A Portraiture of Leadership as Enacted by School Administrators Working in Alternative Educational Settings

Eric Shawn Hall

University of South Florida, tribuhall@hotmail.com

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A Portraiture of Leadership As Enacted by School Administrators

Working in Alternative Educational Settings

by

Eric Hall

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
Department of Leadership, Counseling, Adult, Career and Higher Education
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Major Professor: Zorka Karanxha, Ed.D.
Vonzell Agosto, Ph.D.
Leonard Burrello, Ed.D.
Barbara Shircliff, Ph.D.

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motivate me in my career and life-work, as I seek to establish supports and interventions that remove barriers in schools for students deemed to be at-risk.

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Abstract

School leadership has been an evolving topic over the past several decades, with research examining the impact of leadership on school performance, school culture, and other elements in this field. However, only a few studies have examined the construct of leadership in alternative schools, where these specialized sites often serve as mid-points between traditional schools and juvenile detention centers. Considering the evidence related to the displacement rates of minority students, particularly Black males, from traditional schools to alternative settings, these specialized sites are ideal for exploring practices that perhaps can redirect students in the school-to-prison pipeline, back towards their traditional settings or perhaps help to push students towards high school graduation.

In this study, leadership is examined at two alternative schools operating in the southeast United States, in two different districts where documented disparities have been published in the media as well as federal complaints filed due to the excessive displacement of Black students from traditional school settings as a result of suspensions, expulsions and/or school-based arrests. According to the literature review, alternative schools have grown exponentially over the past decade across the nation, with many having disproportional numbers of minority students placed in these schools. Often these schools serve as sites for segregating disruptive students, and tend to focus greater attention on managing student behavior as opposed to driving student achievement. Utilizing feedback from local district and business leaders, the two alternative schools included in this study were targeted for this investigation due to their perceived success, related to school outcomes, graduation rates and low suspension/expulsion rates. This study,
through the collection of data using participant interviews, constructs portraits of each school principal and their enactment of leadership at each alternative setting.

Using portraiture methodology, this study is intended to add to the larger conversation focused on school leadership, particularly in non-traditional settings where students deemed to be at-risk of school failure, dropout, or even incarceration can be served and redirected towards long-term achievement. The two participants in this study both engage a strong ethic of care, focused on the establishment of positive, pro-social relationships between staff and students at their school sites. Additional themes that emerged throughout this study include topics on servant leadership, situational leadership, compassionate leadership, distributed leadership and transformative leadership that are focused on addressing disparity in the schools due to disparities in student discipline on the basis of race and poverty. Though both participants operate two different models of alternative programs, with each having different goals for their students, and realizing that the lived experiences of each principal cannot be generalized beyond their own context, there were several aligned themes that emerged during the course of this study. Considering that this study utilized a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework to approach this inquiry, it was apparent that many aspects of CRT were evident in the enactment of leadership by the two participants at their designated alternative settings.
Chapter One

Introduction

Education reform has been a pervasive topic across the United States in recent years, with a growing political effort to use education as the foundation to accelerate future economic development for the nation. These efforts have been framed using such terms as equity, accountability, and choice, while supposedly working to close the achievement gap and ensure access for all students, regardless of background, to a quality education. A great deal of this discussion was ignited when the No Child Left Behind Act was signed into law; and now over a decade later, the same efforts exist, however based on the economic climate of the global community, politicians are using the principles associated with achievement to be more focused on access to college and/or careers. This expanded effort, beyond just academic achievement, will no-doubt fuel education reform for the next several years as the United States works to compete in a global market. As these efforts continue, it is important to consider the challenges that have evolved as a result of such policies and political efforts and the implications for schools, their students and the way in which educational leaders enact their duties in support of achievement. Additionally, how will this new landscape in education impact minority students, the topic of social justice, and the overall efforts for closing the achievement gap?

One of the greatest impacts documented from the implementation of many school reforms has been the elevated displacement of minority students, particularly Black males, from the traditional educational settings of our public school systems (Advancement Project, 2010). This displacement of students of color, which is often attributed to student suspension and
expulsion practices, is also enhanced by a student’s ability to adequately access the school’s curriculum, depending on their academic performance or as some might argue, depending on the embedded perceptions associated with those that have the power to provide full access to the school’s curriculum (Downey, Von Hippel, & Broh, 2004; Leone et. al, 2005). This access is often controlled by teachers, who represent a field that is occupied predominantly by White, middle-class women, and who sometimes bring with them attitudes and perceptions that further marginalize children of color, thus impeding their ability to participate fully in a school’s curriculum (Gardiner, Canfield-Davis & LeMar, 2009).

In examining these displacement practices, it is recognized that people of color are funneled and sorted in multiple ways across our society as depicted by the various mechanisms of the educational and justice systems in the United States (Bauman, 2004). Considering the practices across the nation for classifying and labeling people, it is important to assess how the U.S. educational system, which is the most common and widespread organization touching the lives of children in the country, perpetuates and influences the ongoing assault on students of color (Downey, Von Hippel, & Broh, 2004). It is equally important to explore and uncover the racial disparities that are birthing grounds in school systems and result in too many children entering the juvenile and correctional settings of our government managed systems of temporary or sustained long term incarceration. Furthermore, it is critical to understand and correct the inequities that are leading to the over-representation of African American youth in the justice system; where an African American child is “5 times more likely to be incarcerated than a Caucasian child” (Leone et al., 2005, p. 91). Disproportionality also impacts other groups of students as well, where research has shown that “Latino and Native American children are 2.5 times more likely to be incarcerated than Caucasian children” (Leone et al., 2005, p. 91).
Considering this data, what is causing this assault on the children of color across the United States?

When President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2001 into law, it was sold as the necessary framework to ensure the success of all students, regardless of race or socioeconomic status (Darling-Hammond, 2006). This expectation and hope for a better future has resulted in wide-spread punishment and assault on children and communities of color which many have argued has intensified student expulsion, dropout and arrest rates for this victimized demographic (Noguera, 2003). Some of these challenges do precede NCLB, going back to the adoption of zero tolerance policies which stem from drug enforcement laws and were further established in schools after such horrific events as the Columbine High School shooting in 1999 (Hierschfield, 2008). The problem appears to have been further exacerbated by the introduction of resource officers into schools, which stems from the “1998 amendment to the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 which established school-based partnerships between local law enforcement agencies and local school systems” (Casella, 2001, p. 98). In essence, over the past few decades policy has been evolving which has promoted an attack on youth of color and has created greater disparity for this group of marginalized children by converting many operations and procedures in schools to mimic those instituted in prisons and jails (Hirschfield, 2008). This includes the adoption and elevated use of metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and school security personnel at schools with high numbers of minority and impoverished students even though, research shows no direct correlation to rates of incidents or criminal offending on these school grounds (Sparks, 2011). An additional example of this assault is evident in the number of student disciplinary referrals since 1974, when student suspensions were recorded at 1.7 million across the United States and
then by 2000 this rate grew to over 3.1 million, with a disproportional increase for minority students (ACLU, 2011). Supporting evidence can also be found in expulsion rates between “2002 and 2007, where the expulsion rate for Black students increased by 33%, Latino students increased by 6%, while expulsion rates for White students decreased by 2%” (Advancement Project, 2010). When examining suspension rates at the middle school level, when adolescent development is at its peak, one study found that “28 percent of African American middle school boys had been suspended at least once, compared with 10 percent of White males nationwide” (Shah, 2011). When assessing the rates for girls in this same age group it was “18 percent of Black girls as compared to 4 percent of White girls” (Shah, 2011). Many of the infractions that are triggering these suspensions are minor rule violations such as carrying a cell phone or dress code issues and not behaviors that warrant such aggressive school disciplinary responses by school personnel (Shah, 2011). The rates at which these school discipline responses are occurring is alarming considering the well documented relationship between “suspension/expulsion and the likelihood of a student dropping out of school, with an additional correlation showing that a dropout is 8 times more likely to enter the juvenile or correctional system” (Advancement Project, 2010). Such outcomes are driving students of color each day from the public funded education system to the correctional systems of our society (ACLU, 2011). This pipeline has become so well established and so clearly focused on children of color, that the research consistently reflects “disproportionate minority overrepresentation at all stages of the justice process”, ranging from first arrest to the deep-end of the system in secure incarceration (Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine, 2009). The practice of suspending, expelling and even arresting students of color has given “rise to a punishing state” (Giroux, 2009, p. 77) in our society, particularly our schools, where people of color still continue to be
designated as “others”, while trying to navigate the structures established on the middle class White norms of the nation (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

The data and trends discussed thus far have reflected that there are a significant, disproportional number of students of color who experience school-based arrests, student disciplinary actions in school, and diminished access to curriculum. The alarming rates of suspension, expulsion, and school-based arrest for students of color is driving and perpetuating a pipeline from school-to-prison which is further exacerbating the disproportional representation of Black and Brown youth and young adults in the juvenile and correctional systems of the nation (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012). Realizing that schools are typically the site at which the displacement process begins, usually as a response to low-level misbehaviors, it is important to examine practices and leadership theories as they are involved in the pipeline process. Together, this pervasive issue of student displacement due to behavior and academic access has led to the creation of a sub-field of education commonly referred to as alternative schooling. In considering this sub-field of education, how do alternative schools help to either contribute or perhaps redirect students who are at-risk of displacement? Do these schools offer an opportunity for greater access or do they provide a place for those that are not welcomed in the traditional setting an alternative location in hopes of learning? The models of alternative education vary quite extensively, with some operating in the juvenile justice system itself, while others are often commended for helping students with significant needs overcome obstacles and achieve graduation. If we are to better understand how these schools perform and what role they ultimately should play in our public school systems, it is important to examine how those that perform well are led and what philosophies exist in promoting student success. This desire to understand what an alternative school can do to disrupt the potential pipeline towards prison is
what motivates this inquiry, with a focused effort on understanding the role of the school leader. This study will seek to examine the enactment of leadership in alternative sites where positive attributes have been identified, and investigate the elements in place that are perhaps disrupting the pipeline in these communities, where these sites and their leaders operate.

**Considering the Questions and Possibilities Ahead**

Issues which appear to be embedded in policy, policy interpretation and school-related practices can be quite complicated and are often what makes it challenging to determine the root-cause for minority student displacement. This is why it is necessary to study and evaluate challenges and perceptions at the leadership-level of school operations, where policy and practice are in constant battle with student outcome expectations and school-behavior management. It is this constant battle within schools and districts that must be more carefully examined, particularly as it relates to the displacement of students using expulsion, placement at alternative schools and even displacement to the juvenile system which are well documented steps in the school-to-prison pipeline (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012). It is equally important to examine how school administrators working in schools, where student populations have been impacted by policy and practices that have contributed to their displacement, enact leadership that perhaps can redirect this pipeline perspective for their students.

Considering these roles and related issues, as well as the ever-evolving accountability and school reforms in the United States, this study examines questions that help to understand how school administrators working in successful alternative settings enact leadership at these specialized sites, where student representation is disproportional to that of the larger districts where they operate. Successful in this study is defined as those sites where the district and community stakeholders have expressed a high level of satisfaction with the alternative school,
based on their own unique qualifiers, such as graduation, low rates of suspensions, academic growth, etc. This study will focus its attention on school administrators working in the Southeastern part of the nation, where some of the most significant issues have been revealed regarding minority student dropout, suspension, expulsion and school-based arrests (Advancement Project, 2010; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012). In an attempt to better understand how this enactment impacts students being funneled towards the juvenile system, this examination focused its attention on alternative schools, which often serve as a primary step towards the school-to-prison pipeline (Leone et al., 2005). The main question this study seeks to answer is: How do educational administrators working in alternative schools enact leadership? This examination also considered how and/or if race interacts with the decision-making process for enforcing policies as well as other factors that may contribute to the displacement of students from school. Considering this decision-making process and related rituals regarding student discipline, I sought to understand these daily practices at the school, the perceptions of the school administrators regarding their school operations, their theory of leadership and how this leadership is enacted at their school sites. The following questions were considered in the examination of these issues, while expanding the topic beyond the primary question about the enactment of leadership, both in the existing literature and the developing literature as a result of this inquiry:

1. How do school administrators working in alternative schools enact their roles and responsibilities in operating their school?

2. What are the theories of leadership adopted by school administrators working in these alternative schools?
3. How do these school administrators working in alternative schools view their roles in enforcing student discipline policies?

4. How do school administrators in these settings consider the potential consequences for students when they are displaced from the school setting?

5. How do school administrators working in these settings build culture and motivate their teams to serve students in these specialized settings?

6. What interventions do these administrators consider when working to manage student discipline practices in their school?

7. What training have these school administrators received to enact their roles as the principal of their school?

The intent of exploring these questions, and the others that evolved through the dialogue with the participants, is to better understand the perspectives of alternative school administrators regarding their enactment of leadership and how they work to create a school setting focused on positive outcomes for their students. In essence, these questions and this study seek to explore the possibilities and reactions behind why and how school administrators working in alternative schools define their roles, their responsibilities, the desired outcomes for their students, enforce student discipline and the intersection of these practices with student demographics, using a critical race theory framework.

**Theoretical Framework**

In exploring the questions presented in this study, it was important to use a theoretical framework that helps to critically examine how school leaders working in alternative settings operate their schools, enact leadership, manage student discipline and the related impact on students of color. Considering this need for critical examination, Critical Race Theory (CRT)
provides a grounded set of beliefs that seek to uncover and expose racism and its related impact on those who are often without power, in the case of this study, minority students. To better understand CRT, it is important to consider some of the common ideas that define it as a theory and the methods in which it seeks to disrupt the prevailing discourse on education across our society. These include:

- The “centrality of race and racism in American society” (Parker & Villapando, 2007, p. 520). This premise is focused on those embedded practices which “promote the subordination” (Crenshaw, 1990) and “oppressive forces” (Yosso, 2002) of people of color. In the case of school displacement and incarceration, the disproportional attack on children of color is well documented in the literature (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009), which supports the “centrality of racism” (Parker & Villalpando, 2007, p. 520) theme as cited across the CRT literature.

- A second common theme in CRT is the “challenge to dominant ideology” (Parker & Villalpando, 2007, p. 520), where the efforts work to disrupt and expose the self-interest claims of institutions, on their efforts to be objective, color-blind, and race neutral (Delgado, 1989; Lopez, 2003; Parker & Villalpando, 2007; Yosso, 2002). Under CRT, the concepts of color-blindness and race neutral are viewed as methods to perpetuate the interests and ideologies of those in power, which in U.S. society is the White, Protestant, middle and upper class demographic (Lopez, 2003). With such disparities in academic achievement, rates of poverty, and access to higher wage careers, it is appropriate to consider how these concepts of “color-blindness and race neutraliry” (Parker & Villalpando, 2007, p. 520) fail to serve people of color while still serving the interests of those with power (Advancement Project, 2010; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012).
CRT is often described as having a “commitment to a social justice agenda that struggles to eliminate all forms of racial, gender, language, generation status, and class subordination” (Parker & Villalpando, 2007, p. 520). Realizing that students of color are more often expelled, suspended, tracked towards lower skilled careers, being retained at higher rates, and at greater risk of dropping out of school, the fact that CRT seeks to disrupt prevalent practices that contribute to inequality make this central theme of the theory critical to the efforts related to the topic of disproportional displacement from schools for minority students (Advancement Project, 2010; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009; Saddler, 2005; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012).

An additional theme that is common in the literature regarding CRT, is the “centrality of experiential knowledge, where the lived experiences of people of color are considered to be legitimate and critical to understanding racial subordination” (Parker & Villalpando, 2007, p. 520). In the case of experiential knowledge, individuals can come to learn more about the impact of racism from “storytelling, family history, biographies, scenarios, parables, chronicles, and narratives” (Parker & Villalpando, 2007, p. 520). Throughout this study and review of student displacement, the narratives of the larger population will be conveyed by the disturbing trends, data, and stories that have made their way to the literature and media reports, while also helping to expose the severe social injustice that is often targeted at students of color. The experiential knowledge of the two participants in this study, both of which are African American males, also provided considerable insight into the possible issues that they face in enacting leadership at their designated schools.
More specifically, CRT has been established and defined in the literature on five central tenets (McDowell & Jeris, 2004), which includes:

1. “Acknowledging that racism has historically influenced all aspects of society, preventing equality” (Stokes, 2012, p. 230).
2. “Recognizing that racism is an invisible norm and White culture (privilege) is what all other races are measured by (and opportunities are allocated by)” (Stokes, 2012, p. 230).
3. “Committing to understanding that racism is socially constructed and an expanded and inclusive world view is required for true social justice” (Stokes, 2012, p. 230).
4. “Acknowledging the unique perspectives and voice of people of color (as victims of oppression) in racial matters, valuing their ‘story-telling’ as a legitimate way to convey knowledge” (Stokes, 2012, p. 230).
5. Engaging in interdisciplinary dialogue and discourse to analyze race relationships (i.e. history, philosophy, law, anthropology, sociology, economics, and political science)” (Stokes, 2012, p. 230).

These tenets help to define the concepts of CRT in a way that can support this developing inquiry into the unequal displacement of youth of color, while also grounding the topic as an issue of embedded racism that all too often results in incarceration. These tenets can also be very helpful in framing and examining the ultimate question for investigation in this study, which is how do educational administrators working in alternative schools enact leadership?

There were other elements within CRT that were also explored during this study. When considering how race interacts with educational practices, it is important to understand how “administrative policies and procedures in educational institutions” (Parker & Villalpando, 2007, p. 519) feed the displacement of minority students. Some of these policies include Zero
Tolerance, high stakes assessment practices, Safe Schools initiatives, and even various elements within the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (Advancement Project, 2010; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012). There have also been considerable debates which focus on overall teacher preparation programs, where the training itself has been critiqued as being too narrow and driven by the dominant White perspectives that have historically defined the purpose of schools and its related content for instruction (Picower, 2009). Realizing that policies and various school-related practices appear to support and protect the interests of those with power, the analysis of issues surrounding minority student displacement must also consider the concept of “interest convergence” (Bell, 1980). In this concept, Derrick Bell contends that efforts which appear to support and contribute to equality for people of color are usually secondary efforts and framed as a purposeful, equity-driven attempt while primarily promoting the cause and goals of those with power, which in his explanation are the Whites (Bell, 1980). Based on this concept of “interest convergence” (Bell, 1980), is it possible that school-based practices and perhaps even interventions targeted at supporting students are aligned to Bell’s explanation? Do we need to consider this construct as well while exploring the enactment of leadership by school administrators, how this relates to student discipline, or even their views of education? Though these may be challenging issues to uncover in this study, they should be considered as the investigation towards understanding school administrator’s views and behaviors are explored.

In calling upon Critical Race Theory (CRT) to analyze school-based issues, the concept of “whiteness as property” (Ladson-Billings, 1998) has been considered. Efforts have been made to explore this issue in the context of schools where students of color are often the victim of strict punishment and are pushed out from the embedded and often hidden curriculum which is focused on the norms of middle-class White America and not equally accessible to all students.
In essence, the belief that whiteness is the norm and that all elements of schooling and education are defined by this perpetuated group norm concept could potentially make it challenging for any student of color to succeed in a dominated system (Bergerson, 2003). Understanding this practice and the fact that “democratic choice is not necessarily available for all” (McIntosh, 1990), CRT can help to shape the manner in which this topic is explored while also exposing the bias maintained by the author of this inquiry, who is a middle-class, White male. Based on my own experiences as a child living in a pre-dominantly White community, attending a pre-dominantly White school, and then attending a modestly diverse college and ultimately working in the juvenile justice education system, it has been important that biases and potential subjective opinions be constantly evaluated and considered throughout this study. For some scholars, due to my ethnicity, writing this study and exploring this topic in more detail through a CRT lens could be challenged, considering that some have posited the question of whether or not a White researcher can truly be a Critical Race Theorist (Bergerson, 2003). This topic was often revisited throughout the study and during my analysis in an effort to constantly consider my own situated space in the context of this inquiry.

**Experiences from the Inside**

Prior to considering the pursuit of an upper-level graduate degree or this study, I was influenced early on in my career about the challenges and obstacles facing many students, particularly those of color, as it relates to their access and opportunities in school. In 1995, while attending college for my undergraduate degree in education, I had the opportunity to acquire a part-time job working in a juvenile justice program as an evening instructor to help teach basic life and employability skills. This was my first actual interaction with students in non-traditional education programs, which was designed to target youth with high risk for incarceration and high
school dropout. This experience unfortunately influenced my early perceptions about students served in these systems. I can recall participating in training about proper youth supervision and the demand for high expectations for the youth as it related to behavior. During this training and the dynamics associated with my first few weeks on the job, I was conditioned to believe that the youth in this program were challenging, low achievers and needed adult supervision to ensure that the public was protected from this group of juvenile offenders. It was common to hear personnel use statements like “that kid will never go back to school” or “that youth is going to be in the system forever”. Common references to failure were the norm, with a strong sense that these youth were not to be trusted. Fortunately for me, I learned to think differently based on the life lessons shared by the youth that I served and the mentoring that I received by a dissenting voice working at the program. Now almost two decades later, based on the counter stories that I have heard and my own observations that support the marginalization of youth of color in the juvenile system, a critical perspective has evolved; a perspective which seeks to uncover practices which perpetuate racial inequality and have silenced social justice efforts for some of our nation’s most promising students.

My first day on the job back in 1995, I walked into a classroom at the juvenile justice program to a group of students who were completely represented by Black and Hispanic males, with an instructor supervising the class by reading the newspaper and letting the students watch television and talk amongst themselves. As a young, naïve White male who had grown up in a modest middle-class home, I was not sure what to expect or how I could ever make an impact on the students sitting in that classroom. I recall the students snickering and making some comments under their breath to their peers as I proceeded to introduce myself. I didn’t ask them to repeat what they were saying, because ultimately I did not want to know out of fear of having
to respond. Looking back at that moment, I realized that I had already acquired and embraced the “culture of fear” so commonly associated with the portrayal of minority youth in our society (Robbins, 2008). However, that fear would eventually fade and evolve into hope as I developed relationships with this group of students and another instructor who was producing great results with the individuals we served. It is important to note that this amazing instructor was also my college roommate.

I first met this instructor, who I will refer to as Marty, during my first semester living on campus in college. I remember my parents helping me to move my belongings onto campus, and when I opened the door to my soon-to-be dorm room for the first time, my new roommate was not there and I had no idea who I was going to be living with at that time. He had obviously arrived before me based on the fact that the room was set up and decorated on his side. In examining his set up, I noticed several books on the bookshelf with titles related to Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King, and topics related to the civil rights movement. His walls were decorated with a Jamaican flag and a banner with a black panther. My parents were slightly concerned as obvious by their facial expressions, but I was determined and excited about meeting my new roommate and hopefully my new friend. Eventually my parents had left and I was finishing with my unpacking when the door to the room opened and a Black man entered. He immediately reached out his hand with a huge smile and gave me a hug and said “I guess you’re my new roommate, huh”. That evening Marty and I had extensive conversations about each other’s backgrounds and our goals for the future while in college. In-fact, we stayed up so late talking that we did not get to bed until early the next morning. During our discussion that evening and many others that followed, Marty helped me to understand his perspectives on racism and how civil rights were still a work in progress. Marty and I would go to many places
together, including hanging out with many of his friends and social settings with a majority representation of people of color. Since I was new to the area and did not know anyone, Marty’s friends became my own and I was embraced into a rich culture that was foreign to my background.

Prior to entering college and to living with Marty, I grew up in predominantly White communities. I was born in Kentucky and lived in a small town where the only minorities that I ever saw were those that were passing through the area and in many cases were the joke of racist adults in the community. At the age of 10, my family relocated to Florida, where we lived in a coastal community in a county that was historically segregated, with the Whites living on the west-side, close to the beaches and the minorities living on the east-side. Growing up in this county from the 4th grade through graduation, I rarely would see any minority students in my school, let alone any Black males. In fact, there were only two Black males that I recall in my high school, with one being in a self-contained special education classroom and the other rarely seen around school activities. In school and in my community, I know that racism was pervasive as evident by the jokes, and the comments that were made to students from other schools during athletic events, like football games. Fortunately for me, my parents would always encourage my siblings and I to be respectful of all people and not to judge; however as I reflect on this advice and request to be respectful, I wonder why my parents were concerned about Marty as a roommate, based only on his choice of wall art and books? What was there to fear?

While living with Marty during the first few weeks, as stated, I learned a great deal about him, his family and his friends. I also learned about his work as an instructor at a juvenile justice program and mentoring that he was doing with students in the community who had once been in the juvenile justice system. Marty would often bring students who were graduating to the
college campus for tours and to the library to expose them to the resources available for learning. He would often introduce me to the students while taking them around, but I did not get a strong understanding of his work until later that semester when he asked me if I wanted an evening and weekend job at his program? Intrigued, I went on to apply for the job and was hired, which takes us to 1995, on the day that I first walked into the program. Even though I had developed a strong relationship with Marty, I entered my new job with a great deal of fear, which was later extinguished with a new knowledge and a passion for social justice.

As a friend and as a roommate, I knew a lot about Marty, but what I did not know was just how great he was as an instructor and as an advocate for his students. He had an amazing skill in developing relationships with the students at the program. His interactions conveyed a sense of trust, respect and sincere support for student’s goals while also reinforcing these behaviors with the families of the youth he served. I was assigned to work closely with Marty as part of my post-orientation at the program and what I found was that he did not see juvenile delinquents, but instead aspiring young adults full of dreams and goals for their future. He took the time to learn about each student and because of his relationships with each one, he never had a need for behavior management or ever had to depend on staff at the program to control the students. Instead they worked to ensure that he was satisfied with their performance and that they met his expectations for learning and a respectful environment. Marty had the highest pass rates for students on the GED test; had the highest classroom attendance; had the most students graduating and going to college; and ultimately had the most motivated group of students anywhere on the campus. This model of quality instruction and instructional leadership, for me, became the foundation that I wanted to ensure each and every day while working in this facility, and any other classroom in the future. Based on what I learned from working and living with
Marty for over a year, I discovered a group of students that at first I had failed to see or hear and later realized that these young people were truly amazing, with histories that would have been catastrophic for most individuals. Many of their stories included the death of parents, siblings, or other loved ones to narratives of abuse at home and in some cases in their schools by those responsible for their development. In many of these stories, it was the context of school that I found to be most troubling, where these young men were not considered to be a victim, but rather the victimizer due to school-based disciplinary practices. Marty helped me to see beyond the juvenile records held by the students and to look more closely at the life-stories and potential for great futures. He came to know them deeply and their life narrative. Marty went on to be a school administrator and based on what I learned from his passion and focus on social justice, I continue to this day to be an advocate for disadvantaged students and a voice for those without a voice in schools across our country.

In learning more and more about the students served in juvenile justice programs from 1995 to 2005, as a teacher, mid-level administrator and eventually as a school administrator, I was privileged to meet so many wonderful young men and women trying to overcome challenges and working to get out of the system. In many of my discussions with the students in these programs, I found that so many started to have problems in school prior to ever entering the juvenile system. These problems included academic achievement, classroom acting out, truancy, and in many cases disengagement or detachment from the school environment itself. One particular student that I developed a very strong relationship with in a Central Florida program, who will be referred to as Kevin, became a catalyst for my desire to understand more about the inequity facing young people in the system. Kevin, an African American, with learning disabilities, was placed at a non-residential program for acting out in the classroom that then led
to an argument with another student. During this argument, which turned into a physical altercation, Kevin hit a teacher accidentally, as she tried to break up the fight. At that moment, Kevin was charged with assault and battery on a school official and found his way into the juvenile system. As Kevin was served in this system, he interacted with other youth on probation and developed a new network of friends that ultimately led him into a residential program for six months. Upon his transition from that residential program, after being placed back into his home community, he was shot at a car wash and later died due to his injuries at the age of 17. Kevin’s story and so many others have inspired and influenced my research on the topics of juvenile justice, alternative education and zero tolerance policies in schools. This integrated set of topics, which typically defines the often debated school-to-prison pipeline, along with my own personal interactions with these structures, serves as the personal motivation to better understand the enactment of leadership by school administrators. In addition, the oppressive forces that I have witnessed over the past two decades have influenced my views of policies and practices in schools and across systems, which reinforce the “centrality of race and racism in American society” (Parker & Villapando, 2007, p. 520) as it plays out each day in our educational settings. The intersection of school leadership and critical race theory tenets are explored and examined in this study by investigating how two administrators working in alternative settings enact leadership focused on relationships with students and practices that disrupt displacement from school.

In examining the multiple issues in schools that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, such as achievement, truancy, suspensions, expulsions and school-based arrests, patterns evolve and often it is realized that a well defined population of students are targeted for displacement and incarceration. This population, as recognized by multiple publications and
reports, includes a majority representation by minority students, most of which are Black males (Advancement Project, 2010; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012). Many of these same reports would point to school-based practices and district policies, which result in the disproportionate punishment of minority students for misbehavior.

Ultimately, since the adoption of Zero Tolerance policies and the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) under the No Child Left Behind Act, the displacement of minority students from school has increased significantly, with consequences that include entry into the juvenile and adult correctional systems (Advancement Project, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2006). Realizing that many researchers have found correlations between school-based challenges, the displacement from school and entry into the justice system, a more focused analysis of school leadership is needed, where most student disciplinary actions are managed and enforced at the school-level. School leadership is critical in this area of research, because in most cases it is the school leader that creates the culture, climate and expectations for students, teachers and the entire school community. It is often the school leader that must determine the intent, implementation and enforcement of policies like Zero Tolerance, while also balancing school safety with outcome requirements by the district and state. Realizing this massive set of expectations for school administrators, it is important to investigate their enactment of these responsibilities at the school-level, where the displacement of minority students is helping to feed the school-to-prison pipeline each day.

**Review of the Literature**

Considering the fact that this study is situated in a state in the Southeast, where there is a documented history of displacement issues in its education system, as well as its juvenile justice system based on school-site arrests, an extensive examination of the literature including over 200
articles and sources was completed related to the topics presented. This includes sources related to alternative schools and trends that depict the issues perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline, studies regarding student displacement, school leadership in alternative and traditional school settings, and literature related to effective practices for disrupting this displacement. Therefore, the review of the literature in chapter two includes a detailed overview of the issues facing students of color in schools, the pipeline to prison, the effects and roles of alternative schools, and research regarding school administrators working within these specialized educational settings. Additional reviews of the literature focused on the roles of educational administrators in implementing disciplinary practices as well as their role in contributing to minority student displacement from the educational system.

In establishing a definition for what constitutes a school administrator for the purposes of this study, I have defined this role as the principal of the school and as the individual that is tasked with the management of school operations, including the development of the school culture, and the enforcement or over-sight of student disciplinary systems. Using this definition in partnership with a theoretical framework rooted on CRT principles, and the evidence related to the school-to-prison pipeline, this study author seeks to understand how the alternative school administrators view their roles as manager, motivators, and policy enforcers; while primarily seeking to understand how these administrators view and enact leadership with regard to their responsibilities for adopting and supporting effective practices in their schools. In this study, it was discovered that the participants enacted elements often reflected in servant leadership, distributed leadership, and situational leadership, with all theories situated on a foundation focused on relationships between students and staff. Using this ethic of care, and additional descriptions that were revealed in the data, both administrators displayed theories associated with
transformative leadership as well, which is in strong alignment with the tenets of CRT. These theories of leadership are also discussed in greater detail in the literature review in chapter two.

**Research Design and Methodology**

In Chapter Three, a comprehensive description and overview of the methodology is provided in conjunction with how the researcher explored the primary question posed in this study. The methodology used in the examination of the question is qualitative, using specifically portraiture as the tool to capture, and organize the data. Portraiture methodology involved the use of interviews with alternative school administrators about their enactment of leadership, their theory of leadership, student disciplinary rituals in their schools, as well as their development of school culture in support of students served in these specialized sites. By conducting a qualitative analysis of this topic using portraiture, I was able to gather data that is not easily collected via a standard survey process or other quantitative models of analysis. By engaging in critical dialogue with the school administrators involved in this study, I collected data which can potentially contribute to the existing literature about leadership in alternative settings, and perhaps help to foster continuous development in these sites by promoting critical reflection for the administrators who participated in this study. The two participants are individuals that I know well, and have had the privilege of observing their work up close and from afar. They are well respected for their leadership in their local districts and have successful outcomes as determined by district and business leaders in their communities. Having toured and evaluated hundreds of alternative settings all across the country, the two administrators in this study are doing things that separate them from others that I have met and observed. These differences have led to cultures in their schools that are asset-based, and focused on pushing students towards high school graduation. Their practices are different from others that I have observed.
and are important to understand in seeking to uncover their theories of leadership. I also consider one of the outcomes from this study to include a contribution to a broader discussion about what is working within these settings, with opportunities to share lessons about how these leaders are creating situations for individual student success and disrupting the pipeline to prison in their local school districts. Though the findings in this study are not able to be generalized to other school administrators or other school sites, such data may help to inform school practices at those sites included in this inquiry, while supporting a larger dialogue about practices that breakdown the pathways for minority student displacement.

The Study, Its Limitations and Conclusions

In Chapter Four, the data as collected from interviews and field notes is presented for each participant and their designated site independently. This data includes an overview of each participant, their background and characteristics about them as individuals and as administrators. This presentation of the data also provides details regarding their theories of leadership, their established rituals as principals at their schools, and the emerging themes that were presented over the course of the data collection process. Figures for each participant are created which depict their enactment of leadership, and the theories that they subscribe to in their work. These figures and a summary of the findings help to construct the portraits of each participant, which are presented more thoroughly in Chapter Five, in the research findings.

In addition to presenting the research findings in chapter five, the implications and limitations of the study are also discussed. Due to the well documented challenges in the two districts where this study was conducted, there is a great opportunity to learn about what the data and trends suggest about elevated rates of school discipline for minority students, as well as disproportional rates of dropout for Black students in this geographic area. However, it was
promising to consider how the two sites included in this study are working independently of each other towards a common goal, which is to help the students that are sent to their schools achieve and overcome obstacles so that they can progress towards high school graduation. At the same time, each site operates under considerably different circumstances and each face their own unique challenges. Since each site is isolated to its own district protocols and each are managed by different structures, one limitation of this study is the ability to make strong comparisons between the two sites. Due to their student demographics and the circumstances facing their districts in regards to student displacement, there are some elements that I will try to compare and contrast between the two participants, but ultimately each site is quite unique and the structures that dictate their outcomes make it impossible to generalize findings across the two schools.

An additional limitation to be discussed in greater detail rests with the researcher, who is a White male, and a former administrator working in non-traditional settings like the one’s included in this study. With this professional experience, I have embedded biases and beliefs that perhaps have influenced the way in which I view the topics discussed, and the responses reported by the participants. In addition, I have had tours with each of these schools prior to the commencement of this dissertation, and know the culture and practices at the schools better than someone who may approach this study in the absence of that background experience. I am also approaching this study using Critical Race Theory, and as a White male with very different experiences than that of the two African American male administrators in this inquiry, there are elements of my own experiential knowledge that may make it difficult at times to fully know or appreciate the challenges and obstacles shared by my participants. However, in building relationships with both participants and by engaging in honest dialogue, I hope that I have been
able to adequately capture their own experiential knowledge in the data, thus helping me to construct portraits of their enactment of leadership.
Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

With an extensive background working in alternative education and juvenile justice schools, I have witnessed first-hand the disparity facing many of the students placed in these non-traditional settings. In listening to many of the personal narratives of the youth placed at these sites and in reading documentation regarding many of their experiences in traditional school settings, I have a deep knowledge of the system and the all too common outcomes for those served in alternative programs. I also have had the opportunity based on course-work assignments, publications in partnership with my professor, and efforts related to conference presentations, to acquire a great deal of understanding about the school-to-prison pipeline and the impact that school disciplinary practices and curriculum access have on the displacement of students, which are often early triggers that results in the “push-out” (Fine, 1991) of children to the criminal justice system. Considering my diverse and expansive background spanning over twenty years in this segregated field of education, this review of the literature will provide insight that extends beyond my own interpretations of the inequities in the system. The following review of the research will expose the trends and outcomes associated with this sub-field of public education, while also looking to explore the research regarding the lived experiences of those involved in this particular context of schooling, including the students, teachers and administrators. The topics for exploration in this review of the literature include school discipline practices, alternative schooling, and school leadership as well as the overall impact that these elements may have on the displacement of students, particularly those of color,
from the educational institutions of our society. Due to this displacement, a review of the
literature must also examine the effects of the “push-out” (Fine, 1991) practices in education that
ultimately ends with too many children of color being funneled into the juvenile detention
centers and adult prisons across our nation.

Based on the fact that this study is situated in two alternative schools and is focused on
the enactment of leadership, this review of the literature will seek to examine relevant research
on alternative education, operations of alternative schools and the lived experiences of those
managing and providing leadership within these settings. In conducting a search of the literature
using Academic Search Premier for “Alternative School” topic-related publications since 2005
yielded 733 journal articles. From this set of articles, a great majority focused on non-education,
health-related risks, charter schools, and specific risk-related behaviors of students in alternative
schools, such as sexual activity, student violence, physical fitness and parental involvement.
Most were looking at deficit-based behaviors commonly associated with students at-risk in
alternative school settings (Lehr et al., 2004). Refining this search to support the topics of
interest produced a total of twenty-six recent articles in the literature related to aspects of
alternative education with some level of relevance to the question in this study. Though this
relevance is quite varied, not all will be inclusive in this review due to their level of relatedness
to the main question under investigation. In addition, during this search only five articles that
were identified related to leadership or principalship in alternative school sites and five that
focused primarily on disciplinary practices in these types of schools. This review of the
literature will explore these topics as they are related to the question, as well as how they relate
to the process for engaging in dialogue with the two administrators in the study about their
students, their staff, the parents and other actors they engage with in their alternative schools.
Push-Out to Prison – A Review of the Trends

In the United States, particularly since the adoption of integration efforts and the mass incarceration of Black people over the past several decades, the nation has witnessed multiple mechanisms that reinforce and contribute to the sorting and tracking of children of color in our society (Bauman, 2004; Leone et al., 2005). Many of these mechanisms are rooted in school practices that not only sort children within their school settings, but also place too many children of color on a pathway that leads them from our system’s classrooms to lives of despair and inequity (Noguera, 2003). The school-based practices that are enforced each day in schools are pushing children from institutions for learning and into detention facilities that typically create one-way tickets to the adult correctional systems of our country (Meiners, 2007).

There are approximately 60,500 youth confined in juvenile detention or residential facilities each day across the United States, with the rate of juvenile incarceration equating to “336 youth out of every 100,000 youth” being locked up nationally (Mendel, 2011, p. 2). This rate far exceeds any other nation based on recent globalized studies on juvenile incarceration (Mendel, 2011). States are spending over $5.7 billion annually to operate juvenile correctional facilities, with an overwhelming rate of those youth incarcerated in these facilities placed there for non-violent crimes, including misbehavior in schools (Justice Policy Institute, 2009). This level of spending for juvenile incarceration has not always been so pervasive, but actually was initiated when the United States experienced a large prison boom, where prison populations nationally “increased six fold between 1972 and 2000, leaving 1.3 million men in state and federal prisons” (Pettit & Western, 2004, p. 151). One of the greatest consequences of this boom was the direct attack and mass incarceration of Black males as evidenced by the fact that “by 2002, around 12 percent of Black men in their twenties were in prison or jail” (Pettie & Western,
This direct assault on minorities is quite visible as well, where “Black youths with no prior criminal records are six times, and Latino youths three times, more likely to be incarcerated than whites for the same offenses” (Wald & Losen, 2003, p. 4). The ongoing struggle documented consistently in the literature is related to the overwhelming disproportional representation of Black males in the juvenile and correctional systems, with a great deal of evolving literature suggesting that this oppressive force is initiated and perpetuated in schools (Advancement Project, 2010; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012). This process of displacing students of color from the educational system to the criminal justice system is commonly referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012) or the “school-to-jail link” (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011, p. 633). This pipeline is often believed to start with academic challenges in elementary school, which then becomes compounded by 3rd grade when most states utilize high-stakes assessments to measure student academic achievement (Advancement Project, 2010). Due to multiple factors, including socio-economic status, a disproportional number of minority students in 3rd grade, particularly Black students, end up failing to meet the required benchmarks for passing these high-stakes assessments, which ultimately results in a grade retention according to many policies across many states (Advancement Project, 2010). Once retained, the risk for a youth to dropout increases significantly, thus also increasing their risk to juvenile and/or adult incarceration (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009; Daniel et al., 2006). Though these links are often cited in the literature, the research surrounding why these trends and outcomes exist is less understood and in need of additional investigation.

In an attempt to better comprehend and identify the links between race, school performance, behavior and the pathway towards prison, one study funded by the Institute of
Education Sciences under the U.S. Department of Education was conducted by the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Northeastern University. In this research study, the team examined the “relationship between individual student race and discipline imposed by teachers after controlling for differences in the perceived conduct of the student, grades, school-related attitudes, and other factors” (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011, p. 644). In essence, the team conducted a thorough investigation that allowed them to truly examine if there was any difference between the rates of disciplinary actions taken against students of color, and if there appeared to be any other contributing factors that influenced this disproportional effect. To conduct this study, the researchers included more than “22,000 students from forty-five elementary schools, between the ages of 5 and 11, in a large suburban/urban/rural consolidated school district in a mid-Atlantic state” (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011, p. 645). Additional data included over a thousand teachers (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011) that allowed the team to evaluate statistical data regarding true disciplinary actions as well as perceptions/attitudes of both students and teachers included in the study (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011). From their research, the team found that after controlling for all other factors, that Black students were “more than 2 times as likely to receive at least one disciplinary report compared with all other races” (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011, p. 651). Even when controlling for grades or academic achievement, Black students were still more likely than their White counterparts to be targeted for school disciplinary actions based on this study’s findings (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011, p. 653). Ultimately, this study has contributed to the existing research focused on the school-to-prison pipeline by further exposing the disproportional enforcement of school discipline in elementary schools, which is resulting in higher rates of punishment for Black students as compared to Whites (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011). This early grade-level assault initiates the prison pathway, by potentially
supporting the disengagement of minority students by the abuse of school-based disciplinary practices, which leaves Black students feeling a “sense of being singled out as a group for punishment by teachers” (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011, p. 662). The findings from this study are not unique, with other scholars, such as Dunbar (1999, 2001), Ferguson (2000), Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) also identifying and supporting in their research the significant inequities that exist for minority students as reflected in the suspension and expulsion rates for this group of children in schools.

Research focused on the connection between schools and incarceration show consistent correlation between school disciplinary practices and entry into the juvenile system for minority youth (Skiba, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Though the correlations appear to be evident, the research focused on why these relationships exist and are perpetuated has been lacking (Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine, 2009). One study attempted to examine the relationship between school discipline and entry into the juvenile system by reviewing data from 53 counties in Missouri, with at least a 1% representation of Black youth in the total youth population (Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine, 2009). In this study, the researchers sought to examine “exclusionary practices (i.e., suspension, expulsion, etc.) in school for Black youth” and assess if it is predictable to find that this population of youth comes in contact with the juvenile system in the state of Missouri (Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine, 2009). The findings from this study reinforce the existing research by reflecting that there is a considerable discrepancy in the manner in which Black students receive school sanctions as compared to White students, with a positive correlation to the referral rates of Black students to the juvenile system (Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine, 2009).
Early literature focused on the disparity of school disciplinary practices date back to as early as 1975, when the Children’s Defense Fund recognized that Black students were targeted much more aggressively in school discipline processes than their White counterparts (Skiba, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). More recent research has unfortunately confirmed that not much has changed over the past three to four decades since that study when it comes to the unfair, punitive practices in schools regarding student discipline procedures. For example, a study completed by the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles concluded that minority students do in-fact receive harsher punishments for similar offenses as compared to White students (Shah, 2011). This study published findings using 2006 school discipline data provided from the U.S. Department of Education, and found significant disparity in middle school suspension rates between African-American students and White students (Shah, 2011). The disparity was as much as 18 percent for male students and as high as 14 percent for female students (Shah, 2011). An additional finding in this study reported that there were pervasive issues in many states regarding student cell phone policy enforcement, particularly in North Carolina in 2008-2009. Enforcement of first time cell phone policy violators in middle school resulted in the suspension of 33% Black student offenders, compared to 14.5% White students (Shah, 2011).

There have also been multiple examples of how school-based arrest disproportionately targets minority students, particularly Black children across the nation. Recently, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has filed a federal civil rights complaint with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights regarding the disproportionate number of school-based arrests of African American students in the Jefferson Parish School District in Louisiana (Southern Poverty Law Center, Retrieved on March 13, 2012). Based on the demographic data
for that district, “African American students represent 46% of the student population, while representing 76% of the school-based arrests” which supports the complaint filed on behalf of those students victimized by the practices across the district (Southern Poverty Law Center, Retrieved on March 13, 2012). The side effects of these school-based arrests, as cited in the complaint by the Southern Poverty Law Center include physical injuries to students, humiliation in front of peers, racist comments by law enforcement, and ultimately leading to students dropping out (Southern Poverty Law Center, Retrieved on March 13, 2012). Similar challenges like this are also cited by the SPLC in states like Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi, where complaints have also been filed to target the inequitable practices in schools and across the various state systems (Southern Poverty Law Center, Retrieved on March 13, 2012).

The implications from these school disciplinary findings are significant and have been correlated to multiple issues of racial inequality in schools and by comparison in the correctional institutionalization of Black males and other minority groups (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012). In fact, studies have shown that “90 percent of prison inmates are men, with incarceration rates for blacks about eight times higher than those for whites, and reflect that inmates on average have less than 12 years of schooling completed” (Pettit & Western, 2004, p. 152).

The literature on the school-to-prison pipeline and the “push-out” (Fine, 1991) of students, particularly those of color, helps to convey the call-to-action that must be made to continue the development and exploration of student-centered policies that help all children grow to graduate and to avoid incarceration. This review of the research also points to those efforts that must be made to provide high quality alternative schooling options that redirect students
from this pipeline towards lock-up, by ensuring educational services that address both academic and non-academic barriers for long-term achievement.

**History and Context of Alternative Schools in the United States of America**

Considering this backdrop, how do alternative schools, the site at which many students begin their entry into the pipeline, impact the “push-out” (Fine, 1991) effect and what is revealed in the literature about their operations? In addition, how do students served in these settings and teachers working in these sites view their lived experiences in these situated spaces, as well as the school leaders tasked with operating these non-traditional schools?

Alternative schools have been defined in multiple ways, both historically across the education system, and locally depending on the determined needs or goals of the local school district. Alternative schools experienced significant growth in the “late 1960’s and in the 1970’s as the civil rights movement gained momentum and a realization that traditional curriculum was not necessarily sufficient for all” (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 207). Part of this expansion was due to “Chapter 1 of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act that was designed to prevent student dropout and academic failure” (Land & Legters, 2002), with the “idea that some students may learn better in an environment structured differently than that of traditional settings” (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 207). Based on the U.S. Department of Education’s definition, an alternative school is a “public elementary/secondary school that: 1) addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, 2) provides nontraditional education, 3) serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or 4) falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 55).

Alternative schools, as a part of the evolving public education landscape, are growing in numbers in many parts of the country. In 1994, 2606 alternative schools operated separately
from traditional schools while that number grew to 10,900 public alternative schools in the 2000-2001 academic year serving 612,000 students according to the National Center for Education Statistics (Foley & Pang, 2006). By 2002 over one million students were served in these schools (Lehr et al., 2004). This same report based on the National Survey of States on alternative programs for at-risk students also shows that 48 states across the nation have some form of legislation regarding alternative schools (Lehr et al., 2004). In examining the legislation across the nation regarding these schools, Lehr et al. (2003) found that increasingly alternative schools are serving students who have been disruptive in their previous school, or are being used for students who have been suspended or expelled. Findings from a similar and more recent study, show that “many states have established enrollment criteria” which “often specify disruptive behavior, expulsion, or suspension as entrance criteria” (Lehr et al., 2009, p. 26). Youth may be placed at an alternative school for a number of reasons, as determined by the local school system or state policy; however the most common reasons for placement include (a) behavioral problems, (b) emotional concerns, (c) academic failure, (d) law violations, and (e) as a proactive alternative to increase the chances of academic or behavioral successes or both (Gagnon & Bottge, 2006). Based on data collected from public school districts, students are most often referred to alternative schools for a number of challenges, including: “physical aggression (61% of districts); disruptive verbal behavior (57%); possession, distribution, or use of controlled substances (57%); chronic academic failure (57%); truancy (57%); possession or use of firearms (42%); other weapons (51%); arrests or involvement with the criminal justice system (42%); teen parenthood (31%); and or mental health needs (27%)” (Carver et al., 2010, p. 11).
Some alternative education programs tend to emphasize a disciplinary orientation and others focus on developing an innovative program that seeks to meet students’ unique educational needs (Foley & Pang, 2006; Lehr & Lange, 2003). For the purpose of this study, literature related to alternative schools will focus on those schools that are designated to serve students at-risk of dropout, school failure or those students that have been displaced from their traditional school setting due to disciplinary practices. Considering this defined focus, there has been much debate on the purpose of alternative schooling, with some arguing whether they are designed “to shape students to better fit the system” or “better meet the needs” of students (Gregg, 1999, p. 107). Because of the negative connotations associated with alternative education, it is often found that individuals associate students served in these sites through a deficit lens, “branding them as mad, bad or sad” (Parsons, 1999, p. 52). Alternative schools often “struggle with negative stigmas as dumping grounds or warehouses for at-risk students who are falling behind, have behavioral problems, or are juvenile delinquents” (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 207). Students placed in these settings are also “thought to be incapable of participating in choices regarding their education” and are typically “labeled as ‘disruptive’ thus justifying their removal from public school” (Dunbar, 1999, p. 243). Considering these stigmas, most of the blame falls on the students for their failures who are seen as burdens (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997) further contributing to the attitudes and views towards these students as “expendable, disposable and wasted lives” (Bauman, 2004, p. 14). Studies involving students and teachers who work in these settings, often reflect that these individuals feel disconnected and perceive their existence as invisible to the other segments of the education system (Dunbar, 2001; Kim & Taylor, 2008). There has also been a great deal of controversy over the impact of alternative schools where studies have shown that “psychosocial outcomes are
‘overwhelmingly positive’ (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 17) however academic outcomes in alternative education yield mixed results (Jones, 2011, p. 221). In addition, the students in these sites often “experience a sense of hopelessness as a result of continued patterns of perceived failure” (Dunbar, 1999, p. 244) and lack exposure to “positive role models” who can help to further enhance their image of “self” (Dunbar, 1999, p. 243).

Though alternative education is an evolving part of the educational landscape in the United States, the work that takes place in these specialized schools has not been studied extensively as captured in the existing literature. The following studies as examined in this review of the literature help to convey the context, rituals and lived experiences of those operating in these spaces and reflect that there are still extensive gaps in the research regarding the role and behaviors of school administrators working in these sites.

**Alternative Schools in the Literature**

During the early expansion of alternative education in the 1960’s and 1970’s all the way up to the beginning of the twenty-first century, there are several authors cited in the research about the topic of alternative schools (Dunbar, 1999 & 2001; Flower et al., 2011; Gable et al., 2006). Much of the literature has evolved since that time, particularly with the adoption of federal legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (2004), which have reshaped the nation’s educational landscape, particularly regarding school accountability and services for students with special needs (Gable et al., 2006).

Though research is still developing for many of the topics associated with alternative schools, a comprehensive study of these specialized programs in Illinois revealed some interesting aspects of alternative operations in that state. The primary purpose of this study was
to “examine the characteristics of the administrative structures and physical facilities of alternative education programs and to describe the student population and educational services being offered to youth attending such programs” (Foley & Pang, 2006, p. 10). From their analysis of survey data, Foley and Pang (2006) discovered that most alternative schools in the state served student populations averaging about 90 pupils per site, with some serving enrollments over 400. As a comparison, a separate study in Virginia identified alternative schools in that state ranged in size from 54 students to as large as 310, reflecting similar sized institutions when looking beyond the boundaries of Illinois (Duke & Griesdoran, 1999). The demographics for the students served in these sites across the state of Illinois also revealed some interesting, yet contradicting information as compared to national trends. In Illinois, the students served in alternative schools were represented as 63% Caucasian, 31% African American, 6% Hispanic, Native American and Asian backgrounds (Foley & Pang, 2006). The authors of this study suggest that “more recent reviews of characteristics of alternative education programs indicated that predominant populations of alternative school populations were representative of the demographics of their communities” (Foley & Pang, 2004). However, other studies, such as one conducted by Duke and Muzio (1978) suggest that almost half of the students served in alternative education are Black, with national trends reflecting similar findings for students of color as it relates to suspensions, expulsions and their displacement from traditional school settings (Advancement Project, 2010; Hierschfield, 2008; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012). Though the research from Foley and Pang (2006) appears to be in conflict with studies in recent years, since the adoption of the No Child Left Behind Act, the literature has consistently shown that there is a disproportional representation of minority students in alternative education programs across most of the nation (Advancement Project, 2010; Hierschfield, 2008), with many
studies before this policy reflecting the same practice (Edelman, 1975; George, 1993; Dunbar, 1999). In a state-wide review of population demographics reported by the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), the Black or African American population in Illinois is 14.8%, which is nearly half of that represented for Black students in the alternative education programs as reported in this study. Considering these contradictions, greater scrutiny may be needed as it relates to the reports about student demographic representation by the authors in this study. An additional trend uncovered in Illinois, regarding the students served at these sites, found that half of those enrolled had a diagnosed emotional or behavioral disability, with the availability and access to teachers with special education credentials limited in many of the sites (Foley and Pang, 2006).

From this study, and looking beyond student characteristics, it was determined that a great majority of the alternative schools in Illinois operated in facilities that were off-campus from the other traditional schools. Over 80% of these specialized programs were providing school services in buildings that were not a part of the traditional school settings in their districts (Foley & Pang, 2006). In addition, over half of the schools reported that they had little to no access in their alternative school facilities for physical education, libraries or science laboratory activities (Foley & Pang, 2006). This point, though specific to Illinois, does raise the question about equitable access to academic resources for students served in these settings. Without many of these resources, students may not find themselves prepared for re-entry to their traditional school setting or to other post-secondary opportunities as compared to their counterparts in traditional schools.

When examining the alternative schools in Illinois, this study also looked at the levels of supports provided to students in these sites. Most of the alternative schools reported that their primary support services were provided by school social workers, counselors, paraprofessionals,
school nurses, psychologists, and vocational teachers (Foley & Pang, 2006). Also, considering the importance of parent and family involvement, according to Foley and Pang (2006) in their evaluation, only 33% or less engaged these support systems in their child’s education at the alternative school. From the findings in their research, Foley and Pang (2006) also noted that alternative schools did employ certified teachers for general education curriculum, while at the same time; there were also a large number of uncertified personnel working at these sites. Studies have indicated that when student enrollments fall below 50 for an alternative school site, that staffing these schools with qualified personnel is often challenging due to the diverse academic course offerings needed for general curriculum and special education (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999).

Though the findings in this study by Foley and Pang (2006) cannot be generalized beyond the context of Illinois, the characteristics identified did provide insight in developing topics for discussion with the two administrators in my own study, as well as considerations for exploration of the main question. Since my study examines the enactment of leadership at two different alternative schools by their designated school administrators, it is important to consider research regarding practices within these specialized school sites in the literature. To expand upon this review of school practices, this examination of the literature will turn its attention to effective strategies and rituals in alternative education.

Over the past 40 years there has been a growing body of literature focused on alternative schools and non-traditional education programs in the United States (Flower et al., 2011); however there are few empirical studies that address the question of what constitutes quality alternative schools (Gable et al., 2006). In a review of 39 articles by Flower et al., focused on alternative education programs, only 29 of these studies included literature on effective practices
in these schools (Flower et al., 2011). This focus on effective practices becomes critical in understanding how students can be best served in this system once engaged, while also seeking to better understand how various academic and behavioral challenges can be best supported in reducing referrals or even school displacement itself. From the 29 studies which utilized identified effective practices, the analysis of the literature found that there are nine strategies in alternative education proven to be effective in supporting positive student outcomes, which are:

- Small classroom ratios (low student to teacher ratios)
- Highly structured classrooms with behavioral management
- Positive methods to increase appropriate behavior
- School-based adult mentor
- Functional behavioral assessments
- Social skills instruction
- Effective academic instruction
- Parent Involvement
- Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) (Flower et al., 2011, p. 491)

Tobin and Sprague (2000) established the first eight practices based on the results of their research on alternative education programs. The last practice, related to positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), was proposed by Nelson et al. (2009) in order to improve student academic and social behavior with a systems change approach (Flower et al., 2011).

School-based practices, such as PBIS have become a part of the growing effort to provide in-school services and supports to students in schools, with an evolving presence in alternative schools as well. PBIS is a “data-driven framework for organizing (a) positive, preventive, and evidence-based practices that result in desired youth outcomes, and (b) systems features (e.g.,
teaming structures, professional development supports, staff recognition) that promote sustained implementation with fidelity” (Simonsen et al., 2013, p. 4). In an effort to serve and support students with diverse needs, many alternative schools are adopting PBIS practices to ensure adequate interventions for the students in their programs. Since a large number of alternative schools are serving students with behavioral challenges, initial evidence (Lehr & Lange, 2003) suggests that typical behavior management practices in these settings may be “more punitive than positive” (Simonsen et al., 2013, p. 4). In alternative schools, it is often believed that “when a youth fails to respond to typical interventions, a common ‘reflex’ is to become more reactive and punitive” (Simonsen et al., 2013, p. 4). Several studies have examined the role and impact of PBIS in schools, as well as a few that have focused their attention on alternative school settings (Farkas et al., 2012; Simonsen et al., 2011). Studies that have focused on alternative settings have found that the use of PBIS, with some modifications for use at alternative settings, have resulted in positive changes in behavior as well as reductions in the need for crisis-related interventions (Simonsen et al., 2013). Though the primary focus of my study and main question are not directly related to the role or use of PBIS in the two alternative school settings under investigation, the evolving data and research on PBIS is helpful in looking at how interventions and supports are utilized in these sites. The two school administrators participating in this study are using PBIS, or similar intervention methods for supporting students in their schools, but how does this practice relate to their enactment of leadership for addressing student discipline or even student displacement from school, as well as overall motivation? In exploring PBIS or other interventions as a methodology for addressing student needs, this topic of supports is woven into the deep discussions with each administrator as the enactment of their leadership is examined.
Realizing that alternative education is still a fairly new and evolving part of the public education system, more and more researchers are starting to look at effective practices and outcomes at these schools to see what is working at these specialized sites. As Flower et al. (2011) found, there are some common effective practices taking place in alternative schools, with more and more studies finding the impact that PBIS can have on students in these schools when implemented with fidelity (Farkas, 2012). Prior to the research by Flower et al. (2011), Tobin and Sprague (2000), and Nelson et al. (2009), another set of researchers, Quinn and Rutherford (1998) had identified six components of alternative education deemed to be essential to quality. The first component focused on the assessment of academic and nonacademic behavioral needs, in an effort to identify and align the most appropriate supports. In addition to these assessments, the adoption and use of flexible curriculum that supports the academic as well as social and life skills needed for students to achieve both in and out of the classroom, along with instructional strategies that support diverse learning styles and abilities. As part of these six components identified by Quinn and Rutherford (1998), they also found that there is a significant need to ensure transitional services to support and connect the alternative school and traditional school sites, as well as connections with the community. As an extension of transitional supports, the provision of services both internal at the alternative school as well as those that can be accessed in the community are vital to meeting the diverse needs of students served at these specialized sites. Finally, due to the high representation of students with disabilities often served at alternative settings, the provision of trained and adequate personnel to support this group of students is vital to ensure a high quality education and related supports (Gable et al. 2006, p. 7). Though these six components may appear to still have a high level of relevance for supporting the needs of students, it is important to note that these elements were identified by Quinn and
Rutherford in 1998, prior to the adoption of NCLB and other recent federal education reform efforts.

In exploring effective strategies and components of alternative education programs, it is also important to note six core characteristics identified by Hughes et al., (2006) that distinguish an alternative school from other traditional education programs. First, there must be a clearly defined referral process for students to be placed at these sites, along with a comprehensive evaluation process to identify the needs of students to be served. Alternative schools are typically designed to meet the needs of specific populations, therefore using a referral and evaluation process is often unique to these settings as compared to the mainstream traditional school setting. Second, the fact that students often served at these schools have specific needs in regards to their learning, the adoption of nontraditional teaching practices and curriculum that is aligned with “real-world expectations” is a common deviation from the traditional school settings (Hughes et al., 2006). Third and fourth, the use of interventions and practices that support social, emotional and behavioral change all within a school setting that promotes a safe and positive environment, by staff that are trained to implement such supports as well as academic services is common to many alternative settings (Hughes et al., 2006). The final two characteristics expect that alternative schools, as compared to their traditional counterparts, adopt transitional services to help students effectively return to traditional settings, while using data and evaluation at the school to make informed decisions about academic, behavior and other practices implemented at the site (Hughes et al., 2006). This set of effective practices and quality components is important for consideration, as they serve as a set of guiding strategies that are explored in this study through the dialogue with the school administrators participating in this inquiry.
Though the above studies suggest practices that are effective, the review of the literature beyond their studies reflect little on detailed examples of peer-reviewed articles or research related to these topics, specifically in alternative school settings. A recent study by Gut and McLaughlin (2012) focused on the role of alternative education and how the adoption of such a program impacted “office disciplinary referrals in public schools prior to and following the development of a partnership with an alternative education provider” (Gut & McLaughlin, 2012, p. 231). In this study, the researchers examined the partnership established by the alternative education provider with three school districts, ultimately serving 706 students across six alternative sites, with a focus on investigating the impact that these services made on student disciplinary referrals. In analyzing the data, the researchers found that “significant decreases were identified for four categories of harmful behaviors, including threats/intimidation, tobacco use, weapon-knife violations and a near significant decrease in fighting” (Gut & McLaughlin, 2012, p. 234-235). Though these findings do reflect safer schools after the partnership with the provider as measured by reductions in harmful behaviors, it was interesting to see that overall the number of office referrals did not necessarily decrease (Gut & McLaughlin, 2012). There are limitations acknowledged by the researchers for this study, including the analysis of a small sample size and the fact that they did not examine outcomes from districts where partnerships were terminated with the provider (Gut & McLaughlin, 2012). It is important to also note that the number of referrals for harmful behaviors may have decreased due to the fact that students with disruptive behaviors were removed and placed at the alternative education provider’s program, therefore they were no longer enrolled at their previous school and therefore not generating an office referral (Gut & McLaughlin, 2012). Considering this study and its findings, it is important to consider if there were actual behavioral changes or if the removal of a student
to another site promoted the statistical changes identified? This process of sorting students and displacing them to an alternative site may have positive impacts on referral data once they are removed, but how do students behave once at an alternative school and what aspects of alternative schools perhaps promote behavioral changes? Is there something actually different at an alternative school or are these sites simply dumping grounds for students that are sorted and displaced from the traditional school settings of our education system (Dunbar, 1999)?

In examining this topic more closely, a separate study focused on the experience of students in regards to their interactions with alternative education programs by investigating the “satisfaction of chronically disruptive students and their families following mandatory alternative school assignment” (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2012, p. 3). In this study, the researchers collected survey data from 189 clients, where 79% of the student respondents were boys and 21% were girls. The majority of students were African American (81%) while Euro-Americans represented another 18% (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2012). The students in this study attended the alternative school following a due process hearing for serious violations of the code of conduct” and were assigned to this school for a period of “45, 90 or 180 days, with 84% of the students assigned for a 45 day period.” (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2012, p. 7). In examining the results of the surveys administered to students and their families during exit interviews, the researchers found that a “majority of the responses were positive” (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2012, p. 8). In fact, for “10 out of 14 questions” on the student survey instrument, “between 54% and 98% answered positively in their responses relating to their satisfaction with the alternative school program” (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2012, p. 8). Upon completing the alternative school program, “98.4% of the students expected to graduate from high school” while “approximately 94% felt the program helped them to do better work” (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby,
In addition, almost 86% “felt the program helped to keep them out of trouble at school, tutoring helped them to do better work, and the staff helped them get services needed to stay in school”; however “only 33.3% felt this program was good for them” (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2012, p. 8). Family surveys showed overwhelming positive responses, “in 19 of 20 questions” with the “lowest positive response relating to the student and family getting needed services” (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2012, p. 9). Considering that this school was a mandatory placement for severely disruptive students, with no other options presented, the results reported through the surveys did reflect high satisfaction about the alternative program by both the students and the families being served by the school (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2012). The findings presented in this study, which are unique to this setting, provide insight into how student and family satisfaction, through the use of exit surveys to collect data, can be used as a method to monitor service delivery and as a model to achieve a level of accountability to those that are served by these alternative school programs. The data collected from such efforts can also be used to guide and inform practices, policies and to monitor school culture, which are all critical aspects of any educational setting and may also serve as a valuable tool to support administrators as they enact leadership (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2012).

Looking beyond this research focused on effective practices, client satisfaction and components of alternative schools as highlighted in the literature, another study on these specialized sites has looked at the role and impact of school climate from the perspectives of students attending these schools and the faculty who teach and support students in the classrooms” (Quinn et al., 2006). Using purposeful sampling, the researchers surveyed 147 students in grades 7 thru 12, and 135 teachers from the school sites in the study, representing programs in a county education system focusing on categories such as “clarity of school rules,
fairness of rules, planning and action, respect for students, safety, and student influence” (Quinn et al., 2006, p. 14). The researchers found that “students largely feel that the psychosocial climate of their school is one in which the rules are equitably enforced, fair, and valid” with “teachers and administrators treating them with dignity” (Quinn et al., 2006, p. 15). Findings from the teachers working in these sites showed that they were “more sympathetic to the challenges of their students and that they operated with non-authoritarian attitudes” as it related to working with the students in their schools (Quinn et al., 2006, p. 16). Overall, researchers in this study determined that the schools focused on establishing a “caring, non-authoritarian learning environment and populating them with adults who are sympathetic to the special needs of these students and their families” (Quinn et al., 2006, p. 16). Whereas the students in these schools reported that they felt respected by their teachers and showed levels of school attachment and interpersonal competence (Quinn et al., 2006).

By exploring the literature on school elements such as effective practices, strategies, interventions, student and family satisfaction as well as school climate, this study can examine topics that are deemed to be critical in the alternative education field, as my investigation seeks to uncover and analyze the enactment of leadership by the two designated administrators involved in this research project.

**Examining the Lived Experiences at Alternative Schools**

The research on alternative education is still a developing field, with most articles reviewed focusing on the deficits of students served at these schools, disciplinary practices in districts that result in students being placed at these specialized sites, the challenges associated with these sites and effective practices highlighted in the literature. This information is helpful in understanding the context of alternative schools through a lens focused on trends and
practices, but it does little to help one understand how those residing in these spaces experience life in these sites. Based on my own lived and professional experiences in these types of schools, the literature examined thus far helps to reinforce many of the aspects that I assumed about these settings; however it does not capture the experiential knowledge that is critical to this study. Using various methodologies, the ability to bring “voice” to those that are often “the silenced ones” (Giroux, 1988), it is critical that narrative data be used as a method to gather and convey the experiences of those in the alternative school spaces of our systems.

When seeking to capture the experiences of those that reside in the alternative school spaces of our society, the research is often conducted using qualitative methods to gather the narrative data. Throughout the literature reviewed on alternative schools, there are a number of studies that utilize qualitative research, particularly those that attempt to bring “voice” (Corbett and Wilson, 1995; Giroux, 1988) to the students and professionals working in these non-traditional environments. One such study at an alternative school in the mid-west utilized critical theory to examine the perspectives of students, teachers and administrators working at this site with a focus on “determining whether the school benefited students to the extent that it broke the cycle of educational inequality” (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 207). In examining the school and its potential “benefits” using critical theory, the researchers approached the inquiry with the goal of determining if the school “helped disenfranchised students succeed” or did it continue the “work to benefit the elite upper class to preserve their existing social privilege, interests, and knowledge at the expense of less powerful groups” (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 208)? In conducting the study, the researchers used case study methodology, where they “used classroom observations, conducted open-ended, structured interviews with 9 students, 4 teachers, 1 administrative assistant, and 1 associate superintendent, and also examined documents such as
curriculum” (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 209). From their analysis of the interviews and supporting data two categories were established based on emerging themes. These two themes as captured by the students, teachers and other participants were defined as “positive views” and “negative views” as it related to their experiences at the alternative school (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 211) and are organized as follows:

**Positive Views**

a) “I went from a dumping ground to a safety net”

b) “I do not want to go back to the regular high school”

**Negative Views**

a) “I want to go to college” – due to lack of college prep support via curriculum or career counseling

b) “I do not like the new building” – the previous school site was “more like a home than a school”. The school had moved to a newer, larger facility and this theme was revealed after the relocation.

c) “We are left out of everything” – this comment is a direct reflection of the teacher’s opinions regarding their views that they are treated “as second class citizens” by the district (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 211-217)

Though the participants involved in the study identified positive aspects of the school, the researchers found that this school failed to provide “a program that helps disenfranchised students succeed” and ultimately did not provide a “meaningful and equitable alternative education” (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 207-217). This determination was made based on the fact that this school “lacked the systemic support that would break the cycle of educational
inequality” as determined by a lack of “rigorous curriculum” and “lack of support for the teachers and their professional growth” (Kim & Taylor, 2008, p. 216-217).

Phillips (2011) added to this topic by examining the “conditions of learning, both positive and negative, that students in an alternative school experienced both in and out of the classroom setting” (p. 668). In this investigation, the researcher utilized case study methodology and facilitated interviews with eleven students at an alternative school in the Pacific Northwest; analyzed artifacts, such as student journal responses; and conducted direct observations as methods to gather data. Using a social-cognitive theory lens for analysis, Phillips (2011) was able to examine both the positive and negative experiences of the students in the alternative school by capturing their personal stories, and how these stories about learning occurred both in and out of the classroom setting. The first finding of the study suggests that “social and emotional learning” are both critical for the students in the study, with the participants favoring an “environment that fosters a positive climate and pro-social relationships” (Phillips, 2011, p. 692). Based on this finding, the researcher encourages that educators and administrators ensure the establishment of an environment that promotes a positive climate where students feel accepted and confident in their abilities. The second theme of this study was the need for “autonomy”, with the recommendation that educators provide students with “authority to have some power over their learning” (Phillips, 2011, p. 692). By promoting this practice and expectation for ownership over their learning, students are empowered and motivated, while also feeling a sense of success as a student. The third outcome revealed in this study was the theme of relevance, where what is relevant to the individual student can lead to enhanced motivation (Phillips, 2011). Above all else in this study, the researcher concluded that the inclusion of student voice as part of the development of teaching and learning practices for at-risk students is
important (Phillips, 2011, p. 694). By engaging students in the process of developing curriculum and practices at schools, both in and out of the classroom, the level of motivation and sense of power over learning is elevated (Phillips, 2011). According to this study, the role of the teachers and the daily rituals at the school play an integral part in how students perceive their role and own power in the learning process.

A separate study by Jones (2011), approached alternative education by looking at the narratives of students learning in an alternative environment and teachers working within this system. Jones focused his study on looking at how students’ “development of engagement in the context of supportive relationships and a caring school community” were conveyed through their narratives, where “engagement is viewed as the motivational precursor to achievement” (Jones, 2011, p. 219). Using an interpretive ethnographic approach, Jones conducted his study at an alternative learning center in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, capturing the narratives of 24 students and 12 teachers at this school (Jones, 2011). In addition to using interviews, the researcher conducted classroom and school observations to support the analysis of the data, which led to the establishment of patterns and emergent themes (Jones, 2011). Jones (2011) found that “students spoke of creating connections with caring teachers within a close and supportive community” and that this supported the students’ emotional engagement in the school (Jones, 2011, p. 232). From these narratives, and unlike the study by Kim & Taylor (2008) which found unfavorable academic achievements, Jones found that the school had “impressive test scores and graduation rates” due to “attending to students’ core needs” (Jones 2011, p. 233).

Again, these findings like others cannot be generalized, but the results provide insight into developing deep and descriptive dialogue about rituals and practices at alternative schools. In addition, the narratives of the participants in the study by Kim and Taylor (2008), as well as
the one by Jones (2011), the themes that emerged from these investigations lend support in describing some of the positive and meaningful aspects established in many alternative school settings.

Cassidy and Bates (2005) conducted a study that focused on the “ethic of care with a population of underserved at-risk adolescents” that had a history of criminal activity and dropping out or being expelled from school due to troublesome behaviors (Cassidy & Bates, 2005, p. 66). In this qualitative case study situated in ethnographic tradition, Cassidy and Bates (2005) sought to bring “voice to the narratives of administrators, teachers, and students as they perceive and actualize care in policies and practices” (p. 73) at an alternative school. Spending over sixteen months at a suburban alternative school, conducting interviews, observations and document reviews, the team of researchers engaged administrators, teachers and students in the study. As the researchers approached this inquiry, they established a strong foundation in the literature on the importance of “caring” as it relates to the healthy development of students and that “caring” serves as “a catalyst for positive social, emotional, and academic development” (Cassidy & Bates, 2005, p. 67-68). Cassidy and Bates discovered that particular themes emerged from the administrators and teachers around “a culture of caring; a focus on relationships; a perspective of serving the whole child; creating the right environment; showing respect; adapting curriculum; empathetic and non-reactive” (2005, p. 76-87). The students in this study reported “feeling welcomed; being acknowledged and understood; feeling respected; receiving needed help; and being a friend” (Cassidy and Bates, 2005, p. 87-91). From these themes, the researchers were amazed at the reoccurring construct of “caring relationships” and the fact that students felt extremely connected to the school, its teachers and its principal (Cassidy & Bates, 2005, p. 96). Through these relationships,
“the school staff gave students a voice in decision making about curriculum, built friendships with students, expanded the curriculum beyond the classroom walls into the community, worked with students’ families and their peers, and, as such, provided students with a positive and supportive learning environment that was poles apart from the social and economic marginalization they experienced in the wider society” (Cassidy & Bates, 2005, p. 97).

Cassidy and Bates (2005) found from their investigation of this school, that the original founders created an environment that promoted safety, as well as a climate of respect. Furthermore, their study found that the school maintained a nurturing atmosphere, where staff cared for their students and these youth, who were previously identified as at-risk for dropping out were thriving in this school (Cassidy & Bates, 2005).

Adding to this discussion on student voice, other studies have contributed to the literature by collecting data on student perspectives of their alternative school placements as well as their perspectives on their former traditional schools. By examining this information as a comparative process, student voice can be used to articulate strengths and challenges associated with each setting, both positive and negative. Using case study methodology, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with thirty-three students from an alternative school in Austin, Texas in an effort to examine student perceptions about their schooling experiences both in their existing alternative school as well as their previous school placement (Lagana-Riordan et al. 2011, p. 107). From the analysis of this study, specific themes emerged about each setting as it related to the students’ perspectives of their experiences at traditional schools. One of the first themes was focused on the lack of positive relationships with their teachers. Students often noted that their poor relationship with their teachers was a major factor in their lack of success in school as well
as the lack of individual support (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). In addition to their relationships, students at this alternative school indicated that they felt unsafe at their traditional school settings, with the environments feeling “hostile” and often feeling as though they were victims of bullying or witnesses to school violence (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011, p. 109). A third theme that emerged suggested that students perceived rules and authority at traditional schools to be harsh and extremely strict (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). A final theme that was evident in their research, revealed that students often perceived their relationships with peers to be challenging and many times their interactions with peers made them feel threatened (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). In comparison, when asked about their experiences at their alternative school, students’ perceptions revealed that they had positive relationships with their teachers in these settings, with access to individual help as needed. In addition to these positive relationships, students indicated that they believed teachers understood their challenges and was able to help them work through their problems (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). The students also identified that their alternative school helped them to improve their maturity and ability to act in a responsible manner, while also building better peer relationships in these specialized sites (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).

From this study and the related findings, the researchers identified a set of suggestions in an effort to help teachers and schools to better support at-risk students. The first suggestion is to ensure a strong focus on teacher and student relationships, which are supportive and free from judgment (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). An additional recommendation is to ensure that the school and teachers connect to the homes and families of their students so that these connections can help to support the efforts of the school in meeting their child’s needs (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). Further recommendations offered by Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) indicated that alternative operations should adopt practices that work to improve school climate, including
efforts to be flexible in the administration of rules, the use of alternative consequences and a strong focus on the strengths and accomplishments of the students served at the school. Finally, the researchers suggest that in order to effectively impact students in alternative schools, that these institutions should ensure and reinforce access to relevant professional development for personnel working in these environments as well as student access to support services to target other identified risk factors, both in the school and in the community (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011, p. 112).

The importance of relationships is also reinforced in a study by Daniels and Arapostathis (2005), where researchers conducted a study with 4 boys who attended an alternative school in a “medium-sized southwestern town”, with a focused effort on “learning about what factors they saw as contributing to their school successes and failures” (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005, p. 34-39). The alternative school in this study had an enrollment of 116 students, which were primarily Hispanic boys from high-poverty areas across the community (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005). Using a “grounded theory approach, the researchers conducted interviews with each of the four boys, and to maintain consistency, they asked the same questions in the same order during each interview” (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005, p. 41). In addition to the interviews, several hours of observations were also conducted, with final transcriptions used to code themes that emerged from the data (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005). From the data, the researchers learned that (a) building relationships with teachers was important; (b) being interested in school assignments supports motivation and engagement; and (c) feeling competent to perform tasks helped to support feelings of success (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005). From this study, the researchers found that it is important for educators to help students connect to the curriculum by making it relevant and something that is of interest to them personally. It is equally important
that students that are at-risk and struggle with disengagement, find teachers to be helpful and caring. Building trust with the teachers and strong relationships further helps connect the students to the school, while also supporting engagement in the learning process. The use of extrinsic rewards was not particularly important to the students in this study, such as grades, points or other methods of motivation (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005).

Using narrative to tell the stories of students in alternative schools, a study situated in Indiana, utilized critical ethnographic methodology as a way to “study a disadvantaged and marginalized alternative school and its students” while seeking to understand “the nature of culture and human agency at a more comprehensive level” (Watson, 2011, p. 1502). This investigation engaged ten students at the SEI alternative school, four of the personnel, the school principal, and a district administrator using interviews to collect a majority of the data, with field notes from observations to support the analysis and coding for emergent themes. During the process of collecting data, the researcher conducted visits to the school over a one-year period, with each visit taking place about every two weeks for approximately two to four hours each time (Watson, 2011). The alternative school shared space at a facility with a charter school and a community college, utilizing only a single classroom with two smaller offices for teachers to use. This element was of particular interest due to the fact that both of the alternative sites under investigation in my own study share space with other educational programs and one of the two sites has very limited space for its daily use. From Watson’s (2011) study, the space and climate for the operation of the SEI alternative school helped to support and reinforce a “relaxed environment and the teachers’ willingness to talk with the students and build relationships” (Watson, 2011,p. 1518). Other significant findings from this study included students having flexibility in their schoolwork and the ability to use diverse methods for learning, thus ultimately
supporting student motivation (Watson, 2011). In addition, Watson (2011) found that the school was smaller, more personal and had an established culture that was student-centered, with teachers reinforcing student responsibility for their academic development. An additional theme suggested that teachers established “open and collaborative conversations with the students” and “reinforced strong, personal and meaningful relationships” (Watson, 2011, p. 1519). Though most of the findings were positive, one common trend from the interviews revealed that both students and staff expressed “feelings of isolation and alienation from others and the school district, as well as feeling misunderstood” (Watson, 2011, p. 1520). From this study, there are similar findings to others that have been discussed thus far; however there was an additional aspect that looked at the environment, beyond just that of the climate created by the personnel and that of the administrator. Though the culture and climate of this school was most significant, there were themes related to the environment itself worth noting. The space used for this operation appeared to reinforce the working relationships between the students with their peers, the students and the teachers and the personnel with each other. Though this was not the key finding, but again, a theme that is worth noting as my own study also considers the environment, the relationships and the rituals that are reinforced by the administrators at each site, and how these elements interact in relationship to their enactment of leadership.

Many of the studies reviewed thus far have focused on alternative schools, their students and in some cases have included some descriptive data from teachers and administrators at these schools to enhance the retelling of the lived experiences within these settings. In most studies, student voices were included to discover themes in the narrative from across the student sample population included in the investigation. Some studies have taken the approach for giving students a voice by listening to a single voice and examining this individual’s own personal
experiences and perceptions regarding alternative schooling. One study involving an individual student’s voice, named Kevin, engaged qualitative case study methodology using narrative inquiry to examine his experiences in alternative education at a school referred to as Borderlands (Kim, 2011). Borderlands is an alternative school operating in a set of six portable buildings in an urban community where a new housing community has just started (Kim, 2011, p. 80). This school serves approximately 350 students, with most of them being placed there due to suspension and expulsion. Kevin Gonzales, the main participant in the study, is a senior at Borderlands who is “17 years old, half-Hispanic and half-Caucasian, from a working-class family” (Kim, 2011, p.84). Kevin does not know where his biological father resides and lives with his mother, older brother, his fourth step-father and two of his step-father’s children (Kim, 2011, p. 84). The researcher in this study provides a very descriptive image of Kevin and continues to engage the reader in the story by conveying the participant’s experience in Borderlands through the data collected from interviews, observations and document reviews such as school documentation and portfolio documents from the participant (Kim, 2011). Throughout the five month study and data collection process, the researcher found that Kevin viewed his alternative school experience in a negative way. Kevin felt like his school was a “dumping ground or sometimes as an interface between the school and the prison, like a juvenile detention center” (Kim, 2011, p. 90). He references the “frequent backpack searches, implementation of a disciplinary policy such as zero tolerance, and the way students are referred to this school” and that “Borderlands is far from being an ideal haven” (Kim, 2011, p. 90). Though Kevin’s story is but a single view of this experience, it is his experience; it is the way that he has viewed this world at Borderlands. Telling his story cannot be generalized beyond this setting, but the experiences that he shares may “invite readers to identify a problem(s) that might not have
occurred to them before in their practices, or more specifically, a problem(s) that might have been driving their students like Kevin to the edge” (Kim, 2011, p. 90).

In reading Kevin’s story, as experienced by him at Borderlands, as well as the narratives captured by the other studies presented thus far, the power of retelling the lived experiences of others is significant and offers a perspective that is often lost through empirical research. By bringing voice to others through narrative inquiry, the students who reside in the specialized spaces of alternative education can share with us their stories, while providing us with the opportunity to identify themes and trends that cast a larger view of this segregated space. Again, my own study was not focused directly on the voices of students; however the stories that they have shared with the administrators in my investigation, as well as the stories that I have heard over the past two decades, have contributed to a deep dialogue in my interviews with the participants at the two alternative school sites. Combining these stories with the research discussed in this section can help to capture the voices of the administrators as shaped by the voices of their students and others that are situated in these settings.

The School Principal’s Perspective

This review of the research has explored the context of alternative schools through the experiences of students, some by teachers and less by administrators. In my study, the primary participants are the school administrators, who are tasked with making daily decisions regarding curriculum, school operations, personnel management, school safety and student discipline. In examining the existing literature about school administrators working in alternative schools, the research is extremely limited, with only a few studies providing some-level of relevance to the main question in this investigation. In this section, these studies will be summarized and their
relatedness to this investigation of school administrators at two alternative schools will be discussed.

Working in alternative education involves diverse challenges and environments. In many states, alternative education includes non-traditional school sites for students displaying disciplinary challenges as well as students served in schools that operate within the juvenile justice and correctional systems. The research on school leaders working in alternative education is minimal (Price et al. 2010) and yet a large number of students nationally come into contact with these specialized schools each year. One article examined the existing research on school leaders and preparation for school administrators working in alternative school settings. Using a survey data collection process, researchers collected responses from 30 administrators, with this group comprised of traditional school administrators and alternative education administrators. This was intentional so that comparisons could be made about the two groups to see if there were any differences related to: “(a) prioritizing the importance of personal qualities and core values; (b) organizational engagement, particularly around enabling and encouraging feedback; (c) decision making and inspiring others” (Price et al., 2010, p. 303). From their analysis, the researchers did discover some variances between the two groups. The administrators working in alternative education placed greater importance on “encouraging inquiry, being decisive, moving forward, networking and change” as well as making sure “that they are accessible, ready to handle complex problems, and establishing close relationships with staff and students” (Price et al. 2010, p. 305). Traditional school administrators rated higher in the areas of “engaging individuals, inspiring others, and facilitating change” (Price et al., 2010, p. 305). From the outcomes of this survey analysis, the researchers propose that new and focused professional development is needed for school administrators working in alternative
education, with increased focus on how to implement effective instructional practices proven to support the learning of at-risk students, with a high priority on ensuring that “relationship-based and research-supported approaches” are adopted to enhance student engagement and outcomes (Price et al., 2010, p. 306). Though this study is focused on comparative analysis between traditional and alternative school administrators, the findings help to identify that there are established differences between the participants in how these two roles approach their work, as well as the differentiated needs to support their professional development in support of students.

In thinking more deeply about the differences between working in a traditional setting versus an alternative school, one study approaches this topic using the voice of a school administrator who transitioned from the traditional school environment to an alternative school program. The opportunity to examine this transition, using narrative inquiry and learning from the lived experience of a school administrator in this situation is of interest, considering that the main study of my own work is focused on capturing the experiences and voices of school administrators working in these specialized settings. The school identified in the research from this study is in Australia, which may not seem to be a critical element; however when seeking to identify similar studies in the United States, nothing was found in the peer-reviewed literature specifically documenting the lived experience of a school administrator transitioning from a traditional setting to an alternative site. At “Harmony High, an alternative school in a metropolitan community in Australia, the school serves students in grades eleven and twelve focused on preparing them for a career in the music industry” (Riddle & Cleaver, 2013, p. 367). In this study, Neil, the school principal conveys his story through personal narrative captured during interviews over the course of year and transcribed to examine themes regarding his own transition from working in the mainstream system in Australia to the alternative school at
Harmony High (Riddle & Cleaver, 2013). The themes that emerged from these interviews included: (a) commitment; (b) community; (c) culture; (d) curriculum connectedness (Riddle & Cleaver, 2013, p. 376). The theme focused on “curriculum connectedness” appears to resonate from earlier studies reviewed and focused on relevance, as described by students. From this study, it is claimed that “successful alternative schools should have curriculum and pedagogy that connects to the lives of its students” (Riddle & Cleaver, 2013 p. 375). This point about relevance was very interesting, while at the same time Neil in this study states that we are “here to serve the kids and we don’t make a lot of rules for that reason” (Riddle & Cleaver, 2013, p. 373). Based on this need for curriculum relevance and at the same time an intended effort to loosely define rules, the school placed the students at the center of their learning processes and at the same time promotes the relationships between students and staff at the school. Though this study is not within the U.S., it is intriguing to learn how there are similarities between Harmony High and those sites reviewed earlier in this chapter. From these themes and Neil’s narrative, the researchers explain how the stories provided are critical in understanding the differences, through his experience, between mainstream education and alternatives. They indicated that “there is a need for further storytelling in educational leadership, particularly those stories that provide opportunities to speak back to the mainstream and open up new ways of thinking about learning” (Riddle & Cleaver, 2013, p. 376).

School administrators working in alternative schools face various obstacles, with one of the greatest challenges being those related to the negative perceptions of these specialized schools. These perceptions in some cases extend across the community and society at-large; however in some cases the negative or counter-productive perceptions regarding students served in these settings is also concerning. The detrimental perceptions’ regarding students in these
schools becomes an even greater obstacle when it is maintained by those charged with educating them, the teachers. In a study published in 2011, Khalifa examines the “relationship between low teacher expectations and principal behavior at an alternative school for at-risk Black students” (Khalifa, 2011, p. 703). The researcher conducts this inquiry using ethnographic methodology over a two-year period at an urban alternative high school, using interviews, extensive observations, field notes, as well as data collected from the local municipality and county (Khalifa, 2011). Over the two year period, it was discovered that the White teachers working in this alternative school were more likely than Black teachers to engage in deal-making with the students, where the students could both academically and socially disengage (Khalifa, 2011, p. 702-710). This practice of lowering student expectations is often due to a goal of maintaining classroom order, and an attempt to appease relations with the students (Khalifa, 2011). This practice by the teachers at the school was confronted by the school principal, who advocated for social justice, addressed racialized issues in his school, and worked to raise awareness around these topics. By adopting policies that promoted student engagement, while addressing teachers’ expectations and challenging teachers to improve how they dealt with Black students, the principal enacted social justice leadership, which resulted in improved student outcomes (Khalifa, 2011, p. 722). The implications from this research are significant to the study presented in this dissertation, as it addresses the role of the administrator in dealing with sensitive issues around student discipline and achievement, particularly for those that are Black and served in an alternative school setting. By enacting social justice leadership, the administrator set the tone for the teachers and students in how expectations were established and enforced. This administrator confronted race-based challenges in his school and remained
focused on improving behaviors for both teachers and students that were a result of low expectations.

When conducting research focused on capturing narrative and seeking to bring voice to those of interest in a study, the data collected through the analysis of the emerging themes can help to convey the emotions, setting and overall experiences of the participants. The research conducted by Cassidy and Bates (2005), Jones (2011) and Kim and Taylor (2008) all help to convey a sense of experience by students in their alternative education spaces. From these experiences, the students involved in the studies expressed their ability to build positive relationships with peers and staff, establish emotional connections with their teachers and administrators, and feeling safe at their school (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Jones, 2011; Kim & Taylor, 2008). These themes are common threads across most of the studies examined in this review of the literature, and perhaps are more common in the alternative education arena than realized. In developing my study and my investigation of the main question, the goal of capturing the lived experiences of the two administrators in their schools was critical. Looking at their unique set of circumstance, their team of teachers and professionals, as well as the politics that they must navigate as they enact leadership in these settings, together all set the stage for better understanding and documenting their personal narratives. By capturing these narratives and bringing voice to their lived experiences in these segregated spaces in alternative education, this study can contribute to the literature by sharing diverse perspectives on how these school administrators enact leadership in their schools.

**Examining Leadership in Schools**

School leadership is a topic that has received considerable attention over the past few decades, as researchers have come to understand more about the significant role that it plays in
the establishment of effective educational settings and student outcomes (Stronge et al., 2008). Though the research is still evolving on what constitutes effective school leadership, research and evidence indicate that academic achievement does improve when effective school leaders are in place and “attending to the needs of school organizations” (Black, 2010, p. 437). At the same time, there is still a lack of extensive empirical studies on this topic, with more efforts over the past few decades also engaging in the use of qualitative models of inquiry to examine this area in greater detail. The use of experiential knowledge in qualitative inquiry is helpful in understanding the lived experiences of those working in various school positions, where leadership is expected and necessary in the development of quality educational outcomes for students. In today’s society, the determining factors that often define effective school leadership primarily rest in those outcomes produced on student high stakes assessments (Halverson et al., 2007; Leithwood, 2001). This practice has been more pervasive since the adoption of the No Child Left Behind Act, where national trends have revealed higher rates of minority student displacement since this high-stakes testing environment has emerged (Advancement Project, 2010). This evolving model of education includes “reforms that are closely linked to market-driven reforms, and fall into what scholars refer to as neoliberalism” (Khalifa et al., 2013). Neoliberalism in the education sense is focused on the belief that our schools, like markets, can be improved using measures of success that are deemed to be objective (Burch, 2009; Khalifa et al., 2013). However, when relying completely on objective data sets, all other aspects of schooling are often left out of the discussion, particularly those experiences that relate to students, teachers, parents, administrators and the larger community (Khalifa et al., 2013). In addition, evaluating effective school leadership using academic achievement data alone, assumes that the use of single source outcomes like this are “objective, colorblind, in the best interest of
all, and thus rarely challenged” (Khalifa et al., 2013). In considering school leadership in this study, using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the lens for evaluation, it is imperative that efforts consider those criteria in today’s educational settings where school leadership is valued based on high stakes assessment outcomes alone. Some researchers operating under the influence of CRT consider this single-source of qualifying school leader effectiveness to be narrow in its scope, and potentially reinforces school-based practices that further marginalize students of color, by displacing those students that don’t fit within this framework (Gregory et al., 2010). Other aspects of schooling that are important to consider, particularly as it relates to alternative schooling experiences, includes efforts that promote relationships, positive school climate and establish a positive learning environment. The schools in this study create counter spaces that support these practices and establish an environment that promotes caring over punishment. In an effort to broaden the lens in which to examine school leadership, this review of the literature will explore topics related to effective practices that push beyond those constructs rooted primarily on student achievement outcomes on high stakes assessments or punishment, as often associated with alternative schooling practices.

In this examination of the existing literature on school leadership, it was difficult to find research that directly aligned to the primary question posed in this study, which is focused on the enactment of leadership by administrators working in alternative school settings. This absence, though inconvenient for the purpose of this study, does reflect that there are still significant gaps in the research regarding this topic, thus findings in this study can contribute to the larger conversation about school leadership in alternative schools. In broadening this review of the research, it was important to consider those studies that explored the overall construct of school leadership, and those that examined efforts to support all students, regardless of race, ethnicity or
socio-economic status. It was also valuable to examine those studies and articles related to leadership practices deemed to be effective in schools, beyond just the ability to produce outcomes on high stakes assessments. This push to examine outcomes beyond high stakes assessments is considered important since the displacement rates of minority students, particularly Black males, has increased since the adoption of national policies focused on high stakes assessment outcome measures (Gregory et al., 2010). In using the CRT lens for this study, this is critical in this discussion, since standardized outcomes, as noted by Khalifa (2013), assumes colorblind standards, which are not supported by this theory.

When considering the topic of school leadership, it is first important to examine what defines it as a practice. It has been defined and constructed in multiple ways, including “leadership as the process and product of social interaction that influences purposive human activity” (Watson & Scribner, 2007, p. 445). Therefore a “leader is someone who may initiate, perpetuate, guide, and finalize social interaction reflecting and resulting in purposive activity” (Watson & Scribner, 2007, p. 446). In a more simplified description and at the “core of most definitions of leadership are two functions: providing direction and exercising influence” (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 2). School administrators are tasked each day with making decisions and engaging their school-site teams in activities that help their students learn. School leaders are “expected to develop learning communities, build the professional capacity of teachers, take advice from parents, engage in collaborative and consultative decision making, resolve conflicts, engage in effective instructional leadership, and attend respectfully, immediately, and appropriately to the needs and requests of families with diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds” (Shields, 2004, p. 109). The literature is quite diverse in how it approaches the field of school leadership, with some taking a focus on instruction, others on
transformation, and more recently on topics related to distributed and collaborative leadership. The review of the research regarding educational leadership looks at what constitutes successful and effective leadership in schools, and what practices are used to help support students, particularly those that have been marginalized in our education system.

Multiple studies have explored the topic of school leadership, with one particular article in the literature helping to capture several aspects of these studies in a single publication. In an article by Leithwood et al. (2008), the researchers examined a number of studies focused on successful school leadership, and found that their review of the literature led to a compilation of seven core claims in the research, as follows: “a) school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning; b) almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices; c) the ways in which leaders apply these basic leadership practices – not the practices themselves – demonstrate responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work; d) school leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions; e) school leadership has greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed; f) some patterns of distribution are more effective than others; and g) a small handful of personal traits explains a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness” (Leithwood et al., 2008). In addition to these seven claims, Leithwood and colleagues presented four categories of leadership practices, as compiled by Yukl (1989), including the ability to: “build vision and setting direction; understanding and developing people; redesigning the organization; and managing the teaching and learning in the organization” (Leithwood, 2008, p. 30). Many of these aspects of successful school leadership are reinforced in other publications as well, and are supported by various development programs that focus on school leadership. The
Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development published a book titled *Qualities of Effective Principals* by Stronge et al. (2008), and in this publication, the authors point to a handful of attributes that they endorse as critical elements for effective school leaders based on the research. These qualities, which focus more explicitly on instructional leadership, include: “a) building and sustaining a school vision; b) sharing leadership; c) leading a learning community; d) using data to make instructional decisions; and e) monitoring curriculum and instruction” (Stronge et al., 2008, p. 4). In both of these publications, there are some common themes around the distribution of leadership and the sharing of responsibilities. This form of school leadership is often referred to as distributed, and has been the focus of some researchers who consider this an effective model in today’s educational settings.

**Distributed Leadership Theory.** Distributed leadership is often considered the practice of sharing leadership across a team or a group of individuals working on a similar project or task (Watson & Scribner, 2007). In the school setting, this practice often involves the process of the school administrator, working with their school-site team to make decisions and to collaboratively work on common goals in support of student success, with team members having specific tasks and responsibilities for carrying out the work needed to achieve such goals. In this model of leadership, there are three elements that define it, with the first perspective defining “leadership as an emergent property associated with groups and networks of individuals who interact. Second, distributed leadership implies that the boundaries of leadership are permeable. Third, distributed leadership suggests that skill sets and expert knowledge spread across organizations, rather than reside within a few individuals” (Watson & Scribner, 2007, p. 447-448). Though this model of leadership is not a primary focus in this study, it is included in this review of the literature due to it being considered a successful practice in the existing research,
as well as aligning well with those practices and rituals cited in the data collected from the
participants. In order be effective in the practice of distributed leadership, it is also important to
have strong relationships and bonds with the school team. In a review of “meta-analysis of
school leadership research by Marzano and colleagues (2005), they cite the building of
professional relationships between school leaders and staff as a crucial administrative
responsibility” (Stronge, 2008, p. 18). In conducting this study and in examining the main
question under investigation at alternative schools included in this inquiry, it was important to
explore how relationships between the school leaders and their team are viewed, established and
maintained at each site.

**Servant Leadership Theory.** Across the literature on school leadership, the repetitive
focus on elements such as relationships, motivation, and positive school climate (Ehrhart, 2004;
Hunt; 2002; Leithwood et al., 2008; Marzano et al., 2005; McCowan, 2004; Simonson, 2005)
suggest that principals have the most direct influence on these factors in driving student
achievement and outcomes (Halawah, 2005). One theory which significantly influences these
elements is servant leadership (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Servant leadership is a philosophy
focused on “the importance of a leader’s motivation to serve” and “serving others before
themselves” (Black, 2010, p. 438). Servant leadership evolved in the 1970’s following its
introduction in the literature by Greenleaf in *The Servant as Leader*, which as a theory was
focused primarily on the business setting (Black, 2010). Building upon the work of Greenleaf,
Spears (1998) established a list of “ten characteristics essential for any servant leader, which
include: a) listening, b) empathy, c) healing, d) awareness, e) persuasion, f) conceptualization, g)
foresight, h) stewardship, i) commitment to the growth of people, and j) building community”
(Black, 2010, p. 440). Though this is not considered to be an exhaustive list, it does help to
define attributes aligned to the behaviors of leaders adopting servant leadership as a theory. Additional studies regarding servant leadership reflect that this practice has positive effects on teacher job satisfaction (Cerit, 2009). One study, involving 595 teachers in primary schools found that when school leaders operated using this theory of leadership, that teachers more often reported higher rates of job satisfaction (Cerit, 2009, p. 600). Enhanced job satisfaction in teachers has been correlated to higher levels of enthusiasm at work, teachers who spend more time and efforts educating students, and together help to foster improved school climate and student achievement (Cerit, 2009; Nguni et al., 2006; Rowan et al., 2002). Considering how servant leadership as a theory can impact these types of outcomes in schools for both teachers and students, it is a viable model for further investigation at alternative settings, where climate and student achievement are often considered challenging outcomes to accomplish (Kim, 2011; Kim & Taylor, 2008).

**Situational Leadership Theory.** In this theory of leadership, which was initially constructed for corporate models of management, there is a high focus on relationship behaviors and the influence that these relationships play in administering various tasks by the manager. In this model, relationship behavior is “the extent to which leaders are likely to maintain personal relationships between themselves and members of their group (followers) by opening up channels of communication, providing social emotional support, ‘psychological strokes’, and facilitating behaviors” (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988, p. 116-117; Ireh & Bailey, 2014, p. 24). Hersey and Blanchard (1988) organize this construct of leadership around “task behavior and relationship behavior” (p. 169-170) where “task behavior is defined as the amount of direction a leader must provide, and relationship behavior is focused on the amount of social-emotional support required” for an activity or operation. In situational leadership, “maturity is also an
element which is defined as the ability and willingness of people to take responsibility for
directing their own behavior and the extent to which a subordinate is willing and able to
successfully accomplish a task” (Hersey and Blanchard, 1988; Ireh & Bailey, 2014, p. 24). In
their theory of situational leadership, the model is organized into four styles, with corresponding
relationship and task orientations, including: “a) Delegating – Low Relationship and Low Task;
b) Participating – High Relationship and Low Task; c) Selling – High Task and High
Relationship; and d) Telling – High Task and Low Relationship” (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988, p.
169-170). In the “Delegating” style, the leader “delegates and provides general supervision since
the followers” are able to perform most tasks based on the competence required for a “low task”
activity and minimal relationships are required (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988, p. 169-170). In a
“Participating” style of leadership, the “leader and followers share in decision making through
two-way communication” where high levels of relationships are in place and tasks are
manageable based on “followers’ confidence, commitment and motivation to accomplish a
specific task” (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988, p. 175). The “Selling” style is established with “most
direction coming from the leader using two-way communication and socio-emotional support to
get followers to buy into decisions being made” (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988, p. 169-170). The
“Telling” style is focused on the use of “one-way communication in which the leader defines the
roles of followers and tells them what, how, when and where to do various tasks” (Hersey &
Blanchard, 1988, p. 169-170). Though this theory of leadership has its roots established in
corporate organizational structures, more recent studies have examined its relevance and
establishment in the educational setting. One study, conducted by Ireh and Bailey (2014),
examined superintendent leadership styles in implementing district-wide change. In this study,
which was focused on superintendents in Ohio found that this group of leaders utilized “two
predominate leadership styles”, as aligned to situational theory, which were “Selling and Participating” as determined by a self assessment (Ireh & Bailey, 2014, p. 29). Considering this finding, the authors of this study concluded that superintendents utilized these preferred styles of leadership as aligned to other studies which concluded the same preferred methods for a “majority of secondary school principals in America” (Ireh & Bailey, 2014, p. 29). In addition, the literature reiterates that “no single leadership approach/style is appropriate for all situations” and is “unrealistic” (Fiedler & Chemers, 1974; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988; Ireh & Bailey, 2014; Vail, 1991), which perhaps helps to explain how both participants acknowledge this style of leadership in their daily practices.

Caring Leadership

Recognizing the importance that both participants in this study have placed on relationships, it is important to consider how this construct is reinforced in the existing literature or how it impacts efforts to support students, particularly those that have been marginalized in our traditional school settings. Bass (2012) identified in her study that “caring leadership practices can positively impact the learning experiences and achievement of students in urban schools” (p. 74). In her study, she “examined the lived experiences of five African-American women educators and administrators who employed the ethic of care (Merriam, 1998; Yin 2004, 2009) in a large urban school district” which led to her finding that these participants engaged “caring” practices that supported reform in their schools (Bass, 2012, p. 77). This finding also identified that “caring” for individual students was important, but just as important is the establishment of a positive school climate resulting from “policies that support institutional care (Siddle Walker & Snarey, 2004)” (Bass, 2012, p. 83). This practice in the study was apparent by the way that many of the participants responded to district policies regarding zero tolerance.
Several of the study participants acknowledged that they “overlooked district zero tolerance policies in order to protect their students” with the administrators involved also revealing that they utilized “alternative discipline strategies” to avoid harsher punishments (Bass, 2012, p. 83).

A separate study by Roberts (2010), also examined the ethic of care by engaging in a study focused on “African American secondary teachers’ perspectives and definitions of care for their African American students” (p. 455). In this study, it was determined that the participants engaged in “political clarity/colour talk and concern for students’ futures” as major themes (Roberts, 2010, p. 457). These practices reflect that the participants engaged in “conversations with students and/or parents in which the teacher acknowledges that race does make a difference in the realities that are experienced in everyday life and critiques any racialized assumptions based on that difference (Thompson, 2004; Rolon-Dow, 2005)” (Roberts, 2010, p. 457-458).

From this acknowledgement, it was found that many of the participants engaged “code switching” (Flowers, 2000) as a means to help students and parents navigate the larger, racialized structures in schools and society. This practice resulted in teachers encouraging their students “to speak and act more like European Americans in order to more easily achieve success” (Roberts, 2010, p. 464) by “changing their speech, dress or behavior” (Roberts, 2010, p. 458). In regards to “concern for students’ futures” (Roberts, 2010, p. 457), the participants in this study “explained they felt a commitment to help students navigate the under-pinnings of a racist American society in order to appropriately prepare them for the future” (Roberts, 2010, p. 460-461).

These studies by Bass (2012) and Roberts (2010) suggest that “caring” or “caring leadership” are important and effective strategies in establishing a positive school climate, promoting student achievement, and helping students, particularly those that are African
American, navigate the racialized structures of our school systems and larger society. These two studies also align with and adopt several tenets of CRT, which has been the adopted framework for approaching this study.

**Transformative Leadership Theory**

The core focus of this study is to examine the enactment of leadership by the school principals at two alternative schools, both operating in communities where significant disparities have been documented. These disparities include high rates of student suspension, expulsion and school-based arrests, particularly for students of color, and primarily Black males. Considering these contexts and the goal to look at school leadership that perhaps is working to disrupt the pipeline to prison, some researchers have examined school-based leadership practices aimed at addressing inequity. In this examination of the literature, “a growing number of scholars argue that to address inequities for diverse student populations, educational leaders must have a heightened awareness of social justice issues in a field struggling to meet the needs of all children” (Jean-Marie, 2008, p. 340). To help meet these needs, many scholars are pointing to research that suggests strong relationships with the students as a key factor in improving the inequities that exist (Jean-Marie, 2008; Shields, 2004). In a qualitative study, focused on the efforts of four female administrators engaged in transformational leadership in support of social justice, the researchers found that “students’ success began with developing an authentic relationship between themselves as school leaders and their students” (Jean-Marie, 2008, p. 351). Transformational leadership in this case, is defined as a method for “supporting social justice and works to create democratic and equitable schools” (Jean-Marie, 2008, p. 351). Transformational leadership is also focused on the “collective interests of a group or an organization” (Shields, 2004, p. 113), which interacts well with processes for distributed leadership as discussed earlier.
in this section. However, other researchers suggest that in order to truly push the boundaries for improving access, opportunity and equity, that leadership must be transformative, which is “rooted in moral and ethical values in a social context” and therefore leaders in this model “work to create school communities in which educators take seriously their accountability for advancing these values” (Shields, 2004, p. 113). In differentiating transformational and transformative leadership theories, which are often blurred in the literature, it is important to consider how each are characterized in regards to their values, their goals and the role of the leader (Shields, 2010). From a values perspective, transformational leadership is focused on “liberty, justice, and equality”, while transformative operates on those most often associated with “liberation, emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice” (Shields, 2010, p. 563). The goals for each are differentiated with transformational theory driven by “organizational change and effectiveness”, whereas transformative leadership promotes efforts that push for “individual, organizational and societal transformation” (Shields, 2010, p. 563). The leader for each of these theories is also characterized differently, where the transformational leader “looks for individual motives, develops common purpose across the school team, and is focused on organizational goals” (Shields, 2010, p. 563). The transformative leader, “lives with tension and challenge, requires moral courage, and activism” (Shields, 2010, p. 563), with a focus that is “anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, and responsive to class exploitation (Weiner, 2003, p. 100). In aligning these theories with others in educational research, transformative leadership often enacts tenets of critical theory, or in the case of this study, critical race theory, while transformational leadership seeks to align with those engaged in school reform and instructional leadership (Shields, 2010, p. 563).
Since the purpose of this study is to examine practices in alternative schools, where inequity is typically pervasive and these sites are framed as the intermediaries between traditional schools and incarceration, these diverse constructs are useful theoretical frameworks to rely on for data analysis. Furthermore, the sites under investigation are considered to be exceptions in their local communities due to their positive outcomes and school-based rituals, which are in need of greater examination and the findings from this inquiry can perhaps contribute to a larger conversation surrounding leadership in alternative education.
Chapter Three

Methods

Framing the Question

This researcher sought to better understand how school administrators working at two identified alternative schools enact leadership in these specialized settings, particularly in relationship to the creation of schools that work to disrupt the displacement of students. Ultimately, in this study I wanted to answer or at-least better understand how to answer the following question: How do educational administrators working in alternative schools enact leadership? This examination, as focused on this enactment of leadership, defines enactment as the display or description of behaviors, rituals and perceptions that help to inform and guide these administrators in their duties as principals at their schools, in districts with significant student displacement challenges. Considering the uniqueness of each site and the documented disparities for minority student punishment in the traditional school settings in their districts, this study examined the decision-making process and related rituals regarding their roles, their theory of leadership and how these theories are enacted. The following questions were considered in the construction of understanding each school administrators’ enactment of leadership in their designated alternative school:

1. How do school administrators working in alternative schools enact their roles and responsibilities in operating their school?

2. What are the theories of leadership adopted by school administrators working in these alternative schools?
3. How do these school administrators working in alternative schools view their roles in enforcing student discipline policies?

4. How do school administrators in these settings consider the potential consequences for students when they are displaced from the school setting?

5. How do school administrators working in these settings build culture and motivate their teams to serve students in these specialized settings?

6. What interventions do these administrators consider when working to manage student discipline practices in their school?

7. What training have these school administrators received to enact their roles as the principal of their school?

Research Design

Based on the question presented for this study, the investigation itself examined the experiences, rituals and perceptions of the school administrators involved, by adopting a qualitative, multi-case research design using portraiture methodology. Using this methodology, I learned, engaged and participated in the construction of a narrative representation of the school administrators and their enactment of leadership at their school sites as presented in chapters four and five.

Qualitative research is a practice focused on “discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied” (Merriam, 2009, p. 1), which in the case of this investigation are the school principals working at the two alternative school sites. In qualitative research, the researcher is “interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). The experiences of the individuals involved in this study are at the heart of the
research inquiry itself, including those of the researcher. My experience having worked in alternative education programs, as well as juvenile justice schools, influence the way in which I approached this topic. Over the years, having worked with students in the alternative system, I have listened to the narratives of the youth who have been impacted by school displacement, thus serving as the motivation to better understand how school administrators enact leadership in these specialized settings.

Qualitative research has developed extensively over the past few decades, with diverse methodologies that have been born from the need to investigate phenomenon from multiple perspectives (Merriam, 2009). In developing the question explored in this study, as well as the most appropriate methodology, it was important to consider the context for the inquiry and the experiences of the school administrators as well as my own as the researcher. My goal is to be an active participant while seeking to explore and retell the lived experiences of the school administrators in these settings and work to convey their theory of leadership. By investigating these narratives and documenting their stories, it is my desire to see how each administrator confronts difficult decisions in their schools, work to motivate students and staff, and what role do they play in managing their duties, including things like student discipline. Considering the dynamic set of circumstances at each alternative school and the diverse career experiences of each administrator, many of the methodologies that I considered did not go deep enough to capture the lived experiences that I wanted to examine. The rich histories, the existing relationship that I have with each administrator and the shifting educational landscape in these two districts as well as the state create an environment that had to be deeply explored, with narratives that help to capture the realities of each administrator as defined by their experiential knowledge and the retrospective observations made within each context. The need to capture
such information and to retell their narrative through my interpretation of their attitudes, behaviors and enactment of leadership was accomplished using a research practice known as portraiture.

Portraiture is an evolving methodology in qualitative research that was born from the work of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot in 1983 in her publication *The Good High School: Portraits in Character and Culture* (Hackman, 2002). Hackman (2002) defined this methodology as:

A method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions – their authority, knowledge, and wisdom. The drawing of the portrait is placed in social and cultural context and shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one negotiating the discourse and shaping the evolving image, (p. 51)

Portraiture has been described as “an ethnographically oriented method of inquiry that seeks to capture and explain the ever-changing complexities of life and experience” (Burton & Johnson, 2010, p. 378) with the “role of the researcher as an artist” (Waterhouse, 2007, p. 276). This method has developed “from the desire to tell a story in such vivid detail that the event could be pictured as though it were a painting” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 4). In this approach, “portraiture methodology is used when a researcher wishes to produce a full picture of an event or person that tells as much about the subject as it does about the researcher, or portraitist” (Chapman, 2007, p. 157). Portraiture “is more than a new way to do narrative scholarship; it is also a new way to ask important epistemological questions about the variety of
ways we can come to know another human being” (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. xvi). Though portraiture is a qualitative approach to the research question in this study, both Yin and Merriam categorize portraiture as a case study method, due to the role of the researcher and the fact that the narrative is being developed in a highly descriptive manner to convey the elements of the case under analysis (Hackman, 2002; Merriam, 2009). As in a case study, portraiture in this investigation engaged interviewing and retrospective observations for analysis in an effort to gather multiple data points, with these points coming together to create the story or set of stories through the lens of the researcher, who created this narrative portrait as the artist (Waterhouse, 2007). As the artist, the researcher in this methodology is engaged in the environment and explicitly explains his/her bias and motivation for the study, not as a bystander but as an engaged participant who’s “voice is purposely woven into the written document” (Hackman, 2002, p. 52). Based on this perspective, my own background in alternative education as a teacher and administrator had to be acknowledged due to the potential bias that I had to continuously monitor and reveal as part of the “voice” embedded within this study (Hackman, 2002). This “voice” had to also be revealed as I reflected on my own understanding of the research and what it suggests about alternative schools and the potential risk for students served in these settings. As the artist in the development of this portrait, I constantly returned to my own background and as an embedded part of the study, made sure that my “biases and experiences are explicit” (Hackman, 2002, p. 52). In considering the portraiture methodology for this inquiry, as the researcher and the artist working to construct the portrait, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explain the process of developing the portraiture and revealing one’s biases as follows.

“The portraitist comes to the field with an intellectual framework and set of guiding questions. The framework is usually the result of a review of relevant literature, prior
experience in similar settings, and a general knowledge of the field of inquiry. It also resonates with echoes of the researcher’s autobiographical journey, those aspects of the researcher’s own familial, cultural, developmental, and educational background that she can relate either consciously or unconsciously to the intellectual themes of the work….frameworks that get expressed in the researcher’s point of view, using the phrases ‘voice as preoccupation’ and ‘voice as autobiography’. These voice modalities are embedded in the researcher’s template; the intellectual and experiential structure is her point of reference and guides her angle of vision and her data collection.” (p. 185-186)

In portraiture, the portraitist will create an aesthetic product, using narrative that conveys “attitudes, feelings, color, space and ambiance” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 28). This product explored “context, voice, relationships, and emergent themes” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 243) as I worked to gather deep, descriptive stories that captured the experiences of the school administrators in the alternative school sites. In considering the context, this is defined as the “physical setting and the situated space for the study; where the history and culture are considered; and aesthetic aspects of the story are developed” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 41-59). As the data was collected in this study, “voice” was the process of discovering and interpreting the meaning and message of the actors, thus bringing their personal experience into the words that crafted their narratives and contributed to the portraits under construction (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Relationships are at the core of the study, which are established on “trust” and must be “reciprocal” in nature (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In regards to relationships, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) suggest that “portraitists need to prepare for site visits, thoroughly interact with the actors on the
scene with dignity and care, and guard the relationships that are established throughout the writing of the final portrait” (p. 173). As the researcher and artist, I considered the context, voice and relationships that developed and examined these features to discover “emergent themes”, which included the repetition of expression and even rituals by the school principals, based on their descriptions, within the school sites to help create the final product (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 193). By ensuring that cautious and respectful attention was focused on “context, voice, relationships and emergent themes” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), the portrait that has been created provides a solid interpretation of my own observations, while considering my own background and biases, and the lived experiences of the actors in this study.

In considering portraiture methodology, I discovered that this style of research was not without criticism, with some questioning its validity as a scholarly model of inquiry. Over a decade ago, English critiqued this methodology by saying that it “reduces the potential multiplicity and diversity of simultaneous truths to a singular story line, [which] no matter how compelling or interesting, may be the most important disfigurement of the ensuing portrait placed on the verbal canvas” (English, 2000, p. 26). Since English’s initial critiques in 2000, several qualitative researchers have either adopted portraiture as a methodology for analyzing school leadership, or have endorsed it as an appropriate model of inquiry when seeking to interpret the experiences of others (Dixson et. al., 2005; Hackman, 2002; Waterhouse, 2007). For example, Hackman has called upon portraiture as a viable methodology to explore educational leadership in his publication Using Portraiture in Educational Leadership Research in 2002, where he provides a commentary on how this methodology has been used in “numerous educational leadership studies” (Hackman, 2002, p. 51). Then in 2007, Waterhouse published an article titled From Narratives to Portraits: Methodology and Methods to Portray Leadership,
where she defends a stance that portraiture methodology can help to interpret leadership and in-turn “be developed into a layered, textured portrait” in research (Waterhouse, 2002, p. 271). More recently, in the article *Portrait Methodology and Educational Leadership: Putting the Person First*, the authors argue that portraiture is not only a process for research but also for professional development and reflection (Bottery, et al., 2009). While examining the literature regarding the use of portraiture, there are several studies and dissertations that are now using this methodology in order to conduct research and to examine in-depth, the lived experiences of others, particularly those residing in the educational space of our society.

In considering the critiques and the evolving work involving portraiture, even English himself, who had previously been the most vocal critic of this methodology, has come forward in a more recent publication acknowledging portraiture as one of at “least 12 forms of life writing, which may serve as sources for approaching a study of leaders” (English, 2006, p. 144). He goes on to cite Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, originators of the portraiture methodology, who indicate that this style of research “has become one of the many qualitative research tools in describing the dimensions of educational leadership in doctoral studies at several US universities” (English, 2006, p. 145). Considering English’s original critique, and the potential critique from others, this study approached the question by using portraiture methodology across two alternative school sites, with multiple narratives to shape and develop the portrait as observed by the artist/researcher and as experienced by the school administrators. This multi-case approach not only leads to the development of diverse narratives to help shape the portraits, but it also adds additional perspective on the enactment of leadership at these specialized settings and the role that this enactment plays on students and staff. By examining these experiences through rich dialogue, I worked with the main actors (school administrators) to create literary
images that convey my own interpretations of the events and characters involved in this study. The creation of this image, through the use of portraiture methodology helped to explore how leadership is enacted in the identified alternative schools, and the relationship of this enactment with the needs of students, staff, parents and the role that race plays in this space. By approaching this inquiry through “multiple individual studies, and looking for common themes among the cases” this approach can help to mitigate those concerns and critiques regarding data analysis (Hackman, 2010, p. 55). In addition, the triangulation of the data, as examined in the typed transcripts of interviews and my retrospective observations from visits at these school sites, the portrait can be developed using a multi-case approach, with the goal of telling the artist’s interpretation of the lived experiences by the actors in this study, while also comparing some elements across both settings (Merriam, 2009). Using this methodology, the researcher “is ultimately the author of the work and the coordinator of the voices” (Waterhouse, 2007, p. 281). In portraiture, it is anticipated that the reality or “truth” as examined by the artist is a creation based on the experiences captured during the study, while realizing that another researcher/artist could potentially return to the scene and develop a different portrait of the experience, based on their own potential bias or relationships with the actors and/or context (Waterhouse, 2007).

**Considering the Theoretical Framework for Investigation**

While adopting a qualitative approach to investigate the question posed in this study, using portraiture methodology, it is important to also explain the theoretical framework that informs my thoughts about the topics explored as well as the question itself in this research. With almost twenty years of experience in working with students engaged in alternative education programs and the juvenile justice system, the narratives that I have heard and the observations that I have made involving the disparity and the marginalization of students of color
served in these settings have led to the establishment of a critical perspective regarding these non-traditional environments. This critical perspective, which is strongly aligned to the tenets of critical race theory (CRT), will serve as the theoretical framework and lens to be used during this inquiry. Using CRT, the counter narratives offered in this study, which focus on relationships and an ethic of care, push back against the more prevalent practices in alternative settings aimed at administering punishment and discipline. By engaging CRT as the lens to approach this study, the counter spaces that have been created and managed by the participants in this inquiry can bring voice to the students served in these settings by supporting opportunities for the sharing of experiential knowledge.

CRT as a theoretical framework is established on the following tenets, which were also outlined in chapter one of this proposal:

1. “Acknowledging that racism has historically influenced all aspects of society, preventing equality” (Stokes, 2012, p. 230).
2. “Recognizing that racism is an invisible norm and White culture (privilege) is what all other races are measured by (and opportunities are allocated by)” (Stokes, 2012, p. 230).
3. “Committing to understanding that racism is socially constructed and an expanded and inclusive world view is required for true social justice” (Stokes, 2012, p. 230).
4. “Acknowledging the unique perspectives and voice of people of color (as victims of oppression) in racial matters, valuing their ‘story-telling’ as a legitimate way to convey knowledge” (Stokes, 2012, p. 230).
5. Engaging in interdisciplinary dialogue and discourse to analyze race relationships (i.e. history, philosophy, law, anthropology, sociology, economics, and political science)” (Stokes, 2012, p. 230).
Realizing that these tenets have framed this study, it is important to explain briefly how each tenet interacts with the investigation and in-turn with the researcher and participants.

In the first tenet, the role of race and the “acknowledgement of racism historically in our society” is important for examination (Parker & Villalpando, 2007, p. 520). Recognizing that there is significant over-representation of minority students, particularly Black males in alternative education and juvenile justice programs it is relevant that these trends and issues be explored using a CRT lens. This over-representation in both identified alternative school sites is evident, as well as the over suspension and expulsion of Black students in both districts, which often feeds the enrollment at both alternative schools. While acknowledging the historical presence of racism in society, the efforts that I have made as the researcher in constructing the portraiture, focused on the school administrators and how their own race and the race of their students may or may not have played a role in the rituals at the schools. This will include working to uncover any tones regarding topics on race, while also using existing literature about disparity and the over-representation of minority students served in the school or those that are displaced from the school site. This approach allowed for dialogue to develop focused on the acknowledgement of racism or perhaps race-based practices that perpetuate the marginalization of students of color in the two systems.

In the second tenet, “White culture” is deemed to be privileged and the norm; therefore is there any reflection of this privilege revealed in the study or perceptions that evolve regarding this “invisible norm” (Stokes, 2012, p. 230). Is it possible that any of the data collected from interviews or even the retrospective observations support this tenet? Using the CRT lens helped to examine this possibility throughout the data collection process and contributes to the portraiture focused on the research question. By engaging in dialogue about the role of race in
these educational institutions, and the enactment of leadership by each school administrator at their sites, the descriptive dialogue that has been captured and thus analyzed reveals evolving themes and patterns that support the presence of attitudes about this “invisible norm” or “White culture” (Stokes, 2012, p. 230).

In the third tenet, “racism is socially constructed” (Stokes, 2012, p. 230) and in committing to this belief it is important that as the researcher, that I looked to see how this construct is reinforced as evidenced by the perceptions of the administrators, and perhaps in seeking to uncover their perspectives about the role that race plays in the funneling of students of color into their schools from other traditional school sites across their districts. Considering that both school administrators self report that they are Black and identify as African American, dialogue regarding how race is defined and constructed is important in understanding their perspectives on the role of race in educational institutions within their systems.

The fourth tenet is focused on giving “voice to those that are victims of oppression through the use of story-telling” (Stokes, 2012, p. 230). This study utilized the voices of those that have been oppressed in the alternative and juvenile justice education systems as a catalyst for constructive dialogue about the role of alternative schools in the districts. By sharing data, and my personal narratives from my own experience working in these systems, I used interview questions that promoted critical dialogue with each administrator about the students that they serve. Using this process for interviewing, I was able to extract narratives from each administrator about stories that they have gathered related to the experiences of their students and even their own narratives working within a White dominated system as Black male administrators. By engaging in this dialogue, I was able to learn more about their own experiences, the experiences they have had in relation to their students, and the role that race has
played in these experiences, based on their own narratives. In addition, by using portraiture methodology, the use of “voice” is a primary instrument in conveying the data that is collected and framing it into a narrative image of the actors and context involved in the study, thus ultimately producing the portrait (Stokes, 201, p. 230). Through the rich and descriptive narrative collected, the process of engaging in dialogue centered on the practice of encouraging story-telling as a means to help both the researcher and the actors create the final portraiture.

Through the fifth tenet, I engaged in dialogue with each administrator about the relationships between what they do at their schools, the interactions with district and state policies, and the history of their institutions, particularly how these interactions relate to potential racialized issues for them in their work. By using CRT as the lens to approach this study, race has been a central theme for examination as the question for this study were investigated and as the experiences of the administrators were explored. By adopting a portraiture methodology, both administrators and the researcher engaged in “interdisciplinary dialogue and discourse” (Stokes, 2012, p. 230) in an effort to create the imagery needed to clearly develop the portrait as interpreted by the researcher.

**Situating the Study and Setting**

Realizing that the school-to-prison pipeline and the enactment of student discipline procedures in schools across our nation are impacting thousands of students of color each day, selecting a location for conducting this study was important to ensure that the findings contribute to a growing body of research focused on reform. Therefore an intentional effort was made to select a geographic domain where there has been documented challenges related to the displacement of students of color from school, as well as sites where positive outcomes are acknowledged by the local community for the alternative settings to be examined. When
reviewing such challenges in schools, two bordering school districts were identified in a Southeastern state, where studies have identified disturbing trends in student push-out from school, based on student suspensions, expulsions and school-based juvenile justice referrals or arrests. A recent study that was released and reported in the media reveals that both districts identified for inclusion in this study, are receiving a great deal of attention regarding their high rates of student suspensions and expulsions, particularly for Black students. This study cannot be discussed at length due to the fact that any reference to this study would lead to the identification of the districts and potentially to the related school sites. This study and evolving discussion in the community about the displacement of Black students is a major reason for situating this study within this identified space. This study is relevant to the evolving topics within the district on student disciplinary practices and can potentially contribute to the efforts for serving students at the two alternative schools operating in the neighboring districts involved in this study. This two-district domain is comprised of two bordering counties, where the demographics for each county are outlined in Table 1 (2010 U.S. Census of Population and Housing, retrieved November 5, 2013), with each being identified as District A, where Performance Place operates and District B, where Kids Center is situated. These names are pseudonyms and explained in more detail later in this chapter.

Table 1

Local District/County Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>District A (Performance Place)</th>
<th>District B (Kids Center)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>42.1%</td>
<td>61.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The two counties identified for inclusion in this study are urban districts and home to many diverse industries with several of these companies being part of the global market. District A has a total enrollment of 35,536 students in the 2013/2014 school year, while District B has an enrollment of over 147,000 students (Public Schools Review, Retrieved November 7, 2013).

Considering the vast data on the displacement of students of color from schools, as well as the studies associated with the school-to-prison pipeline, this study focused on alternative schools operating within the boundaries of the two selected school districts (Alltucker, et al., 2006; ACLU, 2011). Alternative schools have been selected as the site for this inquiry due to the high rates nationally for student displacement from these specialized school sites, their situated space in the school-to-prison pipeline, and the fact that most alternative schools serve a disproportional number of Black students as referred from the local public schools (Dunbar, 1999; Flower, et al., 2011; Langberg & Story, 2013).

Based on my own experience in working with alternative schools across the nation, many of which operate in the Southeastern states, the two alternative schools included in this study have been purposely selected due to previous site visits at each as part of my multi-state tour of these types of programs. These two sites, based on previous tours, reflections and feedback from community leaders, are targeted for this study because of some unique outcomes produced by each site. These outcomes include the production of high school graduates, changes in student behavior, student academic growth, and the establishment of positive school cultures that don’t necessarily mirror the stereotypical norms of alternative schools (Dunbar, 2001). Using pseudonyms to protect the identity of the school sites, I refer to the alternative school operating in District “A” as the Performance Place, with the one operating in District “B” as Kids Center. Performance Place, in District “A” is focused on serving high school students who are over-age
for graduation, not achieving in the traditional school setting, or students who have dropped out of school and are provided with an opportunity to return to the district by working towards graduation requirements at this specialized site. The student enrollment fluctuates between 150 and 200 students each year and is situated within a multi-use complex for diverse district operated educational programs. The principal of this school shares his operational space with multiple programs for students at-risk of dropout, so it is important to note that the entire facility is not solely allocated to this alternative school program. In addition, this school is situated in a building, along with the other educational programs offered by the district, which doubles as a community center. The Performance Place is operated directly by the school district (District A), meaning that all of the personnel and administrators are employees of the school district. This distinction is made due to the fact that the second site is a contracted alternative school with District “B”.

At Performance Place, the school works with students from across the district that are either over-age for their expected grade-level or students in need of a non-traditional setting to support their academic progression. The school itself operates in a community facility where multiple services and academic programs are managed. This includes career education programs, GED preparation programs, health services and access to community center activities. Performance Place has approximately 100 students enrolled at a time, with each working towards the attainment of their standard high school diploma, and a goal of graduating on-time with their academic cohort group. At this alternative setting, the school partners with several community organizations and businesses to support graduation initiatives and career/college readiness. The original concept for the school was a result of several partners and key foundation investors coming together to develop new models of schooling, where students participate in blended
learning environments, and engage in activities that connect them to their community. This endeavor started over eight years ago, and continues to be a pillar in the local neighborhood as well as a major contributor in the school district’s efforts to improve graduation rates.

The second site for this inquiry is situated within a school facility serving long-term suspended special education students in District “B”. This alternative school, to be referred to as Kids Center, operates as a school-within-a-school model and is focused on serving special education students who have been suspended from other traditional and alternative education programs in the district or have been long-term suspended for significant behaviors which would normally result in expulsion from the district. As indicated previously, this alternative school operates as a contracted program with District “B”, meaning that the school district pays the alternative school operator to provide the alternative education services offered at the school program. The alternative school operator for Kids Center is a non-profit organization, which plans, delivers and administers all aspects of the school, as well as employs all personnel at this program. The school is located in the basement floor of the school building facility, with the upper level serving as an alternative school operated directly by the district. The space where Kids Center operates includes four classrooms, a computer lab, and an office where the school principal and team share administrative space. This small school, with an average daily enrollment of 50 students, was developed to serve students with identified special education needs, with each having an individualized education plan (IEP). Each student placed at this site are on long-term suspension status, meaning that they cannot return to their regular school setting until they have completed minimal requirements at the alternative school site. The students served in this school range from grade six to grade twelve, come from all across the district, and are placed at this specialized school by the district for a period of three to six
months, with the goal of having them return to their traditional school setting upon completion. The school provides a blended learning model with a slightly greater focus on teacher directed instruction, supplemented by instructional software to help differentiate content and lessons by achievement levels. Kids Center operates as a school within a school model, with this administrator running his operations in the lower-level of an existing alternative school in the district. This school was launched in 2010 as a result of significant issues in the district regarding the suspension of special needs students, with local legal firms filing suits and pressuring the district to provide greater supports and legally required services for students with federally protected special education needs. Due to this pressure, the district published a request-for-proposal to solicit third-party organizations with experience in operating alternative school services and from this process, Kids Center was born. This school program was initially operating in a wing of a new high school for the first eighteen months, with its founding administrator working to start-up this new program.

Identifying the Sample

Based on the two alternative schools identified for this study, the sample included the school principals for Performance Place and Kids Center with the focus on examining the enactment of leadership by each school administrator. Both sites are considered to be positive examples of alternative schools, based on district and community leader feedback, outcomes and my own observations having evaluated several alternative education programs across the country in my career. Some outcomes/achievements that point to success for each school site include:

Performance Place

- Graduation cohort rate (equal to that of the larger district at almost 80%)
- Suspension rates that are 8% below the district average
• Acts of crime or violence below the district average
• Higher percentage of teachers that are fully licensed and highly qualified as compared to
  the local district
• Over half (53%) of the instructional staff have advanced degrees as compared to 38% of
  the larger district

Kids Center
• Average reading growth of 1.1 grade level increase in a 4.5 month period on a
  standardized common assessment (historical average has been approximately 2 months of
  growth for every one month enrolled in the school)
• Average math growth of 1.0 grade level increase in a 4.5 month period on a standardized
  common math assessment (historical average has been approximately 2 months of growth
  for every one month enrolled in the school)
• Suspensions that are below the district average for alternative schools
• Nationally Accredited by an independently recognized accrediting organization

Though this is not an exhaustive list of outcomes/achievements, it does help to convey some of
the elements that are positive attributes of both schools.

The principal at the Performance Place is an African American male with over 13 years
of experience in education as a counselor, assistant principal, and principal. This administrator is
the founding principal of this school, since its inception in 2007. Principal Mann started his
career as a mental health professional and was not in the field of education until relocating from
another southern state and in search of a job in this particular geographic area. He had moved to
this community with his wife and due to the significant challenges in the mental health field, it
was difficult to navigate the way in which this particular state funded and in-turn paid for mental
health services. He has a bachelors and masters in counseling, and worked with youth in need of substance abuse treatment and youth in the juvenile justice system. He later completed an additional program at a local university that allowed him to get credentialed for School Administration and earn an Educational Specialist degree. Upon relocating to this state, and in seeking a job, he discovered an opportunity to work as a dropout prevention counselor at a local high school.

Principal Truth, the principal at the Kids Center, is also an African American male, with 8 years of experience as a teacher and administrator. Principal Truth has about five years of experience working in juvenile justice education programs and almost three years serving as the principal of Kids Center. I have known Principal Truth for most of his career, having observed some of his work at the juvenile programs as well as his efforts at Kids Center prior to this study. Being impressed with this administrator’s work, I continued to follow-up on his career and a few years later, he relocated to a large school district in the southeast to serve as the principal of a small alternative school focused on students who were long-term suspended from their traditional school for misbehavior. He is the second principal at this school and has been working at the site as an administrator since January 2011. The school itself has been in operation since March 2010. In an effort to introduce the administrators, their experience, their corresponding districts, and their schools, Table 2 is provided for some comparative information.
Table 2

Context and Participant Overview Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Principal Mann</th>
<th>Principal Truth</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Performance Place</td>
<td>Kids Center</td>
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<td>District B</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Level of Education</td>
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As an executive working in the educational arena across the selected state, I have worked closely with both schools in various capacities. My relationship with the administrator from Kids Center has been in existence for approximately eight years, where I have worked with him as a colleague focused on the development of specialized programs for students at-risk of incarceration. I have toured his school on a few occasions prior to the consideration of this study, and have several retrospective observations shared in detail in chapter four. The administrator at Performance Place is someone that I have known for about two years, and have had the privilege of touring his school as well with other executives prior to the initiation of this study. From my visits at his school, as well as my attendance at his school’s graduation ceremony, I have been able to make several observations which I share from a retrospective view also in chapter four. My relationships with both administrators were existing, but also evolved drastically as this study allowed me to go further in getting to know them, their philosophies of education, their goals for their schools, and their overall theories of leadership, which has helped in the creation of their portraits. Due to these existing relationships, the access that I had to each
administrator and the ensuing dialogue about the topics associated with this study, were extensive and quite comfortable, thus allowing our conversations to start on a foundation of trust. Based on this historical trust and common efforts for serving students in alternative schools, both administrators engaged in deep dialogue regarding their theories of leadership, and their roles related to the enactment of leadership at their schools. This trust, allowed us to start the process of data collection quite quickly, without having to spend an extensive amount of time getting to know each other as professionals and as fellow human beings. Since I commenced my efforts to attain my doctorate almost six years ago, both administrators were aware of my graduate work, and based on their own graduate efforts, were very enthusiastic about participating in this study. They were eager to discuss their work, their challenges and displayed high levels of trust based on their use of language and details regarding their leadership roles in their alternative settings. In addition, based on our pre-existing relationships, I trusted that they both would be honest in our conversations, and that their explanations would align well with prior observations that I have made at the school before this study. Based on our time together before, during and after this study, we have established a collegial bond that is rooted upon efforts to improve circumstances for students in their schools, as well as those in other alternative settings across the geographic area of this inquiry.

**Data Collection**

Using portraiture methodology for this study, I was dependent on diverse strategies for collecting data, including interview transcripts from my conversations with the main actors (school administrators), field notes from my time with the participants, reflective notes and retrospective observations within the settings from previous site visits. Upon collecting and analyzing these data sets, I worked to triangulate the outcomes, analyze the emerging themes,
and organize the information into detailed stories which ultimately have been merged to form a highly descriptive narrative, or portrait of the school administrators and their enactment of leadership.

Prior to commencing with this study, it was important to first select the sites, and then after doing so, make contact with each principal to schedule a face-to-face meeting. After scheduling time with each participant, an Informed Consent to Participate in Research form was provided and reviewed with each principal, and then signed authorizing this study to proceed. During this first face-to-face meeting, this consent form was reviewed, along with a detailed explanation of the study itself, and the main question for investigation. From these initial meetings, the process of organizing our first interviews was explained, with appointments set to conduct these meetings. The actual data collection process through the interviews and dialogue includes taped recordings of each session using a digital voice recorder, with each of these sessions transcribed for future analysis. After completing the first round of dialogue with each administrator, follow-up interviews were scheduled with the goal of capturing great detail about their experience in administration, their views of leadership, the role that they play in their alternative school and in general how they approach their work at their sites. During each interview session, I made notes on my observations of the setting, the body language of the participants, and points which may need additional follow-up during the conversation. In addition, after interviews were complete, the digital recordings were sent to a professional service for transcription, which when completed were reviewed and notes were added to help shape follow-up interview sessions. This reflective process supported the creation and organization of additional questions and helped to identify potential emerging themes prior to any official analysis of the data. A copy of each transcription was sent to the participant as well.
to ensure accuracy of the transcript and to help support reflection in preparation for follow-up dialogue. Each administrator participated in three, one to two hour interviews, in order to capture the data needed for creating the portrait. As the researcher, and an active participant in this study, my interactions and dialogue during the interviews were focused on building understanding, thus the questions that I asked and the comments that I made were aimed at uncovering perspectives that may be hidden from the plain view of others. Just as a sculptor shapes and molds clay to form a statue, I used questions and dialogue to capture the images and behaviors in narrative, thus allowing me to create the portrait for this study. Based on this need for narrative information, interviews were the primary source of data collection in this research, with the additional notes and reflections helping to add more texture to the portraits constructed.

Realizing that words can help to shape and build meaning, the ability to observe behaviors and interactions also helped to support the development of the literary image constructed. Spending time with each administrator helped to build trust and also learn about what was going on beyond the interview sessions. This time was typically either just before the start of our interview sessions or in some cases immediately following, with this time supporting the development of respectful and trustful relationships in support of the data collection process. Also the opportunity to have spent time at each school site before considering this study, gave me a unique insight into both school’s operations and the culture and climate of each setting. Using a retrospective approach in describing the settings and overall environment, this helps to convey the attributes that make each school unique, and the influence that the principal’s leadership may have on these individual spaces. Having been able to watch, through this reflective process, how team members interact with the administrators and how they interact with each other, as well as the students is a major aspect of drafting and refining the portrait that has
been developed. This process of constant data collection, reflection, and analysis, both from the words that are expressed and the behaviors that have been observed, helps me to see what is happening in these contexts, and how this data conveys the enactment of leadership.

During my interviews, I relied heavily on the recordings of our conversations, with some support through the use of field notes to help provide detail for reflection. Field notes are a useful tool in research that can help in the triangulation of other data elements (Creswell, 2003). In reviewing field notes from a visit or interaction, I can use “reflection and critique as the researcher” to help “develop more discerning questions, become more focused in the inquiry, and chart a course of action for the next day” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 214). In this study, I utilized field notes to capture additional details about the context, interactions and physical body language that cannot necessarily be captured from digital voice recordings. This process for incorporating field notes supported the practice of adding narrative contrast and shades to the portraits developed.

**Data Analysis**

The analysis for this study occurred throughout the data collection process. This included reflections from interviews, the review of field notes, as well as reviews of the transcribed interviews themselves to look for themes that emerged from our discussions. Considering that a great majority of the data collected was done through interviews, a significant amount of the analysis process focused on the transcribed conversations. In examining the transcriptions, I identified themes and trends in the dialogue by coding and organizing the data to support the development of the portraiture. In an effort to enhance the analysis of this data once it was collected, I utilized the coding software, NVivo 10.0 to support the process for organizing the information and to identify patterns as they emerged. NVivo 10.0 is a qualitative research tool
that is offered by the developer, QSR at a student rate allowing licensure for one year. I utilized this system to help track themes and patterns in the transcribed research as collected from the interviews. This tool assisted me in looking at the frequency of themes, words, and concepts that emerged from the taped discussions and allowed this data to be easily organized and managed to support the data collection and analysis process for this study. From this process of coding and data tracking, the themes and patterns that are identified, like paints, with each being organized as if they are colors, were used to provide contrast and highlights to the portrait created. This method helped to reveal rituals and trends that added greater texture to the final portrait. For example, rituals may include activities like non-academic practices in the schools focused on student and staff relationship building, or trends regarding reoccurring beliefs by a participant about race or disparity in our dialogue. These rituals or trends may help to convey how the school leader impacts elements such as school culture, climate or even student or school outcomes. Examining school leader rituals and trends can also help to closely examine themes that emerge regarding disparity, student displacement, as well as racialized issues that they confront as Black administrators, or those challenges facing their students, who are majority African American.

In addition, the information provided through the interviews and as analyzed in the transcripts, has been organized into two distinct data sets, one for each site as aligned to each school administrator, with the emerging themes organized to include excerpts from the supporting transcriptions. This process allowed for portraits of each administrator and site to evolve and lead to the construction of an overall portraiture for the main question in this study using the categories that developed between the two cases under analysis.
As a participant in this research, using portraiture methodology, I drew upon my own personal experiences as well as documented sources in the literature to analyze reports and other documents that relate to the main question in this study. In reviewing those documents identified in the previous section (transcripts, retrospective observations, etc.), outcomes or rituals that are in conflict or perhaps in alignment with research supported practices have been acknowledged and drawn into the taped interview discussions with the participants. This process provided background on school-based practices at each site, while using this information to shape discussions with the administrators, thus helping to understand the enactment of leadership around these topics. By using the interview transcriptions, reflective observations, and field notes from my interviews, I have triangulated the data collected and frame it into a deep descriptive narrative that reflects my interpretations of the scenes and events, while ultimately portraying the principals working within these schools and how they enact leadership.

**Role of the Researcher/Portraitist**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the “primary instrument for data collection and analysis” and seeks to build meaning using an inductive process from rich description (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). In portraiture methodology, the researcher must seek to encourage productive inquiry and the establishment of trusting relationships in order to reveal the data that is in need of collection and analysis. These relationships must be respectful, genuine and minimize authority or risk damaging the ability to capture the narrative and experiential knowledge needed to create the portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Using my experience in this field, and my familiarity with the school sites for investigation, a qualitative investigation has allowed me to be situated in the real-space to view the real-world phenomenon occurring in these settings as a natural part of the environment
(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). I am familiar with both sites as well as both school administrators due to my historical engagement in the field of education as an executive working with alternative schools and programs. My knowledge of the work that takes place in both sites from a purpose standpoint is strong, but the knowledge I was able to establish in this study has gone deeper into the enactment of leadership by the two principals engaged in this inquiry.

As indicated previously, I have worked for almost two decades in the field of education as a teacher, administrator and as an executive within a large non-profit organization. Most of my career in this field has been focused on students in alternative schools and juvenile justice education programs, where I have witnessed first-hand the challenges and disparity facing many students served in these sites. During my career, I have observed the over-representation of students of color in these non-traditional settings, as well as listened to the stories that convey their experiential knowledge from traditional schools. From these stories, I was motivated to learn more and to acquire a greater understanding of educational leadership, which led me to take a path towards scholarship as a doctoral student. As a doctoral student, I dug deep into the research and learned a great deal about trends, practices and statistics that revealed the inequity and marginalization that exists in our society, particularly for Black male students. This combination of experiential knowledge and my own understanding of the research literature have contributed heavily to my construction of the portrait in this study. This background provided a level of personal bias as I approached the question, and influenced the manner in which I engaged in dialogue about the practices, rituals and overall enactment of leadership at the school sites. As the portraitist, I had a “need to reflect” on my own “personal contextual frameworks and become clear about the assumptions and expectations that I bring to the work at hand” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 67). Considering these “assumptions and expectations
(Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 67), the biases that I brought with me to this study had to be constantly revealed, explored and reflected upon as I worked to create a product that tells my interpretation of the enactment of leadership by the principals at the identified school sites. My personal history from growing up as a middle-class, protestant White male, with parents who are educators, and friends who have opened my eyes, as Marty did (from chapter one), to the inequity that exists, further contributes to the construction of my own knowledge and biases. Being explicit about my own perceptions, opinions and interpretations of the knowledge that has been constructed in this study has helped to develop a greater narrative that tells the stories of those at the center of this inquiry.
Chapter Four

Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the enactment of leadership at two alternative schools operating amid well documented challenges in each district with disproportional displacement. The two districts have high rates of student suspension, expulsion, and school based arrests, specifically impacting Black Students at disproportional rates. Ultimately, in this study I wanted to answer the following question: How do educational administrators working in alternative schools enact leadership? This examination, as focused on this enactment of leadership, defines enactment as the display or description of behaviors, rituals and perceptions that help to inform and guide these administrators in their duties as principals at their schools, in districts with significant student displacement challenges. Considering the uniqueness of each site and the documented disparities for minority student punishment in the traditional school settings in their districts, this study examined the decision-making process and related rituals regarding their roles, their theory of leadership and how these theories are enacted.

Data collected in this study point to three overarching findings. The first is focused on the leadership theories: situational leadership guided by service (Principal Mann) and compassion (Principal Truth). The second finding is the building of positive school culture that includes students, staff and parents. The third finding is institutional racism faced by students and administrators, as they work against the pervasive, deficit-based forces, one student at a time, in their local districts. I placed particular focus on how their enactment of leadership
provides a counter-narrative to leadership involving over-suspending and over-expelling students of color.

These practices and their individual theories are explored in more detail for each participant as the individual portraits are constructed later in this chapter from the data. As I collected and examined this data, I explored the leadership practices at the two alternative schools and the culture that it shaped to better understand how these two administrators are potentially working against the pervasive, deficit-based forces, one student at a time, in their local districts. I placed particular focus on how their enactment of leadership impacts the students they serve and how their leadership may be working to challenge district practices for over-suspending and over-expelling students of color.

Portraits 1 Principal Mann: The School Leader of Performance Place

“We wanted to do something different.” “No one gets somewhere without someone helping them” Visiting the school for a second time at the invitation of Principal Mann, I saw a parking lot full of students in caps and gowns whose families were taking pictures of them as they entered the school. This school, housed in an old factory, had obviously become a convening place for the neighborhood, which was coming together for this celebratory event. In the large auditorium at the school, I watched families and friends gather, take their seats and watch anxiously for the commencement to begin. Principal Mann was in the hallway with his team who helped graduates line up for the ceremony and make final adjustments to the caps and gowns to ensure that everyone was ready for the walk ahead. Smiles and tears were on the faces of students and staff as they exchanged hugs. As I walked down to my seat, I could feel an energy that was emotional and rooted upon the accomplishments that this group of students had made in getting to this point in life. In this moment, I felt connected to this community in the
school, which was about to grow even stronger as I watched the students walk across the stage that morning. These feelings were amplified as I watched the students walk across the stage to accept their recognition with a person they selected to walk with them. Principal Mann, during his presentation of the graduates told the audience that no one gets somewhere without someone helping them. This was a traditional practice at Performance Place graduations; one that has been in place since its inception as an idea from one of Principal Mann’s best teachers. This practice, which is quite different from others that I have witnessed, appears to embrace the experiential knowledge of the community’s elders, and engages a multi-generational approach in recognizing and celebrating achievement. This is a departure from the individualistic norms in the acknowledgement of achievement in American society. I observed mothers, fathers, grandparents, siblings, significant others and even the children of some graduates make that walk. In watching this ceremony, I got a large knot in my throat and not long after my eyes began to swell from the pride I observed and the accomplishments so many were making that day. There were so many other young people that I had met in my career that did not make it to graduation. I could not help but wonder what challenges, set-backs and life circumstances had served as roadblocks for this group of graduates, and what was it about Performance Place that helped them to overcome and achieve?

Principal Mann founded and became the principal of Performance Place almost a decade ago. In getting this job, he had the following to say:

I loved the fact that I could use my counseling skills on a day-to-day basis. I didn’t have to worry about going to a client’s home and not … them not being there or the kid not being there, the parents not being there, having to take down equipment and all the different things I had to go through with that. I got to put my hands on kids pretty
consistently and have conversations with them about why or why not they were not
being...why or why not they weren’t being successful in high school. And loved it.

After doing this work for a year, the principal at his school advocated that he should consider
becoming a school administrator. In fact, the principal told him “you’re bald, you’re black, you
are wearing a suit, you should be an administrator”. Principal Mann, in reflecting on that
statement had a huge smile and indicated that he really had no intentions on entering the
educational arena for a career. However, the mentoring that he received from his original
principal, who was also a Black male, made a major impact on his future trajectory into
administration. This principal helped to shape Principal Mann’s perceptions of school leadership
and what it meant to be an administrator. Initially he never considered a career in education,
mostly due to the perceptions around pay and responsibility; he just never saw this field as a
viable career path. However, now after having the opportunity to work as a school administrator,
particularly in an alternative program, he is definitely satisfied.

In moving from being a dropout prevention counselor to an administrator, Principal
Mann shared how he was able to work on his graduate degree to prepare to be a school principal.
While doing this, his principal, who made a major impact on his views of being an administrator,
asked him to go with him to another high school, which was low performing. Working at this
low performing school for a year as a developing administrator under the principal provided him
with valuable experience, which led to him being named as an Assistant Principal at another
large high school in the district, where he served for five years. In his role as the Assistant
Principal, he had to deal with student discipline, transportation, textbooks, and the overall
operations of the school. At one point, Principal Mann reflects on having to step in and run the
entire school while his principal was out for an extended period due to illness. From that
experience, which he thoroughly enjoyed, he knew that he wanted to eventually get his own school, but at the same time wanted it to be a different experience, due to the fact that he was always dealing so heavily with student discipline. Principal Mann in thinking about becoming a principal of his own school indicates:

I waited for the right school that I wanted to be at. Having done it (discipline) for so long, I wanted some school where I didn’t have to do that, and …I wanted to do it differently so I waited for this school (Performance Place) to open up.

During his fifth year as the Assistant Principal, he learned about an evolving project that was going to lead to the development of an alternative program for students who were at risk of dropping out and not graduating. In learning more about this project, he applied and was given the task of taking the development of such a school from a discussion and a model from another state to a fully functioning operation in the district. This was the birth and development of Performance Place, which started its operation in the lower level of a mall in town due to the lack of facility space elsewhere in the district. It operated in that space for three years, before moving to the third floor of the community center at the restored and renovated factory. The model, which is established on the principles of blended learning, strong relationships between staff and students, and the integration of technology, was designed to help students over-age for their current grade-level accelerate their academic progression using on-line curriculum and ultimately help them to graduate on-time with their peers. Once Principal Mann was announced as the new leader for this school, he shared that many of his current teachers and team members wanted to follow him to the new school model. This gave him a great opportunity to bring experienced, qualified and innovative professionals with him to help develop and launch this new school. As he talked about some of these team members, he often used a phrase to describe
their goals for this new operation. This phrase was: “We wanted to do something different”. In reflecting on our conversations throughout the interview process, as well as my reflections from earlier visits to the school, this phrase came up on a regular basis, by both Principal Mann and also his team. I would also hear members of the community and district refer to this concept of “doing something different” as a recurring theme as it related to the work being done at Performance Place. Principal Mann in support of this concept for “doing something different”, described his personnel as teachers and professionals that were there to work hard and to make a difference. He gives more detail around this message by stating: “This school is not like their other schools, it’s different because the teachers want to be here, it’s not a job. They chose to be here, I chose them to be here”.

In the early development of the Performance Place, he attributed a great deal of the foundation that was established to his team members that came with him from his former school. They created everything from the color scheme of the school to the way that they would have students dress and conduct themselves. From the culture to the rules that framed the Performance Place, Principal Mann indicates that his team laid the foundation early on which has lead to hundreds of additional students graduating from high school in the local community. In fact, this place was to be so different, that he adamantly requested that I not refer to his school as an alternative, but rather as a non-traditional education model. He displayed a strong sense of dislike for the term alternative school due to the negative connotation that comes with it being labeled and normed as a place for students that don’t behave. He describes alternative schools as referring to:
Chronically disruptive students, kids who are long-term suspended for fighting, drugs, weapons, things along those lines. I’ve had one of the lowest suspension rates over the seven years since I’ve … since the school’s been in place in the District.

In later discussions, Principal Mann goes on to describe that many of his students do have the same risk factors and challenges as those students that are stereotyped as alternative education students, but his school has high expectations and he uses site-based decision making to determine the punishment for students when rules are broken. He suggests that every situation is different, and depending on the infraction, he will reserve judgment as he deals with each situation. In fact, he has such a disdain for student discipline referrals and suspensions that he refused to bring student discipline referral forms with him from his previous school.

Over the past seven years, Performance Place under the leadership and management of Principal Mann, the school, which is referred to by the team and district at his request as a non-traditional school, has made great strides in serving its student population. In this section, I provided some descriptions of Principal Mann, what motivated him to move from mental health to the role of a school administrator, and his desire to do “something different” for students in need of a non-traditional model for learning. In the following section, I will move from a review of Principal Mann’s background to the emerging themes that evolved from our conversations and interactions during the three taped and transcribed interview sessions. These emerging themes serve as the paint brush and highlights that ultimately led to the construction and analysis of the portrait developed regarding his enactment of leadership at the alternative school, or as he calls it, the “non-traditional school”.
Finding 1. Principal Mann’s Theories of Leadership: A Situational and Servant Leader

Principal Mann has had the opportunity to serve in multiple roles as a school administrator during his career thus far, including that of an assistant principal at two different low-performing high schools in his current district, as well as the founding principal of Performance Place, where he has served for over seven years. In his earlier work, he started his career in the area of mental health as a counselor, which based on our discussions, had a profound impact on how he approached his work as an administrator and as a leader. When asking him about his preferences as a school administrator, for working in a traditional or alternative school setting, he explains that he definitely prefers alternative, or what he refers to as non-traditional for Performance Place. He describes this as follows:

Non-traditional 100%. I’m a non-traditional…I came into education in a non-traditional manner. I’ve never taught a…you know, I’ve never taught a class. I’ve never taken a course in Education, other than Ed Leadership courses. And I look at it differently. I look at these kids more than just test scores.

He is very diligent about referring to Performance Place as a non-traditional school and not an alternative school, as discussed earlier in this chapter. In fact, as I reflect on my earlier visits to the school, I recall several of his teachers and support team using the phrase “non-traditional” to describe their classroom methods for teaching and the school’s philosophy for serving students. At the time, this term did not necessarily have the level of relevance that it does now, since engaging in this study and learning more about Principal Mann’s philosophy as a leader. This term, “non-traditional” also helps to describe how Principal Mann views his own professional background, leading him into school administration. He indicates that his counseling background has had a major impact on his role as the school leader and how he approaches his
work with both his students and his team. An example of this approach is apparent in his following statement:

I think my counseling background helps, helps me listen. I don’t take offense to anything. I know I can’t be all things to everyone, but I try to be most things to just about everyone.

In addition, he talks about how working in a non-traditional setting, based on his mental health background, is a great alignment with his skills. Being at the Performance Place, he describes as being:

A perfect fit. And so, for me, being a therapist for a long time, being in homes when primarily African American families… learn how much marijuana and heroin were making a … was making a comeback and how many, how many kids were using on a daily basis, and how that affected their ability to function in school, it was just a no brainer. It was a no brainer, how …how to be an administrator.

He also provides an additional reference to his counseling background, when reflecting on his time as an assistant principal, where he talks about his challenges with suspending students at school.

At that second school that I was a full-time assistant principal at, I led the city in suspensions, I was very good at suspending kids. A lot of the same kids over and over again. The principal that I worked for had a mentality that if you didn’t support the teachers through removing their…for dealing with their chronically disruptive students, you would…you risked losing the teachers to other schools or other professions. And my …The counselor in me, when I would have conversations, it wasn’t just a matter of here’s this write-up, yea or nay, did you do it? Here’s your three days at home, it was tell
me what the moral is going on because I see you in this classroom and you’re not
behaving this way. Or, I see you after lunch and you’re not this way, or I see you at the
end of the day and you’re acting this way. I sort of ask, figuring out the patterns, whether
it was … and … And you found out there was more to the story than them not wanting to
be here.

In this part of our discussion, it was obvious that he was bothered by the high rate of suspensions
that he was handing down at his previous school, not only by his tone, but also in the way that he
disappointedly looked down at his desk and gently tapped his finger. His body language and
behavior conveyed a sense as if ashamed of what he was engaged in at that point in his career,
when removing students from his school. He continued to talk about how there was always
something that motivated the student’s behavior, that it could be something from outside the
classroom, such as conditions related to poverty, or family issues, to being something with the
teacher. In his role now, as the school leader at Performance Place, where he wants to do it
differently, he works with the students giving them every opportunity to achieve, especially
when it comes to how they conduct themselves at the school, and with the teachers.

I give kids every chance in the world to explain themselves, to talk to me about it, to go
back and address it with their teacher, come up with a solution with the teacher and do
something different. We do all that. We try to … I will talk until I’m blue in the face.
My counseling background, I talk and I listen. I talk and I listen. I try to figure out why
and try to fix it for them. And for the most part it works.

Yet again, in this part of our dialogue, he refers to his background in counseling. This continues
to be discussed in this section on leadership, because it plays a major role in how he approaches
his duties as the school administrator. As the school leader, he takes the time to listen to his
students, and works with his team to determine the most effective strategies to support them in their efforts to graduate and succeed. As it relates to serving his students, he talks about how his leadership style ultimately works towards helping students grow into the “kind of person you wouldn’t mind having as a neighbor”. As he made this reference about being a “neighbor”, I recall his speech at the graduation, where he discussed the accomplishments of his students who were graduating. He talked about how these students not only were accomplishing things for themselves but were contributing to the local community by growing into successful members of society. Principal Mann appeared to have a larger view on the impact of graduation on the community, where he personalizes it as trying to help develop young people that you would be happy with living next door.

In turning to how he works with his team, Principal Mann considers himself to be a servant leader. He also indicates that his style of leadership is situational. In reviewing and reflecting on our dialogue, he reinforces these themes, along with his background having worked as a counselor. In our second meeting, we focused a great deal of our discussion on his style of leadership, particularly in working with his teachers and support team. This is where his first reference to being a servant leader came up in our conversation. I had asked him to describe his leadership style, and he responded with:

Servant leader. You know the traditional servant leader. I try to meet the needs for them. I cover classes when they are running late because they had to get their kid to school. I give them what they need and then some to try to make sure that they are successful. I try to provide them the resources and I get out of their way. I’m not a micromanager.

This conversation helped to portray his overall philosophy of working with his team. As a servant leader, he was focused in our dialogue about getting his team what they needed to do
their job. He also talked about staying out of the way and not over-managing them in their duties. He describes this effort as follows:

I’m very open in terms of allowing my teachers to have the leeway to create an environment that hopefully is successful. I give them an end goal of helping these students who have been…had…who had negative experiences elsewhere, have positive experiences here in school. I try to give them what they want and then I get out of their way. I tell them there’s no way I can micromanage each and every discipline, know every standard the way you …They’re the experts. I ask them upfront, what do you need to be successful and I get out of the way and I continue to check in. Is there anything else you need? Is there anything else you need for me to get you; professional development, materials, supplies, a better way of contacting parents, whatever it is. What can I get you? And I get out of their way.

Throughout our conversations and meetings, his desire to serve and support his team was apparent. He described his interactions with teachers as very positive and focused on their needs as professionals. In addition to functioning as a servant leader, Principal Mann also described his style as being very situational in nature. Depending on what was taking place, or the dynamics associated with a problem, he would respond based on those situations or circumstances. He discusses this additional dimension of his leadership style in our third meeting by describing it as follows:

I tend to ascribe to the situational leadership model in terms of every situation doesn’t call for one type of thing. Sometimes I need to be direct and make a decision and go forward with it. Sometimes I need to take into consideration other people’s factors, other people’s histories or leadership experience of themselves, their ideas. Sometimes I let
other people take control of certain situations and step all the way out of it and allow them to make a decision and go with and support that model. It really depends. And there really isn’t a whole…They are not all black and whites in education. And that can come with discipline, whether it be hiring staff, removing staff, conversations along those lines, it’s never really black and white. You can’t treat every individual as if they all came in the same level playing field and have the same experiences about how I deal with them.

He continues this theme regarding his leadership style, but integrating elements that describe both situational and servant models of leadership in his explanation. When asked to describe this style in more detail, particularly regarding situational leadership, he explains:

I try to give them what they need so they can do their jobs as professionals; I try to treat them as professionals. But I think overall it’s really situational in terms of being whatever it needs to be. Some days I have to be a counselor, some days I have to be a no-nonsense decision maker authoritarian. Sometimes I come in and I cut off conversation there’s no room to debate this, this is what we’re going to do. Sometimes I sit back and I let them be adults and come to a conclusion themselves. It really depends. And so when I thought about it more I think it depends on the situation. Again, it’s situational it really is. In terms of my staff it’s more servant leadership, but overall running of the school I think it’s more situational.

As it relates to leadership style and theory, it was also evident that Principal Mann believed in the development of his team. This includes ongoing professional development through training and education, as well as promoting his team members to explore future opportunities in leadership. A few ways that he conveys this effort is as follows:
You know, once I hire somebody to do a job and you give them the tools to do that job, you trust them to do the job. And when they make a mistake it’s…They have to be open…They have to be open to feedback. You have to let them develop, find their own voice, and by exposing them to situations as much as possible.

One of the ways that he exposes his teachers and administrators to growth opportunities include having them sit in on meetings that he has with parents, other teachers, students and stakeholders from the community. His goal in doing so is to help expose the teachers to various scenarios and observe how he responds and processes solutions. He also engages them in the decision-making aspects to help them think through situations, which he deems to be important for their development, especially his assistant principal, who he references on a few occasions when describing his focus on development. As he discusses her growth in her role, he explains how she functions in a way that is very “black and white”, with little room for things to be grey. He attributes this to her business background. This, he perceives is an area for her to grow, because in this setting, it is not all black and white, and that there are multiple shades of grey that as an administrator, you must consider. He describes his assistant principal regarding this development, and his process for supporting her development the following way:

So, she likes looking at the numbers and doing this – bottom line. But she’s learning. She is learning. She likes to sit in with me on parent confrontations, situations where parents are coming in hostile. She loves to say, uh, so and so’s coming in, can you handle that? Sure. Can I sit in? Sure. And she…She always questions afterwards how can they be getting mad at you? I listened. You came in and I would…And frequently, when I talk to her …She always comes in, her issue is that she has already decided, already done, and she presents that to them as if it’s non-negotiable. Whereas, I may
have a decision in mind as well, but I’ll at least let them think that they’re… I think my skill is that I let them think that what I’m giving them is a lot less than what it could be, and I have no problem making it seem as though I gave in when really I gave them exactly what I wanted to give them anyway and the parents buy into that. She hasn’t learned that yet and she’s working at it but she, she hasn’t learned it yet.

In this part of our conversation, Principal Mann is conveying his goal to help his assistant principal grow and learn from his methods of working with angry and hostile parents, particularly when they are coming in to complain about a disciplinary issue from their child as handed down by the school. He again, attributes his style to his desire to listen, as influenced by his background in counseling. This practice of development is a common method of mentoring and coaching in the workplace that helps developing professionals acquire the skills necessary to perform in a particular setting. As Principal Mann continues his work on developing his school, he considers this process for exposing his team members to different scenarios, providing feedback and encouraging their long-term development as critical ingredients in his style and theory of leadership. An additional element aligned to this exposure, and yet also references his trust in their work and decision-making is recognized in the following statement:

I let them make their own decisions. I let them make decisions. I encourage them to make decisions on their own, and once we talk about it, if I don’t have a better idea I have no problem supporting their ideas. And that’s taking from them some getting used to, to being trusted like that. And I said, it’s fine, it’s not what I would’ve done but I understand your rationale behind it, let’s go with it and we move forward.

In his theory of leadership, he encourages risk-taking and displays a high level of trust in his team members. He realizes that he may have different ways of looking at things, but wants his
team to feel free to make mistakes and then learn from those mistakes. During our conversations about his team, he consistently talks about empowering his staff and working to stay out of their way. He refers to them as the experts and wants each of them to take responsibility for their part of the school’s purpose. For his teachers, he wants them to be great teachers, build relationships with the students, and be the standards and instructional experts in the building. He wants his assistant principal to learn and grow, and encourages her to look at becoming a principal of her own school one day. Throughout our interview sessions, each time that we talked about his team, he often referenced his role in supporting them to do their jobs well and then staying out of their way. It appeared to be consistent across all sessions of our conversations, that he viewed his leadership style as being one that is rooted on serving his team, operating his school based on the diverse situations that arise each day, and a focus on development that invests in each team member so that they can grow to be the best in their field for the school, as well as their own professional futures.

**Finding 2. Principal Mann’s Practices: The Building of a Positive School Culture**

Motivation as a theme came up in what really can be summarized in two different constructs throughout the data collection process with Principal Mann. The first construct is motivation in regards to what is it that motivates him to do his job as the administrator? The second looks at how his motivation, as well as his teams, and that of the students are closely connected to the strong focus on relationships.

Principal Mann’s body language and gestures, which included a bright smile and the pervasive use of his hands when he talked, led me to believe that he was extremely motivated and enthusiastic about his role as the school principal. This same motivation was evident in my reflections from past visits and also his expressions during the graduation ceremony that I
attended, leading me to believe that these were consistent elements in his leadership. His tone and exuberant demeanor led me to suspect that there were several factors that motivated and inspired him to be at Performance Place. One of the first questions that I asked him was about his work as a school administrator, and what he enjoyed most about this role at the school. From this inquiry, he responded with:

The light bulb moments when kids finally get it, when they… When they see that their hard work pays off. When they see that the adults who, hopefully, I’ve employed are here to help them and there’s no need to work against them, that this school is not like their other schools, it’s different because the teachers want to be here, it’s not a job.

There are multiple examples throughout our taped sessions where Principal Mann explains the motivating factors for working not only as an administrator, but specifically as the founding principal at Performance Place. He states:

I wanted a chance to start a school from scratch where I didn’t have to operate by the established rules, and the District has given me a significant amount of leeway over the last seven years to run this school the way I see fit. I didn’t even take discipline referrals with me, you know, when I was leaving (his previous school) I was taking pencils and pads of paper with me, I didn’t take discipline referrals. And that’s the counselor in me. Because there’s usually… There’s usually….There’s usually an interaction effect that affects why the kid is behaving. It might be the teacher and the student, it might be home and the student, it might be the community and the student, but there’s something somewhere along the line there’s something going on that’s eliciting that reaction that you don’t want, and finding that out was what I wanted to do.
Dialogue such as this helps to convey how he wanted an opportunity to really do those things that he loved and believed-in as both a counselor and as a school administrator. It is apparent that in his previous role as an assistant principal, that the constant suspension and expulsion of students was contradictory to what he knew was best for the students that he was removing from the school, which is why he chose not to bring the student disciplinary referral forms with him.

In being able to do “things differently” at Performance Place, Principal Mann makes it clear that the district has given him a significant level of site-based management flexibility, and due to this kind of support and the opportunity to exhaust all efforts regarding student discipline interventions, Performance Place has one of the lowest suspension/expulsion rates in the district. His expressions conveyed a strong sense of pride regarding this statistic, and as discussed previously, is completely opposite of what he was tasked with doing as an assistant principal earlier in his career. This fact is something that Principal Mann relates heavily to “doing something different” and appears to motivate his desire to be at Performance Place and free of district mandated protocols, like those required at his previous school for managing student disciplinary practices, often resulting in suspensions or expulsions.

In looking at his motivation more closely and that of the team at the school, there is a clear shift between the ability to do “something different” at this school, and the focus on students, with the impact on students being a strong influence for Principal Mann. Early on in our discussions, even going back to the very first interview, he was very proud of the work that was taking place in support of getting students to graduate. This was evident in his immediate acknowledgement of the diplomas sitting on a table in his office, which he was in process of signing for an upcoming graduation. He pointed to these documents, not as a piece of paper, but as a sign of something larger – something that symbolized the ability to overcome the challenges
in the lives of his students. He recognized that for his students, based on their life challenges, that for many, they are the first to graduate high school in their families and that the diplomas reflected their ability to overcome. This kind of motivation is reflected in his statements about the diplomas and graduates, where he states:

I take great pride in handing out the diplomas that we do three times a year. The happiest day of every single year. Seeing kids prepare for the next phase, enrolled, enlistment or employment, making sure that we have a hand with each one of our kids in knowing where they’re going. There’s a plan in place.  

Here, where he mentions enrolled, enlistment or employment, he is referring to the practice where his team pushes to ensure that students upon graduation are either enrolled in post-secondary education, enlisting in the military, or are entering the workforce. He views the role of his school and team as being more than just simply getting them to graduate, but also preparing them for life after Performance Place. He also states:

There’s no shortcuts and so knowing that they’re prepared for one of those three areas when they leave with a diploma they earned, the best thing in the world.

The enthusiasm and facial expressions conveying emotions of pure joy and pride were evident during this part of our time together. These emotions are linked to motivation because it is something that he would often return to when talking about his role as the school administrator, and how the impact on students served as a reward and motivator in his work, and that of his team. Each time he discussed diplomas, I would immediately return to the day of the graduation, where Principal Mann, his team and their students were celebrating the achievements made. I recall that day often as an acknowledgement of the characteristics at Performance Place that appeared to support and reinforce the motivational elements conveyed by Principal Mann in our
conversations. Elements of this motivation were also apparent when he would joke about how other administrators in the district were surprised by his school’s outcomes. Since many of the students served at Performance Place struggled in other traditional high schools in the district, the administrators from those schools were often amazed and impressed with the school’s ability to get students to graduate. This is evident in the data, where Principal Mann states:

They recognize our work, they hate the fact that we get kids to graduate that they say would never graduate. And I constantly get you got him to graduate? You got her to graduate? What? She came to school – she finished for you? And I tell them all that’s what we do, we make it happen with kids that you all can’t make it happen with. For, sometimes legit reasons, you know, legit reasons. But they’re always surprised that we…that we get it done.

In considering this information, he takes great pride in knowing that his school is doing something for students that many other schools have not been able to do, which is to provide a non-traditional approach to education, where students with diverse challenges can thrive, and by doing “something different”, getting them to graduate.

He continues to discuss other motivating factors during this part of our dialogue, particularly when explaining why he has chosen to work in the non-traditional setting at Performance Place. He conveys this through statements like:

When they (the students) come back for no reason just because it’s Tuesday and they want to stop by and say hello, when they refer their little brothers and sisters here or significant others or the associated family members or significant others saying you need to go to this school because I was just like you and you need…you need this school to help you out, that’s why. Yeah, that’s why.
From this statement, Principal Mann appears to be motivated by the fact that there are obvious relationships between the staff and students, as well as the staff and families at Performance Place. On several occasions, he talks about specific students from the past, such as a local law enforcement officer, named Robert, who often comes by to see him, as well as a student who is a U.S. Marine that stays in touch on a regular basis. Principal Mann describes Robert’s background as a young Black man who was “invited out of his base school” because he was not performing well in that setting based on his grades, minor misbehaviors and attendance. Robert came to Performance Place and did not immediately buy into the opportunities at the school; however Principal Mann got him engaged in various activities, made him a student ambassador, and eventually as Robert’s connectedness to the school improved, he became a Page at the Governor’s Office as part of a summer program that Principal Mann had set up for him. These elements, based Robert’s own feedback, “changed his life”. As mentioned, he is now serving his city as a law enforcement officer and talks about how he has had the opportunity to help bring justice to many victims of crime in his community because Principal Mann recognized his ability. He also talks about how Principal Mann, served as mentor for him and that the staff at Performance Place are “like family”. This motivational link to relationships, as recognized by Principal Mann in his descriptions of student stories, has a strong alignment to an ethic of care, established on love and support, and is further reinforced with excerpts from our conversations across all three interview sessions, as noted in the following:

- I think having them at a school like this where we sometimes replace homes for kids, we’ve had a number of students who’ve told us, you know, that you’re like my family, you’ve become my family, and having a family relationship with you, I can have honest conversation.
• We would take the first four days of school and we actually did everything but school work. It was always about getting to know the teacher; it was about getting to know their classmates, losing their identity from their base school.

• There are some things that you have to do; these kids don’t come to us all ready to go and angels, ready to be filled up. No, you’ve got to do a lot of stripping away of some bad habits and bad practices, but you’ve got to replace it with love and support and willingness to show that you’re not going anywhere (referring to a message that he gives his teachers when coming on-board at the school).

This focus on the importance of relationships is critical, because in each conversation that we had, relationships appeared to be closely aligned to his motivation for being a school principal and his desire for building a non-traditional school, where the students, staff and administrators were motivated by such positive interactions and the construction of a productive school community.

During our second discussion, he talked about the importance of the student and teacher relationships at the school. He indicates that he is often coaching his teachers about this element and that relationships are a founding principle of the school philosophy. In his coaching sessions with new teachers, he explains: “You have to create a relationship with them so that they want to run through the brick wall for you.”

He is often referring to this statement in the final two interview sessions, because it serves as a strong reminder about just how critical it is to get students engaged and connected to the staff, which in-turn connects them to the school. From this connection, he also explains how trust is a critical element that once established leads students to push forward and know that as a school team, they are there to help the students graduate and achieve. He views the development
of positive relationships as a way to motivate and inspire the changes that are needed for students at the school. An example of where these two elements, relationships and trust, are mentioned comes out in the data when Principal Mann talks about his team’s focus on going above and beyond. He explained how staff, including himself, would go to student’s homes and drag them out of bed to ensure that they got to school, they would make calls to encourage students, provide cell phone numbers for the students to call them if they needed help, and also went as far as tracking students down when they went missing from school after a few days. In one case, they tracked a student down at a baseball game to ensure that he focused on graduating from high school. This student, who he refers to as Rico, had a strong interest in baseball, but avoided school as much as possible. Principal Mann and his assistant principal found out that Rico was playing on a baseball league in the evenings, and wanted to use his passion for the sport as a motivational tool to get him engaged back in school. They went to his practice, talked to his coach and to his parents and finally got him to come to school by pulling everyone that interacted with him as partners to ensure that he focused on achieving at Performance Place. This young man is now on track to graduate and is doing well so far in school, but Principal Mann attributes this to the fact that based on their relationship, and the extra effort to engage Rico, that trust has been established. He explains this as follows:

He wants to play baseball more than anything else. That’ll…That’ll be my in with him.

And once he…once he trusts that we’re not out to get him, hopefully he’ll buy in. And that just happens to be the in that we found with him.

So far, from the review of the data, motivation for Principal Mann has been conveyed as the ability to exercise local decision-making at the school-site, the ability to do many different things as compared to the traditional setting, and the opportunity to build strong, productive
relationships across the school community, between students, staff, and the families, as established on an ethic of care. This ethic of care is infused in everything that the team does in their duties for serving students, and in how Principal Mann leads them in pushing each student towards graduation.

**Performance Place School Culture: “This is home.”**

In examining school leadership, and in reflecting on my own tenure as a school administrator, one of the most important elements in operating a school is the ability to create, nurture and maintain a positive school culture. This observation was made as I watched staff interact with students, staff interact with other staff, and how guests were invited into the school community. It was also apparent in the way that the school was maintained, the way that achievements were recognized, such as the multiple banners and awards that were hung throughout the lobby and hallways of the school, as well as the dress code of the students and staff. School culture, along with a strong sense of school pride was evident as well at the graduation ceremony. The connections that students and families verbalized about their engagement in the school and with the staff only solidified the perceptions about a positive culture at the school, which as outlined in the previous section has a great deal to do with the focus on relationships as well.

From the previous visits at the school, prior to the consideration of this study, it was the school culture that was most impressive and ultimately a motivator for deeper inquiry as to what this school was doing in support of students. In the first interview with Principal Mann, he describes the school as follows:

We’ve created an environment where they (the students) feel like this is home and it’s okay for me to go there. Despite the high expectations, despite the rigor, despite the
threats, bribes, inducements or whatever it took to get them to graduate, they come back
over and over and over again, sometimes to the detriment of my work. But it’s a good
…It’s a good problem to have, it really is.

In thinking about this environment, where students and families come to the school, even after
graduating to check-in and see their former teachers and administrators, there is a culture of
connectedness. This connectedness, again, as I observed in my retrospective description of the
school site from earlier visits, is impressive. Students were observed at the school, having
positive interactions with teachers and fellow students, all dressed in uniforms, and engaged in
learning. There was a strong sense of pride amongst the teachers and student body. These
elements were constantly reinforced in the dialogue exchanged between Principal Mann and
myself across all three interview sessions. This process for cultural development starts,
according to him at the initial interview process, when students are being oriented to the school
site along with their families. He describes this process as:

It’s a 45 minute interview. And to talk to a kid for 45 minutes to an hour, it’s not an easy
thing to do…and where we pull things out of kids. I mean we, we’ve…I have stopped
interviews and said we…You need to come back when you’re ready to talk to me.
Because right now you’re not…you’re not talking to me. I don’t know who you are, I
don’t know anything about you, you need to be willing to talk to me and I need to be able
to talk to you so we can understand why this place is different and how some of the
things that you do at your other school aren’t necessary to do here.

Principal Mann continues to describe this on-boarding and orientation process by talking about
his own views of the students his school serves. He provides a strong view on the students who
come to his school, by comparing his views of them and their obstacles as compared to how they
may have been handled at their previous school placement, which he refers to as his competitors. He takes this view and integrates into the interview process as he describes in the following statement:

Unlike my competitors…My competitors at the traditional schools, I don’t disown them, I give everybody a chance. Yes, I’ll take your hard luck case. Unless you are an out and out outlaw where, you know, you are breaking laws and have arrest warrants, felony warrants, I take you. I give everybody a chance. And sometimes my staff says why did we take this young man? Everybody needs a chance. And until you prove otherwise…And I tell them, you’re starting fresh here. We don’t know anything about you. Until you prove otherwise, we treat you as if you’re a brand new kid who just wants to come here and get his education.

From this initial on-boarding process with students, and the reinforcement of the culture throughout the school, such as celebrating success and reinforcing the relationships between students and teachers, the culture has become self-sustaining. A great deal of this he attributes to the students themselves, where many of them will help to orient and support students when they come into the school. For example, when a student may start to engage in behavior or conduct that is not aligned with the culture, Principal Mann says:

The kids who come here and the kids who have been here for the longest, they say this isn’t that kind of place (referring to the fact that some behaviors/conduct are not acceptable or necessary at Performance Place to other students). They stop things before it even happens which is a good thing, which is what you want.

Enacting a philosophy rooted upon self-regulating behaviors and peer-influenced expectations has worked well for the school, as explained by Principal Mann. He indicates that part of this
process truly rests on two practices, beyond the relationship building philosophy of the school, which includes the acknowledgement of success and achievements, and the practice of not overusing suspensions as a method for discipline. In looking at celebrating success, it is a practice used for both the students and the staff. For students he states:

It’s very important to…to celebrate every little thing. We celebrate every…nearly everything, some of the most inane things in the world, whether it be a kid came three days that week on time, as opposed to being late four days. When kids come back to us after missing two weeks …we celebrate them coming back.

At the school they also provide student rewards for great performance, where through school resources and partnerships, they provide students with incentives for completing courses. Each semester they do a drawing for an iPad for those students completing the most courses. They also provide additional days off, to accommodate work schedules when students are making significant progress, and go out of their way to even help find basic needs for students as an incentive to get kids to come to school, by removing roadblocks. Examples of this include their willingness to help find childcare for those students who are parents, help with transportation, find food for the students and their families when needed, even help to find homes when a student is faced with homelessness, or using other community partners to help with resources needed to remove non-academic barriers. In our dialogue about these diverse challenges and the needs of his students, Principal Mann was quite exuberant in his description. His passion for addressing these challenges was apparent and reminded me of our time together during my first visit to the school, where he described in detail examples of obstacles facing students and how his team worked to mitigate those barriers. Each time he talked about these challenges, both in
my first visit and during our interview sessions, his body language was expressive and his tone was quite serious about the nature of their work to help students.

As it relates to his staff, and the use of celebrations and rewards, he has developed a culture where the team celebrates and even socializes together in an effort to strengthen the team bond. Some of the things that they celebrate as a staff include:

Celebrating the adults when they do something professionally in terms of growth, in terms of getting a degree, National Board Certification. And when they apply and get a new job somewhere else, we celebrate that stuff. We do a good job of making sure that people feel valued here.

Beyond the celebrations, he also references his servant leadership style, and that one of the perks of working and being on the team at Performance Place, is the ability to have flexibility. He wants his team to take care of themselves and gives them the time they need to both plan and have balance. He has created a team culture where others step-in to help and in some cases even cover classes for each other when things are going on outside of the job. He himself, has even covered classes so that teachers can go to doctor’s appointments, take care of their sick children and other things that teachers personally have to deal with outside of the school. This ability to be flexible and help each other reinforces the family-like environment, and due to this climate and culture at the school, he has had some of the lower teacher turnover in the district and has received some of the highest job satisfaction reviews by the state for his employees.

At times, though job satisfaction may be high, he does have to battle with his teachers and team members over student discipline philosophies. Based on his own background in using suspensions extensively as an assistant principal at another high school, he has returned to his counseling perspectives on motivating behavioral changes in his students. From this transition,
he pushes back against some of his team members when dealing with behaviors, which in many other places could, and most likely would result in a suspension or other disciplinary action. He describes this philosophy as follows:

There’s a time and place for suspensions, but everything is not worthy of sending the kid home where they have no oversight and no control. And it’s just a part of me, myself and my administrative team having repeated conversations with them (some of the teachers) saying the way we do things here is that we do everything we can to keep a kid in school where we have the greatest amount of control over them and what they do and getting them successful. Suspending them isn’t going to get them prepared for life, they don’t get suspended from work, they get fired. And until we’re ready to fire a kid from this school, there’s…we try to do everything else we can.

With this philosophy, he says that most of his veteran teaches, those that helped him start the school, get it. They understand how to work with students in this non-traditional setting, but he has to often spend more time with newer teachers trying to help them get it. Though this has its challenges at times, he is proud of where they are in using suspensions as a punishment. He makes this point in our first conversation stating:

I’ve had one of the lower suspension rates over the seven years since I’ve…since the school’s been in place in the district. We have our issues but no more than any other school and significantly less issues of disruption along those lines because I’ve intentionally tried to hire teachers who understood the little things don’t really matter, it’s the big things that matter, and if you can deal with the little things, the big things never happen.
As it relates to how school culture and overall pride at the school has been established, Principal Mann reflects that it all began with his initial staff, many of which followed him to the school from his previous placement. Together they did everything they could to make it different from the very beginning, with a focus on student needs, a focus on relationships and an environment built on high expectations. The initial staff did everything to get this established by buying into the ideal. They started with choosing everything from school colors, to their mascot, to even establishing a tradition, where a parent, a sibling, a significant other or even a child walked with a graduate across the stage at graduation. Together these traditions and now institutionalized cultural norms at the school are embraced and contribute to the non-traditional environment known as Performance Place. In addition to these aspects of the school culture, there is a phrase that Principal Mann used over and over again, during the interviews and even back during my initial tour at the school. He says that their motto is:

Every child, every day, anyway. We try to live up to that. Do we always do it? No. But do we try? We try. And it’s a part of having the right staff who buy into this philosophy of this school that these are kids that need something different, that they’ve been cast aside.

This motto has been front and center when in our meetings, our tours, at the graduation ceremony, and over and over again as part of Principal Mann’s description of Performance Place. This philosophy appears to be alive and thriving at the school, and helps to describe and explain the culture and the overall pride on display at this non-traditional institution for learning.
Principal Mann’s Expectations and Practices: “Our motto is every child, every day, any way.”

Part of being a school administrator is the process for setting and enforcing expectations for students and staff at the school. In addition, the responsibility for instituting practices that either relates to instruction, student discipline, or other rituals at a school also falls on the school administrator, particularly when starting a new operation like Performance Place. Principal Mann had the unique opportunity to start Performance Place from a simple concept to a fully realized vision for working with students in a different way. The opportunity to define expectations and institute practices from the beginning, while also being able to modify and enhance these elements over the years, has given him the ability to evolve his non-traditional school model from its earliest renderings. During the collection of data over the four month period, the information that was gathered and analyzed reveals that particular themes regarding expectations and practices are important elements in the conversations. These elements help to convey his enactment of leadership, and how these rituals help to perhaps further define and clarify his role at Performance Place.

One of the first practices at the school that I observed was focused on how students conducted themselves, managed their behaviors and participated in the school community. According to the dialogue with Principal Mann, this was accomplished in a few ways, one being a practice of setting expectations prior to starting at the school through an interview process, engaging parents in the process of setting expectations for their child at these interviews, and also reinforcing expectations throughout the school day with a balance of relationship-focused motivation and discipline protocols when infractions occur. In the interview process, which was briefly discussed earlier in this chapter, students and parents/caregivers are engaged in an
interview where the school and the student/family can learn more about each other, as well as the rules, the rituals, and consequences for not taking full advantage of what is offered at Performance Place. From our discussions, Principal Mann describes the entire process for being referred and then interviewed for Performance Place as follows:

The process is either guidance counselor, parent or self-referral. They come over, they get an application, they bring us a transcript and they bring it back for a family interview so the child and/or significant caregiver whether it’s grandmother, aunt, whoever, they come in and sit with myself or one of my counselors and we go through a list of questions that we developed, an interview, to make sure they’re the right fit. It doesn’t work for everybody.

You have to want to be here. We have a dress code where …we’re pretty fanatical about. We have the rules, the expectations of being here …You’re late at 8 o’clock, you know. We try to prepare them for the next level. You can’t show up to your job late every day and think it’s okay, there’s consequences for being tardy. Cell phone use, using computers for anything other than school work, we have some things that are sort of non-negotiable and we go through that with the student and the parents…and the family. We have everybody sign everything, all those things are laid out so you understand, you have a copy, we get a signed copy, everyone knows. And we’re pretty upfront with that.

In this part of the conversation, one thing that caught me by surprise was the acknowledgement and acceptance that Performance Place is not necessarily for all students. When Principal Mann refers to the fact that it may not be the right “fit” I was intrigued to understand this element more, especially considering the other parts of our discussions where students were pushed to graduate,
the environment was inclusive, and that suspensions were some of the lowest in the district at his school. In pushing to understand this concept of “fit”, Principal Mann explains:

We started out with 75 the first year and we’re up to 150 max at any one time. But we’ll probably go through about 200 (students) a year, we’ll lose about 50 to 60 kids throughout the year and we replace them. We generally have a waiting list. Again, everyone doesn’t want to do it. Students have come only because parents said they had to come to school here. And they signed, they go through the same process everyone did, they agree to do everything and then they get in here and they just don’t want to do it. Or they say I need a teacher to actually teach, me, I need direct instruction, I need that kind of … And they get in and they don’t see it. There are some kids, when they’re chronic behavior problems, we’ll send them back to the base school and we’ll say come back to us when you’ve learned … you’ve grown up a little bit. And surprising, they do. They’ll go back and they’ll say I need another semester to realize what I was losing… and they appreciate it. They appreciate the difference.

In better understanding Principal Mann’s meaning of “fit”, it became apparent that the instructional practices, behavioral expectations and in some cases the overall model of schooling at Performance Place was not an approach that worked for all students. In this last statement from our discussion, I was also intrigued about the practice of sending students back to their base school, when they were not behaving according to the school’s expectations. In summary, from our discussions, Principal Mann indicated that some students came to Performance Place too immature to engage and respond to the daily practices instituted at the school, therefore, by sending them back to their previous school site, they could continue to develop and when ready, return to his school. This practice, he indicated happened quite often with students that had been
sent back to their previous placement. He chose to use this strategy, instead of waiting for a student to get to the point of being suspended or perhaps even expelled, while realizing that his school, due to the blended learning model, may not have been the best option for students in need of other instructional models available in the district. His focus, though on the surface may sound selective in regards to the students served at Performance Place, is really intended to make sure that students get the services and supports most aligned to their needs, and in many cases their learning styles. In explaining this issue, it is clear that the instructional practices at the Performance Place are different. In this setting, the teachers serve as facilitators and do not do direct instruction for all students at the same time in front of the classroom. The teacher floats from student to student, and sits with them in small groups or one-on-one to go over things that are specific to that student’s learning plan and course work. All students are at different stages in their coursework, so the use of instructional software curriculum on-line is the foundation and primary method for delivering content. In using this instructional method, Principal Mann indicates:

They (students) need the flexibility of an online program where they’re not being held to today’s objective 1.03, tomorrow’s objective 1.04 and a quiz the day after that, 1.05 and a test. And you start today, you missed three days, we send out social worker, we send out a counselor, we send out our phone call, we do whatever it takes to get you back here. And when you come back you haven’t missed anything because you are, you are right where you left off and hopefully you did some work while you were out (online), but if you’re not, you pick right back up and you try to get back on track.

Considering this dynamic for instructional practices, it does require that students have a focused ability to sit at computers, work through content online and work collaboratively with other
students, as well as the teacher. In some cases, this model does not work for some students, but for those that it does, Principal Mann makes sure that his team does everything possible to support, serve and push students to achieve at Performance Place.

In working to push students, it has been apparent throughout a great deal of this chapter so far, focused on Performance Place, that the team at the school does everything possible to remove roadblocks as part of their daily practices. Practices such as contacting students when missing school, tracking students down when they are not responding to calls, providing support services, as coordinated by the school’s social worker, or a number of other actions that help to mitigate non-academic barriers to achievement, are all part of Principal Mann’s expectations. He explains this effort, using a personal story to help convey the extent that they will go to help push students towards graduation.

I went to a crack house one time and drug [sic] a kid out of a crack house. I went in…The parent gave me a key to the home, I went and drug a kid out of bed because the parent said she couldn’t get him up…so here’s the key. I went to the house, literally dragged the kid out of the bed by his foot onto the floor and said I have a key to your house from now on. You’re either going to graduate or I come here and I do this every day. He thought that was the craziest shit he’d ever seen and he said…He graduated. That’s …Now that’s an extreme case, but that’s, that’s what we do. Our motto is every child, every day, any way.

He offers another example of this practice, by describing a story that reinforces how far his team will to go to help a student graduate.

We had testing recently and we have one young lady who was working full time, well not full time, she’s working part-time at Lowes and part-time at some chicken place, and she
needed to take a test in one course and she needed to finish one or two units of English IV. And literally, it was down to taking the test and finishing up two units online, and she was hell bent on not doing it. We called the job. We went to the job. We went to the other job, we went to the house, we did everything. And then finally on the day of the test we called the job, we got in touch with the manager, told the manager what was going on, the manager said if you come and get her, I will keep her clocked in and she can go take this test so she can graduate. And that’s what we did.

In working as a team to ensure great results for their students, Performance Place has a culture and a set of practices that expect for teachers and team members to do whatever it takes to help a student graduate and be prepared for the next stage of their life. This was reinforced throughout the three interview conversations, and serves as a foundational element of the school’s culture. In setting team expectations like this, Principal Mann also takes a different approach towards academic expectations. In traditional schools, it is common for there to be a strong focus on student proficiency rates and overall outcomes on high-stakes assessments. At the same time, in alternative settings, the focus is all too often on behavior management, with academic performance serving as a secondary element for students enrolled in these settings. At Performance Place, the focus is on graduation, using student academic growth as the measure of success. Principal Mann defines this focus as follows:

I tell them (the teachers) the expectations are 60% proficiency rate, 100% growth rate for the school, and everybody showing up just about every day, if possible. We don’t meet those goals every year, but that’s what the expectations are. And we just try to create an environment where that…where that is feasible, or to at least strive for that.
In setting these expectations, he realizes that he must have a talented team of educators that are able to balance academic outcomes with intentional relationship building, and a focus on removing barriers for growth. This process of having a strong, talented team begins with the recruitment and interviewing of potential candidates to work at the school, when vacancies come up. Though it is important to note that this school has some of the lowest turnover rates in the district according to Principal Mann, with teachers typically leaving for one of two reasons; either they retire or they die, based on recent trends at the school. Unfortunately for the school, both scenarios have occurred, leaving Principal Mann to have to recruit and hire new candidates as these vacancies have come open. When interviewing potential teaches for his team, he describes the process as follows:

I think the tone you set in the initial interview says a lot of things about how the expectations are. We tell them the good, the bad, and the ugly sometimes about working in a school like this with kids who have had such histories with education. So there’s …So there’s no…I think by being very upfront with everyone from the jump street. And then we talk about despite all of their …their issues coming…they’re coming to you with, I need you to say, yes, these kids can go from the absolute zero to being a hundred. I need you to believe that. Because if you can’t believe that you can get this kid who you believe is a zero, upon meeting them, to a hundred, this isn’t the right place for you.

As part of this interview process, and the setting of expectations right up front, Principal Mann continues this effort to provide candidates with the real-life work at Performance Place by explaining the following:

You may be a fine teacher, but you’re not a Performance Place teacher. And there’s a standard. And I tell everybody there’s a standard of expectations of being a Performance
Place teacher and what that means. It’s not a Monday through Thursday 7:30 to 3:00 job. It’s a Monday through Sunday job. Monday through Sunday. And if a student texts you at 9 o’clock on Sunday night needing a reset for something, if you’re home I expect you to respond to their text. That’s an expectation. If you can’t do that, okay, we’ll find someone who can do that. Because that kid’s life may need that reset. Because their life is so chaotic…They’ve been working all weekend and now Sunday night is the first time they can sit down at the computer because the baby is finally asleep, that’s when they’re going to be able to get to the computer and get started on the work you make available.

Now at 3 a.m., no, I have no expectation.

Using this very deliberate, yet honest process for interviewing candidates has been a successful strategy for the school, one which has helped to weed out potential team members that were more inclined to work in traditional settings, or those that were not the best match for the culture and mission of Performance Place. Principal Mann did say, that he has had some individuals join the team on occasion that were not the best match for the school, particularly those times when he had to make emergency hires. He does try to avoid making hires too quickly because he indicates that when he has done that, they are typically the one’s that struggle the most in his setting.

**Finding 3. Principal Mann: Institutional Racism**

**Obstacles and challenges for students.** Since Performance Place is an alternative setting, or as referenced throughout this chapter, a non-traditional school, it would not be a surprise to expect that there are particular challenges or obstacles in operating this site. Principal Mann, while discussing the challenges at the school, often referenced those challenges faced by the students, not necessarily those facing him as the principal or those facing his staff. He often
spoke of those obstacles that students in his school had to deal with in life and those that they had to overcome in order to reach graduation. This continued focus on barriers for his students was impressive in my view, because he kept his focus on the young adults that his team served and placed their own challenges as the team secondary. Some examples of the challenges and obstacles that he referenced throughout our time together were diverse, but are best summarized in his following statement:

These are the kids that the life, that “if” has happened. They’ve gotten pregnant, they’re having to work fulltime, someone’s sick, they’re having...they’re being a fulltime parent to their siblings, they’re taking care of a sick grandparent or parent themselves. They’re living on their own. They’ve been homeless. Those things happen that made going to a traditional high school unsuccessful for them.

He expands on this set of challenges, particularly those facing his students before they came to Performance Place in the following way:

They have learning disabilities that are probably undiagnosed, and so they’re embarrassed about being asked to read or do math in the classrooms, and so they get thrown out before they get embarrassed. They come to school hungry. Or they’re going home and knowing they’re going to be hungry. That’s why they’re skipping class and getting two lunches. They have children that they’re taking care of themselves. They are parenting their own siblings. They’re working fulltime jobs to help provide because they’re the only legal...legal resident of the country. There are a lot of reasons …

“Don’t play politics with kids’ lives.” As the school leader, Principal Mann must confront diverse challenges and obstacles in order to ensure the success of his students, his team and the overall school. In this previous section, I refer to those challenges that he often describes
facing his students. As it relates to his role as the administrator, he did discuss several challenges and obstacles that his school faced, though most were directly related to the students that he serves. For example, due to the use of technology, the staffing ratios in his classrooms, the need for additional support personnel, such as a fulltime social worker, and the costs for operating his facility, he describes the Performance Place as an expensive school model as compared to other traditional settings. This does leave his school vulnerable to cuts when they occur in the district, but up to this point, due to the outcomes achieved at the site, he has been able to continue with the support and investment of the school system. Due to this potential issue though, he knows that his team and school must continue to perform in order to avoid any significant reductions in funding or resources. Where this becomes particularly challenging, is when the district will try to send him a student who has significant special needs or a student who may not be the best fit for their instructional model. Because of the success at Performance Place, with students who others thought would never graduate or even go to school, the district office and network of traditional schools in his community expect that his team can work with anyone who is not performing in other settings, particularly considering the investment and resources provided. Principal Mann says that he will push back and try to make sure that the district doesn’t just use their school as a place to put students who are being pushed out from other settings. He expresses this push back as follows:

Because we’ve done such a good job with other problem cases, they think we are the cure all for all problems cases. This kid got into an altercation at the base school and they got long term suspended and …because they punched the administrator. The school board said, no, we’re not going to expel you, we think you should go to Performance Place.
No, that’s not the way … That’s not the enrollment process for Performance Place, it’s
not just some place you just place kids.

He continues to also state that if the district is going to push that approach, then he has told them
that “you should just come get these keys – that’s not the way it was run”.

It is apparent that Principal Mann is a leader with strong opinions and a passion for
ensuring that his students get the best possible supports and services available at his school. In
this last set of statements, he makes it clear that he will push back when the focus is not on what
is best for students, and is willing to do this with the district leadership as well when necessary.

When talking about this challenge, and those associated with such issues as the cost for operating
the school, to those related to the placement of students, he is clear about one particular dislike
regarding his job, which he describes as follows:

The politics that people play with children’s lives. School board members or central
office officials who are not in the know as to why a school like this needs the resources
that I ask for, when they…When…When they ask, why do I need certain things, and I tell
them why and they say, well, that’s right, you should get that, and then two hours later
they’re saying no you’re not getting that because it doesn’t justify…your allotments don’t
justify it. Don’t play politics with kid’s lives.

As he stated this dislike, in relation to the challenges that he faces at his school, his facial
expression and body language was quite serious. It was apparent that the constant back and forth
battle about the operational costs for his school, and in-turn the related impact to his students was
stressful and something that truly frustrated him.
Principal Mann on disparity and race: “There are some kids who are considered throw away.”

Through my in-depth conversations with Principal Mann, as well as my retrospective reflections of my tours at Performance Place, I know that there is a significant disproportional representation of minority students served at the school, particularly Black. From my first interview with Principal Mann, he indicated that his student population was:

- 70% African American
- 25% Hispanic
- 5% Other
- 52% Female
- 48% Male
- 60% of his female students are parenting their own child
- 30% of the male students are parents as well
- 85% of the students qualify for free/reduced lunch

As we discussed these demographics and the elements in the county and across the district that perhaps contributes to this disproportionality, he suggested that the following issues are possibilities?

- At the high school level, they view us as a way to get rid of their low test scores. If a kid is behind where they’re supposed to be academically, Performance Place is the way to fix that.

- I don’t think every student is valued equally in the district by everyone. There are some kids who are considered throw away. And I think disproportionately those are African American and Hispanic males, followed by African American and
Hispanic females. And probably in that descending order; African Americans are valued least, Hispanic males are valued the next least, African American females and then Hispanic females.

- The “good teachers” tend to be older and white and they grew up in an era where they may have heard that African Americans are less than. And despite best efforts, despite experiences to the contrary, a lot of that is hard to unlearn or hard to let go of for some people.

As we worked through this discussion on race and the disparity facing so many at his school, he proceeds to say that his rates are better than those though at the other alternative school in his district, where over 90% of the students are African American. In examining this topic and thinking more about the possible issues he identified in our dialogue, Principal Mann considers that the greatest issue regarding this disproportional challenge in his district stems from early racial tensions in the county, as well as challenges where there were originally two separate districts, one being the county and the other being the city, which ultimately merged. From this merger, desegregation and integration challenges emerged at accelerated rates, and the construction of a highway that divided the county separated the communities even more so along racialized lines. Though this dynamic does not necessarily speak directly to his enactment of leadership, it does paint a picture of the challenges and dynamics facing Principal Mann at his school as well in the larger community. In addition, these elements are important to include, because the topic of race, including his own, came up on a few occasions during our time together. We often reflected on the comment his original supervisor made about being “bald, black and in a suit” and what this really meant. Though Principal Mann believes that this was an effort by his original supervisor to equate his large, professional Black maleness, to an innate
ability to perhaps have greater control and management of students; in reality his ability to relate to his students at the Performance Place has been the real asset. Along with this asset, he also goes a step further to ensure that he studies pop culture and terminology to help him best understand his students, as a strategy to build strong relationships, but also to help intervene in possible crisis at his school. Knowing what terminology being used could be slang for a potential fight, to just the ability to comprehend the diverse communication methods of his students, ultimately this effort to understand helps him better perform in his role as the leader of his school, in support of his students.

**Principal Mann – A Final Portrait Constructed**

Principal Mann is an administrator with over thirteen years of experience in education, with most of previous work focused in mental health counseling. He went to college to study counseling and entered the education field later in his career. He has two daughters from a previous marriage and self identified as an African American male. He has a M.A. degree in counseling and after entering the education field, he completed a graduate program at a local university that allowed him to earn an Ed.S. which allowed him to gain the credential necessary to work as an administrator. In this study focused on the enactment of leadership by Principal Mann at his school, Performance Place, it was evident that his role as the school administrator was focused on the establishment of productive, meaningful relationships with his staff and his students. He also commands an environment, where staff working at the school must be focused on the development and maintenance or positive relationships with the students that they serve. He reinforces this importance on relationships through his selection of staff, his coaching of staff, and how he holds his team accountable for doing whatever it takes to help get their students to graduate.
On this foundation of relationships, Principal Mann indicates that he enacts leadership through one of two frames, with one being focused on servant leadership philosophy and the other situational. When operating in the servant leadership frame, he is focused on providing his team with the necessary supports and resources to do their jobs. He works to provide them with the classroom materials, technology and in-school supports needed to ensure that they are able to push their students towards graduation. He also provides the necessary feedback and opportunities for dialogue to consider their needs for professional development and growth, especially as many of his team members consider their future endeavors for working as administrators either at Performance Place or at another school. Through all of these efforts, he is ultimately focused on empowering his team to do what is necessary and treats each of them as professionals, recognizing that he is not a professional educator, with no former classroom experience. Using this practice of empowerment, Principal Mann works to motivate his team using multiple strategies, including the provision of a flexible work environment, celebrations recognizing team member achievement, and the opportunity to help create and continuously refine the practices at Performance Place, thus creating buy-in from each team member at the school.

As a servant leader, Principal Mann uses his desires to empower and motivate his team, as mechanisms that interact closely with his methods for building trust across the school. In hiring his initial team, he brought teachers and support personnel into the school that he trusted would help him to do something that is different at Performance Place. He wanted to construct a school, which utilized non-traditional methods to help push students towards graduation, but realized that he needed a team that believed in the same philosophy as his for getting this goal accomplished. From building his initial team for Performance Place, he focused his efforts on
creating a place where relationships are the foundation for inspiring change, using a servant leadership frame for supporting his team to reach their goals for graduating students who needed something different.

While recognizing that he wants a team that is built on trust, are empowered to do their jobs well, and are motivated to reach their goals, Principal Mann also identified a second critical frame that informs and guides his method of leadership, which is situational. As the school administrator, he must focus on managing a school environment where students learn, staff and students are safe, and that the team is acquiring the goals set by the school, the district and the state. When operating through the situational leadership lens, Principal Mann looks at how he must make all operational-related decisions at Performance Place. Again, like servant leadership, he bases a great deal of his decisions using a foundation established on relationships. Considering these relationships, and what he knows about each staff and student at his school, he makes decisions based on each person’s unique circumstance. When managing student discipline, he evaluates her/his situation, what was the infraction, and what motivated a particular behavior before enforcing disciplinary actions. He believes that there are multiple ways of dealing with situations, and no two situations are alike, leaving a great deal of room for him to make site-based decisions.

In addition to student discipline practices through the situational leadership lens, Principal Mann also looks at how his team must respond to the unique needs of each student. This means going above and beyond in many cases to help get students to school, get them access to critical resources, such as food, shelter or in some cases even child care, so that they can get to school and focus on learning. Again, each of these situations are focused on
relationships, but in this situational lens, each scenario is different leaving him to have to make decisions and enact processes that are aligned to the particular situation at-hand.

The third element that was evident related to this situational framework, is how he must support and set expectations for his staff at Performance Place. As the principal, he has the core responsibility of setting expectations for his team and managing those expectations each day. Each situation may be quite different when dealing with a team member, depending on their tenure at the school, their related experience or in many cases simply how they respond to situations when they arise. Principal Mann works hard to develop strong relationships with his team members, but ultimately expects that each one of them do all that they can to help their students achieve and ultimately graduate. This includes how each one of his team members deals with student behavior, how they provide instruction and support in the classroom, as well as how they provide support outside of the school day, when a student may need additional assistance. All of these expectations are based on what is best for students and the school, while realizing that situations vary quite extensively, thus resulting in his frame for situational leadership. His demand for expectations also did not end with his staff, but also those working at the school district. He was quite critical of the politics involved with operating his school and the fact that depending on the circumstance, he often had to push back against the school district on actions involving Performance Place. This included how the district would place students at his school, the efforts needed to secure resources for his teachers and students, and the way that he would have to work to protect the resources that he already has in place. Again, each situation involving the district may have been unique, but at the same time, Principal Mann made it clear that he was not willing to sacrifice the integrity of his school model due to the politics that often emerged in his local district.
Portrait 2 - Principal Truth, Kids Center

“There is hope that this whole wave could be conquered...” After my first visit at Kids Center, Principal Truth invited me to an end-of-year family event, celebrating the school year wrap-up and the fact that all of the students at the school were returning to their traditional school in the fall. This luncheon was held on a Friday and he thought it would be a great way to help me see how the family engages in the school, and how the staff interacts with them. So, that following Friday I returned to the school, though this time instead of going downstairs, I went to the cafeteria on the upper-level, which both schools shared in the facility. The event had already started prior to my arrival, so I walked in as presentations were in process and lunch had begun. The cafeteria was packed, with students and families sitting together, staff socializing with the parents, and Principal Truth addressing the audience about the school year’s success. After listening for a few moments to his acknowledgement of school-wide achievements, he proceeded to call up members of his team, who then presented student awards for diverse accomplishments. Many were academic awards in nature, with some being focused on changes in attitude, being the most helpful, or in some cases simply being the student who was the most consistent in their positive behavior. During this awards assembly, as awards were presented, families of those students would get excited, standing and clapping, and in some cases yelling out in support of their child. This event was a celebration of short-term success at Kids Center, with a hope for continued success when the students returned to their traditional schools in the fall. This gathering was a setting that reinforced the establishment of a school community, a place where common interests were evident, with a focus on the students being served. After the event was adjourning, students, families and staff continued to socialize for over an hour. I mingled with staff and families, listened to students brag about their accomplishments, witnessed families
feeling proud of what had been achieved. Parents, grandparents, older siblings and even students thanked the staff at Kids Center for their help and support. I recall one young man at this event, speaking with Principal Truth outside of the cafeteria and explaining his concern for returning to his school. His fears about getting back in trouble, his grades falling back down, and hopes that he gets a good teacher like one of the teachers he called by name on the team at Kids Center. I sat there listening and watched Principal Truth place his hand on the young man’s shoulder, give him advice and encouragement, told this young man to call him if he needed anything, and after that, saw the young man give Principal Truth a hug. It was obvious that this school leader was making an impact on students, creating an environment that fostered positive relationships, and was building a school that focused on students’ needs.

According to Principal Truth, there were some tough challenges in the early stages of operation, with the founding administrator struggling to create positive relationships with the school district and local high school administrators. This administrator eventually transitioned from Kids Center and Principal Truth was brought in to help foster strong partnerships and support the relocation of the school to the lower-level of another existing alternative school in the district. Principal Truth as the school leader of Kids Center was involved in the early stages of development for this operation, as part of the start-up team working to build the vision and implement the services necessary for its success.

Having visited Principal Truth at Kids Center prior to the launch or consideration of this study, the following section will provide a retrospective description of the school and culture of the school itself.
Describing the School Setting – A Retrospective Experience of Kids Center

A few years ago, while visiting the district where Kids Center operates, I wanted to reach out to Principal Truth to see how his work was progressing, since I was familiar with his efforts in another state where he served as the administrator of a school inside a juvenile justice facility. Kids Center serves a disproportional number of minority students, and was relocated to the lower-level of the district’s alternative school for reasons that are not completely understood.

However, in making my way to Kids Center during my visit to this area a few years ago, I recall pulling up to the facility, which bears the name of the well known alternative school that has historically operated there for quite some time. This historical alternative school, operated by the district on the top floor has a negative reputation in the community due to challenges with student behaviors, teacher morale and overall operational issues which have led to multiple complaints, with many of these challenges observed myself during visits. Downstairs at Kids Center, it was quiet, it had bulletin boards along the hallways outside the teacher’s classrooms, and I could see friendly staff members walking the hall helping transition students to class as they moved from one period to the next. Trying to reserve judgment about the operations on the upper level; I was hoping that my previous experience up there was just an unfortunate snapshot and not the norm. However, my perceptions were reinforced when a female student from the upper level came running down the stairs, followed by a staff member from the other alternative school. This student ran down the hall, passed me, and then started grabbing things and pulling stuff from the bulletin boards along this hallway where Kids Center operates. The staff member stopped where I was standing; she appeared out of breath, frustrated and identified herself as a behavioral staff at the other alternative school. She watched as the young lady proceeded to run out the doors of the school at the end of the hall, cursing and using profanity. This staff person
made a statement indicating that she wished she could understand what they are doing down
here, referencing Kids Center. She referenced the positive behaviors of their students, and also
suggested that she wished she could work there instead. This combination of events led me to
believe that Kids Center was also doing something different, and that Principal Truth had
brought some of his leadership practices that I had seen in his previous settings to life in his new
role at this school.

After finishing my brief conversation with the behavioral staff member from upstairs, I
walked down the hallway to where students at Kids Center were making their transition to their
next class. Principal Truth was in the hallway and met me with a smile, shook my hand and
welcomed me to his school. We started by stepping into his office, which was a small space that
he shared with two other team members, the team leader and mental health counselor. His office
was nothing extravagant, but rather practical with a laptop that he used to do his work, a shared
printer for the three sharing the office space, and a small refrigerator in the corner, where he
grabbed me a bottle of water. We sat for a few moments talking about his school, and then
proceeded to walk to the classrooms. As we stepped outside of his office into the hallway, he
saw one student returning from the bathroom and asked that student to give me a tour of Kids
Center. This young man, shook my hand, told me his name and welcomed me to the school. His
appearance was impressive. He was wearing slacks, a dress shirt, a tie and a jacket and stated
that he was the top student of the week based on a point system used at the school. He walked
me to the first classroom, where I saw about ten students and a teacher facilitating discussion
about a course-related topic. The students were all dressed professionally – not necessarily in
matching uniforms, but in a dress code that was business attire. The students were very friendly,
the teacher welcomed me to the classroom and after his welcome, each student got up and shook
my hand and told me their name. This was definitely impressive and unlike any other alternative school, it was something different. This process was repeated in each of the following four classrooms that I went into. Most classes were well decorated, though the walls and floors still appeared very institutional based on their colors, which fell outside the control of Kids Center. One of the five classrooms that I entered had mostly computers, where students were engaged in a learning software system focused on their core courses. The student who gave me the tour described the staff and school as a safe place. He stated that he had been in several fights at his previous school and often, they were a result of bullying, which didn’t happen at Kids Center. He said the teachers at the school really cared and that Principal Truth was a great guy that he looked up to. This feedback from the student, the classroom environments, the student behaviors, and the warm, friendly attitudes of the staff made me realize that Kids Center was definitely another site that was working against the norm for alternative schools.

Principal Truth – An Introduction to the School Leader and Kids Center

Principal Truth is a 32 year old professional, who is married and just recently had his first child, a son who is six months old. He started his career right out of college as a teacher working in an alternative setting at a juvenile justice residential program in the southeastern United States. His intentions were never to be a teacher; his plan was originally focused on the medical field, but after working in the juvenile justice school, he found himself enjoying the work and the ability to support young people grow and develop. He describes this as follows:

The first job I received was a job in alternative education in a residential facility…for high school. And in that context, I actually enjoyed my environment. I enjoyed the interaction with the students. I enjoyed to see the growth and the change in the particular students who were socially isolated as unfit or socially isolated as trouble.
In describing his experience in education, he made it clear that his experience was completely isolated to the alternative education sector of the field, and has really no experience in traditional schooling models.

Principal Truth received his bachelor’s degree in History, and while working in the alternative education field, continued to pursue his master’s degree in Educational Leadership. He completed that degree and then continued his graduate studies and earned a Ph.D. in Public Affairs this year, with a focus on policy and government. He self identifies as an African American male with eight years of experience working in alternative education settings. In his first job as a teacher, he indicates that he performed well and then moved to another city to work on his master’s degree, where he ended up working as a lead teacher at a non-residential juvenile justice school. From there, he was offered an opportunity to serve as the school administrator over two residential facilities under the juvenile justice system in a state in the southeast. After working in this setting, he was offered the opportunity to take on the role as the School Principal at Kids Center, which was located in another southeastern state. He accepted this offer and relocated. This relocation occurred prior to him being married, and he has been serving as the principal at this school for almost three years.

Growing up, Principal Truth was one of six children, and a middle child. He describes his childhood as being born into tough variables, similar to those facing the students that he now serves. He describes his background as being raised in a poor home with his unwed parents both working and not always around, leaving him and his siblings to help care for each other. He attributes a great deal of his development to his older brother, who took a great interest in education, setting the example for him as a child. He developed these same skills, and though he
does credit his mother with a great deal of his success, he states that it was his brother that helped him to acquire the skills needed to go far in school.

As a school leader in an alternative setting, we discussed a great deal about why he enjoys school administration, particularly over a traditional environment in the education field. He describes his feelings about this as follows:

Well, I have to say there are two tiers. For the one tier you have the students, obviously, and your connection to the students and often if you look at an alternative setting, the success of that setting is linked to the quality of the administrative staff. And then in the other tier you have the team, the staff…the staff that’s under you.

He continues to elaborate on this desire to serve as an alternative school administrator by describing a sense of competition with traditional school models, where he strives to prove that his students can achieve, even though many perceive alternative settings as something that is secondary to the norm. He expands on this “less-than” perception by explaining how often, alternative schools get the left over or the hand-downs from the traditional schools in a district. This is something that does bother him with being an administrator in an alternative setting. He describes this as follows:

I think the part that’s most difficult is you’re often, in this environment, you’re often receiving hand downs from the educational structure. Your resources are also very much diminished in comparison to the traditional setting. The…just the importance that’s placed on alternative settings is…not to the level in which you would think that the students who need the most attention, you know, would have.

In our very first interview session, he spends a considerable amount of time talking about the discrepancies in resources and also points to some other challenges working in the alternative
setting, as compared to his colleagues in the traditional sites. Beyond the resource challenges, he also points to the engagement and involvement of the parents in his setting. He describes this as follows:

On one level you have…in a traditional setting you have parents who are active. And then the parents who are active, they indirectly support the inactive parents. So you have a balance where there’s parents who are inactive in traditional schools, but there’s so many active parents that the benefits trickle over into the parents who are inactive, and so the parents who are inactive, they don’t see the problems of being inactive in a traditional setting most of the time.

But in a alternative setting, the reputation of alternative settings is inactive parents, and so when a parent’s inactive in that environment, you feel the sting of that decision because you don’t have that balance. You don’t have it.

In making these points, he appears to be focused on some of the differences in the alternative and traditional settings, both from a resource perspective as well as from a parent engagement perspective. He explains his points regarding this as a challenge due to the lack of advocacy that is placed at the alternative sites by parents, thus resulting in diminished resources to ensure the best for their children. He views this as a constant battle when it comes to him having everything that he needs to ensure a high quality school, though he does acknowledge that they are doing some very positive things at Kids Center.

In describing Principal Truth’s background, his role at Kids Center, and some initial perceptions that he shared in the early part of our time together for this study, it is also important to share a little more about the school itself and the make-up of the school team, and student body. Principal Truth has a team of five teachers, a team leader who helps to support the
instructional staff, and an assistant principal that implements behavior modification strategies to help student’s self-regulate behaviors that have previously gotten them removed from their traditional school site. His staff demographics are fairly reflective of the students that they serve, with over half being African American, and mostly male. His student population, as mentioned earlier, is comprised of 6th through 12th graders from across the district; however, over 90% of his students are Black, with a majority being male. The remaining population is mostly Hispanic males, and occasionally a student will enroll who is Caucasian, but rarely. Most of his students come from an impoverished background, and Principal Truth believes that many are at his school due to the fact that they have not had parents engaged in actively advocating for their legally required services. Yes, he indicates, that the students have had inappropriate behaviors that ultimately led to their removal from school, but he also believes that many of the behaviors are for things that had other students done, with supportive parents; they would not have been displaced and enrolled at Kids Center.

**Finding 1. Principal Truth’s Theories of Leadership: Situational and Compassionate Leadership**

As identified earlier in this chapter, I have witnessed Principal Truth’s work in other settings, and have had the privilege of observing his direct efforts at Kids Center prior to this study even being a consideration. Throughout my observations of his past work, I believe that he has the ability to create a positive school culture, where individuals feel connected to the school itself and to the team. He also has a positive attitude, and talks about excellence in his conversations with me about operating an alternative school model. In our very first meeting, I was invited to his home to do our initial interview. I met him at his apartment, where I met his wife, his recently born son, and was also fortunate to meet his younger brother, his wife and their
niece. They were traveling through the state and had decided to stop by for the weekend to visit
Principal Truth and to meet the new addition to his family. This opportunity to interact and meet
his family, helped to create a relaxed atmosphere in preparation for our conversation. I got the
chance to hear stories about his family, and was able to learn more about him as a husband, a
brother, and as a new father.

In this first conversation, he discussed some philosophies regarding staff motivation,
setting expectations and also investing in his team’s development. He talks about going into a
new setting as follows:

Originally, when I first arrived, normally the culture is, we have a tough job, we have
tough students, it’s a non-thankful job. You sort of have that sort of dialogue going on
amongst the team. And then as…over time and when a turnover volume you have to
develop your all starts in terms of staff. You have to develop your all stars. They don’t
walk in the door hitting home runs. You have to develop those particular highly skilled
employees. And over time they begin to buy into that expectation of excellence.

Principal Truth starts to frame his concepts of leadership, as a method of development for his
team. In this part of our dialogue, he gets at the point of transforming a team that was already in
place at the school, and as staff turnover occurred, working with the remaining team as well as
newcomers to work towards the development of a school culture focused on excellence.

In this first interview session, he also talks about creating a culture where as a team, they
are not comparing themselves to other alternative schools, but rather to magnet schools, or even
private schools. He discusses this aspect as a method to help reframe his team’s perceptions of
an alternative school being something that is negative, or perceived as being something that is
less-than other school models. He described his leadership style thusly:
It’s situational, in a sense but it’s compassionate. The situation is, is the adjustment. The compassion is the consistent factor. And I think the compassion is what keeps people following you and the compassion allows you to adjust. Normally, in leadership, if you adjust too much, people start to doubt your ability to lead or make decisions, but that compassion I think is the constant factor that allows me to adjust to situations and still, you know, still remain effective in a sense, so situational…situational compassion.

Dr. Truth seems to place a high importance on the need to be focused on decision-making in relation to the situation that he must manage. At the same time, his attention on compassion appears to relate closely to his expectation of his team to focus on positive relationships with the students, as well as with each other. He continues this description of situational and compassionate leadership, as it relates to serving his students as follows:

Compassion comes from your desire to relieve some of that social demand so that the student can focus more on the academic demands in the classroom. And so that compassion then switches to situational when you find a student who is unable to meet the social demands of living a middle-class lifestyle, clean haircut, new clothes, power…electricity, even the vocabulary used in their household to being able to communicate themselves emotionally, physically, verbally to external people outside the house. Once you relieve that pressure or at least you allow them to understand that you care about their struggle, I think you relieve some of that tension or pressure to have to live up to that middle class values, and they can exist in…in poverty or whatever class they want to call it and focus on learning.

Here, Principal Truth shifts his description of leadership to focus on how he uses situational and compassionate philosophies of leading his school team to instead look at how these beliefs
impact the way he and his team are to work with their students. He continues to expand on his leadership philosophy, particularly as it relates to his role by saying the following statements:

- If I’m not going to lead…if I’m not going to lead this team or these students to a standard or at least to exceed that standard, I shouldn’t be their leader. I shouldn’t be their leader at all.
- A good school leader in, my opinion, first has to understand the team; the staff, the teachers, and they have to make sure the teachers understand their students. All the grades and everything else will come after that.

These two statements show that Principal Truth takes on a position of responsibility, one focused on pushing towards a higher standard at his school, as well as making sure that the standard is not just focused on academic outcomes, but also on relationships and understanding. He describes this in more detail when he states:

A good leader in an educational setting to me is someone who can understand that outcomes are not one dimensional, that there’s layers to academic outcomes, in that academic outcomes is a reflection of all the staff members; all the staff members from teachers and teachers’ assistants to the very small things of lesson plans, to the very small thing of bell transition. So preparation leads to confidence and ability to perform daily functions. The confidence and ability to perform daily functions strengthens our systems in the view of the students. The students then become a part of that system and they understand the expectations.

As the school leader at Kids Center, here he conveys an expectation of preparedness to teach and to function as a team member at the school. In describing this expectation, he believes that if his team comes in each day ready and prepared to do a good job, with confidence in doing their jobs
well, then the student’s in-turn will follow that expectation and also perform well as students. In essence, his team sets the example and role modeling the types of behaviors and attitudes that they must expect from the students at the school.

Moving from the constructs of situational, compassionate and expectations-driven leadership philosophies, Principal Truth describes his beliefs around engaging his team in decision-making at the school. He describes this in the following excerpt from our conversation:

A leader I think they strengthen their system by looking at all the little small things, strengthen the little small things, understanding diversity, understanding innovation not from the top down. I don’t dominate the conversations in my meetings. I don’t dominate knowledge. So, for me to give all the solutions would not make any sense. So there’s a team effort and that’s why I use “team”. There’s a team effort where innovation is encouraged, where strengthening your systems is encouraged. Diversity, not in race, diversity in ideas is encouraged as well as a positive environment. Most of the time I’m hearing concerns from teachers and I try to get them to flip it to a positive statement. So all those things in my environment as a good leader; somebody who can shift toward a larger goal, towards finishing the year, towards finishing with outcomes, towards graduation rates, towards student test outcomes, looking to the larger picture by looking at the smaller things such as attendance, daily attendance, calling parents, some of these little things can lead to the larger picture.

Principal Truth in this statement looks at his role as a leader to push his team to be innovative and to focus on those small items that can ultimately help drive stronger outcomes for the larger goals that they have as a team. He also considers himself to be a promoter of critical dialogue,
rather than the owner of all information for his team. He wants them to work things out together as a team and realize that often times the best solution for challenges will come from within the team, and not necessarily from him, as the school leader. He further expands on this, when asked how his team would describe him. He states:

I empower them to be the…be the expert of their area. So I treat them all as if they’re department heads. You are the expert. So I trust their wisdom in their area. I trust their input in meetings. So empowerment would probably be the largest thing. I want them to…I want them to see and think of themselves on the next level so that they can fight to get there. But I think that would be the first thing, empowerment. The next thing is passionate. I’m not…I’m not sitting in my office. I’m in there with the kids. I’m playing basketball with them at the end of the day. I’m open about my life.

From this description, Principal Truth is focused on empowering his individual team members as experts, but also describes his desire to be very open about who he is as a person, and also reinforces his value for trust with his team. Over and over again throughout our dialogue, he talks about the importance of relationships, those between his staff, and those between his staff and the students they serve. In an effort to reinforce this importance on relationships, he uses three terms to describe how he establishes trust and expectations in his role as the school leader. He states:

It’s pretty clear as to what I expect of the students and the staff. It’s pretty clear as to the rules I lay out and that’s what makes it fair. And it’s pretty clear who I am and so that’s the genuine part. So clarity, genuine and fairness I think would describe me in reflecting to the students and to the staff how I enact, you know leadership and discipline. And I think without fairness and the genuine part, discipline would be difficult in my school.
Using these three terms, clarity, genuine and fairness, Principal Truth believes that together these frame his ability to set expectations for his students as well as his staff, and in setting these targets, he is able to also manage the disciplinary aspects of his role as the school leader. By being open about who he is, being honest and being clear about the overall expectations reinforce trust in his school. By doing these things, he is also, in his opinion being perceived as fair in his decisions and in how he must use disciplinary practices for students as well as staff.

In thinking more deeply about his theory of leadership and the way that he perhaps enacts leadership in his role, he continued to reinforce the three terms just discussed; however he did add one additional term in the final moments of our conversation. He talked about how others may use the term “new” to describe his leadership style. He describes this as follows when asked:

I’ll have to say new. And the reason I’m using the word new is most of the students they let me know that my approach to them is different. It’s refreshing in comparison to what they had to deal with before. And so it’s almost a new start for them. They get to build a healthy adult relationship. They get to engage in conversations that they never had before. And I think it’s a new refreshing concept for them, something that they…some of them don’t expect to have something like that again. They say it. But hopefully they duplicate that when they grow up.

From this concept of “new” he is focused more so on the perceptions of his students and the feedback that he has gotten from them regarding his approach as the school leader at Kids Center. Though this section is primarily focused on Principal Truth’s leadership style and theory, it is apparent that he operates his school with a strong focus on relationships, trust and balanced with expectations that push beyond the norms often found in alternative education.
programs. He uses terms such as “clarity, genuine and fairness” to help define his theory, while
talking about his style of leadership as being “situational” and focused on “compassion”, with
the concept of how he operates being “new” or something different as compared to what others
may anticipate at an alternative setting.

Finding 2. Principal Truth’s Practices: Building of Positive School Culture

As the school leader, Principal Truth must focus on everything ranging from the daily
operations of his school, to the safety of his students and staff, to the outcomes that are being
produced at his school. In order to manage all of these diverse elements well, a large part of our
conversation examined themes around staff and student motivation, as well as those elements
that motivate him as the administrator of the school. In our discussions, a strong, reoccurring
theme regarding relationships emerged as a major, if not the primary ingredient in the success of
his school, his team and ultimately the students served at Kids Center. In this section we will
look at those themes and concepts that emerged from our conversations focused on motivation
and relationships.

Before jumping into the topic of relationships, we will first look at motivation. From the
beginning of our first interview together, I was intrigued to know why Principal Truth wanted to
work as an administrator and ultimately, why work in an alternative setting as opposed to a
traditional school. From our dialogue, it was clear that he has only had experience in the
alternative education arena, and has chosen to stay in this sub-field of education because it is
something that he has enjoyed. He describes this experience as:

I’ve tasted the environment of alternative settings, I’m sort of satisfied with that meal,
whereas in the traditional setting there are students there who need help and their
concerns are different, but I feel that in the alternative setting what keeps me here and to
some extent I just get a …I get the sense that the environment is deterministic. It seems like the fate has already been made and we just have to assist the student on their way to whatever is already predetermined because they’re failing in school. So, you sort of have that wave that’s above you even though you’re trying to produce daily and yearly outcomes, the overarching theme is there’s a fate already at the end of this student’s life.

And if you can help a day then you’re doing a good job.

As he describes this wave, which symbolizes the future of his students as being “predetermined”, he prefers this environment, because he feels that they can work against that “wave” and produce a different outcome. He refers to the effort as “hope”, which is captured in his following excerpt from our interview: “There is hope that this whole wave could be conquered…”

It is this effort to overcome, or conquer the situation or situations that exist for students served in the alternative setting that motivates him to remain in this environment, and push for a stronger impact. In addition, a major motivator for him as a school principal in this setting, is the ability to establish strong relationships with his students, while building a positive school culture. He explains this in multiple ways, but in one particular part of our conversation, he talks about how this ability to form relationships, in conjunction with the need to push back against the larger system is a major motivator for him in this role. He states:

So when I see these kids, I actually see the decision…I see the fork in the road, the place where my mother had to get to, my father had to get to, I see that fork in the road, and that’s what drives me. But what I see is, and what’s the challenge is, I see a lot of parents get to that fork in the road and they relinquish that executive decision to someone else. And when they relinquish that decision to someone else, it’s often someone that has
no clue who their student is. They have no clue of the person, the character, the skill, the
talent. And ironically enough we’re talking about education and we’re talking about
educators who make these decisions, they don’t even know the educational level of the
students.

In this excerpt, Principal Truth talks about the intersection of relationships and judgments made
about the placement of students, in the absence of advocacy, particularly advocacy by parents.
This is a major motivator for him in his role and he points explicitly to the breakdowns that occur
in the decision-making process by the adults who make decisions about the placement of
students in programs like his at Kids Center. These decisions are being made he argues by adults
who have no relationship with the student, and in many cases have no idea who the student is or
more importantly can become. In his role, he sees himself and his team as the advocates for their
students, and this is something that he has grown to love and keeps him focused on remaining in
the alternative education setting of the system.

Principal Truth also goes deeper into this conversation about relationships and his
motivation to work in the alternative setting, by discussing more about “hope” and the role that
he plays in a student’s life during tough situations. In one excerpt from our dialogue he talks
about this as follows:

Depending on the consistency or the turbulence in a child’s life, it gives you moments, it
gives you moments where the student is vulnerable to you, and in those moments you sort
of appreciate the job you have. I mean in those small glimpses when the student is
vulnerable, and the only thing that they’re depending on, the only they are reaching out
to is you, and you’re able to give some sort of glimmer of hope in that, in that one small,
you know, maybe one-day window.
From this part of our conversation, it is apparent that Principal Truth is highly motivated by his ability to impact individual students and respects the role that he and his team plays in the life of a student who is struggling with different life circumstances. As we engaged in this dialogue, his facial expression and body language were quite expressive and his tone intensified as if having a deep feeling of concern for the students, who he knows are really facing some tough situations in their home life, school life or other aspects of their world.

Another factor that motivates Principal Truth is the desire to be the best and to be known in his district as being the best school doing what they are doing at Kids Center. He talks about how the ability and desire to have great relationships with students is the minimum expectation for all on his team, but the desire to be excellent as a school is something that he is constantly pushing for in his work. He explains this as follows:

Anybody who’s in this profession cares. But if you go to the next level, I want to have an excellent school. I don’t want to exist in a school where they go, oh, okay, you know. I want to be a school where they respect academically and that is a long term goal for an environment…an…an alternative environment. That’s a long term goal. But I want the alternative school label to have a different set of assumptions behind it, and I want our school to lead that charge. And right now we’re making good strides in making a good name for ourselves. The District is pretty happy with who we are and how we build relationships with the students but the assumptions behind our name is still the same. So that’s what drives me.

From this motivating factor, he also discusses his own background as a black male, growing up in an impoverished situation, and having the ability to push beyond those factors to grow in his
education and career. He also considers this accomplishment to be a motivating factor in working with his students, who have the same potential if supported.

Beyond the factors that motivate Principal Truth, are those factors that he must deal with as the school leader in order to ensure that he has a motivated staff and student body. He considers one of his primary roles to ensure the motivation of others in his school. One of his greatest challenges is making sure that his team is motivated and remains so throughout the school year. He discusses this with me in the following excerpt:

The motivation of the staff have to be managed as closely as the educational outcomes of the students. And oftentimes that’s a challenge in and of itself. You would hope that your whole focus is just the kids, but the staff, their lives and their behavior and their art, as a teacher and as an administrator, fluctuates throughout the year, depending on where you’re at in the year. The students’ behavior is a direct reflection of the quality of staff, and I think that’s just having a more motivated driven team who is driven outside of economics.

Along with this focus on motivation for his team, as the principal, he must work to manage and inspire their motivation constantly in order to ensure positive effects on his students. He talks about this as follows:

Me as a manager, as a leader, I’m…I find myself being more of a motivator than someone who could come in and bring harsh expectations, hard critiques. I have to massage and…and motivate and encourage more than somebody in the private sector would have to. They could just fill your position tomorrow, whereas I have to grow and develop that level of expectation in the…in an employee.
As Principal Truth talks about the impact of motivation on his team, he does express his concern over the quality of personnel that his school may attract, thus making the motivation of his team highly important. Due to the local competition for qualified teachers, he believes that his ability to recruit candidates to his school is extremely challenging, one due to their salary and benefit structure, but also due to the fact that most professional educators don’t necessarily go to school to be a teacher in an alternative setting. He explains this dynamic between attracting quality teachers and motivation as follows:

The teachers I receive, they tried to enter traditional school and maybe they didn’t make the cut, maybe they’re, I don’t know, a school away or, you know, but in a sense we are that career. We represent their livelihood, their career, and so in their brains I’m stuck with you, you’re stuck with me. That mindset there has to be a constant set of motivation. At the beginning of the year you don’t really too much have to struggle with that, you get them excited about a new year. At the end of the year you have to encourage, change your teaching style, try this, how about just walk around the school and talk.

These competing factors, based on his role are important to consider and which requires him to constantly be monitoring the motivation and energy levels of his team. These elements not only influence new team members coming on-board, but also play into his ability to retain quality personnel. One way that he works to enhance motivation with his team is to empower them as professionals and to use their expertise in diverse areas to help the school. He describes this as:

The one thing I do in each teacher is I find where they are most excited in terms of their skill sets. So, I might have a teacher who is excellent in teaching electronically through PowerPoint, or they may have great organizational skills, or they may…And so I
encourage that they use that to dominate their work time. So, if I need information on an assessment we’ve...we did in the school, I’ll go to that expert and I make them my experts, so they feel that, hey, he’s coming to me for this information, there’s some level in which they … it builds a confidence in them.

Finding diverse methods for motivating his team is challenging, but based on his desire to build capacity in his team members, he also indicates that it is important to gauge how his individual team members and whole team are doing constantly. He has to watch for attitudes, behavior changes and even monitor to see if anyone on his team starts to act withdrawn from the group. He also talks about encouraging different ways of teaching, adopting new strategies, and when he sees that someone needs a break – he has them take a break. Part of his approach to staff motivation is individualized, watching to monitor the personal needs of each member, while pushing the entire to team to perform their best in their work. By having a highly motivated team, he acknowledged that it makes a significant difference in having a group of motivated students at his school.

In thinking about the impact of motivation on students at Kids Center, Principal Truth definitely understands the importance of both being motivated as a leader, and in-turn ensuring that he has a motivated team supporting the needs of the students served in his school. Part of the student motivation that I observed during my pre-dissertation visits to the school appeared to be strongly related to the positive relationships between the staff and students in attendance. The students that I observed talked extensively about these relationships and also appeared to take great pride in their own abilities to achieve in the school, behave in a manner that met or exceeded the school’s expectations, and also in the opportunity to be recognized by the staff for their accomplishments. I witnessed this during the presentation of awards at the end-of-year
family celebration as well as during my tour, when I could hear positive reinforcement being
given to the students for their positive attributes. In addition to the role that relationships,
expectations, praise, and recognition play in this motivation, Principal Truth also states that most
of the students want to return to their traditional school sites. He states:

    I want to go back to my base school. That’s their drive (the students). I want to be
    accepted again to this community of students. That’s their...That’s their driving force.

In this statement, Principal Truth explains that the ability to return to their traditional school
setting is a major motivator for many of the students, with this realization also being a driver in
how his team sets goals for each student and works to target those areas that could be roadblocks
if not addressed. Some of these barriers may include behaviors such as acting out, expressing
anger, engaging in physical confrontation, or even something as simple as just going to school on
a daily basis. The challenges, he indicates are diverse, but one common obstacle for most is their
below-grade level proficiency rates in things like reading and math. Ultimately, his team uses
information from the previous school as well as feedback from the parents/guardians and the
student to design a plan, with goals and progress monitoring mechanisms to help drive
improvements for each student. However, with all of this effort, Principal Truth consistently
indicates that it is the ability to form positive, healthy relationships at the school that supports
and drives student motivation at Kids Center.

Throughout my time with Principal Truth, and in reflecting on my time at this school in
the past, relationships are a key, if not the key ingredient that grounds Kids Center in their work
to serve students. This theme has been so tightly woven into each part of our conversation, that
is was often difficult to separate it as a stand-alone theme for this study. It consistently served as
an element in each topic covered. Perhaps this is because of how Principal Truth looks at the
rewards for working in an alternative setting, where he states:

Because the traditional environment offers more if you’re looking at economics or
opportunities, but the alternative environment, the reward is strictly the student, the
direct clients or the students or consumers, or customers, however you want to see them,
that direct relationship is the largest reward.

Due to his strong views on the power of positive relationships with students, and the impact that
these relationships can have on students as well as the school, he has set some clear expectations
regarding this establishment at Kids Center, where he states:

Well, we have a rule. Discipline or punitive measures are secondary to establishing a
relationship. You establish a relationship first before you address that student at all on
behaviors, or else the moment is going to be lost to smoke and mirrors. But to deal with
the core issue of that particular student, you must have…you must first build a
relationship.

In order to reinforce this rule for relationships and to create a culture where these relationships
flourish, beyond just setting an arbitrary rule, is taking the time to talk and to get to know the
student as well as their families. At Kids Center, each student referred to the school has an
enrollment meeting, where a designated team member conducts an orientation to the school with
the student and the family. In this orientation, information is gathered about the student, the
family and some of the long-term goals for each. In this session, the staff gets to know more
about the student, their likes, their dislikes, and try to create a situation where trust can begin to
be developed. In addition to this orientation meeting, the school utilizes time in the school day
to reinforce and strengthen the bonds between students and staff. For example, Principal Truth talks about the use of the non-academic time as follows:

So, in the morning we very rarely talk about academics. We’re giving them breakfast, we’re talking about basketball, we’re talking about the weekend, we’re talking about…and we’re just building a relationship. We’re building that trust, that caring philosophy in the environment. Because if they care about me, then I can tell them what’s really wrong with me. Or, if they care about me I can tell them what really gets me angry. If they care about me then I can tell them really about what’s going on at home. So that’s really our philosophy. If we build a relationship and we care, we deal less with extreme behaviors and we deal more with the core issues. And all our focus is the core issue.

So our role is teachers come in, every staff is in…in the morning. You build a relationship. Talk about everything but the school. Build a relationship. And then, off your relationship alone, the student will evaluate themselves, off of your relationship alone. They will check their behaviors. They will admit wrong. They will admit what needs to change just based off the relationship alone. But without relationship, you’re going to deal with smoke and you’re going to deal with not even the fire, you’re just going to deal all in smoke. And so that’s really the culture we deal with.

This excerpt conveys the intentional nature for building relationships with the students at Kids Center. In this part of our discussion, Principal Truth describes the difference between “smoke” and “fire” as it relates to student behavior. He describes the “smoke” as the behavior being displayed by a student or the symptom of a deeper issue, whereas the “fire” is the deeper issue itself in need of attention. In building relationships, he believes that his team can move
efficiently and effectively towards addressing deep rooted challenges, or the “fire” for his students, instead of constantly dealing with behaviors such as acting out or aggression, which he refers to as the “smoke”. His team, in his own description must work to fight the “fires” and not the “smoke”. He takes this concept a step further by also talking about how this process for building relationships must be rested on a strong foundation of trust, which leads to feelings of safety for the students. This element is important in the process because, many of the students are coming to the staff with some deeply challenging situations. Whether it is dealing with issues of abuse, neglect, substance use, academic challenges, and a number of other obstacles that can impact long-term success, the students bring these barriers with them each day into the school and depend often times on staff at Kids Center to help them access the help needed to cope and overcome. So, as Principal Truth explains, the focus on trust and in-turn that trust supporting feelings of safety are important in the relationship process. He conveys this in his following statement as he describes what a student may feel.

I trust that my…my intimate conversations with you about my weaknesses, my family weaknesses, my lack of parent or my lack of ability to read or understand or my inability to accept success or failure, etc., that you’re not going to use that to hurt me at some point or it’s not going to be …it’s not going to be turned against me in some great meeting with a whole bunch of external factors of people. So, I’m talking more to that safety than I am talking to a physical (safety).

This focus on personal “safety” as a term used to describe emotional and mental protection is an important element in fostering the kind of relationships that promote change for the students served at Kids Center, based on Principal Truth. He also contributes the relationships that are
established at his school, as a motivating factor to engage parents as well. He talks about how to establish this engagement by saying:

You have to engender a relation with the parents and you have to bring the parents into the school, and you have to show this unified front around the child.

From this statement, Principal Truth is focused on bringing parents into the conversation about helping their child succeed. He indicates that most of the parents that they work with are often not contacted by their child’s school unless there is something that is wrong or only if their child is in trouble. At Kids Center, they try to get parents to be involved in the service model and bring them into the conversations about their child. At times, he does find that many parents, perhaps because of previous experiences at their child’s school, do get defensive or come across as standoffish in initial meetings. He tries to foster relationships in these situations in an effort to develop a coordinated process with parents to ultimately help the students develop. He explains some of this in the following excerpt where he gets parents to see him and his team as different.

Once they see the passion and they say this guy actually cares, the parent actually opens up. “Yeah, I’ve been seeing this at home.” And “his father hasn’t been home for two weeks.” Or, “We just got kicked out, we’re in a hotel.” But initially they come full force, angry at me. But when we get past that that…when they feel like when they understand it’s a soft collaboration, all of a sudden they open up about what’s really, what’s the fire in the room, what is actually needs to be put out. And then that’s when you get the tears and you get the honesty and you get…And then once the child sees their parent in that state around me, who I’m supposed to be external of the home, then that takes the relationship to another level, then I can leverage my relationship to push for, you know, a little bit more tougher expectations.
Principal Truth, as noted earlier makes relationships a corner stone of his school’s operation, as well as a key element in getting parents involved in the work to support their students. He sets high expectations for his team to also develop and nurture these relationships as well. It is apparent that relationships are a major motivator for him in his work, which he acknowledges is a key reason for him maintaining his career in the alternative education setting of our system. As he talks about his personal experiences in this setting at Kids Center, he uses a few statements to further describe his beliefs and some situations that have reinforced his attitude towards this critical element at his school. It is also interesting to note that in some of these statements, he refers to the students making comments regarding his race as well as his masculinity. These include the following:

- Some of my favorite students are the ones who struggle the most in school because we have to talk and I have to learn them the most. I have to get to understand them the most. They become some of the students I’m the closest to. Their victories are very small in some people’s eyes, but their victories are huge in my eyes because it’s a very small step but it’s their step.

- Once I engage them in a relationship and they learn who I am, they always tell me, you know, I thought you was white, man. It’s a weird thing and I’m being honest with you. That’s their attitude…When they feel like that I …When they feel like I have connected to them…All the time…I get it all the time, get it all the time.

- At the end, they are open to someone being dark-skinned and male to have a different perspective on life. They become open to that reality. They become open…And it’s okay. He’s still masculine. That’s another thing. He’s still masculine. He’s still can play sports. He still, you know…but his walk is different, and they become open to that.
In these statements, he again reinforces the importance of relationships, but it veers slightly into a construct about his race as well as his masculinity. In part of our dialogue, Principal Truth indicates that his race often comes into question because of his use of language, his dress attire, and in general how he carries himself as a school leader and as a person. It was interesting to see how his students, most of which are Black males, appear to view his race as something other than Black due to his behavior, his position or perhaps something else that was not directly identifiable. However, this was something that he found to be very interesting, yet at the same time an opportunity to help reframe his students’ perceptions of what it means to be Black. In addition to his race, he also indicated that his masculinity would often also come into question, until they would see him engage in after-school activities like basketball. Or listen to him talk about football games that perhaps were on television the night before. All of these elements seem to be interacting in his perceptions of how his relationships work to both motivate necessary behavior changes in his students, as well as help to reshape the student’s abilities to see race and masculinity in ways that perhaps they had not considered previously.

Principal Truth: Removing Punishment by Incorporating Rewarding and Encouraging Practices and Leadership

“We try to remove the theme of punitive measures and we try to incorporate the theme of rewarding, encouraging…” In addition to this expectation for meaningful relationships, there are other expectations that are also critical to the operation of a school, and help to convey what is important to Principal Truth at Kids Center. It was apparent that staff expectations are in place, but not as a result of forced behaviors. The expectations that I witnessed during my time at the school from my very first tour appeared to be focused on setting a positive example for the students. The staff followed a professional dress code, used positive
language with the students, often being heard referring to the students using their name or as “sir” or “maam”. The teachers engaged with students in the classroom and enforced strict expectations throughout the day. Student praise and positive reinforcement was also part of the norm, with regular feedback given both verbally and using a point system to help reshape behaviors when things fell outside of expectations. I also saw Principal Truth do the same to his staff, by giving them positive feedback and praise. All of these elements tie directly into the positive culture of the school as well as the daily rituals rooted upon leadership and staff driven expectations at Kids Center. Principal Truth talks a little bit about this in the following excerpt from our first interview session:

We try to remove the theme of punitive measures and we try to incorporate the theme of rewarding; encouraging, of allowing a student to build a healthy adult-student relationship, a healthy relationship where the student can be vulnerable and still feel safe. And so in those levels I believe we are successful. And it may not pan out to an immediate straight-A student but it will pan out to where the student can then have a better outlook on relationships and future progress, human progress basically, from just seeing a glimpse of a positive adult-student relationship.

Yet again, in this statement, relationships are reinforced, but the key element that relates to school-based practices and in-turn staff expectations is to not create a culture or sense of punitive practices. At the school, Principal Truth tries to use a ratio of seven positive things to one negative thing, when confronting behaviors. As a school tasked with behavior modification and academic progression, Kids Center must work to enact practices that reshape anti-social behaviors rather than just manage behaviors and then return students to their base school. He expresses this responsibility in the following:
So, if a kid curses out the teacher, you deal with that particular activity, that behavior. In my environment, in order to get to the root of that behavior, because that’s the reason why they’re coming to me, I can’t pass that on to another school. They’re coming to my school based off of that very same behavior trait, so it’s up to me to not shift that behavior but to actually deal with it. So, the immediate behavior becomes less important than the factors that surround that behavior.

At the school, he tasks his team with truly working to modify those behaviors by working to get to the root cause or motivator for the behavior. This team approach requires strong communication and coordination so that students can be served in a very intentional and deliberate way. Principal Truth builds this expectation for communication and coordination by having two supporting personnel on the floor at all times, who can support the teachers and also help to listen to the needs of the students. Their job is to then either deal with the issue themselves or decide when someone with a particular set of expertise is needed to help. These dynamics have led to a culture at the school where everyone, from the principal to the teachers are engaged in helping to confront those less-desired behaviors, while pushing to promote those behaviors that are necessary for future success.

In talking about student-centered expectation, and how the staff are to manage and enforce these expectations, Principal Truth explains this process in the following way:

In talking about certain expectations. There’s…there’s a statewide curriculum. There’s grading benchmarks. There are…so there are certain expectations that are clear, you don’t have to debate that. But when it comes to training staff on how to deal with students, there’s…there’s…there is no benchmark there. There may be a student who needs less attention and…and by giving them less attention you draw them to you. There
may be a student who…who needs more attention and these expectations on behavior, there may be a student who needs harsh repercussions based off of their behaviors, and there may be a student who just needs to call their parents, or you just need…you need to sit and talk with them in the morning. So the expectation may vary in terms of discipline for each student. And I try to give that to my staff members. Do not try to standardize your discipline because you’re…you’re not going to reach every student the same way with the same discipline, the same rule. You may. You may have to let one curse word go so that you can get to why this curse word is being used, whereas with another student you can stop them immediately and then address their behavior.

In this previous statement, Principal Truth seems to really explain expectations as a differentiated process for students, with that practice of differentiation being an expectation placed on the staff to administer. Differentiated expectations, as aligned to individual student needs, to their particular behavior, the factors that perhaps motivate that behavior and even differentiated based on the relationship that the staff member confronting the behavior may have with that student. Other expectations that Principal Truth points to come directly from the district or the management company that he works for, as well as his team. Those standardized expectations include things regarding dress code and definitions of what constitutes unacceptable behavior. He administers these expectations, but his approach to dealing with them is completely aligned to his philosophy on differentiating expectations based on a student’s individual circumstance and the relationships that have been established. He gives a concrete example of this enforcement of expectations in the following excerpt from our conversation about one of his students:
We have a student, named Mark whose mom just kicked him out, 19 years old, 10th grade, not doing well in school, dad is...has an illness that’s terminal until death, so his situation is pretty tough. He acts out for attention. He’s one of two kids, the other child is doing great, actually got a scholarship to go play for a university. And he is that headache, that thorn in the family, and he understands it completely and there’s nothing going above his head so when people talk about him, when they talk about his lack of ability to find a place to live, he understands completely what’s being talked about of himself. So in that frame, the way we reach him and the way I make a decision based off of him is not going to be so concrete as to sticking to the standards of appearance on the point card (rules). I have to be flexible with that standard of appearance. I have to come to compromise with that student in order to get him to buy into outcomes in the classroom.

From this story about Mark, Principal Truth helps to convey that life circumstances do come before standardized behavioral expectations, such as the enforcement of a dress code. If the student has not access to clean clothes, then his expectations on appearance must take that into consideration, as well as his team.

Other expectations and practices at the Kids Center that came up in our conversations relates to things like suspensions, incentives, and managing communications with the team, particularly in staff meetings. At this particular school, Principal Truth indicates that:

“...In order for you to get suspended from our school, we…it has to be something big.”

From our discussions, it is clear that suspension practices are not part of the normal operating process at the school. In fact, he indicates that this punishment is truly reserved for extreme
cases and that all efforts are used to find in-school alternatives so that you don’t inadvertently motivate negative behaviors so students can stay home and out of school. He states:

So our suspension is a little different because we’re trying to create a desire to want to be at our school versus a desire to want to skip. So our attendance rates with students once they arrive to our school shoots up from their base school.

In using suspensions very sparingly, he also states:

The one thing we do not want is a long suspension, like a week, where they lose that desire to want to be at our school. Then we lose that…We lose that…that tool. But for this year, we probably had about 10 suspensions, no expulsions, but about 10 suspensions and then one student was transferred to another alternative school, but none of them was expelled.

The suspensions that the school has given are typically for one or two days, and in alignment with the district procedures; however there was one case, which resulted in a transfer because the student had a weapon on him and brought it to school. This situation was not one where the student, named Brian, was intending to use it at the school, but for safety outside of the school. Brian was actually a model student at Kids Center, and was at the highest level of performance based on his grades and overall conduct. He had positive relationships with the staff and his peers, but at the same time was involved in activities outside of the school that led him to fear for his safety in his neighborhood. Brian brought the weapon to campus and it was seen by a peer, who then brought it to the attention of the staff at Kids Center. The positive thing about that situation, Principal Truth indicates, is that this other student, because of the relationship with the staff, informed the team of the weapon and they were able to respond appropriately without incident. Unfortunately, Brian was removed from the school due to state and district policies,
but again, because of the relationships established, he willingly worked with the staff and ultimately law enforcement to get the weapon turned over to authorities. Had it not been for the relationships that were in place, this situation could have been much worse, if not disastrous.

In order to mitigate suspension practices, Principal Truth returns to the importance of relationships in the school, as well as the need to ensure that his team is well trained and prepared to support the students that they serve. When training new teachers to work at the school, he works with them to understand the basic tools, such as the point system, the expectations for student behavior and conduct, instructional strategies to support the students, the use of instructional software and embedded assessments, and the use of assessment data to inform practices at the school. In addition, he looks at how he prepares new team members to understand student behavior differently. He wants them to understand that the behavior is not something to be taken personal, but rather is a symptom of something larger going on. He talks about this in the following excerpt:

In the classroom, normally when I’m giving a teacher training, often let them know that a student will refuse to learn and that refusal is a behavior and their behavior is normally linked to something else.

This process of building understanding is a challenge for some teachers, and in order to keep his team focused on the expectation to modify behavior, and slowly raise expectations along the way, he tries to help them get past taking behaviors as something personal. This also connects directly into his process of communication in staff meetings, where he works diligently to keep the team focused on solution-oriented dialogue. This comes out in the following excerpt:

So I have solution-based conversations in meetings rather than trying to point to see where the problems occur. So, instead of using individual critiques, I use it as a team.
Hey team, where can we do better in this work? Where can we…So it’s a group taking the…taking the brunt of negative criticism, but as individuals receiving the encouragement in a positive feedback.

This process of talking the team through challenges and working together to find solutions is a key element in Principal Truth’s methods. He puts the problem or challenge out there in a meeting and together they work on solutions for continued improvement. He also uses constant praise and positive feedback to keep his team members motivated and empowered to do good work. He adds that he will never end a meeting by talking about something as a “failure”, but that it must always focus on a “solutions-based conversation” in order to ensure positive effects on the school, students and the team.

**Finding 3. Principal Truth: Institutional Racism**

“All the teachers are suspending black students.” Principal Truth discussed a few commonly reoccurring challenges in serving as the school leader at Kids Center. Many of these challenges are no different than any other school, but there are a few that he consistently points to as major inhibitors to the school’s overall continuous improvement. His greatest challenge is focused on inadequate and diminishing resources for his school. His funding to operate his school has been flat for the past three years, and in the state and district where Kids Center operates, teacher salaries have been recently inflated to compete with other states in the southeast. This challenge is placing his school at risk of losing those good teachers that he currently has on staff, and prohibits him from being able to recruit or hire new ones to replace those that may leave. This situation also causes him to have to tolerate more things from his teachers so that he does not lose them either, based on his description. He uses an example to describe this situation in the following:
I’ll just compare it to the private sector. I have a brother who is in leadership in the private sector, and he can be a little bit more aggressive. He can critique a little bit more. He can be a little bit rough on the edges in terms of pulling out his outcomes that he wants from his staff members. He can…He can place time limits and restraints and expectations on his staff that I just don’t have the luxury. Why? He’s leveraging that with a very good compensation, so they…they’re pay is…is payin’ ‘em for the extra time, the harder labor, the mental strain placed on them, the lack of time with their family, whereas, in my environment, there’s very few factors that’s leveraging the amount of strain that’s placed on an employee.

He elaborates on this with other examples, where he suggests that teachers coming to work at his school have tough circumstances to manage, including teaching multiple content areas/subjects, planning for all of these subjects, differentiating content based on student ability levels, challenging classrooms, limited instructional resources, and working to motivate behavioral changes in the students served. His team often works longer shifts and more calendar days each year as compared to the traditional setting. All of these factors, he fears can lead to high turnover and create obstacles in recruiting the kind of professionals needed to work in a dynamic environment focused on behavior and academics for students with special needs.

Recognizing that this is a difficult challenge for Principal Truth, it was also interesting to hear him describe some of his team, or candidates for positions. He described them as follows:

The staff members that we’re able to pick from are normally the ones that’s hanging lower from the tree. We rarely…We rarely see a top tier employee come in the door for hire, and you sort of need that excitement, that energy, that drive from somebody who is
excited and passionate about their craft to deal with this particular audience, and you rarely get that excitement.

He extends his thoughts around this challenge by also explaining how this impacts someone’s mindset for working in a setting where most do not consider it a preferred place to work in the education system.

You have a staff member who, because of their rejection from the… the school district or any county that is or any school district that is because they were rejected for employment in that particular district or county or state. You’re dealing with confidence issues as a professional.

Principal Truth, considers the challenges associated with recruiting and retaining high quality personnel an obstacle that does place the students at risk long-term and the school. He feels that he is working with his team, his company and the local district in an effort to improve this situation, but there is still a great deal of work to be done in order to eliminate this obstacle.

Other challenges and obstacles that occurred often in our conversations included those related to the parents and families of the students. Many of these challenges he indicates fall way outside of the school’s ability to address, but hopes that his team can work to improve as many situations as possible by engaging the family as partners in the process. Some of the challenges that he points to as major hurdles include things like families involved in gangs, many that are generational members, drug abuse in the home, parents who do not value education, families living in extreme poverty, and many others that serve as major road blocks. He explicitly refers to this in this excerpt:
Kids are literally staying with parents who are actively in gangs or drugs. And so we’re telling them to perform high…at a high level educationally and ignoring these huge chronic issues, I just think it’s not realistic.

In dealing with this issue, as the school leader, Principal Truth works with his team to engage parents and families from the beginning, starting at the orientation meeting and all the way through until they graduate the program and return to their base school. In working closely with parents, some of who are initially argumentative, he feels that the relationships they work to build creates more trust and in the end, gets the parents on-board with the efforts at the school. This comes through in the following statement:

I’ve seen more parents go from a hindrance to a partner to collaborator, etc…But I had to earn their trust just like I had to earn the child, so you can see where the wall is coming from for the child. I can almost hear the home conversation about how school is causing my son to behave a certain way because you could see the wall in the child and you can see the wall in the parent.

When attending the end-of-year celebration noted earlier in this chapter, I recall strong family involvement in the event, great pride by the students and families, and a culture of inclusion and collaboration between the parents and the school staff. Principal Truth acknowledges that his team works hard to make these connections, but at the same time, he does remain concerned about some of the significant challenges facing many of his students as it relates to gangs, drugs, and extreme poverty.

A final challenge and obstacle relates to the students themselves, with some strong connections to the topics just mentioned, including gangs, drugs and extreme poverty. Principal Truth struggles with the fact that he knows many of his students are headed down what he refers
to as a “predetermined” path. He discusses this challenge through a lens that deals with disparity, race and access to basic needs. He states:

Once you make that label and you start that student down that path of alternative or juvenile or a failure or left back, all these negative terms, the student understand. They may not understand it in the sense in which they have the macro scope of what are they’re being placed in but they understand failure, they do. They can articulate it. They can articulate that they are not meeting the expectations of all their peers that’s around them. They can articulate, they will be the first to get a diploma. They can articulate that stuff. And it’s internalized. And they begin to start to speak that particular language of disability, negativity…alternative, juvenile, all these terms.

Having experience in both juvenile justice and alternative education, Principal Truth spoke intensely on this topic, particularly about the student’s own awareness of their perceived deficits. He elaborated this point in discussing how students gain a higher awareness of this perception by sitting in on IEP meetings, where their own deficits are discussed. Here he talks about it as follows:

All the IEP meetings they sat in, all the principal meetings they sat in, all the parent/teacher meetings they’ve sat in, and they have been educated about their own weaknesses of their own behaviors or their own lacks or their own gifts they’ve been educated by these adults around them and these adults’ perceptions of them. They’re sitting there and they’re getting educated about themselves.

Principal Truth is quite adamant about this disparity and the associated challenges with building a student’s self awareness through these processes. He explains how these embedded perceptions continue to evolve and can remain with a student all the through adulthood, and at
the same time, can place a student on a path towards despair, which can lead them to the juvenile or adult systems of our states.

The challenges and obstacles associated with student awareness, self perceptions and the assumed trajectory that these dynamics can take, all create more barriers for Principal Truth and his team to breakdown and strip away, while trying to build the student up for greater success. He expresses that he is proud of where they are as a team in being able to do this, but the competing factors that are external of the school will continue to create obstacles, which is why he advocates for greater investments in mental health services and in-home resources to help enhance the chances of success long term.

**Principal Truth: Race, poverty, and punishment.**

This study is focused on the enactment of leadership in alternative schools, which many argue is a critical juncture in the school-to-prison pipeline. The local community, where this study is situated for Kids Center, has a long documented history of challenges involving race, high rates of disproportional displacement for students of color, particularly Black males, and high rates of school-based arrests in the high schools. Realizing that Principal Truth has a background in both juvenile justice and alternative education, it was not a surprise that this topic would make its way into the conversation, considering that my experience and critical perspective are not in isolation or seclusion as it relates to this field. Throughout all three of our conversations, topics on race, disproportionality, and punishment came up and were connected to the topics being discussed in regards to leadership.

Recognizing that a great majority of his students are Black, mostly male, and several have been involved in juvenile justice, we quickly moved into a conversation about the connections between race and punishment. Principal Truth started by explaining how his
students do come from across the county, but that it is quite easy to see that there are pockets of schools that mostly push kids out and into his setting. Therefore there are some very specific school sites in the local district that are pushing out special education, minority students at higher rates than others. In addition, he starts to frame this phenomenon around stereotypes and teacher perceptions. He starts this part of our dialogue by saying:

You begin to see the baby mammas that you see on TV and you begin to actually judge based off of that reality, where there could be a mom that’s in school working hard. And she’s very articulate and she’s teaching her kids how to go to school and what have you, and she can debunk the whole perception. But race is definitely, in America, a part of the suspension process because it’s clearly obvious in the data, so there’s something that…There’s something that is being displayed by the minority race and there’s something that’s …that’s being perceived by teachers. And it’s not just white teachers, all the teachers are suspending black students.

Principal Truth describes this displacement of students, particularly Black students as a significant message to this group of children. It is a message of rejection and that you, as a student are no longer wanted in this environment at their base school. This is part of our discussion was obviously personal to him, as evident by his body posture, his facial expressions and the excessive use of his hands while he talked about these inequities. He goes deeper into this topic as he describes the way things work in the local district.

Well, punishment in our particular District has a price. And so and let’s say if it’s a drug issue why a student is being suspended and sent to an alternative environment, or if their behavior is linked to some sort of drug issue, to take a diversion class to avoid suspension, a long-term suspension, you’ve got to pay roughly four or five hundred
dollars for a drug class. There’s some families that that’s just not possible…heh…that’s more than their rent and gas for the whole week. And so that’s just not possible. So their student is now left with the only choice to come to our school, even if that’s their only offense. Whereas, someone who has the ability to pay that fee, they avoid that suspension on their record and on their record it looks like they’ve never been suspended, or at least it is a unspoken issue that’s been written off their record without fully focusing on it.

Here Principal Truth talks about a greater inequity that directly relates to one’s ability to pay for an alternative that mitigates a punishment related to their education, or access to education, with those that do not have the resources are left to be pushed out from the traditional education setting, thus leading to a sorting mechanism of students who are disposable to the circumstance. He describes this as a process that “filters out the wealthy from coming to our school versus the poor who can’t afford to take another alternative”.

Structures such as these are often cited in the research as a major contributing factor to the school-to-prison pipeline, and often exacerbate the dropout rates and achievement rates for minority students. In examining the impact of race on schooling, and in particular the push-out effects in the local district, Principal Truth shared the following:

Race is definitely a factor and is a factor because it’s become a cultural norm, a culturally accepted idea, concept that people internalize and it becomes real. It becomes something that’s real, that people really are afraid of certain black males because of their tattoo and that becomes real. You act on that reality even if that person never touches you in their life. In your classroom, a certain female, she dresses a certain way, she becomes someone that you have to watch because she’s going to do something very
nasty in your classroom and it becomes real, you begin to even see certain things that didn’t happen. But these become reality and then you begin to make disciplinary actions on those realities. Even if they’re…Even if they don’t exist. Even if that’s not their life.

It is apparent at Kids Center that disproportionality existed for the students served at the school. Both Principal Truth and I, have witnessed injustice that has motivated our common efforts to disrupt the norms that exist. His district has recently had a federal complaint filed for the high rates of minority student displacement and school-based arrests by legal advocates in the county. Based on their complaints, media reports highlighting the disparities, and the data published in these media stories, it is apparent that there is still a great deal of work to be done. Principal Truth, though a part of this system, is working one student at a time in an effort to change the course for the students he serves at Kids Center.

**Principal Truth – A Final Portrait Constructed**

Principal Truth is a highly motivated and relationship-oriented leader who has over eight years of experience working in juvenile justice and alternative education settings. He has a Ph.D. in Public Affairs and a M.Ed. in Educational Leadership and self identifies as an African American male. He is recently married and has one child, who is six months old at the time of this study. He began his career as a teacher in a juvenile justice program and worked his way through school and up to serving as the principal at Kids Center, an alternative school for students designated as having special education needs and who have been long-term suspended due to behaviors at their base schools.

Principal Truth sees relationships as the foundation for all efforts at his school. He has expectations for his team that ensure the development and establishment of relationships with their students and makes critical decisions regarding their students based on these relationships.
He defines his leadership theory as being one that is compassionate and situational. Principal Truth makes most decisions by operating through a compassionate lens, with compassion serving as the filter that helps him to make the most effective decisions at his school. Through compassion, with the focus on productive relationships, he believes that his decisions are perceived to be fair and better accepted by the students, the parents and his team, particularly those decisions related to student discipline.

As he operates using what he refers to as compassionate leadership, his methods transition into situational leadership, with each decision made at the school based on the circumstance being presented, with a return to a strong consideration about the relationships held between the staff and the student or students involved in a situation. Each situation is unique, and as he considers the living situation of a student, their individualized needs, their goals and other barriers, he uses this information in considering plans of action for supporting and serving his students. He also takes these same factors into consideration as he works in support of his staff.

In his role as the principal, he considers academic achievement to be important but not the only outcome necessary for the students that he serves at Kids Center. He wants his team, as they support the students in their classrooms, to also consider the other areas that are important to the student’s development. One of the most important is helping students to understand the value of relationships and work to help students develop the skills necessary to effectively reintegrate back into their base school upon completion of their long-term suspension. At this school, Principal Truth appears to place as much value on addressing behavior and motivation as he does on focusing on overall academic achievement. This may be due in part to the design of
his school and the demands placed on his team to ensure that students are developing the necessary pro-social behaviors to successfully return to their traditional school settings.

Principal Truth uses his compassionate and situational leadership methods to help motivate his team and to coach them towards improved performance. He recognizes that his school struggles with recruiting highly skilled, experienced teachers, while also realizing that he must make a concerted effort to retain those that are currently on his team. Using his ability for building relationships, he attempts to create a school culture and climate focused on this attribute. His relationships with staff have led him to using strategies for empowering his team members to be the in-house experts for various skills needed at his school, which aligns to the principles of distributed leadership. This empowerment contributes to having a highly motivated team and through open and candid dialogue that is solution-oriented; he believes that he is able to establish strong trust across his school.

Principal Truth, as the school leader at Kids Center, holds relationships as the key to the success of his school and in-turn his students. Principal Truth appears to be challenged in recruiting experienced teachers and in some cases retaining them due to the lack of resources, opportunities, and competitive nature for hiring in his district. It is challenging for Principal Truth to reframe his school as anything other than an alternative school, since it operates inside an existing, historically challenged alternative school facility. This dynamic does hamper the perceptions of his school because of the larger community’s perceptions of this other operation on the upper level of his building. He does indicate that he pushes his team to work against those perceptions by trying to strive to have a school that looks absolutely different, as something new and known for being as good as or better than any other school in the district.
As a Black male, he acknowledges his own experiences in the past and shares his narrative with his students as a means to help reshape what it means to be Black and a male in society, with a focused effort to help his students embrace a new paradigm that goes against the embedded stereotypes. He was able to clearly articulate the challenges facing his students, particularly those that are Black and from impoverished backgrounds in his school, as well as from institutional practices across his district that reinforce disparity for students of color. He recognizes the social construction of race and at the same time works with his team, his students and the parents in an effort to encourage practices that help to diminish the perpetuation of stereotypes and perhaps enhance their advocacy for improved access in the school system. Though he did not explicitly reference Critical Race Theory, many of the opinions, observations and experiences that he shared during the collection of data suggest that he enacts leadership practices that are transformative and in alignment with the tenets of this theory.
Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusions

Introduction

As I sit here writing this final chapter of my dissertation, focused on the enactment of leadership in alternative school settings, where racialized challenges have been debated over the past several decades, I can hear the television in the background talking about a recent officer-involved shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. This shooting, which claimed the life of an eighteen year old Black male, has fueled a national debate about the perpetuation of race, racism and the assault on Black males in the United States. This incident, which shadows others such as the shooting in Florida where Trayvon Martin, a seventeen year old Black male also died, reflects the deep embedded wounds regarding racism, and as some would argue, reflects the “culture of fear” (Robbins, 2008) that dominates our society and portrays our youth of color as “disposable” (Bauman, 2004, p. 14). This perspective, though extremely critical, is one that continues to ignite frustration and tensions along racially divided lines, and has scholars and advocates demanding a call-to-action that stops this attack. The pervasiveness of racism in the U.S., as well as the implications that result from school-based disciplinary practices, contributing to the mass incarceration of Black males, serves as the motivation for examining educational systems where disparity has been well documented. There is and are beacons of light for students in need of another educational option. These beacons provide hope for many, and have been created by school administrators and their teams in an effort to do “something
different”; something that pushes back against the forces that are displacing students of color from schools to prisons each day across their districts.

This portraiture study, using a Critical Race Theory framework, has focused on the enactment of leadership by two administrators working in two alternative schools in the Southeastern United States, where their local districts have been plagued with significant rates of minority student displacement due to suspension, expulsion and school-based arrests. This issue has been highlighted in local media reports, district-specific studies in each county regarding their displacement practices, and currently one of the two districts has a federal complaint pending due to school-based arrest rates, with data reflecting that most school-based responses are disproportionally targeting Black male students in the district. The alternative school setting is of particular interest in this conversation due to the fact that all-too-often these specialized sites serve as the purgatory for students who are moving from the traditional school setting and entering the pipeline towards incarceration, with studies nationally reflecting that these sites often serve a disproportional number of students of color, with many being Black males (Dunbar, 2001; Lehr et al., 2004; Meiners, 2007). The school-based practices in traditional settings, which contribute to this displacement process, often are a result of strict punishments for minor infractions, or are a result of student assessment outcomes on high-stakes tests, which can lead to diminished access to a school’s full curriculum offering, thus increasing risk for disengagement and dropout (Advancement Project, 2010; Shah, 2011).

The two schools selected for this study, are considered to be positive models of alternative education in their local contexts by district and business leaders, and based on outcomes that they are producing, some of which have been highlighted in chapter three, as well as the overall school climate that has been developed and maintained in these settings as
observed by this author during prior visits. The outcomes that they are driving in their schools include: high school graduation cohort rates, improved academic growth, improved attendance (as reported by the administrators for individual students), development of pro-social behaviors, and increased parent/family involvement. Principal Mann and Principal Truth, the two participants in my study, are both non-traditional administrators, based on their backgrounds, professional training, and unique experiences in the alternative education field. Having toured and evaluated several alternative programs across the nation, my observations of these two participants have been extremely positive and thus promote my inquiry through an asset-based lens. The two schools where these participants work have strong local support and positive reputations, as compared to several others that I have visited over the past two decades, where many have failed to yield positive outcomes for their students. The narratives of Principal Mann and Principal Truth, as well as my observations during pre-dissertation visits, have come together along with my own experience in this field of education, to produce portraits of their enactment of leadership, and efforts for reversing the school-to-prison pipeline.

According to the literature, alternative schools were created to serve students in need of different approaches to learning, with trends over the past few decades moving towards models focused more on serving students who are disruptive or those not achieving in the traditional settings (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Land & Legters, 2002). Since the adoption of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), these models have expanded, and it is common to find these specialized schools focused on serving students that don’t fit within the traditional school framework, thus driving out students that are not academically achieving on high stakes assessments or are disruptive. Often this “push-out” (Fine, 1991) effect disproportionately targets students of color, thus contributing to the higher representation of Black students in alternative school programs
This increase in representation and the effects on marginalized students from national policies like NCLB are in need of greater examination, with little research regarding these specialized sites over the past decade. With this lack of research, the discussion and those that follow from this study can hopefully bring an enhanced awareness and accelerated dialogue about those that are displaced and segregated to these rebranded reform school models (Dunbar, 2001). In addition, it is hopeful that this study can contribute to a larger discussion about leadership practices in these non-traditional spaces, where certain theories, when adopted, can perhaps lead to greater outcomes for those students served in these schools.

The review of existing research, though limited, reveals some common traits in effective alternative schools. These effective practices include such things as: “small classroom ratios; highly structured classrooms and behavior management; school-based adult mentors; functional behavior assessments; social skills instruction; effective academic instruction; parent involvement; and the use of positive behavioral interventions” (Flower et al., 2011, p. 491). In addition to these practices, other studies have shown that a strong focus on student and staff relationships, relevant curriculum, diverse instructional methodologies, highly trained personnel, transition planning, and data-driven decision making for student instruction are all important elements in quality alternative schools (Carpentar-Aeby & Aeby, 2012; Gable et al., 2006; Hughes et al., 2006; Quinn & Rutherford, 1998). The findings in this study show that many of these elements were in place and several are considered cornerstones at each school’s operation.

This study, which was a qualitative investigation, utilized portraiture that enabled me to engage in comprehensive dialogue with each participant, while recognizing my own background in this field of education, my own experiences with each school and the relationships that I had before this study with each principal and how these relationships evolved as a result of this
investigation. By weaving the narrative collected through three different interview sessions with each participant, and my own reflections from site visits before the consideration of this dissertation, I have been able to craft descriptive narratives of each principal and their enactment of leadership at their schools. The collection of data through the interview process took approximately four months, with a total of more than eight hours of transcribed dialogue between the two participants for analysis and coding using NVivo 10.0. Once coded, the data and the reflections from my observations at each site, together have constructed the portraits presented in this study.

**Principal Mann – Portrait of an Empowering Servant Leader**

Principal Mann is the founding administrator of Performance Place, which has been in operation for almost eight years. He is an African American male, with thirteen years of experience in education, with all of his previous training and career efforts in the field of counseling and mental health. He worked for many years as a mental health counselor, and he attributes his success as an administrator, with low suspension rates and positive outcomes to this training and experience. He indicates that his background in counseling has helped him to listen and to look for the deeper issues that motivate certain behaviors in students, their parents, and the staff at his school. In addition to his mental health background, his experience working in other schools as an assistant principal and dropout prevention counselor, he suspended high numbers of students on a regular basis as required by his principal. He indicates that this impacted him significantly, because he knew that pushing the students out of school was not beneficial for them, and often contributed to other challenges in the community. He also acknowledged that this practice was often a result of the same educators always referring students, and that his principal expected that he support them so that they would not risk losing good teachers. All of
these things influenced how he wanted to work as a principal and the way that he really wanted to do “something different” when given the chance to build a “non-traditional school” at Performance Place.

This alternative school, which Principal Mann adamantly requests that I refer to as a “non-traditional” school instead, due to the negative connotations of alternative schools, has served hundreds of students who have dropped out, at risk of dropping out or are academically behind their peer group and in need of another option to help accelerate their academic progression towards graduation. This school has a positive reputation in the district and local community for helping students achieve graduation rates that are above the district average and a team that works there doing anything and everything to push students to graduate. A phrase that is closely associated with this school, its culture, and the team, and is reflective in the expectations conveyed by Principal Mann is “every child, every day, anyway”. This phrase is something that he referred to often during my initial tours at the school, and was reinforced by his statements during our dialogue together in this study. He conveyed an expectation of himself and his team that they will do whatever it takes to get their students to graduate. These expectations focused on strong relationships, but also high demands for learning, and avoidance of deficit-based practices that could contribute to diminished rigor. He shared multiple stories during our time together about students’ achievements, and efforts that he made as well as his team to get students through school. He talked about going into homes and pulling kids out of bed, going to their jobs to track them down when they did not come to school and even one situation where he went to a baseball game where a student was playing and talked to the coach so that they could get this student more engaged in school. These stories often ended with the
students graduating and in many cases coming back to visit the school quite often due to their connection with the staff and Principal Mann.

Principal Mann had a strong confidence in his work, a great deal of pride in his school and team, and a focus on helping students graduate. His message was consistent and his passion when speaking was evident by his facial expressions, his body language, and overall tone when communicating. The themes that emerged include his theories of leadership, which he identifies as servant and situational in style. Additional themes include his focus on school practices that promote a positive school culture, the creation of pro-social relationships with students, and challenges or obstacles that he must confront as well as institutional racism. These themes helped to shape how his leadership was enacted as the principal at his school, his priorities in serving as the school administrator, and ultimately who he is as a leader focused on getting students to graduate.

Principal Mann is a combination of a servant leader and a situational leader. As a servant leader, he strives to provide his team with what they need to do their jobs and then as he states “gets out of their way”. He is focused on “listening” to his team, students and parents, and through his servant leadership style, works to create an environment that allows him to “serve others” and “build community” at Performance Place (Black, 2010, p. 440). He is not a “micromanager” and realizes that his area of expertise is not classroom instruction. His background comes from the field of counseling and has never taught a class, but he does know what “good instruction looks like”. He indicates that his goals are to provide each teacher with the tools, the resources and the professional development that they need to be the best that they can be for their students. As a servant leader, he will cover classes, cover lunches, go and track down students, or whatever is needed so that his team can do their jobs. He has covered classes
when someone has a sick child, or is running late, or even when they need to run to a medical appointment. He does this so that his team can function well, and it provides them with the flexibility needed to be balanced in their lives. Though this study did not examine the effects of this leadership style from Principal Mann at Performance Place on his team, the existing research regarding servant leadership suggests that this style promotes higher rates of teacher job satisfaction, which contributes to positive school climate and enhanced student outcomes (Cerit, 2009; Nguni et al., 2006; Rowan et al., 2002).

As a situational leader, he responds to the circumstance, recognizing that not all situations are identical and that all things are not necessarily “black and white”. He definitely considers his style for administering student discipline to be situational and that no two punishments or behaviors are exactly the same. He indicates that he first listens, looks at the situation and works to find a way that is focused on the needs of the student first. He always uses out-of-school suspension as a last resort, and usually only in a situation where safety has to be considered. He also uses this leadership style when considering new hires, removing employees, and in how he deals with parents. Because of his counseling background, which he indicates has had a definite impact on how he has approached his duties as the school principal, he first listens and recognizes that he “can’t treat every individual as if they all came in on the same level playing field”. He must consider each situation independently and work to make the best possible decisions upon examining the information available. In using situational leadership theory, he is in alignment with most other secondary principals across the country, where he utilizes the “Selling and Participating” styles associated with this theory (Ireh & Bailey, 2014, p. 29). In utilizing the “Selling” style of situational leadership, he directs his team using “two-way communication and providing socio-emotional support” to get buy-in on the efforts at the school
This practice was evident in his description of working with his team to support challenging students, particularly when a student may be causing problems at the school. He would solicit input, but always push his team to stay focused on the students being served and the challenges that they had to overcome. In garnering their buy-in, his school team would ultimately work to better support the students at the school towards achieving graduation. When leading through the “Participating” style, he practices shared decision-making with his team, where relationships are strong, and tasks are manageable (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988, p. 169-170). An example of this was evident in his description of the start-up of Performance Place, where his team worked together using shared decision-making to establish the culture of the school and the rituals that define it still to this day; such as the graduation ceremony where a parent or loved one walks with the student across the stage, and the defining of the school uniform policy.

As the principal at Performance Place, he feels that he is a servant leader in how he supports and serves his team, but at the same time, he must be a situational leader in order to operate and manage his school. He knows that there are times that he must be authoritative and make decisions, but most often he tries to get his team to come up with solutions and together they work collaboratively to determine best solutions for the challenges and opportunities that they face.

Principal Mann utilizes competencies that reflect a distributed leadership style, where he engages his team in decision-making, and empowers his team to assume leadership roles within the school, and recognizes that not all skills and knowledge rest in him as the principal (Bennette et al., 2003). For example, he acknowledges his own limitations regarding instruction and curriculum, but at the same time recognizes the strengths of his team, particularly some of his
teachers and his assistant principal to help lead and manage these efforts. As part of his leadership style, he proactively works to develop his team by encouraging their professional and personal development. This includes working with his assistant principal as she strives to become the principal one-day at her own school or even at Performance Place. He has several team members that he has encouraged to expand their own skills by taking course work, earning a higher-level degree, obtaining National Certification, or even work towards completing the necessary steps to become school administrators. Principal Mann strives to push his team towards higher achievements and then celebrates these achievements in an effort to support overall team motivation and to reinforce a culture at Performance Place focused on continuous development.

Considering that leadership is multi-faceted, dynamic and often hard to define within strict parameters, Principal Mann’s explanation of his own theories of leadership have focused on serving others and making decisions based on the unique elements for each situation. These constructs are constantly reinforced in the narrative from our interviews and from the retrospective reflections of my earlier visits at the school. Leadership “is a social phenomenon” (Watson & Scribner, 2007, p. 464) and it is often bound to the setting by the unique characteristics of the school and the personal attributes of the principal working to lead it (Leithwood et al., 2008). For Principal Mann, this is a highly relevant point, since he considers his effectiveness as a school administrator and as a leader at Performance Place to be a result of his training as a counselor, his work in other school settings, and his personal experiences as an African American male, situated in a space where he is committed to not giving up on the students that he and his team serve.
In support of his enacted leadership theories, Principal Mann engages a strong ethic of care for his students, as displayed by his interactions, his expectations for staff, and how he approaches his duties each day at Performance Place. He considers relationships to be the foundation at his school, with staff expected to build productive, pro-social bonds with each student. Like other studies focused on relationships (Bass, 2012; Roberts, 2010), particularly between African American leaders and minority student populations, “caring leadership practices” are proving effective and “can positively impact the learning experiences and achievement of students in urban schools” (Bass, 2012, p. 74). At Performance Place these relationships are reinforced through the school’s activities and overall operational design. This ethic of care, or creation of counter spaces, through the CRT lens, helps to provide students with an environment that is culturally relevant and supportive of their unique experiential knowledge as victims of race-based displacement practices across the larger context. This includes the creation of a “climate for student achievement by discerning how best to govern, educate, and advocate for disadvantaged students” (Bass, 2012, p. 83), which frames the work that Principal Mann is focused on at his school. He promotes these efforts with such things as morning motivations, which are designed to bring the school population together with the staff to kick off each week and to acknowledge individual student’s achievements, as well as beginning of the year activities where the first few days of school are focused on getting to know the students, in support of creating and nurturing these counter spaces for success versus those that may be deficit focused in other settings. The practice of enacting “caring leadership” (Bass, 2012, p. 74) is also displayed as evidenced by Principal Mann and his team’s efforts for making sure students’ needs are met. They go to “great lengths” to remove barriers and go “above and beyond” to get students to school and to ultimately graduate. Principal Mann works to ensure
that his school considers the unique needs of each student and the “different forms of care” (Noddings, 2002, p. 20; Roberts, 2010, 451) required to support their long-term success. The relationships that are established are obvious as observed during graduation ceremonies and the number of graduates that come back to visit with the staff at the school. My perceptions of these relationships were also reinforced by a local law enforcement officer that I recently met at an event, who is a graduate of Performance Place. He raved about his experiences at the school, how it “saved him”, and ultimately that his relationship with Principal Mann is what got him to where he is today. This theme on relationships was pervasive throughout our conversations and my own observations during this study. The ethic of care, in the creation of counter spaces, is at the foundation of the work that is taking place at this school, as driven by Principal Mann as he performs his duties using servant and situational leadership practices, as well as enacting “caring leadership” (Bass, 2012, p. 74) to drive student achievement.

The other themes that emerged during my time with Principal Mann all reinforce his theories of leadership, as established on a foundation focused on relationships. The culture at the school is one driven by respect, celebrations of achievement, and goals that are focused on getting students to graduate. His pride, as well as that of the teachers and students, appears to derive from their success in getting students with previous challenges in their schooling to graduate. It is a clear and concise goal of the school that students will graduate. The staff at Performance Place conducts themselves and their duties with this ultimate goal in mind. This includes their efforts to track down students when they miss school, are in need of additional supports, or perhaps finding ways to motivate students who are not on track to reach graduation. Principal Mann sets his expectations on ensuring student success by role modeling just how far his team must go to push students towards achievement. He tracks down students, he covers
classes, he engages with parents and students who are most challenged, and ultimately strives to remove barriers for his students and staff so that there are no excuses. All of these practices come together at the school to promote a culture and pride that pushes students towards success via his servant leadership style and enactment of theories that work together to transform student and community outcomes.

Principal Mann did acknowledge a few challenges and obstacles that he and his team must overcome which again, helps to define his enactment of leadership at Performance Place. These obstacles include his efforts to fight for his school when working with the district. He advocates for his students by working to secure the resources that his school needs to ensure a positive environment. This includes advocating for the teachers and support staff that he needs to adequately serve his students, the materials and technology resources needed to provide the diverse content required for graduation, and even pushing back against the district when it comes to placing students at the school, when not in their best interest. He was quite critical of the practice displayed by the district to sometimes treat his school as a “dumping ground” for students that no one else can handle. There is “tension” and enactment of “moral courage” which are characteristics of transformative leadership where Principal Mann works to infuse values associated with “liberation, emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice” at his school (Shields, 2010). He is proud of the success at his school, but realizes that many schools try to push students to his site when they cannot pass high stakes assessments. This practice of trying to push students out due to the risk of bringing down school proficiency scores is something that is apparent in his district, but his school takes those students and gets them to graduate. The district also attempts to place students at Performance Place when no one else wants them, so it is common for him to get students who may not necessarily align well with the goals of the
school, but they work with them and do all that they can to get them to graduate. On some occasions, they do get students who may not be able to work well in a blended learning environment and in need of more direct instruction. At times they may also have students who are not “mature enough” to function well at his school due to the overall structure. When this occurs, they have the student return to their base school and provide them with an option to come back to Performance Place when they have “matured”. As I listened to these dynamics, it reinforced Principal Mann’s situational leadership theory, where based on the unique circumstances of each student, he reacts and responds based on the best possible outcome for the student and his team. At the same time, his willingness to push-back against the district and advocate for his students, staff and larger community, he engages transformative leadership to promote the necessary changes (Shields, 2010).

When considering themes that emerged regarding disparity and race, Principal Mann appeared to have some very strong perceptions as it relates to his students and the larger issues within his county. Over 95% of his students are minority, with 70% being African American and 85% living in poverty as determined by his free and reduced lunch count. Principal Mann indicated that his district does not value all students equally, and there are “some kids who are considered throw away” with this group being “disproportionately those who are African American and Hispanic males”. He reflects on significant historical elements in the county, where race has been a divided conversation, which has made its way into the schools for many students. He recognizes the disparity challenges for students in the district, by referencing another alternative school in the county that has a student population with 90% of its enrollment being African American. There is a significant displacement issue occurring, but also in the media reports highlighting this challenge in the district. As an African American male and as the
leader of Performance Place, he works against these issues by working to change the perceptions regarding his students, which again reflects transformative leadership efforts (Shields, 2010). By engaging in practices that create and nurture counter spaces for student development through relationships and culturally relevant dialogue, he enacts “caring leadership” (Bass, 2012, p. 74) that confronts the disparities facing his students. His efforts to also recognize the “centrality of race and racism in his community” and his willingness to “challenge the dominant ideology” suggests that he is “committed to a social justice agenda”, which all reflect tenets of Critical Race Theory in his enactment of leadership (Parker & Villapando, 2007, p. 520). He reflects great pride in being able to get his students to graduate, when others before his school could not. He works to also bring in as many community members as possible to show how his school works and what they are doing to enhance graduation rates. His students, being dressed in uniforms and in business attire, the use of technology to support learning, along with great behaviors helps to make his case for providing a “non-traditional school” model, thus working to reframe the negative connotation of it being an alternative program, as well as reframing the stereotypes associated with the group of students that he and his team serve. By purposefully working to reframe some of the students’ behaviors, dress code and individual characteristics, Principal Mann adopts a level of “code switching” (Flowers, 2000), that works to support his students as they navigate the larger race-biased barriers of society. Part of Principal Mann’s strategy, as he suggests, involves getting to know his students, and working to be aware of the language and culture of his school population. This involves him listening to the conversations, utilizing on-line pop culture resources, and research to be able to connect with his students in a way that brings him closer to understanding how they think and communicate. This allows him to intervene in situations where communication may be moving in a negative direction, or
ultimately ground his relationships using communication methods that his students can understand, while getting his students to also see him as someone who does understand. This practice of incorporating hip hop and related efforts for supporting communication align with evolving research on the use of “culturally relevant pedagogy”, where Gloria Ladson Billings suggests that “hip hop can provide a hope for engaging students in a culturally relevant way to ensure their academic, cultural and social-civic success” (Retrieved from https://sc.loyola.edu/news/2014/0903-ciue-hip-hop-lecture on October 20, 2014). His approach in these situations, along with his desire to work against the displacement practices across the district, is a balance of servant and situational leadership, rooted upon a foundation that is transformative and engaged with the tenets of CRT. On one hand, he works to serve his team as they work in support of his students by providing any and all resources that he can to ensure long-term success. On the opposite hand, he makes daily decisions and responds to situations based on the unique circumstances facing each student, with the goal of getting them to graduate.

In addition to Principal Mann’s use of servant and situational leadership, as well as distributed practices, his rich descriptions employ characteristics focused on “equity, justice, and critique” which are indicative of transformative practices (Shields, 2010, p. 563). As he works with his team to push academic outcomes such as graduation, he does so with the goal of focusing on opportunity for his students, while recognizing the larger political influences that have contributed to his students ending up in their situation. In his effort to lead his team and school, he works to push back against institutional racism, with a focus on transformation that can impact individual students and the larger community. As a transformative leader, he engages individuals on his team and in the community in his efforts to remove barriers, or oppressive
forces that can inhibit his students from graduating; even if these forces come from within his district at other schools or senior level administrators at central office.

The following conceptual framework, in Chart 1, helps to organize the theories of leadership conveyed by Principal Mann and as observed through the data collection process.

Figure 1. Principal Mann Leadership Framework

**Principal Truth – Portrait of a Compassionate Leader**

Principal Truth is a 32 year old, African American male with over eight years of experience in the field of education, with his entire career focused in juvenile justice and alternative education programs. He started his career as a teacher working in an all-boys juvenile facility and while working in this setting continued his education by earning a masters degree in
Educational Leadership, and worked his way up in a non-profit organization to where he now serves as the principal of Kids Center. Since working at this alternative school, he has continued his own education by earning a Ph.D. in public affairs. Kids Center is a contracted alternative school, which is focused on serving special education students in middle and high school, who have been long-term suspended from their traditional school setting. At Kids Center, Principal Truth expresses his school’s success in how they are able to motivate their students, work in partnership with the district, achieve student academic growth in reading and math, and engage parents, who otherwise are often not as involved in the traditional settings.

Principal Truth defines his leadership theories as being situational and compassionate. As a situational leader, he must make “adjustments” as needed to deal with the diverse scenarios that he must confront as the principal of his school. As a compassionate leader, he believes that this is a trait that “keeps people following you” and at the same time the “compassion allows you to adjust” when operating through a situational lens. He continues to describe this process as:

Compassion comes from your desire to relieve some of that social demand so that a student can focus more on the academic demands in the classroom.

This theory of leadership extends also into how he views his role and that of the teachers, if he is in fact to be effective. He states:

A good school leader in my opinion, first has to understand the team; the staff, the teachers, and they have to make sure the teachers understand their students. All the grades and everything else will come after that.

Principal Truth operates using a foundation established on strong relationships between students and staff. The ethic of care is a basic cornerstone of the school’s operation, which reflects his enactment of “caring leadership” that supports the creation of counter spaces for his students.
(Bass, 2012, p. 74). His expectation for relationships comes first, and all decision-making and responses are made through these relationships, which he has described as his compassionate theory of leadership. This self-described theory by Principal Truth aligns with Bass’s (2012) construct of “caring leadership”, which can “impact the learning experiences and achievement of students” (Bass, 2012, p. 74). He also recognizes that outcomes are not solely based on academic achievements alone. He considers academic achievement to be important, but just as important is the ability to help motivate and modify student behaviors which are contributing to their displacement at their base schools. This practice, again, is accomplished using diverse strategies and systems, but at the foundation of those processes are the relationships that his team has built with their students, and the practice of helping students learn how to “code switch” (Flower, 2000) by adopting dress codes, behaviors and characteristics that will help to diminish their risk for being pushed-out once they return to their base school.

In discussing his team and his leadership practices, he describes how he works to empower his team members so that they are the “experts” in their designated areas. He does not “dominate the conversations” and works to create a climate where “innovation” comes from within the team. His descriptions focused on collaboration, shared decision-making processes, empowering his team as “experts” and overall appear to align with those practices described as distributed leadership, but also in strong alignment with the “Participating” style of situational leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988, p. 169-170). His rituals in performing his duties are well aligned with situational and distributed leadership, where he often cites working with his team to support them in making shared decisions, but also empowering his team to lead diverse tasks at the school, as “experts” in their designated areas. Principal Truth often engages the
“Participating and Selling” styles of situational leadership, both of which require strong, supportive relationships with the team.

Principal Truth’s compassionate leadership is rooted in the ethic of care, which is a significant element in the daily operations of Kids Center and a philosophy for how Principal Truth expects his team to work and serve their students by the creation of counter spaces. Through relationships, he works to create an environment where there is trust and compassion for recognizing the challenges that students have faced in their educational and personal experiences, which serves as the counter narrative to what often occurs for students in alternative settings, where punishment is typically the focus. He listens to the students’ narratives and from these narratives he works to construct methods that are unique to serve, respond and care for each student’s individual and unique needs (Noddings, 2000; Roberts, 2010). At Kids Center, they create opportunities within the school day for relationships to be established. They sit down and eat breakfast with the students; they talk about things that are not academic, but rather about personal things going on in their lives or in the world. They also do recreational activities at the end of the day, where staff and students can engage in things like basketball to help build stronger relationships. This focus on relationships, or the creation of counter spaces, where marginalized students can grow and develop, is aligned and reinforces his theory of compassionate leadership, while recognizing that the unique needs and circumstances of each student and team member that he must manage, requires situational leadership to respond and support those at the school.

The practices and expectations at the school, as dictated by his role as the principal, are focused around the development of a counter narrative directed at the creation of healthy relationships, with an effort to remove perceptions regarding “punitive measures”. He has an
expectation that relationships come first, before ever getting into assigning a punishment. Students, he believes respond more effectively when this practice is in place and internalizes the punishment more effectively when trust exits. As part of this method, the team under his guidance seeks to target the “fire” and not the “smoke” as it relates to student behaviors. The “fire” is what is motivating or the source of the behavior, while the “smoke” is the behavior itself. Treating the “smoke” does nothing in his opinion, but by targeting the “fire” and extinguishing it, the school can help to support long-term success in their schooling experience. This same perspective is adopted in how the school approaches student suspensions. Principal Truth indicates that it has to “be something big” in order to get suspended from Kids Center. The team utilizes every in-school option possible before they will suspend students. As a team, they try work together to “create a desire to want to be at our school”. These practices and expectations for differentiating student disciplinary responses, through effective relationships, support his view of enacting situational and compassionate theories of leadership.

Principal Truth works to mitigate challenges and obstacles that are common for alternative schools. One of his greatest challenges is working to recruit and retain the best teaching talent possible for his students. Due to competitive compensation challenges, time off, and the dynamics with providing a very diverse curriculum for his students, all of which are special education, he sometimes struggles with being able to attract top talent. Recognizing this, he adopts strategies associated with distributed leadership to help engage and develop his team to be “experts” in their fields and build in-house leaders who can support the overall mission of the school. This practice appears to help him maintain staff who are dedicated to the school, while helping to improve the operations of Kids Center.
Additional obstacles are more directly related to the life-circumstances of the students enrolled at the school. These circumstances include poverty, past schooling experiences, and home situations, where students are often dealing with parents and family members who are abusing drugs or perhaps involved in gangs. The best way to confront these challenges is through the development of the relationships with students and with their parents. By engaging parents as partners, Principal Truth states that he has seen “more parents go from being a hindrance to a partner to collaborator”. This process must first begin by building trust, and again, enacting an ethic of care that supports his theories of leadership for compassion and responding to unique situations.

Principal Truth fully unpacks the disparity facing his students and the intersection of race as it relates to this disparity. Kids Center has a population of students that are all special education and a majority that are Black males. The school is faced with serving students who have been displaced from across the district due to disruptive behaviors. This site sits in a district that is currently under a federal complaint regarding its high rates of minority student suspensions, expulsions and school-based arrests, with many of the students targeted from this practice being served at schools like Kids Center. Principal Truth recognizes the deep-rooted disparities in his district as evidenced by a number of issues, in addition to those that direct a lot of his students to his school. First, he noticed significant trends related to those schools that are doing the majority of the referring of students to his school. Even though his school is there to serve the entire district, it is common to see that a disproportional number of referrals come from only a few schools. He also points to practices in the local district, where students and families with resources can choose other pathways besides coming to his school, providing that the parent has the financial capacity. Principal Truth states that “punishment in our particular District has a
price”. For example, students who may get referred to his school for drug-related violations can go through a diversion program and have the charge taken off of their record and avoid alternative placements. However, in order to participate in this option, the student must come up with the money to pay for the course, which is almost five hundred dollars. This option forces those who are impoverished to relinquish their access to a traditional education, and instead attend one of the district’s alternative options, including Kids Center. He refers to this practice as one that “filters out the wealthy from coming to our school versus the poor who can’t afford to take another alternative”. When engaging in dialogue about these disparities, Principal Truth conveyed elements that align with the values of transformative leadership, particularly “equity and justice” (Shields, 2010). He recognizes and “acknowledges power and privilege” and its overall impact on the students that he serves, which also suggests a transformative theory of leadership (Shields, 2010).

In these circumstances, Principal Truth indicates that race plays a role in this process and states that it is a “cultural norm, a culturally accepted idea, a concept that people internalize and it becomes real”. In this statement, he is aligning with tenets of Critical Race Theory, where he “acknowledges the centrality of racism” (Parker & Villapando, 2007, p. 520) and how it “influences all aspects of society, preventing equality” (Stokes, 2012, p. 230). However, in an effort to confront these elements for his students and to push back against these norms, he first works to change the perceptions of his students about what it means to be Black and a male in society, since this represents a majority of his student population and is something that he, himself can identify with as an African American male. He starts this process through his efforts with relationship building, where he indicates that he is very “open about his life” and shares his stories and experiences as part of the process for building trust. His use of narrative, the value of
experiential knowledge, and his effort to “challenge dominant ideology”, again invites CRT into his enactment of leadership for equity. Often times, he has had students say things regarding him being “dark-skinned and male”, where his masculinity has been questioned due to his vocabulary and the way that he conducts himself as a professional educator. He believes that through his relationships with the students and his expressions of personal experiences, he has been able to change their perception of what it means to be Black and male in society. They come to know a different perspective of masculinity, similarly to what Dunbar (2001) identifies in his studies at an alternative middle school, where these same perceptions are revealed in his observations of Black male students and their perceptions of Black male educators associated with the school. Principal Truth, goes a step further in this discussion by also identifying that many students regard his professional behavior as “acting White” and not aligned to their paradigms of what Black maleness looks like in their world. This same experience, he states, has been witnessed by other Black males on his staff as they worked to build positive relationships with students at the school.

Principal Truth is an administrator who cares deeply for his students, his team and his school. He serves his students by maintaining a strong foundation established on relationships, then using this foundation to promote academic growth and behavioral changes needed to support long-term success. He also strives to promote an additional goal focused on changing student perceptions about the world around them, particularly those students that struggle with what it means to be Black and male in today’s society. He confronts negative perceptions conveyed by his students by first establishing the relationship, and then working to reconstruct their views of him, as a Black male administrator, who cares, promotes learning, and behaves in a manner that works against their stereotyped perceptions. He engages transformative leadership
to elicit emancipation for his students and calls upon CRT to confront the disparities facing those that he serves. He seeks to empower his team to be “experts” in their identified areas and expects that they also establish strong relationships with students in order to promote changes that are needed for achieving at Kids Center and in preparation for their return to their base school. Principal Truth is a compassionate leader, who considers each situation before responding and works to distribute the responsibilities at the school to his entire team, so that ultimate effectiveness can be achieved. He also is a leader that recognizes external forces that have contributed to the placement of students at Kids Center, and the inequities that must be addressed as he and his team work to serve their students. This effort, which is transformative in nature, promotes “justice” by acknowledging the social construction of race and its related barriers which must be confronted (Shields, 2010). This effort also promotes the “liberation” of his students through dialogue, supports, and enhanced participation in the schooling experience by both the students and their parents, which his team is constantly working to improve (Shields, 2010, p. 563). The conceptual framework in Chart 2 helps to convey his own theories of leadership and how these theories interact at Kids Center through his descriptions.

**Implications of the Study**

This portraiture study was intended to add to the evolving discussion on school leadership, with a particular focus on leadership in alternative school programs, where students are often the victims of disproportional displacement practices occurring in traditional school settings. The research on leadership in these specialized settings is lacking, particularly since the adoption of policies like No Child Left Behind and national efforts regarding education reforms that many argue are accelerating the rapid displacement of students, especially those that are
Black males, and contributing to an assault on this group of children as they are funneled into the pipeline that feeds our prison systems.

In this study, I was able to build strong relationships with two principals with very different backgrounds, working in two very different types of alternative, non-traditional schools. The contexts where these schools are situated are plagued with documented displacement practices that have disproportionately targeted students of color, mainly Black males. The districts that support these two sites are at the center of several debates and evolving lawsuits as
a result of these documented disparities, thus making these two schools very important to the local conversations about serving students with diverse needs. Both schools are considered to be effective in their local communities as described by district and business leaders engaged in this dialogue, due to their abilities to get students to graduate, attend school, modify student behaviors, improve academic growth, and getting families involved at their sites. This success is important, because it is bringing many political players into this local discussion, and by engaging in this dialogue with each administrator, and reflecting on their enactment of leadership, they can become significant participants in this evolving conversation about redirecting the pipeline from prison, to instead towards post-secondary opportunities. Our time together has led to an enhanced conversation about disproportional issues facing their students, and the one’s not so fortunate to make it to their sites. Their efforts have led to the establishment of counter spaces, where students are “cared for” and efforts to prepare them to navigate the larger racialized constructs of society are supported (Roberts, 2010). My hope is that from this study, the two administrators are able to reflect on their own enactment of leadership, while empowering all of us involved in this effort to engage more directly in the conversations that can reduce displacement practices in traditional school settings; while ensuring that effective models of alternative schools are in place and focused on students’ needs. This effort can lead to expanded opportunities for students in these non-traditional settings as opposed to them serving as waiting rooms for incarceration.

This study, as well as the evolving conversations regarding alternative schools should focus on what is best for students, while recognizing that not all students need the same thing to be successful in school. Alternative schools, when operated effectively may provide a non-traditional approach for students with diverse learning and social needs; however these spaces
should not be established as a result of punitive measures or as a result of student “push-out” practices (Fine, 1991). Often these settings are established as a result of a perceived crisis, due to students who have made choices in schools that anger teachers, or create panic by district leaders concerned about school safety. In some situations these sites can be launched too quickly as a response to perceived, wide-spread disruptions and in-turn lead to an environment that fails to truly address the problem or effectively analyze the larger issues that prompt the creation of these alternative settings in a district. Students who are considered disruptive to the traditional setting should be supported and efforts should be placed on identifying the challenges that are motivating behaviors that are deemed to be disruptive, and then target those factors with supports and interventions. In addition, rather than creating punitive, alternative spaces outside of the school setting, efforts should focus on preparing teachers and school administrators in practices that are culturally relevant to all students of diverse backgrounds, and strategies that support a positive school climate. School administrators, in their preparation, should be exposed to leadership theories that support the balance of high standards for academic achievement and the need to create school communities that embrace “caring” as a critical value (Bass, 2012). School leaders that are being prepared or are already working in schools with high rates of student displacement should receive development that embraces transformative methodologies for leading a school towards improved success, while enacting “caring leadership” that can lead to heightened student achievement (Bass, 2012; Shields, 2010). These efforts along with the integration of school-wide interventions, and community partnerships that can support schools in this endeavor can help to break down the pipeline towards life-long disparity for so many of our nation’s students. By confronting these issues together and by engaging in these conversations,
we can perhaps promote a greater awareness of leadership theories that work to disrupt displacement, while encouraging practices that support equity and confront oppression.

**Impact on Future Studies**

Future investigations can go deeper into those practices at alternative schools that are producing positive outcomes for students, both academic and overall development, particularly post-No Child Left Behind and other national reform efforts. Though the findings in this study are unique and bound to the two participants involved, the outcomes do convey hope that alternative programs can produce quality outcomes for students and sustain a culture established on the ethic of care. Studies considered around these topics, may want to conduct a more comprehensive examination of the whole school environment, beyond just that of the school administrator. These studies can consider the role of the teachers, the support staff, the district-level personnel, partnering agencies, parents and even the students themselves.

This study does not seek to generalize its findings, but some common elements across both sites do support the evolving dialogue around alternative school practices that have been noted to be effective in the existing literature, as highlighted in chapter two. These common elements across both sites include:

- Strong focus on pro-social relationships between staff and students (aligned to servant leadership and caring leadership)
- Commitment to empowering team members as experts in their designated fields (aligned to distributed and situational leadership)
- Dedicated to the professional development and growth of each team member (aligned with distributed leadership)
• Focus on both academic and non-academic barriers for students (addressing basic needs and developmental needs)
• Small class sizes to promote one-on-one instruction/relationships
• Structured environments (classrooms, activities, etc.)
• Commitment to social justice at the school through all efforts to support students (aligned with transformative leadership and CRT principles)
• Use of positive behavioral supports or similar support model

This list of common attributes at the two schools is not intended to be all inclusive, but rather a list of practices that were revealed through interviews and observations. This list does align with existing research (Flower et al., 2011; Tobin & Sprague, 2000; Nelson et al., 2009; Quinn & Rutherford, 1998; Gable et al., 2006; Shields, 2010) and serves as major cornerstones of the leaders at both sites. Future studies should consider this existing research and build upon it by examining new practices since the adoption of national education reforms, and the evolving efforts of groups like the Southern Poverty Law Center, Annie Casey Foundation, and others that advocate or in some cases litigate on behalf of marginalized students in our schools. By investigating effective models of alternative schooling, the role of leaders within these sites, and the manner in which social justice is supported in these settings, efforts can be made to transform the “racial isolation” (Dunbar, 1999, p. 243) that is experienced in these sites and establish quality experiences for those that are at greatest risk of incarceration and/or school failure.

Response to the Existing Literature

In reviewing the existing research on the school-to-prison pipeline, displacement practices in schools, alternative education, and leadership in alternative schools, it is apparent that the trends reflecting disparity are easily discernible in the literature. However, what exactly
contributes to this displacement is still puzzling and in need of more comprehensive analysis that can in-turn work to inform practices that push more students towards graduation. In addition, alternative schooling, as a sub-field of education is still an evolving topic, with many studies starting to blur the lines between alternative education and charter school efforts. Alternative schools, which may have started as early incubators for innovation to serve students with diverse learning needs, have evolved to be framed as transition points for students entering and returning from the juvenile justice and correctional systems in the United States of America. Research related to leadership in these specialized settings is extremely limited, with few studies reflecting any empirical data regarding effectiveness, long-term outcomes, or models with hope of being replicated. Studies (Quinn et al., 2006; Cassidy & Bates, 2008; Kim & Taylor, 2008; Jones, 2011; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Phillips, 2011) are mostly qualitative and focus on the lived experiences of those working and being served in these settings.

The findings in this study do align with the existing research, where effective practices and the narratives reflecting the experiences of those in these settings are quite similar. Both participants in this study display and enact leadership that is “caring” and situational across both spaces, with strong elements that reflect distributed leadership, where this practice works to share responsibilities and expertise at the school (Bennett et al., 2003; Leithwood et al., 2008). Principal Mann utilizes servant leadership, where he works to provide his team with what they need to do their jobs well, with this method of leadership cited in the literature as being effective in creating a positive school climate (Black, 2010). Principal Truth enacts a leadership theory that he refers to as “compassionate”, which based on his description is focused on providing a high ethic of care for his students, and from this lens, works to make all decisions in their best interest. This theme of “caring” was also quite common in the dialogue with Principal Mann,
as well as from my observations at Performance Place. Topics on positive relationships and experiences by students, teachers and administrators were quite common in the research, with most studies reviewed identifying relationships as a positive aspect for most involved in these settings (Bass, 2012; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Roberts, 2010); however, some studies did provide a counter-narrative experience, where these sites often subscribe to punitive measures which further marginalize those that they serve (Dunbar, 2001; Kim, 2011). The challenge, as it relates to these aspects in alternative schools is to make sure that social development is supported, while academic achievement is also promoted as a key function towards long-term success in school (Jones, 2011), which can work to reverse the pathways from greater disparity. By engaging practices that embrace “caring leadership” (Bass, 2012) as a core philosophy, and by working to create counter spaces focused on student attributes and rewards, the principals in this study are reshaping what it means to be an alternative school; working against the normative practices focused on punishment and exclusion as often found in these segregated spaces.

In addition to “caring leadership” (Bass, 2012), the participants conveyed attributes that are aligned with being transformative leaders, where both enact values focused on “equity and justice” and elements that engage tenets of critical race theory in their daily work as school administrators (Shields, 2010, p. 563). These characteristics have been acknowledged in the existing literature, and support the findings as determined from the described lived experiences of the two participants in their alternative or non-traditional spaces of schooling.

**Impact of the Study on the Researcher**

In reflecting on my twenty plus years as an educator, administrator and executive working in our public school system, juvenile justice system and private sector across the United
States, I have witnessed many failures of our public school structures in meeting the needs of diverse populations. This system, which offers hope for many, at times has created exclusionary practices which pushes too many of our young people to the boundaries of hopelessness, and casting them to the side as “disposable” (Robbins, 2008) children from our schools. All too often, I have walked juvenile detention centers and alternative schools and looked many of our young people in the eyes and witnessed their sadness, their pain and in many cases their anger for being sentenced to a life that places a lesser value on them as members of our society, and for being misunderstood by those tasked with their care and development. These children, many of which are Black, living in poverty and in need of support, have amazing potential that our society and institutions have not yet discovered. Fortunately, there are leaders and there are schools working to tap that potential and reframe the circumstances that challenge children of color into obstacles that can be overcome, and create a new narrative on school success.

The two sites that I have included in this study, and more importantly the two principals that are leading these sites, have made a lasting impact on me and my work, and in my personal mission to help our young people of all backgrounds grow towards productive lives, free from institutionalization. The relationships that I have formed with each administrator has given me a circle of partners to continue this discussion and perhaps a team of colleagues to pursue greater efforts towards the construction of a larger narrative; one focused on opportunities for diverse learners as opposed to oppressive “dumping grounds” (Dunbar, 1999) as often referenced in the alternative education sector. The vision that each administrator has for their school; the climate of trust and respect that both command for their students; and the personal experiences that each have shared as the motivation for serving in their roles, all have made a lasting impression on me
as the researcher, the learner, the advocate, and as the aspiring critical race theorist focused on tackling the oppressive forces that risk harming our children.

Principal Truth is a young leader with significant potential for expanding the impact on students in his district, and has an energy that resonates with passion for his students. Principal Mann, with a similar passion, has the drive and ability to influence a larger group of district leaders in support of practices that improve the schooling experiences of students in his county. Based on our friendly banter during our time together, I am agreeing with Principal Mann that it is time to reframe the construct of alternative education, and look at models that are doing “something different”; “non-traditional” models that are working and providing hope for many students, like those served at Performance Place and Kids Center.

**Conclusion**

It is with extreme exhaustion, yet also enthusiasm that I write this final section of my dissertation, reflecting on my concluding remarks. About six years ago, when I commenced this doctoral program, I also started a journey that helped me to grow from working in a single state on education-related issues in juvenile justice programs, to working across the nation on juvenile justice and alternative education operations. These past two years, I have strayed from that path, to work as an executive of a non-profit organization which partners with state and business agencies in support of our public education system. In my role, I now have the opportunity to influence and nurture conversations that ultimately work to support all students, with the ability to also inject interventions and supports into schools targeted at helping students stay in school, achieve academically and graduate. Ultimately, helping to keep kids where they need to be, in school. I love this work and it has given me the opportunity to practice what I personally believe
to be right, and professionally to do what the research suggests as it relates to helping students succeed.

Throughout this dissertation process, I have learned a great deal more about my field, the implications for students who are marginalized in our education system, and practices that show promise for improving circumstances which can positively reduce this marginalization. I learned to be more reflective in my work, while also acquiring a critical perspective that reveals practices and policies that reinforce disparity and in some cases racism. I take great pride in this study, as it has brought me closer to understanding the lived experiences of so many others who have faced racism, and racist practices in our education system, through their personal narratives, and the narratives of those that they serve in schools.

This adventure has also brought me closer, as I reflect on my career, to understanding the challenges and barriers that so many of the students I worked with in the past experienced. These students, who were in the juvenile system, often shared their stories and talked about the people who put them in their situation of being locked up. Some of these people were friends, some were family members, and often it was teachers or administrators at their school. Years ago, I probably would have discounted their stories as an effort to cast blame elsewhere, but in reading the literature, hearing the personal narratives of others, and in completing this part of my life-long journey, I now know that there is truth in many of their testimonies. A truth that I failed to appreciate or acknowledge; a truth that I failed to understand. As I complete this study and these concluding remarks, I want to dedicate this new found knowledge to those that I potentially discounted or in some cases failed to see as I traveled this road. I did not intentionally fail to see or listen when sleeping in this advantaged life of White privilege, but in awakening from this sleep, I can now lead an existence focused on exposing inequity and
working to counter its effects. This awakening would not have been possible had it not been for the dedication of my committee chair, Dr. Karanxha, my committee members, or the other amazing professors who have helped me to see those things that previously I had failed to see.

Over these past six years, in addition to this awakening, I have had the blessing of watching my son grow into an amazing nine year old, full of energy, and extremely curious about “this book” that I am writing, called a dissertation. His inquiry about the theme of my book and the use of “big, fancy words” is quite amusing. My daughter, who is now five and just started kindergarten, is less impressed, but pokes her head into my office often, asking “when can I come out and play”. I am excited about the opportunity to tell her and my son in an honest tone, “soon, very soon”. My wife, who was pregnant with our daughter during my first semester of this doctoral voyage, is probably the most excited, as she has stood with me patiently, raising our children and working a full time career herself in education. My wife has been a rock for me during this journey, and now that I am a father, watching my own children grow and develop, they inspire me each day to do what I can for children everywhere.
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March 12, 2014

Eric Hall
Educational Leadership
Tampa, FL. 33612

RE: Expedited Approval for Initial Review
IRB#: Pro00015884
Title: A Portraiture of Leadership As Enacted by School Administrators Working in Alternative Educational Settings


Dear Mr. Hall:

On 3/11/2014, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above application and all documents outlined below.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol Document(s):
EHallProtocolVersion1.docx

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:
EHall Consent Form Pro00015884.docx.pdf

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:
Appendix A (continued)

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Kristen Salomon, Ph.D., Vice Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board
About the Author

Eric Hall has worked as a teacher and administrator, as well as a non-profit executive focused on educational services for students at-risk of dropout or incarceration. His work has included the development of curriculum, the implementation of data-informed systems to drive student outcomes, value-added teacher and leader evaluation programs, the development of evidence-based interventions and school-based supports focused on student achievement. Eric has worked at a state and national level, in partnership with State Education Agencies, Local Education Agencies, Departments of Juvenile Justice, and youth development organizations to design and implement programs and practices aimed at improving student outcomes in school and reducing youth recidivism upon release from juvenile facilities. His work has also focused on the development or reform of state policies that can contribute to student displacement and student achievement, as well as working to address funding models that support the provision of quality and effective services for students in need of additional interventions.

Eric earned his Bachelor’s of Science degree in secondary science education, followed by a Master’s of Education in educational leadership, both at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Eric is married to Lissette, his wife of over twelve years and they have two children, a son and a daughter.