welcome diversity with an understanding that the journey will encounter some challenges (IY, 6/26/13, p. 9). Along with the challenges, make sure “the appropriate resources” are available to support the student group in need with an understanding that “equity doesn’t always mean the same” (IY, 6/26/13, p. 9).

I think they need to truly embraced it and celebrate it. You have to go into things with your eyes wide open and understanding that with diversity comes not only opportunities but real challenges, real educational equity. You need to make sure that you have the appropriate resources in place to support that student community that you are trying to reach. Equity doesn't always mean the same. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 9)

When Principal Yancy referenced that equity does not mean the same, he gave an example of two schools where the exact same resources were not necessary for both schools because the needs were different.

So, if we have, for example, two schools that serve the same age group and one doesn't have the diversity, they might be your high achieving school. The [other] one is your
diverse school and is still high achieving, but because of things such as the achievement gap, they are perceived as not achieving. So, it's important to make sure that you have the appropriate resources in place. You don't want to just say, "Here's your resources for this group and we are cutting them in half. This side gets this, [the other school] half this side." It doesn't go that way. You should put in place those resources as needed. The reality that exists is that it doesn't always look the same, but just because it's equal doesn't mean it's equitable. So I would say, understand that. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 9)

In addition to understanding the allocation of resources based on need, Principal Yancy advised district administrators to listen to the student and parent voices of the diverse community. Along with listening, be available to answer questions because small issues can turn into larger issues (IY, 6/26/13, p. 9).

Understand and support opportunities for these diverse populations to have a voice. Not only the students, but the parents. Be there to answer questions and to deal with issues that start small but quickly snowball to be much larger than necessary. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 9)

Because the district does not currently practice addressing issues publicly or does know how to address issues, seek support elsewhere. The district can look to the intermediate school district for support and resources.

Even if you don't have or understand in your own district or how to start parent groups, look to the County for support. Many of our ISDs [Intermediate School Districts] have hired contractors to serve in that role to help navigate that. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 9).

As a district, Principal Yancy advised was to be engaged, be visible and reach out. Just because a particular group may not be that vocal does not mean that issues do not exist.

It's just important to be engaged and to be seen, to be visible, to be a voice, to be heard, and to reach out. And don't think because you are not hearing from a particular group that there might not be issues that are starting to bubble to the surface. (IY, 6/26/13, p. 9).

Ultimately, Principal Yancy wanted district administrators to be proactive by embracing cultural differences, providing necessary resources, and being visible. Being proactive lends itself to building relationships with all stakeholders and allowing stakeholders to see that their well-being is in the best hands of the district.
Principal Zora

The ninth participant, and final minority participants, was Principal Zora who was a classroom veteran prior to becoming a principal. Zora reported troublesome teacher-student interactions associated with student and cultural insensitivity. In addition, the leadership and professional development practices Zora used were guided by staff feedback. Zora’s experiences enabled her of offer advice to aspiring principals and district administrators that sought building relationships.

Background

Principal Zora, age 50, was an African American female and a 30 year veteran in education who remained in the classroom for 17 years prior to going into administration. She taught 10 years in one suburban district during which time various people began grooming her to become an administrator. She transferred to a neighboring district for eight additional years serving as a teacher, dean, and assistant principal. While serving as assistant principal for one of those years, Zora discovered that she did not completely favor being in administration. Because of this, the school created a unique dean position that allowed her to serve a dual responsibility where she was part administrator and part teacher. After serving the dual role, Zora made the decision to become a full time principal in another district.

I didn’t totally like being involved in administration so they created a dean position, six-tenths as a dean administrator and four-tenths as a teacher. I was a dean for 5 years then I decided to go full time as a principal in [another district], and boy, I’ve been here 8 years already. I can hardly believe it. (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 1)

For Zora, the role as principal has been a “good experience” that has allowed her to learn and grow a great deal as an individual (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 1). Her experiences have also allowed her the ability to “mold and shape” the staff who really care about children by getting them to understand that building relationships and getting to know the children are important (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 1).
Although Zora was able to encourage many staff in understanding how to reach and educate students, “there is still a lot of work to be done” (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 1). As long as Zora remains at her school, she is going to continue trying to mold and shape staff who will listen (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 1).

Teacher-Student Demographics

Principal Zora’s school is located roughly 12 miles from the urban core with about 24 fulltime teachers. While approximately 92% of the teaching staff was White, she had one Asian American teacher and one African American teacher (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 1). Despite making a conscious effort to hire people from diverse backgrounds, annual budget cuts in the district dictated that the last hired was the first laid off or fired. “It’s the same old thing, I hire good people with other backgrounds and colors and they are the first to go when there is a layoff, and we have done layoffs every year I have been here” (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 1).

Although acquiring and maintaining a diverse staff may have been challenging, student diversity has not been an issue. As of 2012-2013, the middle school had 366 seventh and eighth graders which was a decline from the 615 that were enrolled ten years earlier. The decline was due to district budget cuts and downsizing, nevertheless, “It’s racially diverse, basically, Black and White” (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 1). The Black/White enrollment tends to fluctuate around the 50/50 mark but over a ten-year span the African American enrollment increased from 45.7% in 2002-2003 to 56.8% in 2012-2013. “There are fewer White students than there used to be, but pretty much the same, 50/50. It depends on any given school year. But it’s now hovering about 60/40 for the last few years” (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 1) with Black, White and very few other races like Asian and Latino. “It’s not really enough to differentiate other races” (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 1).

According to Zora, the school is financially diverse as well, serving students from opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum ranging from upper middle class to poor. Zora referenced the
poor as generational poverty where families have been on government assistance generation after
generation (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 1). In 2006-2007, the economically disadvantaged had an enrollment
of 51.8% and seven years later that enrollment grew to 62%.

It’s a middle school made up of 7th and 8th graders. It’s racially diverse. Socioeconomically,
it’s very diverse as well. Students who live in [one community] probably have adjusted
gross incomes of $250,000 per household all the way to students who live in [another
community] who have zero dollars coming in. These families have been on aid for
generations and everything in between. (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 1)

Although the African American and economically disadvantaged enrollment increased
over the ten and seven year spans, respectively, Zora’s overall student enrollment significantly
decreased by nearly 250 students. The reduction in students also meant a reduction in staff, which
meant maintaining a diverse teaching staff was difficult. This circumstance suggests that it makes
it difficult to grow a diverse teaching staff that mirrors the student body, which is why suburban
schools maintain predominantly homogenous staff.

Academic Proficiency

While African American and economically disadvantaged enrollment continued to rise, the
academic abilities of students were poor. “We have such needy students and we have to make sure
basic needs are being met before we can even get them to the point where they want to listen” (IZ,
6/25/13, p. 4). According to Principal Zora, they offered two different instructional programs in
their school. One program was similar to traditional-based instruction and the other program was
similar to project-based instruction “for our more independent learners and higher level thinkers”
(IZ, 6/25/13, p. 4).

We do use a lot of strategies such as Marzano. We use a lot more of project-based learning
for English. In math and science we work on teaching higher order thinking skills [using
an online lab notebook]. My math department is awesome. They really seem to have a nice
handle on how to focus on instruction. (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 4)
Despite the low academic abilities of students, differentiated instructional practices were in place to accommodate the multiple learning needs of students. In addition, project-based instruction allowed for creativity to activate higher order thinking skills.

Revelations of Teacher-Student Interactions

Although instructional strategies were in place to support low performing students, teacher and student interactions were sometimes at odds. Teachers felt like students were highly disrespectful while the attitudes of teachers were perceived as culturally insensitive. In addition, students felt like they had to fight in order to survive among peers while feeling singled-out or targeted by teachers because expectations did not appear to be mutually distributed among classmates.

The Teacher Viewpoint

Even though students were given a platform to activate their higher order thinking skills, some teachers lacked the skills needed keep them academically engaged while others lacked an appreciation of the disparities associated with the cultural dynamics of their students.

Frustration with Student Behavior

Because there were some teachers who failed to engage students academically, Principal Zora recounted that certain disengaged students “were being highly disrespectful to their teachers” and sustained a fighting mentality (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 4). According to Zora, there was “a lot of disrespect” that came with the territory of not setting expectations and not keeping students engaged (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 4).

They had fights and think fights are the way to go, that old school mentality or maybe a generational thing. However, when teachers don't keep students engaged and don't have high expectations of students with their academics and behavior then you open up a door for those types of things to continue to happen. (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 4).
Even though not keeping students engaged or not having high expectations runs the risk of classroom management issues, Principal Zora expressed that the best teachers establish routines where expectations are clearly defined keeping students on task. Being on task limits distractions and discipline issues because student attention is defined.

The best teachers are the ones who have routine, routine, routine! The students know exactly how they are to act as soon as they walk into that classroom. The best teachers who have the least amount of problems keep their students focused and highly engaged almost every second. (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 3)

Being highly engaged every second in class keeps students from falling into the trap of the old cliché that “an idle mind is the devil’s workshop,” where not keeping busy lends itself to mischief. The lack of engagement occurred when teachers were ill-prepared to teach resulting in classroom management issues because students ultimately found inappropriate things to do to occupy their time.

Cultural Insensitivity

Piggybacking off of the classroom management issues, Principal Zora recalled an encounter with a White male teacher that was quite attention-grabbing. Because staff complained about discipline and the disrespectful behavior some of the African American students exhibited towards staff the previous school year, Zora decided to be proactive by hosting a professional development workshop on understanding cultural differences. The idea was to host the workshop prior to beginning the new school year in order for staff to become better equipped in managing and maintaining a classroom that was conducive to learning. During the professional development, the facilitator asked about the challenges staff face in dealing with students of color and attempted to get the staff comfortable in talking about the issues. One of the White male teachers felt like this particular professional development workshop was a waste of time and grew angry because in his mind, racism no longer existed. Zora expounded,
I had one young man that exploded with rage. He felt that Blacks should just “Get over it!” [The fact] that we have the President [Barack Obama], Oprah Winfrey, and Michael Jordan, racism no longer exists. “When are Black people just going to get over it?” So that was really interesting. I’m not sure if that took us forward or backwards. (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 2).

This teacher, who lives in a world of White privilege, a world where being discriminated against or treated unjustly solely because of the color of his skin does not exist, simply could not see issues facing his diverse students. The intentions of the workshop were to make staff as a whole culturally aware, a need that this White male teacher demonstrated through his actions. The presumption that the world has three well-known African American figures and racism no longer exists because of these three people not only symbolizes racism, it symbolizes ignorance. While this man has no desire to learn about the culture of others, he is responsible for educating hundreds of students annually without any regards to their cultural well-being.

*The Student Viewpoint*

While teachers dealt with frustrations associated with student behavior along with understanding cultural differences and economic disparities, students dealt with frustrations associated with trying to survive among peers and feeling singled out or targeted by teachers.

*Student Survival*

Concerns about fighting were exhibited by students who were trying to figure out how to survive. According to Principal Zora, there were some students with constant discipline problems and “they think fights are the way to go, that old school mentality or maybe a generational thing” (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 4). Principal Zora referenced fighting and disrespecting teachers as normal behavior for some students, mentioning that fighting and disrespecting teachers, in some instances, may be a generational trait, perhaps a way of surviving unfamiliar circumstances. Because students are often a product of their environment, if they see their parents fighting or disrespecting others
like people in authority, then their behaviors will mirror their parents’ behaviors when it comes to resolving conflict.

Singled Out or Targeted

Along with being concerned with the fighting strategies students used to survive, Principal Zora was concerned with the African American student perceptions of how White teachers were treating them. The students felt like teachers’ expectations were not the same for all students. Students also felt that teachers were always picking on them.

Black students feel that White teachers don’t have the same expectations as their peers. They feel the White teachers are always ‘on them’ constantly badgering them and being on their case which they don’t see that happening with their peers. (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 2)

Struggling to survive accompanied by feeling targeted suggests that some African American students may feel like they are in a no win situation or environment among peers and teachers.

Principal Revelations

As revelations appeared through the perceptions of teachers and students, Principal Zora also had revelations in regards to her leadership practices, professional development sessions, and advice to colleagues and district administrators.

Leadership Practices

Despite being the leader in the building, Principal Zora believed in a “shared leadership” approach where she empowered teachers to “develop their own programs” (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 4). Because professional development was a requirement, Zora also encouraged teachers to participate in training outside the district, including diversity training.

Well, first of all, I believe in shared leadership. I empower my teachers and believe in them to develop their own programs and do their own reading. We are fortunate enough in our district that we still have district money where people can go out and get training and I require that my teachers find outside training and push them into seeking out diversity training. (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 4-5)
In addition to encouraging teachers to participate in various trainings, Principal Zora was “a lifelong learner” with a practice of leading by example and participating in the latest educational trends relevant to staying connected (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 5).

I also lead by example and I stay connected. I stay focused. I am also a lifelong learner, go to my own sessions and I go out and attend and promote lifelong learners. (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 5)

Along with the encouraged trainings, Principal Zora also provided the resources necessary to implement the trainings with funding provided by Title 1, a government funded programs. Title 1 funds supported low-income students academically. These funds allowed Zora to purchase multi-level and multi-cultural reading books for all classrooms, which included the classrooms of teachers who did not teach English.

We are a Title 1 school so we distribute those funds. I gave teachers about $15,000 to spend on high entrance, multi-level, multi-cultural reading books and materials so that every single teacher has a classroom library whether English teacher or not and you are expected to direct your students to read. (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 5)

Along with providing resources and support, Principal Zora prided herself on being a “tough, but fair and caring” educational leader, qualities that she stressed to stakeholders (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 5). Complementing her leadership practices, Zora believed in upholding a very high level of integrity in order to develop trusting relationships (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 5).

I try to be tough, but fair and caring. I stress that to my staff, my students, my parents and my school community. I think having the highest level of integrity possible so that people can trust me and can come to me if there is any issue they need assistance with (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 5).

Ideally, a shared leadership practice lent itself to buy-in by the stakeholders which suggested that everyone had a voice or say in the growth and development of the educational needs of the community.
Professional Development

While the shared leadership practices allowed for professional development to be individualized to fit the personal needs of teachers, Principal Zora sought professional development that would help address building-wide initiatives like diversity and discipline. “We are required to do a lot of training” in the district (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 2). One initiative included listening to concerns about race through a fish bowl activity. The fish bowl was a listening activity where a small diverse group of students sat in circle and had a discussion about race relations with the facilitator while the entire staff listened and hopefully learned from the perspective of the students.

We developed a relationship with [a diversity coach from the Intermediate School District]. We actually had four PD (professional development) sessions with him last year, and have four more scheduled with him this year as well as he is leading us in a book study, “Courageous Conversations about Race,” and he is conducting a fish bowl with our students at the beginning of the year. (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 2)

Because the PD was a four session series, the fish bowl activity was not the only identifier of racial concerns. The facilitator used articles, reflected on personal experiences, and had staff share their experiences (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 2).

Typically he will come in with a four-hour block of time. There are four points to the conversation and I can’t remember what but he will either bring an article and we will read it and discuss it, or he will have us reflect on our past lives and share out. He spent last year really trying to get our staff to get comfortable with issues and talk about them out loud. He’s done a pretty good job, but I’m ready for him to wrap it up now. (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 2)

Although diversity was a major building-wide initiative, other initiatives included dealing with the works of author Ruby Payne on poverty, addressing Mean Girls in bullying, and reaching students with special needs (IZ, 6/25/13, p. 2).

Advice to Aspiring Principals

As an educator with 30 years of on the job training including eight years as principal, Principal Zora advised new principals to immediately learn the kids and build the relationships
Standing in the hallway, performing lunch duty and smiling at students are quick ways to develop relationships with students.

Get to know the kids and start building those relationships right away. It's not hard. Stand in the hallways, high five your kids, ask about their families, ask about their weekends. When you are doing lunch duty, walk around and talk to your kids. Let them see your presence. Smile at them and tell them you are happy to see them; even if you aren't (laughing)! It amazes me how many of my parents tell me, "Oh my child just loves you!"

By spending seconds to develop good relationships, students trusted that Principal Zora would advocate for them. With trust, Zora declared that students would come to you if they believed they could talk to you about problems they were having.

My students believe they have a great relationship with me and I spend two seconds a day interacting with them but they feel like they can talk to me and come to me. They know if they have any issues, they have an advocate for them in the front office. You can accomplish this by just standing in the hallway in between every class.

The seconds it takes to greet and acknowledge students by simply standing in the hallway or being on lunch duty suggests that the principal cares. To stand in the same location every day giving high fives or asking about family members indicates that a person is not only genuine but also consistent. Students often gravitate towards routines that are unswerving because there are no surprises in the way they are going to be treated; they can trust the person and circumstances.

Advice to District Administrators

Just as Principal Zora advised new principals to build relationships with students, she also advised district administrators to build relationships with students. As a district, “You have got to start with making [students] believe, that you believe that they can do it”.

I cannot stress enough that it is the relationships you build; that they are valuable and that they are wanted and cared for; because if you have a good relationship with your students and they feel like you care, then you can get them to do just about anything.
Although Principal Zora advised district administration to build relationships with students, that same advice goes hand-in-hand with building relationships with the community. The district should get to know the community as well as the staff in order to get them to do just about anything like following the districts’ agenda and initiatives.

**Similarities and Differences across the Principals**

This section presents the similarities and the differences of all the participants from the background of the principals and demographic of the schools to the revelations of the troublesome teacher-student interactions. It compares the two majority participants farthest and closest to the urban core to the two minority participants farthest and closest to the urban core. It also compares the farthest majority and minority participants to the closest majority and minority participants. In addition, this section analyzes principals’ sense of the interactions between teachers and students by comparing frustrations with student motivation and behavior as well as culturally insensitive issues related to student tardiness and the volume of loud African American students who struggle to survive in suburban schools and feel singled out by teachers. Finally, this section discusses advice participants offered to aspiring principals and district administrations where establishing relationships of various kinds stood out.

**Background**

There were similarities and differences in the backgrounds of the principals. Although there were nine participants total, four were majority participants, two White males and two White females, and five were minority participants, two Black males, two Black females, and one Native American male (Table 1). All the principals were veteran educators in the field ranging from 16 to 32 years of experience. Adam’s, Vince’s, and Yancy’s experience averaged near the lower end of the range with just over 16 years. Charles’, Wendy’s, and Xavier’s experience averaged the middle
of the range, around 24 years while, Beth, Donna, and Zora averaged near the higher end of the range, around 30 years.

Although all of the participants transitioned into their role of principal from assistant principal positions, Adam, Charles and Yancy were the only ones who participated in aspiring principals’ internship programs prior to becoming assistant principals. Charles, Xavier and Zora served as dean of students primarily responsible for discipline prior to becoming full-time administrators. In addition, Charles and Zora worked in a dual capacity by serving as dean and teacher.

In terms of diversity training, all the participants learned how to manage diversity issues through personal experience, on the job training, and relevant professional development workshops but Charles was the only one who admitted to having formal diversity training. In addition, Beth, Wendy, and Xavier, expressed how growing up in diverse neighborhoods was a norm for them unlike the predominantly homogeneous school settings where they worked.

Teacher-Student Demographics

Of the suburban middle schools farthest from the urban core, Principal Adam (35 miles), Principal Beth (33 miles), and Principal Vince (50 miles), approximately 100% of their teaching staff was White (Table 1). Of those three participants, by the 2012-2013 school year, Beth, who was closest to the urban core, had the largest enrollment of African American (17.6%) and economically disadvantaged (36.2%) students. Vince, on the other hand, who was farthest from the urban core had the fewest enrollment of African American students at 0.6% but a sizeable enrollment of economically disadvantaged students at 26.8%.

The middle schools led by Principals Wendy, Xavier and Zora that had approximately 90% White teaching staff. Although the staff was predominantly White, there was a sizeable enrollment
of African American and economically disadvantaged students. Of the three, Zora, who was closest to the urban core, had the highest enrollment of African American students at 56.8% and economically disadvantaged at 62.0%.

For Principals Charles, Donna, and Yancy, 76% to 86% of their teaching staff was White. However, Donna who was seven miles from the urban core had a sizeable enrollment of African American students at 20% but a significant enrollment of economically disadvantaged at 83.1%. Overall, based on the demographics, the closer the schools were to the urban core the higher the African American and economically disadvantaged enrollment.

Academic Proficiency

Although the participants had notable similarities and differences, there were also notable similarities and differences among the demographics of the middle schools in relation to the distance from the urban core, enrollment of African American and economically disadvantaged students, and academic achievement (or gaps in achievement).

*Adam & Donna vs. Vince & Zora*

When comparing the majority and minority participants, the difference in enrollment and achievement of African American and economically disadvantaged farthest and closest to the urban core was significant. Consider, majority participants, Principals Adam (35 miles) and Donna (7 miles), farthest and closest to the urban core, respectively, to the minority participants, Principals Vince (50 miles) and Zora (12 miles), farthest and closest to the urban core, respectively. In 2012-2013, the African American enrollment in Principal Adam’s school was 5.4% while at 20.0% in Principal Donna’s school. During the same school year, the enrollment for economically disadvantaged was 30.4% for Adam and 83.1% for Donna. In essence, the African American and economically disadvantaged enrollment directly correlated to the distance from the urban core.
The farther the school was from the urban core, the fewer the African American and economically disadvantaged students and the closer to the urban core, the more the African American and economically disadvantaged students.

The same difference in terms of distance from the urban core held true among the minority participants. In 2012-2013, Principal Vince had less than one percent African American enrollment, while Principal Zora had 56.8% enrollment. Likewise Vince had a 26.8% enrollment of economically disadvantaged compared to Zora’s 62% enrollment.

Despite the increased enrollment of African American and economically disadvantaged students as the suburban middle schools drew closer to the urban core, the achievement gap for the African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups in the suburban county were significantly wider than the gap for the subgroups in the urban core. For example, consider mathematics in the suburban county for the African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups in grades 6 through 8. In the suburban county only about 20% (22.8, 21.6, 15.6, for grades 6, 7, and 8) of African American and 25% (27.6, 26.5, 21.0, for grades 6, 7, and 8) of economically disadvantaged were proficient in mathematics (Table 3), which meant, 80% and 75% of African American and economically disadvantaged, respectively, were not proficient.

In contrast, if less than 10% of both the African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups in the urban core were proficient in mathematics, then over 90% were not proficient. Thus, the African American subgroup in the suburban county performed somewhat better than their counterparts in the urban core while the economically disadvantaged in the suburban county performed somewhat better than their urban core counterparts. Additionally, almost 60% (61.6, 60.2, 55.4, for grades 6, 7, and 8) of students in the White subgroup in the suburban county were proficient in mathematics, leaving an achievement gap of when compared to African American
and to economically disadvantaged subgroups in the same county. Even though gaps in mathematics existed among subgroups, similar gaps in reading also existed. Ultimately, in the suburban schools the majority of students were proficient while in the urban core the majority of the students were not proficient. And depending on proximity to the urban core (or distance from it), principals’ individual schools tended to follow this pattern.

**Adam & Vince vs. Donna & Zora**

There were similarities and differences that compared the two participants farthest from the urban core to the two participants closest to the urban core. Majority participant, Principal Adam (35 miles), and minority participant, Principal Vince (50 miles), were the farthest from the urban core while majority participant, Principal Donna (7 miles), and minority participant, Principal Zora (12 miles), were closest to the urban core.

The two participants farthest from the urban core, Adam and Vince, had the lowest enrollment of African American students. Because Vince was 15 miles farther from the urban core than Adam, Vince had even fewer African American students with less than one percent compared to Adam’s 5.4% enrollment. In terms of economically disadvantaged, both Adam and Vince had a comparable enrollment of 30.4% and 26.8%, respectively.

In contrast, the two participants closest to the urban core, Donna and Zora, had a sizeable enrollment of African American and economically disadvantaged compared to Adam and Vince. However, the dynamics between Donna and Zora were unique. Although Donna was closer to the urban core than Zora, the African American enrollment for Donna was 20% compared to Zora’s 56.8%. Yet, the enrollment of economically disadvantaged for Donna was 83.1% while it was 62% for Zora.
Based on the participants interviewed, one could potentially conclude that the farther the school is from an urban core, the fewer the African American enrollment and the closer the school is to the urban core, the greater the economically disadvantaged enrollment. It could also be concluded that the enrollment of African American and economically disadvantaged students did not depend on the ethnicity of the principals because Donna, who was White, had fewer African American students despite being closest to the urban core but she had the most economically disadvantaged. Likewise, Vince, who was Black, had fewer African American and a sizeable amount of economically disadvantaged students. In terms of academic ability, the gaps in achievement for the African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups remained consistently lower than their White counterparts in the suburban county.

Revelations of Teacher-Student Interactions

Although the academic ability of African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups remained lower than their white counterparts, the similarities and differences associated with interactions between teachers and students stemmed from what was perceived as a lack of student motivation and inappropriate student behavior. However, teacher interactions that were culturally insensitive not only lacked compromise but some were blatantly racist. Likewise, teacher perceptions about student tardiness and loudness included unrelatable realities and cultural differences that targeted students struggled to survive.

The Teacher Viewpoint

As the perceptions about student motivation and behavior became unveiled, the similarities and differences varied based on the interactions reported by participants. The comparisons regarding African American students and economically disadvantage were relative to the distance the participants’ schools were from the urban core.
Frustration with Student Motivation

Similarities and differences existed among three of the nine participants (Adam, Wendy, and Xavier) regarding the frustrations teachers had with student motivation as well as their interactions to those frustrations. Although the three participants had an average of 781 students (860, 735, 748, respectively) in 2012-2013, teachers were similarity frustrated with student motivation coupled with low academic performance. Ironically, Adam, Wendy, and Xavier believed that low student motivation was due to the mindset of students. Yet all three shared different ways student motivation and mindset were interpreted.

Principal Adam, the White male participant who was 35 miles from the urban core, had 5.4% African American students and 30.4% economically disadvantage students. In lieu of interacting with students who lacked motivation, Adam identified characteristics and problems observed by staff. One characteristic identified was that students who persistently lacked motivation where also persistently low achievers academically. Other characteristics identified included bumping heads with teachers, disconnecting from an ideal quality world, and selecting a poor group of friends. Although characteristics were identified, no solutions, alternatives or interactions were reported, prescribed or recommended to address low student motivation.

Unlike Principal Adam, Principal Wendy, the African America female participant who was 25 miles from the urban core had 39.1% African American and 25.4% economically disadvantaged students. Wendy not only identified characteristics associated with low student motivation but she also found an alternative to change the mindset of students by implementing a Determination Program. The program encouraged students to attend college by taking support classes that could equip them mentally along with the necessary skills to be successful. The program targeted at-risk students and was designed to take students from where they were academically to where they
needed to be over time. Through the collaboration of teacher support and interactions, students learned to advocate for themselves. One student went from taking a reading support class in sixth grade to advanced mathematics in eighth grade. This student was tracked throughout high school and now attends college. Instead of complaining about low motivation, teachers transformed low motivation mindset through ongoing support programs for students.

Unlike Adam and Wendy, Principal Xavier, the Native American male participant who was 23 miles from the urban core had 25% African American and 19.9% economically disadvantaged. Xavier also identified low student motivation but the alternative was to change the mindset of teachers and the way they interacted with students using the philosophy of Ross Greene where students did not lack motivation, they lacked the skills. Students who had some skills were motivated whereas students without skills lacked motivation. Like Wendy, the key was to develop the skills of student.

Although Principal Adam identified the characteristics associated with low student motivation and achievement, he did not have a building-wide initiative to address the lack in motivation. An enrollment of only 5.4% African Americans suggests that the problem was not big enough to address as a building-wide initiative despite the 30.4% economically disadvantaged subgroup. Also, as a White male, with a predominantly White teaching staff in an upper middle class environment, the ability to internalize the mindset of African American and economically disadvantaged may have been difficult to conceptualize.

Additionally, while Principal Wendy’s initiative looked at changing the mindset of students, Principal Xavier’s looked at changing the mindset of teachers. Nevertheless, both changes in mindset focused on developing the skills of students. As minority participants with a sizeable enrollment of African American and economically disadvantaged students, personal
experience probably led to Wendy and Xavier’s ability to understand that given the appropriate skills, students increased their potential to perform academically. Also, because Principals Adam, Wendy, and Xavier reported unique frustrations surrounding low student motivation, it seems reasonable to conclude that more teacher-student interactions would be likely where there is a larger enrollment of African American students. But for principals who had the largest enrollment of economically disadvantaged students, building-wide initiatives were not reported.

Frustration with Student Behavior

There were similarities and differences in the frustrations associated with student behavior among seven of the nine participants. Three of the majority participants (Adam, Beth, and Charles) and four of the minority participants (Wendy, Xavier, Yancy, and Zora) reported frustrations with student behavior. Ironically, the two participants closest to and farthest from the urban core, Donna and Vince, respectively, did not report frustration with student behavior.

The three majority participants who reported frustrations with student behavior shared why teachers were frustrated. For Principal Adam, teachers were frustrated because students lacked bringing their supplies and misbehaved in class but teacher interactions with students were not described. For Principal Beth, teachers were frustrated with students who blurted out during instruction, however teacher’s reactions escalated teacher-student interactions. As for Principal Charles, teachers were frustrated because the teacher interactions used to focus students and to connect with students were difficult.

Likewise, the four minority participants also reported why teachers were frustrated with student behavior. For Principal Wendy, teachers were frustrated because they personalized not being able to connect with students despite the academic techniques they attempted to use. However, Wendy suggested that teachers find non-academic activities like sports to interact with
students. For Principal Xavier, teachers were frustrated with the fighting that went on between the African American students requiring ongoing monitoring and interactions in the hallways. For Principal Yancy, teachers were frustrated with the disrespect displayed by African American students, which escalated from cultural misunderstandings. As for Principal Zora, teachers were frustrated with both the fighting among peers and the disrespect toward teachers. However, Zora reported that teachers who were not engaging had the classroom management issues.

Oddly, student behavior reported by the majority participants was not as vulgar as the behavior reported by the minority participants. However, the closer the minority participants were to the urban core, the more reports of fighting among peers and disrespect towards teachers. Additionally, while the majority participants had an overall higher rate of enrollment of economically disadvantaged students, the minority participants had an overall higher rate of enrollment of African American students. It could be concluded that teacher-student interactions were more difficult with the African American subgroup than with the economically disadvantaged subgroup.

Cultural Insensitivity

There were similarities and differences that five of the nine participants reported regarding cultural insensitivity. Two of the majority participants (Beth and Donna) reported culturally insensitive interactions between teachers and students while three of the minority participants (Vince, Wendy, and Zora) reported insensitive interactions. However, the two similarities that stood out the most among the five participants were 1) the lack of cultural sensitivity, and 2) the students and staff who were offended by that lack of cultural sensitivity.

Both majority participants reported interactions where teachers were unwilling to accept or understand cultural differences and were uncompromising in terms of classroom rules.
However, for Principal Beth, some teachers maintained a top-down way of thinking where teachers micro-managed their classrooms and did not understand how students could feel disrespected. Additionally, for Principal Donna, one teacher who lacked flexibility told a student receiving special education services to go dumpster diving for not writing her name on a worksheet.

While the majority participants reported culturally insensitive issues, the minority participants reported culturally insensitive issues that were blatantly racist and offensive. For Principal Vince, a teacher offended him by refusing to remove a Confederate flag and White parents offended him by refusing to allow their children to be disciplined by him because he was Black. For Principal Wendy, African American students were offended by a teacher trying to “act Black” and by telling a student he was “acting like a monkey.” As for Principal Zora, a teacher reported that racism no longer existed because President Barack Obama, Oprah Winfrey, and Michael Jordan were influential African Americans who flashed across the television.

Unfortunately, learning about different cultures through television or hearsay lends itself to stereotypes and generalizations. Yet, in communities farthest from the urban core, various media outlets like the internet, movies, television shows, news reports, radio stations, and sports broadcasts, served as a lens to gain a skewed understanding about African Americans and the economically disadvantaged.

Ultimately, such a lack of understanding about cultural differences created a troubling climate, because perpetrators of offensive comments have no filters due to the ideology of White dominance where offensive comments can be made without fear of consequences. The “get over it” comment made to Zora and the “it’s just a flag” comment made to Vince suggests that the perpetrators had the right to voice their opinion regardless of how the comments made African Americans feel. The comments also suggest a double-standard associated with White privilege, a
sense of entitlement in the school environment. Ultimately, perpetrators of offensive comments suffer no consequences, while African Americans must suffer in silence. Unfortunately, all too often, African Americans in leadership positions down play or avoid challenging the perpetrators for fear of jeopardizing their job in an all-White working environment. However, if the tables were turned and an African American said something to offend the perpetrators, perpetrators would be campaigning to have that African American terminated.

Student Tardiness

There were similarities and differences with the concept of being on time and how it was interpreted by teachers and African American students. Three of the nine participants (Charles, Wendy, and Xavier) reported that some students were either late arriving to school in the mornings or tardy transitioning from class to class, which was troublesome for teachers.

Principals Charles and Xavier reported that being on time was interpreted one way by teachers and another way by students. For teachers, students were considered on time if they were in their seat ready to learn before the tardy bell rang. Students, on the other hand, considered themselves on time if they were standing in the doorway of the classroom before the tardy bell rang.

However, Principals Charles and Wendy reported that the circumstance behind being late may have been legitimate. If students were under a joint custody court order, one parent may have lived in the district while the other parent may have lived in another municipality that was not conveniently located near the district. Because students may have been ordered by the court to spend time equally between two homes, getting to school on time was a problem whenever a student came from the home of the parent outside the district. In addition, Charles and Xavier
reported that tardiness may have been culturally based or related experience where tardiness was viewed as an acceptable practice.

Although Principal Yancy did not elaborate on tardiness during the group interview, he summed up the reality of teaching in culturally diverse environments by saying, “we have to change expectations for our students and wrestle with our own prejudices and beliefs” (GI, 7/23/14, p.17). In essence, teachers cannot expect students to instantly conform to a reality or culture that they are not accustomed to. Ultimately, teachers have to take into consideration that they will have to learn the culture of the students they serve, just as the students are learning about the teachers.

Volume: Those Loud Black Kids

There were similarities and differences that five of the nine participants reported regarding the volume of African American students. One of the majority participants (Charles) and four of the minority participants (Vince, Wendy, Xavier, and Yancy) reported teacher-student interactions where the volume of African American students sparked negative perceptions and stereotypes.

Four of the participants (Charles, Wendy, Xavier, and Yancy) reported incidents with loud African American students, which were very troublesome for teachers. In many instances, the initial perception was that the African American students were disrespectful or confrontational when in actuality most where loud because they were excited while talking and laughing with peers. Principal Xavier summed up the volume of students best during both the individual and group interviews by saying the Asian students were quietest, the African American students were the loudest, and the White students were somewhere in the middle (GI, 7/23/14, p.10).

Conversely, Principal Vince who was the farthest participant from the urban core with less than one percent enrollment of African America students had the extreme opposite reaction to
volume. The African American students were the quietest in his building and they were often ignored or overlooked by the White teachers. Because Principal Vince had such a small enrollment of African American students, the subgroup did not have a cohort that was large enough to acknowledge, let alone, create teacher-student interactions that could be perceived as disrespectful.

*The Student Viewpoint*

Nevertheless, the similarities and differences participants reported from the perspective of students dealt with realities that the students were actually experiencing. The reality of students trying to survive in a new environment ranged in comparisons from fitting in to fighting with peers, to feeling targeted or singled out by teachers.

**Student Survival**

There were similarities and differences that seven of the nine participants reported regarding the coping mechanisms some African American students used to survive in their new unfamiliar territories. Three of the majority participants (Adam, Charles, and Donna) and four of the minority participants (Vince, Wendy, Xavier, and Zora) described the coping mechanisms as trying to fit in or survive a variety of ways.

The coping mechanisms for the majority participants varied. Principal Adam described student survival in school as acting out that could have possibly bred from non-school or external factors like the home environment, in addition to reactions towards classmates or something on social media. For Principal Charles, students tried to survive or fit in by acting out in order to cover up not measuring up academically or blurting out to be confrontational. For Principal Donna, students survived by retaliating when they felt picked on or bullied by trigger words that angered them.
As for the minority participants and with the exception of Principal Vince, African American students appeared to have behaved a little more aggressively. For Principal Vince, the African American students wanted to survive by simply blending in and remaining under the radar. However, for Principal Wendy, like Charles, students survived by acting out to camouflage or cover up not measuring up academically. For Principal Xavier, students were more belligerent and disrespectful, fighting to keep themselves safe. Likewise, for Principal Zora, students were also disrespectful and fought.

Whether socially, behaviorally or academically identified, transitioning from an urban core school to a suburban school in terms of the cultural learning curve or survival behavior can be a major adjustment for some students. Although the coping mechanisms may have varied, ultimately, all students were trying to fit in or blend in the best way they knew how based on their personal experiences.

Singled Out or Targeted

There were a few similarities and differences reported concerning how some African American students felt targeted or singled out by White staff. None of the majority participants reported this finding; however, three of the minority participants (Wendy, Yancy, and Zora) reported that they served as an outlet or sounding board for the African American students who felt singled out. This suggests that perhaps there was not a comfort zone for the African American students in talking to White principals.

With three participants reporting students’ feeling singled out indicates these were common not isolated occurrences. Regardless of the location of the middle school attended, African American students recognized when a teacher was being fair or unfair when they were the only ones addressed, while another subgroup exhibiting the same behavior was overlooked. Students
also recognized when expectations were not the same and they were being treated differently, based on actions teachers took or did not take toward African American students.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION of FINDINGS

Principal Revelations

Just as there were some similarities and differences regarding the revelations about teacher-student interactions, there were also some similarities and differences regarding the revelations that the participants encountered. Unbeknownst to the participants during the individual interviews, many had comparable leadership practices and professional development initiatives. In addition, they also had comparable advice to aspiring principals and district administrators.

Leadership Practices

There were similarities and differences in the leadership practices with eight of the nine participants. Principal Vince was the only participant who was interrupted during the individual interview and did not share his leadership practices. Of the majority participants, Principals Adam and Beth reported similar leadership styles regarding the importance of maintaining teacher morale. They made a conscious effort to show appreciation to staff by acknowledging them for hard work, and, in some instances, feeding them. However, the differences included Principal Adam who believed in leading by supporting the curriculum and being visible in the building. Principal Beth led by ensuring that novice teachers were mentored by veteran teachers. Principal Charles’s leadership style relied on shared leadership by working alongside the teachers instead of the top-down approach. Principal Donna’s leadership style encouraged teachers who struggled to collaborate with colleagues without being afraid to ask for help.

Like Principal Charles, minority participants relied on shared leadership to help guide their practices. Nevertheless, some differences included Principal Wendy who led by planting seeds about initiatives with key teachers. Principal Xavier encouraged teachers to be flexible with their
instructional strategies. Principal Yancy believed in shared leadership and encouraged teachers to be culturally aware while reflecting on their own prejudices and beliefs. Meanwhile, Principal Zora had a practice of encouraging and empowering teachers to develop their own programs as well as staying abreast of current educational trends.

Although all of the participants valued teacher input in one capacity or another which inspired their leadership practices within the buildings, principals understood their roles and at times non-negotiable executive decisions had to be made without the input of teachers whenever district decisions were mandated. However, half of the majority participants valued maintaining teacher morale, whereas all of the minority participants valued shared leadership which ultimately impacted teacher morale. Considering teacher input suggests that participants were selfless and that the role of principal was about leading in the best interest of stakeholders not leading for the sake of self-gratification in a job title.

Professional Development

There were similarities and differences in the revelations that all of the participants had about professional development. All nine of the participants supported professional development that was based on the personal interests of teachers. Yet, six of the nine participants spoke of professional development surrounding race, diversity, and cultural competence. Two of the majority participants, Beth and Charles, and four of the minority participants, Vince, Wendy, Xavier and Zora, wanted to embrace diversity and talk about cultural differences and discipline issues.

In terms of differences, Principal Adam wanted to model what he preached by showing teachers that he participated in professional development also. Principal Charles wanted teachers to focus on reading and embrace technology. Principal Donna wanted teachers to focus on science
and social studies in addition to English language arts and mathematics. Principal Vince wanted professional development about race relations to be district-wide not just at the building level. Principal Wendy wanted professional development to be intentional as in the case of the homogenous language arts class.

Professional development guided by teacher interest and building level needs suggested that principals relied on teacher input and overall building concerns in lieu of the principals’ personal agenda. In addition, the challenge of talking about race and diversity suggests that principals were in touch with reality and that race relations was a priority that came with the circumstances of changing demographics.

Advice to Aspiring Principals

All of the participants had similarities and differences in advising aspiring or new principals with an overall similar premise about the importance of cultivating relationships by learning and getting to know staff and students. In addition to cultivating relationships, Principals Adam and Wendy both used the terms “go slow, to go fast” by not rushing to make changes. Principals Donna and Zora added that it was important to be visible in the building by allowing staff and students to recognize their presence.

Unlike any of the participants, Principal Vince advised aspiring principals to look inside themselves to determine if they are mentally prepared for the challenge of being in an environment where there is little diversity. Principal Xavier advised not being afraid and embracing changes. Principal Yancy said to make sure you learn the role of principal and how the system works, while Principal Donna said to learn how to interpret and use data.

Although all of the participants had advice that may have been unique to their personal experiences, establishing relationships was a common denominator. Establishing relationships
suggests a level of trust which lends itself to buy-in by the stakeholders when important decisions have to be made or initiatives have to be introduced. A principal cannot lead a flock if the flock does not have mutual sense of respect.

Advice to District Administrators

Just as similarities and differences existed regarding the participants’ advice to aspiring principals, similarities and differences existed in their advice to district administrators. Three of the nine participants, Charles, Wendy and Zora, encouraged administrators to get to know the stakeholders, the principals, the students, and the community. Principal Charles specified getting to know the minority stakeholders. Of the majority participants, Principal Adam advised district administrators to allow principals to provide input on district initiatives. Principal Beth advised district administrators to visit the schools. Principal Charles said to talk about the problems associated with diversity. And, Principal Donna said to allow principals to provide input about staffing their buildings instead of placing teachers who may not be a good fit.

Of the minority participants, Principal Vince advised district administrators to make a conscious effort to hire diverse staff. Principal Wendy advised district administrators to be visible. Principal Xavier advised district to embrace talking about problems, in particular, test scores that are impacted by the socio-economic changes and diversity. Principal Yancy advised district administrators to allocate resources based on need not uniformity. If one middle school is outperforming another middle school in the district, the lower performing school needs more resources. Both schools do not need equal resources.

Although getting to know stakeholders was encouraged, acknowledging that problems exist with diversity and allocating resources based on need suggest that district administrators must redirect their priority towards the problems in the district. If socio-economic changes and diversity
are impacting achievement, district administrators need to talk about the impact made by the changes and find solutions to address those changes. However, resources should not be thrown at the problems without researching the best solutions or practices to address the achievement problems.

Thus, systematic similarities and differences existed across the participants. First, not surprisingly, distance from the urban core influenced each school’s circumstances and the principals’ reactions to their particulars. Being further away tended to diminish the number of African American and economically disadvantaged students just as it increased the likelihood of racial tensions. Likewise, gaps in academic achievement for African American and economically disadvantaged grew wider as distance from the urban core increased. Second, a principal’s affiliation as majority or minority influenced only a few aspects. While principals were remarkably similar in almost all of their approaches, African American students chose to share concerns only with minority principals. Thus, if stakeholders’ views are central to the workings of schools, then majority principals risk having a gap of blind side in their understandings about the vantage points of African American students if African American students do not share concerns with their principals. Third, while principals’ advice to district administrators was relatively similar, each principal shared additional advice that warranted customizing. However, politics sometimes overshadowed districts’ risk-taking abilities.

In Chapter Five: Discussion of Findings, I take up the issue of how these findings relate to the literature that was reviewed in Chapter 2, and which framed this research. In addition, I offer insights about the applicability of this research to a wider set of schools and provide prescriptive advice for educational policy makers, principals, and other school staff.
Relating Findings to Previous Literature

The goal of this qualitative study was to explore three main topics: the principals’ perceptions of troubling teacher-student interactions, the transformative leadership practices of the principals, and the advice offered to novice principals and district administrators as suburban middle schools become more and more diverse racially and socioeconomically. Revelations emerged from principals about the viewpoints of teachers and students. While teachers expected students to comply and conform to a traditional culture of arriving to school on time, taking a designated seat, waiting quietly for instruction, handing in each assignment as ordered, and participating as needed, some students struggled to adjust to a culture to which they were not accustomed, African American students in particular. Thus, this chapter relates Chapter 4 findings to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

Participants spoke openly and honestly about their experiences as principals and outlined how continuing (or growing) diversification played out for teachers and students. Principals’ advice to aspiring principals, as well as novice and veteran principals, suggests a more enlightened perspective, especially promoting social justice through transformative leadership practices. Here, inequities are confronted and risks are taken to ensure equal educational opportunities. Ultimately, academic proficiency emerged as the underlying motive behind troubling interactions revealed between teachers and students.

Academic Proficiency and Teacher Retention

Even though holding teachers accountable and addressing the academic achievement gap have been primary motives of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, findings confirmed Cooper’s (2009) report that social and cultural challenges would become significant barriers. With the increased diversity at schools, findings were also consistent with Howard’s (2006) statistical
realities that the teaching force remains predominantly White, that the student population was increasingly diverse and growing in students of color, and that students of color remained most at risk of being on the negative end of the achievement gap, as indicated by the MEAP and NAEP (2013).

Although the literature emphasized that the African American subgroup was at the negative end of the achievement gap, the findings emphasized that the economically disadvantaged subgroup also fell at the negative end of that gap (Tables 3 and 4). In fact, students in the African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups from the urban core performed less than one percentage point lower than their White counterparts in mathematics and less than 10 percentage points lower in reading on the state’s standardized assessment. Ultimately, there was little to no gap in achievement in the urban core across the race and class subgroups. However, in the suburbs, the same race and class subgroups performed lower than their White counterparts. The African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups performed approximately 30 percentage points lower than their White counterparts in mathematics and reading, leaving roughly a 30 percentage point gap in achievement. So, why is the achievement gap for both African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups in the suburban county significantly wider than the gap for these subgroups in the urban core?

While the literature (Howard, 2006) reported that students of color were most at risk for being at the negative end of the achievement gap, it did not anticipate that the gap would widen for African American and economically disadvantaged students (compared to middle-class Whites) as they migrated to the suburbs. But, though the achievement gap was wider, African American and economically disadvantaged students performed slightly better academically in the suburbs than in the urban core. However, the present study found that participants made a
conscious effort to address the gaps in learning for the African American subgroup through building-wide initiatives. Yet, building-wide initiatives to support economically disadvantaged were not reported. While race and socioeconomics were viewed as deficiencies, many participants sought ways to improve the African American achievement gap, yet they did not account for ways to improve the economically disadvantaged achievement gap.

In the suburban school districts in this study, teacher retention was high and remained increasingly predominantly White the farther a school was from the urban core. The reality among teachers that “nobody leaves” once hired made it difficult to hire diverse staff. When teachers remained at the same school and taught in the same content area, growth and development of programs or initiatives have the potential to be reflected upon, tweaked and enhanced over time, by the teachers who kicked off the initiatives. Teacher retention and program enhancements transferred to the students, which was evidenced by the findings in Tables 3 and 4 that show a significant increase in achievement by students in the suburban county compared to all students in the urban core. However, when the content taught changed from year to year, the ability to reflect on practices and master the content became difficult, if not impossible.

In addition to high teacher retention, the suburban schools also have access to better resources and technology through financial means or subsidized funding options. Despite the budget cuts that school districts face and the growing number of economically disadvantaged students, suburban families—especially those farther from the urban core—are often better equipped to acquire resources like technology or tutoring through financial means or financial support programs that many urban families lack. Because the suburban schools closest to the urban core had a higher enrollment of economically disadvantaged students, more families in these closer
schools lacked access to technology or tutoring resources to support academic deficits and learning needs of students.

Unlike the schools in the suburban county, teacher turnover was high in the urban core, which corresponds to earlier research (Tillman, 2005) where the retention of highly qualified teachers in urban districts became crucial in maintaining stability and student achievement. Retaining teachers was left up to the mentorship of principals because it was difficult to retain teachers when pay was not comparable to suburban districts, classrooms were overcrowded with 40 or more students, and teacher morale was low. Furthermore, new programs or initiatives rarely got a chance to grow into fruition because the revolving door of teachers (and administrators) interfered with proper program execution, especially when new teachers had to be trained year after year.

With teacher retention and available resources in the suburbs, the likelihood that African American and economically disadvantaged subgroups in the suburban county performing better than the same subgroups in the urban core seems inevitable. However, the rate in which the academic performance increases in the suburban county cannot be predicted because a change in zip code from the urban core to the suburbs does not constitute an instant change in one’s cultural identity, learned behavior, let alone, academic ability. In terms of cultural identity, African American students from the urban core who have never been exposed to a predominantly White cultural environment or a traditional White teaching model made evident by White middle class teacher expectations in the suburbs cannot assimilate overnight, nor should they have to. Ultimately, learning a new culture does not equate to abandoning or devaluing one’s own culture, but rather to respecting the differences affiliated with various ethnic backgrounds.
Additionally, learned behavior comes from students’ environment and their experiences. For example, if a student has never been exposed to or taught Broadway theater etiquette and has only attended a movie theater, the student will probably behave like a movie goer, getting up at any time throughout the movie to use the restroom or buy refreshments, eating popcorn or similar snacks, initiating or replying to a text message, etc. However, on Broadway, once the curtain opens and the theater goes dark, getting out of your seat, eating, and texting are frowned upon and distracting to not only the theatergoers but also to the actors on stage. In reality, no one should expect a new student to automatically behave or to conform to unknown rules that are traditionally prescribed by White middle class teachers. Understanding should come over time and be an explicit focus of learning goals.

Similarly, academic ability does not change instantly when students relocate from the urban core to the suburbs. Often, students coming from the urban core have diminished skills as a result of novice teachers, learning disabilities, limited resources, or mismanaged and overcrowded classrooms. However, when resources are readily available in the suburban county, the remediation of fundamental skills can be a time-consuming process with a steep learning curve for students coming from the urban core. Yet, given the resources, academic gain occurs. Ultimately, socioeconomic status marginalized students via limited resources and inequitable educational opportunities. Nonetheless, evidence exists that the increased academic performance and potential of African American and economically disadvantaged students from the urban core were destined to prosper over time in the suburbs.

Revelations about Teacher-Students Interactions

Various troublesome interactions between teachers and students emerged from interview data. The interactions included stereotypes associated with a lack of cultural sensitivity,
perceptions of student motivation and survival behavior, volume associated with African American students, and the rationale associated with student tardiness.

Stereotypes & Cultural Insensitivity

When individuals stereotype or adopt a certain way of thinking about people who are not like themselves, thoughts generally do not accurately reflect the identity or genuineness of the people being judged. The findings, especially with Principal Vince, echoed the literature by McIntyre (1997) who found that White teachers tended to form their understanding of diverse communities while growing up, and their perceptions of other ethnicities emerged from stereotypes. Therefore, people often judge or draw their own conclusions out of fear of the unknown or based on what little they have seen or heard.

Because U.S. society cultivates and preserves stereotypes, Delpit (1997) maintains that students of color are subjected to bias and ignorance in many schools. The findings showed that a few principals experienced ignorance among their teachers also. Flying the Confederate flag (Vince) and being told that equality exists because Black people have President Obama, Oprah Winfrey, and Michael Jordan (Zora) are prime examples of racially motivated bias emerging from White privilege. In fact, the findings correspond to McIntyre’s (1997) conclusion that racism may be undetected by those who benefit from White privilege. Yet, many White people who demonstrate racially biased behaviors and attitudes do not view themselves as racists (McIntyre, 1997), as occurred in the findings portrayed with Principals Vince and Zora.

In this study, stereotypes and a lack of cultural competence co-existed within the troublesome teacher-student interactions. Being culturally competent implied the ability to interact respectfully towards people from diverse cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds, while simultaneously devaluing stereotypes that inaccurately portray various ethnicities. As schools
across the country grow more and more diverse, findings also coincided with McIntyre (1997) who argued that teachers must learn to understand cultural differences and realize that their upbringing may not parallel the circumstances of students sitting before them. In addition, teachers in some of the school where the principals of the present study worked compounded this by being culturally insensitive and disrespectful, a reality that the literature did not anticipate.

Likewise, when a White male teacher told Principal Zora that racism no longer existed and asked when were Black people going to “get over it” because the country had African American representation through President Barack Obama, Oprah Winfrey, and Michael Jordan, the comment was not only insensitive, but was also a reminder of how little some sectors of society have grown. It was also shallow to think that three public figures could ever be the cure for racial disparities that currently exist in the world today. Although President Obama, Winfrey, and Jordan have been change agents in their respective professions, these three African American figures remain outside the status of power held by CEO’s (Chief Executive Officers) in Fortune 500 companies, who remain overwhelmingly White men.

Furthermore, just as some people may not like President Barack Obama because of his political views or his race, many people do respect his position as President of the United States of America. According to the Huffington Post in 2011, President Obama is the most threatened president to ever serve this country with over 30 death threats a day. Ironically, the senseless mass murders of nine parishioners attending a weekday Bible study in Charleston, South Carolina in June 2015 depicted the hatred towards African Americans that Principal Vince was trying to get the male teacher to recognize when he was asked to the remove the Confederate flag from a classroom. The gunman who worshipped the connection between the Confederate flag and White supremacy murdered nine unsuspecting parishioners. The gunman did not respect the sacredness
of the church, nor did he respect the people or persons in the church. Like the teacher with the flag, the gunman was a product of his upbringing. While the Confederate flag symbolized White pride and supremacy for some, it symbolized blatant racism via the ideology of White privilege and hatred towards African Americans for others. Clearly, it had no place in a classroom, Principal Vince’s point.

*Disenfranchised by Socioeconomics*

In addition to the insensitive comments and actions by the racially biased teachers, stereotypes and ignorance were also demonstrated towards the economically disadvantaged. The findings in this study coincided with Cummins’ (2001) observation that educators choose the way they establish student relationships, which includes the way they interact with students. When the White teacher in Principal Donna’s school told the special education student to go dumpster diving, because the child neglected to write her name on her paper, the teacher was not only insensitive but blatantly disrespectful. In this teacher’s case, the ideology of White privilege was carte blanche where the teacher’s power and authority were unrestricted. The teacher acted at her own discretion without regard to the underlying message behind the “dumpster dive” phrase. Not only did the phrase insinuate low socioeconomic status, but it also insinuated inferiority. If this same special education student were from an affluent home with educated parents, this teacher would not have uttered the phrase “dumpster dive” for fear of repercussions. Unfortunately, socioeconomic status, or the lack thereof, is synonymous with power. High socioeconomic status implies competence and success, while low socioeconomic status implies incompetence and disenfranchisement, where power is deprived. The presence of an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) suggested that the child had educational challenges, yet the teacher lacked cultural sensitivity and held an inflexible agenda, violating student rights that special education laws were designed to uphold and protect.
Student Motivation

Although public education in the United States is designed to offer all students the right to an education by highly qualified teachers, educational opportunities in urban communities are clearly not comparable to those in the suburbs and all students are not motivated in the same capacity or with the same resources to truly understand the value of an education. My findings regarding the lack of student motivation were consistent with those of Muhammad (2009). Students could not choose the families that they are born into, nor could they choose their socioeconomic status. Plus, student experiences and their circumstances influenced their behaviors. Often students made positive or negative choices regarding school, and academic achievement based on those experiences and circumstances. Principal Adam believed that the lack of student motivation resulted from some type of disconnect associated with the home life of students because they did not understand the importance of education. Similarly, Principal Wendy characterized low motivation as students (and parents) who lacked understanding about the resources associated with acquiring a college education. Here, neither principal expressed that helping students to fill such gaps in their understandings should have been a goal of the educational process, another way that the school system judged the students and found them deficient.

Hill (2009) emphasized student motivation throughout his Hip-Hop-Based Education (HHBE) curriculum. When students were able to identify themselves in the literature that was provided in the HHBE curriculum, they became engaged, which not only increased student motivation but also increased their ability to choose to participate in their own learning. Likewise, the findings validated the HHBE curriculum and the all-boys African American Language Arts class that Principal Wendy endorsed because it purposefully selected literature that engaged boys.
Unlike the lack of student motivation being associated with students not understanding the value of an education, Principal Xavier changed his mindset from students lacking motivation to students lacking the skillset needed to achieve academically, which echoes Hill’s HHBE curriculum by giving students literature to which they can relate. Whenever teachers ask students about their favorite song, actor, or athlete, students are eager to share their responses, because students have the background knowledge or skillset to answer the question and there are no right or wrong answers. Students “know” the answers to the teacher’s open-ended question. The same students could very well come from an environment where education is not valued but the difference is the teacher asked a question to which they all could relate.

This suggests that when teachers apply the same concept to instructional practices such as giving students topics they relate to, motivation will become a natural manifestation. Taking the time to get to “know” the students pays off with increased learning. In fact, incorporating aspects of lessons that allow students to share about themselves and their personal interests provides opportunities for students to insert themselves into their schooling. Making a conscious effort to understand students’ worlds from their vantage points allows teachers to understand the motives behind student behavior. As described below, this proves especially important for students from the urban core who “code-switch” to survive.

*Student Survival Behavior*

According to earlier research (Anderson, 1999), students “code-switch” by matching their behavior to their environment. For many urban African American students, the code is a set of informal rules that mediates respect and personal safety in a justice system ruled by the streets. Students learn to retaliate if disrespected. The code-switching and retaliation behaviors resembled what a few participants referred to as “survival behavior” in the findings. Morris (2007) revealed
how Black girls will defend themselves by being combative if they feel the system or school will not support them. Similarly, Fordham (1993) found that the survival of African American females depends upon their ability to live in an environment saturated with conflict and confusion. Likewise, Anderson (1999) reported that when students feel intimidated, they may code-switch or “get ignorant” to give the perception that they are hard or can be violent.

Unlike the literature, the findings revealed that survival behavior for some students included acting out to camouflage not being able to measure up academically, trying to rationalize a series of unanswered questions, and acting hard or fighting to fit in, especially if students are coming from gang-rich environments where fighting is a growing-up ritual. For many students coming from the urban core, surviving is a reality to which most teachers cannot relate. When Principal Donna shared the altercation of the three attackers on one boy, no one knew the issues the boys were dealing with surrounding their mothers. Trying to cope with issues at home coupled with issues at schools was a reality for these boys that made school secondary.

Therefore, understanding the perspective of students is something that teachers need to embrace. Even though teachers must get through their curriculum, they must understand that the curriculum may not be a priority for students when external factors outside of academia monopolize the minds of students. Thus, taking the time to understand the world of a child instead of criticizing behavior may provide insights into student behavior, such as when student behavior is loud.

*Volume: Those Loud Black Kids*

In the literature, the beginning of the title in Fordham’s (1993) study included the words, “Those Loud Black Girls;” however, the actual study did not focus on loudness in the traditional context but rather a metaphor for “nothingness” or invisibility to describe quiet, high-achieving
The findings reported by Principal Vince coincided with Fordham when a handful of African American students were perceived to be loud, but were really quiet and afraid of drawing attention to themselves in their all-White school. In fact, as in Fordham’s (1993) study, they were silenced, afraid to speak, and became quite invisible. Although the African American students in Vince’s school did not have behavior concerns, unless they spoke up, they were overlooked and ignored as if they did not exist.

Fordham went on to describe how teachers’ sense of authority was threatened by Black girls who were confrontational and defiant in the classrooms or in the hallways. In the present study’s findings, several participants reported incidents where the interactions between teachers and students were troublesome because the volume of African American students came across as disrespectful and confrontational. In Lei’s (2003) study, it was reported that although some Black females were loud, it was easy to make a generalization across the entire group of African American students. While the literature primarily focused on loud Black girls, this study’s findings shared interactions involving loud African American students as a whole, not just the girls.

In the Morris (2007) study, the middle school observed had similar demographics to the schools in this research. Morris found that very loud African American girls often overshadowed classroom discussions, whereas in the research, the volume was often prominent in the hallways, as confirmed by teachers wondering why they (African American students) were so loud. Principal Xavier described volume among students best, where African American students will be the loudest, Asian students will be the quietest, and White students will fit somewhere in the middle. That is, being quiet at school is culturally appropriate Asian behavior, not shared by other subgroups.
When Principal Charles reported that the boys were loud, White teachers felt intimidated and backed down from the perception of confrontation. However, the African American teachers suggested White teachers stop coddling the boys by speaking firmly, standing their ground and not backing down. In many African American households, a gentle tone is not taken seriously by students, whereas a firm tone means serious business. For example, if the garbage needs to be taken out, an African American parent is going to firmly say, “Take out the trash” and the student will follow through expeditiously. Typically, an African American parent is not going to gently ask, “Can you please take out the trash?” Such a question seems to African Americans to imply a choice, which is not a parent’s goal. Likewise, when the tone of a teacher is gentle, it may be interpreted as weak, leading students with a choice to continue behaving inappropriately, because the perception is that the teacher is not going to do anything about it or recommend a consequence.

African American boys are taught to be “hard” and to stand their ground by not allowing others to run all over them. Therefore, when teachers stand their ground and do not back down, African American boys will generally listen, respecting authority. Ultimately, teachers need to understand that a tone of authority is not synonymous with disrespect, so when making a reasonable request or prescribing a consequence for inappropriate behavior, the key is being fair and consistent across all ethnic subgroups. Disciplining inappropriate behavior in one ethnic group while overlooking the same inappropriate behavior in another ethnic group will not only cause problems for teachers, but will also be challenged by students. While teachers faced challenges interacting with students, they also faced challenges with students arriving to school and getting to class on time.
Student Tardiness

Although the measure used to start and stop an event is time, the notion of timeliness is interpreted differently by different groups of people or organizations like middle class, working class, or African Americans. To a teacher associated with the White middle class, time may be interpreted in a traditional mainstream model based on cultural expectations where students are seated and ready to learn. To the working class, time may be interpreted in a collaborative model where everyone arriving at the same time is considered on time. And to African Americans, time may be interpreted by some as being present at the beginning of a lesson or event.

Ultimately, to a teacher time is valued because instruction is designed by the length of a class period, but to a student, time may not be viewed in the same light. Thus, student tardiness tends to be an issue in diversifying schools. Like the finding presented here, the literature reported that students who were tardy fail to benefit from instruction (Wilson, 2013). In addition to missing instruction, Farrar (2010) found that walking into class late could also be a distractor to classmates because attention was turned from the teacher to the tardy student. While tardiness can be an issue, the reasons students are tardy turned out to be another issue.

Contrary to this study’s findings, Farrar found that the causes of student tardiness could be attributed to dysfunctional homes and chaotic families where substance abuse and negative attitudes towards school can result in undesirable behaviors like shoplifting and other petty theft wrongdoings. Morrissey, Hutchinson, and Winsler (2013) explained that issues with late students were likely to result from low-income families, while Nelson (1998) found tardiness issues related to transportation problems, health issues, or sleeping patterns.

However, the findings in this study suggested a variety of reasons for tardiness. Participants believed that some students were tardy either because being late was a culturally accepted practice
among African Americans, they did not actually live in the district, or there were joint custody issues. Other speculations included that students did not want to wake up early to catch a bus. Additionally, because many districts did not provide bus transportation for students living within a one-mile radius of their school, parents drove students to school, especially during inclement weather, when students found riding the bus socially unacceptable, or when parents questioned the safety of their children riding on the bus or walking to school.

However, few noticed that district reorganization and rezoning of bus routes set the stage for the students affected by the change—the newest students now attending the school—traveled farther distances. The farther students lived from the school, the earlier they had to wake up and the longer the bus ride due to multiple student stops. In addition, because of a history of racial incidents, the frame of reference of African American families from urban core areas may make them reluctant to have their children stand at bus stops in predominantly White neighborhoods. This was a concern made real when Trayvon Martin made national headlines after being murdered by a neighborhood watch person. Trayvon wore a hoody and (to the neighborhood watch) looked suspicious as he walked in a neighborhood that did not know him. For fear of safety, parents may choose to drive kids to school. In families where students attend different level schools (elementary, middle, and high), driving across the district and dealing with morning rush traffic makes being on time difficult. Additionally, as school drop off lines grew, so did wait time, which meant students could actually be in line before the start of school, but waiting caused students to be late.

Another issue with tardiness dealt with the presumption of how being tardy was understood. To students, being tardy meant being down the hall somewhere, whereas on time meant standing at the door before the bell. But, to teachers, being on time was associated with
White middle class teachers which meant sitting in the seat ready to learn, otherwise, instructional time was being lost. For example, in a 50-minute class period, teachers may take up to five minutes at the beginning of the period for attendance and other administrative tasks. If students are not ready to start working upon entering classrooms, teachers spend additional time allowing students to pull out notebooks and sharpen pencils. Finally, depending on the lesson, additional time may be needed at the end of the class period to wrap things up. Thus, administrative tasks central to teaching can shave up to 15 minutes from a 50-minute instructional period, leaving about 35 minutes for instruction each day. With current emphasis on curriculum pacing, leaving 35 minutes of instruction for a lesson designed for 50 minutes might contribute to teachers falling behind in their pacing. Thus, tardies could reduce teaching time considerably each week. Teachers became understandably frustrated, because they are held accountable for pacing “slippage” and tardiness which are not under their control. In the interim, principals had other concerns on their plate.

Principals’ Leadership Challenges

As schools continued to grow in diversity, principals, as educational leaders, were charged with the task of nullifying stereotypes so that interactions between predominantly White teaching staff and diverse student communities would be transformed into practices that eliminate deficit thinking and promote equal educational opportunities for marginalized and disenfranchised students. Through in-school interactions, teachers and students negotiated identities as they worked together (Cummins, 2001). Thus, participants in this study developed leadership practices enlightened by teacher-student interactions, a learning process which involved careful and thoughtful consideration in their roles as principals promoting social justice.
Leadership Practices

Jun (2011) reported that educational leaders who are guided by transformative leadership principles promote equity and social justice practices in their schools. Like the literature, all of the participants in this study were reflective in their practices despite the cultural biases endured as leaders, corresponding to what Cornell West referenced as culturally biased ideologies that are connected to prejudices and misunderstandings (Cooper, 2009).

In addition to misunderstandings, scholarship suggests that principals have a major role in managing, retaining, and mentoring teachers in urban areas during their primary years as educators, due to poor working conditions, low morale, and miniscule wages (Tillman, 2005). Unlike the literature, the findings reported that principals in the suburban county did not have a problem retaining teachers; in fact, teachers did not leave once they hired in. Principals also insured novice teachers were mentored by veteran teachers. Because of veteran staff, the findings reported that all of the participants valued input from teachers and many relied on shared leadership, which encouraged morale. When leadership was shared, staff took ownership in their work, ultimately boosting morale because teachers took pride in their efforts. Such shared leadership also signaled collaboration and the ability to grow professionally.

Professional Development

Although the literature did not address specific kinds of professional development, it did infer professional development opportunities to retain teachers by providing development in the areas of instructional strategies, classroom management, and building relationships with students (Tillman, 2005). As reported in the literature, NCLB holds teachers accountable for academic achievement; educators and educational leaders must prepare themselves in order to make “curriculum, instruction, student engagement, and family partnership culturally responsive”
According to the findings, most participants reported that they encouraged staff to attend professional development.

While the majority of the participants in the study reported that professional development was guided by teacher interest, the topic of race relations was challenging to discuss for some because it made people feel uncomfortable for fear of being called racists. When fear is a factor or when some groups of people (such as Whites) are not impacted by the negative realities associated with race, race may be produced as somebody else’s issue, and here, it was relegated to an African American (not a White) issue. In Principal Vince’s case, not understanding the overt and covert messages sent by having a person in the community who flew a Confederate flag and hated everything that was not White, not knowing what an HBCU was, and not interacting with people outside familiar boundaries due to discomfort all suggest that people in homogenous communities lived a privileged and sheltered reality. Diversifying schools provided circumstances where White presumptions about how the world “is” were challenged. Privilege became evident, as did cultural diversity, which challenged the centrality and rightness of whiteness.

However, diversifying schools also provide opportunities for all-White communities to learn and understand cultural differences by opening doors, creating opportunities for cross-cultural sharing, and allowing the voices of various ethnicities to be heard. A community cannot learn and understand cultural differences by limiting their resources to watching television. Understanding and valuing cultural differences can be learned through ongoing interactions sustained over a period of time. Notably for this study, African American culture can be learned by interacting with African Americans. Here, interacting with multiple people undercut stereotypes by teaching about variety, displaying individuality, and allowing similarities and differences to
emerge. With their experiences in diversifying schools, the participants were ideally suited to offer advice to aspiring principals and district administrators.

*Advice to Aspiring Principals*

Like the literature, the findings confirmed that with diversity on the rise, educational leaders must be culturally responsive by preparing themselves for the social and cultural challenges that await them in a diverse school setting (Cooper, 2009). While the literature tended not to offer advice to aspiring principals and district administrators, the findings in this study reported that the participants primarily suggested taking the time to get to know the stakeholders and taking time to make decisions that are sound and unrushed.

However, the most valuable piece of advice was given by Principal Vince who encouraged aspiring principals (especially those identified as African American) to look inside themselves to determine if they were mentally prepared for the potential challenges associated with working in a homogenous (or all-White) environment where change can be challenging. Vince’s advice corroborated Cooper (2009) who framed her analysis of transformative educational leadership with reflecting on self, analyzing schools systematically, and confronting inequities that align with circumstances like race, class, and language. Likewise, Tillman (2005) referenced having a sense of self and competence, personally and professionally. Because transformative leaders are risk-takers, principals must be cognizant of self, as well as passionate, courageous, and committed (Dantley & Tillman, 2006).

*Advice to District Administrators*

In order to address the challenges associated with changing demographics, more districts need to serve as liaisons among the stakeholders, especially by making a conscious effort to bring awareness of the cultural misunderstandings about race relations into the forefront. While study
participants advised district administrators to be more visible in the schools, to allow principal input on major district initiatives, and to hire diverse staff, two pieces of advice to district administrators stood out. The first was to embrace talking about the problems that plague a district, such as how socio-economic changes and diversity impact test scores. The second was to allocate resources based on need, not simply based on student count or uniformity.

Because transformative leaders strive for equal educational opportunities and social justice, problems cannot be addressed until they are identified as problems. In essence, race relations and a lack of cultural competence within predominantly White suburban schools cannot be addressed as problems until districts move from being afraid and admit that there are cultural challenges within the district and in the schools, between teachers and students.

Likewise, the allocation of resources should be based on need, not a uniform per pupil base. Thus, if a district has two middle schools that have the same number of students enrolled, but the first middle school serves students who live in single family homes ranging from middle to high income, and the second middle school serves students from low income families living in apartments and trailer parks, then the second middle school needs more learning resources and should receive more funding. Students in families that earn middle to high income have access to resources like private tutoring and technology that students from low-income families may lack access to. Therefore, the district should allocate more resources or funding to the second middle school or award scholarships to those who qualify for financial assistance in order to provide after school tutoring or technology to students who do not have internet access at home or cannot afford tutoring.
Limitations

Because this research design focused on the vantage point of principals and the considerations they must take into account while leading a diverse building, I could not see the vantage point of teachers, students, or parents. In moments of adversity, principals are the ones accountable for managing unforeseen episodes as they unfold, which is why their widespread vantage point was targeted. While principals make decisions based on all stakeholders, teachers and students generally make decisions restricted to the classroom. This study was not designed to be generalizable to all school districts (i.e. rural, homogeneous areas), but instead to apply to diverse suburban districts relatively close to an urban core where racial disparities potentially emerge.

All research is inevitably partial. Here, I have followed systematic procedures to understand a certain topic from the vantage point of participants. Research strategies upheld criteria for trustworthiness, and these findings are plausible and defensible from the data collected at this particular time and place. However, under the constraints of this dissertation, peer checking was not accomplished in the time allotment. Additional research might be needed to extend to other urban areas and to consider the vantage points of teachers, students, and parents.

Possibilities of Future Research

Although the principals in this study were veteran leaders who were sensitive to cultural and socioeconomic differences, the findings extended beyond the scope of the nine participants. While the findings confirmed that some major troublesome teacher-student interactions existed, where a lack of racial sensitivity and cultural competence was evident, it is unknown how representative this behavior is in schools across the county. Nevertheless, it is clear that there were some disturbing teacher-student interactions and these may plague other schools. Despite being
frustrated with student motivation, behavior, tardiness, and loudness, it would behoove educators to understand the root of these conflicts in order to mitigate them.

Even though schools have been diversifying for over 50 years, racial insensitivity and cultural competence issues repeatedly arise in studies of such schools. Future research focused on explicit attempts to educate about these topics is needed. For instance,

1. Modifying participant selection criteria and enrolling principals leading diversifying schools where staff are actively engaged in cultural-competence professional development might provide insight into ways to smooth school diversification.
2. Exploring insights into teachers’ sense that students do not reside in districts would fill a gap in these findings. In particular, studying a setting where this was the erroneous presumption and studying ways to change teachers’ minds about their students could prove instructive.
3. Examining how district restructuring that changes attendance boundaries affects diversifying schools. In particular, studying attitudes of teachers toward attendance expectations and student achievement as well as issues related to student tardiness and the effects on achievement.

Conducting such research may provide greater insight in areas where teacher-student interactions lack racial sensitivity and cultural competence. Understanding cultural differences and the rationale behind interactions may yield empathetic attitudes and an appreciation for other cultures.

Implications and Recommendations

Several key ideas emerged from the findings that suggested ways to improve school settings that are diversifying. In diversifying schools, expect racial and socioeconomic insensitivity and do not wait for diversity via professional development to explicitly counter it. Train teachers to be culturally competent and expect this to be evident in their classroom teaching skills. Create opportunities for cross-cultural interactions. Challenge White supremacy or ideas that implicitly
accept as “right” White cultural practices by quickly disrupting racist attitudes and actions. Foster school staff’s becoming knowledgeable about students’ out-of-school circumstances (e.g. home visits) that is, get staff into the world of their students. Anticipate how restructuring (district, attendance areas, schools, etc.) impacts or creates an us/them conflict and explicitly teach inclusion strategies that disrupt such conflicts. Create opportunities for staff and students to talk openly about race in a safe environment so that talking about race becomes a norm. Rely on input from teacher leaders to help guide instruction and welcome feedback.

Reflection

The study of principals in diverse suburban middle schools was dear to me because I had been an African American female principal guiding an all-White teaching staff and a growing diverse student body. If there was no personal involvement, I would not have been interested in this topic. The qualitative research method allowed me to be fully integrated even though I was not working as a principal during the time of this research. In Spradley’s (1980) research cycle, the domain analysis or the first phase of analyzing the data was a bit awkward because it required coding where distinct themes were identified. Although participants were asked the same questions, the responses varied which made coding or identifying themes and narrowing down the ones to include in this study difficult. Scrutinizing ten transcribed interviews (nine individual and one group) was overwhelming. I wanted to include every theme that I found. For example, two participants shared how teachers were frustrated with teacher evaluations. While teacher evaluations can be frustrating and important, evaluations were not relevant for this study in terms of interactions with students.

Another awkward moment was the initial write up of this dissertation where I was writing across the themes comparing participants along the way. Because themes of the participants varied,
keeping track of who said what proved confusing. Ultimately, I identified the most common themes and wrote up each of the nine participants separately, guided by the themes. After completing all of the participants, I compared them. The added time for this approach proved useful as a way to stay true to my participants. Giving them the space in the individual-principal sections brought them—via their interview responses—to life. Thus, this approach stayed true to the critical research model that gives pride of place to participants and allows their sense of the world to mold the research.

Additionally, the perceptions of the participants were eye-opening. As an African American female, I was forced to carefully consider each word delivered out of my mouth and the message being sent when I spoke. Similar to Principal Wendy, when she addressed student achievement data, she did not want White staff to interpret that they were not doing a good job with the Black kids. The message was about achievement data, not race. White participants (and White teachers) do not have to think about delivery in the same capacity.

Because my frame of reference is unlike that of my White counterparts, race does play a factor in educational leadership, but it is often subtle until brought to the forefront by unforeseen circumstances. When President Obama was elected for the second term, a few White parents who did not want their children listening to a presidential back-to-school speech contacted the White assistant principal to make their request known. They did not contact me, the Black principal. President Obama’s speech (in keeping with a long history of presidential back-to-school speeches that had not historically been challenged by parents) simply encouraged students to work hard and do well academically throughout the course of the school; he was not promoting a political agenda.

Although the research was completed in 2014, ultimately I found the lack of progress toward racial equality noteworthy. Racial stereotypes and biases, such as those that principals
reported, made evident that diversifying schools are a key place where old racial histories play out. Children’s educational futures hinge on their teachers and racial bias in educational settings seemed likely to undercut the purposes of education, not only for African American children who might be learning that they are less worthy, but also for children with other social and cultural affiliations who may be learning that they are more worthy. This study reinforces the importance of principals and clarifies the importance of principals and aspiring administrators continuing their transformative work with teachers in diversifying schools.
APPENDIX A

Interview Guides

Yolanda Bloodsaw – INDIVIDUAL Interview Guide:
A Qualitative Study of Principals in Rapidly Diversifying Schools

Hello, and thank you for coming. Before we begin, I want to go over your rights as a research participant. [Complete the informed consent. Be sure that participant understands the research procedures, risks, how confidentiality will be maintained, benefits, costs, compensation, and the their participation is voluntary. If they agree to participate in the group interview, then write their name and phone number on a sticky note, affix to consent, and enter this in the master list and destroy the sticky note.] (TURN ON TAPE)

Today I’d like to talk with you about your experiences as a principal in a rapidly diversifying school. I hope to hear about your perspective, about your experiences. There are surely no right or wrong answers here, just your thoughts. Could we start by discussing your background in education and how you came to be a principal.

BACKGROUND
1) Tell me about becoming a principal. [How did you get to this point in your career? Probes: Were you a teacher before? How long? Other principal positions? Kinds of schools? I’m not sure I understand… Could you say more about…]

2) Tell me about the school where you currently serve (or “served until recently”) as principal?

3) What are all the ways that this school has been diversifying? (Probes: Are there others? I’m not sure I understand…, Could you say more about…)

Looking at these different ways that it has been diversifying, which of these stand out in your mind? Could you explain [each one in the list of ways the school is diversifying that stands out in their mind]. What makes each one stand out?

TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTIONS – Now, I’d like to shift gears and talk about how students and teachers interact, as well as how teachers are teaching in different ways.

4) Tell me about a typical troubling teacher-student interaction that you think has arisen because your school is rapidly diversifying.

   a) What happened step-by-step?

   b) Who was involved? Who said what to whom?

   c) How did this situation come to your attention?

   d) What did you do at that point?

   e) To what extent did this situation get resolved?

   f) What are all the things that make this event typical in your experience?
TEACHER’S TEACHING RESPONSES TO DIVERSIFYING STUDENT BODY

5) Tell me about how the teachers in your school are responding, in their teaching, to the diversifying student body. (Probes: Could you tell me more.. Could you provide an example to illustrate your answer… I’m not sure I understand…)

   a. Changes to lessons?
   b. Changes to classroom management?
   c. Changes to other things?

6) How would you characterize the mood of teachers in your school as it relates to your school’s diversification? (Probes: Could you tell me more.. Could you provide an example to illustrate your answer… I’m not sure I understand…)

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES – Now, I’d like to shift gears again and talk about your own leadership practices.

7) Tell me about how you approach leading in your school. (Probes: Could you tell me more.. Could you provide an example to illustrate your answer… I’m not sure I understand…)

   a. Curriculum?
   b. Teacher professional development?
   c. Mentoring new teachers?
   d. Other supports for teachers?

8) If you were giving advice to a principal who had just been assigned to a school like yours, what would you tell them? (Probes: Could you tell me more.. Could you provide an example to illustrate your answer… I’m not sure I understand…)

9) What are all the ways that you received training or other preparation about leading a diversifying school? Which of these seemed the most helpful to you? Why did [that approach] prove helpful?

10) Finally, if you were giving advice to your district administration, what would you tell them? Probes: Could you tell me more.. Could you provide an example to illustrate your answer… I’m not sure I understand…)

11) Is there anything else that I haven’t asked that would help me understand the situation in your school and your leadership there?

Thank you for your time. I appreciate your taking the time to share your candor and wisdom.
Thank you all for coming. I know you are on tight schedules, so we will get started now. (TURN ON TAPE.)

I want to remind you of your rights as research participants. This is a research study about the experiences of principals in rapidly diversifying schools. I have interviewed about 10 principals and this group interview will help me fill in missing information, as well as help me tighten up my findings by seeking group consensus about issues that proved important in the individual interviews. I will audiotape and transcribe this interview and destroy this tape when my research is completed. Your identity will be kept confidential. There is no benefit to you, but this research may help others in the future. There is no cost or compensation for you. Your participation is voluntary and you may elect not to answer any question, or to withhold information that you do not want someone in the group to know.

Also, I ask that each of you not repeat what was said in this group interview, or disclose who participated. This improves my ability to maintain confidentiality. Are there any questions about your rights?

There are no right or wrong answers, so different experiences are expected. I want to foster an environment where everyone will be able to speak and to listen. Talking one at a time will help with this. Shall we begin?

DIVERSIFYING SCHOOLS

1. What does it mean to say that your school is or has been rapidly diversifying?

2. What are all of the ways that schools diversify? (Get a list on the table – either sticky notes or write on a large piece of paper.)

3. How do you rank these from most difficult to least? Feel free to debate these and to give your reasons for ranking something higher and other things lower.

4. What are all of the aspects of a school that diversifying impacts?

5. How would you sort these into higher impact, medium impact, and lower impact? Again, talk to one another to work things out.

TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS AND TEACHING

6. What are all of the ways that teacher-student relationships shift as a school diversifies?

7. How do you rank these from most difficult to least? Feel free to debate these and to give your reasons for ranking something higher and other things lower.

8. What are the ways that teachers must change in response to diversifying students?
9. In your opinion, which of these present the most difficult challenges to teachers

LEADING FOR CHANGE

10. Given the challenges that schools face, in your opinion, what are all of the things that principals must do to lead in rapidly diversifying schools?

11. How do you rank these from most important to least? Feel free to debate these and to give your reasons for ranking something higher and other things lower.

12. What is it like to be a principal in a diversifying school?

13. Would it be different if you were in a school that served a predominantly middle class, white student body?

14. Finally, is there anything that you would like to add that would help me understand being a principal in a diversifying school?

Thank you for coming, today. I appreciate your insights. Again, please keep what was said here today confidential and do not disclose the identities of those who participated. Thank you.
APPENDIX B

IRB Protocol

NOTICE OF EXPEDITED APPROVAL

To: Yolanda Bloodsaw
Teacher Education

From: Dr. Scott Millis
Chairperson, Behavioral Institutional Review Board (B3)

Date: March 26, 2013

RE: IRB #: 036113B3E
Protocol Title: A Qualitative Study of Principals in Rapidly Diversifying Schools
Funding Source:
Protocol #: 1030011822
Expiration Date: March 25, 2014
Risk Level / Category: Research not involving greater than minimal risk

The above-referenced protocol and items listed below (if applicable) were APPROVED following Expedited Review Category ("\"\") by the Chairperson/designee for the Wayne State University Institutional Review Board (B3) for the period of 03/26/2013 through 03/25/2014. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals that may be required.

* Protocol Summary Form (received in the IRB Office 3/11/2013)
* Protocol (received in the IRB Office 3/11/2013)
* Behavioral Research Informed Consent (dated 3/3/2013)
* Data collection tools: Individual Interview Guide and Group Interview Guide

* Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. You may receive a "Continuation Renewal Reminder" approximately two months prior to the expiration date; however, it is the Principal Investigators responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date. Data collected during a period of approved approval is unapproved research and can never be reported or published as research data.

* All changes or amendments to the above-referenced protocol require review and approval by the IRB BEFORE implementation.

* Adverse Reactions/Unanticipated Events (AR/UE) must be submitted on the appropriate form within the timeframe specified in the IRB Administration Office Policy (http://www.irb.wayne.edu/policies-human-research.php).

NOTE:
1. Upon notification of an impending regulatory site visit, hold notification, and/or external audit the IRB Administration Office must be contacted immediately.
2. Forms should be downloaded from the IRB website at each use.

*Based on the Expedited Review List, revised November 1998
NOTICE OF EXPEDITED CONTINUATION APPROVAL

To: Yolanda Bloodsaw
Teacher Education

From: Dr. Deborah Ellis or designee
Chairperson, Behavioral Institutional Review Board (B3)

Date: February 20, 2014

RE: IRB #: 038113B3E
Protocol Title: A Qualitative Study of Principals in Rapidly Diversifying Schools
Funding Source:
Protocol #: 1303011822
Expiration Date: February 19, 2015
Risk Level / Category: Research not involving greater than minimal risk

Continuation for the above-referenced protocol and items listed below (if applicable) were APPROVED following Expedited Review by the Chairperson/designee of the Wayne State University Institutional Review Board (B3) for the period of 02/20/2014 through 02/19/2015. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals that may be required.

- Actively accruing participants
- Behavioral Research Informed Consent (Revision date 3/3/13)
- Individual Interview Guide
- Group Interview Guide

Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. You may receive a “Continuation Renewal Reminder” approximately two months prior to the expiration date; however, it is the Principal Investigator’s responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date. Data collected during a period of lapsed approval is unapproved research and can never be reported or published as research data.

All changes or amendments to the above-referenced protocol require review and approval by the IRB BEFORE Implementation.

Adverse Reactions/Unexpected Events (ARUE) must be submitted on the appropriate form within the timeframe specified in the IRB Administration Office Policy (http://www.irb.wayne.edu/policies-human-research.php).

NOTE:
1. Upon notification of an Impending regulatory site visit, hold notification, and/or external audit the IRB Administration Office must be contacted immediately.
2. Forms should be downloaded from the IRB website at each use.

*Based on the Expedited Review List, revised November 1998
NOTICE OF EXPEDITED CONTINUATION APPROVAL

To: Ycanda Bloodsaw
Teacher Education

From: Dr. Deborah Ellis or designee
Co-Chairperson, Behavioral Institutional Review Board (B3)

Date: January 28, 2016

RE: IRB #: 03811382E
Protocol Title: A Qualitative Study of Principals in Rapidly Diversifying Schools
Funding Source:
Protocol #: 1303011822
Expiration Date: January 27, 2016
Risk Level / Category: Research not involving greater than minimal risk

Continuation for the above-referenced protocol and items listed below (if applicable) were APPROVED following
Expedited Review by the Co-Chairperson/designee of the Wayne State University Institutional Review Board (B3) for the
period of 1/28/2016 through 01/27/2018. This approval does not replace any departmental or another approvals that may
be required.

- Activity involving participants.
- Individual Interview Guide
- Group Interview Guide

* Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. You may receive a "Continuation Review Reminder" approximately
two months prior to the expiration date; however, it is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the
expiration date. Data collected during a period of expired approval is unprotected research and can never be reported or published to research
data.

* All changes or amendments to the above-referenced protocol require review and approval by the IRB BEFORE implementation.

* Advance Disclosure/Unsolicited Contacts (ADUCE) must be submitted on the appropriate form within the timesframe specified in the IRB

NOTE:
1. Upon notification of an impending regulatory site visit, host institution, proxy external review. IRB Administration Office must be contacted
immediately.
2. Forms should be downloaded from the IRB website at such time.

*Based on the Expedited Review Ltd, revised November 1998
REFERENCES

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ABSTRACT

PRINCIPALS’ PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTIONS IN DIVERSIFYING SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

by

YOLANDA BLOODSAW

May 2016

Advisor: Dr. Karen Tonso
Major: Education Evaluation and Research
Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

This qualitative study examined the kinds of troublesome teacher-student interactions that principals in a large Midwestern metro community manage. Personal interview data from nine suburban middle school principals as well as a group interview with four of the nine participants followed an interpretivist paradigm. This study found that the tense teacher-student interactions are triggered by conflicting perceptions held by students and teachers as a result of racial/cultural differences and socioeconomic status. Conflicting perceptions included stereotypes, cultural insensitivity, student motivation, student survival, loud Black kids, and tardiness. The bulk of the teacher-student interactions described by participants primarily concerned interactions between the predominantly White suburban teaching staff and African American students from urban core areas. Considering the vantage points of students and teachers via the perceptions of self, race, culture, and socioeconomics helped frame the principals’ understanding of the teacher-student interactions and provided opportunities to examine and discuss their leadership practices as well as advice to aspiring principals and district administrators. This study concludes with recommendations to improve school settings that are diversifying.
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Yolanda Bloodsaw is an educational consultant with over 25 years of experience in K-12 education. She holds an Education Specialist certification in Administration and Supervision and a Master of Arts in Teaching specializing in Language Arts and Mathematics from Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. She earned her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Yolanda has served as a middle school teacher, assistant principal, and principal, as well as on the Board of Directors for the Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principals Association and for the Foundation for Excellence.

As principal, Yolanda addressed gaps in achievement across various subgroups identified by the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) data and proposed a building-wide Drop Everything & Write initiative to specifically address Grade 7 MEAP Writing which went from 50% proficient in 2011-2012 (lowest in the district) to 70% proficient in 2012-2013 (highest in the district). The 20% increase reflected across all MEAP subgroups in one academic school year. Likewise, she piloted a Saturday school addressing mathematics, literacy and standardized test preparations to specifically focus on the African American subgroup.

Yolanda has worked in Detroit Public Schools, Southfield Public Schools, and Walled Lake Consolidated Schools. These urban and suburban school districts had schools that were not only socio-economically diverse but also culturally diverse which included but was not limited to White, African American, Latino, Asian, Arabic and Chaldean (a disfavored Christian religious minority in Iraq) students. Presentations have included: analyzing student-teacher perception to improve school culture and climate; transforming culture through continuity, expectations, and organization; promoting courageous dialogues about the perceptions of race; and enhancing literacy through hip hop.