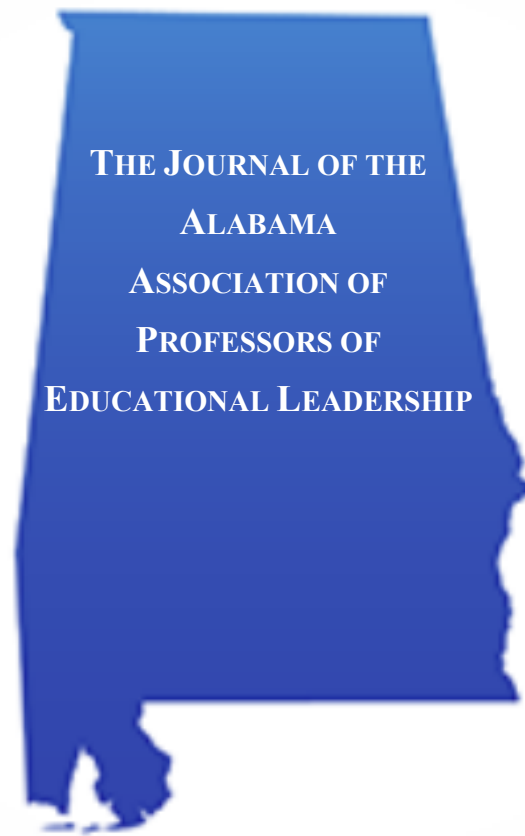


# *The Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership*



*Volume IX - September 2022*

**Theme for 2021-2022:  
LEADERSHIP IN THE BEST INTEREST OF STUDENTS**

Alabama Association of Professors of Educational Leadership

*The Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership*

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The Alabama Association of Professors of Educational Leadership (AAPEL) is a non-profit professional society organized for the purpose of establishing and maintaining a collegial and collaborative organization in the State of Alabama.

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This organization exists for the purpose of:

1. Promoting continuous dialog among Educational Leadership Professors;
2. Exploring and promoting research, thus making distinctive contributions to the field;
3. Recognizing and examining strengths and weaknesses in Educational Leadership Programs,
4. Establishing informational and professional linkages with the State Department of Education and the Alabama Commission on Higher Education; and
5. Perpetuating a positive vision for Alabama Schools and other educational institutions.

# *The Alabama Journal of Educational leadership*

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## **LEADERSHIP IN THE BEST INTEREST OF STUDENTS**

**An ICPEL State Affiliate Journal**

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## *A Message from the Editors*

Welcome to our ninth issue of this journal. The theme for 2021-2022 was *Leadership in the Best Interest of Students*. Each of our nine research manuscripts focuses on a unique aspect of leadership in the best interest of students at various levels and various types of communities, including rural through urban. These articles provide a background of the literature and offer exemplars to move the field forward with the best interest of students as the main focus.

These articles span the P-20 education field. That is why we have divided this issue into three sections: *Review of Literature*, *P-12 Research Studies*, and *Higher Education Research Studies*. A review of the literature is presented, followed by six articles with a focus on P-12 studies, and the closure with research conducted in higher education. Inquiry represented and embraced quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies.

This ninth issue has nine quality manuscripts that would not have been possible without the efforts of numerous people, such as:

Dr. Yvette Bynum, the previous journal editor, for addressing our questions throughout the year.

Dr. Felicia Harris, executive director, and the full board for supporting our efforts, particularly with communicating about the journal to the full APPEL membership.

The APPEL membership for sustaining a venue in which professionals in the leadership field can openly share their research, including members that mentored students for publishing for the first time.

The authors for taking the time to develop and share their manuscripts.

To APPEL members who volunteered to assist us, many of whom were selected to review manuscripts and provide feedback to the authors.

Dr. Brad Bizzell, a copy editor at ICPEL Publications, served as an invaluable team member who, among other responsibilities, tirelessly provided the final editing of all submissions.

For ICPEL's support toward efforts of providing journals that further inform educators.

And finally, you, the reader. We hope that you gain enlightenment from one or more manuscripts published in the ninth volume.

Most importantly, we truly hope you enjoy the nine manuscripts included in this volume. Please consider submitting a manuscript next year (2022-2023) as we will celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this journal dedicated to fostering educational leadership through research-informed decision-making throughout Alabama.

Have a wonderful year!



## Table of Contents

<b>Alabama Association of Professors of Educational Leadership (AAPEL)</b>	<i>i</i>
<b>The Alabama Journal of Educational leadership</b>	<i>ii</i>
<b>Message from Editors</b>	<i>iii</i>
 <b>Literature Review</b>	
<b>Impact of Cultural Responsiveness on Student Achievement in Secondary Schools</b>	1
Karima Hoytt, Sherrica Hunt, and Margaret A. Lovett, <i>Alabama State University</i>	
 <b>P-12 Research Studies</b>	
<b>Fighting Food Insecurity: Recommendations from Child Nutrition Program Directors in Alabama's Black Belt</b>	13
B. J. Kimbrough and Reenay Rogers, <i>The University of West Alabama</i> ; Brandon Renfro, <i>Geraldine (AL) Public Schools</i>	
<b>Beliefs of Teachers in Urban Elementary Mathematics Classrooms: Results of A Mixed-Methods Study</b>	23
Kenya Hall, <i>Jefferson County Public Schools</i> ; Mary E. Yakimowski, <i>Samford University</i>	
<b>Supporting Middle School Student Transition to High School: Best Practices from Middle School Principals</b>	41
Larry Parker Haynes, <i>Shelby AL County Schools</i> ; D. Keith Gurley, <i>University of Alabama at Birmingham</i>	
<b>Analyzing the Impact of Leadership Styles on Student Achievement in Alabama's Rural High Schools</b>	65
Stanley Michael Howard, <i>Jacksonville City Schools</i> ; Denise Knight, <i>The University of West Alabama</i>	
<b>A Quantitative Study on Leader Behaviors and Teacher Well-being: Low and High Socioeconomic Schools</b>	93
Jason A. Bostic, Amy N. England, and Kara Chism; <i>Samford University</i>	
<b>Instructional Leader Field Experience and Policy Implications in Alabama</b>	103
Kimberly Joy Rushing, <i>Auburn University</i>	
 <b>Higher Education Studies</b>	
<b>Torchbearer Leadership: A Conceptual Model for Leading Challenging Schools</b>	115
Stacey Gill, Kimberly Warfield, Pamela White, and Diane Best, <i>Jacksonville State University</i>	
<b>An Examination of the Community Action Poverty Simulation in Rural Education</b>	133
Jan Miller and Courtney Vick, <i>The University of West Alabama</i>	

## **IMPACT OF CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

Karima Hoytt, Sherrica Hunt, and Margaret A. Lovett  
*Alabama State University*

### **Abstract**

Social media has increased students' cultural awareness today, pivoting a need to implement cultural responsiveness in the classroom climate. Twenty-first-century learners need effective teachers who create meaningful experiences and optimize student learning by intentionally working to connect with students, adapting to diverse cultures, and using new strategies to deepen their practice. The most significant demand for culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is in secondary education. Data has shown that educators can promote the best interest of students by creating more equitable classroom strategies to increase motivation, engagement, and classroom effectiveness. If teachers and educational leaders are to evoke true educational reform and thus close achievement gaps exacerbated by the global pandemic, they must employ culturally responsive pedagogical practices. By implementing these strategies, educational leaders will reinforce actions taken for the student's best interest. This literature review aims to explore and identify the impact of CRT on student achievement in secondary schools.

*Keywords:* culturally responsiveness, culturally responsive teaching, student achievement

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## Introduction

America's demographic is continuously changing. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, "Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, and other racial minorities will make up most of the population by 2050" (Parker et al., 2019, p.1). As the national demographic changes, the American educational system must begin reflecting this notion. The beginning is perhaps in recognizing that a paradigm shift must occur. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated issues and, most importantly, widened the achievement gap in schools. While schools seek to return to normalcy, many schools still see a disconnect in teaching and learning. This disconnect is costly and must be remedied if educators truly seek to prepare students to compete globally. As a result, many have looked to administrators and educational stakeholders for solutions to this issue. At this time, there is an increased need for leaders to make impactful decisions solely centered around the needs of the students. Leadership that makes decisions to ensure the best interest of students is essential in preparing students to advance academically, mentally, and emotionally, which is needed to eliminate the achievement gap and foster authentic learning.

Although public school student demographics continue to become more diverse, classroom experiences prove contrary to students' lives outside the classroom (Mackay & Strickland, 2018; Taie & Goldring, 2017). Empirical research indicates a cultural disconnect between home and school contexts and thus attributes to academic difficulties, disengagement, and increased dropout rates among adolescents (Mackay & Strickland, 2018). Emdin (2016) asserts that urban youth are expected to leave their day-to-day experiences and emotions at the door and assimilate into the culture of schools" (p. 25). These cultural disconnections have grave implications and directly impact teaching and learning.

There appears to be a direct correlation between narratives and learning. Dyson and Genishi, scholars specializing in CRT, believe that all humans desire stories (1994). Stories can help us make meaningful connections to our lives and new information. Denman (1991) depicts narratives as a lens individuals use to understand their experiences. Therefore, the impact of stories or narratives must not be overlooked.

Vavrus (2008) highlights the significance of understanding demographics in schools and the academic achievement gap in the following excerpt: "Demographically, [the] academic achievement gap is generally evidenced between (1) White economically advantaged students and (2) students of color, immigrant children, and students from lower socioeconomic families. However, research suggests that "for the first time in our history, students of color make up the majority of students enrolled in U.S. public schools" (Muniz, 2019, p.6; Hussar & Bailey, 2013). Indeed, this is a significant change to our educational system as we know it, but still, there lies a disconnect or dissonance perpetuated in America's secondary schools. Keeping this notion in mind, Muniz (2019) asserts, "yet 65 years after *Brown* tried to pave a fair path for these students, the promise of educational equity remains elusive (p. 6).

The student demographic has changed in the public school setting. Consequently, the curriculum must change as well. The instructional methods that once worked have "often been ineffective for students of color, immigrant children, and students from lower socioeconomic families" (Vavrus, 2008, p.51). Educators must act to reach the current demographic of students in a way that connects their past experiences with their academic material. For this reason, culturally responsive teaching is needed.



Vavrus (2008) defines CRT as an educational reform that strives to increase the engagement and motivation of students of color who historically have been unsuccessful academically and socially alienated from their public schools. CRT can be implemented by incorporating stories or narratives that help students of various backgrounds to make direct correlations with the subject matter introduced.

## **Review of the Literature**

One way to consider the role of race and culture in the classroom is through school racial socialization. School racial socialization draws on literature examining parental racial socialization (e.g., Hughes et al., 2011; Hughes et al., 2006) and multicultural education (e.g., Bennett, 2001) and focuses on specific classroom messages and practices. Recent frameworks identify several dimensions (Aldana & Byrd, 2015; Byrd, 2016), and the current study focuses on four: *cultural socialization*, *promotion of cultural competence*, *support for positive interaction*, and *critical consciousness socialization*.

CRT is an educational reform that strives to increase the engagement and motivation of students of color who have historically been academically and socially alienated from their public schools. School racial socialization promotes positive racial attitudes and an understanding of the role of race and culture in society (Hughes et al., 2006).

CRT draws on students' cultural backgrounds and knowledge as assets in the classroom (Gay, 2010). For example, for African American students, cultural socialization can include events during Black History Month and pedagogies such as Afrocentric education (Byrd, 2016). This is a form of CRT for all students in the classroom setting, regardless of their ethnicity. A curriculum focusing on the different cultural backgrounds in the classroom creates multiple learning opportunities. Through CRT, one can learn about their history and the history of other ethnicities. This type of teaching provides a supportive classroom dynamic created and cultivated through the relatable narratives the teacher presents, which increases a student's likelihood of participation and engagement. CRT can also help students to learn about other cultures. Strategic teaching of this caliber can help one understand another culture's norms or history. This notion is imperative, and the lack of it in classrooms has caused many horrific yet preventable scenarios. For example, if one does not understand another culture, he may misinterpret an individual's response. Students need to understand other cultures to develop empathy toward those who differ from them. This will promote more positive interactions and relationships between different ethnic groups. The above example depicts an overview of the dimensions of CRT. The upcoming section will define each dimension and expound on its significance to this pedagogical strategy.

The first dimension indicated from research findings was *cultural socialization*. Vietze et al. (2019) state that cultural socialization is the process of learning about cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors and helps youth develop a positive cultural identity. Additionally, these researchers also believe that cultural identity comprises feelings of belonging, deals, and attitudes toward one's cultural group or groups, and it is related to better psychological adjustment, including well-being, and school adjustment, including school-related perspectives, toward cultural minority youth (Vietze et al., 2019).

Cultural socialization as a means of increasing opportunities for cognitive stimulation is consistent with the literature demonstrating that more cognitive stimulation inside and outside the home is associated with better cognitive outcomes for children (Caughey & Owen, 2016). Caughey

and Owen found cultural socialization the most common ethnic-racial socialization practice and most consistently associated with positive outcomes for ethnic minority children. Hughes et al. (2016) believed cultural socialization improved a child's self-esteem. As a result, he thought this confidence boost led to better academic performance and decreased disciplinary issues.

Moule (2011) provides an example of a cross-curricular misunderstanding in the opening of her book. She depicts a teacher who genuinely cares for her students and tries to help them achieve academic success. She writes encouraging notes on their papers using a red ink pen and makes sure to personalize all the notes by writing the students' names before writing the comment. However, in some cultures, writing a name in red ink represents an ominous deed bad. As a result, this simple action has incited an adverse reaction from parents and students of specific ethnic backgrounds. This example depicts why cultural competence is a dimension of CRT. Cultural competence can be helpful in the classroom and benefit our students' daily experiences. Moule (2011) defines cultural competence as the ability to teach students from cultures different from one's own. She says that "teachers often discriminate against their students by lacking sensitivity, knowledge, and skills necessary to teach them properly" (Moule, 2011, p. 5). If teachers unintentionally offend their students because they are not culturally competent educators, teachers make students feel uncomfortable in the classroom setting. As a result, students will disconnect and be reluctant to participate. This could lead to disciplinary problems, low self-esteem, and other issues. The classroom should be an environment where all students feel accepted and respected regardless of their cultural backgrounds. The only way educators can create this dynamic is to become culturally competent.

Moreover, positive interactions between students and teachers are essential in CRT. Barr (2016) indicates researchers have found that developing an interpersonal relationship based on harmony, connection, and mutual trust—or developing rapport—enhances the instructor-student and student-student relationships and helps create a positive relationship in the classroom climate. Further analysis revealed that positive interactions between students and teachers had increased student participation and academic success, which allows educators to build rapport with their students and cultivate an environment where students feel safe and are ready to learn without reservation.

The final dimension of CRT is critical consciousness socialization. Schwartzenthal et al. (2022) argue that research on critical social consciousness has proven that "a classroom climate which fosters the active discussion of social inequity (i.e., critical consciousness climate) can contribute to adolescents' critical consciousness, while a classroom climate in which group differences are downplayed (i.e., color-evasion climate) may not" (p. 13). Freire believed that critical social consciousness should be addressed regularly in the classroom setting to help students reflect on inequalities and how they can work against the perpetuation of this cycle (Schwartzenthal et al., 2022). Byrd (2017) suggests that schools implementing critical social consciousness in their curriculum teach adolescents about inequities, systemic racism, and group-based discrimination. This dimension of CRT prepares our students to be future leaders with empathy and respect for everyone regardless of their cultural background.

## **Pedagogy and Curriculum**

Culture is crucial in how students learn and make sense of their world outside the classroom. A shift in thinking, curriculum implementation, and pedagogical practices can remedy the disconnect between the school and home contexts. The curriculum and instruction must reflect the school demographic if the content is genuinely impactful and relevant. Curriculum and pedagogy must be culturally responsive and allow inquiry amongst varying cultures. The breakdown occurs when students cease to derive meaning from lessons and cannot make these lessons applicable to their lives and community.

According to Gay (2010), culturally responsive pedagogy can be defined as “using the cultural knowledge, past experiences, and student performance styles of various ethnic groups to make learning more relevant to and effective for students” (p. 31). The inner workings of culturally relevant pedagogy require that teachers weave and connect student cultural competencies with that of theory to bridge the gap in student learning. From this notion, Gay (2010) states six critical practices that embody culturally responsive pedagogy:

- having high expectations for all students.
- engaging students' cultural knowledge, experiences, practices, and perspectives
- bridging gaps between home and school practices
- seeking to educate the whole child
- identifying and leveraging students' strengths to transform education
- critically questioning normative schooling practices, content, and assessments. (p. 186)

Additionally, Ladson-Billings (1995) postulates that the underpinning of culturally relevant pedagogy proceeds from three criteria: "(a) students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and maintain cultural competence; (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (p. 160). CRT and educators who implement this framework not only cultivate learning environments that are conducive to the tenets of CRT but also foster student agency, student creativity, and above all, student-centered learning. Many nuances build on the CRT framework. However, one thing remains: students must be allowed to participate more actively in their learning.

Wah and Nasi (2019) contend that culturally responsive pedagogy is student-centered and considers the importance of students' cultural backgrounds in learning. Culturally responsive pedagogy involves implementing effective strategies that address, respect, and use students' reality, history, and perspectives as educational practice (Bartolome, 1994).

## **Impact of CRT**

According to Byrd (2016), the ideology of culturally relevant teachers is a powerful method to increase student achievement and engagement and reduce the achievement gap. There are three teaching practice approaches centered around the significance of culturally relevant teaching: high expectations, promoting cultural competence, and promoting critical consciousness (Dickson et al., 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Morrison et al., 2008), and understanding the community and home lives of students (Byrd, 2016).

CRT imposes high expectations, builds on a student's strengths, and assumes responsibility for students' success or lack thereof (Byrd, 2016). A constructivist teaching method can encourage students to be themselves in the classroom and authentically connect with the teacher and their peers for a more significant experience (Byrd, 2016). The climate in high-expectation classrooms provides a respectful and inclusive environment that helps students value and understand their peers' cultures using cooperative and experiential learning (Byrd, 2016). Promoting cultural competence allows teachers to create bridges by incorporating the students' communities, home lives, and other outside influences into the classroom. Opportunities to use students' experiences from their world can be an asset in the school (Byrd, 2016). Lastly, promoting critical consciousness can be achieved by addressing school social justice and racial inequalities. Allowing students to identify problems and address them can empower them to participate in decision-making (Byrd, 2016).

Scholars have contended that authentic, culturally relevant teaching is an important method to help shorten the achievement gaps and promote positive ethnic-racial identity for students of color (Dickson et al., 2015; Sleeter, 2012). In addition, a plethora of research (Christianakis, 2011; Ensign, 2003; Rodriguez, Jones, et al., 2004; Tate, 1995) indicates that culturally relevant teaching promotes academic achievement and engagement. There is also evidence of culturally relevant teaching promoting critical consciousness (Epstein et al., 2011; Martell, 2013; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Stovall, 2006). For example, in one study, students analyzed pollution in a nearby river and developed ways to become politically active in their communities (Dimick, 2012).

### **Student Achievement and Engagement**

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted and devastated teaching and learning because school leaders see a decrease in student engagement and achievement. Some school officials report that students have become "more passive, have a lesser sense of belonging, and feel disengaged from their learning" (Toth, 2021). In a survey conducted by The Education Week Research Center (2021), the results revealed that students' motivation and morale were significantly lower than before the COVID- 19 pandemic. Student engagement lends credence to student achievement in that one is contingent upon the other.

Student engagement and student achievement remain critical factors in teaching and learning. For this reason, teachers must derive new and practical practices to engage students to impact student achievement. Sousa (2016) defines student engagement as "the amount of attention, interest, curiosity, and positive emotional connections that students have when they are learning whether in the classroom or on their own" (p.17). Engaged students feel an intrinsic motivation not only to participate in class and learn challenging concepts but, most importantly, to gain a new and in-depth understanding of the inner workings of their world. At the very least, this notion underpins CRT (Sousa, 2016).

One approach to meeting the needs of diverse learners and improving student engagement is implementing culturally responsive pedagogical practices. Researchers (Byrd, 2016; Tanase, 2020) indicate that culturally responsive practices are a practical way to affirm diversity, positively affecting academic achievement and student engagement (Cuffee, 2020; Okoye-Johnson, 2011). CRT is more than a framework that supports instruction based on a student's cultural background and life experiences; instead, it ensures that students are afforded an equitable educational experience (Cuffee, 2020; Gay, 2010).

Dyer (2015) and Toth (2021) reveal a correlation between high student engagement and improved academic outcomes when culturally responsive practices are implemented in each classroom. Moreover, as teachers establish rapport and build meaningful relationships with their students, they demonstrate the value of culture and the significance of acknowledging culture. In doing so, students feel a sense of belonging and connection to their learning environment (Cuffee, 2020; Wanless & Crawford, 2016). Failing to understand and acknowledge cultural differences in the learning environment results in decreased student engagement, student motivation, and achievement gaps (Cuffee, 2020). Engaged learning cultivates and fosters skills, practices, and habits essential for student achievement. Gay (2018) posits that unless teachers understand what is interfering with students' performance, they cannot intervene appropriately to remove the obstacles to high achievement. Simply bestowing blame on students, their socioeconomic background, lack of interest in and motivation for learning, and poor parental participation in the educational process is counterproductive.

As educators aim to reverse the effects remote learning had on students during the COVID-19 pandemic and remedy the "ever-present" achievement gap, teachers must be willing to pivot and thus implement paradigm shifts. In this respect, teachers must shift their mindset from a "cultural deficit perspective," which means that individuals from select cultural groups are inferior and cannot achieve because of their cultural background (Silverman, 2011; Cheong, 2021; Gay, 2010). Additionally, it requires shifting from "subtractive views," which refers to practices eliminating students' culture and language from classroom contexts (Cheong, 2021; Gay, 2010). Teachers who disengage from the views and pedagogical practices mentioned above are distancing themselves from traditional and antiquated societal norms in teaching and learning and acknowledge that culture plays a crucial role in education. Thus, it serves as a conduit to enhanced student engagement and achievement by asserting value to this entity.

## **Benefits of CRT**

Effective teaching requires knowledge of both content and educational practices. Just like an educator needs to know their teaching content, it is also essential to be familiar with varying student populations. However, many teachers are not adequately equipped to teach diverse populations of students (Howard, 1999). Educators should incorporate courses and professional development for educators to implement CRT techniques in their classrooms.

Implementation is crucial to improving student achievement. Flippo et al. (1997) assert that the relationship between literacy and culture is bidirectional. Not only will cultural diversity mediate the acquisition and expression of literacy, but literacy education will also influence and mold an individual's cultural identity.

Incorporating curriculum and educational practices centered around CRT can change the classroom dynamic in multiple ways. Doing so can close the achievement gap, build student confidence, and help eliminate behavioral issues in the classroom. Researchers Vavrus (2008) and Byrd (2016) reveal that low-status students are among those who lack opportunities to receive the equitable benefits of instructional approaches designed to help students acquire meaningful and engaging content that helps them meet state learning standards, graduate from high school, and develop into active democratic citizens (Vavrus, 2008).

The statement above shows the importance of CRT in a student's life. Implementing this type of curriculum impacts students' learning but can also affect their ability to grow into an adult

who helps benefit society. When educators neglect to acknowledge students' culture and individuality, they fail to view students as unique individuals with distinctive life experiences that enrich the learning environment.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

Culture is deeply embedded in students' home lives, communities, and cultural funds of knowledge. Leaders who genuinely wish to seek the best interest of their students must consider students' backgrounds, norms, and narratives to provide students with an enriching learning experience. Some argue that culturally relevant teaching focuses on academic success through valuing students' interests and existing knowledge and is just "good teaching" (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Sleeter, 2012). Yet, these forms of good teaching are less often seen for students of color, so achievement gaps persist.

However, Vavrus (2008) states that "CRT is a democratic, student-centered pedagogy that incorporates and honors the cultural background of historically marginalized students and attempts to make meaningful links to academic knowledge for student success" (p. 56). CRT proves vital to educational reform and will reduce the achievement gap (Vavrus, 2008). The use of CRT as a tool for learning is a critical indicator of an educational leader who values every student's academic success and personal development. With the implementation of CRT, educators can impact student learning and thus work to help close the achievement gap exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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## **FIGHTING FOOD INSECURITY: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAM DIRECTORS IN ALABAMA'S BLACK BELT**

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### **Abstract**

Public school students in the Black Belt of Alabama suffer from food insecurity disproportionately compared with national peers. Results of a recent mixed methods study indicated food insecurity levels that were three times the national average, with very low food security an alarming 11 times the national average. In the fight against hunger in our public schools, no professionals are more valuable than the Child Nutrition Programs (CNP) staff, headed by the local CNP director. The qualitative portion of the mixed methods study solicited input from CNP directors in 14 Black Belt counties in Alabama. The recommendations from structured interviews suggest an intentional, coordinated, and multifaceted approach to fight against food insecurity in our rural public schools.

*Keywords:* food insecurity, rural, Black Belt

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## Introduction

According to the most recent statistics published by the United States Department of Agriculture, over 38 million Americans, including over 6 million children, live in food insecure households (USDA, 2021). These households lack consistent access to “adequate food for active, healthy living for all household members” (USDA, 2020, p. 5). Food insecurity is pervasive in the United States, with every county reporting its presence among a percentage of its population (Everett, 2019).

Food insecurity among young adults is particularly detrimental. Adolescents suffering from food insecurity are more likely to experience negative academic outcomes (Shanafelt et al., 2016), along with behavioral (Jackson & Vaughn, 2016), physical (Eicher-Miller et al., 2009), and mental health problems (Burke et al., 2016). They are at higher risk of substance use (Baer et al., 2015), in greater danger of sexual exploitation (Dush, 2020), at greater risk of depression and suicidal ideation (McIntyre et al., 2013), and experience an overall higher rate of hospitalization compared to those from food secure homes (Banach, 2016). It comes as little surprise, then, that the presence of food insecurity among youth has been categorized as “a marker of vulnerability” (Kirkpatrick et al., 2010).

## Review of Literature

Rural communities are more vulnerable to food insecurity than their urban and suburban counterparts (Haynes-Maslow et al., 2020). This is especially true in the rural South, where African American children are twice as likely to suffer from food insecurity as their Caucasian peers (Zekeri, 2010). The racial disparity in food insecurity is also seen among all households on a national level, with 21.7 percent of African American households experiencing food insecurity during 2020, compared to the national average of 10.5 percent (USDA, 2021). (See Table 1.)

**Table 1**

*Food Insecurity Comparison: National vs. African American Averages, 2020*

	National Average	African American Average
Food insecure	10.5	21.7
Low food security	6.6	13.7
Very low food security	3.9	8.0

Since 1995, food insecurity in the United States has been measured each December using the Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM). This survey is designed to be completed by adults, even in households where children are present. This frequently leads to underreporting of food insecurity among children and adolescents, missing as many as 50% of children who report being hungry (Fram et al., 2015).

To better assess food insecurity among the adolescent population, in the early 2000s, the Children’s Food Security Scale (CFSS) was designed and published (Connell et al., 2004). This nine-question survey is designed to be taken by adolescents as young as 12 without an adult proxy,

allowing for a more accurate picture of food insecurity among youth. Despite its utility, the CFSS has been underutilized in research, leading to calls for its wider implementation in food security studies (Nalty et al., 2013).

Given the scarcity of self-reported food insecurity data among adolescents, particularly rural minorities, it was decided to administer the CFSS to public high school students in the Black Belt region of Alabama. Originally named for its dark, rich soils, the term “Black Belt” has come to denote, in more modern times, “a region or place with a majority Black population” (Tullos, 2004, p. 1); according to Winemiller (2009), the African American population must be “at or above 50 percent” (p. 5). Depending upon the lexicographer one consults, the Black Belt region in Alabama may be delineated as consisting of 12 to 21 counties. In whatever fashion the geographical boundaries are parsed, the overarching theme uniting the region is poverty. Zekeri et al. (2016) described Alabama’s Black Belt as “one of the poorest regions in the nation,” with “a majority of the residents” being “welfare-dependent” (p. 2). As Winemiller (2009) observed, the defining characteristics of the modern Black Belt “include low taxes on property, high rates of poverty and unemployment, low-achieving schools, and high rates of out-migration” (p. 4).

In households with children, the national average for food insecurity (FI) is 7.6 percent, which may be further divided into two categories: low food security (LFS; 6.8 percent) and very low food security (VLFS; 0.8 percent) (USDA, 2021). From October-December 2021, the CFSS was administered to 742 students in 16 public schools in nine Black Belt counties. Results from each participating school may be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Food Security/Insecurity Percentages in Participating Alabama Black Belt High Schools*

High School	N	FS	FI	LFS	VLFS
A	13	62	38	15	23
B	57	81	19	15.8	3.5
C	54	83	17	7.4	9.3
D	10	60	40	40	0
E	71	77	23	10	13
F	44	70	30	18.2	11.4
G	36	92	8	8	0
H	85	66	34	19	15
I	75	80	20	16	4
J	28	86	14	7	7
K	24	88	12	8	4
L	19	63	37	26	11
M	51	73	27	16	11
N	98	79	21	13	8
O	57	75	25	12.3	12.3
P	20	60	40	35	5

*Note* N = 742. Food Secure (FS), Food Insecure (FI), Low Food Security (LFS), Very Low Food Security (VLFS).

In each Black Belt school surveyed, food insecurity levels exceeded national averages; in some cases, exponentially so. Overall food insecurity among Black Belt students was measured at 24%, over three times the national average of 7.6%. Low food security (LFS) was measured at over twice the national average (15%, compared to 6.8%). Most alarmingly, very low food security (VLFS) was measured at 11.25 times the national rate (9% in the Black Belt, vs. 0.8% nationally). (See Table 3.)

**Table 3**

*Food Insecurity Comparison: National vs. Black Belt for Households with Children, 2020*

	National	Black Belt
Food secure	85.2	76.3
Food insecure	7.6	23.7
Low food security	6.8	14.7
Very low food security	0.8	9.0

## Methods

To better understand the difficulties posed by food insecurity to public school students in the Black Belt and develop a framework for change, input was solicited from Child Nutrition Programs (CNP) directors. These directors exercised oversight in the same Black Belt districts where the quantitative study was conducted, allowing for more direct analysis and interpretation of the data. A total of 14 CNP directors participated in structured interviews in November 2021. Analysis of these interviews revealed an interconnected tier of recommendations for combating food insecurity in rural public schools.

## Results

### Promote School Breakfast, But Shift Its Location

Studies have long demonstrated the benefits of eating breakfast, especially in terms of improving academic performance, student health, and reducing aberrant behavior (FRAC, 2020; Poppendieck, 2010). The question has been how to best increase participation, specifically in locations wherein a stigma is attached to the meal itself. As Poppendieck (2010) related:

A product of the War on Poverty, the School Breakfast Program has always been viewed as primarily a program for poor children, despite valiant efforts by many of its supporters to point out that affluent children also suffered if they skipped breakfast. Only recently, with the spread of “universal breakfast in the classroom” ... has it begun to lose its poverty-program profile. (p. 175)

Many believe the best method for increasing breakfast participation is to remove it from the cafeteria setting and place it squarely within the confines of the classroom. The Food Research & Action Center (2020) noted, “Implementing a breakfast after the bell model that moves breakfast out of the cafeteria and makes it more accessible and a part of the regular school day has proven to be the most successful strategy for increasing student participation” (p. 9). Among the various possibilities, the CNP directors recommended Breakfast in the Classroom (BIC) as the one most likely to produce positive results, reducing stigma and increasing participation (and thereby

reducing food insecurity). As Everett (2019) noted, "...when breakfast was offered to all children in their classrooms, after the day began, doing so doubled participation and reduced the stigma of being a poor kid eating in the cafeteria before school" (p. 59). Not only was the stigma removed; participation rates also soared. According to Everett (2019), "When schools simply change the location of breakfast, participation rates often increase from 30 percent to 90 percent" (p. 60).

Of the 14 CNP directors surveyed, seven (50%) said schools in their district participated in some form of Breakfast After the Bell program (e.g., Breakfast in the Classroom, Grab and Go, Second Chance Breakfast, etc.). Of the seven CNP directors whose districts implement some form of Breakfast After the Bell, six (86%) utilize the Breakfast in the Classroom model. Black Belt schools implementing BIC have seen a marked increase in breakfast participation. According to CNPD 8, whose district now sees 83% of students participate in breakfast, "This [breakfast participation] is much higher than before COVID. We started Breakfast in the Classroom because of COVID, and our numbers increased." The district overseen by CNPD 12 enjoyed a similar increase because of BIC. CNPD 12 observed, "Before the pandemic, about 60% of our elementary schools ate breakfast, but with breakfast in the classroom, we are doing about 85%. The high school and middle schools were doing about 45% before the pandemic, and now they are doing about 80%."

Not only are there health, behavioral, and academic advantages to be gained from implementing BIC, there are financial incentives, as well. CNPD 14 alluded to the fiscal benefits of BIC in observing, "...less hungry students perform better in the classroom; same costs as regular breakfast, but revenue is greater." According to Poppendieck (2010), states lose millions of federal dollars each year "compared with the amount they would receive if the state met a target of 60 percent of the low-income students who participate in lunch also eating breakfast" (p. 178).

Given the obvious benefits of BIC, why do more districts not participate? On the one hand, some CNP directors are unaware of its existence. One CNP director confessed during the qualitative study, "I didn't know about that program." On the other hand, other CNP directors have asked for BIC to be implemented, only to be denied. As one CNPD related, "I have asked the administrator many times to implement the program." Why might these denials be issued? According to one CNPD, "[School redacted] does breakfast in the classroom for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade only to keep the crowds down in the cafeteria. The other schools declined that option because teachers do not want the food in their classrooms." This seems a common refrain, combined with a fear of potential loss of instructional time. However, as Poppendieck (2010) countered, BIC "...has been successful in increasing concentration and alertness during the morning hours and reducing tardiness, morning visits to the nurse's office, and morning disciplinary actions" (pp. 35-36). Given its immense potential for good, any possible drawbacks to participating in BIC would surely be offset.

### **Offer Healthier Food Options**

According to Eicher-Miller and Zhao (2018), "...adolescence [is] the pediatric age stage where food insecurity has the most potential for negative impact on child dietary intake" (p. 98). When it is considered that over twice as many children in the United States participate in school lunch than in school breakfast—29.7 million vs. 14.6 million during the 2018-2019 school year (FRAC, 2019)—it makes sense that the greatest gains to be made in the fight against adolescent malnutrition are made in the school lunchroom. Stated more simply, a meal that students eat impacts their nutritional health more than one they are prone to skip.

However, with the onset of COVID-19, many school cafeterias face financial deficits that frequently lead to students receiving less-than-optimal dining choices. In the place of fresh fruits and vegetables are sugary drinks and snacks. As one CNP director related, “I have noticed that fewer students are eating the traditional school meal... more unhealthy food items, including spicy chips and sodas, are being brought in daily.” Some school systems even provide these unhealthier options to students daily in outside-the-cafeteria snack stores (or sometimes even within the cafeteria) to raise additional money to fund cash-strapped programs. It is a vicious cycle, and, as in many instances in the adult world, children are the unwitting victims.

Ironically, the sugar-laden treats peddled by many school systems often lead to increased hunger among adolescents rather than promote food security. As Bruening et al. (2012) observed, “Food insecurity was significantly associated with...less healthy foods served at meals, and higher rates of binge eating. Food-insecure parents were 2 to 4 times more likely to report barriers to accessing fruits and vegetables” (p. 520).

In contrast to the heavily-processed food approach, many systems are finding success in the fight against food insecurity by offering more healthy choices, not less. As CNPD 5 observed:

Our District participates in the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) is an important tool in our efforts to combat childhood obesity. The program has been successful in introducing elementary school children to a variety of produce that they otherwise might not have the opportunity to sample.

To accomplish this, some Black Belt schools are turning to community gardens, or other farm-to-table initiatives, to fight hunger. CNPD 14 observed, “Supporting community gardens is a step in addressing lack of variety in fresh fruit and vegetables in the surrounding food deserts.” These approaches are to be applauded, and it is recommended that local professionals and business leaders research grant and initiative opportunities, such as those provided by the United States Department of Agriculture,<sup>1</sup> to implement these efforts on a broader scale. As Bruening et al. (2012) observed, “Environmental interventions are needed to protect vulnerable families against food insecurity and to improve access to affordable, healthy foods” (p. 520).

## **Develop and Implement School Food Pantries**

The final recommendation to emerge from the qualitative study concerns the establishment of on-site pantries in local schools to help reduce food insecurity among students. Food pantries offer the potential for students to collect healthy food items at no cost, providing much-needed nutritional support. Such pantries are especially beneficial in helping students combat the “weekend food gap” that many face.

Literature regarding food pantries in academic research, however, is scant. As Hossfeld et al. (2018) observed, “Food pantries are invisible in policy and academic research. While well known to the local social service providers in communities, there is little academic research on the local-level nonprofit food assistance network...” (p. 24). Unfortunately, food pantries seem scarcely more visible on rural school campuses. In fact, in no Black Belt district surveyed was a dedicated on-campus food pantry in operation—a need keenly felt by the CNP directors.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the Healthy Food Financing Initiative, [Healthy Food Financing Initiative | Rural Development \(usda.gov\)](https://www.usda.gov/healthy-food-financing-initiative).



To implement a campus food pantry in Alabama, it is recommended to partner with one of the eight regional food banks comprising the Alabama Food Bank Association (ALFBA).<sup>2</sup> Although these food banks have varying food allocation and distribution procedures, each is a potential goldmine for school leaders seeking to offset food insecurity. As of this writing, a budding partnership is underway between the Food Bank of North Alabama and a high school in DeKalb County, Alabama. This pilot program would see an on-campus pantry stocked by the food bank, with food distributed to affected students by local school leaders. Hopefully, this effort will serve as a model to other school districts in search of practical solutions to the growing problem of food insecurity.

## **Conclusion**

There are no easy solutions to a problem as nuanced and deep-rooted as food insecurity. However, as an old maxim admonishes, it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. Perhaps more than any initiative a researcher might recommend, what is truly needful are school leaders with hearts that bleed for their impoverished children. Untold gains could be made in our schools—socially, emotionally, and academically—if leaders will only see the many possibilities available to improve their student’s lives, and, perhaps most importantly, if they will cultivate the determination to bring these novel ideas to life.

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<sup>2</sup> See [Alabama Food Bank Network | Alabama Food Bank Association \(feedingalabama.org\)](http://feedingalabama.org). Note that “network” is misspelled in the web address as “netwrok.”

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**BELIEFS OF TEACHERS IN URBAN ELEMENTARY MATHEMATICS CLASSROOMS:  
RESULTS OF A MIXED-METHODS STUDY**

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**Abstract**

A mixed-methods study investigated the relationship between teachers within urban Title I elementary schools (e.g., high versus low performing) and their mathematics problem-solving beliefs in six constructs (*perseverance, procedural, conceptual, importance, effort, and usefulness*). The 181 teachers of students in third to fifth grades in 26 schools (93% response rate) took the 36-item *Indiana Mathematics Belief Scale*, and 11 were interviewed. Descriptive and inferential statistics and qualitative thematic analysis were conducted. No statistical difference between teachers in high and low-performing schools in their mathematical beliefs was found in any of the six constructs. The qualitative results did deepen the quantitative findings in offering insights into teachers' recognition of the importance of conceptual understanding in mathematics. The implications and directions for future research are discussed, including further inquiry on addressing professional development supports for teaching problem strategies in mathematics.

*Keywords:* urban education, mathematics beliefs, problem-solving

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## Introduction

Althaus (2017) contended that the United States does not produce citizens who grasp logic, numbers, probability, and problem-solving skills. Evident in children and adults, mathematical innumeracy is defined as the “inability to deal comfortably with the fundamental notions of number and chance” (Paulos, 1988, p. 135). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2003) found that 55% of American adults could not calculate the cost of ordering office supplies and determining whether a car had enough fuel to get to the next gas station. Similarly, mathematics literacy has long been a struggle for many students. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) suggested that district and school leaders be encouraged to provide and participate in more systemic mathematical professional development, training, coaching, and collaboration for educators to improve instructional strategies with the goal of impacting student achievement. To assist teachers in implementing effective mathematical instructional strategies, school leaders should be at the forefront of being the lead learners and instructional leaders of these best practices. The foundation of mathematics literature starts at the elementary level of schooling.

## Background of the Study

Policymakers and educational leaders turn to international, national, and statewide assessment results to grasp student mathematics performance trends, particularly for elementary grades. The Trends in International Mathematics and Science (TIMSS) measure and compare achievement scores among fourth-grade students. TIMSS uses benchmark performance characterized by four levels: *advanced* (minimum score of 625), *high* (550<sup>+</sup>), *intermediate* (475<sup>+</sup>), and *low* (400<sup>-</sup>) on a reported scale from 0 to 1000 (M= 500, SD = 100).

According to TIMSS results gathered by the Institute of Educational Studies (<https://nces.ed.gov/timss/>), 47% of fourth-grade students in the United States scored *high* (i.e., 550 – 624), with their performance described as having the ability to apply knowledge and solve word problems involving operations with whole numbers, simple fractions, and two-place decimals. These students could demonstrate an understanding of geometric properties, including angles less than or greater than a right angle, and interpret data in tables and various graphs to solve problems. In comparison, about a third of the who performed *low* (i.e., 400 – 474) could barely add and subtract whole numbers, had a minimum understanding of multiplication by one-digit numbers, and struggled to solve straightforward word problems. In comparison, 10 (out of 48) countries had higher average fourth-grade mathematics scores than the United States. However, in the United States, those schools with the highest poverty level (75 percent or more eligible for free and reduced lunch [NSLP]) scored lower, on average than students from schools in all other NSLP categories by up to 94 points. In addition, the results revealed that the United States had relatively large score gaps between the top and bottom-performing students relative to other countries.

Comparably, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is used to gauge fourth- and eighth-grade students’ knowledge, skills, and ability to solve real-world problems and skills and their ability to solve problems in real-world contexts (NAEP, 2019). NAEP produces scores in the 0 to 500 range (M = 250, SD = 50), with three achievement levels: *advanced* (minimum score of 282), *proficient* (249<sup>+</sup>), and *basic* (214<sup>+</sup>).

On the most recent NAEP administration, 59% of fourth-grade students in the United States attained *basic* or *below basic* (NCES, 2019). Disaggregation results had gaps, as seen with 84%

of English language learners, 83% of students with disabilities, 76% of minorities, 74% from low-socioeconomic disadvantaged, and 63% for urban districts attaining *basic* or *below basic* levels. When comparing mathematics performance for fourth-grade students in 2019 with 2017, 40 states showed no significant change in the percent of students scoring *basic* or *below basic*. In fact, for over 25 years, the NAEP assessment results in mathematics have found that students' problem-solving ability is one of the highest deficits (Kilpatrick et al., 2001).

One relatively new component of NAEP is the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA). The purpose of TUDA is to focus on large urban districts, representing half of the country's public-school students and disproportionally educating high percentages of Black and Hispanics eligible for participation in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) (NAEP, 2019). These results indicated that students who attend urban districts showed a disproportionate percentage (60%) of fourth-grade students performing at *basic* or *below basic* levels.

Indicators of mathematics performance in Alabama – particularly those in urban settings, are comparably lower than their peers nationally. Ranking 49th of all states and justifications, Alabama's NAEP 2019 mathematics results yielded 43% of fourth-grade students scoring *basic* and 29% scoring *below basic* (NCES, 2019). The 2019 fourth-grade mathematics performance was not significantly better than in 2017. These national results are comparative to state results. In Scantron's statewide assessment, 53% of elementary students scored *below proficient* in mathematics (Alabama State Department of Education [ALSDE], 2020).

In this industrialized nation, mathematics performance appears stagnant, especially in problem-solving, as illustrated by measures such as TIMMS, NAEP, TUDA, and statewide results. Economically disadvantaged students and those in a minority group are disproportionally impacted by mathematical innumeracy, particularly as citizens in a global economy (TIMMS 2015). So, what are the teachers' beliefs on problem-solving strategies that can enhance mathematics performance, particularly in urban Title I urban elementary schools?

### **Statement of the Problem/Purpose of the Study**

There have been few studies (e.g., Arabeyyat, 2017; Arikan, 2016) that intentionally focused on teachers' beliefs regarding using evidence-based problem-solving strategies to support the development of the conceptual understanding of mathematics for students in urban elementary schools. In Armour-Thomas's words (1989), "the investigation of teachers' thought processes is an exciting new area in research on teaching, in that 'the field promises to yield information that may revolutionize the way we traditionally conceived the teaching-learning process'" (p. 35). About 20 years later, Beswick (2012) suggested that more attention should focus on teachers' beliefs due to the cumulative experience of learning mathematics in primary and secondary schools and universities and experienced teachers from years of involvement in the profession. Therefore, with a focus on Title I urban elementary districts in Alabama, we focused this study on two urban districts to gather the teachers' beliefs on problem-solving strategies (e.g., schema-based instruction, reasoning, modeling, manipulatives, and communication) that can enhance student mathematics performance.

## Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

The foundation for this research study was the Constructivist Learning Theory. This approach holds that the learner actively constructs or makes their knowledge and that reality is determined by the learner (Elliott et al., 2000). According to Jones et al. (2010), the principles of this theory are that it enables learning that is (1) active and reflective, (2) designed to allow students to understand new experiences, and (3) is social. Learning requires interaction to develop a deep conceptual understanding and build positive relationships with other learners.

A constructivist approach to teaching problem-solving in mathematics involves delivering instruction for understanding. The student's current knowledge and experiences are the basic blocks for future structures to build upon that prior knowledge. This approach helps students develop the ability to transfer their skills and knowledge to new contexts through problem-solving, enhancing their skills (O'Dwyer et al., 2015). Bullock (2017) denotes that this practice, in companion with the acceptance of any solution method or presentation of understanding, speaks to students' prior knowledge and their experiences' uniqueness.

Since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA, P.L. 89-10), the federal legislation has provided supplemental support for basic skills (e.g., development of literacy and mathematics) to communities with high percentages of students economically disadvantaged. With each reauthorization of ESEA (i.e., No Child Left Behind of 2001, Every Student Succeeds Act, etc.), the federal government has taken an increasingly active role in becoming involved in "...core matters of school governance [including]...academic standards, student assessment, teacher quality, school choice, and school restructuring" (McGuinn, 2015, p. 78). These expectations have shifted how the federal government perceived its approach to school reform and continuous improvement efforts.

The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA, P.L. 114-95) emphasized that evidence-based instructional practices support school improvement. Under ESSA, an activity, strategy, or intervention is defined as evidence-based if it demonstrates a statistically significant effect on improving student results on achievement or other pertinent outcomes based on the following: strong evidence from an experimental study, moderate evidence from a quasi-experimental study, or promising evidence from a correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias (Zinskie & Rea, 2016). Dynarski (2015) and Sparks (2016) stated that the context of evidence is imperative because schools need to focus on evidence from studies in similar settings and populations to their students. For example, low-performing schools with a large population of economically disadvantaged students should seek evidence from high-poverty, high-performing schools. In addition to researching what has worked, Chenoweth (2016) indicated that schools must test these strategies in their learning environments. Under ESSA, State Education Agencies (SEA) now set school accountability standards, while local school districts gain flexibility and responsibility for crafting school improvement plans (Klein, 2016). Moreover, for SEAs to receive federal funding, they must submit a State plan to the federal government for approval.

The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) has identified eight research-informed mathematics instructional practices considered essential for effective teaching to all students, especially at the elementary level: 1) establishing goals to focus on learning, 2) implementing tasks that promote reasoning and problem-solving, 3) using and connecting representations, 4) facilitating meaningful discourse, 5) posing purposeful questions, 6) building procedural fluency from conceptual understanding, 7) supporting productive struggle in learning,



and 8) eliciting and using evidence of student thinking (NCTM, 2017). These teaching strategies foster conceptual learning, promote learning retention and a deeper understanding of mathematics, and rely less on computation, memorization, drills, and repetition (NCTM, 2014). This further aligns with ESSA legislation requiring evidence-based mathematics strategies, activities, and interventions. It has also defined evidence-based research when choosing an activity, strategy, or intervention designed for improvement (Lam et al., 2016).

Alabama has developed a new strategic plan, *Alabama Achieves A New Plan for A New Decade* (herein, *Alabama Achieve*, 2020). *Alabama Achieves* addresses five overarching strategic priorities to support local schools and school systems: (1) academic growth and achievement, (2) college, career, and workforce ready, (3) safe and supportive learning environments, (4) highly effective educators, and (5) customer-friendly services.

Given *Alabama Achieve* focus on academic growth and achievement, a focus on problem-solving may play an integral role in mathematics instruction delivered to elementary students. Problem-solving refers to mathematical tasks that have the potential to provide intellectual challenges for enhancing students' mathematical understanding and development (NCTM, 2014). Additionally, problem-solving refers to a situation that poses a question where the solution is not immediately accessible to the solver. However, knowing how to incorporate problem-solving purposefully into the mathematics curriculum is not necessarily evident to elementary teachers. Nieuwoudt (2015) contended that problem-solving generally involved the following steps: mastering the prerequisite mathematics ideas and skills, practicing the newly mastered concepts and skills in solving word problems, learning general problem-solving processes, and finally, applying the learned ideas and skills to solve real-life problems.

Elementary school mathematics learners are not natural problem-solvers; therefore, teachers must teach problem-solving skills and strategies (Lesh & Zawojewski, 2007). Researchers (e.g., Jitendra et al., 2015; Lesh & Doerr, 2003; Mueller et al., 2014; Peltier & Vannest, 2017) identified strategies for improving student achievement in mathematics. Problem-solving strategies include (1) schema-based instruction, (2) reasoning, (3) modeling, (4) manipulatives, and (5) communication.

Researchers (e.g., Jitendra et al., 2015; Peltier & Vannest, 2017) have found that schema-based reasoning is an instructional strategy that supports problem-solving in elementary students. Schema is often described as a system or framework developed to solve problems, organize knowledge, provide scaffolding, and support future instruction and learning (Peltier & Vannest, 2017). The schema-based instructional strategy for elementary students generally has two variations: (a) schema-based instruction and (b) schema-broadening instruction (e.g., Peltier & Vannest, 2017). Peltier and Vannest found schema instruction generally involved categorizing word problems into problem types to identify a solution plan. However, schema-broadening instruction involved the following: (1) identify the schema; (2) write the corresponding algebraic equation (i.e., converting a word problem to a numerical statement); (3) identify the solution plan; and (4) carry out the plan and check for reasonableness. Students cannot determine the necessary steps to solve the solution if they cannot develop a problem representation. According to Peltier and Vannest, schema instruction can also improve students' ability to analyze the story problems' underlying structure and identify potential PathSolutions.

Mata-Pereira and DaPonte (2017) and Mueller et al. (2014) have studied reasoning as another evidence-based instructional strategy supporting mathematics performance. NCTM

described reasoning as using evidence to conclude and the development, justification, and use of mathematics generalizations and guides teachers in promoting reasoning by allowing multiple strategies. Mata-Pereira and DaPonte found that reasoning involved teachers guiding students to investigate, evaluate conjectures, and develop mathematical arguments to convince them that they are correct.

Scholars (e.g., English & Watters, 2005; Novotna et al., 2014) have asserted modeling could also be used with elementary students. Mathematical modeling has been considered a way of improving students' ability to solve real-life problems (Lesh & Doerr, 2003), including young learners (English & Watters, 2005). Schorr and Amit (2005) positioned that modeling activities could help students build on their prior knowledge, and engage in thought-provoking, multi-faceted problems within reliable real-life situations.

Furthermore, Carbonneau et al. (2013) and Sherman and Bisanz (2009) have studied manipulative-based instruction's impact as a practical approach to improving student mathematics achievement. NCTM (2014) suggested using representational models as a significant area of mathematics instruction so that students interpret representations in many ways, such as illustrations, virtual manipulatives, and physical hands-on manipulatives or didactics. Carbonneau and Marley (2012) have found that a manipulative-based approach also included students' physical opportunities to interact with objects to learn target information.

Researchers (e.g., Huang & Normandia, 2009; Nartani et al., 2015) have further studied how communication can be another evidence-based instructional strategy. NCTM (2000) asserted that communication is essential for understanding mathematics. Jones and Tanner (2002) found that students who can communicate can share ideas and concepts that will help them learn to be critical thinkers through problem-solving. Huang and Normandia (2009) similarly found that teachers must allow students to communicate their ideas and views with other students by promoting small group activities.

However, what do we know about teachers' beliefs about problem-solving strategies? While various researchers have identified instructional strategies to help elementary students enhance their problem-solving skills, Arikan (2016) asserted that teachers' beliefs are imperative to improving student learning and how teachers conceptualize their roles in the mathematics classroom, their selections of learning activities, and the instructional strategies they intend to introduce to students. NCTM further declared that "teachers' beliefs influence their decisions about how they teach mathematics" (2014, p.10). Researchers (e.g., Arikan, 2016; Correa et al., 2008) have classified teacher-centered and student-centered teaching beliefs. Correa et al. offered that while the teacher-centered view aligns with the content-focused view focusing on performance, the student-centered teaching view's idea parallels the "learner-focused" view.

According to Arikan (2016), one of the most critical factors determining the teacher and student's relationship is the teachers' beliefs. These beliefs affect how teachers deliver instruction and their pedagogical approach. While teachers generate thoughts on their students, content areas, roles, and responsibilities, Hoy and Miskel (2001) contended that teachers' beliefs affect their perceptions and judgments. Then, their opinions and experiences affected their behaviors in the classroom, especially when teaching students problem-solving. Similarly, Wilkins (2008) examined teachers' level of mathematical content knowledge, attitudes toward mathematics, and beliefs of 481 third through fifth-grade elementary students. In the third through fifth grades, upper elementary teachers had more excellent content knowledge and positive attitudes toward

mathematics than primary teachers in kindergarten through second grades. There was no difference in teachers' beliefs about effective instruction, but primary-level teachers used instruction more frequently than upper elementary teachers. Wilkins found that teachers' beliefs were the most significant predictor of teaching practices, among other factors. However, there is a gap in research about these teacher beliefs of those serving students in urban contexts or large numbers participating in NSLP.

## Methods

We used a mixed-methods two-phase design with quantitative and qualitative components to examine teachers' beliefs in two urban Title I districts in Alabama to explore the general research question of beliefs about mathematical problem-solving strategies. According to Creswell (2012), mixed-methods designs allow for the acquisition of more detailed and specific information to understand the problem better when neither quantitative nor qualitative inquiry is robust enough to address the general research question. In this two-phase design type, we captured quantitative survey data and then used the qualitative component to explain the initial results further. Specifically, we administered a survey in the first phase of this study when participants indicated their agreement with belief statements about mathematical evidence-based problem-solving instructional strategies. In phase two, qualitative data was gathered from interviews and used to take a deeper dive to explore Title I elementary teachers' beliefs about these instructional strategies.

We addressed the following specific research questions:

1. What are all teachers' beliefs in urban Title I elementary schools educating students in grades 3-5 in these two urban districts regarding effective mathematics problem-solving strategies to enhance performance?
2. In *high-performing* urban Title I schools, what are the teachers' beliefs about effective problem-solving strategies?
3. In *low-performing* urban Title I schools, what are the teachers' beliefs about effective problem-solving strategies?
4. Are there differences in the teachers' beliefs of those who educate *high versus low-performing* Title I schools regarding effective problem-solving strategies to enhance mathematics performance?
5. From teachers' perspective in *high-performing* Title I schools, how are problem-solving strategies used in their classrooms, and what support systems allow for professional growth in these instructional strategies (schema-based instruction, modeling, manipulatives, and communication)?

## Setting/Population/Sampling

We used two adjacent Alabama urban school systems for this study. These communities, referred to as Districts 1 and 2, educate 59%-65% of students on NSLP, higher than the state average of 51%. These two districts serve over 40,000 P-12 students educated in about 40 schools. Both systems target the use of Title I allocated funds at the elementary school level. The districts have 26 Title I elementary schools operating for at least one year and participated in the ALSEE Assessment Program. Across the two districts, they 26 Title I elementary schools enrolled nearly

12,750 students and 790 teachers (ALSDE, 2020). Scantron's mathematics achievement was about 22% compared to the State average of 46.78% in the same period.

The population for this study was 194 teachers of grades 3-5 in these 26 Title I elementary schools. Given this population, 129 was the number of survey responses needed for 95% confidence to generalize results to the entire population. The population included regular education teachers but not special education teachers—the overall majority of the teachers are females and white. All 194 teachers were asked to complete the survey in phase I of the study. To address specific research questions two through four, rank-ordered each of the 26 Title I schools based on their mathematics achievement scores from the 2017-2019 ALSDE Scantron Achievement Series mathematics assessment. The top and bottom one-third of schools were classified as "high" and "low" performing, respectively. The subsamples were teachers from nine high-performing and nine low-performing schools. Additionally, we used convenience sampling for phase II. We did this by requesting the nine high-performing school principals nominate two volunteers who teach in grades 3-5. If one or both volunteers declined to participate in interviews, we requested that the school principal select alternates.

### **Instrumentation**

*The Indiana Mathematics Belief Scale (IMBS)* was utilized for phase I of this study. The IMBS is a survey designed by Stage and Kloosterman (1992) to provide insight into teachers' beliefs on mathematics problem-solving and how it affects mathematics instruction. Each respondent rated their beliefs on 36 mathematics problem-solving items on a response scale ranging from "1" (strongly disagree) to "5" (strongly agree). In addition to an overall score, the researchers obtained a sub-score for each of six constructs (*perseverance, procedural, conceptual, importance, effort, and usefulness*).

### **Data Analysis**

After researchers received the responses to the survey, data analysis began. We used descriptive statistics to address the first specific question examining elementary students' teachers' beliefs regarding effective mathematical problem-solving strategies for student achievement. The statistics included frequency distributions, central tendency (i.e., mean), and dispersion (i.e., standard deviation) on the survey's overall score, construct, and item. Similarly, we used frequency distributions, central tendency, and dispersion on the survey's overall score construct and item to address the second and third specific questions examining teachers' beliefs from high and low-performing schools. The fourth specific research question compared the two subgroups of teachers representing high and low-performing schools. We used the parametric independent *t*-test to conduct inferential statistical analysis. Since the study's participant size was larger than 30, the independent *t*-test used as an inferential technique helped determine a statistically significant difference between the means in two unrelated groups (Laerd Statistics, 2020). The null hypothesis for the independent *t*-test was that the population means from the two unrelated groups are equal. A pre-established significance level (alpha) allowed the researchers to reject or accept the alternative hypothesis. We tested at the significance level of  $p > .05$ . The participants involved in addressing specific research question five were a thematic analysis of interview protocols.

## Results

The total number of grade 3-5 teachers responding was 181 out of 194, a 93% response rate, thereby attaining the target rate to confidently generalize results. Of participants, 52 (27%) were from high-performing schools, and 79 (41%) represented low-performing schools. Additionally, 11 teachers participated in the qualitative semi-structured interviews representing eight of the 9 high-performing schools.

### Beliefs of All Teachers

Teacher survey results from all 26 schools on the IMBS produced an overall mean of 2.92 (SD = .90) on a scale from “1” (strongly disagree) to “5” (strongly agree), indicating a middle-of-the-road response. The construct means ranged from 2.11 for an *effort* to 3.46 for *importance*. The statement that received the highest score was #36: *Studying mathematics is a waste of time*. The lowest item score was #33: *Mathematics is a worthwhile and necessary subject*.

The *perseverance* construct had a 3.00 (SD = .92), with item means ranging from 2.04 to 3.94 (SD = 0.80 to 1.02). For these statements, the highest mean (3.94) was item #5: *If I can't solve a math problem quickly, I quit trying*. The survey item with the lowest mean (2.04) was #3: *I find I can do hard math problems if I just hang in there*. The *procedural* construct had 2.83 (SD = .93), with item means ranging from 2.45 to 3.29 (SD = 0.85 to 1.01). For these statements, the highest mean (3.29) was item #9: *Memorizing steps is not useful for learning to solve word problems*. The item with the lowest mean (2.15) was #11: *Most word problems can be solved using the correct step-by-step procedure*. The third construct, *conceptual*, had a mean of 2.97 (SD = .90), with item means ranging from 1.80 to 3.85 (SD = 0.78 to 0.98). The highest mean (3.86) for these statements was item #16: *It's not important to understand why the mathematical procedure works if it gives a correct answer*. The lowest mean (1.80) was #15: *In addition to getting the right answer in mathematics, it is important to understand why the answer is correct*. The *importance* construct had a mean of 3.46 (SD = .94), with item means ranged from 2.71 to 3.89 (SD = 0.81 to 1.05). The highest mean (3.24) for these statements was item #24: *Word problems are not an important part of mathematics*. The lowest mean (2.71) was #21: *Computational skills are useless if you can't apply them to real-life situations*. For *effort*, the fifth construct had a mean of 2.11 (SD = .83), with item means ranging from 2.06 to 2.17 (SD = 0.78 to 0.88); the highest mean (2.17) was item #25: *One can become smarter in math*, and the lowest mean (2.06) was #26: *Working can improve one's mathematics ability*. And finally, the *usefulness* construct had a mean of 3.06 (SD = .92), with item means ranging from 1.67 to 4.36 (SD = 0.77 to 1.17) the highest mean (4.36) was item #36: *Studying mathematics is a waste of time* and the lowest mean (1.67) was #33: *Mathematics is worthwhile and necessary*.

Descriptive findings gathered from all Title I teachers resulted in middle-of-the-road findings with a mean close to “3” on a scale from “1” (strongly disagree) to “5” (strongly agree) and construct means ranging from a high of 3.46 (*importance*) to a low of 2.11 (*effort*). All teachers are relatively high on believing in word problems and the skills needed to solve problems instead of the other computational skills. However, a relatively lower belief in the extent of effort and study makes individuals smarter in mathematics. Overall descriptive findings from all Title I teachers resulted in a spread of 1.35 among the construct means on this five-point scale, but little difference across variability (.11).

## Similarities and Differences

Inferential statistics addressed the fourth specific research question comparing two subgroups of teachers (those from high- and low-performing Title I urban schools) concerning each construct's general beliefs. First, the high performing schools ( $n = 58$ ,  $M = 2.92$ ) was compared to those from low performing schools ( $n = 73$ ,  $M = 2.89$ ). A  $t$ -score of .97 was obtained and tested at the pre-established  $p \leq .05$  as the actual probability level was .42, so the researchers' failed to reject the null hypothesis. There were no statistical differences between these two means (i.e., 2.92 vs. 2.89). Second, we tested each of the six constructs. The  $t$ -values ranged from .06 to 1.01, with the corresponding  $p$ -values of .06 to .89. We failed to reject the corresponding null hypothesis in all situations, as no statistical differences were found. However, *useful* came close (e.g., .06). While not statistically significant, it may be of practical significance that teachers in high-performing schools generally believed mathematics is useful in daily life. Third, we tested each statement. Only one item within the importance construct showed a statistical difference between high and low-performing schools. An independent  $t$ -test showed that the high-performing schools' ( $M = 2.88$ ) belief of #21, *Computational skills are useless if you can't apply them to real-life situations*, was statistically significantly higher than the low-performing schools ( $M = 2.73$ ),  $p = .001$ .

To complement and further dive into quantitative results, we sought emerging themes from teachers' perspectives in high-performing Title I schools. The themes showed how problem-solving strategies are used in their classrooms and what support systems allow for professional growth in these instructional strategies (schema-based instruction, modeling, manipulatives, and communication). We coded transcripts to determine the common trends among participants' responses to evidence-based strategies in mathematical problem-solving discussed in the literature review. We also found trends in responses of teachers with certain levels of teaching experience, challenges, and barriers each participant shared as it relates to trying new strategies to support diverse learning needs, providing opportunities for their students to have meaningful discourse and productive struggle through problem-solving, and how to authentically support teachers professionally in implementing best practices for teaching students how to problem-solve.

## System-level Support

All 11 participants discussed system support from the district or school level. Participants discuss the importance of having instructional support from professional development inside and outside the school district. Participant seven stated, "I always learn a lot from my colleagues...I talk to [them] and observe.... That is where I get a lot of knowledge from...my colleagues and mentor teacher...I have a mentor teacher." Participants discussed the importance of learning a lot from their colleagues within their school buildings. Participant seven also shared, "I wish I could sit in a couple of teachers' classes to learn the instructional strategies they use." Participant six stated, "My principal has been messaging me about different PDs that the district has offered and wondered if I had attended them because he knows I am a newer teacher. Last year, I was at a different school. So, he asked if I had been to any of those and encouraged me to sign up for those if I have not."

Responses from the teachers indicated that using the best mathematics instruction practices is key to promoting student achievement in mathematics. They communicated numerous methods of teaching problem-solving to their students. For example, P8 articulated, "It is being able to analyze and look at a math problem and not just regurgitate facts but working through the problem."

P3 explained how they like to see students communicate during math. P1 stated, "I like them communicating with each other, and in my class if you can do it, you can explain it." P5 contended that modeling problems for the students are essential as well. "Understanding not just how to get an answer, but understanding the why and, you know, have examples and non-examples the correct or incorrect answer." P11 shared, "So I use that (communication) frequently, and I use discourse because it is important for students to communicate and talk about and talk through problems."

Participants described the obstacles and barriers to teaching mathematics problem-solving by explaining that language usage, student background knowledge, and reading below grade level were issues in students' problem-solving achievement. P8 stated, "Students not understanding the language of math and children's general overall vocabulary seems to have gotten weak over the years...I would say it's just a language barrier I have noticed over the years." P7 offered: "Many of my students have expressed that they are scared of solving word problems...They looked at them as intimidating." And P1 shared, "Challenges I encounter would be trying to teach a fifth-grade skill to someone with a first-grade background knowledge."

Teachers identified students' perception of mathematics and viewed their ability to solve word problems as challenging. For example, P11 stated, "Number one challenge is having to work through trying to show and demonstrate to kids...Yes, you can. It's okay not to like anything that's perfectly human, and that is your opinion, but I think a lot of times that may not necessarily come straight from the students, but it may be the family's kind of pushing on.... Oh, I was bad in math, so you're going to be bad at math." Participants also expressed that using mathematical language and breaking down those language barriers is the challenge of achieving problem-solving.

Those interviewed stated that observing students had a breakthrough when complex solving problems was rewarding. Some participants indicated that it is difficult sometimes to refrain from giving their students the answers quickly. For instance, P9 responded: "I am very okay with watching my kids struggle for a little bit, and once they get it, it's just a lot more exciting and fun for them." P7 expressed, "I am finding different ways to explain to students that they struggle in a different area or a particular area."

Furthermore, participants expressed that teacher experiences have enhanced their knowledge of teaching problem-solving to their students over the years.; participants with more teaching experience revealed more knowledge of best practices and their ability to grow their expertise in particular methods. P10 expressed: "I believe having more time for discourse and not feeling pressured to keep up with the pacing guide is first and foremost; I feel we are doing a disservice to our students where we just keep going on to stay on schedule versus mastering a skill before moving on." P8 stated: "I have so many resources in my head, and it makes it hard to decipher which way I can solve the problem...this way, or this way or this way...I sometimes wish I could go back to my 8th year of teaching when I wasn't as knowledgeable and the way I was doing. If I had five things I could use, I could use it well."

## Data Triangulation

We used triangulation to compare the results of two quantitative and qualitative phases in high-performing schools. Survey responses were compared with interviews to understand better the general research question exploring mathematical problem-solving and teachers' beliefs in urban Title I elementary schools. As illustrated below, a significant agreement was found among participants' quantitative and qualitative responses.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Quantitative and Qualitative Data Triangulation*

Construct	Quantitative Result	Qualitative Result	Example Quote
Conceptual	Participants did not believe the right answer in math is more important than understanding why the solution works.	Participants described using strategies that help students solve various problems in various ways.	"It is not about using any particular strategy at any given time; it's just about using the strategy that works for you and this particular problem."
Importance	Participants expressed disagreement that math classes should not emphasize word problems.	Participants spoke about allowing students to develop their word problems to relate mathematics to their worldly perspectives.	"I like to connect word problems to their (students) world and require them to tell how they will use this in the real world instead of giving them a problem to solve."

## Discussion, Implications, and Future Research

There have been few studies that intentionally focused on teachers' beliefs regarding using evidence-based problem-solving strategies to support the development of the conceptual understanding of mathematics, particularly in urban Title I schools (e.g., Arikan, 2016; Arabeyyat, 2017). This study aimed to gather the teachers' beliefs on problem-solving strategies (e.g., schema-based instruction, reasoning, modeling, manipulatives, and communication) to enhance student mathematics performance in urban Title I elementary schools. To further inform *Alabama Achieve* strategic plan, educational leaders can best meet the needs of students by gaining more insight into teachers' beliefs that affect Alabama's student mathematics achievement results, particularly those in urban districts and large numbers participating in NSLP.

Our guiding research question was: *What are elementary students' teachers' beliefs regarding effective instructional strategies for mathematical problem-solving? Are there differences between teacher beliefs in high and low-performing urban Title I schools? If so, what factors might explain the differences?* We found it essential to understand how these beliefs impact student performance. We found that all elementary teachers within these two districts across all domains displayed very positive beliefs about problem-solving. The most significant finding we detected was no difference between teacher beliefs in high- and low-



performing schools. Perhaps these results may be attributed to high- and low-performing school teachers receiving the same preservice mathematics pedagogy and district-mandated professional development. This we deemed as a positive finding. Findings are aligned with Beswick (2012), who suggested that attention should focus on teachers' beliefs due to the cumulative experience of learning mathematics in primary and secondary schools and universities and experienced teachers from years of involvement in the profession.

This study's findings offer several implications for teachers in low- and high-performing Title I schools. Based on the survey findings, 57% of the participants state that most word problems can be solved using the correct step-by-step procedure. However, 81% of teachers believe that getting the right answer in mathematics is important to understand why the answer is correct. Therefore, teachers who emphasize solving mathematical problems should also find the best teaching practices for conceptual understanding. It is the idea that teachers' beliefs affect teaching and learning and ultimately affect student achievement in mathematics (e.g., Arikan, 2016; Correa et al., 2008). Therefore, it is important to investigate teachers' beliefs since they are expected to reflect instructional strategies for mathematics problem-solving. Teachers should be aware of their own beliefs about problem-solving strategies to strengthen their knowledge base in problem-solving instructional strategies.

This study suggests that further research needs to be conducted on educators' beliefs about problem-solving in urban school districts. This research may enlighten educators that teachers' ideas about mathematical problem-solving will influence their classroom instructional practices. Since this research focuses on elementary students in grades 3-5, future research is extended to grades K-2, 6-8, and 9-12 to understand the various grade span and needs. Also, further investigation of teachers' experience levels, levels of training, and post-secondary degree levels. Further research is necessary to address professional development's effectiveness in supporting evidence-based problem-solving instructional strategies in mathematics. Although teachers receive professional development support in teaching mathematics problem-solving strategies, further research can determine their effectiveness. This research might benefit all school districts, especially school leaders, concerning teachers' beliefs and professional development content and format for all grade levels' most effective practices. The qualitative findings further suggest that research is needed to address the challenges in breaking barriers to problem-solving (i.e., using the language of the discipline to explain mathematical expressions and concepts, perception of math from home and school, students reading below grade level and cannot decode word problems, and students' prior knowledge). Qualitative data suggest future research needs to address students' needs in various sub-groups within urban Title I schools (i.e., exceptional education students and English language learners). Several high-performing school teachers stated the need to identify the most effective mathematical problem-solving instructional strategies to enhance English language learners, students with reading deficiencies, and students with disabilities problem-solving skills.

## **Conclusions**

In closing, our study's results contribute to the research on mathematics problem-solving in urban Title I schools. The findings are a revelation to teachers' overall beliefs about mathematical problem-solving. While there were no statistical differences in their prevailing beliefs regarding whether the teacher was in a high or low-performing school, each teacher strives to find and learn the best ways to present mathematical problem-solving strategies to students. As encouraged by NCTM, the focus of mathematics in schools has shifted from rules, procedures, and

rote memorization to reasoning, problem-solving, and meaning. Teachers must plan student activities that recognize the importance of ambiguity in the instructional strategies and embed them in students' planned experiences.

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**SUPPORTING MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL:  
BEST PRACTICES FROM MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS**

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**Abstract**

Adolescents experience challenges navigating psychological, physiological, and emotional transformations. This article contributes to research into how middle school and high school environments can reinforce the needs of students through the transition from middle school to high school. In this grounded theory study, we interviewed 11 experienced, successful middle school principals in high-performing schools to explore practices and behaviors in supporting this transition. Participants noted the importance of maintaining high expectations while providing students with continuous nurturing, support, and opportunities to develop into responsible and self-sufficient young adults. These principals built positive school environments by promoting a shared vision based on regular collaboration among all stakeholder groups. Principals affirmed the middle school concept practice of exposing students to (a) rigorous, engaging, academic classes; (b) a variety of career exploration and elective course offerings; and (c) opportunities to teach positive character, soft skills, and self-advocacy. Findings reaffirmed the benefits of student-centered schools with effective administrators and teachers who seek continuous improvement, practice professional collaboration, implement student-centered programs/interventions, and make decisions based on the best interest of the students. The article concludes with implications for practice and further research.

*Keywords:* school transitions, middle school concept, student-centered activities, interdisciplinary teaming, grounded theory

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## Introduction

In this article, we present findings from a grounded theory study conducted to explore best practices employed by middle school principals in support of middle school students transitioning to high school. We conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with 11 successful, experienced principals of high-performing middle schools to determine what they perceived to be successful supports and interventions in helping middle school students transition to high school. As a result of our findings, we present a theory of best practices that practitioners in middle schools may wish to implement to support student transition to high school. We conclude by reflecting on these findings and how future researchers may wish to extend this research in different settings.

## Purpose of the Study

This grounded theory study aimed to explore best practices of intervention strategies that support transitions of middle school students to high school as identified by veteran middle school principals and to create a theoretical model to clarify the process. As a result of this study, school leaders may gain insight into how they can collaboratively work with students, parents, faculty, and colleagues to establish successful transitioning programs at the middle school level that challenge, nurture, and prepare students for the experiences and expectations they will encounter in high school and beyond.

## Research Questions

The central research question for the study was as follows: *How do middle school principals in selected schools in Central Alabama describe best practices in implementing transition activities that nurture and acclimatize students while preparing them for the experiences and challenges they will encounter at the high school level?* Sub-questions for the study were as follows:

1. How do middle school principals organize staff members to better transition students from middle school to high school?
2. What types of student-centered activities do principals plan and implement to transition students from middle to high school successfully?
3. What types of school-to-school articulation activities ensure middle school to high school success?
4. How do principals encourage parental involvement while transitioning students from middle school to high school?

## Background to the Study

Transitioning from middle school to high school often generates anticipation and excitement but may also present unique and daunting challenges for students. Students must familiarize themselves with new policies and procedures and face the uncertainty of learning their way around a different and often larger facility. Taking new academic subjects, changing curriculum standards, getting accustomed to the methods of six to eight new teachers, attending classes with older students, and possibilities of encountering bullies add to concerns. Students with special needs, learning disabilities, or lack of support from home face additional risk factors that



could contribute to failure at the next level (Letrello & Miles, 2003). Students often experience achievement losses moving from one campus to another (Alspaugh, 2010; Benner, 2011). Alspaugh (2010) acknowledged the relationship between the number of school-to-school transitions and the percentage of students who drop out of high school. Other researchers confirmed that students had an overall decline in grades during the transition from middle school to high school, particularly during the first year (Benner, 2011; Smith, 2005).

Although physical maturation occurs earlier than in previous generations (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2003), children continue to experience developmental challenges. Adolescents experience numerous psychological, physiological, cognitive, biological, and emotional changes with the commencement of puberty (Association for Middle Level Education [AMLE], n.d.; Wingfield et al., 2005). Additionally, the apprehension of changing school environments is further complicated by additional changes such as the emergent significance of peer affiliations and the development of higher order reasoning skills (AMLE, n.d.; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). Evidence has shown that the middle school experience is directly correlated with success in high school and beyond (Wormeli, 2011). Therefore, school leaders must remain highly involved in providing a variety of interventions designed to equip students to handle challenges constructively during their middle school and early high school years and be prepared to respond positively to obstacles they encounter later in life.

In addition to encountering the challenges of transitioning from childhood to adulthood (Akos et al., 2015), adolescents generally face two educational transitions—from elementary school to middle school and from middle-school-to-high-school (Goodwin et al., 2011). Because most of the research explores the transition from elementary schools to middle or junior high school settings, there appears to be a gap in the empirical research literature regarding transitioning students from middle schools to high schools (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). Caskey (2011) elaborated that more research is warranted regarding how middle school and high school environments support the needs of students throughout the middle-to-high-school transition. Therefore, examining the best practices middle school leaders utilize to provide successful transitional programming throughout the middle school years can be a key ingredient to helping students achieve academic and social success at the high school level.

### **Theoretical Frame and Review of the Literature**

Adolescence is the transitional time between childhood and adulthood, where numerous developmental changes occur (Goodwin et al., 2011). Along with their specific psychological needs, adolescents possess distinctive, evolving needs that should be addressed in the school environment (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013). Despite the numerous resources available to guide parents and educators who regularly interact with young people, adolescents encounter personal and developmental obstacles for which no specific solution exists (Abell et al., 2006). As a result of these changes, secondary school leaders need to look for available methods to promote a more student-friendly, responsive, and nurturing secondary school environment (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013). About a hierarchy of needs, Maslow (1943) said people are inspired to fulfill basic needs before moving to more advanced needs. Defined as the quest of reaching one's full potential and being connected with the world, from the basic to the highest level, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) includes the following: (1) Physiological, (2) Safety/Security, (3) Emotional/Social, (4) Esteem, and (5) Self-Actualization. Maslow (1970a) later extended his original, five-stage model to include both cognitive and aesthetic needs (1970a)

before the level of self-actualization. In addition, beyond self-actualization at the top of the hierarchy, Maslow (1970b) inserted transcendence needs (McLeod, 2007). Researchers adopted Maslow's Theory of a Hierarchy of Needs as the guiding conceptual framework for this study, specifically focusing on the Emotional/Social aspect of the hierarchy related to middle school students transitioning to high school. According to Maslow (1943), being part of a group is an example of fulfilling man's basic desire to belong. As the lower levels of the hierarchy are met, the higher-order needs will take over as motivators. Comparing Maslow's hierarchy to the structure and support system of a middle-level school, especially when effective transitioning practices enhance the students' physiological, safety/security, and emotional/social levels of need, the confidence of the adolescents in the school is increased to the level that higher-order needs take over.

According to the NMSA (2003), successful schools for young adolescents are characterized by a culture that includes the following:

- (1) educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so; (2) courageous, collaborative leadership; (3) a shared vision that guides decisions; (4) an inviting, supportive, and safe environment; (5) high expectations for every member of the learning community; (6) students and teachers engaged in active learning; (7) an adult advocate for every student; and (8) school-initiated family and community partnerships. (p. 7)

NMSA (2003) further stated that successful schools provide adolescents with the following opportunities to support students in making the transition from the elementary to secondary levels: (a) a relevant curriculum, (b) a variety of teaching and learning approaches, (c) high-quality assessment and evaluation methods, (d) supportive and significant relationships, (e) promotion of health, wellness, and safety; and (f) comprehensive counseling and support services.

### **The Rationale for Transitioning Programs**

Schools that do not provide supportive transitioning programs may experience a loss in student achievement and lower graduation rates (Akos et al., 2015; Alspaugh, 2010). Alspaugh examined the significance of achievement loss associated with school-to-school transitions. Citing that prior academic achievement is a reliable predictor of future academic success, Smith (2005) affirmed that a student's achievement loss during the middle to high school transition is associated with attrition or lack of success encountered by one during their first year of college. Alspaugh further noted declines in student self-esteem and self-perception associated with moving from one school setting. Other researchers have cautioned that a difficult transition from eighth to ninth grade is associated with increased behavior problems (Smith et al., 2018; Graber and Brooks-Gunn (1996).

### **Achievement Loss and Dropout Rates**

The Southern Regional Education Board (2002) stated that the transition from middle school to high school is the most difficult transition students face. Alspaugh (2010) also speculated that the loss of self-esteem and self-perception associated with changing school settings could have been a factor in the increased dropout rates. The study further revealed that students who attended schools with larger student populations were more likely to drop out of school than students enrolled in a smaller school. The results of this study were "consistent with the findings of other

researchers in that the instability and adjustments required of students in school transitions were associated with educational outcomes” (p. 25). Rice (2001) examined how the middle school-to-high school transition negatively affected student performance in math and science classes. Rice stated that administrators and teachers need to provide clear expectations and continuous interventions for transitioning students. Rice further noted the importance of parental involvement and the need to establish a strong sense of community and to belong in the high school setting. Smith (1997) added that incorporating transitional programs builds confidence and boosts student achievement and graduation at the high school level. More recently, Akos et al. (2015) examined the impact of students transitioning from one level to another (i.e., elementary, middle, high) and determined that such transition “has significant consequences for many early adolescents” (p. 170).

Lessard and Juvonen (2022) conducted a study of 3,410 ethnically diverse ninth grade students, focusing particularly on those students who had maintained or carried over friendships from middle school to high school. In their examination of 17,255 friendships, these researchers found that first-year high school students who maintained middle school friendships (as opposed to newly formed friendships) reported higher academic achievement as well as higher levels of emotional support from their friends. Lessard & Juvonen stated, “these findings underscore the academic value of maintaining social ties across the high school transition” (p. 136).

### **Dialogue among Stakeholders Important**

Akos (2016), Akos et al. (2015), and Akos and Galassi (2004) concluded that more discussion is needed with students and parents before a major transition, with specific emphasis on the positive aspects of the school at the next level. Students, parents, and teachers at elementary and secondary levels agreed on the importance of discussing the myths and truths about the middle or high school before the move to the new school (Abell et al., 2006; Akos et al., 2015 Akos & Galassi, 2004; Uvass & McKevitt, 2013). Mizelle and Irvin (2000) similarly articulated that middle to high school transition programs are most effective when school administrators involve multiple stakeholders. Suggested activities included (1) sharing information with students and parents about the opportunities at the new school, (2) giving students social support before and during the transition, and (3) bringing middle and high school faculties together to discuss curriculum and expectations. Abell et al. (2006) added that middle and high school principals and faculty members need to share consistent messages regarding the similarities and differences in the opportunities at each level to maximize student success.

### **The Vital Role of the Principal**

Onorato (2013) stated that, as the instructional leader, the principal is responsible for all activities occurring in and around the school building. Onorato wrote, “The principal’s leadership sets the tone of the school, the climate for teaching and learning, the level of professionalism and morale of teachers, and the degree of concern for what students may or may not become” (p. 35).

Ethical leadership from the principal is a key ingredient to the transitioning process. Ethical leaders seek to provide a fair-minded and virtuous school climate for all stakeholders. In addition to being practical and fair with faculty, staff, and parents, ethical leaders base their decisions on what is in the best interests of students. Sagnak (2010) addressed the relationship between transformational school leadership and an ethical school climate. Because principals play such a critical role in determining the ethical climate of a school, transformational leaders focus attention on ethical values and establish standards that impact the actions of all employees in the school.

Sagnak further asserted that strong principal leadership was positively related to caring for others, consistent policies and procedures, promoting group goals, and establishing an ethical climate in the school. Sagnak concluded that principal leadership has a positive effect on faculty and staff, but it models and inspires a culture that provides a challenging yet safe and supportive environment for the students throughout the transitioning process.

Despite the supportive programs, innovative schedules, or academic and elective opportunities a school offers, school-to-school transitioning cannot be successful without strong visionary, ethical, and character-building leadership from principals (Juvonen et al., 2004; McEwan, 2003;). Characteristics of strong leaders included the ability to admit when they were wrong, trustworthiness, integrity, authenticity, generosity, humility, respectfulness, and consistency. Additional traits included (a) recruiting and hiring staff members with character, (b) leading by example, not by appeal, and (c) the ability to develop the character of students. McEwan (2003) further stated that strong school leaders “recognize the power they have to mold and shape young people, encourage and empower teachers, and respect and affirm parents” (p. 149).

### **Successful Transitioning Involves a Collaborative Approach**

Whether the transition involves elementary-school-to-middle-school or middle-school-to-high-school, Mizelle (2005) reasoned that successful programs depend on the administrators, teachers, counselors, and parents coming together to discuss programs, courses, curriculum, and requirements of their respective schools. Vertical teaming promotes such sharing and provides a forum for employees at each school to assess and align curriculum and promote consistent expectations across grade levels.

Mizelle (2005) added that bringing educators at all levels together will allow them to structure their curricula and programs to help students make seamless transitions into the next grade level. The results further revealed that school leaders must remain actively involved in working with students, parents, faculty, and staff across grade levels and schools to develop meaningful transitional programming that supports students as they progress from self-contained elementary classrooms to the secondary challenges and opportunities middle and high school.

Ellerbrock and colleagues (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Ellerbrock & Kiefer (2013) maintained that continuing vertical communication among principals, counselors, and teachers at the middle and high school level is important as educators examine ways to assist students through the challenges they face with each new academic year. In addition, students and parents should also be regularly informed and allowed to provide feedback regarding the transition process.

Finally, due to the lack of evidence-based transition programs for school-wide student transitions, schools that seek to address these concerns must plan and implement programs of their own (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). No empirical studies have been conducted to evaluate the impact of one educational transition on a future educational transition (Smith, 2005). A variety of supportive transitional programs should be designed, implemented, and evaluated at each grade level to maximize opportunities for student success at the high school level and beyond. Schools that choose to incorporate model transition programs must consistently assess each activity to determine whether it serves the purpose for which it was intended.

## **Methods**

This research study sought to explore best practices of intervention strategies that support transitions of middle school students to high school as identified by middle school principals. To adequately collect and understand participant viewpoints, philosophies, and best practices of middle school principals, our research team employed a qualitative, grounded theory research design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Hatch, 2002). Developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory is a method used to produce descriptive theories about the specific observed phenomena from the views of participants instead of verifying and testing a priori theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researchers maintained that theories, or the abstract analytical schema of a process, should be grounded in data from the field, particularly the actions, exchanges, or processes through interrelating categories of information based on data collected (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

### **Sample Selection**

Our goal was to identify an information-rich sample of experienced middle school principals. Smith (2005) noted that transitional programs at the middle school level enhance confidence and heighten student achievement at the high school level. Since achievement loss is associated with transitioning students from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Alspaugh, 2010; Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013), it was important to identify successful schools with the highest student achievement scores.

The research team obtained the most recent (American College Testing) (ACT) Aspire data in reading and math assessed from eighth-grade students in public schools throughout Alabama since the eighth grade is traditionally the highest middle-level grade before the transition to high school. We scrutinized the ACT Aspire data to identify the state's top-performing eighth grade public middle schools. Drawing from the membership roster of the Alabama Association of Middle School Principals (AAMSP), the president of AAMSP, a school leadership expert familiar with middle schools and principals from across the state, then nominated 40 potential candidates to interview, all of whom had at least three years' experience as principals in their schools. We selected the first 11 middle school principals who agreed to participate from this list. These 11 principals represented a cross-section of schools, allowing us to obtain data representing multiple perspectives from diverse middle school populations. The lead author then visited each of the 11 school sites to conduct individual interviews with each participant and collect field notes and related documents.

### **Data Analysis**

Drawing from interview transcripts and document review, the research team employed three sequential phases of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998, 2008). We organized the textual data by labeling the phenomena and categorized these labels into progressively abstract and collective categories. Once coded data from each principal was complete, we re-analyzed all 11 transcripts and related documents to identify common themes among study participants. To increase the veracity of the data, we utilized a member checking process wherein each study participant reviewed the transcript from their interview before data analysis (Creswell, 2009). After the coding was complete, we also employed

a *peer debriefing* process to garner feedback from appropriately qualified peer researchers relative to themes and codes identified in the analysis (Creswell, 2013).

## Results

This section begins with a description of the 11 middle-level principals and information about their schools. Next, we present the development of the major thematic categories using open coding of the interview and document review data. We then turn to the axial coding process applied in grounded theory methodology that breaks the major thematic categories into sections presented in an axial coding model. The last section presents selective coding used to develop a set of propositions and a visual model representing the process associated with principals' best practices of helping students transition from middle school to high school.

### Participants and their Schools

In the tables below, we present data regarding the schools represented by each of the 11 principal participants, as well as selected demographics about the individual principals themselves. As a means of protecting identity, each study participant chose a pseudonym that corresponded with a person from history or pop culture. The first name will relate to the pseudonym of the principal, while the last name will serve as the pseudonym for the school.

The schools ranged in enrollment from about 500 students up to 1,100. Schools reported serving students from grade 6 through grade 9, with all but one school serving a configuration of grades 6-8. Percentages of minority students in these schools ranged from 3% to 70%, respectively. Percentages of students receiving free or reduced meal benefits ranged from 0% up to 68%. These data are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*School Demographics Summary*

Participating School	Student Enrollment	Grades Served	% Minority Students*	% Receiving Free/Reduced Meals
Lincoln Middle	1,142	6-8	34	23
Taylor Middle	808	6-8	35	28
Stewart Middle	825	7-8	47	23
Hamilton Middle	1,069	7-9	3	0
Presley Middle	913	6-8	70	68
Douglass Middle	894	6-8	34	29
Camelot Middle	503	6-8	16	8.5
Jefferson Middle	820	7-8	36	19
Kennedy Middle	703	7-8	46	54
Reagan Middle	853	6-8	15	15
Edison Middle	1,002	6-8	21	18

\*Minority populations represent American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Black/African American, and Hispanic.

Three administrators had earned Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degrees in Educational Leadership. Five participants had Education Specialist (Ed.S.) degrees in Educational Leadership,

while a master's was the highest degree for three of the principals. Eight participants were male and three were female. Descriptions of study participants are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Participant Summary Data*

Pseudonym	Highest Degree Attained*	Administrative Experience	Years at Current School
Abraham	EdD	11	4
James	Master's	16	11
Renee	EdD	14	6
Alexander	EdS	5.5	4
Elvis	EdS	15	6
Frederick	EdS	31	4
Guinevere	EdS	15	10
George	EdS	10	5
Jacqueline	EdD	13	7
Ronald	Master's	12	6
Thomas	Master's	13	7

*Note.* \*EdD = Educational doctorate; EdS = Educational Specialist; Taken from Haynes, L. P. (2017). *Intervention strategies that support middle school student transitions to high school: A grounded theory study of best practices identified by middle school principals*. (Doctoral dissertation). University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, Alabama.

## Open Coding and Emergent Themes

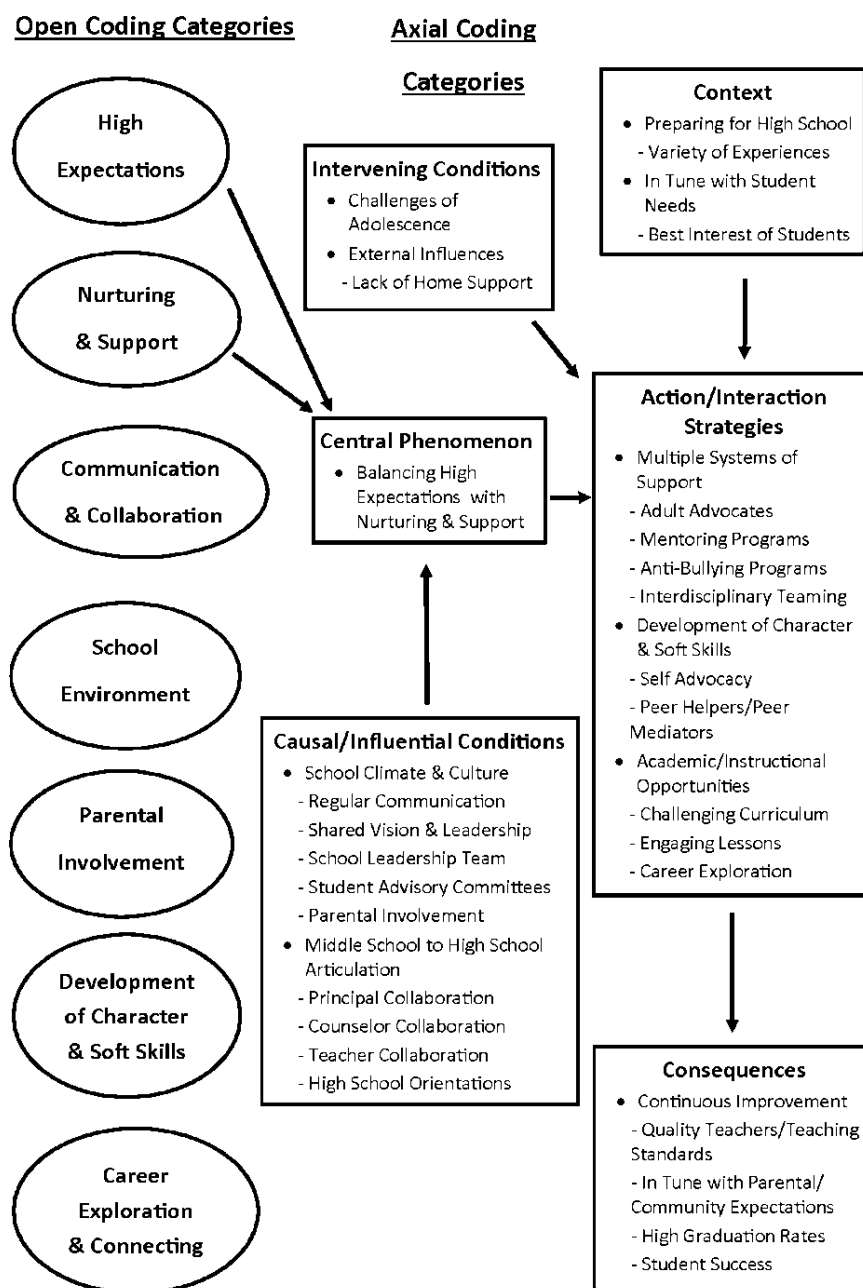
During the first level of data analysis, 92 concepts were coded consistently throughout the interview and document review process (see Haynes, 2017 for a complete listing of constructs identified in the first round of open coding). From these 92 constructs, the following seven categories or themes emerged: (1) High Expectations, (2) Nurturing and Support, (3) Communication and Collaboration, (4) School Environment, (5) Parental Involvement, (6) Development of Character and Soft Skills, and (7) Career Exploration/Connecting. In this section we briefly illustrate each of these emergent themes in turn (see Figure 1).

Each of the participants commented on the significance of maintaining high expectations among teachers and students as a key factor in successfully preparing middle school students for success at the high school level. One principal, Thomas, stated, "Getting our students ready for high school is a top priority, and I want teachers who will challenge them." All participants noted the importance of providing classes that focus on higher level learning skills and accelerated opportunities in math and other core academic subjects, in addition to competitive academic teams within their schools.

Offering honors classes in all core subject areas, including virtual classes that students can take from home, were also mentioned by principals, in addition to performing arts classes that require auditions. Jacqueline reported, "We're preparing our children academically for those

**Figure 1**

*Open Coding Categories with Axial Coding Model*



rigorous classes in high school,” Jacqueline also referenced a data notebook system for students called the Kennedy Playbook. Students use the playbook on a weekly basis to chart their individual data and set goals for personal achievement.

Hosting former middle school students who have moved on to high school in order to motivate and enlighten middle school students regarding the challenges and opportunities ahead



was an effective practice James has used at Taylor Middle School. And, Abraham stated, “We help teachers focus on the importance of knowing, teaching, and regularly accessing their own content standards, first and foremost, but then also knowing the progression [of these standards] at the next level.”

Ronald, along with several of the participants, discussed sending teachers to summer training programs that specialize in increasing classroom rigor, enhancing teaching strategies, and promoting hands-on and engaging lessons. Ronald said, “We have advanced classes designed to provide more rigor than the average middle school classes. Teachers are required to attend...training to help them provide more rigorous curriculum for students.” In sum, virtually all participants agreed that maintaining high expectations was the central component to successfully transitioning students from middle school to high school.

All principals discussed the value of nurturing, building relationships, and providing a strong support system for students throughout their middle school years. Participants described numerous methods they used to nurture and support their students. Seven of the 11 participants incorporated the middle school concept of interdisciplinary teaming at their schools. The remaining four principals acknowledged the value of assigning students to interdisciplinary teams. Abraham added that assigning students to teams maintains a supportive environment, assists teachers in building a deeper relationship with the students, and helps prevent students from “falling through the cracks.” Abraham continued, “One of the goals with teaming is to assure that every child has a meaningful relationship with an adult in the school and has a group of adults that are very familiar with that child.”

All participants also acknowledged the value of assuring that their students received continuous support academically and socially before, during, and after the school day. Each participant referred to using peer helpers or peer mediator groups to help other students. Alexander described a 25-minute advisory type class built into the schedule at his school where the teacher’s loop with the same students from sixth through eighth grade. At Hamilton Middle School, this advisory time is called “Academic Opportunities (AO). AO encompasses a lot of different things, but that is a good way for us to find out about what our kids need because we’re making deeper relationships with kids without the constraints of standards and assessments.”

Ronald summed up the significance of nurturing and supporting students throughout their middle school years as they make significant changes emotionally and psychologically. He stated, “One thing that I try to just drive into my teachers is relationships. The students have to know that you care...and it has to be genuine because students can see right through that.” All participants agreed that middle school students require a variety of support systems, encouragement, and caring, compassionate adult advocates who guide them through the challenges presented during the transition from middle school to high school.

Each participant voiced the importance of communication and collaboration. Principals discussed multiple areas where thorough communication practices play a meaningful role in helping students transition from middle school to high school. Communication is not only crucial within the walls of the middle school, but it is also imperative that interaction remains ongoing among the middle school and high school staffs, students, and parents. Furthermore, all participants cited collaboration as an essential part of the communication process. Frederick commented, “The high school principal and I talk all the time making sure that we’re teaching what our young people will need to be able to succeed at the high school.”

A strong consensus emerged among participants regarding the importance of utilizing a variety of methods of communication and collaboration. Email blasts, newsletters, web pages, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, in addition to School Cast, and Blackboard calls to parents were among the communication methods touched on by principals. Abraham stated that he sends out a weekly newsletter as a school in addition to newsletters specific to each interdisciplinary team.

All participants further noted the importance of maintaining a school website and keeping it updated, in addition to requiring each teacher to regularly send out information via websites, blogs, or email blasts. “We work hard to keep our website updated to where parents can go to the website and get the information that they need,” Abraham said. “If parents aren’t sure what the homework is, they can click on it and see it.”

Collaboration among core curricular subject areas, grade levels, the middle school staff, or between professionals at the middle school high schools is another form of communication. Nine of 11 participants discussed how they create common planning times for teachers to collaborate with subject area colleagues and/or interdisciplinary teams as professional learning communities (PLCs).

It was clear that participants recognized the importance of regular communication through a variety of methods, in addition to bringing teachers together in subject areas, departments, among grade levels, and interdisciplinary teams for regular collaborative communication and planning. Furthermore, each principal acknowledged the importance of middle and high school principals, assistant principals, counselors, and teachers working together to assure that middle school students experience a smooth transition to high school.

Study participants recognized that a positive school environment, also referenced as culture, is essential to the transitioning process. All principals noted the importance of maintaining a positive school climate and culture among both students and staff through service on leadership teams or providing a voice through student government associations. Overwhelmingly, principals shared their beliefs in providing leadership opportunities for faculty members and students to create a shared vision and establish annual goals for the school.

Another practice used by principals to enhance school environment was giving voice to the students. Alexander discussed his method of building a positive school environment by involving students on committees and by interacting with them in the hallways. “I have focus groups of kids that I bring in and I walk the hall nonstop and ask them ‘How’s it going? What’s your biggest stress?,’ and just network with them consistently.”

Each participant further noted the significance of assuring that parents have a voice. Frederick cited the significance of seeking feedback not just from staff and students, but also with parents. “We have an open-door policy from the standpoint our parents can contact us,” he said. “Positive community relationships are a must if you intend to grow.”

Moreover, each participant mentioned the value of promoting a positive school environment by connecting students through electives such as band, choir, drama, robotics, and broadcasting in addition to athletic teams and clubs. Alexander provided this bit of wisdom:

I don’t believe students, in today’s society, can learn at their best if they don’t feel as if they are a part of a positive community. Years ago, when schools were preparing students for factories, it was likely better for students to be in a rigid system. That just isn’t today’s story. Our students need to feel a part of something bigger, to feel as if their voice matters

as much as the next person, to feel valued in what they do, to feel as if the school is there to support them. I would contend that a school without a positive environment is not well suited for student growth.

In this quote, Alexander articulated the viewpoints of all the participants regarding the significance of creating a positive school environment.

Each participant acknowledged the important role parents play during the middle school to high school transitioning process. Principals revealed several areas where they involved parents, ranging from PTA/PTO groups and advisory committees to securing parent support in a variety of areas throughout the school. Thomas said, “Parents are always encouraged to volunteer. Our volunteers work in the main office or media center.” James also acknowledged enlisting a Dad Brigade each summer to paint around the building, clear brush, and complete other projects. James further shared how he recruited dads to volunteer at the school for supervision. He explained, “We have dads that walk the halls for us in the mornings before school, just as an extra set of eyes in the hallways, making sure everybody is where they are supposed to be.”

Several participants discussed how parent advisory committees provide feedback and brainstorm ideas to help improve the school. Elvis described a similar parent group at his school. “We have a parent advisory committee which meets every month,” Elvis commented. “Parents volunteer to come to the school to do reading, to help with specific events, whether it’s a banquet or an awards ceremony.” Each principal voiced the belief that parents make important contributions that not only positively impact students, but also provide support to the administration and teaching staff.

Each principal asserted that promoting positive character and soft skills was essential in equipping students to make the transition from middle school to high school. Nine of the 11 participants revealed how they emphasized character development, self-advocacy, positive decision-making skills, positive behaviors, anti-drug and alcohol awareness, and soft skills development through their advisory programs.

In spite of their efforts to promote positive character and soft skills, every principal acknowledged that instances of bullying increase during the middle school and early high school years. From encouraging students not to become bullies to taking a stand against bullying, each school had a method to address bullying. Along with having a hotline available to report bullying, Thomas stated how he and his staff address bullying issues before they start. “At the beginning of the year the administration and counselors meet with every student during P.E. (physical education),” he said. “In that meeting every student is required to sign a bullying contract with the consequences laid out.”

Participants shared how they combine building character with the teaching of soft skills, organization skills, study skills, coping skills, building relationships, setting goals, and becoming independent learners during their advisory in addition to bringing in guests for school-wide assemblies. “This past year we did a program called Rachel’s Challenge,” George stated. “It’s an assembly program where they (professional assembly group) come in and talk about being connected, standing up for your friends, and basically being a good peer.” Alexander’s students observe a weekly one-hour advisory time to teach character, soft skills, and self-responsibility. “We use that opportunity to prepare our kids for things that are outside of the curriculum: How to treat one another. What does GPA really mean?” he said. “What we do is we set up a whole lot of activities during that hour-long time to prepare them for those next stages in life.”

In agreement with the other participating principals, Frederick reiterated the need for middle school students to learn positive character traits, soft skills, making good choices, and self-advocacy, in addition to maintaining a balance between their extracurricular activities and their academic needs. “We stress the importance of developing good study habits,” Frederick said. “How do you juggle being at a ball game, staying out a little late, and then being in that chemistry class the next morning and expected to perform to your highest expectation?”

Providing opportunities for students to feel connected within the school and explore career possibilities were vital essentials of helping students maneuver the transition to high school according to all 11 middle school principals. Respondents talked about a variety of extracurricular activities available to help students connect; these included multiple elective classes, band and choir programs, career tech classes, clubs, in addition to introducing students to future career options.

“It is important for me to get each child connected to something at the middle school that they can continue to do at the high school,” Renee said. “We introduce them to the academy, band, choir, cross country, the I-Can Engineering Group for girls, Robotics Club, Science Olympiad, Coding Club, some type of activity.” Offering numerous elective opportunities in addition to bringing in parents and local business professionals to share their knowledge and expertise regarding a specific career, are approaches Frederick underscored. “We also get our counselors involved in connecting students to specialized areas,”

Each participant mentioned how their counselors work with the counselors from their receiving high school in the development of each eighth-grade student’s individualized four-year plan which allows students to prepare for high school by incorporating classes that will lead to a future college major and/or career opportunity. Another portion of connecting students to the high school noted by every principal was having a parents’ night at the receiving high school to highlight programs offered at the high school in addition to taking eighth grade students to the high school for a tour. Prior to those events, participants discussed inviting one of the high school counselors to the middle school during the spring semester to introduce students to the career tech and elective course offerings available at the high school.

The participants all cited the significance of providing opportunities for students to examine career options in addition to offering a plethora of electives and clubs to connect students with peers who share the same interests. Furthermore, helping students familiarize themselves with the expectations, course offerings, and physical layout of the high school further connects them and is vital to assuring a successful transition.

In summary, flowing from interview transcripts and document review, seven groups of responses emerged. After the principals revealed their best practices for transitioning students from middle school to high school, it was apparent the data had reached the saturation point. The seven categories that emerged from the open coding were as follows: (1) High Expectations, (2) Nurturing and Support, (3) Communication and Collaboration, (4) School Environment, (5) Parental Involvement, (6) Development of Character and Soft Skills, and (7) Career Exploration/Connecting.

## **Axial Coding**

Once the seven major themes were identified through the open coding process, axial coding was conducted to re-assemble the open coding data into a new paradigm model. Axial coding

involves identifying a single category as the central phenomenon and exploring its relationship to the other categories (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Interactions between these categories are displayed in the axial coding diagram shown in Figure 1. Themes discussed in the open coding section were relabeled into new axial coding categories to provide an improved structural illustration of the data in regard to how the various parts correlated with one another in relation to intervention strategies that support middle school transitions to high school. Each of the axial coding categories is presented and briefly described in this section.

In the first portion of this analysis, the subcategory of *Central Phenomenon* was identified in the axial coding to represent the balancing of high expectations with nurturing and support. According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), the central phenomenon is the central idea, occasion, or occurrence, about which a set of actions/interactions is directed at managing or handling, or to which the set is related. Each participant recognized the importance of maintaining high expectations throughout the process of transitioning students from middle school to high school. However, principals also revealed that the elevated student achievement that results from high academic expectations could not be accomplished without the balance of providing students with constant nurturing and support throughout their middle school years.

According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), the axial subcategory of *causal/influential conditions* is referred to as the events or incidents that lead to the occurrence or development of the phenomenon being studied. The following two categories emerged that correlated with causal/influential conditions: school climate and culture and middle school to high school articulation activities. Establishing a school culture that promotes collaboration among all stakeholders was identified by respondents as a vital ingredient to transitioning students to high school. The axial category of middle school to high school articulation activities included the collaborative communication that takes place between the middle and high school staffs.

The *Action/Interaction Strategies* subcategory included multiple systems of support, development of character and soft skills, and academic/instructional opportunities. The axial subcategory action/interaction strategies consist of things which individuals or groups do or say in response to a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). These actions/interactions are customarily a method of carrying out or responding to a phenomenon and how it exists under a specified set of conditions. Three axial categories of replies which typified particular actions which participants associated with the significance of balancing high expectations with nurturing and support included (a) multiple levels of supports, (b) character development, and (c) academic opportunities.

The axial subcategory of *Context* was represented by preparing for high school and in-tune with student needs. Strauss and Corbin (2008) defined the axial subcategory of context as a specific set of properties that pertain to a phenomenon. For instance, context can represent the specific conditions in which the action/interaction strategies are taken to manage, handle, carry out, and respond to a specific phenomenon. Two axial categories were identified which impacted the general conditions surrounding the participants' implementation of the action/interaction strategies; these were preparing students for high school and being in-tune with student needs.

The axial category of *Intervening Conditions* included challenges of adolescence and external influences. According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), the axial subcategory of intervening conditions is used to distinguish specific circumstances which serve to either expedite or obstruct the action strategies as those strategies are engaged to accomplish the central phenomenon. Two

axial categories emerged from participant responses that linked to intervening conditions. These categories included challenges of adolescence and external influences.

Finally, the subcategory of *Consequences* was comprised of the single category of continuous improvement, which included four sub-groups: quality teachers/teaching standards, in-tune with parental/community expectations, high graduation rates, and student success. According to Strauss and Corbin (2008), the axial subcategory of consequences includes the responses related to outcomes or results of the managed actions used to address the central phenomenon. While the desired outcome of the best practices implemented to support middle school transitions to high school is associated with managing the phenomenon of balancing high expectations with continuous nurturing and support, producing college-and career-ready students is the ultimate result.

Only one axial category, continuous improvement, was identified as related to consequences. However, the single category included four specific sub-groups which emerged from the responses of the participants. These sub-groups were quality teachers and teaching standards, in-tune with parental/community expectations, high graduation rates, and student success.

### **Selective Coding**

Selective coding is the final step in the grounded theory methodology. Strauss and Corbin (2008) described selective coding as the process of selecting the core category, validating the relationships, and filling in the categories that need further development. The selective coding process, which runs parallel with the axial coding process, is the final phase of data collection and assures that saturation has been achieved.

Identifying the central phenomenon was the first step of the selective coding process. Once the central phenomenon was selected, the other categories that had emerged during the axial coding process were interrelated and analyzed to develop a grounded theory. In every portion of the study, participants described similar experiences in their efforts to support middle school transitions to high school and the challenges they addressed during the transitioning process.

From that point, associations between the central phenomenon and the other categories that emerged during the axial coding process were evaluated. A visual model of the theory is shown in Figure 2. From the correlations developed during the axial coding process, the research team was able to create a relational storyline which was illustrated in the previous axial coding section.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore best practices of intervention strategies that support transitions of middle school students to high school as identified by successful veteran middle school principals in Alabama and to create a theoretical model to clarify the process. The outcomes of the grounded theory study presented the answer to the research questions posed to address strategies that support middle school student transitions to high school and coalesced into a theory of best practice to support middle school student transition. The central element of the theory lies in the importance of approaching middle school students with interventions that strike a balance between maintaining high expectations for students and developing interventions designed to nurture and support the students. The seven categories that

emerged and that comprise theory included (a) high expectations, (b) nurturing and support, (c) communication and collaboration, (d) school environment, (e) parental involvement, (f) development of character and soft skills, and (g) career exploration and connecting (see Figure 2).

### **Confirmation of Previous Research Findings**

Participants were successful middle school principals who acknowledged the importance of equipping their students for the challenges and expectations of high school while navigating the physiological transformation that accompanies adolescence and puberty (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2013; Wingfield et al., 2005). Each principal revealed a commitment to the central phenomenon of balancing the highest of expectations with continuous nurturing and support throughout the middle school years. The allegiance to supporting students through every step of the transition was demonstrated by each principal's belief that the experiences students encounter in middle school correlate with their continued success in high school and beyond (Wormeli, 2011).

Regarding the conceptual framework referenced earlier, Maslow (1943) noted the significance of an individual's desire to belong to or be a part of a group, which is an example of the fulfillment of man's desire to belong. As demonstrated in the literature review and from participant responses, successful middle schools provide a variety of effective interventions that meet the needs of adolescent students and build their sense of confidence to a level that allows higher order needs to take over.

Findings from this study confirmed those of previous researchers regarding the need for middle school leaders and teachers to demonstrate a passion for working with middle school students (NMSA, 2003), to commit to the value of parental involvement (Rice, 2001), and for principals to share leadership of the school (McEwan, 2003; Onorato, 2013). Further research findings were confirmed relative to the establishment of a positive school culture that is challenging yet safe and supportive (Sagnak, 2010; Wormeli, 2011). The findings of Akos and Galassi (2004) and of Uvass and McKeivitt (2013) were also confirmed and consistent with the contextual, causal/influential conditions, and intervening conditions acknowledged in the current study.

#### ***Research Question 1: How do middle school principals organize staff members in order to better transition students from middle school to high school?***

The first research question was addressed in study findings confirming how to best organize staff members to support middle school to high school transitioning. Study participants demonstrated a commitment to student-centered and developmentally responsive practices (Babbage, 2012; MacIver & Epstein, 1993; Pendergast & Bahr, 2005). Additional findings of Smyth and McInerney (2007) support the results that principals need to create learning communities that are characterized by their responsive practices and integrated into the lives of middle school students in order to adequately address challenges unique to them.

#### ***Research Question 2: What types of student-centered activities do principals plan and implement to successfully transition students from middle school to high school?***

This question was addressed regarding the types of student-centered activities preferred to help middle school students transition to high school. Study findings confirm the positions of

Mizelle (2005) and Smith (2005) who called for a variety of transitional programming to maximize student success, including anti-bullying curricula (Farmer et al., 2011).

***Research Question 3: What types of school-to-school articulation activities take place to ensure middle school to high school success?***

The importance of articulation activities between the sending middle schools and the receiving high schools was also confirmed through study findings. Mizelle (2005) stated that successful transitions rely on administrators, teachers, counselors, and parents at the middle and high school levels coming together to discuss expectations, policies, course, curriculum, and opportunities. Principals in this study described exactly this practice in their own school contexts. The practice of bringing staff members together to organize tour of the receiving high school for middle school students was also confirmed by the findings (Abell et al., 2006; Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013).

***Research Question 4: How do principals encourage parental involvement during the process of transitioning students from middle school to high school?***

Participants in the study again expressed consensus regarding the importance of parental involvement. Abell et al. (2006) articulated the importance of getting feedback from both students and parents prior to and following the transition to high school in order to evaluate the consistency, value, and impact of transition programming. Additional findings by Ingels et al. (2002) cited parental involvement among key ingredients to promoting effective transitions.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The limitations for the study were inherent in the fact that this was a qualitative study. The lead author of this article was the sole instrument for data collection. Analysis and generalizations to a wider population are not possible. Delimitations included the fact that the study focused only on the best practices of a selected number of successful middle school principals. This study does not include any rural areas, nor does the study include many schools that are not relatively homogeneous in wealth and ethnicity. As a result, data were generalized to the group being studied. Another delimitation existed because the researchers focused only on middle school principals and did not include high school principals in the design. Such research could have provided different results if analyzed from the perspectives of principals at the high school level. The research team acknowledges that by accepting only the first 11 principals who responded to the invitation to participate in the study may also introduce some limitations to the research design, analysis of data, and conclusions drawn from the findings.

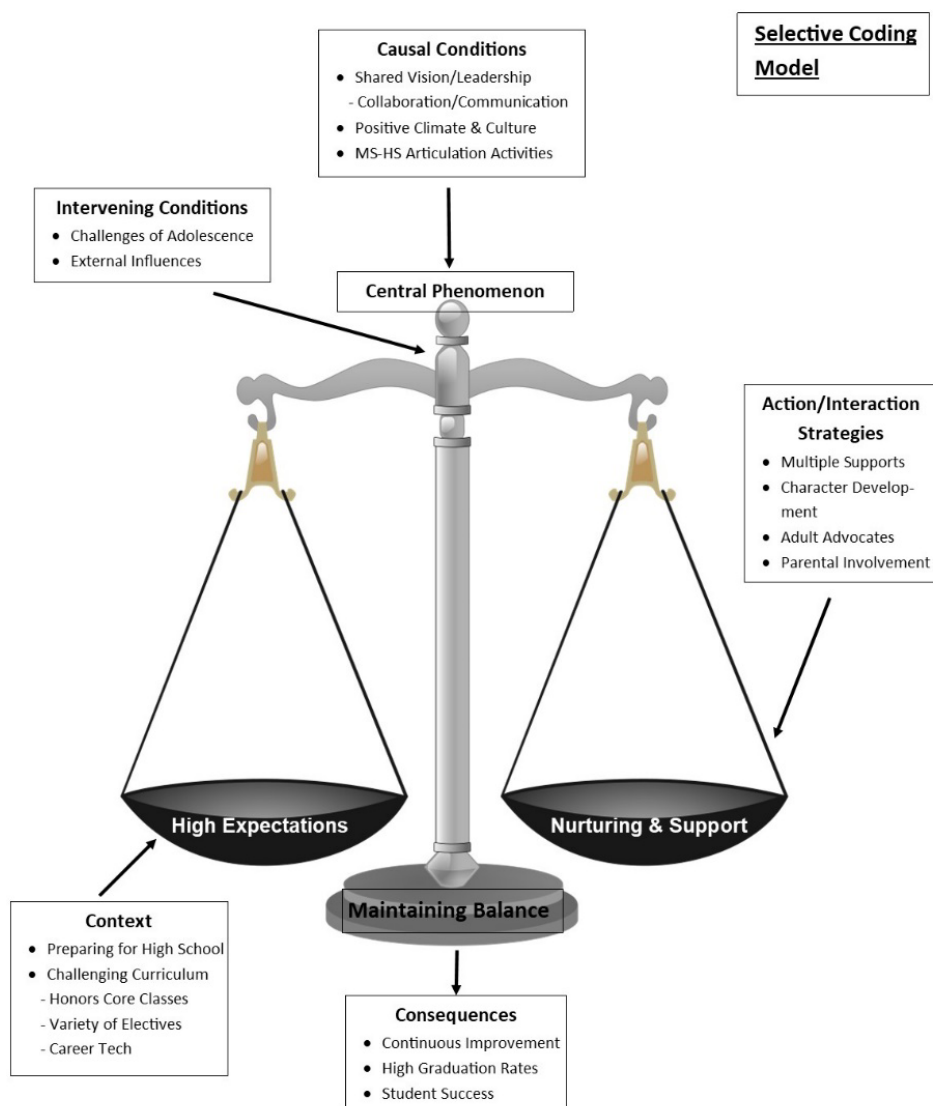
### **Implications for Professional Best Practice**

During this grounded theory study, through the stages of open coding, the creation of an axial coding model, selective coding, and theory building, we constructed a theory along with a set of propositions regarding the intervention strategies principals use in helping students make the transition from middle school to high school. The resulting theory and set of propositions regarding the best practices identified by experienced and successful middle school principals and



**Figure 2**

*Theoretical Model for Strategies that Support Middle School Students' Transitions to High School*



how they support students throughout the transition process was embedded in the context, the causal conditions, the intervening conditions, the action/interaction strategies, and consequences model.

Findings from this grounded theory study could positively impact the methods principals implement to transition middle school students to high school. Participating principals noted the importance of maintaining high expectations while providing students with continuous nurturing and support. These principals built positive school environments through the promotion of a shared vision based upon regular collaboration among all stakeholders, which included teachers, parents, and students. Participating principals also affirmed the value of exposing students to rigorous academic classes, a variety of career exploration and elective course offerings interwoven with opportunities to teach positive character, soft skills, and self-advocacy.

Superintendents and school district leaders may also profit from the findings of this research study. While the schools represented in the study ranged from financially challenged to affluent, most of the best practices identified in the study could be replicated with little or no cost to the district. Providing academic assistance in addition to assuring every student has an adult advocate are further best practices that could be incorporated without the need for additional funding.

Although incorporating the middle school concept, complete with the inclusion of interdisciplinary teams, would require hiring more teachers at some schools, innovative scheduling practices would permit opportunities for teachers to still maintain common planning times for collaborative planning of lessons, common assessments, reviewing of data, and chances to mentor new teachers. Furthermore, district professional development programs should be implemented to address transitioning students, help teachers to better understand the needs of adolescent students, demonstrate how to incorporate lessons that promote student engagement, and show teachers and administrators how to incorporate lessons that teach character and self-advocacy.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This qualitative grounded theory study examined the intervention strategies and best practices of 11 Alabama middle school principals in helping students transition from middle school to high school. Since findings from this study potentially provide insights for future studies, researchers may wish to expand the scope of participant perspectives and conduct a larger study that includes not only principals, but also teachers, students, and parents. High school principals could also be included in a future study. It would be beneficial to learn what an expanded study with greater diversity would reveal regarding the perceptions and experiences of the additional stakeholders. Another replication of this study could include schools at the lower end of the performance scale, not just the top performing schools.

A final suggestion would be to conduct a study with middle school principals in other states since, as noted during the literature review there is an apparent gap in the empirical research literature regarding the process of supporting students in their transition from middle school to high school (Uvaas & McKevitt, 2013). Further, educational researchers may benefit by examining the impact of the middle school philosophy and/or the benefits of interdisciplinary teaming on the middle school to high school transition.

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## **ANALYZING THE IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP STYLES ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN ALABAMA'S RURAL HIGH SCHOOLS**

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed to analyze leadership styles to discover which leadership style had the most significant positive and negative impact on student academic achievement in rural high schools in Alabama. This study attempted to reveal if a significant difference in student academic achievement existed based on the school leader's leadership style, years of leadership, and gender. The independent variables were leadership style, years of experience, and gender. The dependent variable was student academic achievement. The survey was distributed to 24 superintendents and 57 principals in rural high schools and rural school systems in Alabama. The survey consisted of Likert-style questions ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) regarding leadership style and three demographic questions. Employing a One-Way ANOVA and Two-Way ANOVA to analyze the research questions, the results revealed there was a significant difference in the means between student academic achievement and leadership style. Furthermore, results revealed no significant difference in student academic achievement when compared to leadership styles, years of experience, and gender. Transformational leadership had the highest potential for impacting student academic achievement and leaders should be professionally trained to utilize this style.

*Keywords:* leadership styles, achievement, rural schools, transformational leadership

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## **Introduction**

School leadership is crucial for a school's overall operation. Equally important is building a culture of academic success and rigor (Southern Cross University, 2019). Alabama must report academic progress annually in response to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). According to the 2018-2019 state report card data, as reported by the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE), the score for academic achievement for all Alabama high school students was 66.15%. A score of 53.02% was earned specifically by students categorized as rural, and a score of 79.28% by non-rural students (ALSDE, 2021). These scores indicate a discrepancy in the achievement of rural students versus their non-rural peers. If the goal is to increase rural students' academic achievement scores, the factors that impact achievement scores must be explored.

Much research exists about teachers' and educational program's impact upon achievement, but these are not the only factors that impact achievement. The people that lead schools and school systems are employed to act in their best interest. So, it becomes necessary to determine if a district and school leaders positively impact student academic achievement. If they do, training professionals can establish professional development opportunities to facilitate future leaders in impacting the rural schools they oversee.

## **Background of the Study**

Student academic achievement has always been at the forefront of public education. At its inception, public education in the United States began by teaching students to read the Bible, "bridge social gaps, and overcome poverty" (Chen, 2021). However, statistics do not measure these qualities, each aligned with academic achievement at the time. Academic achievement mirrors the pertinent qualities. In today's public education, the student's ability to perform at a high level in reading and mathematics determines student academic achievement scores. Although all content areas are important, reading and mathematics tend to be the focus on achievement.

The legislation established by the U.S. Department of Education's (2015) Every Student Succeeds Act (USDE-ESSA) dictates current trends. According to the USDE, ESSA emphasizes college and careers and state accountability. Specifically, it states that all students be taught the academic standards necessary to prepare them to succeed in life after their educational journey concludes. Additionally, it states that accountability must be expected to raise the outcomes of the lowest-performing schools.

Since 2015, states must publicly account for student academic achievement scores through a report card. Although the states have autonomy on the report card format, Alabama chose to use an A-F format that aligns with a student's report card to make it easier to understand. In an article about the report card, the Alabama State School Superintendent, Dr. Eric Mackey, informed the public the report cards are a tool to "jump-start conversations about what is working in public schools as well as identifying areas that may need support and additional resources" (Alabama News Network Staff, 2019).

Due to the report cards being in effect since 2015, school leaders have adapted to the new accountability measures. In high schools, the accountability score for student academic achievement is from the composite scores of the ACT Aspire and the Alabama Alternate Assessment. Each year, the ALSDE administers these tests to a new batch of students, and every



year a new score is given to the high school and the school system. The system's score reflects the student academic achievement scores at all districts, whereas the high school's score reflects the students they teach. If a school or system performs poorly on their accountability score, the ALSDE places them on monitoring and provides additional resources to improve their academic achievement score. If schools and school systems are held accountable for student academic achievement scores, it becomes necessary to identify factors that increase them.

Decades of research exist to understand factors that affect student achievement. Researchers can find correlational studies about poverty, motivation, school climate, teacher effectiveness, etc. However, the literature is scarce when researching studies involving the school leader's leadership style and its impact on student achievement. According to Jambo and Hongde (2019), school leaders face many challenges in determining their leadership style and increasing their students' academic achievement scores. Leadership styles are not clear-cut and are as vast as the factors influencing student achievement. Regardless of the spectrum of leadership, some leaders make all decisions, some collaborate with a team, and some give autonomy to subordinates to make decisions.

When developing this research study, the researcher considered many leadership styles. From the beginning, it was apparent that leadership styles are abundant and are classified based on different factors. However, although vast in number, they share similarities to Avolio and Bass's full-range leadership theory created in 1994. Their work has led to many studies researching leadership values, traits, and perceptions (Salter et al., 2014). Their theory identifies three leadership styles: transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire. This study utilized these three styles to determine relationships between leadership styles and student academic achievement. This study assumed that educational leadership impacted student academic achievement; specifically, the educational leader's leadership style had an effect that can be measured using quantitative research. This study also assumed that the leader's gender and years of leadership experience impacted student achievement.

### **Statement of the Problem/Purpose of the Study**

Research exists concerning teachers and resources' impact on achievement; however, little research pertains to the school leader's leadership style. A leader, the superintendent, oversees each school system, and a leader, the principal, oversees each school. Because leaders lead in various ways, leadership styles and their influence on academic achievement become an important equalizing factor. "Leadership style is a critical factor in organizational performance and effectiveness" (Machumu & Kaitila, 2014, p. 54).

Therefore, this study aimed to analyze leadership styles to discover which leadership style had the most significant positive and negative impact on student academic achievement in rural high schools in Alabama. This study examined three styles – transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire. Knowing that school leadership impacts student academic achievement is only a portion of the purpose. Which leadership style impacts student academic achievement? When researching leadership styles, the list can be comprehensive and defined based upon the investigator's preference. This study also aimed to analyze gender and the leader's experience to discover if they had an impact on student academic achievement.

## **Significance of the Study**

This study addressed the impact that leadership styles, the leader's gender, and the leader's years of experience had on student academic achievement in Alabama. This study is significant because, before 2021, very little research addresses these items in rural high schools. Consider the following: suppose the research indicates a significant difference between leadership styles and their effect on Alabama's rural high school student achievement. In that case, leadership development in the area with the highest positive impact could improve all Alabama rural school systems' achievement scores, eliminating funding and staffing inequality factors. According to Marzano and Walters (2005), school leadership positively impacted student achievement. Amin et al. (2018) stated that "research has consistently acknowledged and emphasized the critical role played by educational leaders in improving the rural high school educational system and the entire academic realm. Improving leadership development will influence the school system, the schools, the staff, and the students while paving the way for increased achievement outcomes.

## **Theoretical Foundation and Review of the Literature**

Social Cognitive Theory is grounded in the understanding that learners, or students, can be influenced by the individual, their environment, and their behavior. External factors play a pivotal role in a learner's cognitive development (WGU, 2020). The foundation for the Social Cognitive Theory was developed in the 1960s by Bandura, and he explained how people control their behavior to achieve long-term goals (LaMorte, 2019). Controlling one's behavior to achieve long-term goals was the basis for this study. If school leadership impacts student academic achievement, and if the goal is to increase academic success for the students in their school, then leaders should develop behaviors that provide every opportunity to achieve success. School leaders that adapt their leadership style to correlate to the area with the best chance for increased performance will have a higher statistical chance to impact student achievement scores positively.

Bass and Avolio's Full-Range Leadership Theory (see Figure 1 below) classifies three types of leadership (Romascanu et al., 2017). The three leadership classifications are transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire. Each leadership style has strengths and weaknesses and has been the topic of many research studies. Transformational leadership increases the capacities of those within the school, empowers others to perform above expectations, and creates a centralized vision to strive toward (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). Transactional leadership emphasizes a solid centralized authority, obedience, and leadership control (Du et al., 2020). Laissez-faire allows pure autonomy by giving little direction toward task completion to enable subordinates to utilize their strengths (Nasir et al., 2013).

## **Student Achievement**

Over many decades, academic achievement has been a research topic for researchers seeking to determine its correlation to different influences. Studies about student achievement have steadily increased as researchers determine the factors that can raise scores. Christensen (2010) attributes a new emphasis on academic scores to the No Child Left Behind educational reform. His

**Figure 1**

*Avolio and Bass Full-Range Leadership Model*



mixed-method study concluded that transformational and transactional leaders are likelier to change their leadership methods to enhance student achievement. Although laissez-faire leaders were in their position the longest, he stated they were more resistant to change, hindering progress.

Educational reform, especially in student academic achievement, requires changing old mindsets and philosophies to meet the needs of the current learner. Student academic achievement has been on the minds of researchers and education specialists since schools' inception. Many factors play a role in influencing how well a student performs academically, but at the core are socialization and the interactions between people. According to LaMorte (2019), Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory states that learning occurs between people, environment interactions, and behaviors. His theory focuses on the ways social influence impacts people. Leaders within schools, and school systems have daily interactions with students and teachers, so, in theory, those social interactions would impact student achievement.

Moore (2019) conducted a literature review about the history of student academic achievement. This review pointed out that attitude, motivation, and self-control influence academic achievement in elementary schools. Although these factors influence achievement, any academic setback the student encounters would not specifically define an adverse outcome in academic achievement. A separate study about international graduate students concluded that language proficiency, academic preparation, and demographics impact academic scores (Ren and Hagedorn, 2012). Furthermore, intrinsic motivation and expectations significantly influence graduate students in college. Once students enter graduate programs, their desire to achieve personal goals guides their achievements beyond outside influence.

In a contrasting study, Bayat and Salehiniya (2019) found that personal demographics had little influence on academic achievement in college students; however, they confirmed that external and internal motivation played a pivotal role. The student's gender had no impact on academic achievement, nor did their educational status. The primary influence on academic achievement scores was the success they obtained in education. If college students have encountered success in the past, their academic achievement was higher than those who

experienced failures. Similarly, social-emotional and intrinsic motivational factors greatly influenced academic achievement in the literature about college students (Van der Zanden et al., 2018). The primary intrinsic motivation related to achievement was the student's study skills. Students who developed positive study skills were organized, persistent in their preparation, and scored higher in achievement scores.

Other notable elements in improving academic achievement, especially for rural schools, are ensuring the student's basic needs are met and the professional development of teachers. Chrisp (2019) stated that academic achievement increased when schools addressed equitable access to nutrition, educational resources, and social-emotional factors. Also, because students spend most of their educational experience within the classroom, teacher capacity had arguably the most influence on growing academic success. To adequately build teacher capacity is providing the professional development necessary to meet all students' needs. Professional development is key to ensure teachers utilize current practices because education is not a "one-size-fits-all" (p. 4).

Although much research exists to provide clues into factors that influence students' academic success, research about leadership styles is scarce, and rural leadership analysis is nearly non-existent. Niedermeyer (2003) pointed to this by explaining "little empirical data" (p. 7) that assesses a school leader's leadership style compared to student achievement. Preston and Barnes (2017) noted that although rural schools are prevalent throughout the country and a discrepancy between achievement between rural and urban students exists, there is an inadequate amount of research available about rural school leadership. Analyzing leadership styles is important because school leadership positively impacts student achievement (Marzano & Walters, 2005). This research study will fill the gap between student academic achievement and leadership styles within rural high schools in Alabama. Based on the ACT Aspire, and the Alabama Alternative Assessment (AAA) composite data, student academic achievement scores from the ALSDE 2018-2019 report card for each defined rural school district and the rural high schools within those districts were gathered and analyzed.

## **Leadership Styles**

Lewin is widely known as the founder of social psychology (Carlin, 2019). Lewin's research to identify leadership styles has led to many studies that go well beyond the first three he identified in the 1930s: democratic, authoritarian, and laissez-faire. Research about each style's importance in an organization has also grown along with expanding the number of leadership styles. According to Avolio and Bass (1998), determining leadership styles and training professionals to use them effectively is essential because leadership goes beyond the relationship between leaders and subordinates. "Full-range leadership" (p. 394) includes transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire. Each style has positive and negative attributes; however, a leader reaching their full potential becomes a challenge without the appropriate training. Avolio and Bass's full-range leadership model is a continuum of leadership styles that transition from laissez-faire on one end to transformational on the other. It also reflects a leader's effectiveness through their activity or passivity (Vilhauer, 2018).

Leadership is a practice that influences and develops others for a purpose, and leadership styles improve people and programs within schools and school systems (Gyasi et al., 2016). This quantitative research study sought to examine the effect of leadership styles on academic performance in junior high schools in Ghana. A survey determined the headmaster's effectiveness

as the leader within those schools. The survey indicated that 45.6% of respondents strongly believe that the leader always helps people grow in their job, 53.2% strongly believe that the leader constantly challenges norms to achieve results, and 51.0% agreed they are satisfied with their headmaster's style of leadership. The study concluded that principals lacking knowledge and leadership skills do not know if they influence their schools. Also, the study revealed that leadership style affects academic performance. The effect could be positive or negative, but style influences the outcome.

Another study analyzed the relationships between transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles and school culture from the viewpoint of the faculty (Martin, 2009). The School Culture Survey included a random sampling of 250 teachers from 50 elementary, middle, and high schools in five school districts in Georgia. The survey measured collaborative leadership, teacher collaboration, unity of purpose, professional development, collegial support, and learning partnership. The study revealed that a statistically significant relationship existed between the leadership styles of principals and school culture. For each factor measured, transformational leadership style had a positive relationship. Transactional leadership style had a positive relationship in contingent reward. Contrastingly, laissez-faire leadership style had a negative relationship in each factor measured. The study concluded that the principal's leadership style does influence the school's culture. A principal exhibiting a transformational leadership style is directly related to the school having a positive culture. A principal showing a laissez-faire leadership style is directly related to the school having an unfavorable culture.

Allen (2010) conducted a quantitative study to analyze Bass's full-range leadership model with each style's relationship with communication. Allen's research used a Likert-style survey and a regression analysis to determine relationships between transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles and communication. The study concluded that each leadership style has its impact on communication. Transactional leadership style had a positive and significant influence, laissez-faire leadership style had a negative and significant effect, and transformational leadership style leads to the most active listeners.

As these studies indicate, a leader's leadership style directly influences those they oversee. However, how does one determine their leadership style, and why is it essential to understand one's style? Determining leadership style is necessary because when leaders know their style, they can build a climate that provides positive morale and higher expectations (Bulach et al., 2006). In their study, the researchers developed a survey instrument to identify 49 behaviors related to a principal's leadership style. They concluded that their tool is beneficial to help determine leadership traits to develop professional development plans. Determining leadership styles and utilizing tools to align a style to the person had been a daunting task.

In a confirming study, Smith et al. (2017) concluded that leaders who know their style and receive adequate training about other leadership style benefit by leading more efficiently and effectively. In turn, this knowledge serves to help those under their leadership. This study sought to determine if online college instructors utilized a particular leadership style to become more effective. They concluded that a single style would not fit all situations and leaders need to determine the style that works for them to help the students they oversee.

Leadership styles are vast and can be measured to determine their influence leading to various outcomes. The remainder of this literature review will focus on the literature associated

with the three leadership styles outlined by Avolio and Bass' full-range leadership model. This study focused on transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles and their relationship to rural high school students' academic achievement.

### **Transformational Leadership Style**

Bass (1999) described transformational leadership as the leader's ability to guide followers from engaging in their self-interests toward achievement and the organization's success. Transformational leaders are not all the same, and different factors influence their leadership abilities. Bass indicated that female leaders tend to be more transformational in studies involving a leader's gender. Studies have shown that a "greater satisfaction" (p. 17) exists in those led by these female leaders. He also explains that previous studies are male-dominated, and more information is needed on gender to determine if these findings are consistent with the literature.

Leaders that utilize the transformational leadership style motivate those around them to perform at higher levels than their current state (Avolio & Bass, 1998). A successful transformational leader must align the followers' self-interests with the organization. Perhaps the most profound conclusion made by Avolio and Bass (1998) was that leadership training programs must focus on developing leadership styles and ways to utilize the styles to benefit others. Knowing the characteristics of a transformational leader is only a portion of the work; learning how to transform those in the organization is the other. Jiang and Lu (2020) conducted a literature review about transformational leadership style and empathy in making school decisions. They explain that this type of leadership is the most influential because of its ability to increase proficiency. Furthermore, they indicate that the most effective transformational leaders should adopt and utilize the best traits from other leadership styles to accomplish their goals. After researching the literature, they arrived at several conclusions. They concluded that role and mission shape the leader's emotional experiences, the leader's emotional abilities improve their communication and relationships with their subordinates, and the leader's supportive and collaborative behaviors positively affect the subordinate's emotions.

Decades of research about the benefits of the transformational leadership style within organizations and schools exist; however, the results are mixed. Studies performed at the elementary school level are more abundant and have involved multiple data sets that compare this style to various outcomes. Luft (2012) researched the impact a transformational principal has on school climate and teacher efficacy. The study utilized a teacher perception survey about school climate and teacher empowerment. A pre-test and post-test of Bandura's Scale of Teacher Efficacy and Organizational Health Inventory-Elementary measured efficacy, and the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) determined the principal's leadership style. Results indicated that transformational leadership had no impact on teacher efficacy; however, transformational leadership slightly affected a healthy school climate, decision-making, and job satisfaction. This study concluded that the data did not support the transformational leadership style's ability to improve a school's climate.

In a study involving elementary schools, school climate, and student achievement, Allen et al. (2015) had a contradictory conclusion. They surveyed six principals in southeast Texas using the MLQ-5X to determine leadership style, the Self-Care Inventory-Revised to assess school climate, and the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) to determine math achievement. Using the one-way ANOVA model with random effects, the data indicated a significant positive relationship between style and school climate. The data revealed

that no relationship existed between style and math achievement. They concluded that although a relationship exists between the transformational leadership style and school climate, which supports that a leader impacts climate, no relationship exists between this style and math achievement, which indicates that a leader has no impact on student achievement.

Sun et al. (2017) had a similar conclusion finding that transformational leadership positively affected student achievement. Their purpose was to analyze over two decades of studies to determine the antecedents to transformational leadership explicitly focusing on the educational realm. The examined studies utilized various methodologies to derive their conclusions while identifying three antecedents: "school leaders' internal qualities, organizational factors, and leaders' colleagues' characteristics" (p.8). The school leaders' internal qualities consisted of self-efficacy, values, emotional intelligence, traits, and cognitive capacities. After a review of the literature, they concluded that self-efficacy is the most impactful antecedent. Additionally, leadership training programs are vital to prepare leaders with the skills necessary to be effective and enhance their inner confidence and decision-making ability.

A study was performed to determine the relationship between transformational leadership and teacher motivation based on the teachers' demographic variables. The study (Serin & Akkaya, 2020) determined if teachers' perceptions of transformational leadership of their principal were significant to gender and working time. Four hundred eighteen teachers located in Turkey participated in the survey. Analysis of the data included the mean, frequency, independent groups t-test, MANOVA, and canonical correlation. The study indicated that female teachers have a high level of perception of their principals. Female teachers are more motivated, and perception changed when employment was for longer lengths. The longer a teacher was at a specific school, the higher their perception of the principal to provide vision and inspiration.

Kilicoglu (2018) explored the perception of teachers concerning democratic leadership and distributed leadership. Using stratified sampling and a correlational research design, 462 high school teachers participated. The Northouse Leadership Style Questionnaire measured leadership styles, while Hulpia Distributed Leadership Inventory measured functions and characteristics of the leadership team. The data analysis indicated a moderate perception of democratic leadership, and support and supervision led the team's functions. The study concluded that in schools where democratic leadership was present, collaboration, distribution of leadership, and teacher perception of the team dynamics had the most significant correlational relationships.

### **Transactional Leadership Style**

The essential theme of the transactional leadership style is that the leader makes others perform their duties by maintaining a "strict hierarchical structure" (Peker et al., 2018, p. 152). These leaders tend to operate with the mindset of reward versus corrective actions based on their performance levels (Avolio & Bass, 1998). Research studies on this leadership style have had mixed results; however, many conclude that this leadership style negatively affects people. Applying this to an educational context, one can hypothesize that when teachers are unhappy and unmotivated, the result can lead to academic decline, impacting student achievement.

Those serving under a transactional leader are affected at a higher psychological rate when they constantly attempt to please leadership (Hongyan et al., 2017). In this study involving sampling 391 manufacturing workers in China, a survey determined the relationship between transactional leadership and deviant workplace behaviors exhibited by employees. The survey was

analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha (0.90) and revealed that this leadership style positively correlated with employees' deviant workplace behaviors. Specifically, the study concluded that transactional leadership not only had a positive correlation, but this style also increased employees' negative behaviors.

Data also supports that this type of leadership leads to negative consequences from subordinates' performance because the ability to showcase their strengths was hindered (Wang et al., 2019). This study measured the extent to which transactional leadership affects the task performance of subordinates. They hypothesized that a negative relationship between transactional leadership and subordinates' task performance would exist. Data supported a significant negative relationship between transactional leadership and task performance ( $r = -0.22$ ). They concluded that transactional leadership had a negative relationship with the task performance of subordinates. When employees do not believe they have the autonomy to choose their direction to complete tasks, productivity suffers. Those wanting more freedom but working under a transactional leader will perform tasks to a lesser degree.

Peker et al. (2018) conducted a study that confirmed teachers' transactional leadership style's unfavorable effect. The study examined the relationship between leadership styles and the factors that affect teachers' experiences negatively. Factors analyzed were gender, seniority, and teacher happiness. The researchers provided a survey of 395 elementary school teachers in Turkey. A t-test determined if gender played a difference, and the results indicated that gender was significant in both males and females. A one-way ANOVA was used to determine if seniority made a difference. The result indicated that seniority was significant, especially in young teachers' commitment to the profession. A correlation analysis determined the relationship between leadership style and teacher happiness, and a positive correlation existed. This positive relationship indicated that more barriers existed for teachers working under a principal with the transactional leadership style. This study derived two significant conclusions. First, gender and the lack of seniority significantly influenced the factors that affect teachers. These influences are negative and hurt teachers' abilities to perform their duties. Second, the transactional leadership style diminished the happiness of teachers. Work output decreases when teachers are unhappy in their teaching position.

Although the previous studies indicate that transactional leadership has negative influences, many studies prove a positive correlation between this style and the correct context or setting. The transactional leadership style is the strongest when the leader gives clear directives to those they oversee. In a research study to analyze principals' leadership styles and their impact on low socioeconomic schools, Niedermeyer (2003) concluded that transactional leadership had the most significant influence on student achievement in elementary schools.

School leaders that utilize the transactional leadership style are more task-oriented and directly affect followers' behaviors (Smith, 2011). This study aimed to determine how often school leaders utilize this leadership style using a qualitative methodology. After transcribing interviews, the study concluded that all participants utilized the transactional leadership style. The participants' responses indicated they used transactional leadership because "they felt compelled to address managerial tasks" (p. 187). The conclusion supported the study's purpose because they found that transactional leaders are more task-oriented.

Nazim and Mahmood (2016) expanded on this finding in their research. They concluded that transactional leadership correlated with college teachers' job satisfaction when the leader



clearly defined their roles. Their study sought to examine the relationship between principals' leadership styles and the job satisfaction of college teachers. They conducted survey research using a random sampling of 43 colleges with five teachers representing each college. They measured the frequency of leadership styles and analyzed their job satisfaction using Pearson's  $r$  and a  $t$ -test. The results revealed a significant positive relationship between the transactional leadership style and job satisfaction ( $r = 0.259$ ). College teachers were more satisfied with their role if their supervisors defined job responsibilities and expectations.

### **Laissez-faire Leadership Style**

Nasir et al. (2013) described this leadership style as a "hands-off" (p. 5) approach because the leader provides minimal direction and oversight. Furthermore, Carlin (2019) describes this leadership style as allowing the group to have the freedom to complete a task using their completion methods. The laissez-faire leadership style has positive attributes and has a place in leadership. In a study by Beggs (2008) to examine the frequency of laissez-faire leadership in outdoor college programs, he concluded this leadership style was the most used. In this quantitative study, the researcher surveyed a purposeful sampling of 113 outdoor collegiate program leaders using the MLQ-5X to determine leadership styles. A repeated-measures ANOVA computed the interactions between leadership styles among the participants. The results of this study indicated that while the laissez-faire leadership style was used the most by these professionals, no reference to the effectiveness of using this leadership style was present.

In a study conducted on high school agricultural leaders, the laissez-faire leadership style was the least used because it was not preferred (Jones & Rudd, 2008). Their study determined the frequency of leadership styles and if gender or ethnicity contributed. Of the 56 respondents, the mean score of those using the laissez-faire leadership style was 0.88. In contrast, those using the transformational leadership style had a mean score of 3.28, and those using the transactional leadership style had a mean score of 2.24. They found that the scores were indicative of the overall respondents, with gender and ethnicity playing no role in the outcome of the scores. The study indicated that the laissez-faire leadership style was the least used, and the researchers comment that any other leadership style should be considered over this style when leading schools.

Although laissez-faire leadership is present in some leaders, most research conducted in schools and organizations concludes it is inefficient, leads to lower performance, and increases organizational conflict. These leaders operate through absence or avoidance and tend to be ineffective because they seem apathetic and fail to empower others (Avolio & Bass, 1998). Furthermore, leaders who utilize this leadership style avoid difficult decisions and conversations, resulting in poor performance and motivation (VonBergen, 2012).

In a study to determine which leadership style increased employee motivation, Chaundry and Javed (2012) explained that the laissez-faire leadership style has no association with motivation based upon experience, gender, or marital status. They measured the experience, motivation, gender, and marital status of 278 participants. The Pearson correlation determined the relationship between leadership style and motivation. They concluded that the laissez-faire leadership style had a significant relationship with motivation, albeit negatively. Employees are more motivated when given direction and rewarded for completed work and are less motivated when the leader is passive or avoidant.

So, where does laissez-faire leadership fit into schools? The literature is scarce; however, one study determined its impact on high school student's academic performance (Oyugi & Gogo, 2018). This study employed a descriptive research design and a correlational design of 35 principals, 340 teachers, and 1,400 students. After surveying all participants, Pearson's correlation measured the strength and direction of relationships between democratic, autocratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles to high school student academic performance. Democratic and autocratic styles positively influenced student achievement; however, the laissez-faire leadership style had a moderate-negative influence ( $r = -0.435$ ). This score indicates that this style strongly and negatively impacts academic achievement. The researchers conclude their study by stating that when the school leader is naturally laissez-faire by nature, students' "academic performance decreases" (p. 27). As one can infer from the research studies described above, the laissez-faire leadership style can lead to more negative outcomes for those serving under this type of leader if the leader is ineffective at motivating others to operate in this type of format.

## **Methods**

This study analyzed multiple factors that involve Alabama's rural high school students. First, the study determined rurality as the basis of the quantitative research. Rural was defined, which allowed a precise and consistent dataset involving rural school systems and high schools. Second, studies about student academic achievement suggested that the leader's gender and years of experience affected scores. Third, research obtained about transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles suggested that each impacts student academic achievement scores in rural high schools. Research studies have mixed conclusions about how leadership styles affect student achievement scores but have made many correlations related to other school factors (i.e., climate, motivation, job performance, etc.). It is important to note that although previous studies have researched leadership styles and academic achievement, leadership styles and their relationship to rural high schools are scarce at best. This study hypothesized that leadership styles, the leader's gender, and the leader's years of leadership experience impacted rural high school student achievement.

This quantitative study analyzed the results of three questions:

- RQ1. What difference, if any, exists in student achievement scores in Alabama's rural high schools based on the school leader's leadership style?
- RQ2. What interaction occurs between leadership styles and years of leadership experience affecting student academic achievement scores in Alabama's rural high schools?
- RQ3. What interaction occurs between leadership styles and the leader's gender affecting student academic achievement scores in Alabama's rural high schools?

## **Research Design**

This quantitative study utilized a causal-comparative research design to examine the relationships among the dependent and independent variables. Quantitative research investigates variables by gathering data and performing statistical analysis (Question Pro, 2021). A causal-comparative research design determines relationships between independent and dependent variables and if the "independent variable affected the outcome" (Salkind, p. 124). This research

study combined quantitative and causal-comparative research designs to employ a survey instrument to gather the statistical data needed. Northouse's Leadership Style Questionnaire determined the respondent's leadership style. The LSQ is a free survey instrument offered by SAGE Publications.

## **Setting**

The sample of superintendents and principals was delimited to rural school systems and their high schools throughout Alabama. The justification for selecting the participants for this study was based upon specific definitions outlined below and was based upon the researcher being located in Alabama. Defining rural and using only the participants that met the definitions was important because this study was specifically designed to measure the rural leader's impact on student academic achievement. Rural schools and school systems receive the least funding from local, state, and federal funds due to their limited size, so fewer dollars are allocated to increasing student academic achievement than their non-rural counterparts. Determining the impact of leadership on student achievement can help bridge this gap because little to no funding is required to develop leadership styles to meet the academic needs of the students.

## **Participants**

The identified rural superintendents and rural high school leaders in Alabama who met the definition of rural received the survey. Rural areas have fewer than 50,000 residents, have fewer than 35 residents per square mile, and have high schools with fewer than 600 students in attendance in high schools containing grades 9-12. After applying the definitions for rural, the participant pool consisted of 24 Alabama counties and 57 high schools within those counties. The survey was a single-blind study to avoid bias. A single-blind study is used so the respondent will be unaware of the originator of the survey (Gell, 2020). The survey was distributed to the superintendents and principals through the Director of the School Superintendents of Alabama (SSA) to ensure confidentiality. The Director oversees public school superintendents and has contact information for the identified schools and school systems.

## **Instrumentation**

This study used the Leadership Style Questionnaire by Northouse (2020). This instrument consisted of 18 items that examined leadership styles by measuring communication, leadership, adaptability, relationships, task management, production, development of others, and personal development. The LSQ was scored on a scale of 1 to 5, from strongly disagree to agree (see Appendix B) strongly. In addition to determining leadership style, the instrument also determined the dominance each leadership style has for each respondent. Dominance ranges from very high range to very low range. The LSQ measured three leadership styles: democratic, authoritarian, and laissez-faire. Although the survey measured democratic and authoritarian leadership styles, the correlation between transformational and transactional leadership styles is explained below.

The transformational leadership style and the democratic leadership style share similar attributes. Both are rooted in collaborative leadership by involving subordinates in decision-making (Duggan, 2019). Both also share a vision with subordinates to ensure that everyone works as a cohesive unit to reach the organization's goals. The transactional leadership style and the authoritarian leadership style also share similar attributes. Both have an authoritative leader who ultimately makes all decisions, and both believe that workers reach their full potential when a chain

of command and expectations are in place (Maryville University, 2021). Also, both leadership styles allow the leader to make quick decisions, allowing the organization to move forward rapidly.

Information related to reliability and validity for Northouse's LSQ was not readily available. An attempt was made to SAGE Publications to gather the information. They responded that the survey is intended for self-reflection and a validity score is not available (SAGE Publications, personal communication, July 12, 2021). Although the publication company did not have the available information, research has employed the LSQ as the lead survey instrument to determine leadership styles. Hina and Zafar (2018) used Northouse's LSQ in their research study to determine leadership styles while analyzing their relationship to job satisfaction. Seeger's (2020) research revealed the LSQ had a Cronbach's alpha ranging from .92 to .95, which is interpreted as being in the highest range for internal consistency.

Additionally, Sherard's (2015) research using the LSQ revealed a reliability coefficient of 0.887 and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's (KMO) coefficient of 0.896. The KMO score indicates the sampling is adequate. Cronbach's alpha measures the consistency of a set of items as a group and reliability (UCLA, 2021). According to Statistics Solutions (2021), a Cronbach's alpha score of .90 and above is best when estimating the reliability of a score. The lack of a validity score from the developer was a recognized limitation of this study. However, the study's intent was not to determine the leader's leadership style; it was to determine the perceived leadership style's impact on academic achievement.

## **Ethical Procedures**

There was no foreseeable harm to participants. To protect the researcher's identity in this single-blind study, the Director of School Superintendents of Alabama distributed emails to the superintendents and principals that met the definitions of rural. All participants were over the age of 18 and were voluntary participants. The participants remained anonymous, and the survey results were kept confidential. The survey was created and maintained by the researcher using a password-protected computer. Permission to participate was obtained before surveys were distributed. Concerns about the survey or the study were sent to the Director and then anonymously to the researcher.

## **Results**

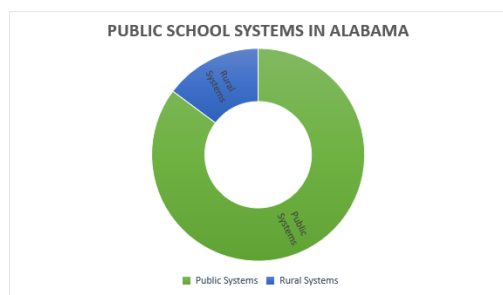
### **Demographic Characteristics**

The identified rural superintendents and rural high school principals in Alabama meeting the definition of rural received the survey. In review, rural areas have fewer than 50,000 residents, have fewer than 35 residents per square mile, and have high schools with fewer than 600 students in attendance in high schools containing grades 9-12. To protect the researcher's identity for this single-blind study, the Director of the School Superintendents of Alabama distributed the survey to 24 superintendents and 57 principals. Figure 2 displays the ratio of participants to the overall population of principals in Alabama's public high schools. Figure 3 displays the ratio of participants to the overall population of superintendents in Alabama's public schools. The Alabama State Department of Education (2021) reports 565 public high schools and 138 school systems in public education. Before answering questions related to leadership styles on the survey, the participants indicated their position (superintendent or principal), their years of

experience (novice or veteran), their gender (male or female), and their student academic achievement score.

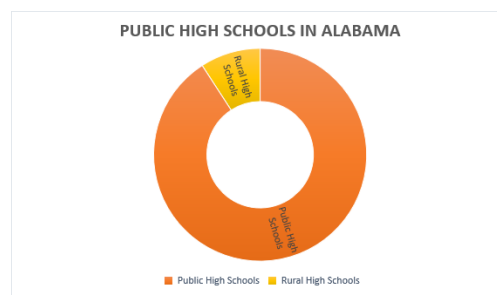
**Figure 2**

*Public high schools vs. rural public high schools*



**Figure 3**

*Public school systems vs. rural school systems*



**Table 1**

*Number of Leaders Indicating their Leadership Style*

Position	Total s	Transformational	Transactional	Laissez-Faire
Principal	26	18	5	3
Superintendent	12	9	2	1
	38	27 (71%)	7 (18%)	4 (11%)

### Research Question 1

What difference, if any, exists in student achievement scores in Alabama's rural high schools based on the school leader's leadership style?

Research question one focused on analyzing the student academic achievement scores and determining each leadership style's impact. In review, 27 respondents were transformational, seven were transactional, and four were laissez-faire. Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics for the mean (M) student academic achievement score for each indicated leadership style and their standard deviation (SD). Student academic achievement scores are reported in the A-F format, while their mean (M) scores are numerical. Results indicated that the mean score for the transformational leadership style of school leaders had an overall score of B (M = 81.778; SD = 8.025). Using the transactional leadership style, school leaders had an overall score of C (M = 73.143; SD = 8.707). School leaders using the laissez-faire leadership style had an overall score of D (M = 68.25; SD = 6.551). Table 3 displays the results of the One-Way ANOVA. F-score and a P-value determined if the results were statistically significant. The F-score calculates the variances of the groups to determine statistical significance. The P-value threshold of  $p \leq 0.05$  is considered statistically significant, meaning that the data deviates from a normal distribution which rejects the null hypothesis. For this research question, the computed value of F (2, 35) was

7.041, and the computed significance level (p) was 0.003. Both values rejected the null hypothesis because the F-score was greater than the F-critical score ( $7.041 > 3.27$ ), and the calculated P-value was less than the threshold ( $0.003 < 0.05$ ). The effect size was measured using eta squared ( $\eta^2 = 0.287$ ), indicating that the type of leadership style accounts for twenty-nine percent of the variability in student academic achievement scores.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics for Leadership Styles*

Style	M	SD
Transformational	81.778	8.025
Transactional	73.143	8.707
Laissez-faire	68.25	6.551

**Table 3**

*Results of the one-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) and Scheffe's post-hoc test*

	Variance (F)	Significance Level (p)	Effect Size ( $\eta^2$ )
One-Way ANOVA	7.041	0.003	0.287
Transformational vs. Transactional		0.052	
Transactional vs. Laissez-faire		0.628	
Laissez-faire vs. Transformational		0.013	

Note.  $F > 3.27$ ;  $p \leq 0.05$

Due to the rejection of the null hypothesis, it was necessary to conduct a post-hoc test. In review, a rejected null hypothesis requires a post-hoc test. According to Scheffe's post-hoc test, the transformational and transactional leadership styles were significantly similar and had a significance (p) of 0.052. There was no significant difference between transformational and transactional leadership styles ( $0.052 > 0.05$ ). The transactional and laissez-faire leadership styles were also significantly similar and had a significance (p) of 0.628. There was no significant difference between transactional and laissez-faire leadership styles ( $0.628 > 0.05$ ). However, the transformational and laissez-faire leadership styles differed significantly and had a significance (p) of 0.013. There was a significant difference between transformational and laissez-faire leadership styles ( $0.013 < 0.05$ ).

## Research Question 2

What interaction occurs between leadership styles and years of leadership experience affecting student academic achievement scores in Alabama's rural high schools?

Research question two focused on analyzing the interaction between leadership styles and the leader's years of experience with student academic achievement scores.

In review, novice (years 0-2) or veteran (years 3+) describe years of leadership experience. Of the 38 surveys analyzed, 11 respondents were novices, and 27 were veterans.

Furthermore, five novice and 22 veteran leaders exhibited the transformational leadership style, four novice and three veteran leaders exhibited the transactional leadership style, and two novice and two veteran leaders exhibited the laissez-faire leadership style. The results from the survey indicated that 71% of respondents were veteran leaders with three or more years of leadership experience, while 29% of respondents were novice leaders with less than three years of experience. Again, the results indicated that most respondents exhibited the transformational leadership style, while the least exhibited the laissez-faire style. Table 5 displays the descriptive statistics for the mean (M) student academic achievement score and standard deviation (SD) based on leadership style and years of leadership experience. Student academic achievement scores are reported in the A-F format, while their mean (M) scores were numerical. Results indicated that the mean score for novice school leaders using the transformational leadership style was C (M = 79.40; SD = 10.02), while the veteran transformational school leaders had an overall score of B (M = 82.32; SD = 7.68). Results indicated the mean score for both novice (M = 73.50; SD = 11.85) and veteran (M = 72.67; SD = 4.04) school leaders using the transactional leadership style had an overall score of C. Results indicated the mean score for both the novice (M = 69.50; SD = 4.95) and veteran (M = 67.00; SD = 9.90) school leaders using the laissez-faire leadership style had an overall score of D.

**Table 4**

*Descriptive statistics for mean scores based on leadership styles and years of experience*

Experience/Style	M	SD
Novice/Transformational	79.40	10.02
Veteran/Transformational	82.32	7.68
Novice/Transactional	73.50	11.85
Veteran/Transactional	72.67	4.04
Novice/Laissez-faire	69.50	4.95
Veteran/Laissez-faire	67.00	9.90

A Two-Way ANOVA was used to analyze research question two. F-score and a P-value determined if the results were statistically significant. The F-value calculates the variances of the groups to determine statistical significance. The P-value threshold of  $p \leq 0.05$  is considered statistically significant, meaning that the data deviates from a normal distribution which rejects the null hypothesis. For this research question, the computed value of  $F_{(2, 35)}$  was 0.237, and the computed significance level ( $p$ ) was 0.791. Because the F-score was lower than the F-critical score ( $0.237 < 3.27$ ), and the calculated P-value was greater than the threshold ( $0.791 > 0.05$ ), the null hypothesis was accepted by both. The effect size was measured using eta squared ( $\eta^2 = 0.015$ ), which indicated that less than two percent of the variability in student academic achievement scores is accounted for by the leadership style and years of leadership experience. The null hypothesis was accepted, so no post-hoc test was performed.

### Research Question 3

What interaction occurs between leadership styles and the leader's gender affecting student academic achievement scores in Alabama's rural high schools?

Research question three focused on analyzing the interaction between leadership styles and the leader's gender to student academic achievement scores. In review, gender was either male or female. Of the 38 surveys analyzed, 22 respondents were male, and 16 were female. Specifically, 17 male and ten female school leaders exhibited the transformational leadership style, four male and three female school leaders exhibited the transactional leadership style, and one male and three female school leaders exhibited the laissez-faire leadership style. The results from the survey indicated that 58% of respondents were male, while 42% were female. Consistent with findings throughout this study, the transformational leadership style was the most utilized, while laissez-faire was the least utilized by school leaders. Table 6 displays the descriptive statistics for the mean (M) student academic achievement score and standard deviation (SD) based on each school leader's leadership style and gender. Student academic achievement scores are reported in the A-F format, while their mean (M) scores were numerical. Results indicated the mean score for both male (M = 81.35; SD = 9.29) and female (M = 82.50; SD = 5.64) school leaders using the transformational leadership style had an overall score of B. Results indicated the mean score for both transactional male (M = 74.50; SD = 11.39) and female (M = 71.33; SD 4.93) school leaders had an overall score of C. Results indicated the mean score for male school leaders exhibiting the laissez-faire leadership style had an overall score of C (M = 73.00; SD = 0), while female laissez-faire school leaders had an overall score of D (M = 66.67; SD = 7.02).

**Table 5**

*Descriptive statistics for mean scores based on leadership styles and gender*

Gender/Style	M	SD
Male/Transformational	81.35	9.29
Female/Transformational	82.50	5.64
Male/Transactional	74.50	11.39
Female/Transactional	71.33	4.93
Male/Laissez-faire	73.00	0
Female/Laissez-faire	66.67	7.02

A Two-Way ANOVA was used to analyze research question three. F-score and a P-value determined if the results were statistically significant. The F-value calculates the variances of the groups to determine statistical significance. The P-value threshold of  $p \leq 0.05$  is considered statistically significant, meaning that the data deviates from a normal distribution which rejects the null hypothesis. For this research question, the computed value of  $F_{(2, 35)}$  was 0.396, and the computed significance level (p) was 0.676. Because the F-score was lower than the F- critical score ( $0.396 < 3.27$ ), and the calculated P-value was greater than the threshold ( $0.676 > 0.05$ ), the null hypothesis was accepted by both. The effect size was measured using eta squared ( $\eta^2 = 0.024$ ), which indicated that less than three percent of the variability in student academic achievement scores was accounted for by the type of leadership style and the leader's gender. The null hypothesis was accepted, so no post- hoc test was performed.

## Discussion

The results of this study implied that a school leader's leadership style impacted student achievement in Alabama's rural high schools. This study sought to accept or reject the null



hypothesis of three research questions by determining if leadership style, leadership experience, and gender impacted student achievement. The mean scores for student academic achievement were higher for transformational leaders than for transactional and laissez-faire leaders. Implications can be made that rural high school students and rural school systems led by transformational leaders score higher in academic achievement. The researcher recommends that leadership development programs train future leaders in transformational leadership as results prove it has the most positive and significant impact on academic achievement scores.

The mean scores for leadership styles and years of leadership experience were negligible and had no significant impact on rural high school students and rural school systems. Also, the mean scores for leadership styles and gender were negligible and had no significant impact on rural high school students and rural school systems. No implications could be made for the leader's years of experience and gender and their impact on student academic achievement scores.

### **Recommendations and Future Research Directions**

Previous studies conducted on leadership styles and rural high school student academic achievement are nearly nonexistent. This research fills this void; however, more research is recommended for future studies. This study showed a significant difference between the leadership styles and student academic achievement scores. It would be valuable to apply this research to a nationwide survey. Does the difference apply to rural high schools nationwide, or is it unique to Alabama? Also, more research is recommended for non-rural high schools. Does the difference only apply to rural academic achievement scores, or is it consistent in the non-rural settings?

This study also compared the leadership styles and the leader's years of experience to rural high school student academic achievement in Alabama. Although the study did not show a significant difference in the leader's style and experience in impacting student academic achievement, the topic should be further explored. Adding a qualitative research question to the study could have offered insight into the leader's decision-making process to determine if experience level has an impact. Finally, this study compared the leadership styles and the leader's gender to rural high school student academic achievement in Alabama. This study did not show a significant difference in the leader's style and gender toward impacting student academic achievement. Gender and leadership style impact is a nonissue because there was no gender influence shown.

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed to analyze leadership styles to discover which style had the most significant positive and negative impact on student academic achievement in rural high schools in Alabama. It was understood from the beginning that the school leader impacts students; however, how much impact? By focusing on three leadership styles that represent Avolio and Bass's Full-range Leadership Model (Salter et al., 2014), it became apparent that there was a significant difference in the style's influence on student academic achievement. As previously described, the transformational leadership style positively impacts student achievement. It should be used as a focal point in leadership development programs. Ingrained in the transformational style is the concept that the whole is greater than the individual parts.

For this to work effectively, the leader must be at the forefront of transforming and adapting to best meet the organization's needs. If the educator's goal is to reach and empower students, the leader's leadership style must be in alignment. The leader must be flexible, understand the school's needs, and determine the leadership style that best serves the school. Are they indeed a leader without knowing their style and willingness to change to meet the school's needs?

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**A QUANTITATIVE STUDY ON LEADER BEHAVIORS AND TEACHER WELL-BEING:  
LOW AND HIGH SOCIOECONOMIC SCHOOLS**

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**Abstract**

Instructional leaders of the school building influence teachers' well-being. While there have been many studies conducted regarding reasons teachers leave the classroom, very few studies focused on the differences between leader behaviors and teacher well-being. The purpose of this research study was to determine if there were statistically significant differences between leader behaviors and teacher well-being at high and low socioeconomic schools located in Alabama. The study used survey data from the *Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire* (MLQ-5X) Instrument and the *Teacher Subjective Well-Being Questionnaire* (TSWQ) using an online Qualtrics platform. The study surveyed 46 participants in the high socioeconomic group and 44 participants in the low socioeconomic group. An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to determine if any significant differences exist between high and low socioeconomic schools regarding leader behaviors and teacher well-being. The results indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in the leader behavior between low and high socioeconomic schools but not a statistically significant difference between teacher well-being between low and high socioeconomic schools.

*Keywords:* leader behaviors, transformational leadership, teacher well-being, socioeconomic status, public school

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## **Introduction**

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2015) reported that teachers in high-poverty schools, 75% or more students receiving free or reduced lunch, moved between schools at a rate of 12%. Meanwhile, 50% or less students receiving free or reduced lunch teachers in mid to low poverty schools and fewer left for other schools at a 6% rate. While many studies have been conducted to determine why teachers left the classroom, very few focused on the differences between leader behaviors and teacher well-being in low and high socioeconomic schools. Educators' well-being is likely to prosper in environments that embody sustainability principles (Shirley et al., 2020).

Administrators who exhibited toxic behaviors damaged organizations by increasing turnover intentions and reducing job satisfaction of personnel (Bakkal et al., 2019). Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) indicated that the lack of adequate leadership sets up both principals and educators for failure, which contributes to high attrition rates among principals and educators in lower-performing schools. Murakami et al. (2017) concluded that the school principal played a vital role in developing relationships among faculty, staff, and the school community.

Torff and Sessions (2009) mentioned that principals in high and low-performing schools saw similar deficiencies, indicating that teacher ineffectiveness varied little across schools that differed in socioeconomic status. While current research reported factors affecting student achievement in low and high socioeconomic status schools, there was not enough research to support whether leaders behave differently or if teachers feel differently in high and low socioeconomic schools. The studies did not address the differences between schools of both levels of socioeconomic status.

## **Problem Statement**

This quantitative, comparative research study aimed to determine if there were statistically significant differences between leader behaviors and teacher well-being at high and low socioeconomic schools. It was unknown to what extent differences existed between leader behaviors and teacher well-being at different schools of varying socioeconomic statuses. This causal-comparative quantitative study provided data on whether differences existed in leader behaviors and teacher well-being at high and low socioeconomic schools.

## **Review of Literature**

A synthesized research review of literature on leader behaviors and teacher well-being in the current educational environment addressed the underlying reasons teachers chose to stay or leave the teaching profession. Creating a supportive school climate was the school leader's responsibility (Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014). School leaders who fostered a community of shared ideas and experiences positively influenced teachers in the learning environment (Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014). When school leaders and teachers worked together to solve problems and achieve common goals, teachers felt supported, which directly impacted student achievement, teacher commitment, turnover, and collegiality (Singh & Billingsley, 1998).

Kelloway et al. (2012) stated that transformational leaders look beyond their own needs to develop long-term goals, which result in the well-being of the followers and the organization. Shamir et al. (1993) stated that theories of charismatic or transformational leadership had a

profound effect on followers. Charismatic leadership has the effect of emotional attachment to the leader on the part of the followers, emotional and motivational reaction of the followers, and improving the follower's demeanor regarding the mission presented by the leader.

Leadership skills allow leaders to be a resource for changing the workplace with their interactions (Alqahtani, 2015). Stress and emotional exhaustion were evident in most workplace environments when employees were not supported or feared being harassed or bullied by a supervisor. Authentic leadership with relationship-building strategies showed less workplace bullying (Parchment & Andrews, 2019). Leaders that did not build strong relationships with employees were found to have more workplace bullying (Parchment & Andrews, 2019).

According to Dyck (2001), toxic leadership leads to poor employee health, which in turn can increase organizations' benefit costs, absenteeism, employee withdrawal (Macklem, 2005), poor performance, and decreased collaboration (Wilson-Starks, 2003), as well as an increase in teacher turnover (Flynn, 1999). Leadership behaviors and styles influence job factors, including turnover intention, job performance, discipline, responsibility, and lack of staff (Hajdukova et al., 2015). Negative actions in the workplace environment affected the mental stability and emotional well-being of employees affected by others' actions (Humair & Ejaz, 2019).

According to Bass and Avolio (1994a), laissez-faire leadership referred to the absence or lack of leadership and was the most ineffective leadership style. In the conclusion of his study, Nielsen (2013) found a strong relationship between laissez-faire leadership and bullying in the workplace. Transformational and authentic leadership styles were found to have a lower risk of work group bullying, suggesting that leaders who were morally strong and showed compassion and concern for employees in the work environment reduced workplace bullying (Nielsen, 2013).

School leaders played an integral role in inequities that prevented the academic achievement of students living in poverty (Fortner et al., 2021). Several studies were cited that focused on educational and social science research, poverty based on income inequity was a strong influencing factor that created obstacles for public school students regarding their social, emotional, and academic development and success and the quality of living conditions (Akom, 2011; Almy & Tooley, 2012; Berliner, 2013; Bommer et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2018). Flint (2018) found that poverty played a huge role in perpetuating the achievement gap in math and English between students raised in low-income families and students from high-income families.

## **Methods**

The participants included teachers from the elementary, middle, and high schools in two different school districts in Alabama. The final sample size was 90 participants- 46 from a high socioeconomic school district and 44 from a low socioeconomic school district. One school district had approximately 2,000 students across six schools with 145 teachers. This school district had 86% free and reduced lunch and represented low socioeconomic schools in the research study. School A (17 teachers), B (21 teachers), C (19 teachers), D (28 teachers), E (19 teachers), and F (42 teachers) were schooled in the research study. The second school district had approximately 4,400 students across six schools with 297 teachers. School G (32 teachers), School H (52 teachers), School I (35 teachers), School J (35 teachers), School K (75 teachers), and School L (66 teachers) were recruited as high socio-economic schools in the research study. Each school G-L had fewer than one percent of students who qualified for free or reduced lunch.

The research study used the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X) transformational leadership subscale and the Teacher Subjective Well-being Questionnaire (TSWQ). An online questionnaire was administered using Qualtrics to a selection of teachers located in two school systems in the same state. Teachers self-reported their perception of leader behaviors and their current state of well-being at school via the questionnaire.

The TSWQ utilizes a four-point Likert scale (1=almost never, 2=sometimes, 3=often, 4=almost always) to determine overall teacher well-being. Two constructs of school connectedness and teaching efficacy can be determined using this instrument by adding every other question for a subtotal within the full scale. This survey supplied information regarding teacher well-being and was used to determine if there were differences between high and low socioeconomic schools regarding teacher well-being.

The first research question considered high and low socioeconomic schools' differences in transformational leadership characteristics. The second research question involved the differences in high and low socioeconomic schools on key components of well-being, including school connectedness and teaching efficacy.

The MLQ-5X was used to determine the level of leader behaviors that exhibit transformational leadership, transactional leadership, passive avoidant behavior, and leadership outcomes. For this study, the researchers focused on transformational leadership behaviors and the differences between teacher perceptions at low and high-socioeconomic schools. This instrument used a Likert scale (0=Not at all, 1=once in a while, 2=sometimes, 3=fairly often, 4=frequently, if not always) to determine leadership styles when rated by followers. Idealized influence or attributes (II or IA), inspirational motivation (IM), intellectual stimulation (IS), and individualized consideration (IC) are measured on the MLQ-5X short form to demonstrate the impact of this leadership style on the organizational structure. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to ensure that the construct reliabilities were consistent. These reliabilities ranged from 0.63 to 0.90 for the complete six-factor MLQ-5X. None of the constructs II, IC, IM, IS, or IC were measured as less than 0.70. The goodness of fit was .84, which led to a “reasonable fit” to the data in the Confirmatory Factor Analysis for the MLQ-5X (Muenjohn & Armstrong, 2008).

**Table 1**

*Transformational Leadership Characteristics*

Characteristics	Question numbers
Idealized Influence (Attributes)- IA	10, 18, 21, & 25
Idealized Influence (Behaviors)- IB	6, 14, 23, & 34
Inspirational Motivation- I IM	9, 13, 26, & 36
Intellectual Stimulation- IS	2, 8, 30, & 32
Individual Consideration- IC	15, 19, 29, & 31

The researchers, in employing a comparative quantitative design, determined if there were differences between leader behaviors and teacher well-being in low and high-socioeconomic schools. Data were collected from 90 teachers. The SPSS v. 28 was used to analyze the data descriptively and inferentially (via independent *t*-tests for two research questions). The first research question addressed the differences between the independent variable of school status (low

or high socioeconomic status) and the leader behaviors in the ratings of teachers' perceptions. The second research question addressed the differences between the independent variable of school status (low or high socioeconomic status) and the overall well-being of teachers.

The independent variable of school status represented whether a school was categorized as low socioeconomic or high socioeconomic. The operational level of the independent variable was socioeconomic status, where schools have 75% or higher percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced lunch were considered low socioeconomic status. Schools with 25% or fewer students who qualified for free and reduced lunch were considered high socioeconomic status. The measurement level of the independent variable was nominal.

The dependent variables came from the self-concept theory, and characteristics of transformational leadership focused on the leader's behaviors. Conceptually, leaders' tone and support for followers, ability to communicate the mission and vision, and school culture and climate influenced followers' feelings and perceptions of the school environment. The operational level of the dependent variables was transformational leadership characteristics and how highly teachers rated their well-being. The measurement level of the dependent variables was the score derived from the transformational leadership scale of the (MLQ-5X and overall teacher well-being from the TSWQ).

### **Limitations/Delimitations**

The researchers recognized that the sample size was small, so the generalizability of the findings and conclusions was limited. The reason for the small sample size is that many participants, from both high and low socioeconomic schools, did not complete the survey in its entirety. The survey was administered a few weeks after the new school year began. Many teachers were busy setting routines, getting to know their new students and families, and completing beginning-of-the-year items for their schools. This may have caused some teachers not to participate.

### **Results**

In testing null hypothesis #1 (there is no statistically significant differences in leader behaviors between high and low socioeconomic schools exist), the researchers ran the Shapiro-Wilk test and a Q-Q plot to test for normality of the data that found a significance value of less than .05 indicating that there was not a normal distribution of data violating the assumption of normality. To test the assumption of homogeneity of variance, the researchers used Levene's Test for Equality of Variances. Based on Levene's Test for Equality of Variances, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was not violated,  $F(.000) = .997, p = .039$ . An alpha of .05 was used to interpret this result. Equal variances can be assumed.

The researchers used descriptive statistics for the first research question: Are there differences in perceived leader behaviors between high and low socioeconomic schools? The independent variable was socioeconomic status. Transformational Leadership subscale on the MLQ-5X had Cronbach's  $\alpha = .79$  in previous research studies in MLQ Manual compared to the Cronbach's  $\alpha = .976$  found by the researchers in this study. Due to the violation of the normality assumption, a Mann-Whitney U was conducted to determine if significance was found. A significance level of less than .05 was found on the transformational leadership behavior data confirming the significance found in the independent samples *t*-test. The effect size according to

Cohen's  $d$  result of 1.16. indicates that the difference between the high and low socioeconomic groups was significant.

**Table 2**

*Transformational Leadership Behavior- Mann-Whitney U*

*Asymp. sig. (2-tailed)*

Overall transformational leadership	.010
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Then, an independent Mann Whitney  $t$ -test to analyze null hypothesis 2. (There is no statistically significant differences exist between self-reported teacher well-being in high and low socioeconomic schools.) The researchers ran the Shapiro-Wilk test and a Q-Q plot to test for normality of the data that found a significance value of less than .05 indicating that there was not a normal distribution of data violating the assumption of normality. The researcher used Levene's Test for Equality of Variances to test the assumption of homogeneity of variance. Based on Levene's Test for Equality of Variances, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was not violated,  $F(1.636) = .204, p = .435$ . An alpha of .05 was used to interpret this result. Equal variances can be assumed.

Due to the violation of the normality assumption, a Mann-Whitney U was conducted to determine if significance was found. A significance level of more than .05 was found on the teacher well-being data, confirming the lack of significance in the independent samples  $t$ -test. The null hypothesis was confirmed as there are no statistically significant differences in teacher well-being between high and low socioeconomic schools.

**Table 3**

*Group Statistics*

	Group size	TL Mean	SD	TW Mean	SD
Low socioeconomic	44	2.88	1.14	3.39	.64
High socioeconomic	46	2.37	1.17	3.29	.55
Total group	90	2.62	1.18	3.34	.59

### Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

In this described study, the researchers found that the data showed a difference in leader behavior between high and low socioeconomic schools, but it did not show a difference in the well-being of teachers. When creating true equity, the disposition of the educational leaders may play an important role in developing, fostering, and enhancing the socially-just transformation of the school culture in attending to the needs of children living in poverty (Fortner et al., 2021). The following is a list of recommendations for future research concerning leader behavior and teacher well-being in low and high-socioeconomic schools.



The researchers recommend quantitative research as the appropriate choice for this study. For example, interview questions related to transformational leadership would allow the researchers to see feelings, and behaviors, and hear personal experiences from the participants. The qualitative portion seeks to understand the social issues by answering the study's how, why, and what (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Conduct a comparison study of transformational leadership classes within an administrator preparation program at the university level with administrator preparation programs that do not include transformational leadership instruction.

## **Conclusions**

The findings of this study have contributed new information regarding differences in leader behaviors and teacher well-being based on the socioeconomic status of their schools that were not discovered in the literature review. Leadership and job satisfaction are the basic elements that determine how an organization can reach its goals (Bakkal et al., 2019). Leadership behaviors influence job satisfaction, and leadership style influences, factors such as turnover intention and job performance (Hajdukova et al., 2015). Leaders should be available to observe students in the learning environment and talk with students about what they are learning. As a follow-up, leaders need to meet with teachers to collaboratively reflect on student observations to determine which areas teachers feel need more support. Instructional leadership and distributed leadership are significantly and directly associated with teacher job satisfaction and self-efficacy (Liu et al., 2021). Teachers feel valued, appreciated, and important when included in conversations regarding achievement and effective practices.

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## INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER FIELD EXPERIENCE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS IN ALABAMA

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### **Abstract**

This narrative study explored the administrative internship experiences of five assistant principals in Alabama for the purpose of better understanding how these school leaders perceived the benefits of Alabama's policy requirement for field experience in their practice. Attention towards this comparatively brief ten-day internship sought to describe the value early career practitioners placed on this experience and to better understand policy implications for instructional leaders. Through individual, semi-structured interviews with assistant principals from rural, suburban, and urban locales, this study asked 1) How do assistant principals describe their professional learning needs and 2) How do assistant principals describe the value of their administrative field experience? Findings show that participants believed practical, building level knowledge and experience was most needed in order to successfully manage their current duties. Those whose school leadership experience was limited to the ten-day internship experience expressed sentiments of being underprepared for their position while those who had longer field experiences and additional leadership responsibilities prior to their assistant role, expressed greater confidence in their abilities.

*Keywords:* Instructional Leader Field Experience, School Administrator Internship, Assistant Principal Learning, Alabama Field Experience Policy, School Leader Development.

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## Introduction

School leaders, specifically building principals and assistant principals, shape a school environment in overarching and profound ways. Leaders directly and indirectly contribute to the successful outcomes of students (Day et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020) and are the catalyst for change within their school (Ni et al., 2018). Because of the school leader's high level of influence in and upon a learning organization, the preparation experiences required for certification as an instructional leader are important to consider. Principals and assistant principals (APs) start their formal, professional leader learning with an experience in an academic credentialing program (Acton, 2021) that intends to prepare teachers for administrative positions where they will be equipped to serve students in the best possible ways. However, the quality of licensing and graduate programs that certify principals varies greatly (Anderson & Turnbull, 2016) and coursework has been criticized as being disconnected from practice (Cunningham et al., 2019). In the effort to provide practical experience in the school leadership role, most states have policies that require administrative field experience in the form of an internship prior to certification. These policies are notable because practical experience and mentorship opportunities are often cited as meaningful learning opportunities for emerging leaders (Cohen & Schechter, 2019).

Alabama's policy requires a ten-day residency (Alabama Education Code, 2015) which is comparatively brief when considering the requirements of other states. The length of the field experience requirement in Alabama is questionable, and in response, this research was an effort toward a better understanding of how this policy contributed to the preparation needs of current school leaders. This qualitative study explored the beliefs of five Alabama APs concerning their learning needs and preparation for their position. To do so, this research asked 1) *How do assistant principals describe their professional learning needs* and 2) *How do they describe the value of their administrative internship experience?* Using Clandinin's (2016) narrative inquiry method to allow for storied experiences, individual, semi-structured interviews between participants and researcher took place in the spring and fall of 2021. The theoretical framework of situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) was drawn upon to explain the perceived impact of contextual, site-based learning during the field experience.

Overall, the findings suggest that practical experience was more valuable to these school leaders than formal coursework. Participants used their field experience to see different perspectives, join social networks, and build their practical knowledge and capacity as administrators who could lead in the best interests of students. Social examples were perceived as most meaningful and relevant in their adaptation to their building level leadership position.

## Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

Situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) asserts that learners are shaped through the environments and contexts in which they learn. Based on this understanding, internship experiences that "draw in elements of the school context as learning resources for school leaders" (Cosner et al., 2018, p.241) are likely to be a valued way for candidates to learn. Situated learning theory gives reason to believe that aspiring school leaders will learn from being in a school site where they function as a leader in preparation to be certified and hireable as school administrators. Situated learning is not replicated in the graduate program among candidates because the K-12 school setting must be utilized as a learning tool. This way, Alabama's field experience policy for future administrators aligns with a well-established theory.

## **Policy Requirements**

The National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Recognition Standards provide expectations for emerging school and district-level leaders. “The NELP standards specify what novice leaders and program graduates should know and be able to do as a result of completing a high-quality educational leadership preparation program” (National Policy Board for Educational Administration). Under these standards, “At least 38 states require field experience as part of traditional school leader preparation programs” (Education Commission of the States), although the number of hours required appears to vary considerably from state to state. According to the Education Commission of the States (2021), twelve states have no state policy on field experience. Of those that do have a requirement, most states do not specify a specific amount of time individuals must be in the field during their preparation program. Notably, several states require candidates to commit to a significant amount of time in an internship. Instructional leadership students in Michigan must fulfill a six-month residency; New York requires a fifteen-week internship, and Georgia requires 750 hours for those seeking school administration credentialing. Comparatively, Alabama requires a residency of “uninterrupted service in an active school with students present for the equivalent of ten full days” (Alabama Education Code, 2015) as part of its instructional leadership credentialing. This ten-day service is typically required to be split between the elementary/intermediate and the middle/high school levels. Consequently, administrative candidates in Alabama spend five days in each placement.

## **Policy Purpose**

In Alabama, field experience for candidates is detailed in sections 290-3-3-.48 (3) (e) of the Alabama Education Code. This policy requires university credentialing programs to work with local education agencies (LEAs) to provide candidates with experience observing and participating in school leadership tasks and responsibilities in a school setting under the support and guidance of a building-level administrator. Student leaders are to have school-based assignments that will provide practical, real-life opportunities that teach aspiring leaders how to apply their instructional leadership knowledge in a school context. Alabama’s instructional leadership residency requirement is designed to provide candidates with a way to experience and fulfill the Alabama Leadership Standard indicators and intends to give candidates “purposeful hands-on experiences designed to prepare them to lead the essential work of school improvement and higher student achievement” (Alabama Education Code, 2015). Field experience provides teachers who desire to become administrators with experience functioning as school leader under the supervision of university faculty and local education agency leadership.

## **School Leader Learning**

The purpose of Alabama’s field experience policy is supported by research. Literature on school leadership development affirms that even strong principal preparation programs “have demonstrated the difficulty of cultivating highly proficient levels of practice” (Cosner et al., 2018, p.239) because leadership skills take considerable time to learn and come through experiences (Day et al., 2009), and so embedding situated and experiential learning into a preparation program offers a measure of practical practice to candidates. The value practitioners find in these practical experiences is important because, as Huber (2011) explains, how learning experiences are “judged by the participants is an important factor in the leaders’ willingness to use the learning in practice”

(p.845). In Kim's (2020) work on the transformative learning of school principals, he asserts "engagement in informal and personally significant experiences are important for leader learning" (p.354). Furthermore, the social learning opportunities that field experiences and internships provide are likely to be highly meaningful to aspiring and novice leaders. As noted in Rushing's (2022) review of school leader learning literature, principals and APs rely on social examples to learn their role. Considering this, the judged value of the field experience for early career leaders is an important phenomenon to investigate.

## **Methods**

The study was a qualitative analysis that described and interpreted the expressed beliefs of assistant principals in Alabama regarding their self-reported perceived learning needs and administrator field experience. As qualitative inquiry seeks to understand participants' individual perspectives (Merriam, 2002), five participants were seeking to understand how Alabama's internship policy influenced their practice. Using narrative inquiry, stories of individual experiences were recorded through dialogue between researcher and participant (Clandinin, 2013). Using a purposeful sampling of leaders based on their school location and experience level, interviews were recorded and transcribed between March and November of 2021. Data were analyzed through open value coding (Saldaña, 2021) and synoptic charts (Attride-Stirling, 2001) to identify emerging themes and patterns. Thematic analysis was used to structure and synthesize data and generate insight (Nowell et al., 2017).

### **Participants**

Assistant principals were sought with the assumption that they would have had a more recent credentialing experience than a principal would. Therefore APs would have a better recollection of their initial learning needs and preparation experience. In this study, the participants were APs employed in a public school at the time of interviewing; four of these individuals had less than two years of experience in their role. The fifth individual had eight years' experience in his role. This participant's perspective was sought to gain insight from one who could speak to the differences in learning needs and practices of new and experienced school leaders. Three participants held an Ed.S, and two were pursuing PhDs in educational leadership. One participant was in the process of earning the Ed.S. These participants represented four different university programs in Alabama.

### **Data and Analysis**

Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each AP. Interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed in their entirety using AI software. The audio recordings were used to reconcile transcripts, and handwritten notes were created to capture reflections during and immediately after the interviews. Each transcript was read in its entirety and then open coding to identify emerging ideas (Saldaña, 2021) drawn from the participant's responses to interview questions. Next, transcripts were value coded (Saldaña, 2021), and a codebook of themes was developed. The third round of coding then occurred where participant responses were connected to the theoretical frame and review of the literature. To ensure the validity of findings, peer debriefing, an audit trail, and researcher reflexivity in the form of a reflexive journal were used.



## Results

**RQ1 How do school leaders describe their early career learning needs?** Informal, context-specific, experiential learning was more valuable to these APs than college coursework or theory. These participants wanted site-specific training and sought social networks to build their knowledge and capacity as school leaders. Local mentorship and social examples were perceived as important in the adaptation to the leadership position.

### Situated Learning for Experience

College coursework leading to administrative credentialing enables teachers to qualify for school administrative positions (Grissom et al., 2019; Huber, 2011), but these APs did not highly value the program coursework program. Assistant 1 reflected upon her master's degree and leadership certification coursework and concluded:

*I don't think there is any class that is going to teach you for this [assistant principal] position. Assistant 1*

*I can't say there is an instructional leadership class that I took...that can teach you everything as an administrator--just can't. And a lot of it you learn by doing, and you fake it till you make it. Assistant 1*

Considering the responsibilities of an assistant principal, she added,

*Well, they don't train you for that. Classes don't train you for that. You're just learning it. Assistant 1*

Assistant 2 and Assistant 3 discussed their preparation for school leadership and affirmed the value of on-site leadership experience over reading leadership literature.

*I think previous leadership experience really, really helps...But I think once you get inside of a school building is when you see things that maybe you can impact or things that you can directly be in charge of. Assistant 2*

*There's no research to tell us how to make it through this. Assistant 3*

Even the most experienced AP, Assistant 5, who was pursuing his Ph.D. in educational leadership, emphasized the importance of experiential learning as he considered site-level learning more valuable than the theories discussed in classes.

*But books or none of that stuff could really prepare you, like I said, theory is always good. And they'll tell you the things that you're supposed to do. But you're not, you have to actually be in the job to really be prepared for--that's going to be the best training ever. Assistant 5*

Likewise, both Assistant 4 and Assistant 1 believed they needed to know context-specific policies and procedures that were not taught in class environments.

*[I need to learn] how to discipline kids. Because that is like, it's ridiculous. Yeah, effective discipline. Because I mean, like my Ed.S program at XX, I don't think we had a single class on school discipline. Assistant 4*

*You know, so you get, you get thrown into this position. And then all the little intricate details that are really the most important, kind of like they always say, do the little things. We don't get trained on that.* Assistant 1

*[assistant principals] just kind of learn...we wish we had training for this...I think it's almost more like this local level training...but I guess you just learn about doing--you just like, sink or swim. You just gotta figure it out.* Assistant 1

The feeling of needing to “figure it out” implies that she judged her prior knowledge to be lacking or misaligned with the practical needs she had as a new administrator. Assistant 3 expressed this sentiment 3 expressed this sentiment as well, who spoke of the disconnection between what she needed and what her school district assumed what was needed:

*And it's not okay to just say, well, you're an admin because you are great in the classroom, or you are great at the district level. So you got it. We don't got it, for lack of better words.* Assistant 3

Teachers are credentialed and move into the assistant principal roles, but it is important to remember that these roles and their corresponding duties are distinctly different. Each of the participants spoke about these differences and pointed out that teachers do not get experience with administrative tasks except, to a degree, through field experience.

Both Assistant 3 and Assistant 1's comments suggested that valuable learning should not be far removed from the contextual experience. Still, rather it needed to be connected to personal involvement and action at a school. Assistant 5 continued to point out the importance of gaining experience in preparation for an administrative position and emphasized that aspiring leaders must go through situations in a school to learn.

*It just comes through experience because as a school teacher, you're not going to encounter the same things that we deal with as administrators. You know, you are not going to even handle those things to gain that experience. And I think that's where most, you know, some administrators fall short when they first start off as administrators, because they have never dealt with it before.* Assistant 5

Likewise, Assistant G did not believe she learned her job through a structured curriculum and reading but through practice and modeling aligned with the school's context and population.

*You know, we get all these great books about, you know, what a PLC is, and you need to implement PLCs in your building, and you need to be supporting your teachers and instruction. But then, what does that really look like and making it specific to the demographic in which you serve? So, like what I need here at XX is very different than what the AP at XX may need.* Assistant 5

## **Social Learning**

In addition to a preference for context-specific, experiential learning, the participants pointed to their need for social examples and mentors to help them build their leadership capacity. The desire to look toward social models reinforces the need for aspiring principals to have placement opportunities within school settings.

*[I learn from] a lot of conversations, mentoring, just talking with people.* Assistant 4

*I say it over and over again, I feel like new admin need mentors.* Assistant 3

Not only does a field experience provide a measure of practical experience, but it can allow for social networks to form that could help support new leaders after they are placed in their future administrative roles. This may be especially valuable since all, but the newest assistant principal spoke of the principal at their school being too busy to mentor them.

*And so and you know, when you're in the building, and you're doing the daily grind of it, the principal doesn't have time to mentor the AP. And that's what is perceived to be how it works. And that's not the reality. Assistant 3*

*You really need to probably find that assistant principal that you can kind of latch on to because, of course, the principal's always busy. Assistant 2*

Although a college cohort of peers can provide a measure of social learning, working alongside experienced administrators during a field experience may provide a better fitting mentorship relationship. In their assistant role, participants expressed a strong need to interact with other administrators to learn, and as Assistant 1 concluded,

*This is a job where you need to be with other people. Assistant 1*

### **RQ2 How do new school leaders describe the value of their administrative field experience?**

Participants credit their field experience as the most valuable part of their administrative credentialing program because they felt it was most practical in providing relevant learning and social networking opportunities. Although each participant found their field experience valuable and helpful, the three participants who only had the required ten days of experience expressed a sense of being unprepared for their current role and feeling isolated and lonely. The participants with the extended internship and the most school leadership experience expressed a sense of self-efficacy and confidence in their capabilities and performance as assistant principals.

### **Field Experience**

Regarding her 10-day residency requirement, Assistant 1 recognized value in seeing different approaches during her field experience.

*I wanted to get out and see what the different city systems and schools do. That was that was big--those 10 days. Because you might see truancy over here. You might see discipline over here, you might see something there. Like, I'll never do that over here. You know...it was interesting to see how different personalities different administrators handled different situations. Assistant 1*

Furthermore, Assistant 4 noted that her field experience gave the experience she did not have as a teacher and could not get at her school.

*I didn't really have a lot of experience managing people, not students--but adults. That has been a challenge and figuring out how to do that with adults because managing students and managing adults is a lot different. Assistant 4*

Speaking of the elementary/intermediate placement that she did not think she wanted, Assistant 3 reflected:

*Once I got in there, there were lots and lots of things that I learned at my intermediate placement, that I feel like has carried over into even how I lead now. And so it was very beneficial. For me, it was the practical part of all the reading and the writing and the discussions that I'd had in class...it was great for me. Assistant 3*

In contrast to the others, Assistant 2 participated in a semester-long administrative internship at the school where he had been teaching. During his certification program, he received a grant from the Alabama State Department of Education, which paid for his classroom substitute to work in his school as an assistant to the administrative team. He explained that ten days split between two schools is too short a time to see what happens at the administrator level. Still, his longer field experience provided many more opportunities to learn.

*It does give you some insight into, you know, how to handle discipline, how to input discipline, how to work with teachers, how to PLC, there's a lot of different things, you know, how to aggregate and disaggregate data, there's a lot of those types of things that in [a longer internship] you can do. Assistant 2*

Notably, Assistant 2 was hired into his leadership position mid-year, immediately after his internship. His prolonged experience not only deepened his learning experience by offering months of work experience in the role, but it also made him a more desirable candidate compared with individuals who could only speak from ten days of field experience.

### **Experience and Self-Perception**

Assistant 2 and Assistant 5, the participants with the most experience before entering their assistant role, showed self-efficacy and confidence in their abilities. Assistant L did not question his current skills but instead looked forward and spoke of future opportunities to “specialize in lanes” of leadership. During his field experience, he had time to plan what his future as an administrator could look like.

*I was able to have a vision for how I would want things to be run or how I might do something differently. And that really empowered me. Assistant 2*

Speaking of his transition from his credentialing program into the assistant role, Assistant 5 believed his experience with administrative responsibilities, his background in the special education behavior unit, and internship provided him with a successful first year.

*So, it was kind of a smooth transition. For me, it wasn't hard at all, just because like I said, I had already had that experience. Assistant 5*

In contrast, the three participants with minimal time in the field spoke of their role as overwhelming, lonely, and questioned their abilities. Assistant 3 described her effort to reach out to an assistant principal at another school for help.

*And that was huge. Because, you know, my personality, I usually don't connect until I'm at a breaking point, and I probably should have already connected....The admin world can be very lonely, and you're always putting out fires. Assistant 3*

Assistant 1 shared the isolation she felt in her new role.

*We're human, you know...I'll tell you, it's kind of like you're on this little island. And you have your people up here. But the teacher friends go away. Assistant 1*

When speaking of her responsibilities in her position, Assistant 4 felt she was not doing well in the two areas assigned to her.

*Discipline and attendance, which is like, I'm not doing a good job with that....I would love to be able to be an instructional leader. Like, that's the fun part. Like, it's, I mean, going*

*into the classrooms and helping teachers, like, with their instruction, that's so much fun. But I never get to do that because I'm dealing with discipline. So, I mean, until I get discipline, you know, you can't have instruction unless the discipline is, you know, good. Until unless the management is where it's supposed to be.* Assistant 4

The differences in perceived capability and relationships among those with more and less experience in the field before entering their position may serve as reasons for a longer internship for administrators than is currently required.

## **Discussion**

This study aimed to explore the perceived learning needs of assistant principals and understand the value they placed on their administrative field experience. Because school leaders are uniquely influential in their position (Leithwood, 2020), and their professional learning can be a pathway to greater organizational outcomes and overall school improvement (Andreoli et al., 2020), preparation policies are meant to examine. In this study, participants clearly articulated a preference for on-site learning above the course content in their credentialing programs. At the graduate level, these practitioners believed experience in the role of administrator was the best preparation for the role because each APS valued the situated learning they gained from working in a school.

Situated learning theory (SLT) (Lave & Wenger, 1991) helps us understand that adult learners rely upon “practice development” (Cosner et al., 2018, p.240) in authentic contexts as ways to learn and improve their abilities. Cosner et al. (2018) explain that SLT “emphasizes the situated and social nature of learning and brings attention to the situational, environmental, and social contexts of the learner during learning experiences as factors that shape learning and development” (p.241). These participants believed they learned in context during their preparation phase, but those with the least amount of field experience expressed feeling underprepared and isolated in their position. Considering the practical value these participants placed on their situated experience, there may be a reason to consider redistributing credentialing requirements to prioritize the field experience.

While these leaders did not express an appreciation for their coursework preparation, that does not mean there is little value in formal course content. A possible explanation for the belief that formal learning does not teach or train an individual to be an AP may connect to divergent priorities between program objectives and immediate AP experiences. Preemptive course work intended to prepare school leaders may include emphasis theory and leadership development (e.g., visionary and transformational leadership, change agency, organizational theory, etc., as in Daniels et al. 2019, Huber, 2011). Yet, in the moment, new leaders may feel the urgency to know context level policy and procedures. Since the assistant principal position generally leads to the principalship (Goldring, 2021), early career practitioners will need to be equipped for their future role as there is no other formal schooling or certification between the level of assistant and principal. For this reason, policymakers may want to emphasize the field experience, but not to the extent that the theoretical underpinnings of leadership are dismissed.

## **Implications**

Alabama's field experience policy for instructional leader certification reflects an awareness of how learning happens in situational and social contexts that require applying skills. The policy for field experience assumes that all field experiences effectively provide quality leadership experiences to a candidate within 10 school days. In reality, field experiences are likely to vary considerably, and therefore, so would participant learning and preparation. Like other educational policies, this state requirement needs feedback from practitioners. Tyack and Cuban (1995) recognize that implementation cannot be controlled from a distance and that there is value in practitioners who bring their 'wisdom of practice' to reform efforts (p. 83). For this reason, practitioners' insights are important to know and consider in making meaningful adjustments.

Changes to the policy implementation at the university and school level may increase the likelihood of successful learning during this relatively brief internship. The policy cannot ensure a quality field experience, but university program faculty, LEA leadership, and candidates have the joint responsibility to ensure these days are meaningful. University faculty and cooperating LEAs may offer guidance and training for their principals who will host an intern to better align their expectations to research on learning through mentorship and contextual experiences. Universities may need to add policy guidelines that identify principals and schools successfully prepared to mentor student leaders. While the state of Alabama sets a field experience requirement, it is ultimately the implementation by local stakeholders that will ensure it fulfills its intended purpose.

## **Limitations and Further Research**

The small number of participants in this study is a limitation of the research. While the effort was made to diversify participants, a larger sample size would provide additional depth on this issue. Furthermore, this study focused only on the self-reported experiences of Aps, and future work could pair participant responses with data from host school administrators and current supervisors. The data of this study showed a difference between the experience opportunities the male participants received compared to what the female had access to. Although the different experiences of participants by gender were beyond the scope of this work, further research could explore this issue. Overall, the field experience policy appears to benefit candidates and does not need significant redesign or alteration, except perhaps in its duration based on the overwhelming preference of these participants for experience in the role of administrator. Comparatively, Alabama's ten days of residency is brief, but because candidates are school employees who must leave their teaching position for ten days to work in another capacity, an extended length of time may be counterproductive to candidates, their schools, and the students they leave to a substitute teacher. The impact of longer field experiences at the administrative level needs further study.

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**TORCHBEARER LEADERSHIP:  
A CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR LEADING CHALLENGING SCHOOLS**

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**Abstract**

School leaders find it extremely hard to lead effectively without a model designed specifically to provide effective leadership in the best interest of students. This study examines the unanswered question as to how to lead successful turnaround efforts in challenging schools today. A critical analysis of studies found the absence of an effective leadership model for urban and rural school leaders. We sought to develop a new model to answer the guiding question of how to effectively lead urban and rural school leaders presented with a unique challenge.. The Torchbearer leadership model, developed from this study, could be a conceptual process as an option for urban and rural principals who are struggling to lead challenging schools.

*Keywords: leadership*

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## **Introduction**

It is widely accepted that effective leadership is very challenging in terms of leading an educational organization through difficult times or change, especially when there is so much that is not fully understood about effective leadership (Leithwood, 2003). Educational leadership embodies the totality of vision, implementation, and successful outcomes. Essentially, leaders create the vision, execute the strategies that make the vision a reality, and follow through to ensure that things are done the right way (Hoerr, 2005). When implementing these strategies, urban and rural principals ought to have the audacity to lead and be deliberate changing the academic performance of economically disadvantaged students (Tajalli & Opheim, 2005) and failing schools. Urban and rural principals should take ownership of the current affairs which reside in urban and rural schools. These affairs include but are not limited to the academically unprepared student (Barnes, 2010). In addition, these affairs include the academic achievement gap between African American students and Hispanic students in relationship to their Caucasian peers (Barnes, 2010), the lack of parental support (Topper et al., 2010) and the threats of sanctions from local and state policymakers on low performing schools (Chiang, 2009). Yet, Bridwell (2012) found that the use of “high-stakes testing, and accountability mandates are experienced disproportionately in high poverty urban schools” are detrimental (p. 53).

Despite all the societal roadblocks and obstacles, students face in and out of the home, there is an opportunity for principals who lead struggling schools to turn their schools around. The opportunity to turn their schools around is through leadership in the best interest of students. Leithwood and Strauss (2010) surmised that the affairs in urban and rural schools present a unique mission and character in leading effective turnaround efforts. Nevertheless, the possibility is present and reasonable if principals in charge of difficult schools would take ownership of their challenges and lead with the intent to overcome them. By doing so, these principals can use their knowledge regarding the plight of their schools and what effective practices yielding positive change to begin building the bridge towards success.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Manufacturing sustainable change in urban and rural schools is very daunting for principals. Hewitt and Reitzug (2015) found that “out of every 1,000 turnaround-designates schools, less than 25% were able to improve their achievement in one year significantly, and only 1% was able to sustain significant improvement over two years” (p. 20). However, the research gap appears to study effective leadership models for urban and rural school leaders to lead successful turnaround campaigns without an axiomatic leadership model to answer the bell for failing schools.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study aimed to examine principals' lived experiences and describe their characteristics that led to successful turnaround efforts. Also, this study attempted to conceptualize these characteristics into an effective leadership model for principals to implement that would yield turnaround results in challenging schools.

## **Review of the Literature**

This phenomenological study aimed to examine the commonalities among successful Torchbearer principals in Alabama. Moreover, the discovery of potential and effective leadership model for leaders in challenging urban and rural schools were cultivated by the literature review that did not accurately provide sufficient evidence to support the notion that current leadership models are effective in challenging urban and rural schools.

Furthermore, current literature illustrates how educational leadership experts have discussed effective leadership without truly answering the general question of how urban and rural school leaders can lead effective turnaround campaigns without the appropriate leadership model to do so? Therefore, this review will show that available literature surrounding school leadership does not accurately address the need for a leadership model that is required to aid schools in turnarounds efforts in urban and rural areas. In addition, literature regarding leadership models was very limited. According to Hewitt and Reitzug (2015), the empirical research available on turnaround was “scant” (p. 21), and Herman et al.’s (2008) analysis of empirical research on turnaround described it as “sparse” (p. 4). As a result, the discussion of an effective leadership model for urban and rural leaders remains vague, if not absent. Lastly, this review of literature was developed from a systemic review of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, electronic sources, presentations, and published and unpublished dissertations. The literature presented is relevant to the purpose of this study.

Leithwood (2003) revealed what the educational leadership community knew about successful school leadership. Leithwood referenced that school leaders must navigate their schools through the maze of complex infrastructure entities posed by school districts, such as curriculum standards, benchmarks, and any other policy directed or given by the district. Also, Leithwood (2003) mentioned the disparities in incomes, cultural backgrounds, and diversity which adversely impacted school leaders’ ability to lead effectively. Leithwood stated that “principals must respond to increasing diversity in student characteristics, including cultural background and immigration status, income disparities, physical and mental disabilities, and variation in learning capacities” (p. 1). Nevertheless, these disparities, among other things, negatively impact school leadership and prevent urban and rural principals from leading successful turnaround campaigns. Principals cannot lead urban or rural schools without an innovative and creative model to overcome obstacles that were identified 15 years ago. However, he contended that there is no acceptable answer that will address the prevalent issue of leading successful turnaround efforts in historically failing schools to date.

Leithwood and Strauss (2010) presented the evidence that successful turnaround efforts began in stages but only to a fault. However, several underlying variables must be considered before congregating all failing schools into a category where Leithwood and Strauss’ proverbial four stages would apply. For example, educational leadership theorists often refer to schools in mainstream society, which typically do not include urban schools because these schools are predominantly Latino or African American, where effective leadership is most needed.

Hitt et al. (2018) proclaimed that, “leadership may be even more important in chronically low-performing schools” (p. 57). Schools the mainstream are predominantly white, and administrators in these schools see an increase in diversity as negatively impacting the success of their schools.

According to Leithwood (2003), many school leaders work with student populations that are increasingly diverse and that may not be experiencing success in school. This includes children who are from low-income families or whose cultural background or characteristics fall outside of the mainstream (for example, native people or recent immigrants, children with physical handicaps, and Latinos or African Americans). Many principals leading schools that are predominantly Latino and/or African American believe the schools they lead do not fit into the mainstream, therefore, evoking the need for a leadership model ideally for urban and rural schools.

Leithwood and Strauss (2010) introduced leadership lessons in which they ascertained successful turnaround efforts happen in “stages.” They identified *direction-setting* as stage one, in terms of goal setting, which emerged from district mandates in Ontario Schools. Districts set goals that are marginal at best. Moreover, Salina et al. (2017) espoused the idea that in establishing his leadership team’s guiding principles, they must begin with expectations in composing a three-prong framework that abetted their effort toward school improvement. In Salina et al.’s (2017) framework, “academic press, social support, and relational trust” were at the epicenter of their journey towards school improvement and change (p. 68). In interpreting Salina et al. guiding principles, first, it must be understood that the precepts in academic press, social support, and relational trust are simply setting expectations, helping people, and building on the expertise of others. Even though the framework is successful, urban and rural school leaders need more. Given the immense complexities of their educational organization, in terms of an effective leadership model, urban and rural school leaders need more in their quest to turn around failing schools.

In 2010, Leithwood and Strauss also claimed that “efforts to better understand the nature of successful school turnaround processes would do well to begin with a focus on successful school turnaround leadership” (p. 2). Years earlier, Leithwood (2003) purported those principals use a combination of leadership styles to find success. According to Leithwood, “principals exert leadership through constellations of actions that coalesce around different ‘models’ of leadership, including transformational, instructional, moral, or participative leadership” (p. 3). However, none of the models fit the unique challenges of failing urban and rural schools. Leithwood went on to conclude that leadership can take “different forms in different context” (p. 7). There is a myriad of examples that can be haggled, but the mere inclusion of all urban and rural schools in the same context of Turnaround Leadership is inconclusive.

Unlike Leithwood and Strauss, Green-Gibson and Collett (2014) proposed a call for change in urban schools by saying the “ability to address effectively the cultural and educational needs of African-American students must require leadership stakeholders, teacher educators, teachers, and counselors to work collaboratively to reform and develop appropriate educational approaches” (p. 1)

In addition, Irby (2014) acknowledges that, “Leadership practices that occur within these schools (urban) reflect school leadership” (p. 1). Irby (2014) proclaimed that education research neglects to examine the leadership challenges that are associated with urban schools and the leadership practices needed to improve urban schools. According to Irby (2014), “education researchers examine anything and everything” (p. 2) but leadership “related to the education of children who live in poverty regardless of where they live or the education of children who live within city limits” (p. 2). Likewise, Green-Gibson and Collett (2014) concluded that “African-American students who attend mainstream (European-centered) public schools... are failing at a higher rate” (p. 1). Thereby, a different and more appropriate leadership model is needed to provide

leaders of urban and rural schools, in terms of different contexts apart from mainstream schools, a model to lead turnaround efforts effectively and successfully.

There are educational leadership proponents who tend to congregate all failing schools into one category with their rendition of a solution. For example, Murphy (2010) summed up that “all failing schools are not worth saving” (p. 93). To restate a previous assertion, he issued a caveat stating “let me be clear that, when I talk about a school failing, I am not talking about the students and their families. It is the school that has failed” (p. 93). Murphy (2010) suggests that the leadership, teachers, and staff have failed.

In Murphy’s defense, he pointed out that leadership “is seen as a central variable in the equation of organizational success” (2010, p. 94). Yet, he did not attempt to provide any coefficients that would lead to success in turning around failing schools. Identifying a problem without providing a solution does not provide an opportunity to address the problem. To clarify Murphy’s perspective on failing schools, he surmised there are approximately nine elements educational leaders must consider to successfully turn around failing schools. Murphy’s elements included “focusing on leadership, acting quickly, diagnosing before selecting a remedy, emphasizing efficiency, centralizing operations, recognizing limitations, focusing on core lines of work, and creating hope through vision” (p. 94). Consequently, these findings do not address the specific needs of urban and rural leadership. Murphy and Leithwood (2010) suggest findings from their studies are consistent with the educational leadership literature and would direct practitioners to the broader literature on organizational leadership to answer the failing school question. Furthermore, they are convinced that their efforts should be “a source of confidence for school leaders aiming to inform their practice with the best available evidence” (p. 29). In contrast, with respect to their efforts, Murphy and Leithwood’s findings should not be applied as a source because Urban and Rural schools’ leaders were not included in the conversation regarding turnaround leadership and what practices, if any, work best. Murphy (2010) believed failing schools should be closed, but closing those schools, it will have an enormous and negative impact on the communities those schools serve while creating new issues for neighboring districts and communities.

Contrastingly, Stein (2012) compared school leaders and teachers to doctors and nurses. Stein clarified that schools need to be saved just the same as patients need to be saved in hospitals. Moreover, he exemplified the need to find “the right school leaders” who will have “a sense of urgency” to save schools that have been labeled as failing (p. 53). Stein provided evidence that concurs with expectations being at the forefront of strategies needed to turn around failing schools. According to Stein (2012), “When I was challenged with turning around a failing school, my first act was to take charge and let everyone know my expectations” (p. 53). Furthermore, Stein championed his belief in distributing leadership roles and responsibilities at an acceptable point during the turnaround process when those opportunities present themselves. He believed, “collaborative leadership comes later, when you have the luxury of time” (p. 53). Stein responded to previous literature with a deliberate approach to changing the academic performance of failing schools. Stein surmised that there are other principals experiencing turnaround success and shared that the school leader is the focal point in beginning the turnaround process.

For instance, successful turnaround principals as illustrated by Kafele (2018), acknowledge that there are successful principals who accept the challenge to improve the academic and cultural performances of failing schools. Kafele proclaimed, “these leaders exist, but I put them in the category of special, visionary, and driven people...” who have committed themselves to

developing their school leadership skills (p. 23). Similarly, Leithwood and Strauss (2010) declared that to improve our comprehension surrounding the complex dynamics of turnaround leadership, we must direct our attention to successful turnaround leadership examples. In contrast, Kafele (2018) recognized that the existence of successful turnaround principals' accomplishments is exceptional and deserving of categorization. This category of exceptional turnaround principals, which would include Torchbearer leaders, would potentially provide a concept to unlock a potential leadership model for struggling urban and rural school leaders. It is this type of leadership model that would aid besieged urban and rural leaders that Kafele described as any "well-intentioned leader who is doing all that he or she can do to stay afloat" (2018, p. 23).

## **Methods**

The participants in this study were three principals and nine teachers from three different urban schools across the state of Alabama that have been designated as Torchbearer schools. Torchbearer Schools are high-poverty public schools that have overcome the odds to become high-performing school according to the Alabama Department of Education (Eleven Alabama Schools Named Torchbearer Schools, n.d.). The participants were chosen by employing a purposive sampling method that is best used with a low number of participants in a group of individuals which is sufficient for understanding human perceptions, problems, needs, behaviors, and contexts, to whom are the central rationalization for qualitative research (Bailey, 1994). Moreover, this sampling method was adopted to recruit the principals, as it "seeks to capitalize on the variations of experiences and descriptions using participants from contrasting "milieus and backgrounds" (Hallberg 2006, p. 143).

The data were collected by a constructed interview method using the "repertory grid" technique. This technique can best be characterized as a semi-structured interview (face-to-face, computerized, or phone interview) where participants are addressed with a series of questions in which they were asked to specify some important ways in which the leadership characteristics are alike and, thereby, different from previous leadership experiences (Bailey, 1994; Kerkhof, 2006).

We used qualitative semi-structured interviews which allowed for questions to be asked that provided a space for open responses from the participants regarding their experiences with principals of Torchbearer schools. According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn, (2019), semi-structure interviews can be used in an academic setting. These semi-structured interviews open the space for both inductive and deductive reasoning in evaluation. Using semi-structured interviews is purposeful in gathering information from participants in the study who have personal experiences, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs regarding the phenomenon that is Torchbearer leadership (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). In addition, the structure of the questions permitted the conceptual framework of Torchbearer leadership to develop, while the open-ended nature of the questions created the space for explanations as to why the phenomenon of successful leadership might have occurred in Torchbearer schools (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

The data were collected by using the following steps. In step one, an e-mail was sent to the principals and teachers to inform them about the purpose of the study. The principals and teachers were asked if they could participate in this research voluntarily. Consent to participate in this study was reached when those who were invited to participate in the research was assured of the confidentiality of the data collected from them and its safe keeping of the data. Those who were invited to participate in this study were informed that their identities would be anonymous, and

their names would not be revealed in any part of the study or shared. Step two, interviews were scheduled and mutually agreed upon with those who accepted the invitation. The participants were visited on the dates previously scheduled. The semi-structured interviews were recorded by audiotape and written notes were taken with the participants' permission. Each semi-structured interview took approximately 50-60 minutes to conduct.

A phenomenological design was appropriately used to recognize the need for an effective leadership model based on the findings presented in this study. Torchbearer principals are school leaders, typically in urban and rural areas in the state of Alabama, who have led successful turnaround efforts in their schools. Data derived from observations of Torchbearer school leaders were transcribed and analyzed to identify common themes among the participating principals. This study sought to determine the essential leadership characteristics that originated from the experiences of successful principals in urban and rural school settings. The collection and labeling of characteristics of Torchbearer principals in this study would potentially lead to the discovery of a new leadership model for struggling principals in similar urban and rural areas.

Principals who led schools that were designated as Torchbearer Schools served more than two years as principal, and were located in or near Birmingham, Montgomery, or Mobile areas were selected. Teachers who served under the leadership of sampled principals were veteran educators who have served more than 10 years as a teacher. The description of the participants resulted in purposive sampling. Additionally, the researcher wanted to discover, understand, and gain insight from the Torchbearer principals' lived experiences. Specifically, the researcher wanted to capture the essence of the "lived" (Hatch, 2002, p. 30) leadership experience of principals who led turnaround efforts at struggling schools. Moreover, the purpose of the design for this study is to "convince the educational leadership community, of "a general phenomenon" (Yin, 1994, p.9) that is Torchbearer Leadership. The rigor of this study was maximized using triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, and an audit trail. Repeated analyses of transcripts and observations were used to allow for common themes to emerge (Creswell, 2007).

## Results

Several themes emerged from this study that were common to all Torchbearer principals. The following analysis used the tenets of transformational and instructional leadership to illuminate the characteristics, behaviors, and practices of Torchbearer principals in high-poverty, high performing schools. This study provides a discussion of how these findings can become practice through a conceptual model for urban and rural school leaders. The identified themes in this study were *Expectations, Provider, Empowerment, Collaboration, Openness, and Data Driven*.

### Expectations

This first theme emerged as a characteristic that was seen in all three Torchbearer principals. Each of them expected students to succeed and teachers to provide quality instruction. All three principals, each of them expressed the importance of clear expectations. One principal stated,

I think that I inspect what I expect. I do not think I am a 'snoopervisor' (*term used by participating principal. This term refers to not snooping on teachers while supervising*

*their work*), but if it is a priority for me, it will be a priority for them. One of the first things I learned when I become a principal was that you could not assume anything.

The commonality among the principals was communicating expectations effectively. Communicating expectations was part of the turnaround process. Expectations would not be effective for teachers without the supervision component. Moreover, expectations were monitored to ensure goals were met and teachers knew the importance of maintaining high levels of standards. On the other hand, ‘expectations’ emerged as number one in the quest to turn around failing schools. Those expectations became more of a personal testament by the participating principals in their belief in students and teachers to overcome the challenges each school faced.

### **Provider**

Providing resources to teachers during the turnaround process was instrumental to their success as Torchbearer principals. Both principals and teachers knew that to improve the instructional program they needed resources. Teachers viewed their principals who provided resources as a provider which to them was a sign of strength as a leader. One teacher recalled,

She finds the financial resources if there is something that we need to get it into our hands. Generosity would be another characteristic as there are times when she will pay for things out of her own pocket if it is not within the budget. If a child does not have something, she goes out and gets out and gets it whether it’s tennis shoes or educational materials.

The principals in this study communicated in their own language that they recognized areas of opportunity and provided support and resources in various forms to teachers and students.

### **Empowerment**

A third theme emerged during this study which described the participants advocating for teachers to take ownership of the turnaround process. The promotion of taking ownership extended to teachers, students, and parents. Torchbearer principals knew that empowering teachers would encourage, if not evoke, a willingness to go above and beyond what was expected of them to improve the academic performances of students. One principal responded,

This is not a job that is done in isolation. You must trust people and be able to delegate. If you try to do it all by yourself, you are going to die. I trust all the people in this building, but I depend on the building experts heavily. Hopefully, we empower each other. By empowering the lead teachers, they take the lead in helping me make sure that everything is being implemented. If there is a problem, we work together in solving the problem. They are immediate support to teachers, but I hope that most of our teachers feel empowered.

The principals all indicated that empowerment allowed them to promote leadership, build relationships, increase trust, and ensure ownership in student achievement.

### **Collaboration**

The theme of Collaboration harnessed the Torchbearer principals’ ability to network and employ attractive people skills which catapulted these principals to lead high-poverty, high-performing schools effortlessly. Teachers from all three school sites shared similar perceptions and experiences about their principals. As a result, one teacher responded,



She brings in her teachers' opinions. There has never been a school year where... ..we have not gotten together as a team. She has consulted with the experts in the building; she does not make decisions on her own. Subscribes to the philosophy that school is part of the community and not separate from that community.

All the principals in this study shared the view and/or perspective on the importance of achieving student success despite the societal challenges present at each school through collaboration with parents and the community.

### **Openness**

In this study, openness was defined as being honest and open about the dire conditions and situations their schools were in. These Torchbearer principals were honest about how the crime rate, poverty, and lack of environmental resources negatively impacted their schools. More importantly, they were honest about their academic achievement levels as well. However, teachers expressed how their principals took the time to listen to them and community stakeholders. Thus, making them open to going against the grain to achieve student success. For example, one teacher stated,

The fact that she is open to change [determines instructional effectiveness]. I feel that when the administrator is open to change, the faculty feels like they have a placement in what is going on. They feel like they are involved, and their ideas are being taken into consideration.

### **Data Driven**

Data meetings, analyzing student data, and adjusting curriculum based on indicators from student data were all common among the Torchbearer principal observed in this study. All the Torchbearer principals studied wholeheartedly believed that data drives instruction. One can witness their belief by simply walking the halls and seeing student data displayed on the walls, hallways, the principal's office, and data meeting rooms. One principal stated,

Everything in the building is transparent data. Anyone can walk into the building and see that our data [are] visible. We look at data on Tuesdays and Thursdays when we have our specified data review meetings to make decisions to help those students achieve.

Data drives our instruction, and we have weekly data meetings.

We are a big data-driven school. Everything is all about data.

The principals in this study all expressed in their own words how they are data-driven and use data to make informed data-driven decisions to positively impact student performances.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study present Torchbearer principals and their leadership characteristics as a different, yet unique framework that would benefit all school leaders in urban and rural areas in terms of a conceptualized leadership model. Myran and Sutherland (2019) surmised that what is "needed in the field of educational administration and leadership is an unpacking of the constraining foundation" of leadership for schools' leaders and start "reframing

the narrative” around the possibilities the Torchbearer leadership model can provide as an effective model to serve failing schools (p. 661).

Moreover, the findings suggest that the conditions in high poverty and low-performing schools provide an ideal opportunity for a differentiated leadership, such as Torchbearer Leadership, to embark on a mission to address the need to turnaround low-performing schools (Duke, et. al., 2007). The commonality among the characteristics that were identified in the study has some resemblance to traditional leadership models such as Transformational and Instructional leadership but does not encapsulate the essence of the models themselves. Furthermore, the commonalities of the characteristics do provide a platform to usher in a potentially new model to lead turnaround efforts based on the characteristics of the studied Torchbearer principals. By the same token, this study demonstrates that effective leadership, such as Torchbearer Leadership, can overcome the challenges of turning around low-performing schools with a specific set of skills that are above and beyond what typical school leaders possess (Duke, et. al, 2007).

As a result, this study of Torchbearer principals has conceptualized Torchbearer leadership which embodies tenets of the effective communicator of expectations, empowerment, provider, collaborator, openness advocate, and a driver of data to enhance the instructional programs of the schools they lead. Burns (1978) argued that organizational leaders employing these tenets would exert an influence and motivation that produce benefits for continued positive behavior. Burns (1978) further suggested that leaders who have trust and confidence in their subordinates inspire them to reach goals of a shared vision. In other words, Torchbearer Leaders possess the ability to motivate teachers through mutually beneficial expectations which inspire them to set and meet a shared vision of excellence when turning around low-performing schools.

After analysis of the commonalities among the Torchbearer principals, the researcher found that when these behavioral descriptions were amalgamated, the result was a desirable approach to leading turnaround efforts in schools experiencing consistent underperformance, particularly in urban and rural areas. Teachers in Torchbearer schools shared common experiences when being led by a Torchbearer principal. These descriptive experiences were grouped into four categories: (1) the torchbearer principal as a provider, (2) the torchbearer principal who empowers, (4) the torchbearer principal as a collaborator, and (4) the torchbearer principal who is open. Once employed, teachers experienced significant incremental growth in student achievement which is identified by the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) as Torchbearer School.

As a provider, the Torchbearer principal marshal their personal resources, building resources, district resources, and community resources to provide support to teachers and staff. These resources are used to address student needs and provide instructional and professional development opportunities for teachers to increase the quality of instruction to all students. By doing so, the Torchbearer principal can achieve the vision and goal of the school. Principals as resource providers is documented in the literature. For example, Jenkins (2009) wrote that “effective instructional leaders need to be resource providers” (p. 36). An earlier study conducted by Smith and Andrews (1989) found that successful principals are good at acquiring needed materials. Later, Leithwood, et. al. (2012) surmised that in the preparation of educational leaders an interactive approach is optimal because it enables them to confront the conflicting pressures they face. Furthermore, Leithwood, et. al (2012) espoused that this development of school leaders equips them to “respond to the needs and pressures for change and development” (p. 13). The Torchbearer principal role in the development of the teachers and staff permits the schools to provide resources necessary to meet the needs for an effective culture and climate in a learning

environment. Thus, confirming the provider attribute is consistent with effective leadership in schools.

When the Torchbearer principal empowered their teachers, these teachers felt included in the environment, the decision-making process, and the overall success of the school. The teachers began to develop deep compassion for the work being done to help students. During the observation, it was apparent there was a level of trust between the faculty and staff. In addition, based on the behaviors of the principal and the teachers, there existed shared compassion for their students. of the schools. Trust is an important element in empowerment. Torchbearer principals view trust as a cornerstone in the culture and climate of a school. Especially, when building these relationships among teacher leaders in a school designated as a Torchbearer school. Moye et al., (2005), found that “teachers who perceived that they were empowered in their work environments had higher levels of interpersonal trust in their principals” (p. 260.). From the outside looking in, Torchbearer principals can be seen building capacity through coaching. Torchbearer principals coach their teachers to be teacher leaders in the building. The literature provides another perspective regarding empowerment that coincides with the notion of building teacher leaders through empowerment. For example, Maxfield and Flumerfelt (2009) wrote “it is possible for principals to contribute to teacher leader development within the context of the daily activities and interactions of a school environment and improve the culture of the school simultaneously” (p. 46).

Torchbearer principal as a collaborator is seen as most effective in terms of moving the school towards its desired goals. By working with the faculty, the Torchbearer principal share in the decision-making process. Torchbearer principals tend to rely on the expertise of the teachers when making instructional decisions for the school, assessments, problem-solving and peer-to-peer professional development. Collaboration is an effective tool during the process of a school reaching its desired goals. The Wallace Foundation (2013) found that “leaders also looked for ways to encourage collaboration, paying special attention to how school time is allocated” (p. 10). Collaboration between the principals and teachers has worked in concert through shared leadership to reach a vision and goal decided upon through the shared decision-making process. The Wallace Foundation concluded that “when principals and teachers share leadership, teachers’ working relationships with one another are stronger and student achievement is higher” (p. 10). As a result of this collaboration, Torchbearer schools increased student achievement has been obtained and sustained over a period of three years according to the ALSDE which gives that distinction.

The Torchbearer principals are open due to their willingness to be transparent. Torchbearer principals are not afraid to share with their teachers the conditions and obstacles that Torchbearer principals face on a day-to-day basis. Also, Torchbearer principals are willing to be honest about how difficult the situation might get before the situation improves. However, Torchbearer principals have managed to convey the importance of connectedness and working together to overcome challenges. The literature points out the pitfalls of transparency but provides a glimmer of hope that transparency can bring. LaFee (2019) stated that school leaders “fear practices that promote openness might undermine their power and position” (p. 1). On the other hand, Torchbearer principals do not share the same sentiments of fear because they believe openness promotes trust in their teachers and community. Michael Fullan (2003) points out that leaders must actively develop sharing of information, tell the truth, admit mistakes, give, and receive constructive feedback, maintain confidentiality, and speak with the good purpose.

Expectations and data-driven decision-making are normal outliers of the Torchbearer leadership model because they are behaviors that instructional leadership-focused principals share. Both characteristics are observed in principals utilizing the instructional and transformational leadership models. However, the exhibiting of these behaviors does not constitute a rehashing of traditional leadership models from the 1980s but merely an acknowledgment that they exist in Torchbearer principals. Smith and Andrews (1989) mentioned that “the effective principal is actively involved in all aspects of the instructional program, sets expectations for continuous improvement...” (p. 21). Expectations and using data to make informed instructional decisions are not new developments in educational leadership. However, expectations and data-driven decisions are the foundations on which the conceptual Torchbearer leadership model is constructed on. The effective Torchbearer principal seems to be able to blend and balance the elements of traditional models along with characteristics that developed out of this study and coalesced them into four elements that are essential to Torchbearer Principals’ leadership: (1) provider of resources, (2) collaborator, (3) empowers others and (4) openness.

### **Implications of Study**

This study on Torchbearer leadership will benefit urban and rural schools where leading these schools is the most challenging. Urban and rural school leaders cannot lead effective turnaround efforts in failing schools because the educational leadership community has given band-aids and not a remedy to combat the systemic and cultural epidemic in urban and rural educational leadership. Myrna and Sutherland (2019) found that the educational leadership community has supported the notion that leadership is only second to teaching which was an identified improvement from earlier assertions that suggested leadership accounted for 3% to 5% of the variation in student learning. Furthermore, to improve the quality of leadership in urban and rural schools, educational leaders must provide an alternative professional leadership practice for those leaders. To do so, it is imperative that educational leaders (1) understand the meaning of Torchbearer leadership as a viable option, (2) develop professional development opportunities on Torchbearer leadership for districts who have schools in need of a turnaround, (3) development cohorts designed to select and educate principals who can perform as Torchbearer Leaders, and (4) implement supervision, evaluation, and Torchbearer development models that will allow school districts to make decisions regarding the achievement of their current group of principals.

Torchbearer leadership has answered the call to focus on ‘successful’ turnaround leadership and improve student performances. In fact, Torchbearer leadership is derived out of the study of successful principals in urban and rural areas in the state of Alabama known as Torchbearer principals. The urban and rural south present a unique set of challenges that are, what most would consider, normal. Overcoming culturally embedded behaviors that impact the overall performance of the school is a daunting task for even the most skilled and experienced principal. However, Torchbearer leadership will be seen by principals and superintendents as a viable option to lead failing schools. Professional development opportunities are likely to be created as a result of exposure to this study which will bring to the educational leadership community a new and innovative leadership model, Torchbearer Leadership. Moreover, the literature is definite in its proclamation that school leadership is essential in recognizing success in failing schools. Yet, no evidence within the literature suggests a definite model for failing schools in urban and rural Alabama and other states alike. On the other hand, this study will add to the scarce and limited

body of available research surrounding leadership models for leaders leading turnaround campaigns.

## Conclusions

Urban and rural school leaders are poised to lead turnaround campaigns within and around communities that desperately need academic and cultural change. However, to equip well-intentioned, struggling, and overwhelmed leaders for the task at hand, these leaders must furnish a leadership model that will fill the void of appropriateness regarding school leadership in urban and rural schools. Efforts to address the lack of an appropriate leadership model for urban and rural schools are beginning to take shape. This study is one of a few that are seeking to address the scant and sparse leadership models for urban and rural school leaders. According to Hitt et. al. (2018) “growing attention has been given to what principals in such schools need to be able to lead a turnaround, although the articulation of those expectations seldom differs much from already established bodies of school leadership literature” (p.57).

Failing schools are on the rise and becoming more protuberant in districts where schools are racially homogenous over the years. The number of free and reduced students is increasing which incorporates 90-99% of the student population. These factors have been consistent when identifying failing schools. According to Fowler and Wahlberg (1991), they surmised that “districts socioeconomic status and the percentage of students from low-income families were the most influential and consistent factors related to schooling outcomes” (p. 191). However, there is hope. Recent studies have demonstrated that consistent collaboration with leadership and teachers can evoke substantial change in failing schools. For example, Jarl, Anderson, and Blossing (2021) concluded that “failing schools have unique characteristics” such as an absence of collaboration which signals that working together “is difficult or does not work” (p. 464). In contrast, “at successful schools, teachers and principals have high expectations of students and signal what is expected of them” (p. 465). The hope is the characteristic of collaboration as expressed in this study provides a glimmer of what is possible in a new leadership model. Also, the level of expectation from both teachers and students signifies working collaborative is not difficult but encouraged in moving failing schools towards success. Furthermore, Jarl et. al, (2021) espoused that “successful schools have created stability and continuity in students’ learning environments that enable learning to prosper” (p. 466).

This study makes a significant contribution to educational leadership. It shows a persistent culture change in leadership and increased teacher collaboration at successful Torchbearer schools. Moreover, this study argues that it is most likely that change is needed in the leadership and the way principals evoke change, and that such a culture of success is missing in failing schools. Principals are important agents of change through the way they act as leaders (Leithwood & Louis, 2011).

Therefore, Torchbearer Leadership is leadership in the best interest of students where educational leaders and policymakers cannot ignore this growing epidemic that is on the horizon in education. A proficient school leadership model, such as Torchbearer Leadership, would allow leaders of failing schools to have the audacity to lead and be deliberate in turning around failing schools. Districts will be more inclined to hire principals with Torchbearer training to respond to the turnaround challenge. Hitt et. al (2018) espoused the notion that “urban schools are increasingly ascertaining principal candidates’ leadership competencies and then using these

competency scores to make hiring decisions about which candidates are best suited to turn around their low-performing schools” (p. 57).

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## AN EXAMINATION OF THE COMMUNITY ACTION POVERTY SIMULATION IN RURAL EDUCATION

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if participation in the Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS) had an impact on rural educator candidates' and practicing rural educators' attitudes toward poverty (ATP). The group of rural educator candidates are students pursuing an undergraduate degree in education at a small, rural university in Alabama. Practicing educators who participated in the research were from a rural school in west Alabama. The CAPS is a one-hour simulation made up of four 15-minute weeks. Each 15-minute time segment simulates one week in poverty. In each week, participants have various tasks to complete in the allotted time. Participants in the simulation take on the roles of individuals living in poverty. Data was examined from two different simulation groups, rural educator candidates and practicing rural educators. All participants completed a demographic information sheet and the Pretest before participation in the CAPS. Following the simulation, all participants are involved in the debrief session. This session, led by the facilitator, allows participants to discuss the range of feelings they experienced during the simulation. After the debrief portion of the simulation, participants completed the Posttest. Statistical analysis using SPSS was conducted. Data were analyzed using a paired samples t-test. The results indicated an increased (more positive) ATP score ( $M_1 = 3.65$ ,  $M_2 = 3.68$ ) for rural educator candidates, but there was not a statistically significant difference ( $p = .578$ ). However, the data for practicing rural educators indicated an increase in the ATP score ( $M_1 = 3.51$ ,  $M_2 = 3.68$ ) and a statistically significant difference ( $p = .000$ ). Based on the data analysis, it was concluded that participation in the CAPS has a greater impact on practicing educators versus undergraduate education majors. Rural school leaders grapple with ways to ensure students living in poverty have the same learning opportunities as other students to thrive academically. Often school accountability is focused on high-stakes testing results. Across the nation, there is an increase of children from homes of poverty, who have unique educational needs. Rural schools are faced with barriers such as funding, isolation, and community support. School leaders must ensure faculty and staff have a clear understanding of poverty and how poverty can affect a student's educational journey; hence, the need to provide poverty simulation training.

*Keywords:* poverty, rural, leadership, simulation, education

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## **Introduction**

Researchers have established the Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS) is has a positive impact on student attitudes toward poverty in multiple healthcare-related fields (Hitchcock et al., 2018; Lampiris et al., 2017; Northrup et al., 2020). The CAPS is an in-person simulation where participants work through the one-hour simulation, consisting of four 15-minute weeks simulating life in poverty. In each of the 15-minute time segments, participants complete many of the day-to-day tasks as a person living in poverty. Participants are given scenario cards and scripts that require prioritization of necessities, much like people living in real poverty situations. Little research has been done to determine if CAPS effectively improves educator attitudes toward poverty. This study focused on rural educator candidates and practicing rural educators to determine what effect participation in CAPS had on their attitudes toward poverty.

This study occurred at a small, rural institution in the southeast United States. The county seat of the location where the research took place has 46% of its children living in poverty, which is drastically higher than the national average of 18% (Alabama Possible, 2019). Based on the high rate of poverty in the area this study was conducted, providing educators with opportunities to understand poverty better may provide beneficial learning opportunities for K-12 students in the community.

According to Ajzen (2001), "strong attitudes are thought to have several interesting qualities. They are said to be relatively stable over time, to be resistant to persuasion, and to predict manifest behavior" (p. 37). Understanding that attitude is a predictor of behavior makes having a positive attitude toward poverty critical in the classroom. While studies show strong attitudes are resistant to change (Ajzen, 2001), other studies have shown that CAPS participants have a more positive attitude toward poverty after the simulation (Hitchcock et al., 2018; Lampiris et al., 2017; Northrup et al., 2020).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study aimed to determine the impact participation in the CAPS had on rural educator candidate and practicing rural educator attitudes toward poverty. Many research studies have been conducted to determine how poverty simulations impact participant understanding of poverty (Hitchcock et al., 2017; Northrup et al., 2020; Lampiris et al., 2017). However, each study was conducted with students pursuing healthcare-related fields, including dental, nursing, and pharmacy students. Few research studies can be found on how CAPS participation will impact attitudes toward the poverty of educators or those pursuing a degree in education.

### **Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature**

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the Pygmalion effect. This effect "usually refers to the fact that people, often children, students, or employees, tend to live up to what is expected of them, and they tend to do better when treated as if they are capable" (Chang, 2011, p. 198). Rosenthal and Jacobson (1992) conducted a study in which students were given an intelligence test at the beginning of the school year. The researchers informed teachers that a particular group of student test results indicated they were "showing unusual potential for intellectual growth" (Jensen, 2009, p. 114). However, this selection of students with advance intellectual growth, was actually selected at random. At the end of the school year, the students who were labeled as intelligent showed drastic improvement compared to those who were not

labeled as intelligent. This study showed that high teacher expectations could lead to improved student performance.

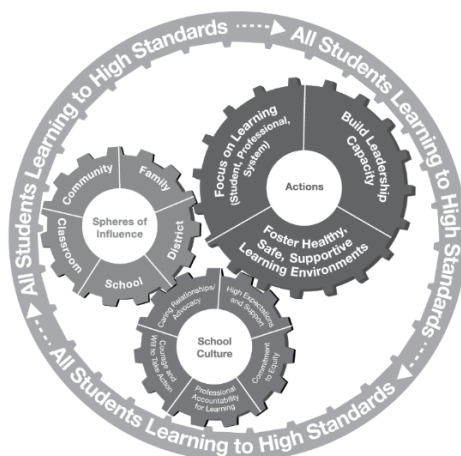
Jensen (2009) explained that teachers must of better understand all students. However, many middle-class teachers do not understand the behaviors of students who come from poverty (Jensen, 2009). Providing educators with a better understanding of poverty could benefit future student academic outcomes. Kannapel and Clements (2009) researched the successes of high-performing, high-poverty schools in Kentucky. The study results indicated that one of the factors contributing to student's success was "high expectations that were communicated in concrete ways" (Kananpel & Clements, 2009, p. 2). The high expectations were not just from the teachers to students; they began with the principal setting high standards for teachers. High expectations and school culture tend to go hand-in-hand. School culture is extremely powerful, often difficult to define, put the finger on. Focusing on what matters most, like a focus on high expectations, will lead to improved academic achievement for all students. Students tend to rise to the level of expectation. The Georgia Budget & Policy Institute (2017) if educators believe students are smart, students believe more in themselves. The school leader sets the tone at the school. It begins at the top. School leaders who set high expectations for all (teachers and students) typically have stronger, more academically rigorous schools. Additionally, findings showed that teachers and staff at the high-performing schools did not treat students in poverty any differently from other students. All students were held to high expectations, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Figure 1 shows Parrett and Budge's (2012) Framework for Action: Leading High-Poverty Schools to High-Performance. This figure, which is the premise for their text by the same name, shows that "All Students Learning to High Standards" is the critical thread for school-wide success. According to Parrett and Budge (2012, p. 15) this figure "attempted to illustrate the complex interactions between the three arenas in which leaders take action, the nature of the culture found in high-performing/high-poverty schools, and various spheres through which leaders influence the lives of students in poverty" However, when one has not experienced poverty, they may not understand the challenges faced daily. Participation in the CAPS may introduce some of these challenges to educators, helping them have a more sensitive attitude and higher expectations for students living in poverty.

Johnson (2015) stated, "poverty cannot be used as an excuse to educate students ineffectively" (p. 3). Historically, education has been seen as an equalizer among classes and the most efficient route to leaving poverty. Because of this, effective educators are critical for students in poverty. Academic performance in students is closely linked to socioeconomic status. Children living in poverty enter school at approximately 18 months behind their peers in cognitive development ("When Poverty Comes to School," 2014). Lavalley (2018) examined the relationship between reading scores and home literacy's importance. Conclusions were drawn that "rural students begin school with lower reading achievement than their suburban peers." These gaps, according to Lavalley (2018, p. 9) are bolstered by "deep, persistent rural poverty." Sosnowski (2020) concluded that "children of higher-income parents increased their vocabularies at twice the rate of children in poverty" (para. 5).

**Figure 1**

*A Framework for Action: Leading High-Poverty Schools to High-Performance*



Middle-class and low-income students can have many different characteristics in the school and classroom setting. Jensen (2013) identified seven of the most common: (a) health and nutrition, (b) vocabulary, (c) effort, (d) hope and growth mindset, (e) cognition, (f) relationships, and (g) distress. Educators having a solid understanding and focusing on these seven characteristics may help students in poverty work toward a more equitable education.

Taylor (2017, p. 1) stated "beyond education-related deficiencies, low-income children can experience inadequacies with physical and cognitive development and disparities regarding access to key resources that help ensure success." Understanding the extensive relationship between a child's socioeconomic status and classroom success is critical for change in poverty-stricken communities. Investing in change for the future of those students living in poverty may present in the form of early integration, more intense coursework, and a focus on college and career-ready standards (Taylor, 2017).

The Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS) was developed by the Missouri Association for Community Action (MACA) as a learning tool to help people better understand the effects of poverty. The CAPS consists of participants working through a one-hour simulation, to provide for their families necessities. Each week consists of a different scenario in which the participant must make decisions that people in poverty make daily. According to MACA, "the simulation was designed to sensitize those who frequently deal with low-income families, as well as create a broader awareness of the realities of poverty among policymakers, community leaders, and others" (2011, #20 Binder, p. 1). CAPS is a widely used simulation experience (Steck et al., 2011). The active participatory aspect of CAPS provides a unique experience for participants.

### **CAPS History**

The CAPS was developed as a training tool for the Missouri Community Action Network to bring awareness to those living in poverty. While the original simulation dates back to the 1970s and an organization known as Reform Organization of Welfare (ROWEL), the Missouri Community Action Network purchased the CAPS copyright in 2002. Since then, updates have

been made to the simulation to include a homeless shelter and inter-faith services (2007) and a community health center (2012) (About the Simulation FAQ, 2020).

### **CAPS Debrief**

"The debriefing is the bridge to transformation, outcome attainment, and social action" (Missouri Community Action Network, p. 17). According to Shinnick et al. (2011), knowledge scores increased from pretest to posttest when participants experienced the debrief process. In contrast, participants who were not a part of the debriefing process had decreased scores from pretest to posttest (as cited in Melkersman, 2020).

### **Simulation in Education**

Simulations allow participants to conduct themselves in any manner without receiving negative, real-life consequences. Simulations "allow users to encounter problem situations, try decisions and actions, experience the results, and modify their behavior without risking harm" (Kaufman & Ireland, 2016, p. 261). Hitchcock et al. (2018) concluded that "experiential learning using realistic poverty simulations appears to be an effective method to help the educator bridge the gap between theory and real-life" (p. 527). Situational simulations, as defined by Alessi and Trollip (2001), are "those that model aspects of working environments and interpersonal interactions, making them particularly applicable to teacher training and assessment" (as cited in Kaufman & Ireland, 2016, p. 262). Lunce (2006) concurs that situational simulations, similar to CAPS, "employ role-playing as a vehicle to allow students to explore different options and decision paths" (p. 38). Additionally, scenario/role-play simulations have enhanced participants' ability to prioritize and communicate with others (Kaufman & Ireland, 2016).

### **Methods**

This study used a quantitative within-subject research method that can be statistically analyzed (Patten & Newhart, 2018). This design selection allowed the researcher to study results from the same group of participants before (Pretest) and immediately following the simulation (Posttest). The data was reviewed for two groups of participants, rural educator candidates and practicing rural educators. The results yielded from these questions helped identify if participation in the CAPS results in a more positive attitude toward poverty. Based on literary research, many rural children who live in poverty have classroom teachers with no formal training on poverty (Bennett, 2008; Capra, 2009; Ryan, 2006).

Participants in this study were undergraduate students pursuing a degree in education at a small, rural institution and practicing rural educators. There was a decreased participation rate due to COVID-19 protocols in place when the simulation was completed. All educator candidate participants (n=31) were on-campus undergraduate students and had a declared major in an education field. The findings from that data may be generalizable to other rural institutions whose educator candidates serve high-poverty populations upon program completion. The second set of data gathered from practicing rural educators (n=61) contains results that may be generalizable to other rural schools, similar in size and demographics.

The procedure used in this study closely followed those outlined by the Missouri Community Action Network (2011). The host for the simulation was trained as a simulation

facilitator. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire and the Pretest before the simulation. Candidates were assigned an identifier that would link their data, but not their identity. This identifier was added to all submissions. Participants were then provided an overview of the CAPS, and the simulation began. At the conclusion of the simulation, all participants took part in a facilitator-led debrief session. In this time, participants were encouraged to share how they felt during their week in poverty. The simulation facilitators used open-ended questions to encourage conversations that would enhance the simulation experience. Upon completing the simulation and the debrief process, participants completed Posttest. The Pretest and Posttest were the same Yun & Weaver 21-item ATP short form.

## Results

Data analyses in this study were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. A paired samples t-test was used to independently compare the data for each set. Results indicated that participation in the CAPS statistically impacts practicing rural educators, but not rural educator candidates.

**Table 1**

### *Rural Educator Candidates*

Category	N	M	SD	t <sub>31</sub>	p	95% CI
Pretest	31	3.65	.51	.563	.578	-.10, .17
Posttest	31	3.68	3.49			

Table 1 shows the data for the rural educator candidates indicating an increase (more positive) in the mean ATP score (M=3.65, M=3.68) but does not indicate a statistically significant increase (p=.578). Practicing rural educators' data is shown in Table 2 and indicates a more substantial mean increase from pretest to post-test (M=3.51, M=3.68) and a statistically significant difference (p=.000).

**Table 2**

### *Practicing Rural Educators*

Category	N	M	SD	t <sub>31</sub>	p	95% CI
Pretest	61	3.51	.45	3.913	.000	.09, .26
Posttest	61	3.68	.48			

According to one rural school leader who participated in the CAPS, “sometimes teachers get caught up, and all they want to do is teach, which is not a bad thing, but until you can meet those basic needs of those students, the education is not going to happen, and they are not going to learn content.”



## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to determine if participation in the CAPS would yield a more positive attitude toward poverty among rural educator candidates and practicing rural educators. This study's results indicate that the simulation experience results are more positive when the participants are practicing educators versus educator candidates. Effective school leaders recognize the importance of supporting all learners, particularly at-risk ones. Many rural students come to school with deficits. When you coming from an area of poverty and a rural area, many students struggle to succeed. It is widely believed that a good school leader is the key to a successful school. It is also widely believed for schools to thrive; all stakeholders must embrace and support one another. The best way to embrace and support others is to understand better the struggles one faces. The poverty simulation experience is an excellent way to ensure others within a school can better understand the struggles of others.

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