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Examining Social Identity Among Urban School Leaders: A Case Study of Five Principals In New York City

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EXAMINING SOCIAL IDENTITY AMONG URBAN SCHOOL LEADERS: A CASE STUDY
OF FIVE PRINCIPALS IN NEW YORK CITY

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by

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ABSTRACT

EXAMINING SOCIAL IDENTITY AMONG URBAN SCHOOL LEADERS: A CASE STUDY
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Exploring how school leaders address underrepresented student voices, meaning those of
marginalized experiences along the continuum of social identity including though not limited to
race, class, gender, immigration, and LGBTQ issues in schools is more essential than ever
following the novel coronavirus of 2019 (COVID-19). Principals' social identities (i.e., race,
class, and gender), and their connected social locations and personal histories reveal how their
leadership styles can contribute to the support of marginalized communities. Hence, this
qualitative research study employed a case study methodology to investigate whether and how
the social identities and lived experiences of principals in the Brooklyn and Bronx school
districts of New York City inform their school leadership practices and help them navigate the
policies in place to address social constructions of difference and other critical issues in highly
diverse schools. Guided by the critical case sampling method, a total of five principals native to
four different countries were selected for their diversity and years of experience in NYC school
leadership were interviewed using a semi-structured protocol. Both the research questions and
study protocol drew on multiple leadership theories and applied a social justice leadership lens to
reveal if and how urban public-school leaders support their school communities by advocating
for equity, inclusion, and diversity. Six themes intersected by immigrant narratives emerged
from the data, creating a shared social identity and connected purpose among the participating
principals. Each principal expressed their social identities metaphorically through their

respective immigrant experiences in a sense-making process that explained their leadership styles and understanding of complex issues that occurred in their schools, pre- and post-pandemic. The leadership narratives explored may serve as resources and catalysts for school transformation among principals facing similar diversity and student experiences. My knowledge as a participant observer and former NYC student serves to increase trustworthiness for the findings and affirm the vast implications for future principal leadership practice and research. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (https://aura.antioch.edu/) and OhioLINK ETD Center (https://etd.ohiolink.edu).

Keywords: social identity, social location, school leadership, immigrant status, ESL, social justice leadership, servant leadership, marginalized students

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my gift from above and my loving wife, Fabiola. From the very moment we met, I knew my life had changed. Despite our relocation to New York City, you never turned back, and for your unwavering faith in me, no matter the hurdles I encountered, you have always been there to remind me of our love softly. You gently reminded me of my purpose even when I most doubted this process. You are my smile, my reason why. I am deeply and irrevocably in love with you.

I dedicate this dissertation to my loving mother Inez, who passed away but continues to shape the very essence of who I am as a father, husband, and brother. Your absence is deeply felt, and I miss you daily, Mom. Your love and guidance are the pillars of my life, and I carry them with me in every step I take. I also dedicate this dissertation to my dad, Victor Sr., my first teacher and inspiration. Furthermore, I dedicate this dissertation to my biological mother, Maria Del Carmen. I am reminded of our past; there are many memories, and I stand on your shoulders because of this early journey. Your prayers, vulnerability, and long-awaited embrace are why I am so proud to be your son. Gracias, madre.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my children, Denphenie, Vanessa, Federico, Abigail, and Genesis. Each of you has a piece of this old man's heart. My dearest grandchildren are Roman-Alexander, Emma, Jozie, Peter, Sofia, Emilia, and Elyse. Despite the distance, know your grandfather loves you dearly, and our time together is one of my most treasured memories.

My brothers Mark, Leo, and sister Mari, you have always been my pillars of strength, inspiring and lifting my spirits when it mattered most in my academic journey. My other brothers, Billy and Paul, your love has been a guiding light. My nephews and nieces, your presence in my life has been a source of joy and inspiration. I also dedicate this dissertation to

my adopted family in Florida. Each of you, with your unwavering support, holds a very dear place in my heart. Thank you for taking me in and showing me the love of family.

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Your feedback elevated my thinking and sense of search as a scholar, and I will never settle for less. Your thoughts bridged my soul and gave me a voice of validity. This dissertation's quality indicates that my scholarly voice and experiences have increased exponentially because of your efforts. Thank you, Dr. Raymond, for showing a research perspective and your unrelenting quest and advocacy for equity, diversity, and inclusion. You led and modeled leadership principled by example and have the same passion and love for education as I have. Thank you, Dr. Watnick, Dr. Diaz-Reyes, and Dr. Raymond, for your guidance and support throughout the years and for serving on this Committee. Your contributions have been invaluable to my academic journey.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented events of 2020, and particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, have

impacted humanity on a global scale (UNICEF, n.d.). While the effects of this calamitous time

were universally felt, the lives of families with school-aged children were among the most

dramatically altered. Although economic, political, social, and religious disparities have been a

social justice concern for years, the disruption caused by COVID-19 heightened issues such as

marginalization, access, and equity in education. Implications for social-emotional development

and learning will be a concern for years to come. According to annual data recording by

UNICEF (n.d.) throughout the pandemic, intensive, post-COVID school support is a necessity:

> Three years into the COVID-19 pandemic, 23 countries—home to nearly 405 million
>
> schoolchildren—are yet to fully open schools, with many schoolchildren at risk of dropping
>
> out…Though national governments around the world have been quick to implement remote
>
> learning, new health protocols and reopening plans, these policies have varied widely based
>
> on each country's wealth. Even short disruptions in children's schooling can have
>
> long-lasting negative impacts due to factors including the lack of structured programmes
>
> for catching up … Quite simply, we are looking at a nearly insurmountable scale of loss to
>
> children's schooling. While the disruptions to learning must end, just reopening schools is
>
> not enough. Students need intensive support to recover lost education. (Exacerbating the
>
> Learning Crisis section)

The intensive supports that students need to recover educational losses and cope with the

uncertainties caused by COVID-19 call for strong and effective school leadership. Namely,

principals today must have the skills to lead teachers and other staff toward meeting increased

academic needs amid an increasingly diverse student body (National Center for Education

Statistics [NCES], 2022a). As a high school principal living and working in New York City

(NYC), Brooklyn, in the largest public school district in the country, I utilized a case study

methodology to examine whether a school principal's social identity (i.e., conceptions of the self

particularly related to race, class, and gender) helps them to navigate district, state, and national

level policies in place while still addressing the social constructions of difference and critical

issues in schools.

The need to successfully (a) address how students engage instruction and school safety,

and (b) support those whose voices are most often underrepresented has intensified school

leaders' goal to sustain the learning environment. Those at the top of principals' lists of concern

for underrepresentation in education policy and achievement primarily include Black, Brown,

multi-language, and economically disadvantaged students, as well as students with disabilities

(NCES, 2022b). Thus, I decided to undertake this case study because personal narrative forms

the basis for much-needed human connections and healing, which underrepresented students

need now more than any other time in recent history.

Montes and Castro (2020) describe testimonies as a form of empowerment and a bridge

toward autonomy. They exposited: "We have the power as a community to listen, acknowledge,

and transform" (p. 4). Highlighting communities marginalized according to race, class, and

gender, is an essential part of this investigation. Academic literature lacks stories like mine about

a one-time homeless student, living under the poverty line, struggling in my journey as a

traumatized, bilingual student, becoming a first-generation college graduate and finally, a school

principal who identifies as Brown and of Dominican origin and maintains a goal of holistic

education for all students. Such lived experiences, including lessons learned from the COVID-19

pandemic, may spark a new framework for educational policy makers and academic scholars as they engage with stories of social justice in relationship to teaching and learning.

Problem Statement

NYC public high school principals solve evolving school incidences and crises daily. These events can include anything from an irate parent exhibiting mental health needs to an increase in guns and other weapons found in schools. What is more unnerving is the frequency in which these events occur. Indeed, balancing school safety with public health conditions and academic rigor presents challenging conditions which impact the school principal's leadership behaviors. The increase in weapons in schools is a significant concern for all stakeholders. According to Rajamani (2022): "Twenty of the 5,546 weapons were guns including two 9mm handguns a 15-year-old student brought into school in Queens on May 18" (line 7). National and global crises, such as epidemics and pandemics, inevitably serve to exacerbate longstanding community issues already entrenched in social constructions of difference, and which many pose difficulty for some principals to understand and respond to.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected everyone, especially schools in ways that mirrored the inequities seen within the larger society. Its impact was felt both within classroom walls and school-to-home relationships. Marginalized communities such as Black and Brown populations, and immigrant communities living in homeless shelters and under the poverty line lacked the resources to connect to schools for distance learning. Unsurprisingly then, the pandemic exacerbated the existing digital divide as access to technology became an absolute requirement for instruction. Teachers require ongoing training and oversight to understand the connections between privilege, oppression, and identity in relation to education services, equity, and access in classrooms (Sparks, 2020). Exploring NYC high school principals' experiences with effective

training, mentoring, supervision, and/or implementation of strategies that create space and opportunity for justice through a case study approach may reveal how social identities and associated social locations and personal histories influence their leadership styles.

Through this study, I sought to gain a better understanding of how NYC principals embrace their responsibilities for personal authenticity and professional responsibility, particularly in the boroughs with wide racial and cultural diversity within the student body— such as Brooklyn—that thrive on social justice leadership strategies (e.g., DeMatthews, 2016). The more that school leaders are aware of their intersectional social identities, the likelier they will be to utilize social justice leadership that supports both students and staff and guides them to respect each other's identities and needs in light of social constructions of difference between races, genders, and classes (Angelle et al., 2015). Thus, this study explored how the social identity (i.e., race, class, and gender) of multiple NYC principals impact their leadership practices and ideas from the position of social justice leader regardless of differences in their respective social locations.

Major Research Concepts

Social Identity, Location, and Positionality

According to Jacobson and Mustafa (2019), the ways in which people view and interpret the social world "is impacted by where, when, and how we are socially located and in what society" (p. 1). Also referred to as *positionality*, Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) set out to develop a three-tiered tool for facilitating researchers' ability to locate themselves in society prior to conducting qualitative research. As described in their article:

> When learning about critical qualitative health research, one of the basic elements of reflexivity that is taught is positionality (Day, 2012; Gastaldo, 2015; Waterson &

Rylko-Bauer, 2007). Some of the many facets that make up our social identities include but are not limited to class, citizenship, ability, age, race, sexual orientation, cis/trans status, and gender (Collins, 201; Dhamoon & Hankivsky, 2011). These factors—whether one is young, old, a woman, a man, nonbinary, cisgender, trans, a Canadian, an Emirati, White, Black, lower middle class, wealthy, able, with a disability, heterosexual, homosexual, pan-sexual, and so on—affect the way that we see and interpret the world around us, and how the world sees and interprets us (Day, 2012). (p. 2)

Tier one of Jacobson and Mustafa's (2019) Social Identity Map (SIM) identifies social identities, including race, sexual orientation, cis/trans, gender, class, citizenship, ability, and age/generation. Specifically, the focus of the first level of the SIM is on the identification of the broader aspects of social identity "categories we feel best describe our being in the world" (p. 4). Tiers two and three provide space for deeper exploration of each identity to effectively locate the emotional, psychological, and societal meaning of each one. For instance, SIM learners are asked to move beyond categorizing to identifying how the categories impact their lives, using nouns and adjectives to describe their actual lived experiences (e.g., Brown, White, Black, etc., cis-, trans-, x-gendered, etc., person on tier two). They are asked to apply emotions that may be bound to each of the first two levels of social identity on tier three.

The three-tiered model was developed on the premise that (a) facets of our overall social identity are interconnected; (b) our social identity informs our view of our environment and the people in it, and vice versa; and (c) none can isolate their social identity and various facets from our work. Also, according to Sparks (2020), "Intersectionality is a key concept used to explain how social categories interact and constitute multiple systems of privilege experienced by individuals and groups," and "Intersectionality is the interaction of social categories, which

shape one's social location and experience" (p. 25). Consequently, to get to thinking and working intersectionally, each of us must first understand our individual social locations.

I agree with Jacobson and Mustafa (2019), that "It is important for researchers to use the [SIM] to reflect on their positionality and apply these reflections directly to the research context" (p. 6). Additionally, with regard to my conceptualization of social identity as embodying race, gender, and class, and social constructions of difference between selves and non-selves as inherent consequences of them within U.S. society, I agree with Sparks (2020), that,

> The intersection of gender, sexuality, and race emphasizes the complexity of privilege, and the impacts of varying experiences of privilege can be seen in many contexts of everyday life such as public space, sport, the media, and employment. For example, campaigns such as "Black Lives Matter" help to destabilize by making visible systems of white privilege, which tend to be normalized. These intersectional identities are socially constructed, with more visual markers of difference dominating perceptions and therefore actions and behaviors. In this way, privilege is relative and situated. (p. 25)

Thus, in an effort to authentically understand (a) the literature reviewed in preparation for this study, (b) how my diverse high school principal participants may understand and receive my research questions from their respective social positions, and (c) how their responses may intersect with my positionality, I will remain reflexive as a researcher by utilizing the SIM and considering my social location throughout this study.

Case Study

The definition of case studies is wide in scope. Heale and Twycross (2018) defined a case study as an in-depth analysis of an individual, group of people, or a phenomenon. The pandemic impacted the social, economic, cultural, political, and religious institutions nationally. Moreover,

Robson (2002) stated: "[Case Study] involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence" (p. 5). A case study may include observations and the exploration of experiences encountered in real-time by urban school leaders. For instance, the COVID-19 health pandemic required urban school principals to manage both the mental and academic needs of students and families. A case study enabled me to examine the strategies principals used within their educational setting to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic. Hence, the following case study models highlight the common themes of intervention, personalization, and leadership character traits that I researched during this investigation.

I explored Omi and Winant's (2014) work, *Racial Formation in The United States*, to further inform my research focus on social identity (i.e., race, class, and gender). The authors provided insight into (a) how race is shaped, and (b) how racial formation can transform and become a focal point for political struggle (e.g., class). According to the authors, "In order to explain race inequality one must turn to the social and political processes and practices" (p. 67).

Similarly, I examined Northouse and Lee's (2021) text, *Leadership Case Studies in Education*. Their work analyzing leadership behaviors and characteristic traits key in elevating staff morale proved vital to my conduct of this study, and particularly when forming the research questions. For instance, they concluded that replicating awareness, removing obstacles, and providing support is a vital model to imitate if increasing staff morale is a leadership goal.

Finally, as Trujillo-Jenks and Jenks (2016) indicated in their study, "Case Studies on Safety, Bullying, and Social Media in Schools: Current Issues in Educational Leadership," the use of case studies on safety, bullying, and social media is of paramount importance because the context of these realities intersects with policies and practices implemented by principals daily in

schools (Sparks, 2020). I intended to mirror Trujillo-Jenks and Jenks's (2016) case study model given its alignment with how principals respond to seminal issues in the classroom, and with the inherent intersectionality of social locations. Indeed, these models were helpful for this study as they provided complementary frameworks for the observing, interviewing, and shadowing activities that were carried out during data collection with primary interest in social justice strategies that meet the range of complex needs amid students in urban areas like Brooklyn, NY.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender) of high school principals in NYC helps them to perform critical duties, like navigating the policies in place that often fail to meet the needs of or serve to further complicate the learning experiences of marginalized studies, including English Language Learner (ELL) instructional program, compliance related to up-to-date maintenance of the students' Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), advancing Social Emotional Learning policies that lack restorative justice components, balance their concomitant social locations, and personal histories of being as they influence their school leadership styles. Ultimately, I sought to identify leadership approaches that result in a positive impact on the culture and outcomes of diverse NYC schools. I used the results of my interviews with diverse high school principals to emphasize the connections that exist between leadership behaviors and social identity and location.

More succinctly, the purpose of my study was to identify how NYC principals' multiple identities intertwining class, race, and gender, and their concomitant social locations and personal histories of being influence their school leadership styles. I furthermore anticipated that the results of my study would include best practices for leading school communities during complex incidences, such as school closures and remote instruction during the COVID-19

pandemic. My investigation also informs principals, district leaders, and other stakeholders in school cultures and outcomes for students about the ways in which school leaders in the largest and most diverse districts in the country both embody self-awareness, diversity, and inclusion, and promote the same in their practice amongst teachers, staff, and students. Mehrotra (2021) calls this promotion a *pedagogy of care*.

<div align="center">

Significance of the Study

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The Importance of the Research to the Academy

This research study contributes to the ongoing scholarly conversations about principals' social identities and how they may include underrepresented ideas concerning myriad social constructions of difference in relation to leadership skillsets. In investigating and identifying social identity- and social justice-oriented themes that surfaced around leaders' navigation of the requirements of institutional policies, this study is significant for helping future school leaders identify which lived experiences and strategies are beneficial to their practice versus those that are not. I anticipated that the principals' own social locations would influence their behaviors and mindsets. Furthermore, I foresaw that the leadership narratives and insights of my colleagues would serve as a catalyst to motivate and inspire other leaders facing similar work challenges. Findings affirmed both of these assumptions.

The Importance of Research to K–12 School Leadership

The daily responsibilities of the principal are myriad and varied. They can include (a) managing teacher retention, (b) closing student achievement gaps, (c) addressing unequal access to highly qualified teachers, (d) overseeing technology, (e) supporting a Title I under-performing school, (f) combatting a lack of parental involvement, and (g) retaining leadership. Some of these responsibilities can blur the lines between education and social work. Hence, principals often

look for the support of social workers to help them fulfill some of their duties. As first

responders during the COVID-19 pandemic, many social workers started organic grassroots

efforts to support economically disadvantaged Black and Brown communities, who struggled

with a lack of access to basic resources (Rodriguez, 2020). These initiatives included managing

foodbanks, fundraising, and offering legal services and translation for multilanguage learners.

Innovative and creative strategies such as those discussed by Rodriguez (2020) provide

support and equity to schools that need it the most in the absence of state funding. Connecting to

personal leadership narratives may serve as an entry point for much needed discussions about

strategic planning and advocacy. For instance, Creswell (2013) argues,

> Narrative is stories about lived and told experiences. Narrative stories are gathered
>
> through many different forms of data, such as through interviews, that may be the
>
> primary form of data collection, but also through observations, documents, pictures, and
>
> other sources of qualitative data. (p. 71)

The power of the stories is often designed to flow from the past to the present and future as I and

the participants share our personal experiences within the framework of my research.

In this study, I used storytelling in the context of principals' social identities and

locations to advance socially just leadership styles in the interest of educational improvements

for all students. Importantly, storytelling provides a safe space to discuss those lived experiences

that are central to the construction of social identities and may thus aid self-discovery and

healing toward locating oneself and accepting one's location in society (Jacobson & Mustafa,

2020; Tillott et al., 2022). Storytelling was utilized in this study as a form of analysis in

constructing themes, patterns, strategies, and application. Ackerman et al. (1996) confirms, "At

some point participants begin to think differently, more critically and less self-centered. They are

challenged and inspired to think more deeply about their practice" (p. 23). The complexity of identity and lessons learned from our own stories may provide a deeper understanding of the principal's practice, particularly in high schools.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer how Brooklyn, NY high school principals' social identities assists them with navigating school policies while addressing social constructions of difference and critical issues in schools. Thus, the following questions were explored:

1. How do the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social location, and personal histories of New York City Brooklyn high school principals' influence their leadership style(s)?

2. Do the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social location and personal histories of New York City Brooklyn high school principals contribute to the incorporation of social justice leadership practices to support marginalized student communities, and if so, how?

Key Terms

The following terms appear often in the literature on principal leadership and/or social identity, location, and justice, and may, therefore, appear often in this study:

- *Class*: or socioeconomic status (SES), refers to the vast array of interrelated social and economic factors that determine one's standing in their society which "are likely to be given high levels of subjective importance by individuals and used as a meaningful way to categorize and define themselves and others" (Antonoplis, 2023; quoting Easterbrook et al., 2020, p. 66). Class/SES is often used to stratify people on

a low-to-high wealth hierarchy based on parents' educational attainment and/or
"possession of material resources" in a given society (Antonoplis, 2023, p. 277).

- *Crisis Management*: refers to the leader's compass to be swift and decisive during
  situations (Okilwa & Barnett, 2021).

- *Gender*: connotes a continuum of role assignment relative sex, sexual orientation and
  daily behavioral norms such that "an attraction to the same gender (lesbian, gay, or
  homosexual), an attraction to the opposite gender (straight or heterosexual), and
  attraction to multiple genders along the spectrum of gender identity (bisexual or
  pansexual), or the absence of sexual attraction (asexual)" defines sexual or gender
  identity (Warwick et al., 2022, pp. 138–139).

- *Instructional Leadership*: Shaked (2020) explains, "Instructional leadership is the
  pattern of behaviors that school leaders exhibit in order to ensure improved teacher
  practices and student performance" (p. 2).

- *Intergenerational-Economic Mobility*: refers to generations who lack or have limited
  educational experiences and access to social networking, which in turn leads to lower
  wages and limited higher education experiences (Islami et al., 2021).

- *Narrative Stories*: Creswell and Poth (2016) state that narrative stories inform
  individual experiences and surface "the identities of individuals and how they see
  themselves" (p. 69).

- *Pedagogy of Care*: having a deeper understanding about the student's diverse
  background including through the lens of equity, including "class, race, age,
  parenting status, first-generation status" (Mehrotra, 2021, p. 538).

- *Race*: Jones (2001) explained that "Race is a social construct, a social classification based on phenotype, that governs the distribution of risks and opportunities" (Jones, 2001, p. 300). Race is further differentiated from ethnicity inasmuch as, while the latter "reflects cultural heritage, race measures a societally imposed identity and consequent exposure to the societal constraints associated with that particular identity" (p. 300).

- *Restorative Justice:* a shift from managing behaviors to restoring relationships with youth through collaboration (Fronius et al., 2019).

- *Social Justice*: is inevitably about recognizing equality, freedoms, and policies related to issues about individuals in society (Reisch, 2002). Hytten and Bettez (2011) further state that "[Social Justice is] critically pluralist and democratic, transformative, moral and ethical, feminist/caring and spiritually/culturally responsive" (p. 13).

- *Social Justice Leadership*: acts as a multi-layered umbrella that "inspires transformation, improvement, and achievement for all learners at every level of education" (Sun, 2019, p. 147).

- *Transformative Leadership*: "[The leader who] must, somehow, get [their] people to take risks, to embrace uncertainties, and above all, to be willing to 'trust [their] ability to produce results that advances their own interests'" (Generette & Welch, 2018, p. 1114).

Ethical Considerations

Assumptions

I entered this research with certain assumptions. For instance, based on my personal experiences in school leadership and the literature that I studied in the process of designing this study, I assumed that high school principals in Brooklyn and similarly diverse NYC boroughs leverage their social identities (i.e., race, gender, and class) to navigate the policies in place in their schools, often through a lens of social justice advocacy and practice. I further assumed this to be true despite great diversity within their school communities and the concomitant social constructions of difference that such multitudes inherently bring.

Another assumption that I entered into this research with was that principals with prior experiences as an ELL student themselves would have a deeper understanding and connection to English as a second language (ESL) acquisition needs than those without such experience. As one such principal, I assumed this to be true more often than untrue.

Additionally, I assumed that former ESL-aware principals' personal experiences as former ELL students would form the basis for advocacy in support of new immigrant students who may also encounter similar difficulties in access to audio/visual devices (e.g., iPads and software for ELL students). I specifically assumed such principals to express more success in this policy area *because* of having lived experiences that were colored by lack of access. Furthermore, I assumed that their personal experiences would indicate contribution to their leadership style(s) as they engaged class, immigration, and other critical social location issues.

Finally, I further assumed that the leaders' lived experiences would demonstrate having shaped their mindset and influenced their leadership behaviors post-COVID-19. For example, I assumed that school leaders who served as bilingual teachers in the past would share stories of

their own experiences about the best and worse teaching resources for ELL students. These experiences—I assumed—would furthermore influence how such principals worked with similar students related to the non-lingual factors of race, class, gender, LGBTQ orientation, and special needs (e.g., sensory impairment or cognitive delay) in the school community, all of which would be emphasized in the narratives of immigrant and former ELL principals.

Limitations

I anticipated that every principal would be forthcoming, honest, and willing to share their personal and professional experiences to me as both a researcher and colleague. However, though the participants did exchange experiences and share similar stories, some leaders may have harbored personal and professional biases about K–12 leadership that they did not wish to share with me. For examples, some may have withheld all or part of their ideals and philosophical leadership stance(s) concerning COVID-19 response policies. Additionally, although we may have previously shared leadership strategies in meetings, some principals' responses to research protocol questions may have been influenced by personal reservations about revealing their experiences of balancing challenges and institutional policies in the more formal research capacity.

Of particular concern for case studies utilizing interviews and observations are socially desirable responding, and performance memory bias, in which participants tell researchers what they think the researchers want to hear based on the "right answer" according to social trends and mores and omit responses that they as participants are unconscious of thinking, feeling, or doing because they are now so routine (Guest et al., 2017). Ultimately, researchers collecting self-report data, whether via interviews or surveys, face the limitation of lacking control over respondents providing what are believed to be socially acceptable even if the participants do not

actually agree; and vice versa, I may have had implicit biases concerning participant responses that were only partially resolved through my conscious reflexivity (e.g., see Gagnon, 2009).

For instance, my assumption that the participating school leaders struggled with creating priorities and striking a balance between setting up for instruction and addressing parental engagement with families may have been influenced by my own social identity and school leadership style. Furthermore, my experiences and framing of questions may have affected how the participants interacted with me, either positively or negatively. Additionally, I assumed that my personal experiences as a former homeless, high school dropout, ELL student, and later, crisis interventionist provided an entry point for the participants in our discussions of how school leaders navigate through institutionalized policies, and common social constructions of difference. However, it may not have. Finally, as a multiple-case study (Heale & Twycross, 2018), participation was further limited to a small number for in-depth analysis of social identities, social locations, and social justice-oriented leadership behaviors. I was mindful of these potentially limiting issues and practiced reflexivity as I conducted the study.

Delimitations

This study had delimitations in relation to the limitations. For instance, and as previously discussed, this study employed the case study design which relied upon self-reports that may come with inherent response bias. However, this particular methodology was selected given my group membership as a participant observer, which often serves to lessen the effects of self-report bias (Guest et al., 2017). Furthermore, data collection exploring the principals' professional life stories of successes, hardships, and challenges in problem resolution in their NYC schools were restricted to the study question responses offered by the participants in narrative form, and my observations and connected field notes of them at work. Analysis and

interpretation of participant narratives were further delimited by a narrow focus on the literature reviewed, key terms, and study questions used in the study conceptualization.

Also, as a multiple-case study (Heale & Twycross, 2018), participation was limited to a small number for in-depth analysis of social identities, social locations, and social justice-oriented leadership behaviors. Thus, this qualitative case study comprised five semi-structured interviews based on an instrument designed to answer the two major research questions. Further, the study population was limited to five seasoned principals specifically in Brooklyn and potentially other, similarly diverse NYC boroughs, strategically selected for the wealth of school leadership experience necessary for "critical case sampling" (Tierney & Lincoln, 1994, p. 116). Where leadership styles may be broad, determined by various identity and/or personality factors (e.g., Angelle et al., 2015; Canli, 2020), the likelihood of the participants' inclusion of or focus on social justice centered or adjacent types was increased by the strategic location for sampling (e.g., Brooklyn and the Bronx, Manhattan, and/or Queens).

Conclusion

Overall, urban school leaders recently experienced an unprecedented and monumental event that was emotionally and intellectually draining. Namely, the hours and stress caused by ongoing crisis and critical issues in schools caused by COVID-19 infections, state and district-level COVID-19 policies, instructional access changes, etc., took a toll on many leaders. Within a school, it is the principal who sets the tone and leads the teachers, staff, students, and community through those challenges, and the consequences of the pandemic responding were particularly dire for the nation's public school principals.

For instance, school districts in Arizona, Nevada, and Utah experienced a low 40% principal retention average during the pandemic (Makkonen & Jacquet, 2021). Among the issues

highlighted as causing principal attrition were mobility within the district and the health pandemic. Parts of a broader practice rooted in social justice leadership can serve as a useful model for school leaders both now and in the future. These include community building, providing access to services, creating a space of inclusivity, sustaining and adapting resources in support of mental health, and targeted teacher training. Thus, I employed a case study methodology to examine whether NYC school principals' lived experiences helped them to navigate the policies in place to then allow them space and opportunity to address the social constructions of difference present in richly diverse schools.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I provide an overview of the studies I reviewed to inform and construct the basis for my study. Specifically, I identify the literature on social construction of difference, social justice leadership, instructional leadership, transformative leadership, servant leadership, leadership and crisis, and case study theories intended to influence social change. The rationale for my literature selection was that each contributes to the discussion about leadership practices and critical issues in schools. I address how the findings help clarify the forms and locations of intersection between high school principals' social identities and their leadership practices (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019; Sharp, 2020). The critical role of school leaders continues to evolve in response to social shifts post-COVID-19. School leaders are required to lead the community and utilize tools and strategies for learning under strenuous conditions. Thus, I sought research that might help me understand the intersecting lines of identity, diversity, and school leadership.

The goal of my investigation was to build on past studies conducted by Jacobson and Mustafa (2019), Northouse and Lee (2021), Okilwa and Barnett (2021), Omi and Winant (2014), and Purnomo et al. (2021). These authors are important because they contribute to the evidence-based discussions on social location, social justice, and leadership styles in relation to critical issues in schools. Additionally, my goal was also to discover how the principals' social identity composites in terms of class, race, and gender helped them to navigate their school policies without having to neglect pedagogies of care (e.g., social justice leadership strategies) that help to address social constructions of difference. Adding to extant scholarship, I thus sought to answer the following research questions through the lens of social justice framework:

1. How do the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social location, and

   personal histories of New York City Brooklyn high school principals' influence their

   leadership style(s)?

2. Do the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social location and personal

   histories of New York City Brooklyn high school principals contribute to the

   incorporation of social justice leadership practices to support marginalized student

   communities, and if so, how?

There is a lack of published research connecting the social location of school leaders and leadership practices in relation to supporting marginalized communities. Regardless of multiple search attempts using key words, including "principal leadership style," "principal practice," "principal and social justice," "principal and transformative leadership," "principal and crisis," "principal and social construction," I found a lack of literature in the area of personal principal experiences and the social construction of identity.

Studies related to or containing discussion on personal principal experiences were few and irrelevant to this study. These studies relied more on theories of practice and not past experiences. For example, Cho et al. (2013) explored intersectionality in the context of power, engagement, and political dynamics. These authors discuss how race, class and gender co-exist in an institution. Intersectionality is a starting point that cross connects sameness and differences in relation to "sexuality, nation and other inequalities" (Cho et al., p. 788), and thus contributed significantly to the conceptual foundation of this study. Some of the disparities discussed include advocacy for women of color in the workplace.

First introduced into the literature by Crenshaw (1989, as cited in Bauer et al., 2021), intersectionality is understood today as "a theoretical framework wherein consideration of

heterogeneity across different intersections of social positions is integral to understanding health and social experiences" (p. 1). Crenshaw (1989, as cited in Bauer et al., 2021) conceptualized intersectionality to address Black women's experiences in the crossfire between racial, gender, and class oppression, and many researchers have extended the framework to a myriad of other social identities and subjects. Since intersectionality has "long been considered a primary theoretical and methodological tool for qualitative studies of identity and marginalization" (Bauer et al., 2021, p. 2), the construct was woven throughout this study as an integral aspect of identity, leadership, and social constructions of difference.

In the following section, I discuss the pertinent studies and elaborate on current gaps in the research and scholarly reviews. Social location or social identity, as discussed in Chapter I, both refer to the combination of different individual identities (e.g., gender, race, class, religion, ability, etc.) that someone brings to their understanding of approaches to the social world. These fundamental constructs are also incorporated throughout this chapter.

Social Construction of Identity

Social identity is grounded in the self in comparison to other groups that may share common interests, values and or norms (Kirkham, 2015). This view of identity factors into my study because the very construction of self-identity in relation to the construction of identities held by other people and groups suggests that human beings, and especially leaders (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019), are at some level intentional about defining and expressing their social locations. In this way, the personal experiences of principals in this study revealed behaviors in their leadership styles, and what was revealed is inextricably linked to the principals' social identities and locations per force of the social enterprise of self-making in society.

Because of what it says about how the social identities, social locations, and personal

histories of the NYC high school principals contribute to the support of marginalized

communities under an umbrella of beliefs and strategies defined by social justice leadership

practices, social construction of identity connected strongly to my study. Further, the model of

identity and analysis I explore below in this review was thus based on Omi and Winant's (2014)

theory of social identity. Also, Crow et al. (2017) reminded me of the complex nature of

competing priorities when one must balance their social identity against policies, beliefs, or

needs that must be adhered to or met regardless of agreement with one's social location such that

what a principal decides to prioritize and how they choose to address those priorities may be

understood as an extension of their social identity (e.g., race, class, and gender).

Case in point, Crow et al. (2017) argued that, "[Principals] struggle with new policies and

their own sense of self which may create an internal crisis" (p. 267). Thus, having a deeper

understanding of how principals promote a pedagogy of care via social justice-oriented

leadership in the context of diverse emotional and academic needs present in their schools may

help other leaders identify and advance capacity for providing socially and culturally responsive

leadership from their particular social location. Adopting Jacobson and Mustafa's (2019) map of

social identity locations, social identity is a nexus of identities with axes that may refer to race,

sexual orientation, sexual dimension (i.e., cis or trans), gender, class, citizenship, ability, and

age. Respecting the intersectionality of social identity, I examined three of these axes.

Furthermore, with regard to race being a social construct, Bauer et al. (2021) refer to

Jones (2001) when discussing the operational definitions for race and racism among

intersectionality researchers. According to Jones (2001), it is widely accepted that race is a social

construct rather than "a biologic reality" that is yet also a "an individual characteristic and a

matter of self-identity akin to ethnicity" (p. 299). Race is furthermore contextual given that it is a social construct connected to classifications based on phenotype that determine how individuals, groups, and systems distribute risks, rewards, and even recognition in society (Jones, 2001).

On an institutional level where all races are ideally seen and respected among leaders within the shared social system, such as public schools, Jones (2001) explains the following:

> Institutionalized racism is defined as differential access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society by race (14). It is structural, having been codified in our institutions of custom, practice, and law so there need not be an identifiable perpetrator. Indeed, institutionalized racism is often evident as inaction in the face of need. Institutionalized racism manifests itself both in material conditions and in access to power. With regard to material conditions, examples include differential access to quality education, sound housing, gainful employment, appropriate medical facilities, and a clean environment. With regard to access to power, examples include differential access to information, resources, and voice. (p. 300)

 Though Omi and Winant (2014) state that, "No social category rises to the level of being understood as fixed, objective and social fact" (p. 105)," my analysis of race and racism in the United States is anchored by the pervasive nature of White dominion over various minority groups (Omi & Winant, 2014). Therefore, principals are responsible for rooting racism out of their schools as a social construction of difference that oppresses, marginalizes, or silences students (and staff) of color. Similarly, class and gender are social constructions that impact people in a number of societal areas. Thus, I adopted Omi and Winant's (2014) conceptualization of class as a compilation of people who share a common economic, sociolinguistic, and political standing in society. The researchers further argued that class categories are set within three

tenets: "the market, stratification, and conflict approaches" (pp. 53–54) which intersect with other constructs, such as race and gender. For instance, how the market views gender largely determines how we *engender* ourselves to the very construction and performance of gender identity and difference.

bell hooks (1994) explored the intersectionality of race, class, and gender in the classroom and the interaction of students in their environment. hooks was heavily influenced by Paulo Freire's thinking, whose primary focus was race and class. Like the United States, Freire's country of Brazil experienced colonial oppression. Through enslavement and a rigid class system, first through the decimation of the indigenous tribes followed by the slave trade, Black Americans and Brazilians share similar experiences under colonial rule. The ideals of voice, freedom, and democracy for the Creoles and Mulattos were never part of their daily vocabulary but rather that of obedience to the master plantation owner. Likewise, in the plantations of the American Southern States, the Brazilian and Black experience was exploited for political, economic, and social power.

The collective misery, disconnection, segregation, and civil yearning for equity is at the heart of Paulo Freire's (2013) philosophy of critical consciousness. For instance, Freire speaks of the connection between the powerless and a paralyzed mindset: "Perhaps the greatest tragedy of modern man is his domination by the force of these myths and his manipulation by organized advertising, ideological or otherwise" (Freire, 2013, p. 5). Freire's position on the impact of colonialism, oppression, and the subjugation of liberal expression was the basis for my quest in gaining insight about other leaders' lived experiences.

Finally, in discussing Butler's description of gender, Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) stated that "She draws on Merleau-Ponty's work by explaining that the body and its expressions

become entwined with meaning based on the social and historical context it is viewed in" (p. 9).

Thus, while some might argue that gender is biologically expressed, others would also be correct

in arguing that it is socially constructed through actions or performances. Jacobson and Mustafa

(2019) explain that,

> Butler (1988) describes how gender is instituted by performing acts that have been socially
> constructed to indicate the particular gender of the individual actor (Butler, 1988). Whether
> one views their social identity as performed or in action, as one's being/one's doing, or as
> heavily influenced by a specific construct like gender, the most important element is
> understanding the complexity that where we stand in what society impacts the way that we
> present ourselves, interact with participants, and interpret the meaning of our data. (p. 9)

Class, race, and gender are all interconnected. These social identities, intersect to create a

composite social identity and location that drive and shape our daily behaviors. The more aware

leaders are of their social identity intersections the more effective they will be at their jobs. In

school communities, the principal's leadership behaviors act as a key relationship builder. The

principal orchestrates a vision and plan of action to support both academic and mindfulness

activities that are influenced by both internal and external issues such as policies on discipline

and safety in schools. For instance, successful principals lead by navigating through systemic,

institutional policies that define the roles and responsibilities of each staff member within the

school community. Anthias (2013) states: "Our [racial-gendered-and-class-based social]

'location' is embedded in relations of hierarchy within a multiplicity of specific situational and

conjunctural spheres" (p. 130). However, a staff member's role may or may not be connected to

their identity or moral values.

Crow et al. (2017) conceptualized existing theories of social construction to be multidimensional, yet consistent on the intersection of social identity, professional behavior, and the importance of context. The authors stated that, "[The philosophical framework] suggests that the salience of the personal, cultural and political elements of professional identity formation may vary depending on, for example, personal life experiences, emotions, reform expectations, school culture and other influences" (p. 274). Accordingly, this analysis argues that identity is not stagnant but rather evolves according to the environment as well as perceptions of common interests/values. The 'self' interacts with internal and external forces and exchanges ideas with others, and this concept is what this study is largely premised upon.

Cruz-Gonzalez et al. (2019) examined 20 articles published between 2009 and 2018 using a thematic analysis of the relationships between gender, identity, and leadership identity. Their findings revealed that female principals chose to promote trusting, emotional, and professional relationships more often than male principals did. However, it is important to consider that their findings may be at least in part due to gendered social conditioning (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). Even more, through an intersectional lens and from a social justice frame of reference, we must consider what Williams (2018) espoused: "Gender stereotypes were designed to marginalize women" (p. 806).

Cruz-Gonzalez et al. (2019) also advocate for an examination of results with respect to social identities and inclusivity. Principals often have to decide how to redefine their roles as leaders in ways that allow them to cope and deal with social challenges, from microaggressions to largescale district or state level policies that fail to consider lack of instructional access (i.e., class) or racial tensions (i.e., race) affecting specific subsets of the school community at any given moment, without compromising their own values in relation to social justice and change.

Thus, would Cruz-Gonzalez et.al (2019) conclude that, "There is evidence that education policies influence leadership practices and that this can be a source of concern for principals" (p. 63). My goal was to determine *how* principals navigate education policies influencing their leadership practices for social justice, and how the leaders participating in my study consciously or unconsciously relied upon aspects of their social identity (i.e., race, class, and gender) to lead effectively (e.g., Guest et al., 2017). There appears to be a strong correlation between a leader's ability and the way they navigate challenging and complex issues such as those described above. More importantly, those personal experiences may influence leadership philosophy. Leadership identity may also be framed as a pre-requisite for shaping how leaders value and commit to long-lasting advocacy for change.

Pedagogy of Care

External issues such as an unstable or low-income home environments often require tiered supports and interventions in the classrooms. Accordingly, principals having a deeper understanding about their students' diverse backgrounds, including "class, race, age, parenting status, first-generation status" and more (Mehrotra, 2021, p. 538), and thereby more effectively addressing students' social support needs through lenses of equity epitomize the concept of pedagogy of care. This study sought to answer how a school principal's social identity (i.e., class, race, and gender) helps them to navigate education policies such as emergency school closures and restrictions on teaching critical race theory (CRT) or gender plurality and simultaneously work to support the learning and development of diverse students and staff. Thus, my study investigated how principals address multiple, and at times divergent, issues competing for their attention and pedagogical skills to locate practices and ideas that demonstrate social justice leadership in the interests of diverse school districts like New York City Brooklyn.

Christopher Emdin's book, *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood* (2016), provides the reader with an in-depth analysis of shifting the teaching mindset by focusing on our students' diverse social identities. Emdin provided a rich historical framework for examining the main argument found in pedagogy of care (Mehrotra, 2021). Inasmuch as pedagogy of care is a set of concepts and practices that are designed to be inclusive and progressive, it aligns with social justice leadership which informed this study. Notably, Emdin compared the experiences Native American students encountered when they were stripped of their culture and customs as they engaged "White America's Classroom" and those of marginalized students of color in our urban classroom settings, who are typically excluded from curriculum and modes of instruction. Emdin (2016) explained the importance of comparing the indigenous experience with that of urban youth of color: "Identifying urban youth of color as a neoindigenous allows us to understand the oppression these youth experience, the spaces they inhabit, and the ways the phenomena affect what happens in social settings like traditional classrooms" (p. 9).

Responsible school leaders responding from a pedagogy of care mindset might provide teachers with a digitized professional development activity that addresses the contributions from marginalized groups and improve how students see themselves and each other as agents of change. Notably, unlike Emdin's (2016) lens, hooks (1994) agreed with Freire. Understanding how the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social locations, and personal histories of NYC high school principals promote pedagogies of care in their practice is crucial. Freire (2020), for instance, argued "Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued always and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man, nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is instead the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion" (p. 47).

While I agree with Freire, I also assert that creating the conditions to nurture freedom by embracing students' voices and empowering them to reflect critically and question their texts or curriculum is essential in the human quest for it. How can principals, for example, facilitate, help train for, or lead students and teachers in important conversations about differences in race, gender, and class identity in a 9th grade English course? In this way, I endorse hook's (1994) reference to Giroux's and McLaren's (2014) point about highlighting the essence of critical pedagogy as it relates to respect and experience. hooks (1994) elaborated:

> You cannot deny that students have experienced, and you cannot deny that these experiences are relevant to the learning process even though you might say these experiences are limited, raw, unfruitful, or whatever. In this view, the interaction of emotions, respect, trust, and collaboration are critical elements relationship building. Leadership that foster these behaviors are essential in the critical space paradigm. Therefore, a pedagogy of care is transformative and empowering for all students. (p. 88)

Context and Educational Setting

Race, class, and gender intersect in relation to how discriminatory practices have hindered academic and social progress, especially amongst Black women (Bauer et al., 2021). For example, the concept of race and sex discrimination is but a fraction of what Black students and women have historically encountered. Hence, placing a limitation on a single axis analysis can be challenging. As cited in Bauer et al. (2021), Crenshaw argued: "Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by White Women and Black men" (pp. 150–151). Advocating for broader discussion on the needs and critical issues is of paramount importance within the discussion on intersectionality at

all levels and sectors of education and society. Understanding the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender) of NYC high school principals was a core component of my research.

Hence, academic scholarship examining strategies to remedy challenges posed by critical issues within schools has evolved over the past five decades in the field of educational leadership. Understanding the depth of social identity (i.e., race, class, and gender) which affects leadership decisions and behaviors is of paramount importance in a school setting. I outline some of the recurring history and critical issues facing principals today below. These issues relate to (a) race and institutionalized racism; (b) violence in schools, including bullying, gangs, and teen suicide; and (c) managing diversity and meeting the needs of marginalized groups.

Race and Education in the Post-Civil Rights Era

One of the most notable historical crises in schools is the racial conflict arising from the desegregation of schools of the 1960s in Brooklyn, New York. The racial politics of the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s and Rabbi Meir Kahane's adaptation of the Black Panther movement period in NYC had long-lasting effects on the relationship between the Black and Jewish communities in the Crown Heights neighborhood in Brooklyn. Overcrowded schools, funding shortages, and safety issues were but a few of the issues school leaders had to confront on a daily basis during that time period. From boycotts to barricading school districts in response to the inequities, both Jewish and Black families encountered significant barriers.

Integration efforts faced stiff resistance from Whites and when the school district did announce the construction of 210 new schools, it deepened the social divide in the subsequent years between 1965–1971 (Dorman, 2016, pp. 411–419). This racial divide still exists in Brooklyn neighborhoods, as seen in the Redhook, Brownsville, East Flatbush, and Williamsburg communities as evident in the gentrification that has occurred in the past decade and its impact

on marginalized communities. Wyly (2019) expands on the meaning of gentrification: "To me, the concept of third-wave gentrification is more useful than gentrification as a general term; it centers on the role of the (local) state as an instigator, catalyst or sponsor of the socio-spatial restructuring of the city" (p. 2). The lack of community resources, vocational education, increase in crimes and new and more affluent groups settling in these parts of city may be a contributing factor of civil unrest.

Disparities in wealth and social class also have a significant effect on educational settings in the United States. Despite its reputation as the being the "land of opportunities," there are countless barriers in relation to class, social wealth, and intergenerational economic mobility. Young White adults who have generational wealth are more likely to be economically independent. Their Black and Brown peers who fall under the poverty line tend to have fewer resources. As a result, school leaders have advocated for financial literacy in schools. The crisis, in this case, is determining how to build economic awareness for both the student and the parent. Johnson et al. (2019) allude to the evidence of wealth gaps between White, Black and Brown students in college. Families of color often lack the financial resources as result of higher education policies. The authors exposit:

> In fact, Black and Latinx students are more likely to take on student debt than White students and borrow greater sums than White borrowers. Higher student loan balances, lower expected earnings, and less family financial support leave non-White borrowers not only at risk of exacerbating the racial wealth gap but can also have a negative impact on college persistence and completion. (p. 38)

Similarly, Lee and Sun (2020) argued that intergenerational economic mobility is relational to the parents and their children's economic financial independence in the "context of

racial and ethnic disparities" (pp. 921–922). Limited opportunities and access to resources are among the likely causes of barriers to social mobility. Lee and Sun (2020) found evidence that supports the premise that includes a concept of generational inheritance. Although other studies have included fathers and wealth, Lee and Sun (2020) focused on single, Black mothers and their children. They examined their experiences as they relate to racial discrimination and social mobility. The authors stated, "This evidence suggests that racial and ethnic disparities in intergenerational economic mobility should be understood in terms of mother's economic activities, given their participation in the labor force" (p. 930). These findings may reveal the reasons why students of single-mother households have greater difficulties in gaining access to resources and potentially enrolling in higher education.

Wealth, education, and poverty discussions are at the forefront of how students engage the marketplace and compete with others. Jonathan Kozol (1991) examined the issues of race, class, and intergenerational economic mobility in his seminal work, *Savage Inequalities– Children in America's Schools* (1991). Kozol described his experiences as he traveled the United States exploring the differences in the educational journeys of American children. *Savage Inequalities* highlights the disparities among major school districts, such as NYC and Chicago, between 1988–1990.

Zoning school districts and zip codes determined how much funding schools would receive per capita. Kozol (1991) identified substantial inequities between affluent districts and those where the predominant student population was Black or Brown, Hispanic, and Latinx. For example, Riverdale in the Bronx, received more per student funding than District 10 in the Bronx, where oversized classrooms, building leaks, and holes in the floor were the norm. In

addition, these schools had less qualified teaching staff and not enough resources as compared to White school districts. According to Kozol (1991):

> Some of the most stunning inequality, according to a report by the Community Service Society, derives from allocations granted by state legislators to school districts where they have political allies. The poorest districts in the city get approximately 90 cents per pupil from legislative grants, while the richest districts have been given $14 per student. (p. 119)

Kozol's findings regarding the schools' infrastructure, funding, and levels of support suggest that these factors may have contributed to the increased drop-out rates of students of color during the late 1980s and 1990s in NYC.

School Violence

Unlike other countries in the world experiencing gun violence and other forms of violent crime, American school districts are spending billions on safety and security. Factors that contribute to the violence range from guns and other dangerous weapons in schools to physical and psychological challenges. According to Cornell et al. (2021): "[There are] 50 national organizations, representing over 5 million professionals working in and with schools" (p. 151), but very few of them address the social and emotional antecedents to school violence. The school shootings, school safety and scanning, gangs in schools, and bullying and harassment produce critical challenges in school leadership decisions.

School Shootings. The history of school shootings can be tracked to Olean, New York where three adults were killed and 11 injured on December 31, 1974 (McFadden, 1974). At Sandy Hook Elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut in 2012, 26 people were killed (Smith, 2013). Haddad et al. (2021) assessed violent threats from students experiencing suicidal ideation toward their schools. The Parkland shootings in Florida in 2018 is considered one the deadliest

school shootings in school history. There were 14 students and three staff members killed and 17 people were injured. The perpetrator was a former student who was expelled for weapons violations and making threats against the LGBTQ community. The student had a history of mental illness and was known to have made derogatory comments. Haddad et al. (2021) explain Nicolas Cruz's mental state: "He was noted to hold racist, homophobic, antisemitic, and xenophobic views and he frequently fantasized about enacting violence on others" (p. 88). Furthermore, the researchers found that an estimated 35% of the patients seen in the emergency rooms for further observation within the six weeks after the shooting were male (Haddad et al., 2021).

One of the bloodiest school shootings occurred in Columbine High School in Columbine, Colorado on April 20, 1999. Two high school students went on a shooting spree killing 12 of their peers and ending with both of their suicides. After the shooting there was a debate about who was to blame: parents, schools, or society. This particular event was significant because public outrage, news coverage, and a wave of safety policies paved the way for school leaders to initiate school lockdown procedures around the country, which still exist today. Lickel et al. (2003) conducted two case studies and found that:

> When tragic events occur as a result of human action, people feel a need to assign responsibility. The present research demonstrates that people look beyond the individuals who directly caused an event and also may assign blame to those who are merely associated with the wrongdoers. (p. 203)

There were at least 30 school shootings at K-12 schools by mid-May in 2022 according to Chapman et al. (2022). On May 24, for instance, when a former 18-year-old, Hispanic male and high school dropout killed 19 students and two teachers in Uvalde, Texas. The gunman had

purchased two "AR 15-style rifles and ammunitions for his birthday" (p. 1). These school shootings continue to challenge the American Constitution and, in particular, the Second Amendment, which guarantees a citizen's right to bear arms. The impact will have far reaching consequences, including attempts to pass of further gun-control laws in Congress.

Vessels (2019) argues for more state control and passage of gun law reforms. The Gun Free School Zone Act of 1990 was enacted to ensure gun holders stay at least 1000 feet away from the school premises in grade school and higher educational school environments. Vessels advocates for states to take the lead in gun control, instead of waiting for the federal government. Kemal et al. (2018) concluded that compared to NYC and Los Angeles, freshman and sophomore students were more likely to carry guns. The city with the highest gun possessions category was Chicago.

School Safety and Scanning. Concerns about safety and weapons in schools are prominent, but controversy exists around the use of searches and metal detectors in schools as they may violate the Fourth Amendment rights of students. Critics have pointed to the fact that, in NYC, the schools with scanners happen to be located predominantly in school districts where the majority of student enrollment is Black and Brown, yet the presence of scanners in predominantly White school districts is practically non-existent.

Schildkraut and Grogan (2019) argue that more students pass through metal detectors in the Bronx and Brooklyn where Black and Brown students attend. The reverse is true for White students in Manhattan, Staten Island, and Queens schools where metal detectors (or scanners) are less likely to be present. These metal detectors are more prevalent in communities of color. As Schildkraut and Grogan (2019) explain, "In New York City, for example, 48 percent of Black high school students and 38 percent of Hispanic, compared to 14 percent of White students, pass

through metal detectors" (p. 3). It is important to note that specialized high school programs like those found at Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, and Brooklyn Technical High Schools are not considered scanning schools. Despite the NYC's Department of Education student demographic composition and lack of diversity, 70% Black and Brown students make up the majority of students in the system. Johnson (2022) states: "These three schools are the ones with the diversity problem. In a public school system that is approximately 70 percent Black and Hispanic, the elite public high schools show a Black and Hispanic population of less than 20 percent" (para. 3).

Similarly, Rajamani (2022) reported a 12% increase in weapons confiscation according to NYPD First Deputy Commissioner, Edward Caban. As of September 2021, up to 5,000 weapons were brought into schools by students. The Chancellor of the NYC schools is exploring safety options, including locking the doors after arrivals and consulting with the head of the principal's union (CSA), who also agreed with the new policy. Rajamani (2022) conceded: "If people are coming to our schools, they need to press the buzzer, they need to do something where we can stop them, we can identify who's coming in our schools" (line 37). These statistics continue to present a significant crisis for school leaders as they navigate through these safety experiences. Development of safety policies will continue to be at the forefront of gun control laws, and leaders must have the skillsets to hold their positions on the issue based on their social locations and beliefs, acknowledge divergent positions from the community, and somehow promote inclusivity and acceptance of diversity.

Gangs in Schools. The rise in gangs and victimization in marginalized neighborhoods, such as those found in East New York in Brooklyn and Spanish Harlem, is well-known in educational circles. Reasons for joining gangs may vary, but it important to note that delinquent

gang behaviors in schools take on various forms. Cribs, Bloods, Latin Kings, Flying Dragons, Haitian Mafia are all synonymous with gang associations. From bandanas to the use of colors and handshakes, these individuals often recruit and have heavy presence in school hallways, cafeterias, and stairwells. Johnson (2022) points to the NYC Gang data base and the percentage of White vs Black and Brown membership:

> In general, while gang involvement is more common amongst Black and Latinx males, gang involvement is substantially more common among white youth than law enforcement statistics estimate, with white gang members accounting for 25% or more of all gang members (p. 1041).

The increase in school fights, intimidation, and harassment are but a few of the challenges facing leaders in schools in 2023. Much of the fighting that occurs on school campuses is related to neighborhood rivalries that often intersect in school settings. The daily disruptions create a safety nightmare and school leaders are expected to be front and center as negotiators and conflict mediators as they provide safe passage to those that are most often victimized. Heimans and Singh (2020) found that although gang membership can be attributed to high levels of victimization and other inappropriate behaviors, most students interviewed for the study felt more at ease when they were former and non-gang members. However, their study concluded that for those living in neighborhoods where gang affiliations were high, most students went along with these behaviors just to get along. Joining a gang or affiliating with those in gangs has created challenges in schools throughout the country.

Nuño and Katz (2019) offer a similar perspective: "Our findings support these arguments in that we found that youth who possess non-conventional beliefs and attitudes, and who have delinquent peers are more likely to join a gang" (p. 319). It was for these reasons beneficial to

discover NYC principals' perceptions of non-conventional beliefs and attitudes versus conventional ones, as well as how they address education policies that help or harden their practice with students who may fit the profile for gang membership according to research.

Bullying and Harassment. School leaders have had to recognize and embrace the power of social media and how it influences behaviors in society as social media platforms and social applications continue to evolve. From Facebook to Twitter to Instagram, schools have utilized these platforms as a central tool for broadcasting school policy and events, as well as for encouraging parental engagement. However, the same social media has had a negative impact. For instance, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, and promotion of violence against the LGBTQ community has caused significant social and emotional trauma in society and in school settings, including colleges and universities.

Arseneault (2018) found that childhood bullying can be traced to substantial long-term costs in society related to emotional and physical trauma: "Taken together, these finding suggest that childhood bullying victimization is not only associated with individual suffering but could also be linked to considerable costs for society given its pervasive impact on the physical, criminal, and socioeconomic outcomes" (p. 411). Although laws have been passed in support of protecting those most marginalized, in particular, the LGBTQ community, the long-term impact may not be seen until a later age. These bullying experiences have created a culture of victimization. Strategies to support and protect school scholars must be part of the overarching goal of school leadership aimed toward social justice.

Professional Duty and Social Identity Nexus

Finding solutions to challenging and complex issues such as class, immigration, gender, and LGBTQ concerns have become core issues for school leaders. Managing the learning

experience as an instructional leader is but one of the many facets of school leadership. For instance, as society evolves, so does the issue of managing crisis. Crises may be related to safety, health, climate, and environmental factors. School leaders are expected to be interventionist, as well as chief negotiators and communications experts. Theoretically, social identity is paramount in leaders' ability for navigating through the challenges facing educational settings today. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic health crisis highlighted the types of leadership behaviors needed to bring about the calm and infrastructure to stabilize educational institutions.

According to Purnomo et al. (2021), effective leadership behaviors involve working collaboratively with one's team. Thus, principals who desire to influence crisis management and pedagogy of care practices in their schools may also be apt to work alongside teachers and principal teams in service to students and families. Purnomo et al. (2021) explain:

> Essentially, the leader's ability to drive all organization members to work together towards the organization's vision out of crisis becomes the critical factor. In contrast, in crisis management, the most decisive factor in managing a crisis is the ability to organize and execute various high-reliability programs rapidly. (p. 16)

Indeed, leadership behaviors are powerful instruments that have created a new type of normalcy after the pandemic. There is no single leadership framework that is responsible for the success of a school community, but rather an intersection of styles that may have varying degrees of relationship to intersectionality in social identity (e.g., see Berkovich & Eyal, 2021; Brauckmann et al., 2016; Generette & Welch, 2018; Gocen & Sen, 2021; Kwan, 2020; McIntosh, 2019; Shaked, 2020). For instance, principals lead instructional reform, professional development and build teacher capacity through an instructional leadership framework for narrow skill development where systems reform requires other directive styles (Shaked, 2020).

The transformational leader, for example, is constantly reinventing systems and structures and advocates for autonomy, building trust, and community (Kwan, 2020). The servant leader is bound by a moral and ethical way of being (Gocen & Sen, 2021). Similar to both of these, the social justice leader is concerned with diversity, inclusivity, and equity in response to institutionalized racism and discrimination (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2018; Kwan, 2020). When taken in combination, these leadership styles prove most beneficial for the school community, with social justice leadership taking the highest priority.

Social Justice Leadership. In the summer of 2021, schools throughout the U.S. and around the world searched for solutions for school planning as school leaders faced the uncertainties of the post-COVID-19 educational landscape. According to Angelle et al. (2015), the term social justice leadership has a wide range of meanings, but they argue that the term seeks to answer how social justice leaders implement social change principles and how these principles are significant. They assert that social justice as a framework advocates for "children of all races, marginalized class, gender, ability, poverty or culture/language" (pp. 21–22).

In other words, their work may have addressed how social justice leaders investigate how to advocate for instructional resources for students and promote parental engagement. For example, principals can utilize bilingual social workers to address home-to-school connections and provide families with physical and psychological information about school wellness. Addressing bilingual education issues is critical to school principals, as well as addressing immigration policies impacting school enrollment and building teacher capacity in response to second language needs.

Bilingual school principals in Texas have expressed concerns about advocacy and support for dual-language education. DeMatthews and Izquierdo (2018) detailed how they have

also created a space for staff professional development, parent training in various languages, hiring bilingual staff, and utilizing funding in support of dual-language programs. Social justice principles are rooted in the principals' perceptions about advocacy and their own experiences as former bilingual students, teachers, and administrators. DeMatthews and Izquierdo (2018) also identified fundamental principles associated with social justice leadership in underserved communities. As the researchers noted, the school and family community experienced high poverty index levels, prevalent racial discrimination, and language deficiencies. Undoubtedly, the psychological consequences of the Mexican drug wars and its impact on families traveling back and forth between Mexico and the United States has had a significant impact on families.

There has been an increase in native Spanish speakers from Mexico who are unable to get adequate access to curriculum or second language services, and who experience the disconnect between the school and the home. Part of the challenge is bringing the broader community into the discussion. According to DeMatthews and Izquierdo (2018):

> Depending on resistance and preparedness within the school and community, principals must consider building coalitions, engaging in advocacy, developing partnerships with local organizations and businesses to enhance resources, and maintaining steady improvement. (p. 64)

In another study, DeMatthews (2016) bolsters this argument, stating, "Thus, exploring social justice leadership in this context contributes to understanding the effective leadership practices principals can take to address social justice challenges" (p. 3). DeMatthews' (2016) descriptive study revealed the causal relationships between the school leader's reaction and shifts in practice linked between educational, philosophical, and school improvement principles. DeMatthews utilized a qualitative case study methodology, which included interviews with

teachers, assistant principals, and other staff members as alternative leadership perspectives as they gathered and triangulated data points. Furthermore, DeMatthews (2016) shadowed one principal for one year to gain more insight into how the principal incorporated Social Justice Leadership principles within the school community. In doing so, the researcher utilized empirical studies of social justice leadership in the school environment.

DeMatthews (2016) also incorporated purposeful interviews and observations about the leader as the standard tools for data triangulation, including the role of the principal in dismantling or decreasing the learning gaps (e.g., linguistics, over-aged, interrupted education) and providing culturally relevant curriculum. The implication of this study is that principals must prioritize the school needs based on prior experiences and available resources. They also have the sole responsibility of balancing competing forces while defending their moral compass and creating a balanced social justice educational culture in the schools.

While DeMatthews and Izquierdo (2018) operationalized the term social justice in the context of dual language and bilingual education in Texas, Canli (2020) emphasized advancing social justice principles as a moral compass. The focus on disrupting social injustices and leadership practices within the school setting requires principals to be highly reflective practitioners with a view toward the fairness of policies. They also must identify the culture and expectations of the community as they navigate policies related to class and immigration. Canli (2020) pointed out that building trust and a clear line of communication about inclusivity are anchors that drive community belongingness. Canli found that social justice principles endorsed by the principal increased the students' sense of belonging, especially among female students.

The disparity between program alignment proposed by DeMatthews and Izquierdo (2018) on second language acquisition and Canli's (2020) defense of the interconnecting behaviors of

leadership and student belonging complicates the discussion about the relationship between leaders, school culture, and climate. For example, as Canli (2020) argued:

> In this context, school principals may exhibit sensitive behaviors as social justice leaders; they may treat students respectfully. They may include students in decision-making processes by laying emphasis on collaboration and solidarity. They may endeavor to meet the requirements of students, and they may ensure that students are relaxed and happy in the school; and they may try to adopt that education is beneficial for them. (p. 206)

This may lead one to question how leadership belief systems lead to change, and before that, what human factors and phenomenology shape leadership beliefs.

I suggest that social identity and overall location is a factor that shapes leadership belief systems, and through this study I uncover connected phenomenology through the self-told personal histories of my participating leaders. Flood (2017) examined the role of principals' social identity as agency informing a praxis for change. The study addressed five leadership practices in the Southwestern regions of the United States. Flood chronicled their social identity using fictional narrative. The study used interviews to capture the factors that direct leaders toward a path of social justice. Capturing the fictionalized behaviors of a principal raised with White privilege was also highlighted in the storyline. Another part of the study addressed how the parents' beliefs influenced character, passion, and belief in oneself. The unique experiences in relation to diversity was another significant cause for grounding a social justice paradigm.

For instance, the study discussed a poignant leadership statement made by the school Superintendent. Flood (2017) made the connection in response to the Superintendent's remark:

> But then he turned to the staff . . . every single person involved in the school in some capacity . . . and told them if they weren't on board, didn't want to do this, or didn't think

this was possible, that maybe this school district wasn't the place for you! I mean he drew

a line in the sand and encouraged people to leave if they weren't up for the challenges that

lie ahead. It took him ten years as a superintendent to develop this vision. You know, really

figure it out, but when he did, he was fearless. (p. 119)

The change in mindset, for this principal, was profound. Flood's (2017) proposal for teacher

behaviors emphasized that teachers report to work "ready to teach, engage, and enhance the lives

of [their] students" (p. 118). It can be inferred that implementing social justice principles in

schools may require principals to refer to their social location as well as a moral imperative.

In Arar's (2019) analysis, social justice leaders must confront the realities and complex

nature of acting as a catalyst that advocates for change. In this case, the goal was to promote a

moral imperative that is (a) critically conscious of the disparity, (b) self-aware of the

cross-connects between leadership dimensions, and (c) investigative of policies that hinder

progress and limits social mobility (p. 199). The study concluded by placing a significant value

on the role of inclusion and acceptance of diversity. Arar (2019) claims, "Most of the principals

saw themselves as able to realize SJ in their schools, using characteristics such as modesty, a

strong personality, being true to their values, and being willing to help others" (p. 205). The

study inferred that social justice principles should outweigh the historical discord in the region.

Sun's (2019) study paid attention to the discourse on addressing the valuable

contributions that both White and Black educators can make in the classrooms. Additionally, the

study included an analysis of interviews and interpretation of leadership behaviors of six

principals of color. Most of the principals interviewed concurred that diversity and inclusion are

part of the dinner table conversation. These are the types of discussions that go on in leadership,

cabinet, and department meetings. Sun came to a similar conclusion as that of Arar's (2019)

study on the role of the principal in implementing inclusion and the use of resources to support marginalized students. Sun (2019) concluded with, "Based upon the analyzed data, Black and Hispanic principals in the study demonstrated a variety of ways in which they apply Social Justice principles and developed approaches to their leadership practices" (p. 159). Even so, this can suggest that interconnecting relationships and trust-building are at the root of social justice leadership practices.

Another viewpoint on social justice leadership include findings from Conrad et al. (2019), Dantley and Green (2015), and Feng and Chen (2019) on the role of the principal as an active advocate for the voiceless. Their conclusions revealed social justice principles that evoke radical practice and implementation fostered by their prior experiences from the Caribbean to Taiwan. It is important to note that these reviews highlight culture, hierarchy, and the leader's role as a parent figure managing teacher behaviors and pedagogical needs in Taiwan. The disparity falls on gender inequalities and building leadership capacity, which is predominantly male.

Gender perception of principal leadership roles reveals a need for further inclusive leadership practices and academic teacher optimism. According to Feng and Cheng (2019): "Thus, men and women may have a different focus on principals' social justice leadership, explaining that a teachers' gender moderates the relationship between social justice leadership and teachers' academic optimism" (p. 1261). Here, Feng and Cheng stressed how male teachers typically have higher frequencies of meeting with the principal than female teachers. This could imply that collaboration, meeting student needs, and inclusion of parents' voices are also elements of social justice principles in action.

Battling an invincible enemy, lack of resources, staffing issues, space, and the relentless concerns of health screening are causing both physical and psychological meltdowns among school leaders. Unlike my transition as a student into the NYC's Department of Education, Ackert (2017) suggested that the current dilemma facing new immigrants is not about enrolling in schools, but rather entering the work force. Ackert's (2017) findings reveal that "Mexican-origin youth face greater barriers to educational incorporation in the U.S. society that those in more established gateways" (p. 409). Economic, legal, and cultural challenges posed by Ackert implied that these are some of the issues related to the dropout Latino/a rate. Through the analysis of leadership studies, scholars present diverse and unique leadership pillars.

Peguero and Bracy (2015) examined noticeable reasons why students drop out of school. In particular, they explored school climate, safety, student discipline, and teacher-student relationships as a direct correlation between students dropping out of school. For this reason, Peguero and Bracy advance equity and inclusivity by suggesting that "In order for students to 'buy in' to these philosophies, they must trust, respect, and feel respected by their teachers and school administrators" (p. 422). Indeed, I argue as a former dropout student, teacher, school administrator, and interventionist that school climate and culture play a significant role in a student's decision to drop out of school.

Through the analysis of leadership studies, scholars have presented diverse and unique leadership pillars that may prove to be valuable in one or more levels of the K-12 school setting. This study focused on social justice leadership practices given the prioritization of social identity and location within it, at a time when social justice reforms and a culture of inclusivity are experiencing a critical impasse post-COVID-19. Social justice leadership practices often rely on the leader's ability to communicate, disseminate, organize, train, coach, heal, support, maintain,

motivate, and promote ethical and appropriate behaviors (Angelle et al., 2015; DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2018; Sun, 2019). Thus, effective principal leaders embracing a social justice leadership style leads by example, are intuitive, and use cross-connect models using servant and instructional leadership practices as levers for change when necessary to address class, race, gender and LGBTQ issues advance their school communities.

Finally, social justice leaders often have diverse experiences as they engage students, parents, teachers, districts, and other broader community members (e.g., see Conrad et al., 2019; Dantley & Green, 2015; Feng & Chen, 2019). However, the impact of these experiences can often lead to principal burnout and a decrease in leadership retention. Additionally, these varying experiences may also alter leadership management styles and educational philosophy. Throughout the day, social justice leaders prioritize, identify, and monitor systems and structures aligned to academic standards, teacher professional development, and community building utilization to boost student achievement. Prioritizing, balancing needs, and competing with the impact of COVID-19 pandemic aftermath has increased the anxiety and stress levels of leaders such as myself in NYC and those around the world.

Conclusion

Several competing forces at work in urban schools post-COVID-19 often impact how and when services are provided for students and families. The ways in which principals address these issues demonstrate their decision-making process and expectations in relation to social support goals. This chapter has provided an overview of research discussing (a) the social construction of identity; (b) pedagogy of care; (c) the contemporary education context and setting, including historic levels of school violence, school shootings, school safety and scanning, and gangs and bullying and harassment in schools; and (d) the nexus between principals' professional duties

and their social identities, including the importance and effectiveness of social justice leadership. Together, these concepts relate to the thinking and philosophies behind the moral and spiritual compass that may guide past, present, and future leadership experiences in relation to social construction of differences. In Chapter III, I provide further details about my methodological approach and research design for this study.

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHOD

As the purpose of this study was to investigate how the social identity (i.e., race, class, and gender) of several high school principals in NYC, especially Brooklyn, helps them to navigate the policies in place and address the social constructions of difference present in their schools, a trusted research design that allowed me to raise critical questions based on the literature and my personal knowledge and experience as a Brown, Hispanic, middle class, male cis-gendered school leader, with immigrant roots in the Dominican Republic, ELL education, and long-term NYC residency background was needed. In their seminal analysis of the utility and use of qualitative research methods in the field of education, Tierney and Lincoln (1994) trace the history of case studies, ethnographies, ethnographic interviews, participant observations, and critical ethnographies to the mid-1980s. In this chapter, I explain my use of the case study method to examine whether social identity (i.e., race, class, and gender) helps high school principals in NYC address the social constructions of difference and critical issues in schools as they navigate standing policies in education.

Historically, according to Tierney and Lincoln (1994), education researchers have considered the possibility of multiple realities and viewpoints far less than anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists, whose "theoretical debate about positivism, constructivism, and critical/feminist theories" have occurred at least since the *early 1900s* (pp. 107–108; Kawulich, 2005). Given the slower progression of education researchers to embrace such postmodern constructivist notions as (a) informant and author as knowers, and (b) reality as inherently contextual rather than purely observable, researchers interested in investigating the phenomenology of specific contexts or among particular groups of people have had to borrow

from the methodological approaches and connected theoretical assumptions applied regularly in anthropology, sociology, and psychology.

Further, given my inescapable experience as a high school principal in Brooklyn, I was conscious of my position as participant observer in conducting this research study, even during interviews if not field observations. As stated by Tierney and Lincoln (1994),

> as researchers, we can never entirely step outside our selves or our histories to achieve complete objectivity; rather we speak from unique locations in time, and from economic, class, race, sexual, and historical histories. Thus, all knowledge is arguably partial, perspectival, and situated. (p. 111)

Finally, in answer to the question of "Why use participant observation," Guest et al. (2017) provided four reasons:

1. *Opening up the areas of inquiry to collect a wider range of data.* Only those with the privileges accorded to participants can observe certain sorts of events. In most social groups, there are things that outsiders are simply not allowed to do, see, or know. You cannot collect data about these things if you are not on the inside as a participant.

2. *Reducing the problem of reactivity.* People change their behavior around outsiders, and if you have an interest in "normal" behavior, you have to stop being someone around whom people make these adjustments. A successful participant observer fits into the scene well enough to be ignored, even if he is doing abnormal things such as interviewing, taking pictures, recording video or audio, or taking notes.

3. *Enabling researchers to know what questions to ask.* Being embedded in the social context helps researchers learn what questions are relevant and to ask them in terms that make sense to the "natives." The value of participant observation at the early stages

of learning about an unfamiliar culture or social setting can be huge. One of the most

common errors in designing survey questions or in-depth interview guides is asking

questions that are not sensible to the research participants or that are asked in some

form of "research speak" rather than the local vernacular. Participant observation

teaches you what to ask about and how to ask it.

4. *Gaining intuitive understanding of the meaning of your data.* The interpretation of

qualitative is always a somewhat subjective activity, and those who question the

validity of qualitative methods often point to examples of studies in which the

researchers grossly misunderstood something that was obvious to knowledgeable

insiders or members of the studied culture or social group. Participant observation gives

you an intimate knowledge of your area of study that greatly reduces this type of

validity error. As someone who has directly experienced the social phenomena of

interest, you are capable of taking positions about the meaning of your data with

confidence that you are "getting it right." (p. 80)

Thus, to effectively describe the methodology of this study, I begin by outlining what I

understood to be the most "relevant" research questions to ask the informants in my study. I then

discuss the study setting and sample, or context. Next, I clarify the rationale for my method of

inquiry, and my role as a researcher, detailing the procedures employed (e.g., sampling, data

collection, analysis, and reporting, etc.) and timetable of the study. Additionally, I review the

confidentiality and informed consent process approved by the Antioch College Institutional

Review Board (IRB) employed in this study. Finally, I discuss critical validity and reliability

components of qualitative research, including the potential threats to trustworthiness, a summary

and review examining common limitations of the case study method, and ethical considerations for research involving human subjects.

Research Questions

As this study sought to answer whether and how principals' social identities on the indices of race, class, and gender help them to navigate the policies in place while also addressing the social constructions of difference and critical issues present in high-diversity NYC high schools, the following questions were explored:

1. How do the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social locations, and personal histories of NYC high school principals' influence their leadership style(s)?

2. Do the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social locations, and personal histories of NYC high school principals contribute to the incorporation of social justice leadership practices to support marginalized student communities, and if so, how?

Methodology

Setting and Sample

I chose to conduct my investigation within Brooklyn district schools given their diversity of student groups consisting of White, Asian, Black, Brown, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish families (New York City Council, 2023). Another reason for my selection of the district was the regional location and access to the schools. Thus, I utilized what Tierney and Lincoln (1994) referred to as critical case sampling, involving nonprobability sampling to remove focus from random selection and the widest possible generalizability and instead place it on the importance of selecting participants who are (a) capable of answering my research questions, and (b) conveniently available for me to conduct the study without need for external funds. In other

words, my research focus was on gathering answers to my questions from the people in position to have or know them versus random selection which contain the possibility of receiving no answers (e.g., Espinal, 2021; Gagnon, 2009). Schools throughout the participants' community serve students with a wide range of academic achievements. Therefore, the participating school leaders working in Brooklyn served in multi-ethnic, mixed neighborhoods.

During the course of gaining setting and sampling consent to interview principals in Brooklyn schools through the district's IRB and Conflict of Interest Board Review and Approval office, significant processing delays of over nine months necessitated revision of the original methodological plan for timely completion. Namely, the setting was expanded to include a smaller neighboring borough with equivalent diversity, culminating in two principals leading high schools in Brooklyn, and three in the Bronx. The participants were recommended by the superintendent of schools in each district. One of the reasons I selected the superintendents is because I knew firsthand that at least one of them—from Brooklyn—was an advocate of promoting leadership scholarship and building collaboration within his teams. Thus, he might be inclined to refer principals who are "intentionally of mixed ages, races, [class], gender, and experiences" (Espinal, 2021, p. 89). Moreover, I expected that both superintendents would enjoy recommending their seasoned leaders with 10 or more years of experience to inform this study.

The shared experiences of such a diverse group was expected to span a wide spectrum of leadership styles and practices that other school leaders and education researchers may draw meaning from. School principals require the foresight to counter and disrupt inequity and advance diversity and inclusion. Employing a critical case sampling approach provided for direct insight from the lived experiences of diverse high school principals who can help broaden the conversation about the role of social identity (i.e., race, class, and gender) in leadership traits and

responses to the social constructions of difference within schools. I hope that the experiences explored in this study serve as a conduit for synthesizing effective leadership practices.

Procedures

Instrumentation and Materials

In qualitative research, the analysis of data through both observation and interview is preferred. Gagnon (2009), for instance, stated that "the case [study] method is said to be appropriate for describing, explaining, predicting or controlling processes associated with a variety of phenomena at the individual, group and organizational levels" using a variety of complementary data collection methods to better ensure validity during analysis (p. 2). Bochner (2012) further explained:

> The burden of the social science storyteller is to make meaning out of all the stuff memory and experience, how it felt then and how it feels now. That is why the truth of stories can never be stable truths. Memory is active, dynamic, and ever-changing. (p. 161)

Bochner's argument aptly explains the utility of multiple data collection methods in interview-based case studies. Nearly two decades before Gagnon (2009) and Bochner (2012), Tierney and Lincoln (1994) more broadly explained that qualitative research as a whole "is a human endeavor where individuals interview, observe, record, and interpret the words and actions of other individuals" (p. 110). All of these researchers warn against haphazardly constructing research questions or collecting and analyzing data. Tierney and Lincoln (1994) specifically recommended that rigor and trustworthiness be applied by having or incorporating (a) a research plan to include "A plan for data management, data coding and retrieval systems, and the ongoing analysis of fieldnotes" (p. 117); (b) the cross-coding and cross-referencing

analyses between data sources and types; and (c) a computer-managed data retrieval process option to remain up-to-date on the latest sophistications in software in the field.

Given the above procedural research guidelines, I initially planned to collect observational data of the participants during their regular workday leading Brooklyn or Bronx, NY high schools. However, the IRB and Conflict of Interest Board Review and Approval office delay in Brooklyn previously discussed led to the need to omit observations and the collection of field notes though would be created from them for expedient completion of the study. To ensure the soundness of the single data collection method of semi-structured interviews available to me, absent field observations, I pilot tested the study protocol.

Specifically, I piloted the interview process with one principal prior to conducting the study. Piloting data collection tools and procedures was vital because doing so would help surface flaws within the interview protocol (see Appendix A), providing insight into issues of concern within the research design such as with time, question format, word selections, and sequence of the questions. I asked 30 questions and each interview lasted approximately 1.5 hours. At the outset of the protocol, I provided an explanation about the intentions and purpose of the study and protocol used in it. Additionally, I explained how and why their responses would be confidentially recorded, transcribed, and stored on my personal computer. Finally, both of the major research questions and their associated sub-questions (see, e.g., Appendix A) were presented to the participants, with the option to merge, move, or avoid answering items, at any time, as well as stop the interview upon request.

Furthermore, as the individual investigator of this study, I provided first-person accounts at select discussion points to serve as a relatable introduction or practical illustration for the central basis of moving the inquiry forward (Gagnon, 2009; Guest et al., 2017). Given the natural

flow of information exchange that characterizes most participant observer-initiated case studies, for instance, oral histories were drawn from the five urban high school principals in this study. The interview process not only brought to surface how the social identities, social locations, and personal histories of the Brooklyn and Bronx high school principals contribute to their support of marginalized student communities through an umbrella of social justice leadership practices and "assumptions and motives" (Undheim, 2003, p. 20), but also their childhood narratives or general life experiences in society. Ultimately, personal histories provided during interviews offer valuable data points that convey a poignant event, time or incident that is associated with trauma and possibly a healing tool. Thus, such oral histories can evoke strong and sometimes contradictory emotions and did so in this study for several of the participants.

Investigative Position

Creswell (2013) raises fundamental questions about qualitative interviews and personal narratives when stating,

> Multiple issues arise in the collecting, analyzing, and telling of individual stories. [More importantly], who owns the story? Who can tell it? Who can change it? Whose version is convincing? What happens when narratives compete? As a community, what do stories do among us? (p. 76)

Embedding my personal experience as a school leader during critical-issue moments, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, allowed for my voice as a member of the participant group with over 15 years of principal leadership in Brooklyn to be considered a benefit in this study design. Namely, my experience and participant observer status assisted with data interpretation and enrichment, such as that of a subject matter expert capable of affirming the trustworthiness and vigor of the study (Gagnon, 2009; Tierney & Lincoln, 1994). I understood, however, that my

voice should not be treated as a primary source in the case study results, yet I have the ability to

validly express a particular viewpoint or provide examples for my agreement or disagreement

with a finding in my interpretation of the data. Kawulich (2005) poignantly explained the power

and value of careful participant observation positioning in qualitative research studies:

> To conduct participant observation, one must live in the context to facilitate prolonged
>
> engagement; prolonged engagement is one of the activities listed by Lincoln and Guba
>
> (1994) to establish trustworthiness. The findings are considered to be more trustworthy,
>
> when the researcher can show that he/she spent a considerable amount of time in the setting,
>
> as this prolonged interaction with the community enables the researcher to have more
>
> opportunities to observe and participate in a variety of activities over time. The reader
>
> would not view the findings as credible if the researcher only spent a week in the culture;
>
> however, he/she would be more assured that the findings are accurate, if the researcher
>
> lived in the culture for an extended time or visited the culture repeatedly over time. Living
>
> in the culture enables one to learn the language and participate in everyday activities. (n.p.)

Kawulich (2005) continues by explaining that data collection activities like interviewing

and observing during work allows the member-researcher to easily explain the meaning that such

events occurring in the field hold for them as individuals to use in conversations with participants

to elicit more data than third party interviews would. To ensure that I remained conscious of my

primary role as researcher, I utilized Gagnon's (2009) checklist for case studies. For instance,

regarding the steps for ensuring accuracy, I (a) established my position prior to conducting the first

interview or observation; (b) set clear informant selection processes and inclusion criteria; (c)

clearly defined study concepts, constructs, and units of analysis or data types; and (d) explicitly

described the data collection and analysis strategy to be employed prior to conducting the study

(Gagnon, 2009). I also considered the first four phases of Guest et al.'s (2017) six-phase participant observer model (as the final two refer to product testing, pricing, and marketing, which is irrelevant to this study). These refer to:

- Phase 1—exploratory

- Phase 2—questionnaire development

- Phase 3—survey

- Phase 4—concept test [or cross-referencing for reliability and validity]

Trustworthiness is a central concept in any qualitative research study as the concerns about time constraints and conducting interviews during a regular day can present challenges that some researchers might feel a strong desire to bypass through manipulation of data (e.g., see Gagnon, 2009; Tierney & Lincoln, 1994). Given these common concerns, I foresaw scheduling several time and day options for my participants. Additionally, I resisted against my own research biases by employing reflexivity, and I have already expressed very strong beliefs and convictions in the research proposal stage (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2012). In my acknowledgement of personal biases and strong beliefs that may arise during the research process, I also wrote my thoughts down to consciously set them aside, so they did not affect my analysis of the data.

Data Analysis

In the tradition of other qualitative research studies employing thematic analysis, themes in this study were identified based on participant responses, including direct extraction of terms from interviews (e.g., grounded theory; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, as cited in Tierney & Lincoln, 1994). Specifically, key terms and phrases, or codes, were continuously categorized until all participant responses were situated under a category (see Appendix B). Thus, only the interviews

for each participant was treated as primary data sources. By doing so, I hope to have solidified the validity of the results from my case study investigation.

In summary, and to increase study validity, I (a) recorded and transcribed the interviews during the data collection phase, (b) conducted a thematic analysis including unitization for organized coding and meaning, and (c) created themes or domains from the codes according to the "grounding theory" method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967, as cited in Tierney & Lincoln, 1994, p. 109). Importantly, unitization is the process by which data is grouped according to shared meaning or proximity and organized for ease of analysis and reporting (Tierney & Lincoln, 1994). Magnotto (1996), for instance, argued that,

> Unitizing means deciding what will constitute a "unit" of information in the database. In linguistic research this might be a word, clause, t-unit, etc. In writing research, "chunks of meaning" work well as units. The researcher reads the data base and decides where one chunk ends, and another begins. (p. 3)

Since I did not use document-based data, such as the principals' written directives to staff or reports to district leaders, the method of content analysis did not apply to this study. Instead, thematic categorization of interview response set the stage for coding snapshots of data. The unitization process provides researchers a mechanism for determining when the chunking line begins and ends. Valid unitization depends, however, on sound coding based on word, phrase, or other response frequencies. Hence, I manually read each interview response and coded them under critically applied domains or subdomains as needed, then unitized them based on their unique categories, or rather domains for quantitative frequency analysis and qualitative meaning.

Finally, I coded the interview responses using a series of spreadsheets. In my professional capacity, I already used Microsoft Office Excel or Google Sheets as a system of organization and

thus seamlessly exported the study data into the QDA Miner 6 software for qualitative and mixed methods data mining and analysis. Because I used Google Forms to collect responses, the answers were collected directly onto a spreadsheet, making coding easier. From there, I began unitization.

Time Table for Study

Given the many duties and availability limitations that the superintendents of schools had per force of their role in large, urban, highly diverse districts like Brooklyn and the Bronx, I anticipated that gathering enough principal recommendations to attain my desired sample of five participants (out of 10 candidates) might take several weeks. This, as aforementioned, in fact took several months attempting to sample principals in Brooklyn alone. Once I had my five consenting participants, I began the longer data collection and analysis phases. First, collating their responses as part of the procedural and data collection process particularly noting evidence of the transformative approaches inherent in social justice leadership practices (Hudon et al., 2021). Implementation of the entire study method occurred over the course of several months, from December 2023 to March 2024. Union University IRB approval was obtained before I began the study.

Ethical Considerations

Research with Human Subjects. Given all of the above, my case study approach was guided by an instrumentation of semi-structured interviews, helping to steer the development of the investigation. Memory and recalling specific experiences of human subjects is a major component of case study. Thus, personal and narrative inquiries should be intentionally collaborative and form the basis for informing and engaging leaders in exchanging best practices during critical issues. However, and as one of the ethical considerations includes ensuring that participants are protected from possible stressors and safeguarded with anonymity, the school

principals in this study were informed of the interview being a safe space to share pandemic

related and non-pandemic related traumas they encountered with the loss of family, students,

staff, and colleagues. For instance, I added a disclaimer to the interview questions which

explicitly stated that the interviewee could end the interview at any time if they sensed any type

of adverse memory or triggered trauma. Reliving the stressors of a pandemic and the process of

managing crises did now appear to trigger anxiety about the past or future.

Confidentiality & Informed Consent. Participant confidentiality was explained in the

informed consent form to participate in this study. The consent form was approved by the IRB as

a component of my research study application. Again, participants had the option to select the

questions they wished to answer and stop the interview at any point in each of the series of

protocol questions. I protected participant confidentiality and privacy by using pseudonyms

selected by the participants, and using secure, password-protected software to store and analyze

data. I furthermore used the chosen pseudonyms in my handwritten and/or typed notes.

I adhered to the guidelines set forth by the university's IRB in relation to protecting

human candidates throughout my case study. I similarly sought the recruitment of candidates

only after receiving final IRB approval. Namely, I reached out to the superintendents of schools

for the names of possible principals they recommend and who may have an interest in

participating in the project. After receiving the names and contact information of the candidates,

I facilitated the scheduling of zoom meetings to discuss the purpose of my study with them.

Results and Analysis

I examined and triangulated the data addressing how the social identities (i.e., race, class,

and gender), social locations, and personal histories of New York City Brooklyn and Bronx high

school principals influences their leadership style, with a focus on social justice beliefs and

practices. For example, I inquired about how the principals' lived experiences may or may not have included strategic planning for measuring and assessing the effectiveness of interventions for bullying, weapons in schools, and responsiveness to student diversity. Thus, the analysis of the data collected from five high school principals provided answers to my research questions as to whether a principal's primary sense(s) of self and lived experiences influences their professional leadership style particularly when addressing the social constructions of difference in schools.

In-depth analysis of the data with the assistance of QDA Miner 6 authenticated whether or not social identity (i.e., race, class, and gender) and personal experiences support effective leadership behaviors in solving situations related to diversity in schools. The analysis was built on the thematic domains, filtered through several levels of data coding that focused more on the meaning within them and less on superficial indicators like naming or categorization (e.g., see George et al., 2022; Tierney & Lincoln, 1994; Warwick et al., 2022). Vaismoradi et al. (2016), for instance, recently defined the term theme "as attribute, descriptor, element, and concept" (p. 102). The themes in this study served as a lens for understanding the similarities and disparities between the participants' answers in relation to the larger issues of leadership behaviors.

Additionally, thematic analysis in this study revealed how the school principals have built trust in their learning communities by modeling social justice behaviors. Accordingly, Vaismoradi et al. (2016) further described themes and thematic analysis as occurring when "similar grounds related to similar issues are found and compared until they are explained by the theme as an umbrella. Theme can further be divided into subthemes to cover the different levels of similarities and differences" (p. 9).

Finally, I conducted member checks during the interviews such that, during the interview process, I shared my perspective and understanding of the principals' statements and their feelings about my interpretation (Maxwell, 2013). By doing so, I ensured the accuracy of their statements and validated my interpretation of it. Like Maxwell (2013), I am a realist and intended for my research questions to drive the method of analysis (i.e., coding, unitization, and cross-referencing) toward truthful and credible information.

Limitations

One of the most significant challenges I faced in the completion of this study was the probability of interviewing principals during a potential incident in school that required their attention even after schools closed for the day. Another significant concern was the participants' willingness to share their own biases or experiences that required disclosure of staff and/or student challenges during the interview phase (Kawulich, 2005). Thirdly, case studies are personal and possibly triggering emotionally. Nevertheless, I argue that understanding servant leadership in relation to emotions and ethics supports the use of such in-depth qualitative research above and beyond these limitations. Specifically, the case study is one that can illuminate the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the subjects. Thus, the limitations of conducting one, with its strong degrees of subjectivity and long lengths of time, is pale in comparison to the depth of knowledge and ability to create valid theories to advance education practice (Heale & Twycross, 2018).

Summary and Review

Throughout this chapter providing the conceptual and procedural background of this case study, I offered and discussed my role as both the principal investigator of the study and a participating subject in the field of investigation. I also discussed the methods by which I

collected data and analyzed the results. Furthermore, I offered important ethical considerations and limitations of the study. Through this study, I discovered whether the effective use of lived experiences assist and support school leadership practices to support learning and development environments inclusive of and responsive to marginalized students.

The study findings revealed strategies that have the potential for construction of effective leadership practices, and transformation of less effective ones that seek to liberate student communities from marginalization under stressful and challenging circumstances (e.g., health pandemics like COVID-19 and policy changes in response to it). Over the course of several months, I explored the often-evolving challenges and experiences that Brooklyn and Bronx high school principals faced flexibly, innovatively, and with emotional intelligence (EQ) in order to balance their social identities, social locations, with district polices and student needs.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

As mentioned in previous chapters, the purpose of this study was to identify how NYC principals'—in Brooklyn and the Bronx—social identities (race, class, and gender), and their concomitant social locations and personal histories of being influence their leadership styles. I further sought to identify leadership approaches the principals believed results in positive impacts on the culture and outcomes of their schools. In the present chapter, I introduce the five participants and provide a portrait that depicts their demographics and related leadership strategies to lift their backgrounds and theories for scholarly interrogation.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide each participants' journey using rich narratives. Although an interview protocol was utilized (see, e.g., Appendix A), the candidates were offered an opportunity to disclose their experiences as they wished (i.e., sharing yearnings, desires, and passions). Each narrative was unique and offered a glimpse into the personal background and professional experience—including theoretical framework—leadership toolkit, and crisis response of the principals. The individual narratives thus uncovered how social identities in terms of race, class, and gender craft the principals' leadership styles in structured and unstructured forms, making the data more reliable or trustworthy (Bochner, 2012).

The initial method for data collection as described in Chapter III was to both interview and observe the principals during the day in the course of their regular workday. However, the size of the Brooklyn school district as the largest in the country necessitated higher than normal levels of bureaucracy, including additional IRB and Conflict of Interest Board Review and Approval. The review process followed by the district went on for more than nine months after which point the decision was made to (a) switch workday interviews to post-workday, (b)

eliminate observations, and (c) include principals from nearby Bronx, NY, in consultation with my study chair. Thus, the study proceeded with principals who were available after school hours.

The interviews were structured to be interconnected with the research questions (see Table 1), which asked participants how their social identity (i.e., race, class, and gender), social location (i.e., orientation toward society based on social identity), and personal history as a high school principal in Brooklyn and the Bronx influences their leadership style(s). This chapter provides a detailed description of how the participants' narratives in response to RQ1 and RQ2 link to the literature on school leadership and social identity theories, with elaborations on key findings through respondent quotes. The chapter concludes with a cross analysis of ubiquitous themes that surfaced in each of the candidate's narratives.

The Principals

This section offers an introduction of each principal to set the stage for the thematic findings collectively originating from their interview narratives. My overarching objective was to highlight the principals' background experiences and provide insight into their stories so that readers and stakeholders may better understand each of them and their leadership practices. I describe each participant's personal and professional practices as they navigate policies supporting marginalized students with the hope that every reader connects with the rich narratives and diverse experiences through the lens of their own social identity, location, history.

Understanding the complexities of school leaders as they navigate personal philosophies about teaching and learning, doing away with complacency, and embracing inclusionary practices is key to successful U.S. schooling today and in the future. The principals' current realities are triggered by high-stakes accountability and social injustice unearthed by the research questions and protocol. Table 4.1 lists all of the study questions.

Table 4.1

Research, Protocol, and Interview Sub-Questions Snapshot

Research Question 1	Protocol Questions
Q:1. How do the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social location, and personal histories of New York City principals' (middle and high schools) influence the principals' leadership style(s)?	PQ:1. How did you arrive at this position through the lens of your social identity (class, race, and gender)? PQ:2. What crises did you manage prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Sub-Questions
PQ:1 1.Where did you grow up (urban setting, rural setting)? 2. Are you a first-generation college graduate (explain)? 3.What influenced your decision to become a school administrator? 4. As school administrators typically attain their positions through promotion after several years of teaching, I would like to know if you were previously a teacher, and for how long? 5. How would you describe your experience as a teacher? PQ:2 1.What happened prior to the crisis? 2. Do you recall what influenced your decision? 3. What were the competing issues? 4. How did you react (emotionally)? 5. Have you experienced a similar event in the past?

Research Question 2	Protocol Question
Q: 2. Do the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social location and personal histories of New York City (middle and high school) principals contribute to the incorporation of social justice leadership practices to support marginalized student communities, and if so, how?	How have past leadership experiences influenced your leadership practice in developing community capacity (school leaders, teachers, students, and parents)?

Sub-Questions
1.   How have you adjusted pedagogical and instructional plans in support of student engagement? 2.   How are school-wide expectations communicated and monitored to the community? 3.   How do you monitor the implementation of academic pathway protocols and how are the instructional priorities aligned to your school mission? 4.   What were some of your own experiences going through the pandemic as you navigated through staffing issues and COVID-19 protocols? 5.   How would you describe your parental involvement and community partnerships?

The interaction between how principals reflect on their leadership practices and execute their goals for the year is often shaped by institutional policies and the national context, including COVID-19 reactions since December 2019. Simultaneously, the extent to which principals draw from prior knowledge as they face uncertainties, perplexing issues, and misunderstandings, and engage local, state, and federal mandates is inevitably colored by their social identities and backgrounds, especially in large districts like those in New York City. Thus, principals' heightened awareness from past experiences can draw meaning out of crisis.

These leadership characteristics are part of principals' everyday experiences, serving as an impetus that is anchored on "beliefs and values" within the context of leadership practice (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2018). Table 4.2 presents the contextual background and demographic data of the participants. The next section provides further context to foreground the findings, followed by idiographic analyses of the principals' narratives in distinct sections.

Table 4.2

Participant Backgrounds and Demographics

Pseudonym	Race & Gender	Age	Language & National Origin	Years of Work & Positions	School Setting(s)
Alita	Black woman	~53	Non-ELL Haiti	30 Teacher (10 years) Principal (20 years)	High Schools Special Needs Over 1,000 students
Gail	Black woman	~46	Non-ELL Grenada	20 Teacher (10 years) Principal (10 years)	High School 350 Students
Joseph	Brown man	~58	ELL Dominican Republic	26 Teacher (3 years) Principal (23 years) Retired	Middle School ~500 Students
Karen	Brown woman	~51	ELL Dominican Republic	28 Teacher (8 years) Principal (20 years) Now SPED Director	Middle School Special Needs ~350 Students
Olivia	Black woman	~55	Non-ELL Jamaica	28 Teacher (12 years) Principal (16 years)	Middle School ~300 Students

The Importance of Demography and Contextual Background in Leadership

As detailed in Table 4.2, I deliberately used pseudonyms to protect the identities of all

participants in this study. These individuals, whom I will refer to as Alita, Gail, Joseph, Karen,

and Olivia, have a rich and diverse range of experiences in education, having worked in both

middle and high schools as well as general and special education. Each one represents a unique

program focusing on mixed student populations covering two densely populated boroughs of

New York City, encompassing over 2,500 diverse students and cultural backgrounds. The

principals' ages spanned from 46 to 58 years. Two of the participants were former principals,

one having retired (Joseph) and another accepting a special education position in a local charter

school (Karen), and the rest were actively administrating in two of the largest school districts in

the nation. Alita, for instance, leads a city-wide Special Needs high school program in Brooklyn, which has the largest student population in a single district.

Gail, on the other hand, is currently overseeing a comprehensive academic model with an emphasis on business administration. Joseph is retired and works as a consultant and peer coach. Karen left the school district several years ago and is now a special education director at a charter school. Olivia is leading a middle school team in one of the most at-risk areas in the city.

This research, which is based on the rich narratives of a group of dedicated and socially diverse urban principals, breaks new ground, offering a fresh and enlightening view of social justice leadership in education. Previous studies, include those by researchers Sendjaya et al. (2020), Purnomo et al. (2021), and Creswell (2013) are acknowledged for their contributions that made this study possible. The findings in this study advance one of the assumptions regarding principals with prior experiences as second language students: even though there are unique journeys in their respective stories, there is a resemblance or bridge among their experiences. This finding and other assertions related to how principals leverage their social identities (i.e., race, gender, and class) to navigate the policies in their schools is discussed in the cross-case analysis of emerging themes as shared in their personal background histories below.

Next, I will provide a detailed summary of each principal's stories to bring out their authentic voices, underlining the importance of their narratives in understanding social justice leadership in education. I will conclude with a comprehensive analysis of how their social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender) influence their leadership styles and how they may or may not contribute to incorporating social justice leadership practice in support of marginalized student communities. In doing so, I aim to advance the theoretical and conceptual approaches other researchers utilize, offering a fresh perspective on social justice leadership in education.

Additional Contextual Background

Principal Alita

Alita is a Black woman and seasoned principal in high schools, serving over 1,000 students with special needs in New York City. She migrated from Haiti to the United States at the age of 13 and, from the onset, had a profound connection to education and viewed it as the gateway toward financial freedom. Alita grew up as an immigrant student in Brooklyn, New York, in the mid-1970s. She is the eldest of four siblings, having a deep understanding of and moral obligation to her family. Alita saw firsthand how her mother worked as a seamstress in the city at various factories, earning a salary based on completed pieces and very little or no benefits working as a non-union member. As she explained throughout her interview, it is for this reason that she was compelled to study and break the cycle of intergenerational economic immobility. Becoming a teacher furthermore brought great pride to her family, especially as immigrants.

Alita began her teaching career immediately after college, around three decades ago. She first worked as a special education teacher, school evaluator, and assistant principal before becoming a principal in various districts throughout Brooklyn. Alita's background experiences as an immigrant Haitian, first-generation college student, and Black woman, and her positionality in special education advocacy first occurred at age 24. She recalled a life-altering event:

> Well, I was married when I was 18. I was young. It was like, again, our parents believed in early marriage. So, once you are married, it does not matter what becomes of you as long as it is a status thing [reminds me of a class system or social acceptance]. And so, I gave birth to a child when I was 18 years old. At the age of 6, I found out she was deaf. She was not hearing a thing at a routine medical checkup. I was devastated to hear that because I did not understand, like, you know, of all the children in my house, my sisters, my child was not listening because she was always the loudest. In the home, she was glad because she could not hear herself. And her speech was not being developed.

Alita was alarmed and frustrated as a parent of a special needs child and the first in her family to have the experience. This was a turning point in her life, career, and views in society about advocacy as she defended her own daughter while co-educating and leading the children of other parents in her community. The experience of being a Black mother with an immigrant past to a special needs child, who also happened to be a girl likely to face gender marginalization in addition to disability discrimination, solidified Alita's commitment to advocacy to marginalized students and their parents in her role as a principal. For instance, she stated,

> So, I got upset over that and said I made a promise that I would support her to ensure she has an opportunity. I learned about policies, rules, and regulations like special needs. I did not know anything about special education at the time of the experience. However, my daughter ended up at a school for deaf students at a school in Queens, New York. My daughter made friends. But they did not treat the kids right because the parents did not know the rules and the policies.

Principal Gail

Gail is a Black female and high school principal serving about 300 students. Like Alita, she is a first-generation college graduate. While her parents were farmers and pastors, Gail had the opportunity to pursue higher education and majored in Economics. In her experience, growing up in a rural community created significant structure and modeling for her and her siblings. Most conversations around the dinner table were about education, the distinction between class and gender roles in society, and the labor market.

Gail's professional journey began two decades ago when she started as an investment specialist in New York City. Although she found great success in banking, her experiences teaching bible study on Sundays awakened a yearning for teaching and learning. Consequently, she researched her options, left the banking sector, and became an NYC Teaching Fellow, where she was hired as a math teacher and taught for approximately eight years. Additionally, when

asked about her teaching experience, she expressed that immigration also shaped a large part of

her social identity, guiding much of her school leadership practice:

> I grew up in Grenada, West Indies. My parents did not even graduate from middle school back home, but one thing I remember when I was a very young child is that education was their priority. So, they always wanted us as their children to stand on their shoulders and reach much further than they did.

> Later in the interview, she continued to explain her passion for education stemming from

her upbringing by low income, Caribbean-immigrant parents, stating,

> Moreover, I always remember seeing my parents work hard on the farm, not just seeing them work hard on the farm but being part of it and working together with them. Amidst all that, they instilled in us that education was the way to success. So, we always had to ensure that we had excellent grades. Through my grandmother, I remember my mom constantly telling us about how hard she had it while growing up.

After eight years, Gail became a renewal director as part of the district school improvement plan.

She supported over 10 schools in her role and felt a great sense of commitment and responsibility

to support principals. Unsurprisingly, after several successful years as a school improvement

director, the superintendent offered to send her back to the school setting as a principal. She then

started at a low-performing school and was able to transform it in two years through hard work

and collaboration with her teams. Gail described this process succinctly:

> By really looking at the data and providing support, strong teacher teams were very critical in the work. The goal is to look at the data and support students in performing better. This is what we did as a team, and I took these experiences as powerful practice along with me when I became a principal.

Principal Joseph

Joseph is a Brown male and retired Dominican principal now working as a consultant and

mentor in New York City. He originally majored in criminal justice and the journey of life

circumstances, as he explained it, led to teaching and school administration. As a first-generation

college graduate, Joseph feels a profound responsibility as an educator and father to ensure his

children attended college. During the interview, he recalled his first experience as an immigrant

student:

> I grew up in the Dominican Republic, immigrated to the States when we were seven years old and settled in the Bronx, New York. However, the first 10 years, it was just going back and forth, spending the entire summer in the Dominican Republic, and then coming back for school in September, and my parents, at the time, felt they needed to hold down to the culture and the language. They advocated for bilingual programs. I never attended the neighborhood schools. Instead, my parents ensured I attended a district that offered a variety of options including bilingual programs. I understood that, you know, they wanted me to really, not lose the culture, not lose the language.

Joseph taught 4th grade for several years. Two years later, he became an assistant

principal and soon transitioned into the principal role of a school designated by the New York

State Department of Education as consistently dangerous. During the interview, Joseph became

highly animated and often laughed when he recalled his first year as a new principal of a middle

school in Bronx, New York in the early 2000s. He confronted several barriers and explained

what it was like to inherit a school with issues when asked about what influenced him to become

an administrator:

> On my very first day at 115, I stepped into the school only to find my headlights stolen. This was just the beginning of the challenges that lay ahead. The way the community dealt with issues was parents fighting parents. I was a young principal at the time. We had to develop coping strategies. There were a lot of mental issues and students were falling behind in their performance.

Principal Karen

Karen is currently a Brown female Special Education Director working at a charter

school. Originally from the Dominican Republic, her family immigrated to the Bronx when she

was seven years old. Karen's formative years were spent in the church, where she assisted her

mother in translating for fellow parishioners. In adulthood, earning financial independence was a

fundamental goal for her as a first-generation college graduate. It meant working as a teaching

assistant at a Special Education program and helping pay the bills at home. Karen further explained that she grew up in a dysfunctional home, and those experiences fostered a yearning that culminated in the pursuit of a PhD in Special Education.

Karen became a special education teacher, teaching bilingual education and math. She focused on behavioral analysis and constructing effective Functional Behavior Plans for students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). During the interview, she reflected her role and skill set when asked what influenced her to become an administrator. Her leadership style can be characterized as a collaborative approach, where she values input from all team members and encourages open communication.

> I did not plan to become a school administrator, but I was placed in charge of a department because the need was there. The principal had just taken over another school, and she had an assistant principal who would specialize in English language arts. The position was not for me, but there were many students with disabilities and multilingual learners, and I was the only one on the team who had that expertise. I do not think I decided to become an assistant, a school leader, or an administrator. The need was there. And I was the only one who met the requirements to do that.

Karen stated that she sincerely believed in modeling and showing best practices, although it was difficult to detach herself from teaching. She felt a sense of responsibility as a Servant Leader in the secular and spiritual environments she served. She expressed finding great joy in delivering services to those who are most unfortunate in society. Karen expanded on her time as a teacher during the interview:

> I loved teaching. I loved it. Once a teacher, always a teacher, the passion was there. The only reason I accepted leaving the classroom was because I wanted all the teachers to do what I could in a classroom. So, it was a fantastic experience as a teacher, to the point that when the school leader asked me to go and do classroom observation, it was tough for me because I used to take over the class. It was an enriching experience for me because I used to take over the class. It was a very rewarding experience.

Principal Olivia

Olivia, a Black female principal in a middle school program in Bronx, NY, was raised in Jamaica. Her parents and much of the rest of her family were educators. Thus, attending college was always part of the conversations at home. Olivia started her career in the Caribbean as a secondary math teacher. In all, she has been a teacher for about 12 years.

Setting goals and high expectations, and knowing that as a school leader, there must be a balance between academic norms and how principals lead their teams during crisis is what frames Olivia's leadership practice. She shared her perspective on teaching during the interview:

> My journey in the classroom has been a testament to the transformative power of education. It was a positive experience, driven by my love for working with children. I found immense joy in building relationships and supporting students to reach their highest potential. Witnessing students with limited resources set and achieve their expectations was a deeply moving experience. These experiences have enriched my academic and social growth and filled me with a sense of personal fulfillment.

Steering The Findings

Awareness of Intersectional Identities—Class, Race, Gender, and Immigration

As I explain in the following sections, the principals' shared perspectives represent examples of how personal and professional experiences interconnect. These experiences contribute to the leadership practices of other principals, creating a sense-making mindset for collective support. Though, for instance, none of the participants used the terminology of Schechter et al.'s (2018) leadership sense-making framework, I discovered that all of the participants described their personal immigrant experiences as a significant driving force in the shaping of their social identities and thus their pedagogical approaches, compassion, adaptations, and very appreciation for education and love of teaching.

Perreira and Pedroza (2019) opened their study on the structural (e.g., social, legal, and cultural) determinants of health with surprising statistics from 1990 to 2015, stating that "the number of immigrants to the United States rose from 19.8 to 43.2 million" and "these immigrants move to the U.S. from Latin America or the Caribbean (51%), Asia (31%), Africa (5%), Europe (11%), and other world regions (2%)" (p. 1). One in four children in the U.S. today live with at least one immigrant parent (Perreira & Pedroza, 2019). With NYC being the most popular destination, alongside Los Angeles (Van Hook & Glick, 2020), the school leaders who informed this study on the ways their social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social locations, and personal histories on the matrix of ethnicity and nationality, income and education, culture, social status, and belonging influence their leadership styles and navigation of existing policies to support marginalized student communities unknowingly represented a core group of the U.S. population whose intersectional identity landscape calls for increased understanding.

Excerpts from Van Hook and Glick (2020) on the intersectional influence of immigration in the development of cultural nuances spanning generations helps to situate the findings of this study within the concept of identity:

> [Advancing the field], family researchers have documented how the acculturation and enculturation process operates as families settle in the destination setting and raise the next generation…At the same time, however, this work underscores how external stressors, such as neighborhood crime, poverty, and discrimination, can wear down these defenses…Attending to the diversity of culture, race, socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual orientation will help us understand the extent to which the family processes and acculturation patterns observed in prior work are universal or whether they are contingent on a unique set of constraints or circumstances. (pp. 13–14)

Regarding the role of immigrant experiences in the participants' work as school leaders, Van Hook and Glick (2020) further explained that many parents who immigrate to new countries exert conscious efforts to "pass along ethnic identities and values to their children" and "these

parenting practices influence children's *socioemotional outcomes and their effectiveness* as parents themselves" (emphasis added, p. 13).

Inasmuch as each principal in this study saw their professional responsibilities to their students as reflective of the lessons, support, and ethics they received or were taught as the children of working-class immigrants of color reared with strict familial and gender roles, it is clear that the socioemotional outcomes and effectiveness experienced from these personal histories has impacted not only their parenting but their school leadership as well. Furthermore, and whether documented or undocumented, immigrants and the children they bring "must navigate legal systems that often fail to recognize their rights" (Van Hook & Glick, 2020, p. 14), especially if non-heterosexual, and those experiences may offer conscious or unconscious passion and resilience to the work of navigating policies in schools.

Additionally, understanding, implementing, and enforcing policies can be draining for educational leaders and these demands were shared in each participants' narratives. These high-stakes requirements were particularly discussed in Alita and Gail's stories, who directly connected raising a special needs child and voluntarily working in low-income, low-performing schools in Brooklyn, respectively, to their backgrounds as former immigrant students of color. For example, out of her background, Alita's perceived social location compelled her to create systems and structures to ensure student attendance and safety, and staff compliance with IEPs. In this way, she effectively navigated the policies in place within her district and schools by filling gaps where they existed for her students while conforming to existing ones (e.g., federal IEP laws). Effectively navigating policies in this way meant that she had to ensure the right teams were in place with up-to-date knowledge and skills for their special needs students.

Gail did not shy away from low-income schools with long records of academic underperformance after a harrowing class-based experience growing up in the Caribbean with parents who—though poor and lacking formal education beyond elementary years—regarded higher education and a community ethos among the highest of values. Joseph, Karen, and Olivia enlisted the support of their Bronx community to create a space for social-emotional support to reduce anxiety and increase coping skills to manage anger in their schools and wider Bronx, NY communities. Each principal accomplished these leadership goals using reference points from their social identities as Black and Brown immigrants (i.e., race-ethnicity); members of the low-wage countries and stratified U.S. backgrounds (i.e., class); with gendered positionality deeply rooted in Afro-Caribbean and Hispanic cultures as wives, mothers, daughters, sons, sisters, and brothers, etc. (i.e., gender).

In the following section, I advance the principals' narratives and elaborate on whether and how using lived experiences effectively assists and supports school leadership practices, as discussed during their interviews. Given that I created the interview structure to align with my research questions, in question one, I want to know how the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social location, and personal histories of New York City middle and high school principals influence their leadership style(s). In research question two, I inquired about how the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social location, and personal histories of New York middle and high school principals specifically contribute to the incorporation of social justice leadership practices to support marginalized student communities, and if so, how?

The Unveiling of New York City Principal Journeys

Awareness of Intersectional Social Identities in the Immigrant Experience

This section captures social identity formation as influenced by the immigrant experience for all five of the principals in this study. Each participant had roots in the Caribbean, including Haiti, Grenada, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic. This national and cultural background was further believed to impact or create other social experiences. For instance, four out of five participants were female, and three were raised in patriarchal homes. One classified her family as dysfunctional, and consequently one of the dominant reasons she found refuge in education.

Alita: "A Parent's Anguish and Passion for Advocacy"

Delving into Alita's life story quickly reveals a woman of remarkable resilience. She fearlessly shared her challenging upbringing in Brooklyn and the unexpected responsibility of parenthood at the young age of 18. Her ability to face adversity head-on is genuinely inspiring. However, when her daughter was diagnosed with special needs, Alita's world underwent a profound shift. More specifically, her daughter's journey at a center ignited a deep-seated connection to advocacy within her, igniting a fervent passion for education. Alita revealed, "It was my daughter. Her journey became my passion, fueling my appetite to become an advocate for children with special needs."

Alita's transition to a principal role was, therefore, marked by a unique perspective shaped by her experiences as a teenage parent who became a teacher after being raised to put family first based on her Haitian roots. Her experiences as a mother and passion as a teacher sparked innovative, community and justice oriented ideas about leadership. Alita reminisced:

> We created something called Parent University, which has worked for us. So, we want to avoid engaging parents in a surface-like approach. We want parents to connect with the school. The format is that we have a tracker. We track all our parents and know what they

are good at, so if you know how to make cake, that is what you do. If you work for the police department, that is what you do.

Further, the sense of inclusion and equitable support that led Alita's principalship practice for over 20 years helped create a general culture of care that also extended to teachers and other staff districtwide. She recalled:

> Our staff's mental health support is currently limited to what we offer through their regular related service. This has prompted me to consider the potential benefits of having a mental health office within our building. However, this remains a vision yet to be realized. In the absence of such a resource, we have had to make the most of what we have. Our counselors, in particular, benefit from the support they receive from the district, which they then bring into their work within our building. It's important to note that we are not isolated in our efforts. We are part of the district office, a community that is deeply committed to restorative justice practices. This affiliation provides us with a strong support system, reinforcing our ability to provide comprehensive mental health services.

Alita's quote highlights how she intentionally infuses personalization, precision, and partnership to connect all community members to the school culture. Furthermore, as a high school principal with a special needs population, Alita said she was able to leverage parents' soft skills and create an organic space for genuine school-to-home connections:

> We would invite them to the school and ask them to do a workshop for everyone. Tell us about police brutality. If the police stop us, how do we engage? How do we make ice cream? We also did sip and paint activities. Parents designed these activities for parents; we just helped facilitate them, which made them so powerful. They are coming; it is like a parent helping other parents, and people are excited to show the skills to talk about the regulations.

In addition to holding Parent University activities, Alita expressed that it was just as important if not more crucial to invite other stakeholders from the community, especially politicians. City Council members add resources, she explained, and collaboration is essential.

> Our parents' husband worked for the New York City Council, so we all know that the city council significantly influences the budget and provides resources to the community. So now, you know, the parents are coming in and talking about how it is essential to know your city council. Invite them.

Remembering that since, to Alita, her upbringing as a Haitian immigrant meant having a high interest in service, then her empathy towards parents is logically a guiding principle in her approach. She understands the importance of parents feeling valued, respected, and heard. In a notable incident with an irate parent, for example, Alita's immediate and reassuring response was, "I am here for you and your child, which is my responsibility. Whatever we need to do, we will do it together." This incident is a clear example of Alita's approachability and commitment to working with parents to benefit the students, and her ability to handle difficult situations with grace and confidence.

As a school supervisor, Alita's role is multifaceted and demanding. She not only manages staff and aligns levels of expertise within the building but also oversees students' IEPs. Her responsibilities further span seven buildings, four assistant principals, and over 1,000 students. Alita firmly believes that understanding student behavior, connecting to the broader community, and collaborating with parents and staff are essential leadership skills. Her commitment to collaboration is a cornerstone of her leadership style, as she believes building trust and relationships within the school community most crucial. She shared:

> So, I am an advocate, and people know that. I have a track record in the district of getting things done. I'm not the one who uses warrior stance. I also use a wizard stance, where I'm very creative in the things that I do. I look at the case, the data, and the change in programming. I adjust to the kids—the kids who are going to prison, the kids who are going to hospitals, the kids who are moving.

Alita's innovative approach to leadership and her ability to adapt and create change are sources of intrigue and inspiration. Alita has expressed solid convictions and passions as a parent, school leader, and advocate for the special needs community. In her journey as a school leader, she indicated that creating opportunities for the special needs student demographic has

been imperative. With this, understanding the students' capacities for learning and how they

adapt to the world of work is one of her primary roles as a school leader. As she pointed out,

> As a change agent, I am not rigid in my approach. I adapt to the needs of the students—those who may be at risk of incarceration, hospitalization, or frequent relocation. For instance, I revamped the system from two terms per year to a full term, ensuring that every student, regardless of their circumstances, has a fair chance to earn 11 credits.

> According to Alita, serving students and families for the past 20 years as principal of

special needs communities has required flexibility and creative approaches to getting the job

done. Her vision for learning must connect to vocational training. As she mentioned,

> By the end of the year, the students have diverse experiences. So, in other words, every cycle you get, you know, you get to earn three credits, so that's one thing, and I'm also aware that my student population is not going to become doctors or physicians. My approach is different. I create shops, auto shops, customer construction, and culinary career pathways for each of my students. I work with partners. They learn about shopping, and my kids go to the laundry. We have laundromats. I encourage local businesses to work with us and share the business model with our students. Our students become interns and learn the laundromat business. I create opportunities that will help them succeed in the world.

Alita is a proponent of school internships and staffing students in her schools. In doing so, she

firmly believes she is shaping the future of a unique student population. According to Alita, she

hired every single student possible. She currently has 22 students who are getting ready to work

entry-level positions in schools. Alita's passion connects to empowerment. She expounded,

> So, I motivated them to let them understand that, you know, you decide your destiny. If you want to play, there's time to play, but there's also time to work. And when is that time to work? You can be playing. So, it's a decision that you have to make. What will your future be like? And let me tell you, sometimes I think about this one like them; those kids are listening to me.

> Part of being a school leader from Alita's Haitian, female, mother of a special needs

child, and advocate location is clearly focusing on building school capacity and collaborating

with staff at the heart of educating. In her words,

All my buildings are designed to foster self-guided learning and growth. This means that the expectations are clear, and everyone is encouraged to take ownership of their development. I also invest a significant amount of my time in building capacity, particularly in developing people and leaders. The beneficial aspect of this approach is that if you join my school as a school aid, you will have the opportunity to grow into a teacher role. This progression is not a matter of question, it's a known path. Similarly, if you join as a teacher, you can rest assured that you will have the potential to become an administrator.

Over 20 years of intentional, transformative school leadership has solidified the belief that principals and teachers work symbiotically and their personal attributes, such as their character, ethics, and intrinsic desire to collaborate impact student outcomes. For instance,

Nevertheless, I enjoyed collaborating with the teacher to maximize the educational outcome for kids. So that's my experience. I make sure I communicate and be kind to people. When you give people your word, you have to stay on it. You cannot say one thing today and two more you flip or appeal like your faith. I don't do that. I'm honest. If I'm upset or annoyed, I'm telling you we need to do this to make it better for kids.

Alita also shared that she encountered many experiences that fueled a passion for leading and supporting schools through a collaborative effort. She explained that leadership is about being flexible and reflective, and these practices shape one's mindset. Emotions also influence leadership style and how leaders improve their school communities.

We do a survey every year. We survey our kids, we survey our staff, we survey parents as well. Moreover, we do a quick survey with two or three questions. Our questions include: What are your thoughts about the school? What can we improve, and if you were in school, what would you have done to support some achievement soon? Our parents would fill them out, and we would write to them there. So, our parent coordinator, you have probably seen her, and she is very instrumental. Everyone's voice matters. However, if you have a small group who tells you something, you need to take that seriously.

Alita further connected the use of technology in her leadership practice and commitment to creating an inclusive school community:

So, a survey is a precious tool. With Google Classroom, you can create a Google format, send it out to everybody, and then, you know, quickly tabulate within seconds and see

what people are thinking. We do much work with cultural responsiveness in sustaining education.

More of Alita's leadership practices and how she supports marginalized students in her school community are discussed in the summary of findings below. The components of her overarching leadership style that are strongly influenced by her personal background as an immigrant adjusting to marginalization both within her own life and those her students are echoed by the other principals. Next, I discuss Gail's leadership journey, which she grounds in her personal immigrant story as a Grenadian.

Gail: "Overcoming Adversity as a School Leader and Immigrant"

Childhood memories impact how we view the world, according to Principal Gail. She expressed that growing up on a rural farm and having parents as pastors framed her thinking about serving. At the time of the interview, Gail shared that it was more important to reflect on prior roadblocks than attempt to predict future obstacles. She indicated that this is because such experiences can often foster an amber of hope. Gail stated that she overcame many challenges in her life, and these experiences helped her along the way in the principalship. She recalled,

> Even at my school, we have a lot of immigrant students, and I have seen students who separate from their parents for a very long time. As educators, we know firsthand what it is like to be separated from your parents for a long time. This empathy allows us to understand better and support our students who may be going through similar experiences; fostering a sense of connection and trust in the classroom is essential.

Unlike Alita, Gail's parents never attended high school, yet they were successful farmers. Their dedication to the farm and unwavering work ethic became a powerful leadership model for her. This influence, combined with her own experiences, led her out of banking and into a career in education. Originally an economist, Gail was moved by how her Sunday school students

followed her instructions. She said this initial pedagogical seed planted in the church altered her

lifestyle and continues to shape her leadership practices today. Gail remembered,

> As a Black woman, working in banking can be rewarding but overwhelming. However, when I became a principal, one of the things that we did was a learning survey. So, we did a learning survey to see how students learn best. We shared that information with staff so that the survey could serve as a model of practice for pedagogical impact. The survey revealed that modifying instruction to meet the needs of students ranked first on the list. Moreover, students must consider what interests them, their career interests, and everything else. I want to utilize my banking experience and advance a curriculum that fosters empowerment. By doing so, I am breaking through intergenerational economic mobility. It is one of the reasons why I have a business program in my school.

Gail drew a connection between her experience as a triple minority in the banking

industry (i.e., Black, female, low-income background immigrant) with no foundation for

business or investment knowledge or access to upward mobility networks in her background

with those of her diverse NYC students marginalized by educational and economic divestment

within the larger state and national context. At the time of her interview, Gail's school

enrollment included approximately 300 students. According to New York State's Department of

Education public domain site, Gail's student population was 86% Black, 11% Hispanic, and 2%

Asian or Native American. Multilingual learners were 3%, and 26% were students with

disabilities. Yet, her school had an 83% graduation rate overall for the 2022-2023 school year.

Gail asked that her students' demographic data be considered in the study because she fervently

believes that context matters to fully understand the connection between her social identity,

social location, and personal history and her leadership style, particularly given that many of the

students she serves require intensive academic interventions.

With that, she noted that principals have to get creative; this is especially true where

social-emotional needs must be confronted:

> We used to have culinary arts after school, but we had to make that strategic decision and drop the program. It wasn't an easy decision, but it was a necessary one. I decided to reallocate the funding and staff a social work intern instead until we had additional funding for after-school programs. The social worker could provide the support that students need until we can afford a social worker because that was key, that was crucial. The strategic decision-making process in resource allocation has not only given us confidence but also reassurance in our ability to provide the necessary support for our students, knowing that every decision is carefully considered and in their best interest.

This discussion caused Gail to recall that part of her leadership journey has been data analysis and utilizing a transformational leadership stance. The data analysis provided a springboard toward changes in instructional delivery: "This cycle of reflection, revision, and implementation is what drives our continuous improvement." According to Gail, she connects this philosophy to instruction through a variety of voices and mediums. For instance, in the previous school year, she had a special guest speaker visit and lecture on 'the Genius factor;' proclaiming that every student can be a genius, and the realization of it is only a matter of knowing every student well.

As a former economist, Gail recognizes that her leadership practices in NYC schools largely include data tracking, organizing goals, and setting priorities in much the same way that banking did, although the latter focuses on markets and profit analysis while the former centers humanizing scores and trends that are assumed to predict the potential of each student to contribute to the economy. Leadership for Gail's students requires systems and structures that maximize the diversity, intersecting identities, and common personal immigrant experiences of them and/or their parents to meet or surpass district and national standards for student outcomes, and she understands this intimately based on her own social identity (i.e., race, class, and gender), social location, and personal history. Gail recalled, for example, that,

> One of the things we did was to recreate student IEP snapshots. These snapshots, when used by teachers, provide a clear understanding of what management needs, and more importantly, what specific students need. This practical and effective use of IEP snapshots has not only enlightened us on the specific needs of our students but also

reassured us about the effectiveness of our support strategies. It has given us hope and optimism about the future, as we are now better equipped to support their engagement in the classroom.

Gail stated that navigating policies related to attendance, student performance, safety, gangs, and bullying are all part of the day-to-day issues she deals with. Understanding the root cause of the issues external to the school environment can shed light on why students behave and perform the way they do. This is why, according to Gail, principals need careful case management strategies if they hope to be effective at meeting diverse student needs:

> Principals play a crucial role in investigating and aligning the necessary resources to support the student and the family. This is one of the reasons why the social worker is critical in our school. Your role is not just about managing, it's about leading and making a real difference in the lives of our students and their families.

One of Gail's regular practices involves creating a space for collaboration with leadership team members during cabinet meetings. These sessions are used to discuss general issues and raise significant questions about individual students. Gail recalled that, as an economist, "I was trained to master the skills of reflection and troubleshooting." Principals must find solutions and maximize all recourses in support of a project. These are clearly some of her cornerstone skills as she underscored them when describing her former experiences. Raising questions about attendance, exploring the root causes for absences, and knowing what kind of support is needed are all necessary for successful school leadership in New York City, especially during crises. Many principals, Gail recalled, raised similar questions during the COVID-19 Pandemic:

> What's happening in the home? How can we provide the support? What resources can we connect the family to really be, you know, find solutions to the root cause? So, the skill is really peeling back the layers to find those root causes and providing strategic support, just like in the classroom, where we expect teachers to know students well. And to differentiate instruction based on need. Now, at the principal level, it's our responsibility to have those systems structures in place. We need to implement differentiated support, which means tailoring our interventions and resources to meet the unique needs of each

student and family, and we need a multi-tiered system of support for students, not just in terms of academics but in terms of the social-emotional aspect as well.

According to Gail, principals must deepen their analysis to ensure they address the best leadership strategies, such as (1) collaboration, (2) professional development, and (3) social-emotional support. The intersection of academic and emotional learning is critical to understanding student progress. Gail's remembrances of questions that surfaced during her cabinet meetings and case management experiences further elucidated the role that principals' social identities play in their leadership practices. Next, I detail Joseph's professional leadership experience from the vantage point of his immigrant and connected identities.

Joseph: "Leading with a Purpose—the Immigrant Beyond the Classroom"

Joseph, the only male participant in this investigation, also found his educational trajectory profoundly influenced by his personal experiences. He reflected, for instance, "Getting into education, well, it just happened. I was a Criminal Justice major." His journey to education, much like Alita and Gail, was profoundly shaped by his experiences as an immigrant student. Starting in Quantico, where he was accepted into the FBI academy, a significant event led him back home to pursue a degree in education, eventually leading to a career with the Department of Education as a second-grade teacher, which he described as a "role I was drawn to."

Joseph's upbringing in the Bronx left a lasting impression on him, particularly the strong community-school engagement that was present. When asked about his principalship experiences and supporting students, Joseph was clear: "As a new principal, I had to make quick decisions." Joseph further recalled, "It was a young staff. I was a young principal at the time. We had to develop these coping strategies to deal with the different conflicts we were running into."

Leading requires creating a team, and although building one was a challenge, it was also an

opportunity for growth, says Joseph:

> Well, so we, you know, part of my growth was having a strategy to inspire others; how do I provide the opportunity to learn? When I came into 115 at that time [20 years ago], I felt like this job was just too big for one individual. I needed to have a team. I need to believe in a team.

Additionally, according to Joseph, the school was ready when the pandemic hit New

York City because his scholars had already been immersed in technology for at least a decade.

Through advocacy and partnership connections, Joseph acquired tablets for his entire school. He

explained:

> Our situation is unique only because we were ready for the pandemic. So, we had this iPad Home initiative. Prior to the pandemic, every kid in our school, you know, had an iPad. Students were bringing those devices back and forth. The way we structured our program was similar to that of Long Island, New York. There was an organization called School for One. Freeport was one of those very cushy communities. The parents purchased the iPads for the kids. I saw how we needed that extension in our community.

Joseph further remembered supporting students' learning pathways and implementing

new strategies, which he described as critical for the school community.

> I have always believed we must commit and plan for the initiative. I was very strategic, and sometimes, when the principal says or when it comes top down, the staff does not welcome that. What I did was I got a couple of teachers, and I let them come up with ideas about best practices in lesson planning. Thus, all the credit would go to the team.

Joseph further explained that there was a time when he needed to adjust based on observations

and planning. He decided to meet with several teachers and present a dilemma. The teachers

devised their solutions and shared them with the rest of the staff during their regularly scheduled

Monday Professional Learning Opportunity (PLO).

As for his largely immigrant neighborhood, Joseph vividly remembered how local

supermarkets would generously contribute to the school. As a principal, he was determined to

replicate this community involvement. He made it a priority to keep local businesses informed about school activities, and in turn, they often sponsored breakfast, lunch, and other school events. Joseph was especially inspired by the support of his Parent Association, and he leveraged business partnerships through it to further enhance the school's resources. He eloquently stated:

> I took pictures of how students looked, what they ate, and how they learned. I adopted the priority for the entire school in collaboration and partnership. I would speak to parents, who would speak to teachers. I would speak to everybody in the community, I reached the point where you would talk to me about priorities, and I mentioned my kids. Thus, that is what I wanted to get that message across. The community's role in setting priorities was crucial, and I made sure to listen to their concerns and incorporate them into our plans.

This response from Joseph highlights how he aligns his priorities with the school community. His statements illustrate how he identifies as a middle-class, brown, Dominican, and former bilingual student working in one of the poorest and crime-driven neighborhoods of New York City and understands the importance of teachers knowing precisely where students are in order to make learning shifts. This understanding has created a space for professional development and sharing in support of marginalized student inclusion in Joseph's school, especially ELL students and those with disabilities.

As the school leader, Joseph reiterated his unwavering moral and professional commitment to guide and nurture his education community. He leveraged the community-centered school culture created among the staff and stated that there were significant impacts from it. Recalling an incident between a teacher and a student under Joseph's leadership, for example, their community-centered school culture allowed the incident to create a positive shift in feeling and practice. Joseph recalled:

> We wanted kids to know the Lexile level for self-reflection and monitor class improvement. So, we created a culture of awareness where scholars knew their academic level by the end of the week. Students were charged with understanding how to increase

these levels. I recall an incident that I found funny but also decisive. The student advocated for himself and the Lexile scores; he knew he was part of the 1300 club. Your parents had VIP status if you were 1,300 in your Lexile level. Parents will come in and can immediately arrive at the school. Parents were seen immediately. We will always reference that—initiatives between parents, students, and the school community matter. My scholars were ambassadors for the rest of the school community. Ambassadors were mentors and student models. I devised these things, which were incorporated into the school's vision and mission to ensure everybody knew.

Joseph's journey is further explored below in relation to the other participants. Next, let us explore Karen's background experiences and how she navigates compliance, academic, and systemic practices. Her responses ground principalship in a service framework shaped by immigrant experiences. This framework should further, according to Karen, serve as a tool for resilience to overcome obstacles.

Principal Karen: "In Search of Justice—the Immigrant Breaking Barriers"

Karen's story begins in the Dominican Republic where, she stated, growing up with a large family can often be both a curse and a blessing. She was the second of seven children. She recalled the competition between her siblings and her father constantly working. On the other hand, her mother would not quit but instead ignited a passion for serving her community: "At a very early age, it was clear to me that I needed to do something to support the community."

While growing up, Karen would often join her father at work, in a private Jewish Autism school. This early exposure to the field of Special Education sparked a deep-seated aspiration in Karen: to one day earn a PhD in this field. According to Karen, "I became very interested in students with autism and went on to pursue a PhD in applied behavior analysis. That did not go well because I had a son and needed to ensure my son was okay," conveying her sense of familial obligation and prioritizing of family values.

Karen's journey as an immigrant student and their family's economic conditions created a heightened sense of urgency, and education was believed to be the key to getting out of poverty for her and her siblings. As she explained, "I needed to go to college. I needed to follow up regarding the degree because I needed to open doors for my brothers and sisters. I also needed to be independent, not depend on anyone regarding finances, right?"

As I recall from the interview, Karen eventually graduated from school and obtained a job where her father was a custodian. Her exposure to the behavioral sciences at the school, she further explained, opened a window of opportunities for serving marginalized communities. Karen's primary concern as an early educator was thus families that needed support. This school was the place that exposed her to a particular educational language, increasing her understanding of the laws serving autistic children. She said it positioned her to take on the role of principal: "This journey led me to a pivotal role as the principal. The school needed an assistant principal with a deep understanding of special education and bilingualism. I was the perfect fit, meeting all the requirements."

Karen's educational enlightenment not only transformed her life but also equipped her to make a significant impact in her professional career. Initially, she never imagined getting into school administration, however, the exposure to various roles and legislation, opened doors in administration. She was inevitably selected as the principal:

> I did not plan to become a school administrator. It was an unexpected transition, a role in which I was placed in charge of a department because there was a need for me. The principal has just taken over another school. She had an assistant principal who would specialize in English language arts. The position was not for me, but there was a large number of students with disabilities and a large number of English Language Learners. I was the only one out there, you know, in the team, that had that expertise. I still need to decide to become an assistant, a school leader, or an administrator. The need was there; I was the only one who met that requirement.

The ascension into the principalship in Karen's professional journey meant an increase in support. According to Karen, supervision, which often carries a negative connotation of control and oversight, was not her preferred term. Instead, she would use the word support, which she defines as a collaborative and empowering approach to leadership. As a principal, Karen recalled that her number one priority was to develop her staff. By doing so, families would have a greater connection to the school, and consequently, students would learn. At least, this was her theory, from an early influence and passion for serving, explaining, "the influence, the compassion, the understanding, the buy-in. All that I learned at home. I come from a huge family."

When asked about her strategy for managing school crises, Karen similarly emphasized that her spiritual faith and upbringing are not just personal aspects but guiding principles in her professional life. As one of the eldest in her family, she took on the leadership role as a moral precept. Hence, Karen believed that this leadership positioning was a matter of culture: "My upbringing defined and shaped who I am, and it continues to guide me in my role as a principal."

Like Joseph's leadership journey, Karen inherited a challenging middle school a few years before the COVID-19 pandemic. From this experience as a new principal, she concluded that dysfunction breeds crisis:

> We were coming in, and the school was fading out. When that happens, you inherit the same students. It was very toxic. When I came as a principal, there were no systems in place. Students used to run the school. Parents would call in countless complaints. There were many fights, and the academic performance of students was below. It was one of the lowest-performance in the school district. But with the implementation of new systems, a shift in the school's culture, and a focus on academic excellence, we were able to transform this toxic environment into a thriving one, with improved academic performance and a more harmonious atmosphere.

Karen further submitted that one of the most important things to do as a principal when you inherit a school is to bring people together and share a meal. This strategy creates ample

opportunities for voices to be heard and respected in the building of harmony. These meetings are not just about the meal but creating a space for genuine human connection.

After working with parents, the next priority for Karen was building the capacity of her staff, and to do that, she worked around the clock to ensure a cohesive culture that takes ownership of learning. When asked about teacher collaboration, Karen said, "The data is my first step, and it has been very effective. When we speak regarding the data and how students are doing, it is your effectiveness in terms of execution." A natural leader from given her culture and familial order, Karen's goal, as she explained it, was for teachers to take ownership over their data outcomes.

Like Alita, Gail, and Joseph, Karen believes modeling and recognition of teacher attributes is crucial in building school culture. During her interview, Karen recalled her Monday staff meetings:

> These meetings allowed teachers to learn from their mistakes and ask questions about what we would do when we planned instruction. It has been tremendous for me, especially gathering the data. The process helps determine the effectiveness of the pedagogical practice that you are going to utilize. It has been key to my leadership career.

Further exploration of Karen's principal experience in relation to her fellow participating principals below reveals the inextricability of social identity characteristics to leadership practices. Let us next explore the final participant's background of Olivia. Her narrative provides additional insights into the influence of immigrant background and experience on principalship.

Principal Olivia: "Giving Up and Failing is Not an Option."

Olivia's upbringing in a foreign and rural setting was a significant part of her journey. She is a third-generation college graduate from the Caribbean Island of Jamaica, distinguishing her from her peers in this study, who were all first-generation students. Her animated storytelling

during the interview not only reflected her excitement about sharing her journey as a school leader and immigrant to NYC, but also her deep passion for education. Farms surrounded Olivia's home, and she was part of a large family.

Her parents, both teachers, deeply instilled the values of integrity and hard work in her from an early age, which continue to inspire her today. Olivia cherishes her father's words, 'Education is the only way out.' According to Olivia, deciding to go into teaching was easy; she embraced it. Olivia shared that all her family members were educators, and no one was surprised when she pursued a career in Mathematics education. She started as a classroom teacher, then moved on to become a department head, assistant principal, and eventually, a school leader. During the interview, she passionately recalled: "So, I was a teacher for many years, and I was always a person who wanted to be at the top of my field."

Olivia's tenure in education was marked by numerous "behind closed doors" events that sparked her desire to become a school principal. When the opportunity arose, her principal was eager to nominate her for the role. She has successfully overseen a staff of over 75, guided instruction, and fostered a culture of high expectations, nurturing, and safety. Her focus on student development and building staff morale and capacity was instrumental in school-wide improvement.

It was clear based on Olivia's responses that her personal values, shaped by her home experience, serve as her moral compass in her role as a principal. Her upbringing in a home where gender roles were clear, relationships were shared, and hierarchical leadership was replaced with respect and self-honor, continues to guide her. She continues to cherish a life-changing moment and a dream come true:

In terms of culture and maintaining the stability of a middle school, I remember walking one day and doing my observation as an AP with the Superintendent of schools. It was a turning moment for me as an educator. The Superintendent said: 'I want to make you a principal.' I was caught off guard and immediately said, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, this is my third year being an assistant principal. I have yet to do a principal's job. Her response shocked me: 'I see some qualities in you that are necessary in a school. I would like to see that in our schools'.

Olivia smiled throughout her interview as she recalled her first task as a principal, which was creating a culture of high expectations. Therefore, one of her priorities was preventing school violence. She recalled walking through the hallways of her school and quickly identifying a young man, whom we will call Jason, who needed support, as he was always in the hallways. She immediately connected with Jason, spoke about his day, and enrolled him in the after-school program. Olivia indicated that it was remarkable to witness how quickly he began to improve his behaviors and academic performance. She discovered that Jason was afraid to learn—or rather fail—so she devised a strategy.

Consequently, the impact would eventually lead to increased state-level assessment scores thanks to Olivia's genuine desire to serve and build relationships. Jason outscored his peers in English and Math by April of that year due to her direct instructional approach. Olivia stated proudly: "I was his teacher; we were both proud." The experience, in turn, got out, and more students joined Olivia's after-school math club. To this day, Olivia provides several incentives, including an academic dinner with family members and the rest of the school community: "I was very intentional about making him a success, and he was."

Olivia indicated that the key to being a principal is making personal connections with her students and the rest of their community. She remembered how mentoring and using strategies to improve math skills were particularly essential. She discovered that mindset matters, and students need to *know* they have potential, telling students "they just need to work on their

skills." When students have a mentor, other students see their success and want to join. Olivia then indicated that as school leaders, we must remind our teams to meet students where they are. She recalled that:

> I told you I love math. Math is a challenge for many students, and as a principal, I tap into what they are struggling with. I remind my teams to support them in that area and build upon that. I have seen a significant improvement, which has been my strategy over the years. It is a strategy that I'm also utilizing to help my teachers build the connection.

During the interview, Olivia reiterated the positive outcomes of her new practice this year, which has witnessed a significant impact on student performance and behavior in her school. She restructured interventions to include support beyond the classroom, assigning a counselor and school social worker to the most at-risk students. Her approach is to infuse social media with academics, combining efforts with those of the guidance counselor. She has attached all of her counselors to the instructional data tracker showing students' progress. Namely,

> So, we have a tier system of academic and emotional support for students. Each tiered approach is intentional and aligned with student behaviors. So, our most at-risk, say tier three students, require increased social-emotional support. The student is always in a fight. This tracker tool helps the principal monitor that student's progress academically.

Like those of the other four principals' leadership journeys, Olivia's leadership approach has led to significant positive outcomes. By intertwining the cognitive and emotional aspects of learning, she has created a space where every student (1) feels heard, (2) is reminded of their potential, and (3) accepts the high expectations set by their educators. This has not only improved her direct relationship with students but also sparked a 'buzz' for learning across classrooms. Like Alita, Gail, Joseph, and Karen, Olivia's narrative highlights the systemic issues related to monitoring and addressing academic performance and the importance of mechanizing systems to support all students, especially those from marginalized communities, from the basis

of school leaders' own backgrounds and life experiences. This approach interconnects the dissertation questions:

1. How do the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social location, and personal histories of New York City (middle and high school) principals influence their leadership style (s)?

2. Do the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social location, and personal histories of New York City (middle and high school) principals contribute to the incorporation of social justice leadership practices to support marginalized student communities, and if so, how?

Synthesis of Interview Findings

In my study, I investigated how the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social locations, and personal histories of New York City middle and high school principals influence their leadership style(s). I discovered that Alita, Gail, Joseph, Karen, and Olivia's leadership practices grew out of their deep commitment to reflection and sense-making of how they navigate the policies and address the social constructions of difference present in their schools in concert from the centers of their being as Black and Brown men and women of immigrant origins. It is impossible for me to describe how existing policies are navigated by principals of non-immigrant or non-Caribbean backgrounds with varying social identities, however, I can say that, by having clear senses of who they are and how they came to be in social and educational contexts, each of the principals in this study were able to effectively manage the diverse needs and disagreements within their respective schools.

It was clear from each interview that middle and high school principals constantly construct meaning from their experiences. The background experiences of these five school

principals, viewed through the lens of Alita, Gail, Joseph, Karen, and Olivia, also illuminated

how individuals and organizations (e.g., Department of Education) make meaning out of events

such as those referenced earlier in the chapter. These approaches are significant because they

explain how leaders respond to critical school incidents, such as school violence, irate parents,

and students' academic achievement needs. Recall, for instance, that for Alita, advocacy and

providing voices to her community of special needs students were rooted in

the belief of empowerment rooted in her own experience as a mother of a child needing

accommodations. Literature in the area of memory and cognition support this finding.

For instance, making sense and having meaning, according to Schechter et al. (2018), is

grounded on "working knowledge, cognitive frames, enactments or cognitive maps" (p. 3). As I

cross-referenced the interviews data, coding responses and locating themes, I discovered that

navigating institutional policies, crisis, and high-stakes accountability could be organized as

sense-making focused on *identity formation, family values, student connections, intrinsic*

administrative motivation, professional life commitment, and intentional leadership styles. I will

describe these cross-case, thematic findings more specifically in the sections below.

Identity Formation, Family Values, and Student Connections

By exploring how the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social locations, and

personal histories of New York City middle and high school principals influence their leadership

style(s) (i.e., RQ1), I uncovered that each principal had an underlying connection between

identity formation, family values, and student connection. Though unexpected to such a strong

degree, extant research demonstrates, on a conceptual level, why immigration surfaced as a

central factor in the participants' discussions of social identity (i.e., race, class, and gender),

social locations, and personal histories. For instance, in her chapter on "Intersectionality in the

Immigrant Context," Tummala-Narra (2020) underscored "the importance of recognizing unconscious processes that underlie complex identifications associated with immigration and sociopolitical contexts and oppression" (Abstract). Figures 4.1 and 4.2 were designed for this study by graphic designer Justin Jenkins to depict the core concepts and sentiments of the study themes utilizing the minor codes that yielded them, at times (i.e., identity formation and family values).

Figure 4.1

Illustrative Image of the Identity Formation and Family Values Theme
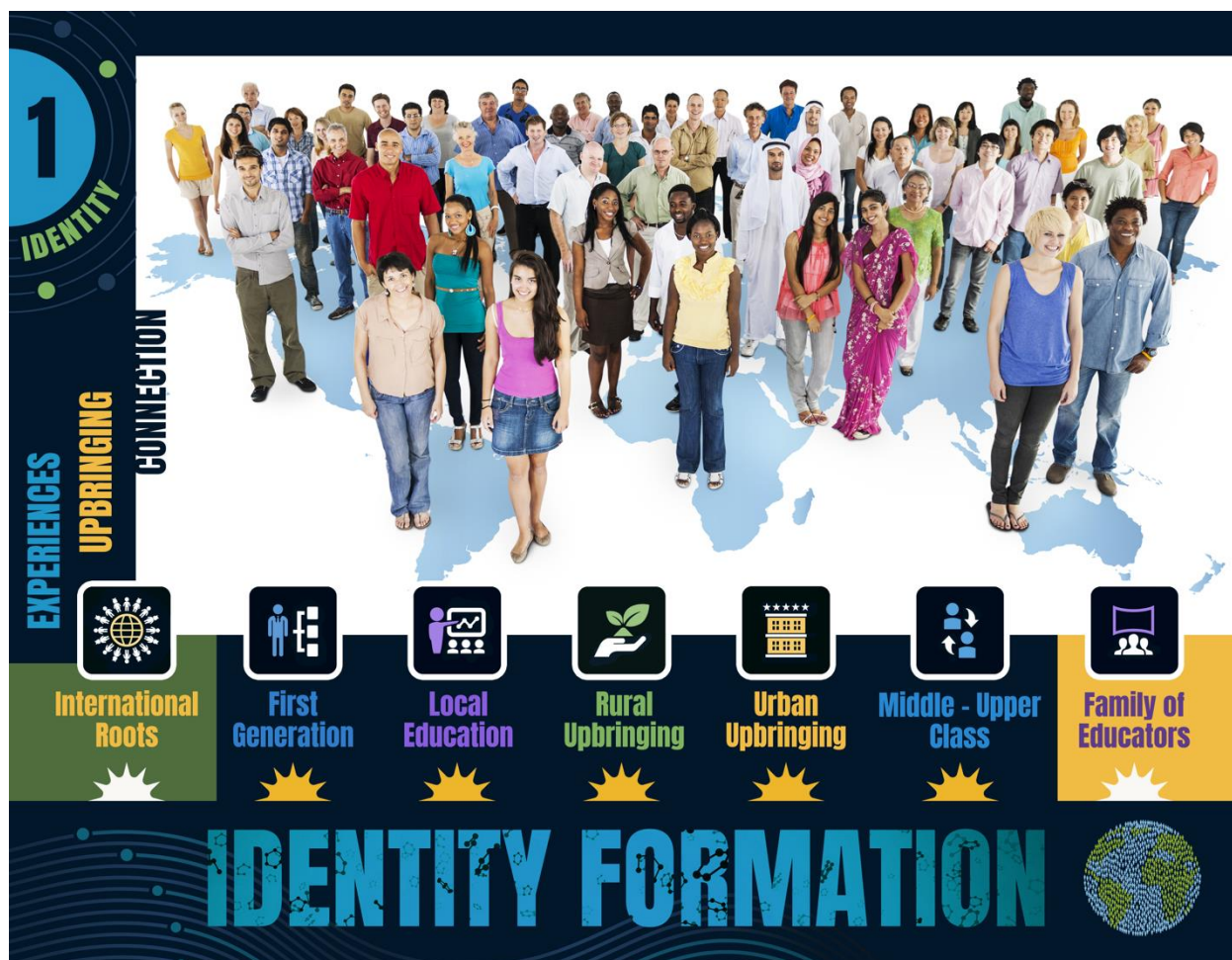
For immigrants, Tummala-Narra (2020) explains, the racial, class-based, and/or gendered marginalization that minorities with citizenship face is compounded by for a host of reasons involving geographic, cultural, lingual, and sometimes political distinctions (e.g., social constructions of difference). Thus, immigrants and their children may have "multiple social locations and identities, and privilege and marginalization, in pre-migration and post-migration contexts" (Abstract). Identity formation grounded each of their experiences as bilingual or immigrant students within the New York City Public School System. Take, for example, Alita, Gail, Joseph, and Karen, whose leadership practices were sparked by their own classroom experiences. In Olivia's case, school leadership style and practices were inherited from a previous generation of teachers in her family.

Figure 4.2

Illustrative Image of the Student Connections Theme

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In every case, though to varying degrees, the impact of immigration, family separation, and English language learning experiences positioned each principal to 'make sense and draw meaning' from these experiences within a personal and professional framework (Schechter et al., 2018). This was particularly evident in Joseph's case, where he prioritized students' needs through promotion of student autonomy and community engagement. The transformative

practices these leaders adopted led to their personal growth. As described by Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2019), "Self-transforming knowers orient to interconnections, collaboration, and mutuality as essential ingredients of progress (p. 7)." This journey of personal growth is truly inspiring.

Four of the five principals interviewed discussed how the transformative power of education through their first-generation college experiences shaped their thinking about disrupting their personal and professional environments for the better. In essence, getting out of poverty (i.e., class) and understanding the intergenerational wealth gap was critical in directing the rest of their future and that of their similarly located Black and Brown students (i.e., race). For Karen, it was a matter of shifting the dysfunctional family cycles:

> I must say that I love my father. I was, you know, the first child. However, the relationship between my mom and my dad was dysfunctional. I remember saying, oh, although I loved my father with all my heart, I remember saying I needed to become a professional.

All of the principals in my investigation further disclosed that they undertook a social justice stance in transforming their communities as they sought to decrease school violence, improve parental involvement, build staff capacity, and engage the broader community and resources. Through their stories, leadership practices were, therefore, heavily influenced by factors within the themes of (1) identity formation, (2) family values, and (3) student connection. They had, as one participant expressed it, a "passion and focus to do the best, support those parents, support students, and train and support teachers to replicate best practices. To do what I learned in the classroom, you know, move students' learning or academic achievement."

Intrinsic Administrative Motivation and Professional Life Commitment

Throughout their interviews, every principal expressed a yearning to lead and a love of teaching and creating opportunities for their communities borne from their social identities, locations, and personal histories. In their roles, these principals cultivated communities, and as a result, the teams within their schools needed to do things more carefully. They were strategic in their work and focused on one thing: "student achievement, data analysis, and transformative practices through student self-regulating behaviors," as expressed by Olivia. Alita similarly built her leadership team (i.e., unit coordinators and assistant principals) through the lens of personalization, coherence learning, and strategic planning. I found out that for Alita, much of her influence came from her identity and experiences as a young Haitian mother and teacher with few economic resources. Figure 4.3 provides a visual illustration of the intrinsic administrative motivations theme, while Figure 4.4 aptly depicts the fundamental nature of the professional life commitment theme in the form of visual imagery.

Making sense of such lived experiences as described by Alita, Gail, Joseph and Karen also highlights the need for further support and mental health services. Joseph recalled, for instance, the degree to which trauma factored into his daily leadership service: "You know, we started using the ambulance as a lifeline. The ambulance was twice or three times a day in our school because of mental health issues. The doctor noticed that many of our kids were going into the crisis unit, so he visited to see how he could help."

As Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2019) suggested, socializing knowers prioritize the feelings of others. This was vividly demonstrated in the personal growth and learning journeys of Gail, Joseph, Karen, and Alita, who each drew profound meaning from their shared immigrant experiences, while Olivia was most influenced by her lineage of family

educators. In Olivia's case, teaching and learning is also about intentionally creating strategies and a vision for learning. Her shift in focus from instruction to fostering a culture of community collaboration and relationships in the building is a powerful example of the transformative potential of such relationships regardless of national origin, lending credence to Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2019) assertion that school principals should view "social justice as a relational endeavor, striving to build deep, authentic, and culturally relevant relationships" (p. 13).

Figure 4.3

Illustrative Image of the Intrinsic Administrative Motivation Theme

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Figure 4.4

Illustrative Image of the Intrinsic Administrative Motivation Theme
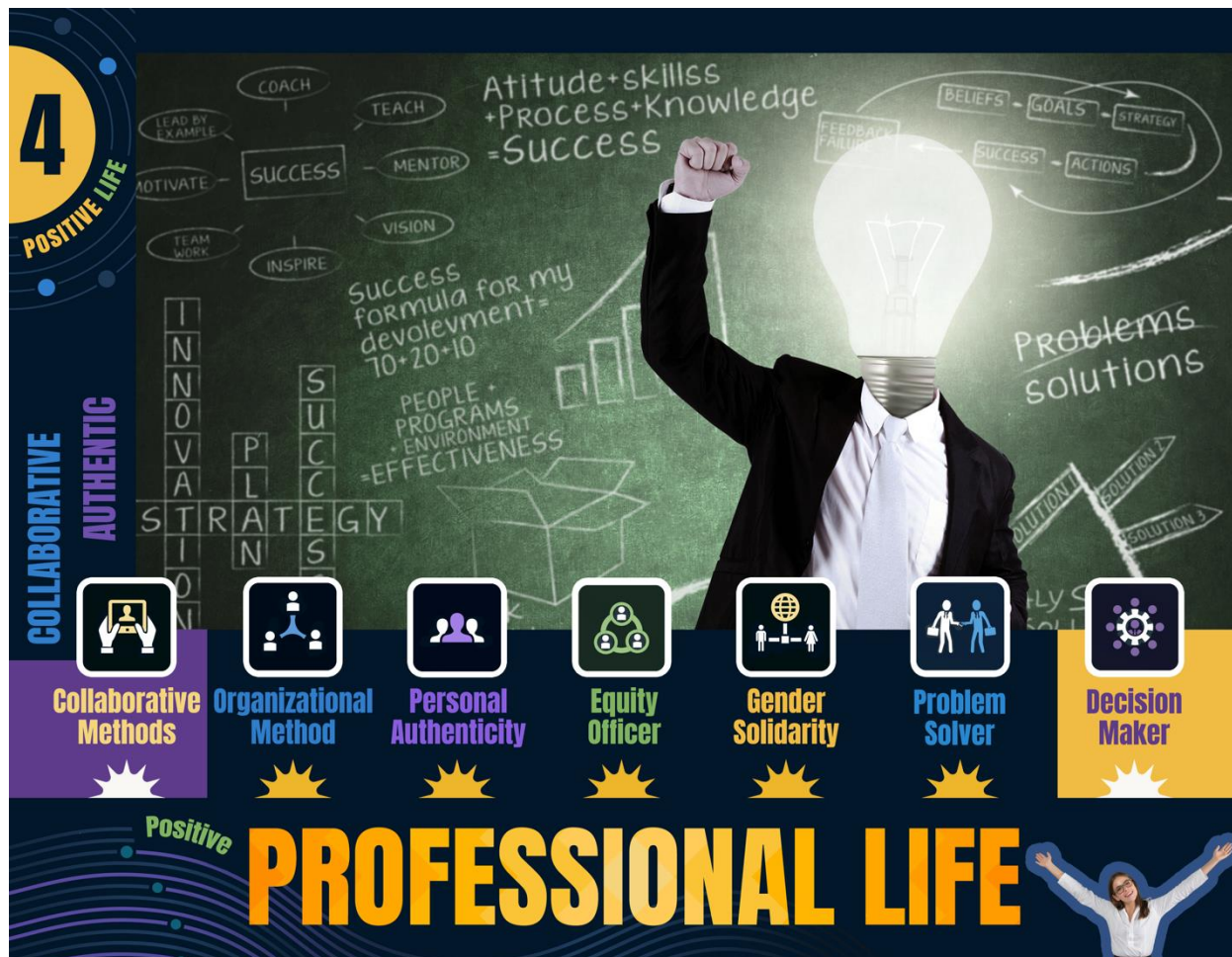
Intentional Leadership Styles

Alita, Gail, Joseph, Karen, and Olivia, all school leaders with traditional education experiences, had unique yet related stories to tell. Their leadership journeys were marked by a commitment to building student voices and providing differentiated professional learning opportunities to staff; strategies that have proven to be instrumental in enhancing their students'

success. Joseph, for instance, was able to tour the local community, leading to sponsored school events. Alita, on the other hand, tapped into her parents' talents to organize parent events. Karen and Olivia, in their strategic roles, maximized tracking tools for self-regulating behaviors. However, Gail believed that it is the connections that matter most in leadership. The theme of intentional leadership styles was thus a common thread throughout the data, befitting the principals' and their respective school demographics (Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5

Illustrative Image of the Intentional Leadership Styles Theme

Strategies inherently involve intentionality, and these principals had proven effectiveness in challenging school environments that could only have occurred by strategizing in every area of leadership. Gail exemplified this point with the following narrative:

> Many kids sometimes need love. Students just need someone to love them, listen to them, and care for them, and that's what they get because we have people who can really, really support them on all different levels. As we have seen over the years, we have improved because we reflect. Based on that reflection, we flip and revise the plan we implemented. We see the direct impact on our students' success when we keep doing that cycle.

Next, I provide a summary of the findings, revisiting the research questions and principal profiles. This summary is followed by the final chapter which provides a full study summary, a discussion of implications, and conclusions.

Summary

I organized this chapter into five parts: (1) The Principals, which introduced preliminary background information on the participants, (2) Additional Contextual Background, digging deeper into the personal histories of the participants to amass social identity characteristics, (3) Steering the Findings, presenting an initial picture of the study results, (4) The Unveiling of New York City Principal Journeys, providing a comprehensive report, and (5) Synthesis of Interview Findings, where the research themes were introduced. In sharing their initial motivations for entering the field of teaching and learning, all five participants directly addressed the dissertation questions. These questions were intricately tied to their social identities (i.e., class, race, and gender), social locations, and personal histories, and in turn their leadership styles and practices.

Notably, each participants' practice incorporated social justice leadership tenets, demonstrating a clear connection to the study purpose of supporting marginalized students in their communities. Seven themes emerged in each of the five participants narratives (Table 4.3). Throughout this research, I have investigated two research questions, specifically, (1) how do the

social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social locations, and personal histories of middle

and high school principals in Brooklyn and the Bronx influence their leadership style(s), and (2)

how do these social identities, social locations, and personal histories contribute to incorporating

social justice leadership practices to support marginalized student communities. I have presented

an overview of these findings, which surfaced discussions centering sense-making and leadership

challenges and successes to overcome or continue in schools.

Table 4.3

Emerging Themes

Dissertation Questions	Emerging Themes
1. How do the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social location, and personal histories of New York City middle and high school principals' influence their leadership style(s)?	● Identity Formation ● Family Values ● Student Connections
2. Do the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social location and personal histories of New York City middle and high school principals contribute to the incorporation of social justice leadership practices to support marginalized student communities, and if so, how?	● Intrinsic Administrative Motivations ● Professional Life Commitment ● Intentional Leadership Styles

Importantly, I have shared the personal narratives of individual school principals,

allowing their voices to be heard and understood both on their own unique terms and in

connection to each other. I have also incorporated my analysis of the interviews. In conclusion, I

further summarized the interview findings, and specifically through the lens of the sense-making

framework that underscores the complex intersectionality of all six emerging themes; *identity*

formation, family values, student connections, intrinsic administration motivations, positive

professional life, negative professional life, and leadership style.

Furthermore, I presented the five principals, Alita, Gail, Joseph, Karen, and Olivia as social agents carrying influential identities and backgrounds that significantly shape their leadership experiences in this chapter. The dissertation and protocol questions may be reviewed in Tables 4.1 and 4.3, while detailed and contextualized demographic background data can be seen in Table 4.2, including each participants' pseudonyms, race, age, employment status, and job tenure. Each principal's journey offers an important contextual story that underscores the importance of the relationship between school leaders' social identities, social locations, and personal histories and their leadership styles and practices. In the next chapter, I will conclude with a research discussion and provide insights into future practice and research-based recommendations to better serve students and the principals and school communities that guide them along their educational paths.

CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND DISCUSSION

In this study, I explored the relationship between social identity (i.e., race, class, and gender), social location (i.e., orientation toward society based on social identity), and personal history or background and the professional leadership practices of five school leaders working in the Brooklyn and Bronx boroughs of New York City. The research methodology was qualitative case study, wherein semi-structured interview data were collected through individual interviews with middle and high school principals. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using thematic analysis in the post-COVID-19 context. The participants were purposively selected to provide both depth and breadth on the subject of social justice aligned leadership approaches, especially in times of crisis, in support of increasing diversity in U.S. schools.

Thus, principals from two heavily diverse districts in NYC were intentionally invited to participate, and the data from their interviews were analyzed to produce trustworthy answers and implications for the utility of principals' self-awareness surrounding important social constructs. In the first section of this chapter, I discuss the premise undergirding the investigation, including the purpose, goals, and participant selection process. Importantly, I will also discuss the profound relevance of the principals' immigrant backgrounds to their social identities, locations, and commensurate leadership experiences. In today's society, understanding the far-reaching implications of the findings in connection to previous research is urgent as immigration into the United States, and particularly from Latin America and the Caribbean, is increasing (e.g., see Perreira & Pedroza, 2019). Further, race and national origin are intricately linked both geographically and socially, making immigration a potentially enveloping or overarching social construct that intersects others, especially for Black and Hispanic immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean, and Central or Latin America (Van Hook & Glick, 2020).

Purpose

This study aimed to investigate how the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender) of principals in NYC Brooklyn and Bronx middle and high schools influenced their policy navigation and approach to addressing social constructions of difference through a social justice framework. I dived into this investigation because I wanted to learn more about leadership practices and how those of diverse leaders impact learning from the basis of a conscious knowing of the leaders' social identities and experiences. More succinctly, the purpose of my study was to identify how NYC principals' multiple identities intertwining class, race, and gender, and their concomitant social locations and personal histories of being influence their school leadership styles. By interweaving the interviews to understand how the principals' leadership practices intersect with their social identities, social locations, and personal histories, we can better equip educators and policymakers to address the controversies, stereotypes, and disagreements within schools. The data collected for this study were, furthermore, designed to be representative of the principals' personal, unfiltered voices via semi-structured interviews.

Study Objectives

In alignment with the research questions of my dissertation, there were three empirical objectives of this study, and each were met. Specifically, I aimed to (1) identify leadership approaches that have a positive impact on school culture and outcomes for all students, (2) offer practical insights that can be applied by other leaders in the field of education inclusive of diverse social identities, backgrounds, or personal experiences carried by leaders, and (3) to contribute new information and ideas in the literature on school leadership in highly diverse contexts that often includes the complexities borne from social constructions of difference along race, class, and gender lines, often in the midst of crisis.

As mentioned in the preceding chapters, this study sought to answer the following two research questions: (1) How do the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social locations, and personal histories of New York City middle and high school principals influence their leadership style(s)? and (2) do the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social locations, and personal histories of New York City middle and high school principals contribute to the incorporation of social justice leadership practices to support marginalized student communities, and if so, how? Meeting the objectives of this study indicated that understanding the complexities of school leadership and the emotional balance required to effectively respond to disruptive changes is significant in the life of diverse schools led by equally diverse principals, comprising the demography of most U.S. public schools today. Thus, this research can be utilized to inform school leaders on effective education strategies that are responsive to diversity and complex situations.

This study further advances past research investigations on school principal leadership experiences. These include the studies conducted by Schechter et al. (2018) and Ganon-Shilon and Schechter (2019) who investigated leading through sense-making, Duncheon (2021) and DeMatthews et al. (2020) on social justice leadership in schools, Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) on social identity and location, Tillott et al. (2022) on storytelling leading to increased resilience, Ackerman et al. (1996) exploring case studies in schools, Northouse and Lee (2021) on leadership-focused case studies in schools, Okilwa and Barnett (2021) discussing school leadership during COVID-19, Omi and Winant (2014) studying racial identity formation, and Purnomo et al. (2021) on effective principalship during crisis. Particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19, research that builds on the intrinsic resources of school leaders is critical.

I was able to successfully capture the common denominator intersecting each of the above listed leadership concepts and research-based practices through the narratives informing this study from the perspective of Emotional Quotient as previously discussed by Gómez-Leal et al. (2022) and McKay et al. (2024). My deliberate plan to recruit five principals, each with a unique perspective derived from their social identities, perceived social locations, and personal histories as individuals, former students, and education professionals in Bronx and Brooklyn middle and high schools surfaced six themes never identified before. As referenced below, the leaders' lived experience serves as an anchor to their leadership practices, identities, utilization of education resources, and relationship development with teachers, colleagues, students and families, and community stakeholders.

Summary, Implications, and Discussion Outline

The remainder of this chapter is structured to provide (1) a synthesized summary of the major findings aligned to the two dissertation questions and three objectives described above, including an extended discussion of key takeaways for the specific benefit of school leaders among the readership; (2) a discussion of the relevance of the study for diverse stakeholders; and (3) an advance of recommendations for future investigations followed by concluding remarks. Throughout each section, the findings are cross-examined and connected to past reviews, with particular focus on DeMatthews et al.'s (2021) case studies on principals within immigrant populations given the finding that issues and experiences centering race, class, and gender include the politics of national and cultural origins for many educators in the country today. With this approach, I expect to lay the ground for framing the significance of the investigation for school leaders, district offices, community-based organizations (CBOs), and other scholars

seeking to discover how social identities, social locations, and background experiences impact and influence principals' behaviors on the job.

Summary of Findings

The major findings of this study derived from the thematic analysis of data collected from five Bronx and Brooklyn, NY principals were comprehensive in covering leadership styles and strategies to socially and educationally support diverse schools. These findings specifically spanned *identity formation, family values, student connections, intrinsic administrative motivations, professional life commitment,* and *intentional leadership styles*. I discuss these major findings and their relation to the education and social justice theoretical frameworks literature via three key takeaways encapsulating proximal theme dyads below. Specifically, identity formation and family values, student connections and intrinsic administrative motivations, and professional life commitment and intentional leadership styles are discussed in light of the impact of immigrant status, value of EQ, and the utility of CBOs and initiatives on the leadership styles and practices of the principals interviewed, respectively.

Takeaway I: Immigrant Status Exists Within the Nexus of Social Identity

The biggest or most frequently cited topic distilled from the data following a comprehensive analysis of the principals' interviews was that of immigrant status ostensibly as a supra-theme enveloping much of the overall responses from the participants, though especially *identity formation* and *family values*. Namely, all of the principals in this study—Alita, Gail, Joseph, Karen, and Olivia—had diverse international roots and first-hand understanding of many of the struggles experienced by their largely Black, Brown, and low-income students, including but not limited to (1) family separation, (2) first- or second-generation immigrant journey(s), (3) ELL experience, (4) first-generation college student experience, (5) a mixture of rural and urban

upbringing, and (6) deep familial connections to education. The principals expressed the many ways they exemplified these identity and social location influences in their leadership roles.

At times, the respondents' immigrant statuses were described as distinct from race, class, and gender, thus veritably standing as its own identity, and at other times intersecting these social identity areas depending on the principals' social location in the context of school leadership and the issues, student or school needs, and the relevant personal experiences of the principal. Understanding immigrant experiences and second language acquisition, for example, was critical to the leadership mindset of the five principals interviewed.

Similarly, recognizing the need to support students beyond the compliance levels sanctioned by federal, state, and local regulations for students with disabilities was closely aligned to the identity formation of the principals in my study. For instance, the unwavering commitment to advocacy demonstrated by Alita and Karen, as expressed in their interviews, is a source of inspiration, showing how these factors can influence leadership practice and contribute to research on the situational leadership and leader sense-making frameworks discussed further below. As evidenced in my investigation, the influential school leader activates a tool kit filled with strategies and action plans and awakens innovative creativity amongst teachers by creating opportunities for mentoring and increased leadership capacities within their school community.

Many students experienced loved ones pass away, as divorce and domestic violence rates skyrocketed. These events were heightened by the continuous introduction of migrants settling in the city (Van Hook & Glick, 2020). Now, principals must manage both the long-term absence of education, and myriad physiological and psychological seeds brought about by family separation and other high-level stressors. Further relevant to the findings of this study, Kirsch et al.'s (2023) study on immigrant refugees highlights the challenges faced by these marginalized communities:

"Exacerbation of social challenges, illumination of unjust governing and poor structural shields" being central among them (p. 14).

Having a direct connection to the human condition is a hallmark trait of the school leader as discussed throughout this study. Leaders with conscious awareness of their personal social identity, social location, and personal history as it relates to their work as principal are especially situated to employ their unique perspectives and background experiences to capture the essence of the moment and serve as a symbol for community building. Next, I will discuss the third and fourth major findings of *student connections* and *intrinsic administrative motivation*, which relate strongly to the leaders' EQ traits and skills.

Takeaway II: Emotional Intelligence as the Ultimate Tool in the School Leadership Toolkit

The second takeaway was the relational alignment between *student connections* and the principals' moral compass, evoking the EQ literature and establishing a clear foundation for social justice leadership tenets. Furthermore, given the political climate around the social identities (i.e., class, race, and gender) and social locations of five immigrant school principals of color, this study has unearthed the critical finding that there is a lack of research on principal diversity and professional attributes in schools during a period of significant immigration influx from the Caribbean into New York City during the participants' generation. This novel finding builds on the existing body of knowledge in our field linking demographic drivers and principal connection to students that was raised by Grissom et al. (2021).

Remembering that earlier, in Chapter IV, I discovered that Alita, Gail, Karen, and Olivia's maintained interconnected teacher-student relationships to co-construct a strategic goal-setting plan through their data chats. In this case, there is a direct correlation between this study and Grissom et al.'s (2021) research, which also yielded a critical data-related component.

Data is prioritized and discussed as a tool to improve institutional outcomes and build coherence around systems and structures among school leaders with intentionally social justice-oriented leadership stemming from the social identities, locations, and personal histories of the principals.

Principals across school districts in NYC and the rest of the country have had to rely heavily on EQ and balancing stressful conditions in school settings. School leaders experience emotional distress daily; thus, stress is not a new phenomenon, but what is radically necessary to address is how the school district's institutional policies address leadership health and wellness factors that directly impact principal practice. Specifically, how can principals implement staffing needs when there are insufficient teaching licenses/certifications in bilingual education, TESOL, and special education services? Additionally, how do you address the broader issue of weapons in schools and the absence of scanners, or maintain an emotional balance between leading and care? The time has come to explore how health and wellness needs are incorporated within the more prominent leadership framework in response to stressors that often lead to leadership burnout, leadership retention, and divorce rates amongst school principals.

I have further witnessed firsthand how students throughout school districts in NYC have had to navigate through increases in trauma, depression, anxiety, and physical and emotional abuse. Chapter IV discussed, for instance, how Alita oversees a city-wide special needs high school program. Unlike the other principals interviewed, Alita's student population is 100% special needs, which requires constant oversight and management of IEPs and functional behavior plans. Alita's message to her staff has been made clear: "Creating a culture that understands that we are dealing with a special population and that we have a responsibility to structure, to organize and deliver in a way that maximizes student achievement" with social issues and diversity included rather than excluded.

Throughout the interviews, all five principals expressed urgency toward social-emotional tenets in much the same way as Grissom et al. (2021) did: "Principals who build a school climate in which teachers and students feel emotionally supported provide a bedrock on which academic improvement efforts can rest" (p. 83). Research on Emotional Intelligence and school leaders has surfaced several findings, including how school leaders manage and discern the emotions of others around their immediate sphere of influence. Gomez-Leal et al.'s (2022) analysis of over five theory studies has highlighted how leader's emotions have a direct impact on the school climate and culture. Therefore, I argue, health and wellness should never be associated with simple siloed professional development. I recommend a deeper examination of the broader corporate community's health and wellness strategies, such as those found at Google, Apple, and other organizations.

Examining how to manage stress related to compassion fatigue (e.g., assisting students and families) and scheduling time for physical exercise may impact how principals develop favorable relationships with staff and meaningful "quality of the time outside of work" (McKay et al., 2024, pp. 9–10). These strategies, which take a holistic approach to wellness, could significantly improve the well-being of school principals beyond dealing with trauma or pedagogy to include creating a comprehensive approach to wellness that addresses all aspects of a leader's life. I agree with Prilleltensky (2024): "Reframing adversity into opportunity, creating a coherent narrative of one's life, savoring food moments, following a passion, using strengths, counting kindness and blessing … are all paths of flourishing" (p. 13). Though not addressed by the participants in this study, the significant role of EQ in school leadership necessitates having a balance between the home and a career in school leadership as leaders navigate the combined

social and professional landscape of education while self-regulating their emotions and meeting the needs of students and staff daily and during times of crisis.

The principals in my study placed the social-emotional learning (SEL) process at the forefront of their goals for the year as they engaged in trauma-informed pedagogy and restorative justice principles for de-escalating crises. As school leaders navigate the landscape of policies throughout the city, they also orchestrate strategic leadership moves about student academic and social achievement. In my investigation, principals Gail, Joseph, and Olivia expressed concerns about their respective schools and how they responded to students' needs via a three-tiered approach, also known as the New York State Department of Education's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) in English and Math instruction. In most cases, I have witnessed firsthand how principals utilize this framework as a tool to monitor student impact. The MTSS framework intersection draws its foundation and implementation compass on (1) SEL, (2) academic, (3) linguistic, (4) behavioral, and (5) culturally responsive supports to sustain educational tenets.

Principals like Joseph, Gail, and Olivia strongly focus on social justice, restructuring teacher schedules, and engaging in professional development that addresses co-teaching models for integrated collaborative teaching (ICT) plans structured around multilingual needs. They also provide training on how to support students who face economic hardship. Olivia mentioned using 'teacher's cafe hour' to focus on a book club that connects to social justice, emphasizing the importance of this aspect. My investigation thus adds to DeMatthews et al.'s (2021) findings on principal differentiated strategic moves.

Namely, "More recent scholarship has focused on principals moves from analysis of data by subgroups, to having a social justice orientation to create opportunities for marginalized students" (as cited by Garza et al., 2014, p. 94; Grissom et. al. 2021). Considering, these first two

major findings provide answers as to how the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social locations, and personal histories of diverse NYC middle and high school principals influence their leadership styles and support their marginalized student communities. Exploring the fourth major finding provides a deeper look into the internalized leadership practices that lead to their professional success as extensions of *intrinsic administrative motivation*.

In my investigation, I uncovered the resilience and adaptability of school leaders whose practices were shaped by a variety of factors, including national origin, race, class, gender, and past hardships based on a combination of some or all of these. For instance, Alita's narrative is a testament to her unwavering advocacy for the voiceless grounded in her motherhood to a deaf child, and particularly students with disabilities. Gail, despite her initial career on Wall Street, quickly adapted to a new pathway in education after her experience as a bible school teacher. Similarly, Joseph's leadership was deeply rooted in his experiences as a bilingual student, teacher, and school principal, demonstrating his ability to adapt and grow.

Further, Karen, similar to Alita and Joseph, was compelled to move her family out of poverty and break free of a cycle of stunted intergenerational social mobility. In all, Olivia especially highlighted how shaping high expectations, holding everyone accountable, and placing herself in the middle of the instructional and emotional spaces are all aligned with the servant leadership, instructional leadership, and transformational leadership theoretical frameworks that I discussed in Chapter II, indicating that the theories are culturally responsive to diverse principals. From this point of view, I argue that the variable practices listed above, such as collaboration, SEL, and community-builder characteristics are all borne of *intrinsic administration motivation* rooted in EQ.

As another example, Alita was the only principal out of the five participants who expressed a profound need to support families with disabilities after her daughter was diagnosed. She allied herself with like-minded parents and immediately immersed herself in the world of special education; however, Alita's personal history with her daughter in school was not welcoming, assuring, nor safe. She indicated, for instance, "But they didn't treat the kids right because the parents did not know the rules and the policies. I got upset and said I would support her and ensure she had an opportunity." Exploring the context of intrinsic leadership applications draws reference to the inherent qualities and behaviors that leaders possess from diverse backgrounds walks of life, as illustrated by Alita, Gail, Karen, Joseph, and Olivia.

My interviews with the study participants revealed the profound impact of intrinsically motivated leadership behaviors in the creation of nurturing environments. These factors highlight the transformative potential of intrinsic leadership behaviors in supporting students with disabilities and those considered most at-risk for school failure. The intersection of transformative and instructional leadership behaviors influence the practices integral to principals' missions. In return, these experiences empower them to support marginalized student communities such as those revealed in their interviews, including ELLs, over-aged or remedial students, and impoverished students. Next, I discuss themes five and six, *professional life commitment* and *intentional leadership styles*, respectively, which are also critical components of successful leadership in contemporary, inclusive or community-focused education.

Takeaway III: Community-Based Organizations Aid Staff Development & Collaboration

Effective principalship in public education catalyzes change, innovation, and inspiration, and serves as role model behavior for teachers. Based on the data produced from this research, I argue these effects are anchored by principals' *professional life commitment*. Specifically, all

five principals interviewed had deeply rooted ideas about what professional learning

opportunities (PLO) would look like in their buildings. Their commitment was palpable as they

spoke about how collaboration brought about change, a sense of vulnerability, and a time for

sharing best practices in the service of students. In Alita's unique narrative, for instance, her

innate compassion for serving and sharing her perspective about her commitment and ethical

stance on supporting students with disabilities shone through. Her experiences are vast and

diverse such that regardless of the teaching environment or co-teaching model, she always found

a way to make collaboration work.

Leader-staff collaboration is key to intentional and purposeful teacher planning for

professional development opportunities transcend classroom expectations. For many, it is a

source of pride and a testament to their deep commitment to personal and professional growth.

The principal, as a key figure, can and should leverage these gatherings to champion and enrich a

culture of mutual understanding and respect. These collaborative seeds are the bedrock of

compelling leadership practices and experiences shared by all five principals interviewed. This is

precisely where the intersection of social identity and social location co-exist.

Furthermore, as teachers gather, they share perspectives. In turn, students, especially

those most at risk and requiring further enrichment and scaffolds, can witness positive growth

and learning both within themselves and their teachers after effective planning and

implementation. For instance, Gail shared an intentional, collaborative practice that was echoed

by Joseph who created opportunities for teachers and students to co-plan, reflect, and build ways

of knowing every student well. Alita further summed this process up as, "Your demeanor is

essential. It opens or closes doors. If people see you as genuine and kind, you are attracted, and

they are more likely to respond. But if you come across as fake or someone who doesn't care,

your vibe says that." The details surrounding collaboration align with Michael Fullan's

conventions of organizational change in *Coherence* (2016) and *Breakthrough* (2012) which

broaden the unique features of intrinsic motivation to *professional life commitment* toward

establishing positive school culture and broader community togetherness.

More specifically, the collaboration among the principals in my investigation aligns with

Fullan's (2016) idea of creating a space where individuals are respected and feel safe and

unjudged for their opinions or ideas. For principals like Alita, Gail, and Joseph, these ethics and

the leadership practices stemming from them extend to CBOs that have the potential to further

empower the school community. Ultimately, as Fullan (2016) asserted, collaboration "is about

fostering the expertise of all individuals to be directed towards a collective purpose … it evolves

as a result of the interplay between growing [with purpose as a community]" (p. 33). I observed

that the five principals in this study not only discussed collaboration, but also it as a fundamental

element of systemic change and the identification of school-wide priorities.

Additionally, Fullan's *Breakthrough* (2012) discussion on unique pedagogical expertise

complements the leadership practices of Alita, Gail, Joseph, Karen, and Olivia through the lens

of personalization, precision, and professional learning (PPP). Hence, collaboration models serve

as effective leadership practices, effectively answering DQ 1: how do the social identities (i.e.,

race, class, and gender), social locations, and personal histories of New York City middle and

high school principals influence their leadership style(s)? Connectedly, *professional life*

commitment also answers DQ2: do the social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender), social

locations, and personal histories of New York City middle and high school principals contribute

to the incorporation of social justice leadership practices to support marginalized student

communities and if so, how?

Creating a school community that fosters support for teacher expertise also requires time investments in organizing and communicating school-wide needs where diversity, equity and inclusion is concerned. For this investment, incentivizing opportunities can underscore the unique positionality of leadership practices. We witnessed these efforts through Alita's practice, where she passionately discussed her unique approach to building her students' capacities despite their limited academic functions. These positive experiences highlight the role of the principal in cultivating empowering skills for students with disabilities by supporting the teachers who, through *their* professional life commitment, sacrifice, and work overtime to help them achieve.

On the other hand, Gail champions business, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy to help her students break free from intergenerational economic and structural oppression. She emphasized that college is not for everyone, and while there is a strong focus on college-to-career readiness as part of her school district's overarching education policy, she still believes in marketable skills such as those found in the foundations of literacy and marketing. As demonstrated by the principals in my investigation, the concepts of personal authenticity and identity formation, which are directly linked to my study, create the equitable lens and navigational skills often utilized by principals who engage underserved, marginalized communities. Notably, Grissom et al. (2021) point to a lack of studies that intersect principal genders and student outcomes.

Helping to fill this research gap, my investigation results are also a testament to the power of female leadership, as four-fifths of the participants in my study were women who have led highly successful and diverse educational programs, making a significant impact on student outcomes through the centers of their social identities (i.e., race, class, and culture), social locations, and personal histories. Their critical practices, such as emphasizing principal

sense-making and data analysis, are game-changers for students with disabilities, multiple language needs, extreme poverty, gender-diverse identities, etc. In this case, Karen's leadership narrative serves as a shining example as she declared, "I am a staunch supporter of the development and execution of lessons. I also advocate for an extension in terms of identifying the functions of behaviors and developing a behavior intervention plan to assist teachers and students in the classroom." Her expressions of commitment to staunchly supporting responsive learning practices leads to the final study theme of *intentional leadership styles*.

An ironic finding in this study was that, while the NYC principals interviewed took concerted efforts to include CBOs in the educational planning and resource development of their schools, the business of teaching and learning itself exacerbated the issues affecting how school leaders respond to the needs of the most vulnerable or marginalized. Specifically, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2019–2023 (Sarker et al., 2023), leaders around the country adopted new paradigms, shifted the delivery of professional development, and built on teacher capacity. Notwithstanding, leaders in NYC enlisted the expertise of social workers and CBOs such as in Alita's work-entry partnerships for her students with disabilities and Joseph's Dominican Parents Association to combat the psychological trauma and employment loss encountered from the pandemic. The lasting impression of the pandemic has increased suicide ideation, anxiety, depression, and anger among both young and old, and I argue that these experiences matter and shape values and beliefs about humanity and compassion community-wide as learning occurs.

Thus, the entire community should be constructively involved in students' learning as much as possible. Joseph, a young principal of a middle school, felt and embraced a sense of loyalty and commitment to his diverse school community as a social member of it. Thus, it is no wonder why he often made his way around the neighborhood, and in particular, the supermarket.

By connecting with the broader community, he was able to get additional resources for his school. Joseph disclosed during the interview that he remembers his struggles as a former ELL, when interventions were less evolved. For instance, Joseph's approach has recently expanded to include interventions in terms of pedagogy, social media, and local business, reflecting the changing needs of his students. As he stated, "When I think about intervention, I think of behavioral support, right? Social-emotional support. Only this year, I looked at intervention in terms of academics and social media."

On the heels of the pandemic, this study accordingly revealed models of practice for successful and enduring school leadership embedded within the very social identities, social locations, and personal histories of principals. The contribution to the literature on school leadership is, therefore, potentially great, particularly on how (1) identity formation, (2) international roots, (3) family separation, (4) personal immigrant status, (5) EEL experience, (6) first-generation college graduate life, (7) family values, (8) education as a community-based priority, and (9) student connections influence principals' practice. Furthermore, at the top of the leadership tool kit unearthed by this study are deeply rooted values and beliefs about teaching and learning and use of collaboration as a mechanism to promote autonomy, school culture, authentic relationships, and problem solving. Next, I discuss the relevance of the study and connections to social justice and servant leadership models specifically.

Theoretical Relevance of the Study

Social Justice Leadership

As previously discussed in the section for themes one and two, *identity formation* and *family values*, respectively, the role of the principal typically shifts according to the needs of their communities. Social justice leadership literature includes findings from Conrad et al.

(2019), Dantley and Green (2015), and Feng and Cheng (2019) discussing the principal's role as an active agent and voice for the voiceless. Their conclusions revealed social justice principles that evoke radical practice and implementation fostered by prior experiences, from the Caribbean to Taiwan. It is important to note that these reviews highlight culture, hierarchy, and the leaders' role in assisting parents with actively managing their children's needs. This was certainly the case in Taiwan, where the gender disparity for leadership capacity is significant whereupon leaders in professional settings are predominantly male.

Gendered perceptions concerning principal leadership roles reveal a need for further inclusive leadership practices and academic teacher optimism, according to Feng and Cheng (2019), who stated, "Thus, men and women may have a different focus on principals' social justice leadership, explaining that teachers' gender moderates the relationship between social justice leadership and teachers' academic optimism" (p. 1261). Here, the authors stressed that male teachers typically have more frequent meetings with the principal than female teachers. This suggests collaboration, meeting students' needs, and hearing parents' voices are elements of social justice principles in action that require differentiated training for gender diversity.

As discussed above, student connections and the social justice leadership style interconnect. Berkovich and Eyal (2021) offered another assertion: transformative leadership is a leading theory amid leaders in education. Further, unlike Generette and Welch (2018) who provided a perspective on intergenerational dialogue, Berkovich and Eyal's (2021) focus compared transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and moral reasoning. According to their study, these three distinguishing theories have recently gained traction, creating a context that applies a lens of critique and influential ethical behaviors. For instance, the authors identified four intentional leadership practices among the tenets of transformative leadership,

asserting that these principals and their actions "serve as role models, express an energizing vision, encouraging questioning of the status quo and providing support for individual needs" (p. 132). This suggests effective school leadership that supports personalization, professional development, and radical and critical pedagogical strategies.

This form of leadership coincides with a belief in moral imperatives that suggest the leader is grounded in an ethic of caring, fighting for social justice, and preserving the rights of staff and students at the forefront of strategic planning. Added to these ethical principles is the premise that the leader's expertise is associated with "evidence-based education and improved school outcomes" (Berkovich & Eyal, 2021, pp. 136–137). However, it is important to note that implementing transformative leadership in education can be challenging, with some of the potential barriers including resistance to change, lack of resources, and the need for continuous professional development. Educational leaders are responsible for ensuring the well-being of students and staff, and transformative leadership hinges on activating these obligations.

Similarly, and as described in finding four, *intrinsic administrative motivation*, Ravitch's study (2020) introduced the concept of 'flux leadership,' which is a paradigm that addresses current dilemmas related to racism, inequities, trauma-informed pedagogy, critical inquiry, and compassion. This leadership approach is further characterized by its ability to navigate change and uncertainty, making it a powerful tool for combating future uncertainties. Ravitch (2020) also emphasized the role of leadership in addressing models of restructuring and forms of accountability that can be potentially stressful.

Nonetheless, according to the Ravitch (2020) study, the transformative leader has an extraordinary opportunity to "disrupt and reinvent schooling, teaching and the field of education, to eschew the transactional and socially reproductive and embrace the socially disruptive and

transformational" (p. 2). Understanding the scope and magnitude of trauma and reflecting on the self is complex, however, creating a safe place for teachers, parents, students, and leaders when trauma is a collective physiological and mental reality such as during the pandemic will likely be part of the discourse during the 2024 United States presidential election. Ravitch (2020) identified several essential practices, including having an awareness of trauma and anticipating reactive responses in the case of excessive loss among family members and staff.

Leaders, as Ravitch (2020) suggested, have a crucial role in creating a supportive environment that addresses the needs of all community members, including support for identity stress trauma. Consider, for instance, the Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC), young lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and trans, queer and questioning, intersex, asexual or agender, two-spirit, and other non-heterosexual or non-heterosexual-only (LGBTQIA2S+) student demographics (Michigan State University, n.d.). This includes teaching SEL as a cornerstone and preamble each year. Ravitch (2020) also pointed to the use of *radical self-care* as a form of reflection and examining the political and social constructs that place limits and restrictions on those most marginalized. The emphasis on creating a safe environment reassures school leaders of their value and the importance of their role in transformative leadership.

In contrast, Minai et al. (2020) advanced another dimension, discussing transformative leadership and crisis management. Namely, they focused on positioning transformative leadership as a psychological and empowering phenomenon. This means that leaders would frame goals and expectations by instilling a sense of trust and advocacy for autonomy built on inspirational ideologies. This approach suggests that the nature of inspiration and the leader's positive mindset may influence how [teachers] engage in overall school improvement.

Minai et al. (2020) claimed that "When leaders provide words of encouragement and positive persuasion in [schools], [teachers] are more likely to experience [and] sustain levels of self-efficacy" (p. 1423). This leadership perspective advocates for further collaboration and building teacher capacity. Another way to explore integrating leadership styles may be to re-examine instructional leadership and transformative leadership pillars from a social justice position, such as by promoting inclusive teaching practices and fostering a culture of respect and understanding as ambers of hope supporting equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Servant Leadership

Similar to that illustrated in the fifth theme, *professional life commitment*, Gocen and Sen (2021) referred to the term servant leadership as "the focus on leaders who serve their followers, which in turn produces a shared spirit in purpose, trust, commitment, desire for wisdom and effort in the organization" (p. 753). Their analysis of recent studies aligns the service leadership model as a call for *Agapo* love. Servant leaders lead with trust and advocacy for autonomy among its membership as core values. The participants in this study reflected this leadership model in many ways.

Likewise, this study acknowledges the relevance of Liden et al.'s (2015) servant leadership scales and points to Gocen and Sen's (2021) discoveries about the disconnect between business and education which affirm, "there is a clear and substantial divide between the scales developed by academia and industry" (p. 755). Their studies indicated a wide scale of servant leadership qualities, including humility and community-building. Such wide conceptual and practical ranges implies that servant leadership is the spiritual force behind other styles with an unrelenting quest to serve as a basis for peaceful dialogue and transformative change. Social

justice is, for instance, rooted in belief in service and support for historically marginalized communities to advance equity in all areas of society.

Additionally, Locke (2019) offered another viewpoint on servant leadership connected to moral and ethical philosophy. Locke examined Tarallo's (2017) analysis, concurring that leaders must possess an inner ability to listen, have humility, self-encouragement, and trust as community builders. Similarly, other studies suggest that coaching to develop the potential of others and foresight are all-inclusive behaviors that shift the paradigm funnel upside down where control of behaviors is driven by [teachers] (Locke, 2019). This then unleashes critical positive energy and introduces an environment that blocks the noise of negativity.

However, Locke (2019) noticed religious faith or scripture could lead critics to view servant leadership as lacking critical analysis. To this Locke declared, "Perhaps the most important risk in identifying servant leadership or other leadership theory with scripture is that it invites a lack of critical review" (p. 40). This may suggest that the theory may be compromised by Christian dogma and spirituality.

Yet another perspective of the servant leader, as expressed earlier, involves the characteristics or traits of being a good listener and influencer. Crayne and Medeiros' (2021) study in response to COVID-19 positions the servant or charismatic leader as the central figure in managing the stress associated with the wide range of sociopolitical and economic disruptions caused by the virus, since the leader is at the intersection of sense-making, making them the central mediator in combatting the chaos brought upon by the pandemic, including exasperated racial tensions, digital divides, and health and economic disparities in many communities around the world. Crayne and Medeiros (2021) compared the sense-making actions of three world

leaders and used their findings to provide recommendations that may help to mediate future health crises.

Namely, relying on the charismatic, ideological, and pragmatic leadership models, their study posits that, like the social justice, educational, and transformative leaders, the servant leader is also pragmatic when circumstances dictate radical change. Crayne and Medeiros (2021) further asserted that the servant leader in the charismatic, ideological, and practical models "delegates decisions, responsibility and ownership to followers when they are highly skilled, providing an opportunity for both motivations through autonomy and high-quality relationship building in the leader-follower dyad" (p. 468). Thus, relinquishing control is a prerequisite to community building, fostering collaboration and unity to counter the impact of crises like the recently concluded COVID-19 pandemic. Analysis of these findings and those of this study also position principals' leadership styles and behaviors as critical factors in building a psychologically and ethically primed community for learning and collegiality.

Sendjaya et al.'s (2020) investigation called for analyzing the psychological and ethical climate of schools, pointing to a lack of empirical studies that explain the ethical entry point of how servant leadership, subordinate ethical development, and organizational citizenship behaviors co-exist. According to their investigation, the entry point of servant leadership is located in personalization and driven by leaders' innate abilities to connect to their community's needs, like, for instance, their social identities and locations (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). Therefore, the servant leader's pulse on individual interests, aspirations, strengths, and goals is essential (Sendjaya et al., 2020). By modeling ethical behaviors, the contagion—in this case, morality—may influence and model practices that counter unethical practices.

Finally, Heyler and Martin's (2018) study alluded to servant leadership theory as an invention of hierarchical practices in which the leader is placed at the bottom of the organization and acts as a figurative and literal entity that supports the organization's foundation. In the comparative analysis of business governance and moral behaviors, organizations have fewer unethical behaviors when two or more servant leaders are present: "emotional heal[ers], create value in the community, [build or develop] conceptual skills," promote modeling ethical norms, and place the subordinate at the forefront of intervention and support" (Heyler & Martin, 2018, p. 237). Thus, servant leadership is once again shown to be critical in analyzing leadership models supporting marginalized communities. The servant leader connects with findings one through three of my investigation. What must be considered next is the best direction for future research on the topic of principal leadership in immensely diverse contemporary school environments.

Implications for Future Research

The science of teaching and learning continues to evolve through situational and sense-making frameworks, as illustrated in the narrative summaries of the five Bronx and Brooklyn, New York principals heard in this study. This research will aid future stakeholders in examining school leaders' social identities and locations and personal histories, referring to their societal positionality based on factors such as race, class, and gender, as well as their backgrounds and experiences from birth to career. In particular, future scholars will need to explore how to identify identity formation, family values, student connections, intrinsic administrative motivations, degrees and forms of professional life commitment, and intentional leadership styling to promote support for marginalized students.

For example, researchers can explore the influence of effective transformation practices among school leaders, such as inclusive curriculum designs and student-led initiatives. These strategies, described throughout this study, can be used to disrupt intergenerational economic immobility. Additionally, the process for mentorship and coaching requires further study. Also important, researchers could include how intentional leadership practices may advance a call to justice in support of migrant and ELL students, emphasizing therapeutic and trauma-informed leadership practices where needed. Exploring how principals develop or create strategies (coping mechanisms) to self-regulate anxiety may generate a broader discussion on how school districts design policies to support leadership well-being. Future studies should consider how school districts incorporate wellness into the broader fabric for leading.

The aforementioned current migrant crises, increase in weapons in schools, and need for employment opportunities that serve students with disabilities are all timely and necessary research topics as senior school leaders and policy makers examine the direct correlations between intentional leadership styles and leadership success and retention. Pandemics, school crises, domestic violence, at-risk behaviors, stress, gender identity conflicts, and cultural, inclusion, and social awareness disagreements are not going away. Thus, the need to leverage student attributes, parent voices, and teacher-led teams underscores the importance of understanding how school leaders' social identities and background experiences influence their professional ideologies and practices. Future studies should be responsive to these issues by exploring how (*identity formation, family values, student connections, intrinsic administrative motivation, professional life commitment, and intentional leadership styles*) intersect emotional intelligence and leadership mentoring.

Conclusion

In this study, I have highlighted the themes that surfaced from the interview narratives of five purposively selected middle and high school principals from Brooklyn and the Bronx, NYC aligned with effective leadership practices for diverse student success. I also underscored the profound impact of the principals' tendencies of incorporating social justice strategies in support of marginalized students. I have further—through my participants—emphasized the importance of SEL, inspiring engagement, including families, collaboration, staff development attributes, and community-building behaviors embraced by the social justice leaders. Leaders like those interviewed in this study have witnessed diverse, interconnecting, and complex events pre-COVID, during COVID, and post-COVID, and they are intentional about successfully navigating around them from their very social identities, social locations, and personal histories.

I determined to complete this case study because personal narratives provide the much-needed human connections still missing in K–12 education. I have been an educator for the past 31 years. Twenty-four of those years have been as an assistant principal, principal of middle and high schools in NYC (Manhattan, Bronx, and Brooklyn), and founding principal in Miami Dade and West Palm Beach counties, Florida. During those years, I experienced the loss of six students, supported mothers in protective custody because of domestic violence, and designed intervention programs for ELL students and those with disabilities. A part of my leadership journey has included a moral lens of empathy, flexibility, and advocacy for voices too often silenced. Stories like mine are scarce in academic literature: formerly homeless, self-identified Brown school principal of Dominican origin who struggled in his journey as a traumatized immigrant and bilingual student.

During the past three decades, I have further witnessed firsthand how many marginalized students struggle to compete and have equal access to programs (i.e., Advance Placement Courses and specialized high school programs) and highly qualified teachers. Similarly, within the urban setting, the social justice leader confronts multi-layered competing intersections, including developing teacher capacity, managing the learning environment by tracking students' performance, and identifying and planning pedagogical strategies to support students. The health and social conditions from COVID-19 and the migrant influx in the past two years may have sparked a new framework for educational policymakers and academic scholars as they engage with stories of social justice in relationship to immigration, teaching, and learning that I endorse.

Equally important, understanding the magnitude of past experiences is central in case studies. For example, I struggled with many of the same academic gaps and challenges that my students have encountered over the past three decades. I am the oldest of four siblings and the first to graduate from high school, earning six degrees and professional certificates during this journey. These experiences help me to identify with my students' thirst for learning in their diverse, bilingual, and under-resourced positions. My concerns about the disruptive nature of managing crises, including health pandemics, academic loss, and emotional instability weigh heavily in my heart as a servant leader.

Being a servant leader means that I have a heightened sense of urgency regarding building teacher capacity and professional development. Servant leadership has grounded my view of leadership styles that lift others' spirits, create learning opportunities, foster humbleness and authenticity, develop clarity around interpersonal experiences, and provide space for guides and shepherds (Heyler & Martin, 2018, pp. 230–233). Adopting the servant leadership style as a principal reminds me that my physiological and emotional mindset can and may alter my

school's culture and requires that I understand how to manage emotions and recognize

self-limitations toward building an inclusive school community and advocating for social justice.

Inclusive leadership practices that value diversity and equity influence the righteous

compass for social intervention that principals like me and the participants in this study activate.

Over the past year and a half, I, too, prioritized and managed complex educational policy

including issues of state, federal, and local compliance issues, such as with IEPs for students

with disabilities and language access for my ELL students. The COVID-19 pandemic further

exposed the nature of systemic inequities in access to quality and equitable education for Black,

Brown, multi-language, low SES, and special needs students. However, as these elements

interacted and intersected, I identified building teacher and leadership capacity as an arch to

support social change within my schools, further affirming the study findings.

Inasmuch as I endeavored to lift my and fellow NYC principal experiences and provide a

snapshot of the joys and vulnerabilities of being a transformative, servant leader in this

investigation, it was an overwhelming success. All communities are interconnected and essential

and I want to highlight those interconnections through my research. Personally, I feel like a

byproduct of diverse lived experiences that connect me to Black, Brown, low-income,

immigrant, and ELL communities. Many of my experiences stem from my mother's immigrant

experience and my own, living in the ghettos of the Dominican Republic. I had to overcome the

challenges of language and intergenerational wealth disparities as an immigrant in New York

City in the mid 1970s. Thus, it was simultaneously humbling and empowering for me to gather

and analyze the responses of Alita, Gail, Joseph, Karen, and Olivia, which I am confident will

positively impact the professional and learning experiences of many principals and students who

are similarly positioned and striving for wellbeing and upward mobility.

Raising our family in the ghettos of the Dominican Republic in the early 70s was profoundly challenging for my biological mother. She raised two boys when she was 17 without a formal education or vocational skills. I remember packing our little bags and moving out without paying the monthly rent. As a former six-year-old homeless kid, the trauma of hunger, sleeping in the streets, and fear of never seeing my mother again forged in me an unrelenting spirit to persevere. My primary responsibility was taking care of my four-year-old younger brother. I am referring to my childhood trauma because I see myself and the struggles of dealing with a single parent in an overwhelming number of my scholars.

These are *our* experiences, and I did not see them reflected in academia. I felt no connection to most of the research that I came across. For example, I searched for exemplary research and dissertations on past immigration experiences and leadership practices and found no results. Nevertheless, I maintained that stories like mine are unique and construct a pathway of hope for those in despair. This gap in the scholarly literature suggests that more research is needed by and about Black and Latin leaders from the Caribbean and their immigration histories.

Like so many of my scholars do today, I needed teachers who cared or who had the time to differentiate instruction to meet my academic, ELL, and SEL needs. I may never have dropped out of school if I had a nurturing instructional environment. Peguero and Bracy (2015) examine the reasons why students drop out, exploring school climate and safety, student discipline, and teacher-student relationships as direct correlates to student attrition (p. 412). From their findings, Peguero and Bracy (2015) advocated for advanced equity and inclusivity by suggesting that, "In order for students to 'buy-in' these philosophies, they must trust, respect, and feel respected by their teachers and school administrators" (p. 422). As a former student drop out, teacher, school administrator, and interventionist, I submit that school climate and culture play significant roles

in students' decision to quit the system. These components of schooling often rely on leaders' ability to communicate, disseminate, organize, train, coach, heal, support, maintain, motivate, and promote ethical and appropriate behaviors, which is strongest when self-awareness is high.

Leaders lead by example and are intuitive and cross-connecting when using bonified leadership practices as levers for change. Social justice leaders engage students, parents, teachers, districts, and community members and prioritize, identify, and monitor systems and structures aligned to academic standards, teacher professional development, and community-building utilization to boost student achievement. However, prioritizing, balancing needs, and competing with COVID-19 served to increase the anxiety and stress levels of leaders like me.

Creating a community, building teacher capacity, teacher retention, and data inquiry are often competing forces that require continuous improvement cycles led by school leaders. The continuous improvement cycle mindset is set on the belief that as change agents within the community, our focus must be on personalization, professional development, and sense-making for enhanced precision as these practices set the stage for supporting marginalized students. As a social justice leader who often experiences similar dilemmas in New York City, I agree with DeMatthew's (2016) thesis, "that the unique combination between the principal, school, community, and new circumstance shape how Social Justice challenges are identified, prioritized, and addressed" (p. 3). I am driven by passion and support for students, parents, and teachers who have experienced a lack of motivation and encouragement or worse as members of marginalized social groups precisely *because* of who I am, where I see myself in society today, and how I arrived here, and the same was true of my study participants.

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APPENDIX A: PROTOCOL FOR INTERVIEW

<u>Getting to Know Each Other: Context of the Participant's Experience</u> (90 minutes)

Name of Interviewee: _____

School/Site: _____

Date: _____

Duration of Interview: _____

<u>Introduction to Interview (15 minutes)</u>

I. Acknowledgement & Planning

  I appreciate your support in helping with this research project and participating in a qualitative interview. I recognize your time is valuable at this time of the year as an educational leader managing end of year priorities. Your sharing of your personal stories will contribute to this important research. As mentioned, this interview should take 90 minutes. Does this feel like an appropriate time?

  I am a doctoral student at Union Institute & University and a current high school principal in a Brooklyn, New York City school district. I hope that by doing this research, I can gain insight about you and other urban school leaders and the challenges you face on a daily basis in your position. I will investigate whether a principal's lived experiences help to navigate the policies in place to address the social construction of difference and critical issues in schools.

II. Purpose

  I want to know about your leadership style and your experience dealing with situations prior to, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. How, if you recall, did these leadership realities influence your leadership decisions moving forward? How have crises impacted your

school community at the time of the event professionally and personally? I want you to know that there is no right or wrong response but rather an opportunity for me to learn more about the leadership style and the emotions experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

III. Confidentiality

I will highlight what you share with me to support other prospective and active leaders in the field. I will write about what I have gathered from you and other leaders in this investigation in order to share new insight and aid in the understanding of principal practices. Although I will share these experiences, I will also protect your confidentiality and privacy. I will use pseudonym, selected by you, for your name and your institution. This means that both your identity and that of your school will be hidden. Please let me know if you have questions regarding this. Furthermore, please understand that you can stop this interview at any time and there is no need to answer all the questions.

Interviewee Pseudonym: _____

Institution Pseudonym: _____

Does the participant agree to have the identity sealed? YES/NO

IV. Recording

I will be making an audio recording of your responses while we conduct the interview. I want to capture your exact responses as a point of clarity and verification. Are you comfortable with this process? After our interview, I will transcribe our discussion. This means that I will type our questions and answers on a Word document and print out the transcript. This transcript will be kept confidential, and no one will hear the interview but me. I will share the audio and

the transcript with you after our interview to check for validity and accuracy. Is this ok? Are we able to proceed?

V. Interviewee Questions

A) The initial phase of this interview will focus on you, your personal histories, your story, and how you arrived at this position through the lens of your social identity (class, race, and gender).

1. Where did you grow up (urban setting, rural setting)?

2. Are you a first-generation college graduate (explain)?

3. What influenced your decision to become a school administrator?

4. As school administrators typically attain their positions through promotion after several years of teaching, I would like to know if you were previously a teacher, and for hour long?

5. How would you describe your experience as a teacher?

6. How long have you been a school administrator?

7. What is your role and title today?

8. How many staff do you supervise?

9. What are your areas of supervision?

B) I would like to understand a little about where you acquired your leadership background experience.

1. How many years did you work there?

2. How did you get that job?

3. What role did you play?

4. Can you describe the culture of the school prior to your arrival?

C) What crises did you manage prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?

    1. How did you respond to the situation?

    2. What happened prior to the crisis?

    3. Do you recall what influenced your decision?

    4. What were the competing issues?

    5. Were you surprised or did you forecast it?

    6. How did you react (emotionally)?

    7. Were there multiple situations going on?

    8. What triggered the event?

    9. How did you respond during the incident?

    10. Did you debrief with anyone?

    11. How did that make you feel?

    12. Have you experienced a similar event in the past?

D) How have past leadership experiences influenced your leadership practice in developing community capacity (school leaders, teachers, students, and parents)?

    1. How have you adjusted pedagogical and instructional plans in support of student engagement?

    2. How are school-wide expectations communicated and monitored to the community?

    3. How do you monitor the implementation of academic pathway protocols and how are the instructional priorities aligned to your school mission?

    4. What were some of your own experiences going through the pandemic as you navigated through staffing issues and COVID-19 protocols?

5. How would you describe your parental involvement and community partnerships?

E) How does the use of surveys to build trust and community inform your practices in support of climate and culture?

    1. What types of leadership activities have you promoted in the community that foster acceptance, inclusivity, and equity?

    2. How does the influence of transformative leadership inspire other teachers, students, and parent leaders in the community to co-share their experiences?

F) What does closing the economic gap for students and families mean to you?

    1. What strategies do you implement in support of academic intervention and what has the data inquiry resulting from those activities revealed about the school climate and culture?

    2. What does case management look like in your school?

    3. What types of strategies, events, mental health services, professional development for teachers and personalization occur in your school?

APPENDIX B: PRELIMINARY CODING SCHEME

1. Leadership lived experiences (background experiences)

   - Contextual background (leadership style) at the time of the leadership crisis

   - The current context

   - The role of leadership

   - Competing/intersecting challenges

   - Emotional leadership

     o Transparency, grieving, isolation, anxiety

   - Influencers

   - Meaning-making

   - Surprises

   - Leadership crisis meaning-making

2. Competing challenges

   - Personalization

   - Budget

   - Compliance

   - Communication

3. Healing

   - Assurance in systems and structures

   - Highlighting and sharing best practices

   - Forums and network support

4. Factors in leveraging the self

- Strategies to support personalization

- Human capital

- Leadership styles

    - Servant Leadership

    - Instructional Leadership

    - Transformational Leadership

    - Social Justice Leadership

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

Union Institute & University

Institutional Review Board

<u>*Adult Consent Form to Participate in a Research Study*</u>

Study title: An Examination of The Social Identity of Urban School Leaders: A Case Study of Five Principals in Brooklyn, New York City

Study number: Union Institute & University IRB Number 1973

IRB of Record: Union Institute & University

Participation duration: Participants will partake in 1 session over the course of 1 day, averaging 1.5 hours per session

Anticipated total number of research participants: 6

Sponsor/Supporter: NA

2. Researchers' contact information.

Principal Investigator: Victor Frias, Student, Union Institute & University, B. S. Ed, M.S. Ed, M.S. Ed, D.R.E., A.B.D.

Co-Investigator/Study Coordinator: NA

Phone Number: NA

Email Address: NA

Faculty Advisor For Student Research:
Daniel Diaz Reyes Ph.D., J.D.
Chair & Faculty, Educational Justice & Equity Concentration
Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Studies

Union Institute & University

Phone Number: na

3.What information is on this form?

I am asking you to take part in a research study.
This form explains why I am doing this study and what you will be asked to do if you choose to be in this study. It also describes the way I would like to use and share information about you. Please take the time to read this form. I will talk to you about taking part in this research study. You should ask me any questions you have about this form and about this research study. You do not have to participate if you don't want to.

4. Why is this study being done?

I am doing this research study to learn more about *Principals' Leadership Background Experiences.* I am a doctoral student at Union Institute & University and a current high school principal in a Brooklyn, New York City school district. I hope that by doing this research, I can gain insight about you and other urban school leaders and the challenges you face on a daily basis in your position. I will investigate whether a principal's lived experiences help to navigate the policies in place to address the social construction of difference and critical issues in schools.

5. Who is being included?

You are being asked to participate in this study because I have determined that people who have diverse backgrounds will help me answer my research question(s). A total of six principals will be selected (out of 10 candidates), each of whom may volunteer to participate in the study during the recruitment process. Moreover, I will seek participants with over 10 or more years of experience, and who are intentionally of mixed ages, races, [class], gender, and experiences. The shared experiences of such a diverse group are expected to span a wide spectrum of leadership styles and practices that other school leaders and education researchers may draw meaning from.

6. What will I be asked to do if I choose to be in this study?

Recordings:
Audio/video recording or photography

I am asking for you to allow me too voice record you as part of the research study. *(voluntary)*

The recording(s) (Zoom Session) will be used for transcriptions purposes only and will be deleted immediately after the analysis and triangulation of the data.

The recording(s) will include participants identifiers as a single variable.

The recording(s) will be stored in password protected personal computer in a locked file cabinet and will be destroyed upon completion of the study procedure.

7. **Are there any risks?**

I do not think that the risks associated with taking part in this study are greater in and of themselves, than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examination or tests.

You may feel uncomfortable when asked about past experiences. You can choose to skip questions if they make you uncomfortable.

There may be risks or discomforts if you take part in this study. These include: past trauma or memories of discomfort.

Loss of confidentiality
A risk of taking part in this study is the possibility of a loss of confidentiality or privacy. Loss of privacy means having your personal information shared with someone other than myself and was not supposed to see or know about your information. I plan to protect your privacy. My plans for keeping your information private are described in section 9 of this consent form.

8. **Are there any benefits?**

You will not benefit from taking part in this study, but your participation will contribute to our understanding of leadership practices.

This research study will contribute to the ongoing scholarly conversations about principals' social identities and how they may include underrepresented ideas concerning social constructions of difference in relation to a leadership skillset. I intend to investigate and identify social identity- and social justice-oriented themes that surface as leaders navigate the requirements of institutional policies. The significance of the study will help future school leaders identify which lived experiences and strategies are beneficial to their practice versus those that are not. I anticipate that the principals' own social locations influence their behaviors and mindset. Furthermore, I foresee that the leadership narratives and insights of my colleagues will serve as a catalyst to motivate and inspire other leaders facing similar work challenges.

9. **What about my privacy?**

Every effort will be made to keep your personal information confidential. However, we cannot guarantee total privacy.

The data collected will be given a code number (variable), and separated from your name or any other information that could identify you. The research file that links your name to the code number (variable) will be kept in a password protected computer that is in a locked file cabinet in my home. As the Principal Investigator, I am the only person able to see this file.

10. **Will I get paid or be given anything to take part in this study?**

You will not receive any payment or other reward for taking part in this study.

11. **Will I incur costs if I take part in this study?**

There will be no costs to you for being in this study.

12.What are my rights if I take part in this study?

Taking part in this study is your choice. You can decide not to take part in or stop being in the study at any time. If you decide not to participate, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your participation will also end if the Researchers or the study Sponsor stops the study earlier than expected or if you do not follow the study procedures.

13. **Who can I call if I have questions?**

You may call Victor Frias if you have any questions or concerns about this research study.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, or if you have a concern about this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board listed below.

Mollie Miller, M.B.A. A.B.D.
IRB Coordinator & Affiliated Faculty

14. **Statement of consent and signatures**

Statement of consent

I have read this consent form. The research study has been explained to me. I agree to be in the research study described above.
A copy of this consent form will be provided to me after I sign it.
By signing this consent form, I have not given up any of the legal rights that I would have if I were not a participant in the study.

APPENDIX D: EMAIL TO PRINCIPAL CANDIDATES

Greetings,

As I have discussed, I am a doctoral student at Union Institute & University.

I want to schedule an interview with you in person or through a Zoom session. Whichever is more convenient after work and at your earliest convenience. Please let me know when I can send an invite. I am attaching a letter for your review and consideration to participate in the study.

I thank you in advance for supporting my case study.

Victor Frias

Union Institute & University

APPENDIX E: LETTER TO PRINCIPALS

Victor G. Frias, Jr.

Union Institute & University

December 2023

"An Examination of The Social Identity of Urban School Leaders:

A Case Study of Five Principals in New York City." IRB #:1973

Permission Letter to Principals

Greetings Principal _____,

 I am a doctoral student at Union Institute & University and a current high school principal in a Brooklyn, New York City school district. I hope that by doing this research, I can gain insight about you and other urban school leaders and the challenges you face on a daily basis in your position. I will investigate whether a principal's lived experiences help to navigate the policies in place to address the social construction of difference and critical issues in schools through a case study methodology. This study will explore how the social identity (i.e., race, gender, and class) of multiple New York City principals impact their leadership practices and ideas from the position of social justice leader regardless of differences in their respective social locations.You are being asked to participate in this study because I have determined that people who have diverse backgrounds will help me answer my research question(s). A total of six

principals will be selected (out of 10 candidates), each of whom may volunteer to participate in the study after they are recommended. Moreover, I will seek participants with over 10 or more years of experience, and who are intentionally of mixed ages, races, class, gender, and experiences. The shared experiences of such a diverse group are expected to span a wide spectrum of leadership styles and practices that other school leaders and education researchers may draw meaning from.

I will protect participant confidentiality and privacy by using pseudonyms selected by the participants, and using secure, password-protected software to store and analyze data. I will furthermore use the chosen pseudonyms in my handwritten and/or typed field notes. You will not benefit from taking part in this study, but your participation will contribute to our understanding of leadership practices.

This research study will contribute to the ongoing scholarly conversations about principals' social identities and how they may include underrepresented ideas concerning social constructions of difference in relation to a leadership skillset. The significance of the study will help future school leaders identify which lived experiences and strategies are beneficial to their practice versus those that are not. As a school leader in the largest public-school system in the United States, you are in a unique position to share your perspectives on this topic and contribute to the growing conversation about the role of the principal. If you choose to engage, your participation in this interview is completely voluntary and all of your responses are

anonymous. None of the responses will be connected to identifying information. If you

have any questions, please contact met at: Victor.frias@email.myunion.edu

Thank you in advance for providing this important feedback and for all that you do

each day on behalf of students!

Sincerely,

Victor G. Frias, Jr.

Union Institute & University
Doctoral Candidate

Note: This research study and the associated interview has received IRB approval from
Union Institute & University IRB Protocol #: 1973

Principal Initials: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX F: PERMISSIONS AND COPYRIGHT

09/06/2024

Dear Recipient / Publisher:

I give Victor. G. Frias, Jr. Permission to include figures / photos 1-5 in his dissertation and know that it will be published. The photos are commercial licensed through Justin Jenkins Designs.