LEADING SCHOOLS IN POVERTY: PRINCIPAL PERCEPTIONS, KEY FACTORS, AND STRATEGIES TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS

By

Gabriela Arriazola Rivera

A Scholarly Delivery Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Educational Leadership

West Texas A&M University

Canyon, Texas

December, 2021

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Scholarly Delivery Framework

The research focus of the scholarly delivery is on improving the academic performance of students in poverty through specific leadership strategies and critical factors that positively impact parental, community, and teacher involvement. The first scholarly deliverable is a case study article that can be used for teaching doctoral or master's candidates in the field of educational leadership. The title of this article is "Principals Transforming Schools in Poverty." This case study showcases the specific leadership strategies of a transformational principal coming into a rural school in poverty to influence, inspire, and unite the staff, community, and all stakeholders to improve students' academic achievement. The final scholarly deliverable is titled "Leading Schools in Poverty: Principal Perceptions, Key Factors, and Strategies to Academic Success," is an empirical article that focuses on leadership efforts of high-performing rural school principals to increase academic performance by involving parents, the community, and teachers.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS
Letter of Approval

April 1, 2021

Dr. Harper:

The West Texas A & M University Institutional Review Board is pleased to inform you that upon review, proposal **#2021.03.016** for your study titled, **"Rural School Principals Transforming Poverty Schools,"** meets the requirements of the WTAMU Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) No. 15.99.05.W1.01AR Institutional Review Board (Human Subject Research). Approval is granted for one calendar year. This approval expires on **March 31, 2022.**

Principal investigators assume the following responsibilities:

1. **Continuing Review:** The protocol must be renewed on or before the expiration date if the research project requires more than one year for completion. A Continuing Review form along with required documents must be submitted on or before the stated deadline. Failure to do so will result in study termination and/or loss of funding.
2. **Completion Report:** At the conclusion of the research project (including data analysis and final written papers), a Close out form must be submitted to AR-EHS.
3. **Unanticipated Problems and Adverse Events:** Pursuant to SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.13AR, unanticipated problems and serious adverse events must be reported to AR-EHS.
4. **Reports of Potential Non-Compliance:** Pursuant to SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.05AR, potential non-compliance, including deviations from the protocol and violations, must be reported to the IRB office immediately.
5. **Amendments:** Changes to the protocol must be requested by submitting an Amendment form to AR-EHS for review by the IRB. The Amendment must be approved by the IRB before being implemented. Amendments do not extend time granted on the initial approval
6. **Consent Forms:** When using a consent form, only the IRB approved form is allowed.
7. **Audit:** Any proposal may be subject to audit by the IRB Administrator during the life of the study. Investigators are responsible for maintaining complete and accurate records for five years and making them available for inspection upon request.
8. **Recruitment:** All recruitment materials must be approved by the IRB. Recruitment materials distributed to potential participants must use the approved text and include the study's IRB number, approval date, and expiration dates in the following format: WTAMU IRB##-##-## Approved: ##/##/#### Expiration Date: ##/##/####.
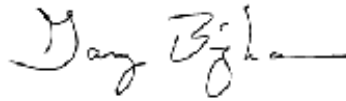
9. **FERPA and PPRA:** Investigators conducting research with students must have appropriate approvals from the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

administrator at the institution where the research will be conducted in accordance with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) if applicable to the research being proposed. The Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) protects the rights of parents in students ensuring that written parental consent is required for participation in surveys, analysis, or evaluation that ask questions falling into categories of protected information.

Sixty days prior to the expiration of this proposal, you will receive a notification of the approaching expiration date at which time you will need to submit an Amendment/Continuation/Close out form.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

Dr. Gary Bigham
Chair, WTAMU IRB

Dr. Angela Spaulding
Vice President of Research and Compliance

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I am immensely grateful to my family. Porque mi logro es su logro. Sin ustedes yo no soy nada. A mi esposo Edgar y a mis hijos Didier y Dasten, ustedes son mi razón de vivir. Gracias por su paciencia y amor. Los quiero mas que nada en este mundo. Ustedes siempre serán mis personas favoritas y los amaré para siempre.

Para mi papa, Antonio Arriazola. Aquí te va papi. ¡Mi doctorado! Y te lo dedico en especial para ti como prueba de que valió la pena tú sacrificio. Papi, siempre seguirás vivo en mí en mi hermano, Chris. Te querré por siempre y nunca olvidaré todo lo que me enseñaste. Te extraño cada día mas. Y el dolor de perderte no tiene fin. Pero sé que estas conmigo, aunque ya no te puedo ver. Gracias Papi por todo el amor y todos los sacrificios que hiciste por nosotros para darnos una mejor vida. Te amaré por siempre hasta que un día te vuelva a ver.

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A special thanks to my committee chair, Dr. Irma Harper. Her immense knowledge, experience, encouragement, and especially for always believing in my academic potential. Her concern for me as a "person" when I needed it most will always

be a cherished memory. I am also extremely grateful to my principal, Tammie Villarreal, for hiring me twice, allowing me to begin my journey as a leader, mentoring me along the way, and for her tremendous understanding and encouragement in the past few years. It would have been impossible for me to complete my study and survive my personal adversities without her support.

Finally, to my best friend and beloved "hermana", Veronica Ramirez, my godchildren Brooke and Blake, "You keep me grounded, and spending time talking to you and watching the kids play is one of my favorite things to do." Last but not least, to my doctoral support group and partners in crime, "Las Chicas, we made a pact to support each other through thick and thin pulling, pushing, or dragging each other across the stage." ¡Sí se pudo! None of this would be possible without your support, help, and encouragement. We will be forever bonded.

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Principals Transforming Schools in Poverty

by

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Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

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Abstract

Principal Wick moved from a middle school in an affluent gated community to a high school in a poverty-stricken area. Many families lack the basic necessities and struggle to make ends meet. Student academic performance dwindles along with the morale and frustration of the staff. The area is filled with criminal activity that lures students away from academics, while trying to survive as they struggle to live in an impoverished community. This case study is a narrative of a transformational principal left to gain trust, find solutions and influence change within an economically disadvantaged community.

Keywords: poverty, educational leadership, school improvement, economically disadvantaged

Principals Transforming Schools in Poverty

The principal's role as the central figure of school leadership is to drive change and improve student academic success (Bush, 2019). This is a task that principals aspire to accomplish, but it is difficult when a leader is chosen to be the "savior" in a high-poverty, at-risk campus. Grissom (2011) stated that principals tend to be weaker in high-poverty, low-achieving schools. Few principals are "up" for the challenge of tackling high poverty areas where there is an abundance of unemployed, homeless, and gang-related activities. A 2017 national survey of public-school principals found that, overall, approximately 21% of principals in high poverty schools had left their position since the year before (Goldring & Taie, 2018).

Principals working in high poverty schools face many challenges when working with at-risk students. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds face many hardships, in addition to their academic needs. Over six million children in the United States live in poverty (Olszewski-Kubilius & Corwith, 2018). These children lack basic necessities, and their need to "survive" places stress on them and their families. It seems impossible for students to thrive academically in such extreme circumstances. In order for students to have an opportunity to break the cycle of poverty, "schools must create a partnership with parents seeking to involve parents, particularly those of at-risk students" (Lacour &Tissington, 2011, p. 526). Lack of monetary support leaves families with the inability to cope and adjust to their environment. Masarik and Conger (2017) found parents raising children in an environment stressed by poverty are more likely to apply harsh punishment or neglect to supervise their children. The lack of parental support not

only affects the parent-child relationship but also makes it difficult for these children to progress academically.

Background Information

A thorough description of the student's environment and the community's economic hardships are provided in this case study. A new principal faces the institution's organizational challenges and students' academic deficiencies at a high poverty school. In addition, this case "highlights" the ability of a transformational leader to create change by forming relationships, involving the community, and collaborating with his staff.

The principal's transformational leadership "shines a light" on internal and external factors that can interfere with the learning and well-being of the students. This case provides discussion questions to analyze the actions of the principal in the attempt to improve the learning environment for students while engaging the staff and the community. The educational leader coming into a high poverty community identifies the organizational practices and local pressures that may impede student academic success. In order to create a healthy learning environment in an economically disadvantaged community, the principal must "set up" the right conditions to attain success.

Context

Gasper High School (GHS) is a school composed of approximately 900 students located in the Central United States. GHS is located in the downtown area of Valley Lake Independent School District (VLISD), a large school district located in the city of Termont. VISD serves 50,000 students in 65 schools, and during the year 2020 experienced an increase in minority demographics, with the percentage of African American students jumping from 15% in 2010 to compose 25% in 2020. The Hispanic

population also increased from 30% in 2010 to 40% in 2020. GHS historically has been located in the most impoverished area of the city and is surrounded by low socioeconomic neighborhoods. The demographics of GHS consist of 99% economically disadvantaged students; of this percentage, 95% participate in free or reduced lunch. Gasper High School is also composed of 40% African American students, 50% Hispanic, and 10% of the population is white or of mixed race. At GHS, the White students are the minority, with most of the students coming from similar backgrounds as the rest of the school population. These students also participate in free or reduced lunch, and many of their parents struggle to meet their basic needs.

Many of the residents in this community have grown up in the area and attended GHS. In the past 10 years, with a surge in minorities, a decrease in the economy, and the expense of higher education, many families cannot access a living wage to meet their needs. The residents have seen an increase in crime, and the living conditions continue to deteriorate. Since GHS is located close to a busy avenue in the poorest area of the city, many homeless people hang out in the local park across the street from the school. Without resources to accommodate the growing population of homeless people in the area, the park is becoming more dangerous as these homeless residents cater to visitors that include local small-time drug dealers.

Case Narrative

Most of the students that attend GHS are accustomed to hardship. They have lived in poverty all of their life with the norm of losing their loved ones to incarceration, immigration, or victims of crime. The local drug dealers target the students that are desperate to attain essential basic resources. Due to their vulnerability, drug dealers and

other undesirable individuals take advantage of the student's poverty, immaturity and lure them into selling drugs or engaging in other illegal acts. The students are in survival mode, with much suffering abuse and enduring hunger. Their academic success is not a priority. The students cannot see themselves reflected in the staff and feel the people at school can't really understand them or their home environment. One teacher, in particular, Mrs. Johnson said:

> The students don't realize how easy they have it. Wait until they get to the real world. Then they will understand how hard life really is. All they have to do is turn in a few questions on an assignment. These kids don't take us seriously and don't care about their education.

Her view is not shared amongst all of the staff. Many staff members believe that the students require additional support such as counseling, patience, and positive reinforcement. Mrs. Jane said:

> Our kids are in the real world. They worry about what they are going to eat when they get home. They have to raise younger siblings and make sure they have food because of the lack of parental support. Many of our students are stressed beyond belief. No wonder academics aren't important. Can you really blame them for not having a pencil or forgetting their homework?

GHS has a reputation for being a tough school and historically has the lowest academic performance in the district. Even as the district improves, GHS test scores continue to decrease despite the efforts of school leaders. The VLISD is taking notice of the plundering scores and is rolling out new policies, initiatives, and systems to work with Gasper's leadership team to attempt to turn the school around. Most teachers have

been working at GHS for over 10 years and feel that most of the district mandates will not work. These educators are already in an uproar because they feel the district doesn't understand the unique challenges the school has. Despite their protest, the superintendent in combination with the high school leadership team, district curriculum team, and behavior specialist, will be closely collaborating and monitoring the GHS leadership team. As their new principal, Principal Wick, takes control of the school, there are many underlying issues that are hindering the academic progress of the students and staff. Principal Wick acknowledges the school's unique circumstances, economically challenged students, and the mistrust he faces from the community and staff.

Gasper High School - Transitions

VLISD hired a new principal for GHS in June of 2019, Principal Chad Wick. The previous principal, Mr. Jones, a White male that grew up in a wealthy elite household, was principal of GHS for 10 years and viewed himself as the "giver of knowledge". Mr. Jones was the district curriculum coordinator before he left to take over GHS. He felt that the district's initiatives were adopted for a short period of time and constantly changing. He knew the "ins and outs" of teaching, curriculum, and he wanted to implement some of his own ideas. Since Mr. Jones worked at a district level position, he was well versed in the latest curriculum and teaching strategies in reading, math, science, and social studies. Mr. Jones believed that his job was to involve all the staff in weekly staff developments, constant training, and enforced an outline on the "dos and don'ts" of teaching. A teacher at GHS described Mr. Jones:

> Mr. Jones is an intelligent man, but he believes that he knows the only possible
> way to do things. We never have an opportunity to try our own ideas. Although

we understand learning is important, we never get a break from staff development. He doesn't understand our students or us because he comes from another world.

Chad Wick was notified that he would take the GHS principal position in 2019 shortly after the school board received sudden notification about Mr. Jones successfully securing a superintendent position at a nearby school district. Mr. Wick was the principal of Pleasant Middle School, located across town, whose demographics were quite different from GHS. Pleasant Middle School had some of the top scores in the district and was composed of 10% minorities, 90% white, with a prime location in an affluent neighborhood in the city. The community was involved in assisting Principal Wick in every school activity, and many parents made considerable donations to the school.

When Principal Wick was notified that he would be moving to a high school, he was excited because he had pursued this change for a number of years. He knew Mrs. Glad was retiring from Sunny High School a few blocks away. Principal Wick was ecstatic when the superintendent informed him about his promotion as leader of a high school. When Principal Wick asked the superintendent if he was moving to Sunny High School, the superintendent asked him to come to his office the next morning. He went home to inform his wife, and they celebrated the upcoming change to most likely being Sunny High School. This job came with a number of challenges, such as pressure from parents striving for perfection in their child's academic success. It also included perks staying close to the families he was accustomed to and a noticeable increase to his salary. The next morning when Principal Wick arrived at the meeting with the superintendent, he almost fainted when he was notified that the school, he was assigned to was Gasper High

School. His face turned red with a combination of fear, nerves, and anxiety. Although he loved helping students succeed, he knew that being a White male from a school in an affluent neighborhood, he would not be well received by the staff, students, and the local community. The reason he had the desire to become the principal at Sunny High School was that it was located only minutes from his middle school and served the students of the community that knew and respected him.

When Principal Wick went to GHS to meet his staff, he was met with anger and disappointment from his employees. The staff was hoping for an experienced leader accustomed to the school's demographics, challenges, and struggles. They were optimistic that one of the neighboring middle school leaders would be assigned to be principal and would assist with their hardships because these leaders experienced their struggles firsthand. They weren't shy, showing Principal Wick their frustration and disappointment. Knowing his background, they were convinced that he was a Mr. Jones "clone". Principal Wick's background mirrored their prior leader and induced fear and uncertainty amongst the members of the school. The teaching staff was dreading micromanagement and desired creative freedom. They felt they knew the students better than anyone and believed their opinion should be considered when planning the curriculum.

When the district released the new principal's name to the community, they were angered that they did not have a principal that reflected the majority of the school population. Many desired a minority leader with the ability to communicate with Spanish-speaking parents. They felt that this was the only way they would have an opportunity to be heard and included in restructuring the school. Over half of the student

population had parents that only spoke Spanish. These parents would not participate in meetings or school functions because they couldn't communicate and felt they were not important. The community was shocked and angered when they discovered that the new principal for GHS came from Glad Middle School. All the parents from Glad Middle School had beautiful homes in a gated community and drove the latest SUV. The students at Glad Middle School grew up with a "silver spoon" and a multitude of private tutors ready to help them reach success or even perfection. The students attended Sunny High School after completing their education at Glad Middle School. They were known to get into Ivy League schools, and parents spared no expense to ensure that this happened.

The GHS parents questioned how a principal would be able to serve the community of Gasper High School with only upper-class experience. The working parents earned minimum wage, and many struggled to put food on the table. Mr. Jones only offered afternoon events impossible to attend on a 12-hour shift schedule. Parents found it difficult to understand the reasoning behind poor school communication, lack of flexibility for school events, and limited parent involvement opportunities. It was almost impossible to attend school events and support their children. One of the parents, Mrs. Morales stated:

> I don't get off of work until 6 p.m. I was unable to be present at my daughter's award ceremony. It broke both of our hearts, but leaving work early is impossible. I also need the money to pay for our rent. I wish Mr. Jones would realize that most of our schedules are similar and make it impossible to be here for our kids.

Most parents depend on one income due to the incarceration of a mate, living as a single parent, or immigration status, making it difficult to work. Their homes reflect the lack of resources, unstable environment, and the desperate need for assistance. Some of the student's daily meals came from the school, and they depend on them. "How can this white male driving a BMW from an affluent neighborhood help us?" they asked. The parents began "trashing" Principal Wick on social media and making angry calls to the school and the district, demanding another leader. They have not even met him, and the parents are already openly sharing their anger with anyone that will listen. Although he was nervous, he knew that he had to be a positive influence, and it was crucial to get his leadership team on board.

Principal Wick was a dedicated worker, a man of his word, and was known for his high ethical standards. He was motivated to serve others, especially when it came to children's success; he believed all students deserve an education. Although this assignment to GHS came as a surprise, he was a man that enjoyed a challenge and looked forward to leading a high school. His superintendent knew that Principal Wick was dedicated to learning and was confident he would find a way to increase student achievement. After much thought, many conversations, and support from his wife, he firmly believed he had the capabilities to create the change needed to lead the school. Principal Wick decided to jump in full force with a positive attitude. Since GHS was already the last in the district, the students needed urgent support in order to leave the cycle of poverty and improve their lives through education. Principal Wick's only choice was to attempt and embrace this new opportunity to change the students' lives.

Plan of Action: Developing Community Awareness and Cohesiveness

Park. The superintendent granted Principal Wick's request for Officer Gonzalez, a liaison officer, to accompany him to the park to assess the situation closely. The local teens were playing basketball on the run-down basketball court. Dangerous gang members loitering at the park would eventually approach the students.

Homeless Residents. In addition to the dangerous visitors, the homeless residents have brought with them other problems such as an abundance of trash, debris, and transitional homes. Officer Gonzalez offered to call in backup and have the police evict the park residents. Principal Wick immediately declined the offer. Officer Gonzalez then suggested calling Zoey Gomez, a local community advocate that grew up in the area and attended GHS as a teen. Principal Wick decided to collaborate with Zoey to assist in finding emergency resources such as shelters for the residents. She began the task of working with social services to offer the residents a safe place to stay, access to food, and medical care. Principal Wick demanded a full-time liaison officer to be visibly present at the school to discourage drug dealers and other undesirable visitors. During school hours, Officer Gonzalez patrolled GHS and its surrounding areas. The students were well monitored upon morning arrival and during dismissal. Principal Wick requested extra patrol cars to make rounds every hour in the evening.

Park Renovations. Principal Wick got a hold of Kee Valverde, the city's parks and recreational department manager, and insisted that the park be renovated. He convinced him that the basketball court needed to be restored, and there was a desperate need to improve the landscaping. Principal Wick, his family, Zoey, and a group of volunteers arrived to clear out trash, debris, and scraps left from transitional homes in the

park. Soon the local residents began to notice a sunburned Principal Wick who was profusely sweating in a baseball cap, t-shirt, and shorts. Much to their astonishment, people began stopping at the park to offer their help or observe the transformation.

Plan of Action: Developing Family Support

One of Principal Wick's best qualities was his ability to listen first and then respond. He listened to Zoey's concerns about the people of the community. She mentioned how they struggled with the English language and long 12-hour shifts. Some had lost a significant other to incarceration or immigration issues and were forced to live life as a single parent. As Principal Wick listened to Zoey, he brainstormed ideas to help the community. Although he was exhausted, he had a strong desire to help.

The following day, Principal Wick arrived early at his office to pull the parent meeting documentation spreadsheet that Mr. Jones kept. All the parent meetings offered by Mr. Jones were immediately after school or early in the morning. Parental involvement was minimal, indicating that the times were not practical for parents working at the local meatpacking company. Principal Wick decided to change parent meetings and students' activities to 6:30 p.m., a more convenient time for working families. He made sure to post the new hours on all school platforms.

Principal Wick decided to open the school to the community. He began by offering English classes Thursday evening from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. Principal Wick had been practicing the greeting Zoey taught him, "Hola! Me llamo Principal Wick. ¡Bienvenidos a la escuela!" He planned to teach an English class along with Zoey, a fluent Spanish speaker. Principal Wick welcomed both parents and students to participate in the evening activities. Monica Ramirez, the director of the local community center,

agreed to send a wrestling coach to train the students in the gym. In the library, tutoring

would be offered for students struggling to complete homework assignments. His wife,

who was also an educator, along with two of her friends, provided homework support for

the students. In addition, Principal Wick convinced the local Lions club to prepare meals

every Thursday for the families to sit down and eat together before beginning their

activities.

Plan of Action: Developing Campus Climate

Principal Wick called both of his assistant principals to his office to discuss his

concerns about the community. The assistant principals were inspired by Principal

Wick's charisma and his willingness to include them in the transformation of GHS.

Unlike Mr. Jones, Principal Wick took an interest in their ideas and made sure each one

was happy with their assignments. Adding a bit of humor to the occasion, assistant

principal Kasey pulled out her social media account to share a picture of Principal Wick

looking less than stellar picking up trash.

Principal Wick personally called each staff member to a "Welcome Back to

School Picnic". As the host of the picnic, Principal Wick grabbed his apron and grilled

burgers for his entire staff. As he casually mingled with the teachers, he paid close

attention to their common concerns.

The teachers felt overwhelmed with weekly staff meetings, professional learning

communities (PLC), and staff development. This comprised most of their free time,

leaving little time for their loved ones. Most teachers were exhausted and dreaded coming

back to school; as a result, this led to high turnover. The majority were veteran teachers

and knew their content well. Their utmost challenge was behavior, but Mr. Jones did not

see this as a problem that needed outside support. The teachers had no voice in selecting various staff development training, and they had a strong desire for creative freedom. In addition, the teachers needed a planning period to alleviate the amount of work that was taken home.

After collaborating with his administrative team, Principal Wick called a staff meeting to address the concerns of the teachers. First, he began by thanking the staff for their time and promised to release them before 4:00 p.m. He began to explain the school's new committees that would play a strong role in the decision making of the school activities, plans, and initiatives. They would vote amongst themselves to select representatives from each team and delegate committee responsibilities. Principal Wick also informed the staff that he would hold staff meetings once a month. PLCs were going to continue to be used for examining the student's latest testing data and ensuring the lessons were aligned with the state-mandated requirements. The teachers would have the opportunity to answer a survey to identify preferences for staff development in order to accommodate individual needs. Principal Wick also arranged for the district behavior specialist to come once a week and be available to support the staff as needed. He also rearranged the schedule to allow each teacher a 45-minute planning period. As Principal Wick continued, he said with a smile, "I expect you to leave by 4:00 p.m. most days. Remember that family comes first, and please take care of yourself!"

Teaching Notes

Principals leading high risk poverty schools exhibit certain characteristics, practices, and behaviors that contribute to the high academic performance of students (Klar & Brewer, 2013). In school transformation, principals have a significant impact on

student learning. Effective leaders include other people in decision making and strategically guide discussions to influence decisions while achieving unity (Lumby, 2018). Principals use their charisma and talent to motivate students, staff, and other members of the community to support campus goals. Woods and Martin (2016) stated that principals could impact student achievement by creating change through establishing relationships, community involvement, and increasing staff accountability. A principal's task in a high-risk poverty school is to involve the parents and members of the community to work in unison in the best interest of the students. Khalifa (2012) stated that the principal's role as a visible advocate and leader within the community creates trust and forms relationships. This visibility is also valued within the school. Principal behaviors, such as interacting with students, positively affect the way a student feels and impacts the student's endurance through difficulties (Sax & Gialamas, 2017). This effervescent feeling that students get from positive interactions with school leaders may help the student continue to "push" through academic difficulties making them more successful.

Transformational leaders exemplify moral and ethical standards using motivation, creating goals, setting expectations, and genuinely caring for their team members (Hitt & Tucker 2016). These leaders are well respected within their organization and the community. Known for their approachable personality and "charisma", transformational leaders motivate and inspire their team (Phaneuf et al., 2016). Transformational leaders can create a clear picture of expectations and possibilities. The leader's use of inspirational motivation permits team members to raise "the bar" and strive for excellence. A transformational leader is attentive to initiating change and is receptive to

suggestions from his followers. Since a transformational leader respects and desires the opinions of other people, relationships come naturally. Henker et al. (2014) stated leaders are viewed as "role models" by their peers. One of the most important qualities of transformational leaders is the desire to foster relationships with the people around them. Transformational leaders are charismatic leaders that understand the importance of positive relationships between school leadership, staff, and the community (Louis et al., 2016).

A high poverty school in a disadvantaged neighborhood must have a transformational leader that can oversee the teaching and learning process (Pokharel, 2014). Economically disadvantaged schools are usually located in high poverty communities, making it difficult to recruit experienced educators. Grissom (2011) stated teacher turnover contributes to low student performance in high poverty schools. The principal must find ways to retain a highly qualified teaching staff to serve the student population living "in crisis". Breaking the cycle of poverty demands a leader that recognizes the urgency to create change and the ability to use his charisma and knowledge to form relationships. Transformational leaders know how to capitalize on their influence to encourage teamwork and accomplish the goals of the organization (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). A transformational principal understands the value of involving the students, staff, and community to work in unity in the best interest of the students.

Discussion Questions

1) According to the National Recreation and Park Association (2017), the homeless population in public parks is often viewed as a "nuisance" that disrupts the use of the

park. Principal Wick understands that homeless residents across the street from the school can attract dangerous visitors that can threaten the students.

- Discuss the dilemmas the principal encounters when removing the homeless occupants from the park.

- Why do you think that Principal Wick declined Officer Gonzalez's offer to call law enforcement to evict the homeless residents in the park?

- What implications do these dilemmas raise for Principal Wick as the new leader to Gasper High School and specifically to a transformational leader transitioning into a new school and new community?

2) Communities that live in poverty many times do not receive the necessary resources to be able to overcome poverty. These impoverished communities also lack the voice to choose their educational leaders, politicians and rely on government assistance programs (Howard et al., 2017).

- Discuss how a community in poverty can demand better educational leaders. What can the community do to ensure a leader like Mr. Jones listens to their concerns about their child's education? Additionally, what can the parents do to participate and raise the academic performance of the students with the limited income and resources that they have available?

3) A transformational leader must be able to "win over" other people in order to achieve the goals of the organization (Lumby, 2018).

- Using the perspective of the community, how will Principal Wick's decision to seek the assistance of Zoey Gomez, a well-known community leader, be perceived?

4) A transformational leader is charismatic and has the ability to influence change in people working for an organization by influencing attitudes and assumptions while building commitment (Demir, 2008). Principal Wick's actions of taking his family to the park to participate in the park clean up can be perceived in different ways by the community.

- Discuss the different viewpoints of the community members as they see their future leader work in the park with his family. How does Principal Wick's series of actions affect the way the community views him, and how do these implications affect the way a transformational leader is perceived?
- From the perspective of the leaders that fight to protect the vulnerable population of homeless residents, how will removing the homeless residents cause an "uproar" in the community?
- From the perspective of the homeless residents, how will Principal Wick's approach to cleaning up the park affect the people that are being displaced?

5) Walumbwa et al. (2004) stated that a transformational leader would earn trust and loyalty "by showing respect and confidence in their followers." (p. 516).

- How does Principal Wick express his trust and loyalty to his new staff at Gasper High School?
- How do you think his actions towards his staff will help with teacher retention?
- How can retaining highly qualified staff increase student performance in a high poverty school?

6) Collective efficacy is when the group believes that change can occur in an organization. Demir (2008) stated that transformational leaders could produce better outcomes when they create collective efficacy.

- How can Principal Wick, as a transformational leader, create collective efficacy within his new organization?
- How can this improve Gasper High School academic goals, the organization's goals, and the overall school climate?

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Leading Schools in Poverty: Principal Perceptions, Key Factors, and Strategies to Academic Success

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Abstract

Background: Principals working in high-poverty schools face many challenges when working with at-risk students. The achievement gap continues to increase; students do not meet grade-level standards because of the economic disparity that takes priority in their lives. This study utilized the perspective of principals to identify key factors and strategies they implement that can positively impact the academic success of economically disadvantaged students. **Purpose:** This study aimed to understand how three successful rural principals, located in Texas, lead campuses with accountability "A" as assigned by TEA despite meeting the poverty requirements as stated by the NCES (2020). **Findings:** This study highlighted the critical role principals play working in low-income schools in improving the academic success of the students. These successful principals have an "open door" policy that fosters relationships, ensuring participation, financial support, shared decision-making, and communication amongst all stakeholders. **Conclusion:** Findings suggested that rural school principals must involve all stakeholders to successfully implement strategies that can positively impact the academic success of low-income students.

Keywords: rural school principals, stakeholders, poverty schools, transforming, academic success

Leading Schools in Poverty: Principal Perceptions, Key Factors, and Strategies to Academic Success

The principal's role as the central figure of school leadership is to drive change and improve student academic success (Bush, 2020). This is a task that principals aspire to accomplish, but it is difficult when a leader is chosen to be the "savior" in a high-poverty, at-risk campus. Grissom (2011) stated that principals tend to be weaker in high-poverty, low-achieving schools. Few principals are "up" for the challenge of tackling high poverty areas where there is an abundance of unemployed, homeless, and gang-related activities. A 2017 national survey of public-school principals found that, overall, approximately 21% of principals in high poverty schools had left their position since the year before (Goldring & Taie, 2018).

Principals working in high-poverty schools face many challenges when working with at-risk students. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds face many hardships, in addition to their academic needs. Over six million children in the United States live in poverty (Olszewski-Kubilius & Corwith, 2018). These children lack basic necessities, and their need to "survive" places stress on them and their families. It seems impossible for students to thrive academically in such extreme circumstances. Principals serving in high-poverty schools should possess a unique set of skills, charisma, and the ability to drive change in order to make an impact on student achievement despite the severity of the families' economic situation.

As the achievement gap continues to increase, students do not meet grade-level standards because of the economic disparity that takes priority in their lives. The inequality in education for economically disadvantaged students has existed historically,

increasing the gap between whites and blacks persisting since the time of slavery (Bertocchi & Dimico, 2014). Government efforts to provide an equal education frequently fall short. Silva-Laya et al. (2020) stated, "Thus, the poor quality of education stands out as one of the main social disadvantages faced by the urban poor" (p.16). This inequality makes it even more difficult for a principal to ensure all students are successful. With the lack of school funds and increased time commitment, it is challenging to employ and retain high-quality leaders (Woods et al., 2016).

Although schools and the educational environment impact students, the outside world in neighborhoods, health, and family will have a direct impact on the success of the students (Bower & Rossi, 2018). Families living in poverty have necessities such as a lack of a stable home environment and food insecurity. Many are accustomed to surviving through these necessities. Najman et al. (2018) reported that poverty affects about 20% of people that move in and out of poverty because they are affected by unemployment and divorce. Reardon (2011) stated, "The socio-economic status of a child's parents has always been one of the strongest predictors of the child's academic achievement and educational attainment" (p. 3). Children living in poverty are exposed to more stress and other adversities but benefit from living in a stable environment. Leventhal and Dupéré (2011) stated that adolescents from low-income families that live in high-poverty public housing that move to low-poverty neighborhoods and remain in these neighborhoods for at least five years report less distress, drug use, and anxiety. This stability also allowed the students to attend the same school and get consistent support from the educational institution in their area.

Principals leading poverty schools located in impoverished neighborhoods should be aware of the outside circumstances that could impede student success. Impoverished communities can be stressful environments with exposure to drugs and alcohol that may surround youth in the neighborhood. Youth living in struggling communities are also more vulnerable to engage in alcohol (Rhew et al., 2020). Cerdá et al. (2010) stated, "Neighborhood poverty could shape alcohol consumption through several mechanisms, including the limited availability of employment options in disadvantaged neighborhoods, five lower levels of social cohesion and social control over deviant behaviors such as excessive alcohol use" (p. 2). These external factors intensify the difficulty for students to concentrate on academics. By being aware of the negative environmental factors, principals are better equipped to understand the elements that impact student academic success.

Furthermore, families growing up in poverty struggle to have access to education; their children are coming from "educationally poor" homes. This means that children coming from underprivileged families are not exposed to rich language and experiences that can help them academically. Cave et al. (2020) asserted, "Parent's education is also associated with the extent to which they provide opportunities for cognitive engagement for their children" (p. 4). This lack of cognitive ability hinders children's academic performance making them inferior to peers growing up in a more privileged environment.

Statement of Problem

Miller (2013) discovered that 20% of public-school principals in the United States leave their position every year. Principal turnover has a negative impact on student

achievement. This impact is felt more in campuses that serve the neediest population of students. Beteille et al. (2011) stated, "Poorly performing schools and those with high concentrations of poor students not only experience much higher principal turnover rates than other schools, but they are also unable to attract experienced new principals when vacancies arise" (p. 1). The academic achievement gap continues to increase for students living in poverty (Reardon, 2011). Students in poverty may have lower GPAs and a higher dropout rate. Martinez et al. (2020) found that addressing a student's mental, nutritional, and academic needs could improve graduation rates. In order to improve the quality of life of students and the future of their families, researchers should continue to find ways to intervene and increase the academic performance of students living in impoverished communities.

Wiley et al. (2013) stated that campuses submerged in poverty have a disproportionate number of African American and Latino students. Schools located in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods are faced with many challenges such as gangs, drugs, and lack of parental support, making it difficult to attract the "right" leader that is up for the challenge. Furthermore, this research study focused on principal strategies and actions that positively impact poverty schools. In summary, there is a need for a better understanding of key factors that transform a poverty rural school into a high performing school.

The aim of this research study was to examine the perspective of the principal and the key factors they believe transform a poverty rural school into a high academic performing school. This review provides principals with information and awareness of the principal's needs to improve principal professional development, embedded support,

and awareness of the needs of high poverty schools with low achievement. For the purpose of this research study, a high performing school was defined as an elementary, middle, or high school that is recognized as meeting the Texas Education Agency (TEA) requirements for meeting accountability "A" and meeting poverty criteria as meeting the poverty guidelines set by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES;2020). More specifically, the following research questions need to be addressed:

1) How do community efforts transform a poverty rural school into a high performing school, according to the perspective of the principal?

2) How does parental involvement transform a poverty rural school into a high performing school, according to the perspective of the principal?

3) How do leadership efforts transform a poverty rural school into a high performing school, according to the perspective of the principal?

4) How does teacher involvement transform a poverty rural school into a high performing school, according to the perspective of the principal?

Poverty

The United States Census Bureau (2020) reported that the median household income in 2019 was an average of $68,703. From 2018 to 2019 there was an increase in income of around $4,000 a year, with an estimated 10.5% of the population reported to be living in poverty. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2020) stated poverty guidelines for a family of four are reported as earning $26,200 per year. The income level of 10.5% of the population places needy families in inadequate housing. These families can only afford housing located in impoverished neighborhoods with higher crime rates. Economically disadvantaged children have access to lower quality

schools with higher teacher turnover. These students face additional hurdles while families struggle to survive.

Many children are born into poverty and become innocent "victims" of the environment. The experiences as "children of poverty" can have a lasting effect as they develop. Children that are less fortunate grow up with fewer opportunities. Unequal access to high quality teachers makes it difficult to thrive in their stressed environment. Growing up with many disadvantages has a lasting effect on the child's life (Baugh et al., 2019). The cycle of poverty becomes a trap making it difficult for families to escape. The cost of living is rising as a global pandemic contributes to a struggling economy. The cost of education continues to increase and families with limited income face additional economic hardship and social pressure than ever before.

The U.S. Department of Labor (2020) found that from February 2020 and May 2020 about 14% of people in the United States lost their employment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the global COVID-19 pandemic spreads throughout the United States, the number of Americans living in poverty continues to rise. This economic and social crisis caused by the pandemic has forced millions of Americans into unemployment (Lancker & Parolin, 2020). This decrease in job availability has placed an already vulnerable population in a social and economic crisis. Many of the population affected are minorities and children surviving in poverty-stricken communities living in deplorable circumstances. Families struggle to make ends meet as their economic situation makes them more vulnerable to the deadly virus. Patel et al. (2020) stated, "Poor housing conditions, limited access to personal outdoor space and overcrowding will reduce compliance with social distancing" (p.1). As the emergence of COVID-19

continues to linger through the United States, the most vulnerable populations will continue to be affected.

Poverty and Health

Malnutrition in children may have distressing physical consequences for this vulnerable population. Maslow (1943) stated in his five-tier model of human needs that human beings have biological requirements necessary for survival. Maslow found that physiological needs such as food, water, and warm shelter, are essential in human development. Food deprivation can cause serious physical impairments and disturb "normal" growth and learning patterns in vulnerable youth. Proper nutrition combined with a well-balanced diet may avoid disastrous consequences as well as disturbances in growth and brain development. Pavlakis et al. (2015) stated that in children, "Socioeconomic disparities in brain structure and function are complex but, in part, may stem from stress associated with poverty" (p.386). Children growing up in stressed environments face additional challenges in acquiring nutrition that is key to their development. Nutritious meals are a necessity and have become an unattainable "luxury" for many children living in marginalized communities.

Poverty and Advancement

Families living on a limited income may not have access to the resources necessary to escape poverty. They may view a professional degree as unattainable, and attending college would be an impossible feat. Durate et al. (2018) stated that in order to help youth living in impecunious conditions, it is also necessary to help the parents access a higher level of education. For many families living paycheck to paycheck, acquiring a higher education is not possible without support. Without assistance and

access to outside resources, these families continue to struggle and may never have the opportunity to be successful.

In addition, disparities in language and memory are common in children in poverty (Farah et al., 2006). In order to ensure that these disparities are addressed, it is important to have the available resources necessary for the families to receive assistance. Noble et al. (2015) stated:

> Children's total brain surface area, implying that any increase in parental education, whether an extra year of high school or college, was associated with surface area, implying that, for every dollar in increased income, the increase in children's brain surface area. (p. 777)

In order to continue to grow healthy children, it is imperative that their parents have the necessary support to continue their education and break the cycle of poverty.

Poverty Setting

Affordable housing is frequently located in communities with a high crime rate. Due to the vulnerability of a community in poverty, drug dealers and other undesirable individuals take advantage of the youth's poverty, immaturity, and lure them into selling drugs or engaging in other illegal acts. Sax et al. (2001) stated, "Visible drug sales were 6.3 times more likely to be reported in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods than in the least disadvantaged" (p.1). The youth in impoverished communities may be in survival mode, with many children suffering abuse and enduring hunger. Their "basic needs" are a priority over their motivation to learn, which leads to lack of academic success (Maslow, 1943).

The schools in poverty-stricken communities are surrounded by more crime and violence, making it difficult to attract a high-quality teaching staff (Buka et al., 2001). Many teachers that apply for these positions are novice educators and are not equipped to deal with the problems that come with children of poverty. Children in poverty have to endure hardships that can interfere with their academic performance making it challenging for new educators to motivate them. Many of these children are accustomed to losing their loved ones to incarceration, immigration, or become victims of crime. Eddy and Poehlmann-Tynan (2019) explained that without intervention, the loss of a parent would cause many negative responses in children. These children may experience emotional and physical trauma experiencing emotions such as anxiety, sadness, and grief. Under these circumstances, both children in poverty and their educators are fighting an uphill battle.

Rothstein (2014) stated, "As these and many other disadvantages accumulate, lower social class children inevitably have lower average achievement than middle class children, even with the highest quality instruction" (p.22). For this reason, it is vital that children in impoverished conditions receive the necessary support to ensure they are placed on the path to success. Holzer et al. (2007) reported, "Achievement increases for children, if sustained, are likely to translate into increases in educational attainment and earnings later in life" (p. 15). Education can be life changing for this critical population, and early intervention is the key to success.

Poverty Support

Students living in poverty need additional support to be successful. These students benefit from a collaborative effort to meet the emotional, economic, and educational

needs of their families. Community effort may be the key factor to prevent and combat the vicious cycle of poverty. Hampden-Thompson and Galindo (2017) stated, "Positive interactions between schools and families lead to higher levels of parental satisfaction and, in turn, better educational achievement among young people" (p. 259). Growing in poverty comes with many adverse effects. In order to positively target, prevent, or assist this population in crisis, it is necessary to incorporate prevention strategies to make students successful.

Unfortunate circumstances continue to widen the academic gap as poverty continues to rise. Silva-Laya et al. (2020) explained, "The urban poor and the schools they attend, face a tangled net of material, organizational and cultural obstacles that hinder learning, the development of abilities, and thus the social and personal development of children and youth" (p. 17). Families in poverty-stricken communities need access to necessary supports that equip them with tools to overcome isolation, malnutrition and alleviate poverty. Ebersöhn (2017) argued that the well-being of children in poverty depends on a combined effort of the community with a collaboration of parents, principals, and access to appropriate funding. By involving everyone in the community, parents may be able to access the necessary tools to help their children not only academically but grow up as healthy individuals.

Characteristics, Practices, and Behaviors Impact Student Academic Success

Principals leading high risk poverty schools exhibit certain characteristics, practices, and behaviors that contribute to the high academic performance of students (Klar & Brewer, 2013). In school transformation, principals have a significant impact on student learning. Effective leaders include other people in decision making and

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strategically guide discussions to influence decisions while achieving unity (Lumby, 2018). The strategies the principals use to accomplish unity is crucial to the overall success of the school. Hoppey and McLeskey (2013) stated that an effective principal understands the importance of relationships, "believing in faculty by acknowledging, respecting, and trusting educators' ability to be successful" (p.5). The "trust" that the principal builds with the staff, in turn, is passed down to the students.

Principals use their charisma and talent to motivate students, staff, and other members of the community to support campus goals. Woods and Martin (2016) reported that principals could impact student achievement by creating change through establishing relationships, community involvement, and increasing staff accountability. These relationships are critical to encouraging, supporting, and promoting the success of students in need. The "special" skills that principals need for leadership are vital to making connections and continuing relationships. The importance of the leader's skills is critical to the level of management the leader occupies. The skills these leaders possess include the ability to balance problem-solving, implement strategies to support the team, and become an efficient leader that can motivate the employees (Gonzales et al., 2020).

An effective leader possesses personal skills crucial to leading a poverty school. In order to positively impact student success, the leader of an economically disadvantaged school should be able to balance and identify internal and external problems (Day et al., 2016). Most organizations require a leader that can problem solve effectively and lead many staff members. An efficient leader should have human skills in order to relate to the staff and deal with the public daily. Khan and Ahmad (2012) explained that people skills help leaders become more effective in moving an

organization forward at top levels of management. The leader's effectiveness can make connections with others catapulting the organization to success.

Another important characteristic of a successful principal is the ability to work with others and accept new ideas. Meyers and Hambrick Hitt (2017) stated, "The research suggest that turnaround principals indeed see, feel, and think differently than many of their peers" (p. 16). This different way of thinking allows an effective principal to be able to verbalize, understand, and communicate the key ideas that are important to the organization. Geraki (2014) argued that school leaders need additional training in management and leadership training reflecting people-oriented and problem-solving skills. These skills are valuable assets to continue to make an impact on followers to encourage others to "think outside the box." In addition to these skills, Salas-Vallina et al. (2020) found that social interactions within the organization help the employees access how much a leader or follower values their work. This high performance is accomplished by ensuring that the staff has the means to accomplish goals by feeling supported in a mutual relationship of respect.

In addition, a leader's ability to form relationships is an important characteristic in creating an environment that fosters trust between the leaders and the followers. The principal has a great responsibility of being a role model within their school. Moore et al. (2019) found that supervisors that serve as role models influence their employees by decreasing the level of moral disengagement and deviant behavior. The principal, as a role model, acknowledges that it is necessary to support staff in different ways and at various levels. A strong leader combines relationship skills to better support the staff and increase job satisfaction leading to a higher level of staff retention. O'Brennan et al.

(2017) stated that staff are "less overwhelmed when they felt connected to their school communities and believed they had the skills to completely meet students' behavioral needs" (p.174). An effective leader knows how to support their staff, use relationship skills, and serve as a role model.

Wright (2017) stated, "Adaptability of leaders is critical to effectively handle the variety of situations that may arise" (p.28). Principals as leaders recognize the challenges in each circumstance. For example, the leader has the responsibility to adjust to the uniqueness of each distinct situation. Although adjusting to various situations has challenges for the leaders, it also has benefits. Strong leaders have to make choices on how to solve each unique problem by keeping the lines of communication open between the leader and the follower. The open communication lines accommodate each person and are conducive to building a relationship of trust and support (Kolzow, 2014). On other occasions, the leaders use supportive behavior to build team members up and help them feel confident about the work they produce (Khalili, 2016). This confidence leads to a supportive environment where employees feel valued. Developing the skill of the leader is vital because the way the leader handles each unique situation determines a successful outcome (Wright, 2017).

A principal's task in a high-risk poverty school is to involve the parents and members of the community to work in unison in the best interest of the students. Khalifa (2012) mentioned that the principal's role as a visible advocate and leader within the community creates trust and forms relationships. This visibility is also valued within the school. Principal behaviors, such as interacting with students positively, affect the way a student feels and impacts the student's endurance through difficulties (Sax & Gialamas,

2017). This effervescent feeling that students get from positive interactions with school leaders may help the student continue to "push" through academic difficulties making them more successful. In order for students to have an opportunity to break the cycle of poverty, "schools must create a partnership with parents seeking to involve parents, particularly those of at-risk students" (Lacour & Tissington, 2011, p. 526). Lack of monetary support leaves families with the inability to cope and adjust to their environment. Masarik and Conger (2017) found parents raising children in an environment stressed by poverty are more likely to apply harsh punishment or neglect to supervise their children. The lack of parental support not only affects the parent-child relationship but it also makes it difficult for these children to progress academically.

The importance of a "good" leader is vital to the progress of the entire student body. Many times, low-income areas surrounded by poverty make it difficult for the parents to be fully involved in their child's education. This lack of involvement may be viewed as a disconnection or disinterest but in reality, places more responsibility on school leaders to represent the best interest of the students. These families depend on the integrity of the school and trust that the school leaders are making the right decisions for their children. Woods and Martin (2016) analyzed principal leadership and found that the actions the principal takes have a direct effect on student outcomes. Principals that lead with high moral values and follow school guidelines are able to guide students submerged in poverty and hardship to success. This dedication and hard work of these ethical leaders are the "pillar" necessary for leaders to guide this vulnerable population to success with the utmost integrity and moral character.

Method

Improving academic performance for students living in the cycle of poverty has been a challenging task for principals. Research indicates that schools that have a high population of children living in poverty experience greater challenges in the achievement gap, state mandated testing, and difficulties in retaining quality leaders (Bertocchi & Dimico, 2014; Grisson, 2011; Olszewski-Kubilius & Corwith, 2018). With the growing disparities in the education of this vulnerable population of students, the academic performance of children in poverty is at greater risk of declining.

However, in school transformation, principals have a significant impact on student learning, and numerous principals have risen to the challenge. The intent of this study is to explore what the leaders of successful Education Service Center (ESC)16 rural schools with a high student population that lives in poverty do that increases the academic achievement of their students. In summary, there is a need for a better understanding of key factors that transform a poverty rural school into a high performing school. The intent of this study is to examine the perspective of the principal and the key factors they believe transform a poverty rural school into a high academic performing school.

Design

Through a qualitative approach, this research explored the perspective of principals and the key factors they believe transformed a poverty ESC 16 rural school into a high academic performing school. Interviewing the principals was a way to examine their perspective into the key factors they believe transformed a poverty rural school into a high academic performing school. A multiple case study was utilized using

three schools meeting the poverty guidelines set by the NCES (2020). Each school was considered as a case. By using multiple case studies, the information collected from the schools was related across school districts.

Population

The population of the study was chosen through purposive sampling. Qualitative research was used for purposive sampling in the selection of the cases that were used in this research study. By selecting schools with comparable backgrounds, this research study focused on the similarities and differences in the results of the study. The participants for this study were selected from the ESC Region 16 and met the poverty standards stated by the NCES (2020).

The study included all rural schools located in the ESC 16 area considered to be poverty and high performing. The participants were certified principals by the State of Texas, employed in the principal position leading a rural school. The principal's district met the poverty requirements as noted by the NCES (2020), and the school met the accountability of "A" given by the TEA.

Principals interviewed were from schools that met the accountability rating of "A" as defined by the TEA 2019 Accountability Report. In order to score an "A", schools had a scaled score of 90 or above in the areas of student achievement and overall school academic progress. The category of student achievement included testing performance, college, career and military readiness as well as graduation rates and school academic progress, includes academic growth, relative performance in accordance to the percentage of economically disadvantaged, and efforts made to close the achievement gap.

The participating schools met the criteria of having a specified percentage of their children living in poverty. Schools determined poverty levels according to how many children were considered economically disadvantaged. Economically disadvantaged children who live in households with incomes at or below 130% of the federal poverty level are eligible for free and reduced meals. An economically disadvantaged student is defined as one who is eligible for free or reduced-price lunches (FRPL) under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Program. The NCES (2020), defined poverty using the percentage of eligibility for FRPL also. According to the NCES (2020), poverty in public school is divided into categories by being eligible for FRPL.

Participants

Three principals participated in this study. Principal A was a veteran principal starting his 27th year as an educator. He was born and raised in the same community where he served as principal. He taught and coached for many years in this community. Since he had a limited staff, he took the opportunity to teach one class during the school day to stay connected with the students and serve his community. Principal B had been in leadership for 12 years. He taught for three years before becoming an assistant principal. He has been a high school principal for the past eight years. Principal C had been an educator for 10 years. He started his career as a teacher assistant for two years. After receiving his teacher certification, he taught for three years and served as an assistant principal for another three years. He has been the high school principal for two years.

Data Collection

The data that were collected to address the research questions for this study were obtained through semi-structured interviews and TEA data documents. The instrument utilized in this qualitative research study was a semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions. The questions were semi-structured to allow the flexibility and responsiveness of the principal's answers to follow up depending on the responses given during the interview (Merriam, 2009).

In addition, TEA documents were analyzed and utilized to establish that the school met the accountability of A given by the TEA. These TEA documents also gave information on the demographics, student achievement, graduation rate, college, career, and military readiness, academic growth, and other important information that gave a fuller view of the school. By using more data points, the progress of the school was analyzed along with the perspective of the principal's actions to understand how these actions impact student academic success.

Data Analysis

The Framework Method (Gale et al., 2013) will be used to conduct the analysis of the data collected from the principals participating in this study. This method is appropriate for the study because it is systematic and works with a deductive approach to qualitative analysis (Gale et al., 2013). The Framework Method provides seven stages for the procedure for conducting data analysis. The first stage includes transcription whereas the researcher transcribes word for word the interview of the participant is used with plenty of space to take notes and for coding to occur. Coding refers to the process of taking notes and grouping like responses using a code created to relate like items.

Secondly, Gale et al. (2013) stated, "Becoming familiar with the whole interview using the audio recording and/or transcript and any contextual or reflective notes that were recorded by the interviewer is a vital stage in interpretation" (p. 4). It is important to understand and pay close attention to what the principal has said including notes that will be helpful when analyzing the data. In stage three, the transcription of the notes will be analyzed while coding values, statements, and anything that can be labeled to note the responses or behaviors of the principal responding to the questions (Gale et al., 2013). This procedure of coding is simply labeling and "making annotations" that can serve when examining the data. Furthermore, Gale et al. (2013) stated, "Coding aims to classify all of the data so that it can be compared systematically with other parts of the data set" (p. 4). This process is performed line by line based on the responses of the principals.

As the coding process continues, all the interviews should be transcribed and coded with the same labels to allow the responses of the principals to be evaluated in a comparable way. After completing the coding process, Gale et al. (2013) explained that each code may be abbreviated or assigned a number to make it easier to compile and analyze the data collected. As the process of analyzing the data continues, it is important to condense the information without losing the integrity of the data. Gale et al. (2013) stated, "Good charting requires an ability to strike a balance between reducing the data on the one hand and retaining the original meanings and 'feel' of the interviewees' words on the other" (p. 5).

Findings

The first research question focused on rural principals' perception of community efforts transforming poverty rural schools into high performing schools. Research

Question 2 concentrated specifically on parental involvement and the impact on academic success in poverty schools. The third and fourth research questions addressed the principals' leadership efforts and teacher involvement in transforming their rural school into high performing school. One emerging theme was stakeholder participation and financial support from the community. Another theme interconnected throughout the research questions is rural schools have shared decision making and strong communication. Although commonalities were identified in research questions, contrasting aspects of the questions were addressed in each research question to also explore differences in stakeholder participation, financial support, shared decision making, and communication.

RQ1. How community efforts transform the poverty rural school into high performing school?

The rural school principals participating in this study have notable economic support and access to monetary donors from the community, such as churches or other organizations. Principal C stated, "We've opened up that line of communication with them (the community)." All the principals interviewed reported that they could easily "pick up the phone" and make a phone call to a member in the community and get access to any resource necessary for their school. As principal A stated, "They [the community] want to do it, but also when something pops up, and we need something, it's really easy to call for help." In each rural school in this study, the principal had a strong partnership with the community and there was a desire from the community to provide support. There was constant communication between the principal and the community. This created a sense of trust and support for the school. Another commonality between the

participants was the relationship with area businesses. Principal B stated, "What better way to support a kid than by giving them a scholarship?" Furthermore, acknowledging that the support of the community [scholarships] provided the students with the ability to continue their education.

 Although these principals had strong community support, Principal A was in a unique situation where he was located in the middle of two communities. His campus served as the only school located six miles from one town and four miles from the other town. This uncommon situation placed him in the middle of two communities serving students from Pre-K to 12th grade. He was able to develop a partnership between the two communities. Principal A stated, "So, instead of getting just one of the pieces of the pie, we get the whole large community involvement because our Lions Club serves both communities; they collaborate with each other."

RQ2. How parental efforts transform the poverty rural school into a high performing school?

The principals participating in this study felt that open communication with the students' families led to strong parental involvement at their campus. A commonality between the principals was that engaging parents not only kept parents informed in all aspects of the students' life, such as academics and sports, but also raised the academic performance of the students. The rural school principals benefited from parents being "decision makers" and participating actively in their schools. Principal C stated, "Engaging the parents in what's going on in school, and allowing them to participate in the decision-making process, is kind of scary for a lot of schools." Principal B talked about the parent booster club and how they rewarded students for participating in sports

for two years. He explained, "They [booster club] are giving every one of those kids, $800 each scholarship to further their education." Although only Principal B and C had a booster club, Principal A had farmers get together to provide funds for the school. By having parents involved, they were able to solicit additional business support, which increased greater contributions to the school.

Another commonality between the principals is the open communication between teachers and parents. The principals reported the ability to easily communicate with parents through conferences, phone calls, in-person meetings, and easy access to the staff to build relationships. Principal C stated, "The way you engage parents in the learning process is by including them such as using remind alerts. We send out all communication inviting the parents to school." These strong partnerships between the parents and the teachers allowed issues that occurred to be resolved immediately. Furthermore, Principal A shared that parental help is easy to come by, "We have an open-door policy where the teacher can easily call a parent to invite them to events or request additional help, for example, to a Valentine's party."

RQ3. How do leadership efforts transform the poverty rural school into a high performing school?

The principals of the rural schools in this study have open lines of communication with their teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. They listen to specific needs and plan meetings with a purpose valuing the time and voice of the staff. These principals provide support to their campus, gaining confidence and trust in their decisions. Trust and collaboration coexist on their campuses with special attention and value to the teacher, parent, and other stakeholder's concerns and suggestions. The principals leading rural

schools in this study valued the opinions of teachers, parents, and other stakeholders in the decision-making process. Principal A stated, "Whenever we have our meetings, I'm not in charge. We collaborate together."

Furthermore, Principal C believed the involvement of everyone was critical to get buy-in and moved students toward academic success. Principal C continued, "Involving your parents, your teachers, your administrators, and board members, your church leaders, and your businesses leaders; that's how you engage the entire community, school." Principal B added the importance of staying up-to-date with new curriculum and technology. He felt that as a leader, it was critical to provide opportunities for all students, and by doing this, it contributed to their success. Principal B stated, "We're leveling the playing field, whether you're a kid with parents that make $200,000 a year, or whether your parents make $10,000 a year, they all get the same technology."

RQ4. How does teacher involvement transform your poverty rural school into a high performing school?

The teachers working in the rural schools that were represented in this study were involved in the decision-making process for the campus. The campus principals felt it was important to allow the teachers to express their ideas in a safe place. Their voice, opinions, and concerns were valued and appreciated by the principals. This sense of value between the principal and the teachers created mutual respect that fostered relationships. Principal C expressed, "I think building positive, appropriate relationships, being a servant leader, communicating and collaborating with your teachers, and also knowing when to just let them breathe." The principals at these successful rural schools valued people. Principal C stated, "Because they're [stakeholders] are always going to remember

how you made them feel, not what you said, not what you did." The principals focused on the teacher as a person as well as a professional.

Principal A recognized that problems would arise, and he believed in compromising for the greater good of the students. Principal A stated, "Let's communicate; we will figure it out." The principals at these rural schools show empathy, compassion, and are approachable. The characteristics these principals exhibit help open the line of communication with the teachers. Principal C stated, "Even if their recommendation is not the decision that's made, they still feel like they are valued."

The teachers know they can "trust" their administrator to listen. Furthermore, the principal is instrumental in planning opportunities for teachers to collaborate with other professionals. Teachers are comfortable reaching out for assistance if they feel their data is trailing behind. Principal A stated that teachers would reach out to them when they wanted to collaborate with other teachers. The teachers used the opportunities to get together with other teachers to strengthen their craft, learn new strategies to help their students, and build relationships amongst themselves.

Discussion

Principals working in rural high poverty schools face many challenges when working in their community. Many students come to school with many hardships that overpower academic needs. In the United States alone, there are over six million children that live in poverty (Olszewski-Kubilius & Corwith, 2018). The achievement gap continues to widen, and more students are not performing on grade level. An "equal" education is difficult to attain with students coming from impoverished communities struggling to meet the educational demands of the state. Furthermore, many families are

struggling economically and are attempting to meet their basic needs. Silva-Laya et al. (2020) stated, "Thus, the poor quality of education stands out as one of the main social disadvantages faced by the urban poor" (p.16). The principals working in these rural communities must ensure all students are successful. This is a difficult task to accomplish when the student's academic success is directly impacted by the environment that surrounds them (Bower & Rossi, 2018).

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative, holistic multi-case study was to examine the key factors, strategies, and behaviors rural principals leading rural schools in poverty used to transform these schools into high academic performing schools. The research was conducted through three cases with principals from rural schools located in the Region 16 service area. The principals leading these campuses are certified by Texas and their campus meets accountability "A" for the TEA and meets the poverty requirements as stated by the NCES (2020). The intent of this study was to use the data collected to help leaders of rural schools in poverty identify key factors and implement strategies that can positively impact the academic success of economically disadvantaged students. In addition, this research study could assist schools that are not meeting high performing standards, as identified by the TEA, identify key factors, strategies, and behaviors in school leaders that can be used to turn a school around.

Through data coding and analysis of the responses, four main themes emerged: (a) stakeholder participation, (b) financial support, (c) shared decision making, (d) communication.

The theme, stakeholder participation, includes the participation of the entire community. This theme encompasses the participation of the teachers, parents, area businesses, and other members of the community. This includes teacher buy-in, parental involvement, business support, and collaboration from churches and other nonprofit groups.

The second theme, financial support, can be defined as the access to funds from stakeholders. The principals had established relationships with parents, area businesses, churches, and other stakeholders that support their campus needs. The principals in this study shared how they "make the phone call" to stakeholders in the community to get the financial support they need. The third theme covers shared decision making for the campus. The principals at each campus have constant interactions with parents, teachers, and other stakeholders in regards to the decision-making process for most decisions, such as curriculum, products purchased, and the planning of social events and activities for the students. The fourth theme covers communication to keep all stakeholders informed of the daily operations, decisions, conflicts, and needs of the students or the needs of the campus. The principals in this study had established an open-door policy and value the voice of the community. These principals took time out of their day to sit down with stakeholders and listen to their ideas, suggestions, and concerns.

Each theme in this research study correlates with research findings and validates the research conducted. The principals in this study spoke about interactions, beliefs, expectations, and decision-making opportunities for the campus that included all stakeholders. Known for their approachable personality and "charisma", transformational leaders such as the principals in this study motivated and inspired their team (Phaneuf et al., 2016). The rural communities have the expectation to support the campus principal in

running the school and expect the academic success of all students. Wood and Martin (2016) stated that principals could impact student achievement by creating change through establishing relationships, community involvement, and increasing staff accountability. The relationships between the campus principal and stakeholders stimulate the followers to feel empowered to accomplish goals and support the growth of the organization.

The literature supports that collaboration between a school and community can open lines of communication to access important resources. The principals participating in this study had successfully created a partnership with their community. Klar and Brewer (2013) stated that "good leaders were adept at listening to stakeholders and understanding the nuances of the contexts in which they work" (p. 34). Transformational leaders are charismatic leaders that understand the importance of positive relationships between school leadership, staff, and the community (Louis et al., 2016). These strong relationships benefited the school by creating an "open door" environment where the principal was approachable, and open communication existed between the school and the community.

Transformational principals understand the need to collaborate and work with parents, community, and other stakeholders to create an environment full of people united to make students successful (Bottomley et al., 2014). Principals A, B, and C agreed that the internal and external communication regarding the needs of the school helped acquire all the services, materials, software, or technology needed by their campus. Community efforts could be the key factor to prevent and combat the vicious cycle of poverty. Hampden-Thompson and Galindo (2017) stated, "Positive interactions between schools

and families lead to higher levels of parental satisfaction and, in turn, better educational achievement among young people" (p. 259). All of the principals participating in this study described the strong desire of the community to serve their families. They also shared that many of the graduates from their campuses came back and worked in the community. This sense of service and duty is instilled in the students from a young age and is a result of being part of a smaller community. These communities are "tight-knit" and are a place where no one is a stranger, and supporting each other is just "a way of life."

The literature indicated that principals as transformational leaders use their charisma to influence, inspire, and motivate their teachers to create positive change and innovation (Sheehan et al., 2020). The principal, by involving the teachers as part of a relationship that is interconnected raises motivation and morality for both the leader and teachers. Faupel and Süß (2018) stated, "Engaged employees have high levels of energy and mental resilience at work, perceive a sense of significance about their work, and feel pride in it" (p. 149). This level of energy and investment in teaching motivates not only the teacher but also motivates the students to increase academic performance. In fact, having highly motivated teachers that are provided positive opportunities to collaborate is evident in standardized test scores. Ronfeldt et al. (2015) found that "Schools that have instructional teams engaged in better collaboration also have higher achievement gains in both math and reading" (p. 500). The rural school principals in this study effectively use their influence to pull the school together as a team and to serve as a catalyst for change.

Kendrick (2011) stated, "Expertly crafted and practiced, transformational leadership focuses on the followers, motivates them to achieve a higher performance

level and helps develop the leader within each individual" (p.14). This "power" opens lines of communication between the principal and stakeholders with the belief that ideas, suggestions, concerns, and the financial obligation of educating the students in the community belong to all members of the community. The ability of the leader to balance and identify internal and external problems that affect the success of the students is vital to positively impact student academic success (Day et al., 2016). Taking care of the "whole child" including the child's family and living conditions, could lead to an increase in academic success. Reardon (2011) stated, "The socioeconomic status of a child's parents has always been one of the strongest predictors of the child's academic achievement and educational attainment" (p. 3). Within this study, principals discussed the unity and uniqueness of living in a small rural community where there is a sense of "shared" responsibility for the academic success, emotional support, and financial stability of all the members of the community.

Implications

Principals working in poverty high performing rural schools face many challenges. These schools require a talented leader that can implement systems and strategies that impact student success. First, the school should have a principal that can identify the internal and external factors that can impede the progress and success of the staff and the students. The principal should understand that students in high poverty areas carry "baggage" that goes beyond academics. A successful principal should work to unite a strong team that includes not only the staff at school but the leader must include the community. When the leader uses characteristics such as charisma to captivate the attention of others in the community, it can open doors to getting outside help such as

from social workers, business owners, and the local police department. By working as a team, the principal brings attention to the needs of the students and ensures that resources are available to meet the external and internal needs of the student. In addition, the students get to "mingle" with educated professionals that can mentor and lead them through the path of success by example.

Secondly, a successful leader is able to build relationships with staff, teachers, parents, students, and the community. A principal should use their ability to be approachable and well-liked to "bond" with the staff and students. A successful principal should capitalize on the ability to build trust and connections with others in order to bring them together for the greater good of the community. By utilizing their ability to build relationships and relating to other people, principals can capitalize on their power to inspire, influence, and support others in the organization to join together in common goals. Principals that build relationships can encourage their followers to work through challenges and continue to push to better solutions and outcomes. By fostering problem solving, generating solutions, and outcomes, students and teachers learn to collaborate and generate successful outcomes. By opening the school doors to the community, parents, and stakeholders, the school gives the feeling of ownership, encouraging all parties to be more invested and participate in the education of the students.

Third, the principals should be invested and visible in their school. The principal's presence throughout the school hallways, in classrooms, and through the building is a strong visible presence that motivates others to work hard by viewing the example. Although rules, procedures, and regulations are in place in the school building and abided by the staff and students, the principal is a reminder that we all must work together to

continue to follow these procedures. The principal, as the school leader, is the most important person that sets up an environment of success. By being involved in lunch duty, doing walkthroughs, taking students from lunch to band, they demonstrate that they take a piece of the workload and "care" about the staff and the students. Teachers and students enjoy the smile, the presence, and the ability to make a quick comment, share a concern, or simply say hello to the leader as they go through the building. This principal "presence" encourages others to continue working hard and feel assured that their leader is just around the corner when they need them.

Conclusion

There are several things that rural school principals can do in their rural communities to help improve the academic success of their students. First, the principals must ensure that they have an established relationship with community participation where teachers, parents, area businesses, and other stakeholders feel valued and included in the school. These relationships with stakeholders open the door for access to financial contributions from the community. The community "trusts" the principals leading these schools and feels obligated to financially support the school to contribute to the student's future education. The principals also effectively share decision making with members of the staff, parents, business owners, and other organizations that support their campuses. This sense of "our kids" unites the community to pull their resources together for the greater good of all students. Furthermore, the academic success of the students in poverty at these rural campuses greatly depends on the "open door policy" the principals have established. These rural school principals value all people and members of their "internal" community, such as staff and parents, as well as the "external" community

such as churches and businesses. The open communication that the principal allows for teachers, parents, and other stakeholders fosters a sense of trust and transparency, allowing the community to stay informed and tackle issues as they arise.

Limitations

Limitations existed in this study. Participants were chosen from rural schools located in the Region 16 service area. The principals leading these campuses are certified by Texas, and their campus meets accountability "A" for the TEA and meets the poverty requirements as stated by the NCES (2020). Due to the criteria in this study, the number of schools that met the criteria was limited and excluded other regions and principals that could have made contributions to the study.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many schools to operate short staffed postponing the interviews to the end of the school year. The interviews added to the already full workload of the principals making it even more difficult to schedule. Furthermore, the COVID-19 outbreak forced schools to take additional precautions, and the principal interviews had to be conducted through Zoom or other electronic means. Technology issues occurred at times from a band width overload slowing down connectivity and interrupting interviews or causing a slight delay. The interruptions in technology made it difficult at times to understand the principals and took time from the interview to troubleshoot technology issues. This loss of time could have been used by the participants to add beneficial information to the study.

There are other limitations that were encountered during the course of this study. First, there are many rural school principals with knowledge and expertise that could not be reached because of the workload the pandemic placed on the leaders. The next

limitation was related to the time when this study occurred. The global pandemic shut down many schools and also limited access to in-person interviews.

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