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A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN RURAL HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOLS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate School of Education

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Education

By

Harley D. Ramsey

May 2021

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Harley D. Ramsey

2021

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN RURAL HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOLS

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Approved March 10, 2021

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ABSTRACT

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN RURAL HIGH-POVERTY SCHOOLS

By

Harley D. Ramsey

March 2021

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Darius Prier

This study investigated “why” some educational leaders are effective in serving rural high-poverty populations and to better understand “how” to enact effective leadership in similar spaces. Core principles of Critical Social Theory, Systems Leadership Theory, and Emotional Intelligence informed this work. Using a Grounded Theory methodology, a theoretical framework for effective educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools emerged. This framework suggests that effective educational leaders take a systems leadership approach to guiding their organizations to more equitable and socially just ends. Such leaders honor student and family voices and actively seek to understand and respond to their lived realities. They nurture interpersonal relationships with all stakeholders to establish trust, build a cohesive vision, and cultivate deep commitment to transformative change. Such leaders engineer opportunities for

students to learn and succeed, removing obstacles to access. They redesign educational systems to support students' learning and their ability to apply that learning to real-time opportunities. These same leaders are inextricably connected to their local communities and actively pursue opportunities for their students and families to authentically engage with both the school and the greater school community. Germane to this theoretical framework is that all components of the system are interconnected. A deep understanding of students' lived realities and the complex social structures that impact them inform all other decisions and actions. It is only with informed intentionality that educational leaders can be architects of systems that produce truly sustainable, socially just outcomes for the diverse populations they serve.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this Dissertation of Practice to my family. It is through outstanding modeling of selflessness by my great grandmother Evelyn Allen and my parents, Walter and Colleen Ramsey, that I learned to be a truly committed spouse, parent, friend, and educator. Their example has empowered me to persist, regardless of conflict or adversity. It is through watching them that I came to understand and embrace love as a verb.

My “true north” has been and continues to be my wife Kristen and five children (Chance, Mac, Rainie, Killian, and Aurora). It is only through their encouragement and sacrifice that I have been able to grow both personally and professionally. They are my inspiration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am compelled to first acknowledge Dr. James E. Wortman as my colleague, mentor, committee member, and close friend. Dr. Wortman started me on the doctoral journey and actively invested in my growth from start to finish. His preternatural ability to deliver the right words at precisely the right time kept my train on the proverbial tracks.

Secondly, I acknowledge Dr. Darius Prier, my committee chair. As intimidating as it was at times to learn from such a dynamic and gifted academic; his deep understanding of Critical Theory opened my eyes to more clearly see the systems impacting students and families in the rural high-poverty communities I serve.

I acknowledge both the Otto-Eldred and Saint Marys Area School Districts. In particular, Matthew Splain and Dr. G. Brian Toth. I was able to freely learn and grow under their leadership. The teachers, staff, students, and families in both communities helped me become a more conscientious leader.

I acknowledge Dr. Amy Olson for always giving it to me straight. She taught me to be self-reflective without being self-destructive.

Stephen Covey said, “Love is a choice— a decision— that we must commit ourselves to over and over and over again.” I acknowledge my cohort members for their love and support throughout an extremely difficult time. Their continual commitment to me and one another, inside and outside of the classroom, made this journey unforgettable.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	x
List of Figures	xi
List of Abbreviations	xii
CHAPTER I: RATIONALE AND INTRODUCTION	1
Social, Cultural, and Historical Perspectives	1
The Rural High-Poverty Context	8
The Leadership Perspective	10
Problem of Practice	12
Central Research Questions	13
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE	15
Overview	15
Leadership	17
Leadership and Poverty	18
Critical Discourses.....	21
Critical Theory	23
Equity Literacy.....	25
Leadership for Social Justice	25
Transformative Leadership	27

Systems Leadership	29
Emotional Intelligence.....	35
Theory of Action.....	40
CHAPTER III: METHODS	46
Introduction.....	46
Research Design	47
Timeline.....	47
Grounded Theory	48
Selection and Recruitment of Participants	49
Procedures	53
Data Collection and Analysis.....	54
Trustworthiness.....	58
Method of Analysis	58
CHAPTER IV: DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS	60
Introduction.....	60
Understanding and Responding to Students’ Lived Realities.....	61
Relationships.....	68
Capacity and Competency.....	73
Community Engagement.....	80

Access and Opportunity	87
CHAPTER V: RECOMMENDED ACTIONS	95
Introduction	95
Overview	96
Intersections	97
Relationships	98
Understanding and Responding to Students’ Lived Realities.....	103
Access and Opportunity	108
Community Engagement.....	114
Capacity and Competency.....	119
Contributions to the Field of Educational Leadership.....	124
Recommendations and Implications for Educational Leadership for Social Justice ...	126
Limitations	130
Implications for Your Leadership Agenda and Growth.....	131
References.....	134
Appendices.....	148
Appendix A	148
Appendix B	149
Appendix C	150

Appendix D	151
Appendix E.....	152

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 2.1 Transformative Leadership and Principles of Democratic and Social Justice Education	28
Table 2.2 Goleman’s Personal and Social Emotional Intelligence Competencies	37
Table 2.3 Bar-On’s Theoretical Mixed-Model Framework of Emotional Intelligence	38
Table 3.1 Documents Analyzed in the Document Analysis Process	56
Table 5.1 Leader Behaviors: Building Trusting Relationships	100
Table 5.2 Prominence of Relationships to Effective Educational Leadership in Rural High-Poverty Schools	105
Table 5.3 Leader Behaviors: Creating Access and Opportunity for Students	111
Table 5.4 Leader Behaviors: Authentic Community Engagement	116
Table 5.5 Leader Behaviors: Developing Capacity and Competency	121

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1.1 Share of counties with high child poverty, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010	1
Figure 1.2 Poverty rates for children and elderly (1959-2012).....	2
Figure 1.3 Distribution of Wealth in the United States.....	3
Figure 1.4 SAT Performance Gap by Family Income	6
Figure 1.5 Average ACT Composite Score of 2012-2016 ACT-Tested High School Graduates by Family	7
Figure 1.6 Relationship of Educational Leadership Work to Student Learning	11
Figure 2.1 Effective Leadership for Rural High-Poverty School Communities	16
Figure 2.2 Organizational Features of Schools That Interact to Advance Student Achievement	32
Figure 3.1 Timeline of data collection	48
Figure 5.1 Theoretical Framework for Effective Leadership in Rural High-Poverty Schools	95
Figure 5.2 Prominence of Relationships to Effective Educational Leadership in Rural High-Poverty Schools	100
Figure 5.3 The Foundation of Effective Leadership Practice: Understand and Respond to Students' Lived Realities	105
Figure 5.4 Access and Opportunity for Students and Families Experiencing Poverty....	111
Figure 5.5 Community Engagement: A Core Leadership Function	116

Figure 5.6 Capacity and Competency in the Theoretical Framework for Effective
Educational Leadership in Rural High-Poverty Schools121

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACT: American College Testing.

CDL: Commercial Driver's License.

CNA: Certified Nursing Assistant

CTE: Career and Technical Education

EI: Emotional Intelligence

ELA: English Language Arts

ESSA: Elementary and Secondary Schools Act

HVAC/R: Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning, and Refrigeration

IQ: Intelligence Quotient

ISLLC: Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium

LftM: Leading from the Middle

NAEP: National Assessment of Educational Progress

NIMS: National Institute for Metalworking Skills

NISL: National Institute for School Leadership

NOCTI: National Occupational Competency Testing Institute

NSLP: National School Lunch Program

PDE: Pennsylvania Department of Education

SAT: Scholastic Aptitude Test

SES: Socioeconomic Status

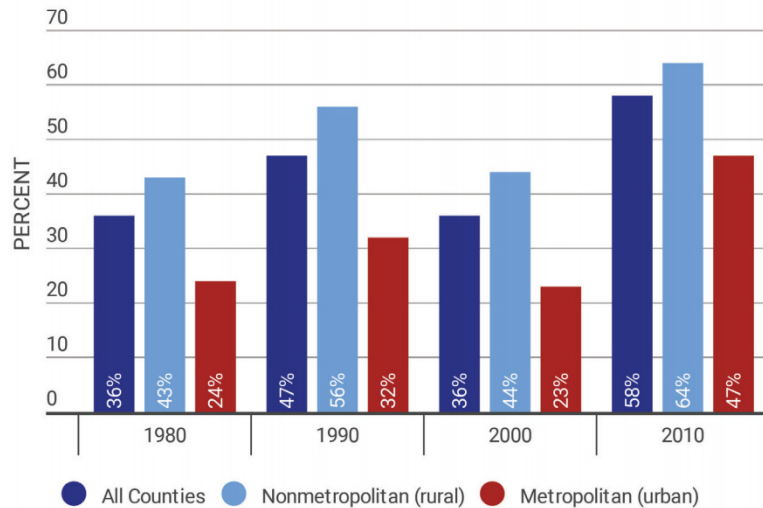
CHAPTER I

RATIONALE AND INTRODUCTION

Child poverty is a persistent and growing national problem and rural communities are home to a disproportionate number of children experiencing high and persistent levels of poverty. Roughly 58 percent of rural counties had at least 20 percent of their children living in poverty in 2010. Particularly concerning is research showing that 24 percent of counties in the United States experiencing high rates of child poverty have done so for at least two generations. (Schaefer et al., 2016). Figure 1.1 provides an illustrative comparison of rural versus urban counties and the relative share of those with high child poverty rates.

Figure 1.1

Share of counties with high child poverty, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010



Source: 1980–2000 U.S. Decennial Census; 2008–2012 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates

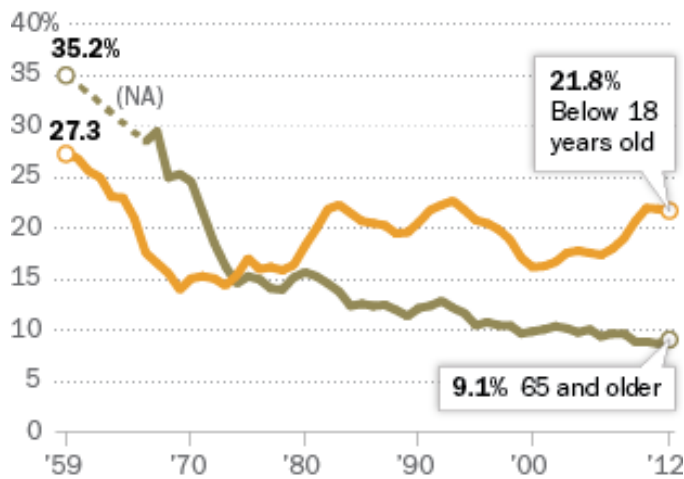
Note: Taken from Schaefer et al., (2016)

According to Koball and Jiang (2018), children are disproportionately poor compared to the United States population as a whole. This remains true independent of the poverty measure used (Dreyer et al., 2016). Although children represent just 23 percent of the total population,

they comprise 32 percent of all living in poverty. The 2015 data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics reveal that nearly 14.7 million children were living in poverty (McFarland et al., 2017). As illustrated in Figure 1.2, although poverty rates have fluctuated over the past fifty years, the poverty rate for children under the age of 18 has shown an upward trend since around 1970. “Children remain the poorest members of our society even in good times” (Dreyer et al., 2016, p. S1).

Figure 1.2

Poverty rates for children and elderly (1959-2012)



Source: Census Bureau

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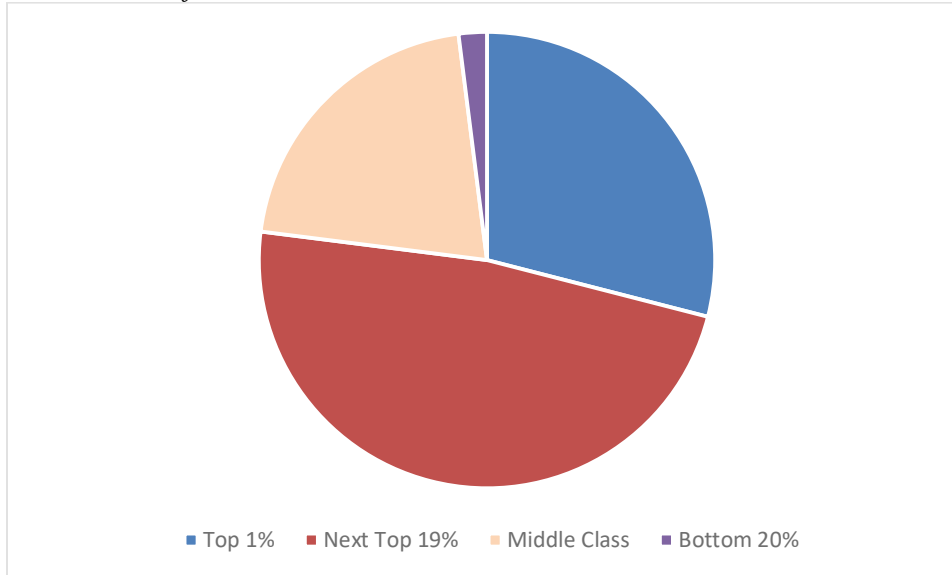
Note: Taken from (DeSilver, 2014).

In 1970, the average income of families in the 20th percentile was about \$37,700 compared to just \$26,900 in 2010. The gap between the lowest earning families and highest earning families continues to widen at an alarming rate (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Gorski, 2014). In a 2019 report by the Brookings Institution the inequitable distribution of wealth in the United States was highlighted. As seen in Figure 1.3, the top 1% possesses more wealth than the

entire middle class (Sawhill & Pulliam, 2019). These trends are particularly concerning given the realities of disparities in academic achievement based on socioeconomic status.

Figure 1.3

Distribution of Wealth in the United States



Note: Created with data from Sawhill and Pulliam (2016).

Young children are particularly susceptible to the negative impacts of chronic socioeconomic deprivation, even those living at 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Davies (1999) states, “[Socioeconomic status] is the strongest and most enduring social determinant of educational attainment” (as cited in Shields, 2004, p. 120). High stress levels, violence, unhealthy relationships with parents and other adults, increased mental health problems, behavioral problems, drug and alcohol abuse, and various forms of neglect all negatively impact the ability of children in poverty to succeed in school, which can directly and indirectly hinder their future success (Jensen, 2009; Lauer et al., 2016; Bogotch & Shields, 2014; Dreyer et al., 2016).

Students living in poverty often:

- attend schools with inequitable and inadequate funding,

- don't have access to quality preschool programs,
- are unnecessarily and disproportionately tracked into programs lacking rigor,
- have more unqualified teachers than their wealthier peers,
- experience instruction that is rote and not engaging,
- learn in class sizes that are larger than those in more affluent schools,
- do not have access to a school nurse,
- and have limited access to physical education and the arts (Gorski P. C., 2014).

In “Equity of Opportunity” (2017), the United States Department of Education explicitly states “far too many students, especially in underserved groups and communities, lack robust access to the core elements of a quality education” (p. 1). In this same report, the challenge of educational equity is brought to the surface citing inequitable funding, “stubbornly wide” achievement gaps, and disproportionate suspensions, expulsions, and dropout rates for low-income and minority students. Low college attendance and completion rates, limited access to strong teachers, and lack of opportunity to receive rigorous curricula like Advanced Placement are also recognized as existent and persistent barriers to success for low-income students (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

These same students are more likely to experience barriers to timely medical care, tend to be less engaged in academic activities, and encounter higher delinquency rates in adolescence; all having lasting effects on health, family, and economic status well into adulthood (Schaefer et al., 2016). “Over 40 percent of children born to parents in the lowest quintile of family income remain in the same quintile as adults” (Shields, 2014, p. 126). According to Dreyer et al. (2016), mounting evidence suggests that childhood poverty has effects that last long into adulthood; effects that are “independent of adult-level risk factors” (p. S1).

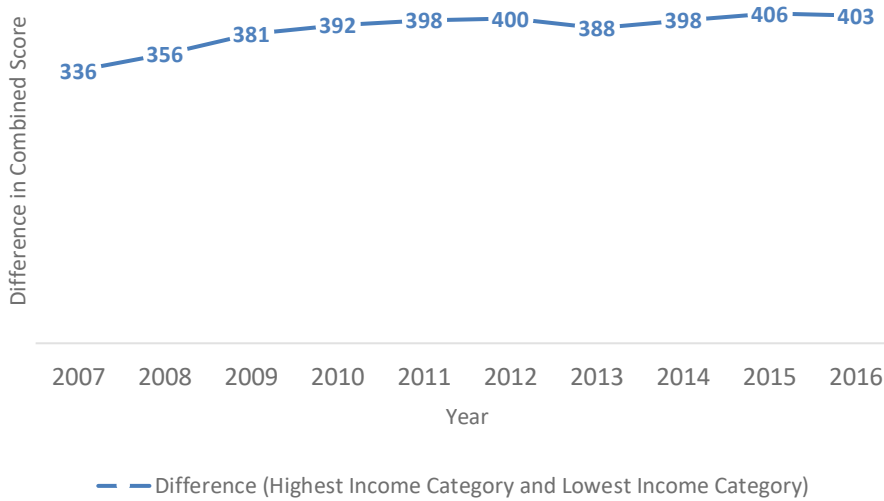
A dominant deficit-based ideology fed by claims of laziness, low intelligence, uncaring parents, and apathy toward education have unjustifiably influenced school systems serving low-income students; leading to school processes and systems that often further disadvantage low-income families (Gorski, 2018). Inequitable access to extra-curricular activities, high quality teachers, and educational resources including a high-quality, culturally relevant, expansive, and rigorous curriculum are reflective of low-performing schools serving low-income populations (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Gorski, 2014; Ullucci & Howard, 2015). Students in these schools generally achieve lower academically than their more affluent peers, a problem that has persisted over time. Additionally, they drop out at disproportionately high rates, as high as four times that of students with higher socioeconomic status (Gorski, 2014). Unfortunately, “poor education for poor people produces poor outcomes” (Ladson-Billing, 2014, p. 14).

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), students identified as Eligible for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) score below students identified as Not Eligible for NSLP in all grades and reporting categories, a trend that has persisted over time (NAEP, 2019).

A ten-year analysis of mean SAT scores from 2007-2016 shows an alarming trend. SAT scores in each tested area; critical reading, mathematics, and writing, increase consistently with reported family income level. As illustrated in Figure 1.4, over time, the gap between mean scores of students in the highest reported income category and the mean scores of students in the lowest reported income category is widening. The reported income categories changed in the 2017 Total Group report rendering a comparison for years 2017-2019 impossible (College Board, 2019).

Figure 1.4

SAT Performance Gap by Family Income



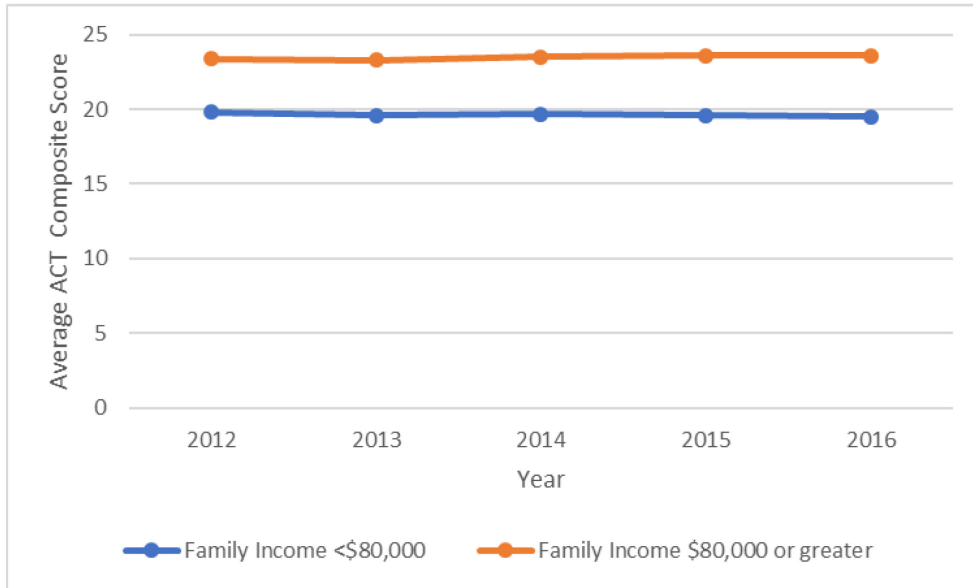
Note: Calculated from annual reporting data (College Board, 2019).

In a 2016 ACT research and policy report, an achievement gap between lower income and higher income students was also evident, persisting and widening slightly over a five-year period from 2012-2016. Using reported family incomes of <\$80,000 and \$80,000 or higher, Figure 1.5 illustrates the score disparity over time. Mattern et al., (2016) noted, “Efforts should be focused on improving readiness levels for students from lower income families” (p. 1).

Figure 1.5

Average ACT Composite Score of 2012-2016 ACT-Tested High School Graduates by Family

Income



Note: Adapted from (Mattern et al., 2016).

Pennsylvania reports data to the United States Department of Education for accountability under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The most recent reporting year is 2018. In that year, the “economically disadvantaged” subgroup underperformed compared to the “all students” group in every statewide student assessment measure in English language arts (ELA), mathematics, and science. That same year, the economically disadvantaged subgroup met two of three achievement goals set by the Pennsylvania Department of Education; mathematics and ELA, but not science. It is important to note; however, that the achievement goals are set lower for the economically disadvantaged subgroup than benchmarks set for the “all students” group.

In the same year, economically disadvantaged students report a 4-year graduation rate of 79.78% and a 5-year graduation rate of 83.14% as compared to the “all students” group’s rates of 86.57% and 89.25% respectively. Attendance benchmarks are also disparate. Economically disadvantaged students reported a 76.76% regular attendance rate versus an 84.26% regular attendance rate for the “all students” group (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2018).

Burney and Beilke (2008) claim that “poverty may be the most important of all student differences” within schools (p. 171), and “understanding the constraints of poverty on high achievement is important for all such schools” (p. 172). Abbott and Joireman (2001) in their work in schools across Washington state, determined that “low income explains a much larger percentage of the variance in academic achievement than ethnicity” (p. 13). This is the leadership challenge for rural, high-poverty schools.

As the world becomes more complex and school populations become more diverse, educational leaders face increasingly unique and inherently ethical leadership challenges. Educational leadership is becoming much less about solving people’s problems and more about helping people understand their problems, identify the complex forces acting against them, and develop the agency necessary to act against those forces (Sergiovanni, 2005). Furman and Shields (2005) argue that embedding educational leadership in concepts of social justice and democratic community in schools is “foundational to the moral purpose of educational leadership in this century” (p. 120).

The Rural High-Poverty Context

Poverty is a persistent problem in many rural communities. Access to jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage is lacking and has been a barrier for generations. Schools are underfunded and are often served by teachers who lack experience and are paid

disproportionately low wages. Access to health care and other social services in rural communities is often limited as well (Burton et al., 2013). As Burton et al. (2013) state, “poverty remains the alpha and omega of many rural communities” (p. 1132).

Rural poverty has persisted for decades and continues to exceed poverty rates in more metropolitan areas. Just over 85% of counties within the United States that have experienced persistent poverty are non-metropolitan, presenting a unique and troubling context for rural communities. Even though poverty rates in more rural communities are trending downward, poverty rates in more metropolitan areas are decreasing at a higher rate; widening the poverty gap between the two (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2020). Rural high-poverty communities are aging disproportionately as well. The most talented young adults are leaving their rural communities to embrace opportunities in more populated spaces; a trend that contributes to further economic decline of rural communities which has direct impact on schools (Burton et al., 2013).

Gorski (2018) reinforces that rural schools fall victim to underfunding which exacerbates the opportunity gap for students and families residing in those communities. This is not only an issue between states, but between rural, suburban, and urban districts within the same state; leading to disproportionate gaps in learning. In her work in rural communities, Hesbol et al. (2020) reports that 68% of American rural schools report significant achievement gaps, yet there continues to be a paucity of research on systems of inequity specific to rural communities. Concerningly, few rural educational leaders report understanding how to address existing achievement gaps in their schools, a reality that I have seen in my own professional practice as a principal, assistant superintendent, and professional learning facilitator for educational leaders.

The Leadership Perspective

Schools in the United States are lagging those in most industrialized nations in providing opportunities for low-income and minority students to advance their social and economic status (Tucker, 9 Building Blocks for a World-Class Education System, 2016). While performance by American high school students on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) has been relatively stagnant since its inception over forty years ago, the United States has increased their per-pupil expenditures as much as 200% (NAEP, 2019). This exceeds the per-pupil spending of all but a few other industrialized nations, yet measures of achievement and equity in the United States remain disproportionately low (NAEP, 2019; Tucker, 2016). This poses an ethical leadership challenge.

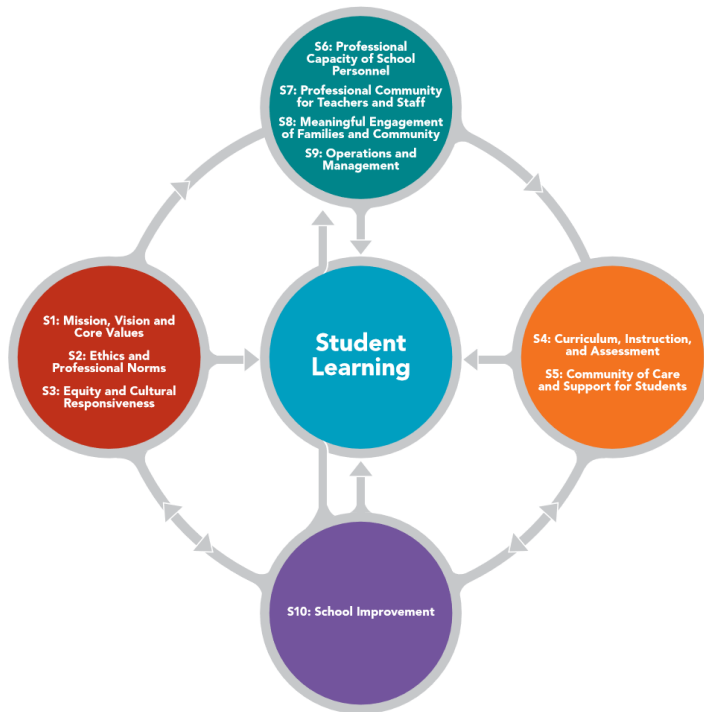
According to the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015), “An expanding base of knowledge from research and practice shows that educational leaders exert influence on student achievement by creating challenging but also caring and supportive conditions conducive to each student’s learning” (p. 1). The rapidly evolving demands of educational leadership, informed by a growing knowledge base of research-based practices, calls for a detailed set of standards to guide professional practice of educational leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). This is particularly critical in high-poverty contexts serving marginalized populations.

The 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders provides a solid foundation for ethical educational leadership, authentic community engagement, and equity and cultural responsiveness; critical practices in schools serving marginalized populations. Although Standards 2 and 3 (pp. 10-11) are explicitly linked to ethics and equity in educational leadership, all leadership behaviors are best viewed holistically through a social justice lens as all are

interconnected and have deeply moral implications for principals and other educational leaders. (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Figure 1.6 illustrates the relationship between the important work of educational leadership and student achievement.

Figure 1.6

Relationship of Educational Leadership Work to Student Learning



Note: Taken from National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015)

...students learn when educational leaders foster safe, caring and supportive school learning communities and promote rigorous curricula, instructional and assessment systems. This work requires educational leaders to build and strengthen a network of organizational supports—the professional capacity of teachers and staff, the professional community in which they learn and work, family and community engagement, and effective, efficient management and operations of the school. In all of their work, educational leaders are driven by the school’s mission, vision, and core values. They are called to act ethically and with professional integrity. And they promote equity and

cultural responsiveness. (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 4)

Problem of Practice

In response to the growing demands of educational leadership in the United States, a new set of leadership standards was created in 2015 to provide a comprehensive, ethical, and evidence-based framework to guide the professional practice of educational leaders. The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (2015) “elevate areas of educational leader work” with a deeper understanding of how they influence student achievement. They serve as guideposts for impacting systems and cultivating relationships in an effort to achieve equity and excellence for all students. It is with this framework of leadership practice in view that I present the subsequent literature review in the areas of:

- Leadership
- Critical discourses
- Systems leadership
- Emotional intelligence.

First of all, the literature review begins by examining the claim that educational leadership is solidly at the center of school improvement efforts, particularly for schools guiding populations of students with low-SES.

Next, the literature review of critical discourses as it applies to the education context is outlined. As critical theory is a very broad and dynamic area of study, I have intentionally examined the areas of critical theory most pertinent to the education context, referring to them as ‘critical discourses’ for the purposes of this dissertation. This examination is neither intended to be comprehensive nor favor one theoretical construct over another. Rather, this section is

presented to illustrate the common threads inherent in prominent critical theories informing educational leaders who actualize a social justice mindset.

Systems leadership is the next area of focus in the literature review. For the purposes of this dissertation systems leadership includes concepts of improvement science, systems leadership, and organizational leadership; viewed through the lens of nationally recognized educational leadership standards. Bryk et al. (2017) quote notable leader in quality improvement, Donald Berwick, “The problem is that managing quality is not just an intellectual endeavor; it is a pragmatic one. The point is not just to know what makes things better or worse; it is to make things actually better” (Bryk et al., 2017). Through this lens of pragmatism, I examine improvement science as it applies to the practice of educational leadership.

Finally, I explore the prevalent models of emotional intelligence (EI) and investigate the ability model of emotional intelligence, as presented in the works of Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2008), as a functional construct for educational leaders serving dynamic school communities. A plethora of constructs exist which seem to, at least in perfunctory form, explain a leader’s effectiveness in establishing and maintaining healthy personal and professional relationships. This “eclectic mix of positive traits such as happiness, self-esteem, and optimism” (Mayer et al., 2008, p. 503) has failed to be operationalized in a form providing utility for educational leaders.

Central Research Questions

1. What is it about educational leaders that contribute to significant improvement of rural high-poverty schools?
2. What are the behaviors of effective educational leaders who have been successful in mitigating the achievement gap between students with low-SES and otherwise advantaged students?

3. What are the social justice implications for the meaning and interpretations of effective educational leadership in rural, high poverty school districts?

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Overview

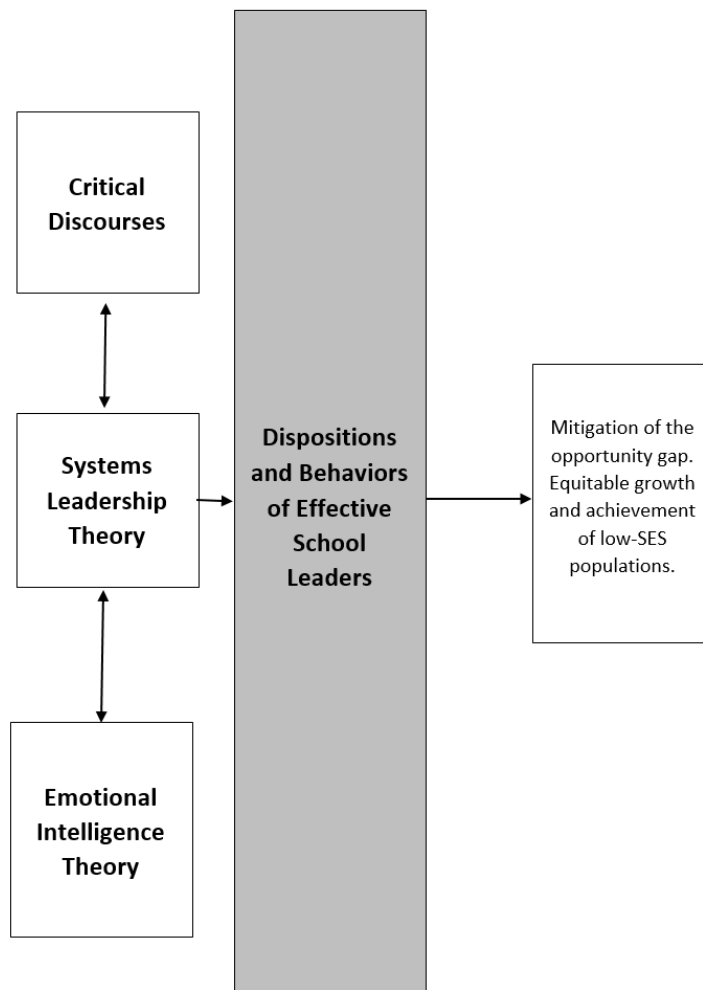
A dive into school improvement research reveals common themes around poverty, critical social theory, leadership theories, school culture, school climate, multi-cultural education, instructional strategies, assessment, curriculum, policy, and even the physical school environment; all attempting to answer questions about how to improve student learning. Foundational research behind the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015, critical discourses, systems leadership, and emotional intelligence reveal these theoretical frameworks as interwoven threads of an evidence-based school improvement framework particularly relevant in a rural, high-poverty context. This framework places leadership firmly at the center of school improvement efforts; the education leader being a key facilitator of emancipatory practices in high-poverty educational spaces.

As illustrated in Figure 2.1, critical discourses, systems leadership, and emotional intelligence are primary drivers of effective educational leadership serving rural high-poverty students and families. I propose, from both practical experience in the field and a review of relevant literature, that rural high-poverty students benefit from educational leaders who effectively leverage their capacity to promote emancipatory practices in their spaces. Such leaders have a unique ability to recognize the complex systems that comprise school communities and are able to strategically influence each contributing part of the system to produce desirable outcomes. This complex and dynamic practice of effective educational leadership is guided by the ability to identify and manage emotions effectively to inform and facilitate effective action. According to Bennis (2009), "...all authentic leaders have a distinctive

voice.” He goes on to describe voice as “...the whole gestalt of abilities...we now call Emotional Intelligence” (p. XXV).

Figure 2.1

Effective Leadership for Rural High-Poverty School Communities



Taking a lesson from James Clear’s *Atomic Habits* (2018), educational leaders with a social justice orientation build identity-based habits. As illustrated in Figure 2.1, critical discourses, systems leadership, and emotional intelligence inform effective educational leaders’ beliefs and self-image. They impact educational leaders’ worldview, perceptions of self and

others, and informs their assumptions and biases. In other words, they contribute to a sense of personal and professional identity.

This identity is the starting point for effective behavior change. Who educational leaders are informs their processes, which is what they do. Such processes or identity-based habits result in systems of improvements that contribute to positive outcomes. I propose that there is intentionality and importance in the direction of such change which is particularly important in the context of educational leaders serving rural high-poverty schools. This attention to who they wish to become--their personal and professional identity--is reflected in educational leaders' dispositions and behaviors, and ultimately the achievement of marginalized populations.

Leadership

Eric J. McNulty states:

Leadership...requires a more nuanced view of the world because it involves people: what motivates them, what their interests are, and how engaged they become. Mechanical systems may be linear but as soon as the human element becomes involved the system becomes both complex and adaptive. (as cited in Maxwell, 2019)

Although unpacking leadership and all its dimensions and nuances is beyond the scope of this analysis, there is reasonably strong evidence that principals and other educational leaders can positively influence student outcomes.

Consistent with empirical findings on successful educational leaders serving low-income populations, setting high expectations; strategic allocation of resources; and maintaining a clean, safe, supportive, and orderly learning environment are effective educational leadership behaviors (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Parrett & Budge, 2009; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

Research on student achievement places the teacher as the #1 influencer of positive educational outcomes; however, the principal has significant influence on student learning as well. The overall reported effect of principals/educational leaders on student achievement is moderate. To get a more complete picture, there is value in looking critically at individual leadership dimensions. The extent to which principals understand priority goals for their school correlates with student achievement at a moderate level. The ability of the principal or educational leader to ensure an orderly and supportive environment, establish clear goals and expectations, strategically align school resources with those goals, and engage in and support professional learning for teachers all positively impact student achievement and should be key leadership considerations for schools serving marginalized populations (Hattie, 2009).

Leadership and Poverty

Since this dissertation places leadership as a driver of high-performing, high-poverty schools, it is necessary to explore the leadership dispositions and behaviors that surface in the literature. Sergiovanni (1992) describes the hand, heart, and head of leadership. He contends that a limited view of leadership looks only at practical leadership action, what he describes as the hand of leadership. To fully understand effective leadership requires a parallel examination of the heart and the head of leadership as well.

The heart of leadership is what Sergiovanni (1992) defines as “what a person believes, values, dreams about, and is committed to” (p. 7). This is in the same vein as how the term disposition is operationalized in the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Performance Standards and Indicators for Education Leaders. Dispositions are what “the administrator believes in, values, and is committed to” (The Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 13). The head of leadership encompasses knowledge frameworks, theories of

action, and the capacity to reflect on and react to situations they encounter. “The head of leadership is shaped by the heart and drives the hand” (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 7). I propose, that understanding the head, heart, and hand of effective educational leaders serving high poverty rural schools is critical to replicating improvements in similar spaces.

In a 2003 study of high-poverty districts that had improved achievement across multiple schools, Togneri and Anderson cited the presence of key leaders as distinguishing them from other less successful districts. These leaders “were willing to accept ownership of difficult challenges and seek solutions without placing blame” and were willing “to question practices in the public arena” (Togneri & Anderson, 2003, p. 13). These same leaders established a clear vision of improving instruction and student achievement, emphasized distributed leadership within their districts, effectively leveraged professional learning opportunities to increase collaboration among teachers, and strategically allocated limited funds to achieve these goals.

Ylimaki et al. (2007) analysis of effective principals in high-poverty schools determined that promoting a clean and safe learning environment, exhibiting a caring attitude, modeling expectations to both teachers and students, valuing diversity, strategic allocation of resources, and a social justice orientation are key leadership qualities in high-poverty schools. Distributed leadership, “persistence, empathy, passion, and flexible, creative thinking” were also important dispositions and leadership behaviors (Ylimaki et al., 2007, p. 378).

Parrett and Budge (2009) worked specifically with high-performing/high-poverty schools and identified some similar leadership dispositions and behaviors. As evident in other studies, a commitment to maintaining a clean and safe educational environment is foundational to academic success. Leaders in high-performing, high-poverty spaces also critique and redress “policies and practices that manufacture low achievement” (Parrett & Budge, 2009, p. 24). This

includes promoting a growth mindset, offering extended learning opportunities for underachieving students, and leveraging budgets in an equitable and “moral” fashion that “sustains success for all students and the adults who serve them” (p. 23); placing particular emphasis on the lowest-performing students.

In the schools studied by Parrot and Budge, an “ethos of professional accountability” for high expectations for and learning of all students guides professional practice of teachers and educational leaders. Teachers and leaders in these schools have an understanding and appreciation of cultural and socioeconomic factors that influence students’ home and school lives and employ protective factors to support success. Maintaining smaller learning environments, building strong bonds with families, and promoting caring relationships are core practices of the schools in the Parrot and Budge study. Removing economic barriers to full participation in school programs, including connecting families with outside service providers, is central to the practice of successful schools serving marginalized populations (Parrett & Budge, 2009).

Masumoto and Brown-Welty (2009), in their work in rural California schools, concluded that effective leadership is an important factor contributing to high levels of student achievement. Such leaders practice distributed leadership, promote high expectations, maintain multiple levels of supports to meet the needs of diverse learners, and creatively and strategically leverage human and financial resources to help students. Development of strong relationships with families, service agencies, and higher education were identified as effective leadership practices in those high-achieving, high-poverty spaces.

Poverty-disrupting educators, according to Budge and Parrett (2018) have the ability “to see through poverty to the *person*” and leverage relationships to establish an environment in which learning can occur (p. 57). I envisage this as largely an educational leadership function.

This is reinforced by Parrett and Budge's (2009) work in successful high-poverty schools, "A school can indeed overcome the powerful and pervasive effects of poverty on a student's learning. Sustained improvements usually began with an individual or a small group of leaders committed to equity and the goal of successfully teaching every student" (p. 24).

Having reinforced educational leadership as a primary driver for change in rural high-poverty schools and communities, the following section describes the beliefs and behaviors central to understanding and redressing inequities in those same spaces. The extensive body of literature on critical theory I refer to as "critical discourses" for this analysis, identifies inequities in power and privilege as central to the ongoing achievement disparities between disadvantaged populations and their otherwise advantaged peers. This section again positions educational leaders as agents of transformative change.

Critical Discourses

After the 1983 Reagan-era report "A Nation at Risk", poor and minority children began to be labeled as "at risk"; establishing poverty as a "culture" (Gorski, 2008). Common myths about poverty began to surface. Parents of poor and minority children were labeled as lazy, incapable, indifferent about education, deficient, and at fault for their own position in society. Poor and minority children were thought to be unable to benefit from the expansive and rigorous curriculum desired by their more affluent peers (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Deficit thinking dominated belief systems about poor children and families in schools; people in poverty being pegged as "morally, intellectually, and even spiritually deficient" (Gorski, 2014, p. 129; Ullucci & Howard, 2015). A critical approach to students in poverty shifted from what low-income students cannot do versus a strength-based approach.

Schools responded with emphasizing uniformity and control. Authentic and rigorous curriculum gave way to a highly basic and regimented course of study. Standardized tests were overemphasized and “The learning for poor children in many contexts became prepackaged, predetermined, and rote” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 9). Imagination and intellect of low-income students were disregarded as key variables in future educational success; valuing compliance over innovation (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Although parents of poor children are often blamed for the poor academic performance of their children, there is no evidence to support that. Complex contexts keep people in poverty. Anyon (2005) in Ullucci and Howard (2015) states “faulty schools, few work opportunities, inadequate health care, a lack of a living wage, geographic isolation, poor child care, and a host of other factors weave together to threaten the chances people in poverty have of getting out” (p. 176). Families can rise out of poverty if structures are put into place to help them do so. This includes significant changes to schools, curriculum, pedagogies, processes, and policies.

Effectively serving low-income populations requires changes in beliefs about students and families living in poverty. Educational leadership is an important starting point for transformative change in schools serving marginalized families (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Restructuring schools to provide equitable opportunities for marginalized students is critical. This requires deconstructing and reforming belief structures of teachers and all educational leaders (Ullucci & Howard, 2015).

[Educators] need to critique the ways in which our present practices marginalize some students and their lived experiences and privilege others- both overtly and through our silences. We need to act agentially, to lead deliberately, to facilitate transformative

dialogue, and to achieve socially just learning environments for all children. (Shields, 2004, p. 127)

Critical Theory

The extensive body of work known as “critical theory” examines structural systems of inequality within society and dimensions of power and privilege that serve to marginalize certain populations (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). McClaren (2003) states that critical theory operates on the premise that “men and women are essentially unfree” and exist in a world troubled by “contradictions of power and privilege” (p. 193). Furman and Shields (2005) reinforce the importance of critical theory in promoting an altered consciousness and heightened awareness of how day-to-day lives of people, structures, and cultures interact to create social conditions that reproduce the inequality of social classes, while serving the interests of those in the dominant class. It makes visible the policies, practices, pedagogies, and curricula that perpetuate injustices to the less privileged.

Kellner (1993) suggests that critical theorists nurture “a critical approach to social analysis that would detect existing social problems and promote social transformation”, and “that these problems are part of the interactive context between the individual and society” (as cited in McClaren, 2003, p. 44). Through the emancipatory influence of critical theory students learn “to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 2005, p. 17). “School conditions in our society have been consistently, systematically, and disproportionately unequal and unfair, and the major casualties have been those students who differ significantly in social class, race, ethnicity, native language, and gender from what is considered the ‘mainstream’” (Darling-Hammond, 1995; Tyack, 1995; Weinberg, 1977, as quoted in Nieto, 2000, pp. 180-181).

Through an investigation of the works of prominent critical social theorists like Agger, Brookfield, Kincheloe, and McLaren; Dugan (2017) presents five central tenets of critical social theories. He states critical social theories:

1. Are a direct rejection of positivism. Research is inherently biased due to the bias and assumptions of those completing it.
2. Presume structural inequality. Western democracies are highly unequal, operating within “thin” democratic systems (Furman & Shields, 2004); allowing the majority to simultaneously serve their own interests and maintain social stratification.
3. Disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions. Through the altering of consciousness or “awakening of critical consciousness” (Freire, 2005, p.36), dominant ideologies are made explicit allowing “taken-for-granted” assumptions to be actively challenged; leading to social change.
4. Envision agency within structure. People are responsible for their own liberation and are expected to act in ethical, moral, and socially just ways so as not to contribute to systems that reproduce social stratification and present obstacles to future liberation.
5. Advance social change. Social justice is the core of critical social theories.

Similar principles surface in the works of Shields (2014) and Caldwell et al. (2012) on the concept of transformative leadership, and in the works of Theoharis (2007), Beyer (2012), and Furman and Shields (2005) on leadership for social justice. A moderately strong positive correlation exists between educational leadership’s willingness to challenge the status quo, commitment to monitoring effectiveness of school practices and their impact on student learning, and student achievement (Hattie, 2009). Applied to educational leadership, these knowledge frameworks inform professional practice designed to improve the educational experience for

marginalized populations and bring equity to a highly inequitable system; abilities present in Gorski's (2018) equity literacy model.

Equity Literacy

Gorski (2018) describes equity literacy as having four “interlocking abilities” including:

1. The ability to *Recognize* subtle and not-so-subtle biases and inequities in classroom dynamics, school cultures and policies, and the broader society, and how these biases and inequities affect students and their families;
2. The ability to *Respond* to biases and inequities in the immediate term, as they crop up in classrooms and schools;
3. The ability to *Redress* biases and inequities in the longer term, so that they do not continue to crop up in classrooms and schools; and
4. The ability to *Create and Sustain* a bias-free and equitable learning environment for all students. (Gorski, 2018, p. 20).

Gorski (2018) alludes to the critical nature of the critical social theory and related discourses when stating, “There is no *Respond*, *Redress*, or *Create and Sustain* without a well-cultivated *Recognize*” (p. 23). It's this ability to see systems of inequity that leads to leadership action directed at social justice outcomes.

Leadership for Social Justice

Our complex and increasingly diverse world needs ethical leadership to address inequities between majority and minority populations. As schools struggle to serve students with conflicting beliefs and ideologies, educational leaders face the need to develop principles for ethical action and social justice education (Shields, 2014). In Beyer (2012) Arne Duncan is quoted as saying “I believe that education is the civil rights issue of our generation. And if you

care about promoting opportunities and reducing inequality, the classroom is the place to start. Great teaching is about much more than education; it is a fight for social justice” (p. 9).

This fight for social justice within educational spaces requires making matters of “race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions” central to the vision and practice of leading for learning (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223). Dialogue around issues of inequity and social justice, especially who is included or excluded in certain decisions and whose voices are silenced, is critical to improving the educational experience of students. Teachers and administrators must be drivers of this type of authentic practice in schools; challenging the status quo and confronting the uncomfortable (Shields, 2004).

In an effort to develop a constructive model of leadership for social justice, Theoharis (2007) studied six principals who possessed the necessary beliefs, skills, and dispositions to advance social justice in their schools and had evidence to support their work was creating more just and fair educational spaces. In his work, he produced similar results to other empirical studies in high performing, high poverty schools.

Actively addressing systems of inequity, increasing learning time for underachieving students, investing in professional learning for staff, distributed leadership, authentically engaging families and the community in the school, and promoting a vision of high achievement for all are at the forefront of Theoharis’s work on leadership for social justice. Appendix A provides a framework of the four injustices identified in the study and the strategies social justice leaders used to disrupt them.

Theoharis (2007) offers the following definition of leadership for social justice:

[Social justice] principals advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States. This definition centers on addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools. In doing so, inclusive schooling practices for students with disabilities, English language learners, and other students traditionally segregated in schools are also necessitated by this definition. (p. 222)

Aligned with leadership for social justice, transformative leadership theory substantiates the need for educational leaders to be willing to challenge the status quo, committing to deep and equitable change in schools.

Transformative Leadership

Transformative leadership theory is “inherently ethical and focused both on excellence and social justice” (Shields, 2014, p. 29). Transformative leaders must be willing to disrupt the status quo; deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge frameworks to more fully comprehend the influence of culture, privilege, and power. Such leaders must be dedicated to understanding dominant social and political power structures and be willing to challenge them; being voices for the marginalized. Such voices must be represented in the curriculum and pedagogy of truly transformative schools committed to emancipation of marginalized students and elimination of the opportunity and achievement gaps that have persisted over time (Shields, 2014).

In her (2014) work, *Ethical Leadership: A Critical Transformative Approach*, Shields attempts to unify principles of social justice education and transformative leadership. She contends that transformative leaders enact a social justice education through respect and equitable access for all within the organization. Policies, practices, and building norms must be equally inclusive of all members and promote equitable outcomes for all. Civil, political, and

social rights are provided equally to all members of all stakeholder groups and are reinforced by equitable allocation of funds.

Table 2.1

Intersections: Transformative leadership and principles of democratic and social justice education

Principles for Democratic and Social Justice Education	Tenets of Transformative Leadership
All persons in a given organization shall be treated respectfully	The mandate to effect deep and equitable change
The education institution will ensure equitable access for all	The need to deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and injustice
The education institution will promote equitable outcomes for all	A focus on emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice
The practices of the organization should emphasize mutual benefit	An emphasis on both private and public (individual and collective) good
The norms and practices of the organization shall be equally inclusive of all members	The need to address the inequitable distribution of power
All members of a designated group (society, community, school) shall have equal civil, political, and social rights as citizens	An emphasis on interdependence, interconnectedness, and global awareness
Competition for funds to ensure basic needs is undemocratic	The necessity of balancing critique with promise
	The call to exhibit moral courage

Note: Taken from Shields (2014), p. 29.

The previous sections have established that leadership is central to improvement; particularly in systems that serve marginalized populations. Improvement in any complex system requires an understanding of each sub-system and how each interacts to generate the results it is

producing. The following section looks closely at improving educational systems and, again, the role of educational leaders in driving those improvements.

Systems Leadership

Bryk et al. (2017) qualify schools as complex systems and recognize the urgency in improving them. They emphasize that school reform is a salient and persistent theme today and has been for decades. Improvements, however, have not kept pace with the public's expectations. Marzano (2003) writes, "Leadership is a necessary condition for effective reform relative to..." school-, teacher-, and student-level factors. He goes on to emphasize that decades of literature suggest educational leadership is associated with clear school goals, school climate, teacher attitudes, curriculum and instruction, pedagogy, and "students' opportunity to learn" (Marzano, 2003, p. 172).

Educational leaders must overcome the belief that improvement can happen without change. They must imagine an entirely new system of education. This demands creativity, insight, collaboration, and a commitment to the redesign of "systems capable of preparing all students for life in a learning society" (Carter & Berreth, 2001, p. 21). Traditional improvement approaches have failed to close widening gaps in education as "most educational reforms reflect at best a partial understanding of system dynamics, and some seem almost oblivious to the fundamental character of the phenomena they seek to change" (Bryk et al., 2017, p. 58).

Achieving quality outcomes in schools requires "seeing the system" and each of its individual parts, recognizing the complex interactions of people, processes, resources that produce the current outcomes (Bryk et al., 2017; Carter & Berreth, 2001). Such outcomes are the product of dynamic interactions between processes within classrooms, schools, districts, and the families and public entities they serve. As Bryk et al. (2017) state, "we must attend to how all of

this joins together for the people charged with carrying out this work and for those that they seek to serve. In short, we must make systems work better” (p. 59). They go on to emphasize the importance of *networked improvement communities* in accelerating systems improvement.

Bryk et al. (2017) add that learning happens at three key levels within an organization. Front-line workers gain knowledge and understanding by virtue of their roles and professional practice. Such learning accumulates and is refined and developed through collaborative practice with groups of individuals within the organization.

A third level of learning for systems improvement occurs when multiple institutions interact and learn across their organizations. A systematic approach to social learning allows collective capabilities to grow at a radically increased rate. This requires intentionality on the part of organizational leadership to coordinate the efforts of diverse groups of individuals to address a very specific problem.

The importance school improvement through inter-organizational learning is reinforced in the (2006) work of Fullan, Hill, and Crevola.

School leaders [must] be dynamically plugged into the external expert system. Schools have a moral and intellectual responsibility to learn from other schools and agencies and to contribute what they know to others. Some of the most powerful learning (and enhanced moral commitments) that we have witnessed has come from lateral capacity-building relationships among clusters of schools working together over time. (p. 95).

Kotter (2014) takes a similar approach yet holds on to the value of hierarchical structures in improving systems. His *dual operating system* presents systems leadership as not an “either/or” of hierarchies versus networks, rather a “both/and: two systems that operate in concert” (Kotter, 2014, p. 12).

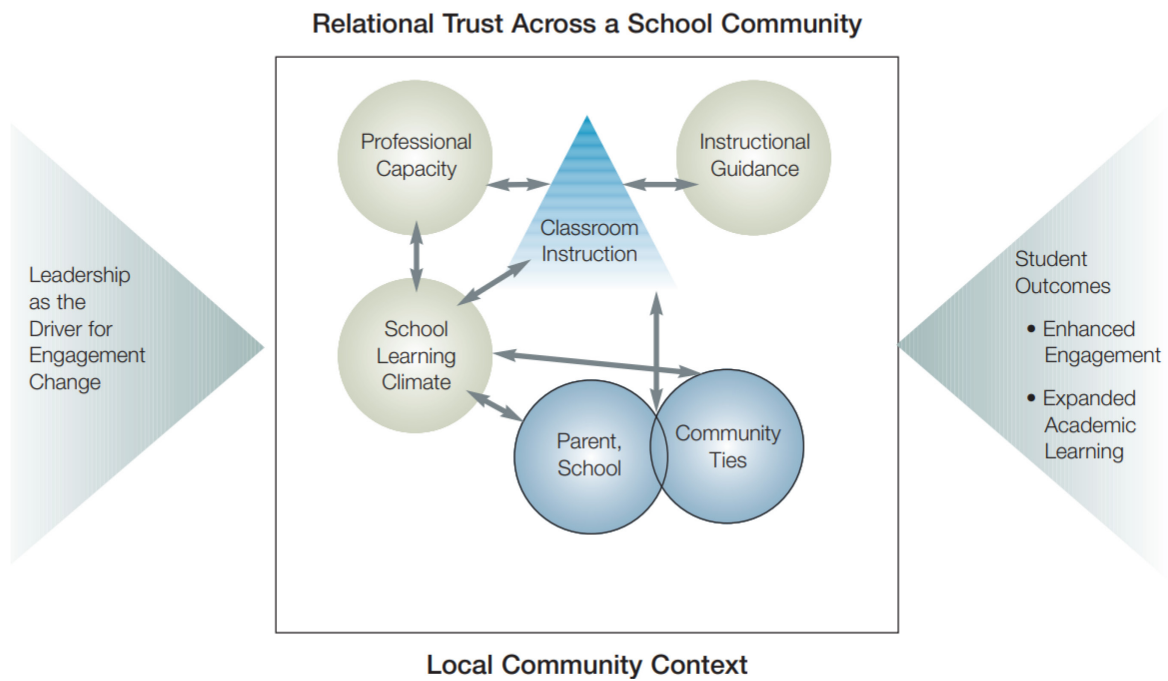
Effective systems leaders understand the interconnectedness of systems within their influence and the value of relationships in sustaining them. Relationships that promote internal unity are inherently moral and honor a “collective responsibility to support all...partners” (Carter & Berreth, 2001, p. 24).

Schools are much like living systems, requiring constant attention and maintenance, reflection, and analysis of systems that comprise them. Carter and Berreth (2001) state that to reinvent schools as resilient bodies with high “adaptive capacity”, educational leaders must “think and act in integrative, systemic, and soulful ways” (p. 25). This speaks to courage, morality, visionary leadership, collaboration and synergy in school-community relationships, reflection, and action.

Working from similar principles, Bryk (2010) completed a longitudinal study of hundreds of Chicago elementary schools to analyze what differentiated improving low-income schools from those that failed to improve. The results revealed the importance of interaction between complex systems and subsystems, and the unique role of the educational leader as the driver of improvements. He goes on to say, “These data provide an extraordinary window to examine the complex interplay of how schools are organized and interact with the local community to alter dramatically the odds for improving student achievement” (p. 24). Figure 2.2 illustrates five organization features or ‘systems’ that interact within the school community and are essential to improving student achievement.

Figure 2.2

Organizational Features of Schools That Interact to Advance Student Achievement



Note: Taken from Bryk (2010), p. 24

In his analysis, Bryk (2010) emphasizes the prominence of the leader in driving systems improvements in this study, adding that the “actual execution of improvement is more organic and dynamic” (p. 26). Instructional improvement and resultant advancements in student learning require “coordinated action” across multiple domains. This demands leaders to visualize the system and its individual parts, understanding that the improvement value lies in their integration (Bryk, 2010).

Bryk’s (2010) work in Chicago schools complements that of fundamental principles of networked systems improvements identified in New Zealand schools. Fullan (2015) describes a “more powerful way to seek whole system success” through what he calls “Leadership from the Middle” (LfM) (Fullan, 2015, p. 22). In his analysis of New Zealand schools, five fundamental

principles surfaced as key aspects of educational systems improvement, which emphasize LfM. These principles place educational leaders at the center of education systems improvements.

In the New Zealand case study, educational leaders viewed the system as having four critical parts: education pathways, parent and community engagement, development of the educational leader, and achievement outcomes. These four subsystems are broken into five core guiding principles that provide a theory of action for educational leaders to improve education systems. See Appendix B for a comprehensive table.

In summary, children are the focus of improvement efforts. Varied and seamless pathways exist from early learning to post-secondary education. Parents must be informed about and authentically engaged in their children's education. Educational leaders do not work autonomously, rather they engage in collaborative efforts to grow professionally and to systematically improve achievement outcomes for their students. These are outcomes that represent specific and measurable gains in target areas. Lastly, educational leaders have clear pathways for growth and advancement within the field.

It is important to realize; however, that context matters and simply copying these principles and practices will not automatically produce outstanding results. Much of the success of implementation lands on the "system designer" or educational leader to put "parts and pieces together, often coming from different systems that he or she thinks will work in harness with each other" (Tucker, p. 3).

Out of a 25-year study of top performing education systems in the world came a composite design for educational leaders to utilize as a road map for developing a high-performing system in their schools. These 9 *Building Blocks for a World-Class Education System* represent systems leadership in action (Tucker, 2016).

1. Provide strong supports for children and their families before students arrive at school
2. Provide more resources for at-risk students than for others
3. Develop world-class, highly coherent instructional systems
4. Create clear gateways for students through the system, set to global standards, with no dead ends
5. Assure an abundant supply of highly qualified teachers
6. Redesign schools to be places in which teachers will be treated as professionals, with incentives and support to continuously improve their professional practice and the performance of their students
7. Create an effective system of career and technical education and training
8. Create a leadership development system that develops leaders at all levels to manage such systems effectively
9. Institute a governance system that has the authority and legitimacy to develop coherent, powerful policies and is capable of implementing them at scale.

This compilation of research is not meant to illustrate any one perfect model, nor is it meant to imply that any single educational institution or entity has mastered each of the principles presented. It is a set of big ideas put forth as foundational to implementing substantive change in rural high-poverty spaces. The ability to see each system, appreciate its people, and imagine a more socially just and equitable way begins with an “awakening of critical consciousness” (Freire, 2005, p. 36) that transcends superficial understanding of the lived realities of those served. It demands a deeper understanding of culture and how people in those spaces are viewed by others, oppressed, and often silenced.

Educational systems leaders must be open to critique of their own biases, assumptions, and values. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) reinforce the ethical need to be “awaken[ed] to our own unstated values” (p. 13) and understand how structures of power may have influenced and even corrupted our moral compass over time. It is through this ethic of critique that educational leaders begin to rethink, “redefine and reframe... concepts such as privilege, power, culture, language, and even justice” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016, pp. 13-14) as they strive to be more equitable in thought and action. Thought and action are inextricably linked and are preconditions to enacting truly transformative systems leadership within rural high-poverty spaces; keeping ethics, equity, and excellence in focus.

As outlined in previous sections, leading change in rural high-poverty schools is complex and requires a deep understanding of school, community, and social systems that influence the ability of students to realize success. To put that understanding into transformative action not only demands a relentless pursuit of excellence, it requires establishing genuine relationships. Such relationships are influenced by the leader’s ability to identify emotions, understand them, use them to facilitate thinking, and manage them to achieve desired outcomes; an area of study called Emotional Intelligence (Mayer and Salovey, 1997).

Emotional Intelligence

Shanwal and Kaur (2008) contend, “It is beyond doubt that emotions play a pivotal role in our cognitive and behavioral functions” (p. 153). Caruso (2008) reinforces that the core of emotions is to move us to “effective, adaptive action” (p. 5). These abilities influence an educational leader’s capacity to establish sound interpersonal relationships. Such skills influence communication, stress and conflict management, and the creation of a positive and productive work environment (Shanwal & Kaur, 2008). Emotions contain data and are critical for effective

decision-making. “The most important function they serve is to prepare us – quickly – for critical interactions with other people...the question is not whether it is better to be sad or happy, negative or positive, but when we should be negative or positive” (Caruso, 2008, pp. 5-6).

Effectively leveraging emotions has the potential to transform schools.

By giving more credence to sense experience and intuition, and by accepting sacred authority and emotion as fully legitimate ways of knowing, equal in value to secular authority, science, and deductive logic, the value systems undergirding management theory and leadership practice will grow large enough to account for a new kind of leadership- one based on moral authority. This kind of leadership can transform schools into communities and inspire the kind of commitment, devotion, and service that will make our schools unequaled among society’s institutions. (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 16).

Referencing a relevant Stanford Research Institute study appearing in multiple leadership texts (Chibber & Fellow, 2013; Miller, 2001), Shanwal and Kaur validate the critical nature of emotions in leadership, “12% of effective [leadership] is knowledge and 88% is dealing appropriately with people” (p. 154).

Although researchers have historically dismissed emotions as a serious consideration for leadership development, formal theories of emotional intelligence have surfaced in the literature, accompanied by methods of measurement and empirical studies advocating for such skills or abilities as important to successful practice within school, work, and social settings (Mayer et al., 2008; Palmer et al., 2000). Interest in emotional intelligence has soared since the early 1990’s, fueled by the popularity of Goleman’s (1995) best-selling book *Emotional Intelligence* (Brackett et al., 2011; Palmer et al., 2000).

Goleman’s (1995) work and subsequent works were written for the general public, primarily those in the business sector, reacting to the evolving paradigm of leadership. Goleman (1998) claims, “We’re being judged by a new yardstick: not just by how smart we are, or by our training and expertise, but also how well we handle ourselves and each other” (p. 3). He defines emotional intelligence as “the ability to sense, understand, value and effectively apply the power and access of emotions as a source of human energy, information, trust, creativity, and influence” (Goleman, 1995, as quoted in Shanwal & Kaur, 2008, p. 156). This evolving paradigm created a demand for operationalizing personality traits in the practice of leadership, and Goleman capitalized on the intuitive basis of emotional intelligence, which at the time lacked a strong empirical foundation.

Goleman (1995) describes emotional intelligence as having a combination of personal and social competencies. The personal competencies include self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation. The social competencies are described as social awareness and social skills. Table 2.2 provides a brief summary of each competency as presented in this model.

Table 2.2

Goleman’s Personal and Social Emotional Intelligence Competencies

Competency	Description
Self-awareness	Knowledge of personal feelings at any moment and using it to inform decision-making
Self-regulation	Management of impulsivity and negative emotions. This competency includes maintaining honesty, integrity, and personal responsibility, and promotes adaptability in handling change.
Self-motivation	Perseverance in the face of adversity, driven by optimism and deep preferences.
Social awareness	Sensing others’ feelings. “Attunement with a broad diversity of people” (p. 157).

Social skills Relationship management and effective communication. This includes dimensions of leadership, conflict management, persuasion, and collaboration.

Note: [Reprinted with permission from Nova Science Publishers, Inc. from: Emotional intelligence: Theoretical and cultural perspectives, Emotional intelligence in education: Applications & implications, pp. 156-157, (2008), Shanwal & Kaur.]

Following Goleman’s work, Bar-On (1997) took a slightly different approach. He contended that emotional intelligence is a continuum of non-ability traits (i.e. mental abilities) and abilities. His mixed model has five broad areas (see Table 2.3) developed from the psychology literature and attempts to provide a more balanced view of a person’s overall intelligence (Shanwal & Kaur, 2008).

Table 2.3

Bar-On’s Theoretical Mixed-Model Framework of Emotional Intelligence

Characteristic	Description
Intrapersonal skills	Self-awareness. Understanding of one’s strengths and weaknesses.
Interpersonal skills	Empathy and relationship management.
Adaptability skills	Being flexible and adaptable to challenging situations. This includes being responsive to oneself and one’s environment.
Stress management	Effective stress management, tolerance, and impulse control.
General mood	Happiness and optimism.

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The Mayer-Salovey ability model positions emotional intelligence in the field of other intelligences (e.g. IQ). In their model, “reasoning and thinking operate on emotional information and emotions directly interact with thought to facilitate better decisions, thinking and action”

(Caruso, 2008, p. 2). The ability model of emotional intelligence as defined by Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2016) has practical application to educational leadership. They define emotional intelligence as the ability to “manage emotions, understand emotions in others, facilitate thought by using emotions (i.e. use emotions to make decisions), and perceive emotions in oneself and others” (p. 293). For the purpose of this dissertation, this four-branch ability model of emotional intelligence will be the foundation for emotional intelligence as it applies to educational leadership serving rural high-poverty schools.

Mayer and Salovey posit that emotional intelligence abilities develop sequentially. At a very basic level, accurate judgment and perception of emotions in oneself and in others is important but is hardly adequate as a function of effective educational leadership. It is necessary to be able to leverage emotions to facilitate effective thinking. More complex is the ability to understand emotions, their causes and consequences, and relationships among them. Management of emotions allows for better decision-making. This requires being open to all feelings, pleasant and unpleasant, and the ability to actively engage or disengage with emotions when choosing the best course of action (Caruso, 2008).

In applications of leadership serving marginalized populations, this is particularly important as there is a positive association between leader emotional intelligence and school climate (Anderson, 2017), and data suggest that school climate serves as a protective factor for students from low income families (Hopson & Eunju, 2011). Makolandra et al. (2009) refer to the work of Mills and Rouse in their review of literature on emotional intelligence and educational leadership. Their study suggests a moderately strong relationship exists between emotional intelligence and effective educational leadership.

Gray (2009) contends “Emotional intelligence is the cornerstone of every decision a principal makes; solving problems and making judgments are part of a leader's system of values and beliefs” (p. 2). This is particularly important when schools face complex challenges requiring mutual trust among those involved; such as the achievement gap between low-SES and otherwise advantaged students. Educational leaders need to intentionally develop their own emotional intelligence abilities and those of others within their sphere of influence, to improve collaborative school improvement efforts (Makolandra et al., 2009).

There is still focused research to be done before making grand claims of the significance of EI to leadership (Brown & Moshavi, 2005). However, the ability model of EI is a promising framework through which to examine EI (Antonakis, 2010), particularly as it relates to leadership practice. Emotional intelligence is predictive of “work outcomes that focus on long-term quality of interpersonal communications, conflicts and relationships” (Caruso, 2008); work congruent with leading and sustaining high performing schools serving marginalized students.

Theory of Action

Freire (2005) speaks of “praxis: reflection and action upon the world to transform it” (p. 15). It's through this definition that I explore essential dispositions and behaviors in the practice of educational leadership serving high poverty rural schools. This is leadership that demonstrates “the twin concepts of critique and possibility” (Shields, 2009, p. 5). In other words, how leaders confront moral issues within their schools while maintaining hope that their actions will lead to social justice outcomes. As Giroux (2003) reminds us, critical discourses are more than just thoughts and ideas, it is an active process of critique leading to social transformation.

For starters, Sergiovanni (1992) speaks of characteristics of a virtuous school. Such characteristics of moral leadership are relevant and consistent with principles of critical social

theories applied to the context of schools. He states that virtuous schools create self-learners and self-managers. Students, over time, begin to become more self-reliant and aware of their own convictions. Such schools have a commitment to all students' learning and will do anything they can to support it; including challenging the status quo. In virtuous schools, mutual respect drives teacher-teacher, teacher-student, and student-student interactions. Lastly, virtuous schools develop authentic interdependency between the school, students, parent, teachers, and the community. A relationship built upon mutual trust and mutual benefits.

Langlois (2011) found that leaders exhibiting characteristics of ethics of critique are aligned with core tenets of transformative leadership. Leadership actions of interest include those that ensure power struggles are brought to the surface. Injustices related to race, class, and other biases are made visible. Disproportionate benefits are exposed as are the groups that receive them. There is intentionality in raising the consciousness among stakeholders on contradictions of power and privilege. Stakeholders are authentically engaged in decision-making. Barriers are removed to ensure decisions are informed, collaborative, and focused on unity over division.

McLaren (2003) draws on Henry Giroux's distinction between micro and macro objectives as evidence of critical discourse in the action of educational leadership. Micro objectives in the classroom emphasize productive knowledge, which has narrow purpose (e.g. dates, times, and how-to-do techniques). Whereas, macro objectives "center on the relationship between means and ends, between specific events and their wider social and political implications" (McLaren, 2003, p. 71). Such objectives promote directive knowledge and provide students with a model that facilitates examination of larger underlying social, political, and economical functions of certain forms of knowledge.

Directive knowledge, termed emancipatory knowledge by critical theorist Habermas, is extremely important as it seeks to expose how power and privilege can distort and manipulate social relationships allowing disparities between classes, races, cultures, and genders to persist. Emancipatory knowledge also aims to create conditions under which deliberate, collective action can overcome oppression and marginalization.

In her (2012) work, Furman synthesized a conceptual framework for social justice leadership that effectively illustrates the praxis of social justice leadership across multiple dimensions of educational leadership. In this model, she describes social justice leaders as having a deep commitment to a social justice agenda. They are courageous and persistent in their pursuit of becoming activists and change agents in their schools. Social justice leaders create more inclusive practices within their schools, addressing inequities and issues of marginalization. Ryan (2006), as quoted in Furman (2012) summarizes inclusive leadership practices well:

Inclusive leadership consists of a number of distinct practices. They include advocating for inclusion, educating participants, developing critical consciousness, nurturing dialogue, emphasizing student learning and classroom practice, adopting inclusive decision- and policymaking strategies, and incorporating whole school approaches. (p.9).

Furman goes on to emphasize that “social justice leaders engage in critical self-reflection aimed at personal awareness and growth” (p. 197). They are committed to fostering caring relationships and sustain them through authentic communication. Social justice leaders promote pedagogy within their schools that guarantees equitable learning for all students. Teachers are encouraged to examine their own practice and identify bias in their curriculum and pedagogy.

Fullan (2003) states, “[educational leaders] must be cognizant that changing their schools and the system is a simultaneous proposition” (p. 4). He goes on to state:

Let's be explicit. The only goal worth talking about is transforming the current school system so that large-scale, sustainable, continuous reform becomes built in. Moral purpose of the highest order is having a system where all students learn, the gap between high and low performance becomes greatly reduced, and what people learn enables them to be successful citizens and workers in a morally based knowledge society. (p. 29).

In a 2002 case study of high-performing, high-poverty schools in Texas, quoted in Fullan (2003), nine key improvement strategies were proposed: 1) setting high expectations for all students; 2) distributive leadership; 3) high levels of collaboration among faculty and staff; 4) leveraging assessment data to promote student success; 5) placing students at the center of all decisions; (6) removing barriers to learning; (7) authentically engaging families in student learning; (8) identifying and employing systems of interventions; and (9) having an effective inclusion program that provides a continuum of special education supports.

Children today are facing overwhelming problems. Poverty, violence, racism, hyper-individualism, discrimination in all forms, and fear dominate the landscape of the society our students are navigating. To advance social change requires equipping our students with the tools necessary to successfully understand the utility of emotions, how to identify and manage them, and how to leverage them to reshape themselves and the society they live in (Shanwal & Kaur, 2008).

Goleman (1995) as quoted in Shanwal and Kaur (2008) reinforces this idea, "Emotionally literate students have mastered the emotional abilities that inoculate them against the turmoil and pressures they are about to face during life transitions" (p.163). To help students master these skills requires purposeful action by emotionally intelligent educational leaders to provide opportunities, knowledge, routines, and supports for students to practice and grow in this area.

Kremenitzer et al. (2008) suggest that educators with high emotional intelligence are more comfortable with their own emotions and emotional interactions with their colleagues. They are also aptly aware of their emotions and their influence on the climate in their classroom. Such educational leaders are cognizant of their own “emotional blueprint” (p. 200) and are able to model it for their students. Although their work centers on teacher-level practice, I submit there is a high level of transferability to all levels of educational leadership within the school system.

In addition to high expectations for all students and a caring attitude toward students, Kremenitzer et al. (2008) recommend a series of proactive steps for creating emotionally intelligent educational spaces: development of a class charter, clearly defined routines and procedures, and modeling of emotional intelligence by educational leaders. Classroom-level indicators of emotional intelligence development include morning meetings; conflict resolution processes; a curriculum that promotes critical themes such as ethics, courage, mutual respect, hope, and social justice; emphasis on creativity, and clearly defined opening, operating, teaching, and closing routines. Such indicators are governed by a class charter that honors and preserves teacher rights and student voices, while protecting the property, physical, and psychological well-being of students.

Collins’s (2001) work on leadership is particularly relevant in the action of educational leaders who have been successful in transcending “good”, reaching a level of greatness that has eluded most. Although his work centers on business success, Fullan (2003) points out, “Be that as it may, Collins’s findings about leadership are germane to our interest in what it would take to develop great schools” (p. 8).

The first three levels of Collins's five-level hierarchy are visible in educational leadership in many good schools. Highly capable individuals, who are effective team members, and competent managers in their respective spaces are the mark of strong educational leaders. Great educational leaders are effective, action-oriented leaders who "catalyze commitment to and vigorous pursuit of a clear and compelling vision" and build "enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will", as described in Levels 4 and 5 (Collins, 2001, p. 20). Rural high-poverty schools need more Level 5 educational leaders. As Fullan (2003) aptly states, "This is an exciting proposition and represents the moral imperative in its highest form" (p. 11).

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Introduction

This study sought an emic perspective of leadership in an effective, rural high-poverty school. Three central research questions framed this grounded theory study.

1. What is it about educational leaders that contribute to significant improvement of rural high-poverty schools?
2. What are the behaviors of effective educational leaders who have been successful in mitigating the achievement gap between students with low-SES and otherwise advantaged students?
3. What are the social justice implications for the meaning and interpretations of effective educational leadership in rural, high poverty school districts?

This study argued that effective leaders in rural high-poverty schools are able to actionize key concepts of critical theory, systems leadership theory, and emotional intelligence theory. This study is important because it not only investigated “why” some educational leaders are effective in serving rural high-poverty populations, it sought to provide utility for practicing educational leaders guiding “how” to enact effective leadership in similar spaces. Leadership guru Simon Sinek in his (2009) work “Start with Why” presents a relevant anecdote. In his speeches, Dr. Martin Luther King was inspirational and often spoke of the philosophical implications of the civil rights movement; providing the “why” of the cause. Dr. King’s mentor and friend Ralph Abernathy would follow Dr. King’s speeches with “Now, let me tell you what that means for tomorrow morning” (Sinek, 2009, p. 138).

This chapter provides an overview of the study, research design, and timeline for data collection and analysis. The process for identifying participants and the three phases of data collection and analysis are also discussed. To maintain confidentiality, the name of the school in the study, as well as names of each of the participants, are represented as pseudonyms.

Research Design

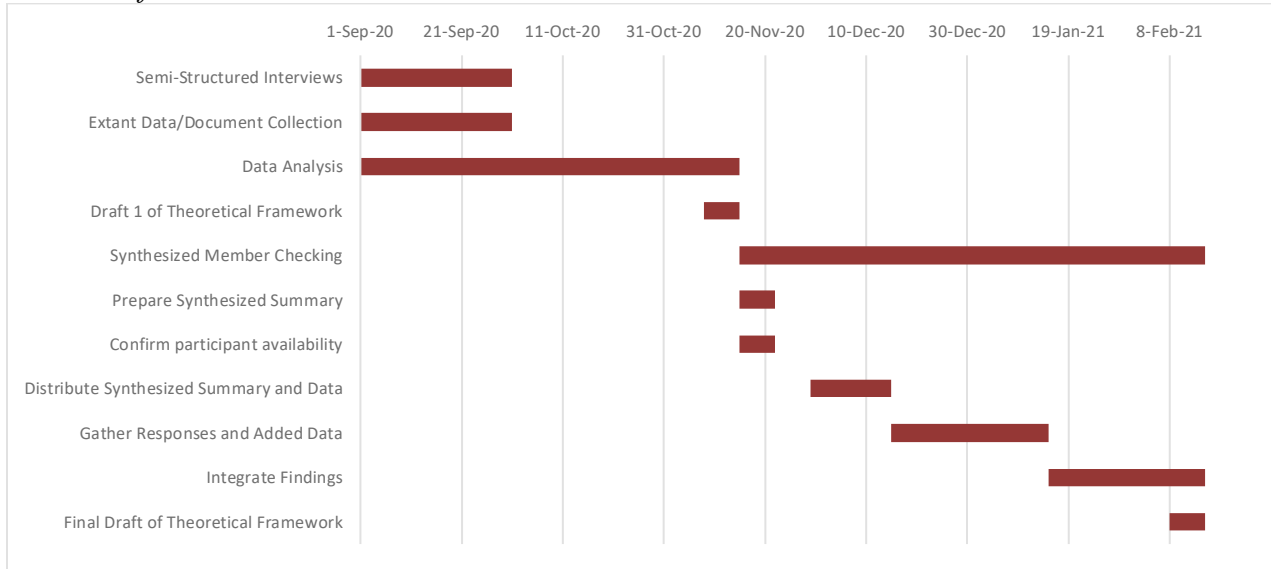
This study examined the beliefs and actions of five rural educational leaders effectively serving high numbers of students and families experiencing poverty. This study contributes to existing literature by providing a framework for actionizing theory for the purpose of improving achievement of rural students experiencing poverty. Leadership actions resulting in transformative change were positioned solidly at the center of this investigation.

Timeline

Figure 3.1 illustrates the timeline of data collection for this study. Note that data analysis happened concurrently with data collection. In the constant comparative method used in this study, “Joint collection, coding, and analysis of data is the underlying operation. The generation of theory, coupled with the notion of theory as a process, requires that all three operations be done together as much as possible” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 43).

Figure 3.1

Timeline of data collection



Grounded Theory

A grounded theory process was used in this study. The basic process, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is to discover theory from data collected and analyzed in a systematic fashion. The position is that the grounded theory methodology arrives at theory that has particular utility in its intended field. The resultant theory must be readily understandable and applicable. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), theory has five interrelated functions:

- (1) To enable prediction and explanation of behavior;
- (2) to be useful in theoretical advance in [the field of study];
- (3) to be usable in practical applications- prediction and explanation should be able to give the practitioner understanding and some control of situations;
- (4) to provide a perspective on behavior- a stance to be taken toward data; and
- (5) to guide and provide a style for research on particular areas of behavior. (p. 3).

As Glaser and Strauss (1967) state, “the researcher does not approach reality as a tabula rasa”. My perspective as an educational leader serving a rural high poverty school provided an

informed lens through which to view relevant data, analyze the data, generate theory, and critique the theory's utility to practitioners and future researchers in the field.

Selection and Recruitment of Participants

As a practicing educational leader in rural high-poverty spaces, the researcher routinely looks for “bright spots” or “...specific work practices, tools, and other materials that are thought to contribute to unusually positive results found in some classrooms, schools, or districts” (Bryk, 2016, para 2). The researcher embarked on a new journey in June of 2019, taking a position as Assistant Superintendent of a district in the same region, but different county. While acclimating to the new role and exploring all of the systems within his sphere of influence, the researcher saw that his district was paying to send multiple students to a career and technical center in another county. This was unusual, as the district has their own CTE programs. To fully understand this practice, a visit was scheduled.

A positive climate is easily recognized when entering a school building. This was true during this visit. The receptionist, security personnel, and administration were remarkably welcoming. They were kind and warm in the midst of a pandemic which had all schools and school employees stretched to their emotional limits. As the tour continued, the director described the organization's vision for students' learning and success, supports that have been put into place during his tenure, challenges, strategies, and desired outcomes.

Experience as a scholarly practitioner, educational leader, and facilitator of leadership programming has prepared the researcher to be observant of what is and, maybe more importantly, what is not present in any conversation, classroom, presentation, or report. In this brief interaction with staff, administration, and students a few interesting items surfaced.

First, there was a casual confidence about educating students during the COVID-19 pandemic. In many conversations and interactions with teachers and administration from across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, most schools and educational leaders have voiced being extremely anxious and resistant to moving forward due to unknowns and fears about what tomorrow may bring. There was an impression that this organization was committed to maintaining consistency for their students. Although necessary precautions were being followed, the pandemic did not dominate the conversation. In fact, it was barely a footnote in any discussion.

An attentive ear heard the director, principal, and various teachers describe their mission and specific strategies they employ to meet it. Positive messages were posted around the school which was obviously well maintained. The principal began describing a positive behavior support (PBS) initiative while standing in the hall and she only had to move about 6 feet to point to a poster which illustrated the pillars of the program. This was visibly a part of their culture, not a fad. The director pointed to different rooms and staff who were hired to support the unique needs of many students served in the building; including learning support and emotional support services. He described working cohesively with the community to make curriculum and program decisions and explained that student employment opportunities had increased exponentially since he was hired only six years prior. Complaints about funding, technology, staffing, and students never came.

In this rural high-poverty school, located in a highly conservative part of Pennsylvania, educational leaders spoke of equity, trauma, and opportunity. The researcher entered a paint booth in the Autobody Repair shop to see a project a student was working on. There were three female students in the room and one confidently approached, introduced herself, and began

talking about what she was doing and why. Autobody Repair is a male-dominated field, yet this building was creating opportunities for females in those spaces. The instructor was also female.

That visit was inspiring. The researcher wanted to learn more about *what* this organization was doing, the hard work and strategy behind *how* those improvements were made and sustained, and the belief systems behind *why* certain people, policies, and processes were put into place. This organization was seen as a “positive deviance” (Sparks, 2018, p. 2) from the average, a case with a number of bright spots that deserve attention and deeper analysis.

The Participants

The study began by identifying a single educational leader at the administrator level who met the requisite criteria. Using Foster’s (1991) community nomination method, four additional educational leaders were nominated from known members of the school; educational leaders in administrative and non-administrative roles who have contributed to high levels of success of students experiencing poverty. These individuals were “individuals whose behavior and language diverge most sharply from mainstream life” (Foster, 1991, p. 239). This supported the collection of an “emic perspective” (Foster, 1991, p. 239), a view from the inside of the organization that may reveal substantive differences in culture and practice than those imposed by forces external to the organization.

Seeking to understand the dispositions and behaviors of non-principal leaders within the school is crucial to developing a comprehensive theory of educational leadership and its impact on student achievement. Fullan et al. (2006) emphasizes this point, “Change and sustained improvement are impossible without good educational leadership...” and “educational leadership and coordination...are not the sole responsibility of school principals: They can and should be exercised at all levels of the organization” (p. 95).

Each of the five participants in the study had been employed at Q-Tech for at least five years. The school director, Larry, was the first to be identified. He identified four other educational leaders based on their effectiveness with serving rural high-poverty students; Chrissy, Doug, Janice, and John.

Larry is a 44-year-old white male with a doctorate in education. He is currently the director of Q-Tech, serving in that role for 6.5 years. He has a total of 19 years in education.

Chrissy is the principal of Q-Tech. She is 46, white, and has a master's degree. Chrissy was previously a teacher in business computer information technology. She has been in her current role for 8 years, 16 years overall in education.

Doug is a 61-year-old white male. He was previously a student at Q-Tech, worked in industry, and returned to Q-Tech as a building and property maintenance teacher. He reported having an associates/technical degree. Doug has 27 years in education, all at Q-Tech.

Janice, a 57-year-old white female, is the cosmetology instructor at Q-Tech. She reports having an associates/technical degree. Janice is the SkillsUSA advisor and previously served as the National Technical Honor Society advisor. She has 25 years in education, 17 of which have been at Q-Tech.

John is a school counselor. He is a 43-year-old white male who previously provided community-based counseling services before getting hired at Q-Tech. He has a total of 6 years in education, all at Q-Tech. His education level was not reported.

The Organization

Q-Tech offers training in fourteen technical programs, complete with core high school academic courses and a cooperative education program. Q-Tech also offers a variety of adult education courses, providing career training and certifications to help adults become more

competitive and marketable. Enrollment at Q-Tech is 374 students, 62.3% were identified as economically disadvantaged, 32.6% received special education services. Of the 374 students served by Q-Tech, 63.6% are male, 36.4% are female (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2018).

Four rural districts partner with Q-Tech to provide career and technical education programming; Rivertown School District, Angelwood School District. Deer Valley School District, and Grandview School District.

Rivertown School District serves 966 students over approximately 130 square miles. This is a predominantly white community with a school population that is 97.4% white; 44.8% are considered economically disadvantaged; participating in the federal free or reduced lunch program. Angelwood School District (ASD) is slightly larger, serving 1,463 students over 262 square miles. ASD is 96.2% white and 46.3% of students are considered economically disadvantaged. Deer Valley School District (DVSD) has a student population of 1,975 students and has the highest percentage of economically disadvantaged at 65.1%. DVSD's student population is 95.7% white and covers 274 square miles. The largest of the four sending districts, Grandview School District (GSD) spans 258 square miles and serves 3,491 students. GSD is 93.8% white and 55.2% are economically disadvantaged (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2018b).

Procedures

This study utilized a three-phase design to collect perspectives from adult members of each respective school community. Phase one was dedicated to semi-structured personal interviews with five effective educational leaders serving rural high-poverty populations. Phase two was a critical document analysis, a systemic procedure for making meaning of printed and

electronic documents provided by leaders in the study. Phase three was a member checking process to confirm accuracy of interview transcripts and interpretations, ensure participants' voices and experiences are accurately represented in the proposed theoretical framework, and solicit additive data from participants that may inform revisions to the proposed theoretical framework (Birt et al., 2016).

Data Collection and Analysis

Phase One

Data in phase one were collected through the use of Zoom, a live video-conferencing platform. Given that the study took place during sporadic school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to do in-person interviews. Video recordings of the interviews were made and used to generate a written transcript of each interview. One interview was completed over the phone due to technical difficulties on the participant's end. This interview was recorded using an audio recording function on the researcher's cellular telephone.

Using the established interview protocol, each participant was asked eight core interview questions identified in Appendix C. The questions were designed to better understand educational leader beliefs and actions specific to serving rural high-poverty students. Given that the format of phase one of the study was semi-structured interviews, some follow-up questions were asked of participants for clarification or to dig deeper into concepts which surfaced in participants' responses.

Audio recordings of the semi-structured interviews were transcribed using Otter transcription software. The researcher then hand-edited all transcripts for accuracy, comparing text against the original audio files. Subsequently, transcripts and interview notes were reviewed to identify emergent themes. Each individual interview was manually coded and key participant

phrases were aligned with each coded theme. Emergent themes within each interview were repeatedly compared to the other interviews to identify conceptual similarities and inherent differences; an iterative coding and recoding process integral to refining themes and developing grounded theory.

Phase Two

In conjunction with semi-structured interviews, a document analysis procedure was used to provide additional sources of evidence to add to the understanding of phenomena which surface from this qualitative study. This is consistent with the principles of grounded theory which advocate for the use of semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A critical examination of relevant documents provided by subjects in the study allowed the researcher to “corroborate findings across data sets and thus reduce the impact of potential biases that can exist in a single study” (Bowen, 2009, p. 28).

Bowen (2009) went on to identify five specific functions of document analysis. Such an analysis provides: data on context of the subjects and the organization in the study; suggestions as to further questions to be asked or observations to be made; data that contribute to deeper understanding of phenomena; a process for observing change in subjects or the organization over time; and ways to verify themes or findings derived from other sources of evidence.

It is impractical within the limitations of this study, to have a complete collection of documents which may suggest selection bias. Care was taken to collect a diverse array of documents that provide a comprehensive view of the subjects and the organization in the study. Documents that illustrated professional practice and organizational priorities over time were the primary focus. Extant documents readily accessible through public means were collected and analyzed.

Participants in the study were provided with a list of suggested artifacts to provide that are not in public domain (See Appendix D). Such artifacts could reveal important information about how each individual’s knowledge and beliefs were constructed, key data used to inform their decisions, key data highlighting successes, and examples of systems leadership, critical discourses, emotional intelligence practice in their respective spaces. Artifacts were collected at the district, building, classroom, and individual leader levels. An analysis of the collected artifacts corroborated findings from the semi-structured interviews. A combination of interview data and document analyses were used to refine themes and develop a theory of effective leadership in rural high- poverty schools.

Of the five participants in the study, two submitted documents for review. Additional extant documents were retrieved from the school’s website and other publicly accessible sources. Each document was analyzed and coded. Emergent themes were identified, consistent with the constant comparative method use in phase one. Emergent themes within documents, between documents, and between interviews and analyzed documents were repeatedly compared until themes emerged that fully illustrated the breadth and meaning of data collected in the study. Documents analyzed in this study are listed and described in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Documents Analyzed in the Document Analysis Process

Document Title	Description
BLT Big Picture	Notes for creation of the Building Leadership Team in 2019.
Childcare Proposal	A 2018 proposal for an on-site childcare program to support teen and adult learners who have young children.

Comprehensive Plan	7/1/2018-6/30/2021 Comprehensive Plan for Q-Tech.
Director's Notes 9.26.16	Speech notes from the Q-Tech director, stating the strategic direction and expectations for the organization.
Flyer: Aevidum	2017 flyer describing the Aevidum program.
Food Drive Letter	2020 letter to Q-Tech staff soliciting payroll deductions to fund a backpack program to feed students on weekends.
Future Ready Index	Summary of Q-Tech's college and career readiness data.
Holiday Dinner Donors	List of donors who contributed to the Q-Tech holiday dinner for families.
Letter: Career Fair Invite 2020	2020 letter to industry partners inviting them to a career fair for Q-Tech students.
Letter to the Editor: "The Answer is CTE"	2015 Letter to the Editor.
Mission, Vision, and Shared Values	Q-Tech's written mission statement, vision statement, and shared values.
Occupational Advisory Committee List	List of all Occupational Advisory Committee members by technical area.
Photograph: Cosmetology Day 1 and 2	2016 photographs of cosmetology students serving local nursing home residents.
Photograph: SkillsUSA	Photograph of Q-Tech students who participated in the 2019 SkillsUSA district-level events.
Photograph: Students to Commissioners	2018 photograph of Q-Tech students after a presentation with county commissioners,
Press Release: Cosmetology Service Day	Press release promoting the cosmetology students' service to a local nursing home.

Phase Three

In Phase 3, member checking, written transcripts of the recorded interviews were provided to reach respective participant. Participants were asked to review the written record of the interview for accuracy and provide the researcher with any suggested edits or new information that would ensure their desired meaning was clear.

Trustworthiness

Various methods were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the themes that emerged during this study. Triangulation across interviews and document analyses supported the credibility of the five overarching themes that emerged. Member checking was used to ensure accurate representation of participants' voices while giving the opportunity for all participants to add relevant data after having the opportunity to reflect on their responses.

Method of Analysis

A constant comparative method was used to analyze collected data. This systematic coding and analytic procedure proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) allows for the development of theory through an iterative process of sampling, coding, and analysis; constantly seeking new relationships until the point of theoretical saturation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Specific steps followed were:

1. Begin collecting data.
2. Look for key issues, recurrent events, or activities in the data that become categories for focus.
3. Collect data that provide many incidents of the categories of focus, with an eye to seeing the diversity of the dimensions under the categories.

4. Write about the categories [explored], attempting to describe and account for all the incidents you have in your data while continually searching for new incidents.
5. Work with the data and emerging model to discover basic social processes and relationships.
6. Engage in sampling, coding, and writing as the analysis focuses on the core categories (Glaser, 1978, as quoted in Bogden & Biklen, 2007).

CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

This study sought an emic perspective of effective educational leadership in a rural high-poverty school. This insider view allowed the researcher to better understand critical leadership characteristics, beliefs, and behaviors that contribute to positive outcomes, particularly in the area of social justice. Educational leaders in the study spoke extensively about specific beliefs and actions that guide their professional practice. They discussed an unwavering commitment to their rural students, the majority of whom are experiencing poverty. Understanding students' lived realities and relating to students, families, and community members were themes that were foundational to leadership practice in this study. The power of relationships to effective educational leadership was unmistakable with sub-themes of “love” and “family” surfacing in different interviews. Educational leaders in this study were committed to providing all students with access to a rigorous and well-rounded education. They understood the complex systems that impact their students, families, and community and were strategically aligning their people, policies, practices, and priorities to positively impact those systems.

All leaders in this study expressed a fondness for their rural communities and voiced a desire to see them thrive. An important part of success, as described by educational leaders in this study, is engaging parents and the greater school community in guiding the curriculum and providing a continuum of supports and opportunities for students. Developing students' capacity to grow and adapt in an evolving and demanding global marketplace was central to the work of educational leaders in this study. They saw this as imperative to redressing the extensive poverty

that persists in their community. Although only one participant described growing up in poverty, all participants expressed an understanding of the continuum of challenges their families face.

These findings brought clarity to the three research questions which guided this study: 1) What is it about educational leaders that contribute to significant improvement of rural high-poverty schools?; 2) What are the behaviors of effective educational leaders who have been successful in mitigating the achievement gap between students with low-SES and otherwise advantaged students?; and 3) What are the social justice implications for the meaning and interpretations of effective educational leadership in rural, high poverty school districts?

Using the constant comparative method that is integral to the development of grounded theory, these discussions were analyzed at length; as were documents provided by participants. Through this extensive, iterative process, five overarching themes emerged: 1) Understand and Respond to Students' Lived Realities, 2) Relationships, 3) Capacity and Competency, 4) Community Engagement, and 5) Access and Opportunity.

Understand and Respond to Students' Lived Realities

The educational leaders in this effective, rural high-poverty school verbalized a commitment to understanding students' lived realities and taking specific action to respond in ways that would maximize student success. As Larry stated, "...it all comes down to knowing kids, knowing what they need, and responding" (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020). They discussed the importance of giving students voice, openly communicating with students, and listening to their stories. Multiple participants expressed a commitment to getting to know students on a personal level, opening a window into their home lives. They voiced an understanding of the challenges that poverty places on their students' lives and how those conditions impact learning and academic achievement. Educational leaders in this study voiced

an understanding of the complex contexts influencing their students and were unwavering in their commitment to meeting their specific needs.

Possibly more important than what the participants said during their interviews is what was not said. Educational leaders at Q-Tech understood that a large number of students they serve experience poverty. Not one participant blamed the students or their families for their circumstances. There was confidence that no matter what students are facing, Q-Tech is willing to serve them at a very high level; providing a learning environment in which students can succeed. Furthermore, that view of learning and success extends beyond classroom walls at Q-Tech.

Although not stated in these terms, educational leaders in this study expressed a commitment to Gorski's (2018) *structural* view of poverty. They understand "...how societal barriers — including barriers students experiencing poverty face outside of schools ...impact student engagement and performance" (Gorski, 2018, p. 10). This view is in stark contrast to the deficit-based ideologies that drive thinking in many institutions serving students experiencing poverty.

Educational leaders at Q-Tech were intent on getting to know students and addressing inequities through increasing access to a high-quality education. They systematically removed barriers while providing multiple opportunities for students to succeed inside and outside of the classroom. A key component of mediating barriers to student success was described as developing students' capacity to learn, grow, and succeed while promoting technical competencies that would lead to long-term family sustaining employment. They see parent and community engagement as critical to understanding family circumstances, addressing stereotypes

around career and technical education, and mitigating the many barriers students often face. These were distinct, yet complementary themes, that surfaced in participant interviews.

It is also important to note that having similar lived experiences as students was not a common thread between educational leaders interviewed in this study. Although all participants grew up in a rural community, only one participant described growing up in poverty. This is an important distinction as it speaks to the possibility of all educational leaders, regardless of background, to effectively serve rural high-poverty populations.

Prior to coming to Q-Tech as the principal, Chrissy, believed that Q-Tech students were bad kids and expected to have to lead that building with a military style. It wasn't until she got to know students and understand their personal circumstances that she began to change her view:

[Q-Tech] kids had been labeled as the bad kids, and so I come in with the idea they were going to be the bad kids...When I came in and I started meeting the kids [I learned] that's not what our student population is. Our student population [is] just kids that have never even learned how to express themselves appropriately. And maybe that's from their upbringing, their friends, [or] previous experiences in school that were negative. And so instead of being more military-esque, and I hate to say it that way but that's the truth, I tried to do it as more of a... I don't want to say motherly. More of that firm, family-based approach. (Chrissy, personal communication, October 27, 2020).

Chrissy began to align her response with the realities of the students she was serving.

Educators in the study reflected intently on the struggles many students face in their everyday lives. They all described a commitment to listening to students. After all, “Those who lead in educational settings — be they teachers, administrators, or university faculty — must

learn to listen to others... Listening is crucial when creating and sustaining trust..." (Patrizio, 2012, p. 231). Larry described his approach:

I feel it's important to get to know the kids and that's how I've approached this. So, I know a lot of kids in my building, the majority, always striving to get to know them more to the point where I try to be super visible... I've taken a real hands-on approach trying to understand everything that's happening, and try to take a look at how well each component of our system is functioning and meeting needs of the students. (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020).

It's through this relational trust that students are able to reveal the true nature of their lived realities (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Participants specifically referenced food insecurity, financial instability, lack of transportation, and inadequate living conditions as factors they recognized as impacting their students' lives and ability to learn.

Chrissy, the building principal, spoke about the establishment of relationships and trust to encourage students to be more open. Chrissy spoke to this point and referenced how it shapes her professional action:

Once you [establish a trusting relationship] ...they open up a little bit more. So, you can find out that, well, maybe today George came to school and he was not [exhibiting] typical behavior. And you found out that, you know, mom went to jail last night, or they didn't have anything to eat. Because, once you build that rapport with the student, they are more apt to open up and then that helps you understand the behaviors. Then, that helps you understand where you need to, I guess, set your course or your direction as a[n educational leader]. (Chrissy, personal communication, October 27, 2020).

Larry recollected an emotional experience that shaped his commitment to understanding and responding to the harsh realities that students face in everyday life; influencing his beliefs and practices as an educational leader in a rural high-poverty school:

I was hired to be an assistant principal. The day that I was notified [of the] job, I was sitting in the principal's office when he was called to be told that our third student in a few months had committed suicide. That has shaped every facet of my professional career. We lost four kids that year. Telling kids you love them and fighting with everything you have shaped every part of my professional career. That's a foundation for the importance of knowing kids... (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020).

He expanded on this thought, reflecting on his current student population,

You know, when you talk about kids in poverty, [they] have a higher rate of trauma. They have a high rate of just the things they need to be comfortable and ready to learn. And we know that, because...we've put the time in to get to know... (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020).

In reality, not all students are comfortable sharing their truths. Understanding students' lived realities is an active process that requires seeking critical information about students' lives, their individual circumstances, and their families. It demands looking beyond the poverty to see the complex systems that perpetuate the difficult circumstances students face every day.

Doug described the importance of not judging students as they can come from very challenging contexts. He told a story of a young man who he got to know and the troubling circumstances in which he was living:

A few years back, I had a student that would come in kind of quiet, reserved, kind of unkempt. So, over the course of time, a few weeks of school, [I would] get some

background...[I learned] he was kicked out of the house, at 14, [and] lived with his grandparents... in the basement. And it was a dirt floor. (Doug, personal communication, November, 4, 2020).

He continued by providing an example of a student who sacrificed a valuable work experience opportunity to fulfill childcare needs during the COVID-19 pandemic:

I had a student, a very excellent student, that went on online schooling. I had them all lined up for a co-op job, good co-op job as a senior. And he went online. So long story short, he had to stay home and take care of the younger kids, because mom and dad had to work to pay the bills [during the COVID-19 pandemic]. (Doug, personal communication, November, 4, 2020).

Understanding; however, is not enough. Educational leaders serving rural high-poverty schools must possess the courage to respond to those difficult circumstances in which students are living and learning. As Gorski (2018) states, “We strengthen relationships with students experiencing poverty when we... elicit input from families experiencing poverty, but only if we have the will to follow it” (p. 145).

John referenced one way understanding students’ lived realities was met with real action at Q-Tech. Q-Tech started a backpack program in which they send food home every week to students in need; an initiative funded by teachers through payroll deduction:

I kind of was able to really understand that home perspective and see, see what students are up against. I meet with students to really, really understand where they’re coming from and the struggles that they’re up against a lot of the time. If they are one of our backpack kids...we send food home every Friday. Yeah, there’s some pretty...sad stories there. (John, personal communication, October, 29, 2020).

Larry described Q-Tech's pursuit of free meals for all students. They were successful in qualifying for community eligibility so 100% of students can eat breakfast and lunch at no cost.

Chrissy described a scenario in which an intellectually disabled student was expected to be the primary wage earner for her family:

[She was] one of our special ed students that is intellectually disabled. Everybody says she can't do it. A lot of social issues, a lot of family issues. [The teachers] worked with her the whole way through. She actually earned her CNA during COVID last year, and is only person in the family working, supporting the family. (Chrissy, personal communication, October 27, 2020).

Unique to the comprehensive Career and Technical Center context is the need to serve students from multiple schools and communities. In the case of Q-Tech, the educational leaders acknowledged that students not only were coming from challenging home lives, the students face a host of biases and stereotypes from their home schools. Preparing students to be highly successful in their field, publicly recognizing those successes, providing leadership opportunities for students, and advocating for students at area school and community events were responses that have been met with success.

Each educational leader in the study was aware of the emotional fragility of their students as well. They described their conscious use of emotional management to portray understanding and reinforce trusting relationships with students. Although emotional management was described as important to building relationships with their students, participants also expressed a belief that showing appropriate emotion and allowing students to see their human side has been beneficial as well.

An important take-away from participant interviews was the constant reinforcement that the people, policies, practices, and priorities of the organization were directly aligned with an understanding of what students need to be successful.

Relationships

Maintaining smaller learning environments, building strong bonds with students and families, and promoting caring relationships are core practices of the high-performing, high-poverty schools studied by Parrett and Budge (2009). Poverty-disrupting educators, according to Budge and Parrett (2018) have the ability “to see through poverty to the *person*” and leverage relationships to establish an environment in which learning can occur (p. 57).

In this section, relationships between all stakeholder groups are discussed. Educational leaders in this study recognize the importance of forming trusting relationships with both students and families served by the school. They acknowledge the value of collegial relationships between staff and how critical those connections are to strengthening support networks within and outside of the organization. Educational leaders in this study also voiced the need to forge relationships with the greater school community. Those relationships are leveraged to create networks of support for teachers, students, and families.

Establishing relationships with students was a theme that repeatedly surfaced in all participants’ responses in this study and was evident in Q-Tech’s shared values, provided by Larry: Shared Value #4: “Citizenship, culture and interpersonal relationships matter.” He made it clear that attention to forging trusting relationships was an active process at Q-Tech. “We sit down with teachers and students to make sure that they have facilitated conversations when they need to be able to work through issues” (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020).

Excerpts from a 2016 speech provided by Larry were particularly powerful and illustrate the importance of placing trusting relationships at the center of effective educational leadership. This was his “salute” to the educational leaders at Q-Tech, and his recognition of “the power of their love for [their] students”. Excerpts are not presented in the order they appear in the document.

I am proud of our principal...for the impact she has in the lives of kids every day. I have been involved in education for 15 years and have never had the privilege to work with someone in administration that knows, really knows the kids in a school as well as she does. She never gives up on them, is personally invested in them and values what makes each of them unique. It is the rare administrator that blends true caring, accountability and high expectations likes she does. [Q-Tech is] a school that transforms the lives of our students, year after year. I am honored to work with a staff that cares tremendously about the education, career goals and social-emotional well-being of all of its students. I get to observe the impact of their love every day. The level of care that I see for our students by our staff is unparalleled. Constantly I see staff members working to support each other and help others improve their craft.

In his speech, Larry went on to describe the outcomes of those authentic teacher-teacher and teacher-student relationships:

We have seen our NOCTI and NIMS scores, measuring student occupational preparedness soar to 80%, as one group of students after another spoke about not letting the others down on a goal they collectively set. Our English scores rose 9% in the 14/15 school year and another 8% in the 15/16 school year in a time that others around the nation struggle to maintain theirs. Our students have a strong attendance rate, even those

that have struggled in the past and our graduation rate is high as well, indicators of the power of relevance and achievement. Time and time again, our students do the right thing.

Bryk and Schneider (2003) concluded that school size was an important factor to school improvement. In smaller schools, there is more opportunity to get to know students and families on a personal level. That personal connection not only promotes trust, it fosters a deeper understanding of the personal circumstances that influence how students and families experience school. Educational leaders at Q-Tech recognized the advantage of working in a smaller school.

“So, I’m kind of in a unique scenario where I’m closer to the students than a lot of school leaders...” (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020). He went on to describe the benefit of his school’s size to allowing more authentic connections with kids who need it the most. “...one of...the reasons I love it here is, I [get to] have a relationship with that kid.” John reinforced this concept, “...we’re a smaller school and we really get to know our students...we all kind of try to, try to have that, that relationship with all our students” (John, personal communication, October 29, 2020).

Larry was quite emphatic about the centrality of relationships to all other functions of educational leadership:

I mean, it all comes down to relationship building. He went on to paraphrase the Theodore Roosevelt quote, [Students] don’t care what you know if they don’t know you care. I’ve shared...emotion with kids... ‘cause I felt their pain. I’m not afraid of that. I’m not afraid to tell kids, I do this because I love them. (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020).

Larry spoke of the Lifelines suicide prevention program that Q-Tech implemented and how that program helped Q-Tech staff establish relationships with students; understanding what they really need and informing appropriate supports. He stated, “When you talk about suicide, students that are impacted are going to show themselves emotionally. That’s a way into these kids to start a dialogue and build that trust and get that support” (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020).

Chrissy said, “I make sure [kids] know that I care about them. And I tell them that I care about them. That’s...the best part of the job, building that relationship.” She went on to explain how establishing those relationships contributed to better behavior and, ultimately, student success:

The more I treated the students with respect, the more respect I got, and it was easier to get them to follow the rules and do...what they needed to do to be successful. I make sure they know that I care about them. And, I tell them that I care about them. I guess I’m good at building those personal relationships with the kids...I think that’s part of what makes me good at the job. (Chrissy, personal communication, October 27, 2020).

Janice explained that the school’s director routinely provides small reminders and inspirational sayings about connecting with kids. She provided a picture of the inside of her locker which was completely covered. She went on,

It’s just kind of nice, because I’ll look at those and...[it] helps get me set for the day. You have to realize that you may be the only smile that these kids see, you know. You may be the only one that these kids can connect with. (Janice, personal communication, October 20, 2020).

She expanded on the importance of that connection:

...it's just kind of funny. I've got a couple of kids...they would leave at the end of the day, and one girl would say I love you. I'm like, I can't say it back...so then, I would say, "Love you like a daughter." I'm thinking, you know, maybe...I'm the only one that tells them that. Maybe nobody else. (Janice, personal communication, October 20, 2020).

Janice went on to describe how showing her "human side" has been valuable to cultivating authentic relationships with her students:

I'm human, you know, and they'll see my human side. And I think that helps. You know, there's been times we've cried together, will laugh together. I just think that's how they, we've made the connection...with them. I love my job. I love my kids. (Janice, personal communication, October 20, 2020).

Multiple participants referenced the family approach to educational leadership. "[I] kind of relate to them, so. And, of course now, I think I'm more into the mother role...for them. A lot of kids will even slip and call me mom..." (Janice, personal communication, October 20, 2020). Chrissy said, "I make sure they know that I care about them. [I take] more of that firm family-based approach" (Chrissy, personally communication, October 27, 2020). She continued, "...we've been very lucky to obtain that family atmosphere, and that's what makes it work..." Doug stated, "Most of the instructors will probably agree with me. We probably see our students more than their family structure. So, we become more like their surrogate family" (Doug, personal communication, November 4, 2020).

Participants voiced the importance of emotional management in establishing relationships with students. Chrissy stated:

...I also understand not being able to control emotions at times, and it takes years for some people. That's always something that I have to work on. I don't have a good poker

face. And I kind of use that sometimes as a lead in with the kids when they're upset and when they look mad and, you know, that kind of starts a conversation and helps maybe make me more down to earth. (Chrissy, personal communication, October 27, 2020).

Trusting relationships were a central theme in this study. Educational leaders at Q-Tech take that responsibility very seriously. They expressed a clear and conscious awareness that their interactions with students and their families have a direct impact on student learning and success. They openly welcome all students, without judgment, and build in a continuum of supports to ensure students are celebrated, rewarded, and have access to high-quality education. Chrissy summed up the Q-Tech mindset, "They get to start clean in ninth grade and nobody knows who they are. Nobody knows where their family came from, what house they live in. They get a brand-new slate to start."

Capacity and Competency

For the purpose of this study 'capacity' has been defined as "the potential each of us has to do more and be more than we are now" (Daft 1999, p. 333). It extends beyond practical skill and involves intellectual and emotional capabilities. 'Competency' refers to "the knowledge, skills and abilities, and other requirements that are needed for someone to perform a job successfully. Competencies define not only what a person must know and do, but also how a person does it" (Auburn University, 2018, para 1).

Another prominent theme in this study was the need to prepare students for obtaining and maintaining family-sustaining employment which requires academic rigor, the development of technical competencies, and promotion of what have traditionally been called 'soft skills'; those employability skills that are critical to sustaining long-term employment and career advancement. In participant responses, there was an unmistakable promise to developing

students' academic and technical skills while preparing them to be adaptable, cultivating students' capacity to grow and learn beyond graduation.

This attention to capacity and competency is not new to career and technical education, as competency-based education in these spaces was introduced in the 1960's and 1970's (Nodine, 2016). The commitment to developing the whole learner has not historically been as ubiquitous in technical schools, but is certainly at the forefront of decisions and actions within Q-Tech. In fact, Larry expressed great pride in the decision to bring back the art program and add additional electives like psychology, Spanish, and interactive chemistry and physics. This commitment is reflected in the four principles of the Q-Tech mission: receive the opportunity for additional educational experiences; graduate with industry-recognized credentials; acquire training in emerging career trends; and attain placement in a high-demand career (n.a., Mission, Vision, and Shared Values, 2020).

Q-Tech extended their commitment to competency-based education to include academic subjects as well. Larry spoke about the development of the competency-based grading system, "I got tired of explaining the calculus behind every teachers' grades...you know" (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020). He elaborated on the importance of having a "commitment to stay with the process", exploring and purchasing a new grading system that would support the competency-based grading in core academic subjects. He also engaged staff in the development of the process, getting a critical mass of staff to buy-in, giving the vision early and telling them that they could help inform its design.

Chrissy described her frustration with traditional grading practices and Q-Tech's commitment to competency-based education:

I always hated, you know, you get a kid in pre-algebra, 70[%] and they pass. 70[%] and they pass and then go to algebra, and they struggle the whole time... We're not doing them a favor at all. We're not. And so...with [career and technical education], we have our programs of study so we have a list of tasks [competencies], what they have to do. And, you know, either they know how to change a tire or they don't...they continue to practice until they can change a tire. So, that was our basic theory behind the standards-based for the academics. (Chrissy, personal communication, October 27, 2020).

Results of this commitment are being reflected in federal accountability measures. Although Q-Tech continues to struggle to meet the prescribed standards of performance and growth in most standardized assessment areas, they are seeing success in College and Career readiness standards and English Language Arts growth.

In the 2018-2019 academic year, the last year of available data, 97.5% of Q-Tech students in the 11th grade met the Career Standards benchmark, compared to a statewide average of 89.8%. Interestingly, 96.5% of the students in that cohort identified as economically disadvantaged met the prescribed standard. In that same year, Q-Tech reported a 4-year Cohort Graduation Rate of 93.7%, compared to a statewide average of 86.5%. In addition, 93.9% of students identified as economically disadvantaged graduated within the designated 4-year timeline.

Also, in the 2018-2019 academic year, 43.5% of economically disadvantaged students assessed scored "advanced" on the industry-based competency assessment in their respective fields. This surpassed Q-Tech's "all student" group performance of 38.4% on the same assessment. The statewide average for "advanced" on these assessments was 45.8%.

Although Q-Tech has struggled to meet the performance standards in core academic areas as prescribed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, they have seen particular success in the growth measure reported in the English Language Arts. All Q-Tech student scores reported on the Literature Keystone Exam in the 2018-2019 academic year received a growth score of 79 compared to a statewide average of 75. The economically disadvantaged students at Q-Tech in that same group received a growth score of 80 (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2018).

Although it is not possible to claim a causal relationship due to the lack of empirical data, these data suggest that the emphasis on competency-based education in both technical and academic classrooms is contributing to positive student outcomes.

Q-Tech's "Shared Values" reinforce a commitment to developing capacity and competency while emphasizing the importance of community engagement in student development, and providing students with access and opportunity to be successful in their own individual pathway:

Shared Values:

- Every child should reach their own unique potential.
- Community is involved in the educational process.
- Continued growth of all stakeholders.
- Citizenship, culture and interpersonal relationships matter.
- Employability education includes understanding and modeling of what makes a good employee.
- Students should be equipped and supported to determine their path. (n.a., Mission, Vision, and Shared Values, 2020)

Doug described Q-Tech's commitment to providing students access to tools and technology integral to developing critical trade skills foundational to securing family-sustaining employment:

...we try to, you know, keep the kids up-to-date on the technologies that might not be available to them here in the rural area. We pride ourselves here on trying to get state-of-the-art equipment, so that it gives our students a chance to compete... (Doug, personal communication, November 4, 2020).

Larry shared a presentation he made to a community group in 2018 in which he described Q-Tech's pursuit of a "real world model" of education that emphasizes four key components of workplace readiness: responsibility, respect, safety, and excellence. These principles have become the four pillars of the school wide positive behavior support (PBS) program.

Chrissy explained that students are rewarded for meeting the principles laid out by the PBS program. This is just part of Q-Tech's strategy to building relationships with students. Students who are recognized throughout the year are rewarded with gift cards, a family-style picnic, a trip to an amusement park, and more. She would even personally take reward winners out to lunch, 12 at a time. This is a program that has grown every year.

This "real world model" is supported by a competency-based curriculum that disaggregates learning into core competencies that are taught with mastery as the end goal. Gervais (2016) describes the importance of collaboratively establishing competencies, "[They] are developed based on the feedback and contribution from all stakeholders involved, that is, students, teachers, and community partners" (p. 100). She goes on to reinforce the value in creating advisory councils as a means of continually refining the curriculum. "This also ensures

that professionals in the field inform the curriculum. As the needs of a profession change, so should the preparation for that profession” (Gervais, 2016, p. 100).

Doug described the value of engaging the community through an occupational advisory committee. They not only provide specific expertise on technical competencies required to be successful in the field, they provide insight into what is needed to increase the likelihood of long-term employment and, consequently, financial stability for students. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (2016) defined occupational advisory committees as:

[Committees] comprised of representatives from local business and industry who are actively involved in the occupation for which training is being provided. Representation should also include management and labor personnel, homemakers, career and technical education students, recent graduates, postsecondary faculty, home school and career and technical center counselors, and members of the community. This committee shall provide advice on program content and performance objectives to the classroom teacher. (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016, p. 2)

Doug described the value of occupational advisory committees to informing those critical competencies that extend beyond technical skills:

[We] try to get to the core values of a worker. We have our occupational advisory committee come in. They’re not necessarily looking for a college degree...they’re looking for someone who is dependable, shows up on time, and that willingness to learn. (Doug, personal communication, November 4, 2020).

There is a belief that the technical employee of the present and future is not the “techie” of the past. Technical skills are just part of the competencies needed by those entering higher education and the workforce:

...the economy for which traditional vocational education was designed no longer exists. Today's economy demands a workforce with more advanced academic and technical skills. Further, workers are expected to adapt quickly to changes in technology and have stronger communication, critical thinking, collaboration and creative skills.

(Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2019, p. 1).

Participants in the study all voiced a commitment to a competency-based education. They expressed a sense of pride in Career and Technical Education and employ programs that align with the needs of the local community, the Commonwealth, and the nation. Larry outlined the fourteen programs provided by Q-Tech (see Appendix E).

Larry explained how Q-Tech makes programming decisions with Pennsylvania's twelve targeted industry clusters, called High Priority Occupations (HPO), clearly in view. HPOs are defined as, "... job categories that are in demand by employers, have higher skill needs, and are most likely to provide family sustaining wages" (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016, p. 2). Occupations within these clusters account for "nearly 69% of all employment in the Commonwealth" (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2019, p. 8).

In summary, there is high demand for skilled workers. Employers simply cannot source a stable and competent workforce. This is a call to schools to ensure they are providing a rigorous curriculum that is aligned with the expectations of industry professionals who are seeking qualified applicants. In the case of students experiencing poverty, this is a real opportunity to obtain short-term economic stability while having the opportunity to advance in a career that provides a family-sustaining wage and healthcare.

Community Engagement

Community engagement emerged as foundational to the vision of the Q-Tech organization. Their vision statement reads, “Strengthening our community through rigorous academics combined with innovative career and technical education” (n.a., Mission, Vision, and Shared Values, 2020). In this study, two dimensions of community engagement surfaced as relevant to supporting student success, which were as follows: 1) school-community engagement and 2) community-school engagement. Parent engagement surfaced as being important to both dimensions of community engagement. Therefore, it is not listed as a separate theme, but the parents’ place in community is discussed as overlapping dimensions.

School-community engagement refers to those activities in which the school serves different individuals or organizations within the greater school community. Community-school engagement are activities that engage individuals or organizations in providing service or support to the school.

In an April (2018) presentation to a regional Chamber of Commerce group, Larry presented an overview of Q-Tech’s priorities for community engagement. Bulleted points from the presentation are summarized below. Added text is provided for clarity based on additional discussion with Larry.

Community Alignment

- Commitment to aligning programming to prepare students for HPOs [High Priority Occupations]. Larry describes this as “providing the opportunity to take the big swings”, aligning education with research on occupations that will provide real time opportunities for students.
- Listening and responding to the employment needs of the community

- Establishing partnerships with employers and community organizations
- Developing and sustaining occupational advisory committees
- Connecting students with employment opportunities within the community
- Relationship building with families

School-Community Engagement

Effective community engagement is a symbiotic relationship. Not only can the community support the school, the school has a unique opportunity to support the community. In a (2016) speech, Larry outlined some specific school-community engagement activities Q-Tech was pursuing:

We have reached out to become truly a part of the community, we are embarking on projects with Habitat for Humanity, the Town of Reynoldsville and have already done projects with the Jefferson County Commissioners and various town agencies. Our Christmas party gave over 500 members of our community an incredible Christmas. Our Career and Technical Education Month will be held for the third time this February and next month we will invite our communities in to take part in our First Annual Fall Festival.

Doug described how the students in his program lent their expertise to support an important community project. Not only did they provide an important service to a community group, they were rewarded with a sense of pride and accomplishment:

A few years back, we got involved in a community [project]. It's called Camp Friendship. It's for the developmentally disadvantaged. Our students went up...[for] about a year and a half to almost two school years. And we built them a big building and

remodeled and everything like that. And those kids were beaming when they did. (Doug, personal communication, November 4, 2020).

He went on to describe how his students built an Adirondack-style school bus shelter for the local trucking company to support the Commercial Driver's License (CDL) program. It allowed adult and student CDL trainees to stay out of the weather during truck driving practices. He reflected on the students' pride in their contribution, "They were very protective of that [when] it was in the shop. They were proud as a peacock" (Doug, personal communication, November 4, 2020). Students also contributed to school events. "I try to use [our students] around the school. Our students...would set up for dances, clean the floor, and help set up and so on. You know, it gave them a sense of ownership in the school" (Doug, personal communication, November 4, 2020).

Two photographs and an accompanying press release were provided by two participants in the study. One photograph showed twenty cosmetology students in a room at a local nursing home. The other was a picture of the cosmetology students interacting with nursing home residents, and there were a lot of smiles on everyone's faces. The press release read:

The Cosmetology students from [Q-Tech] traveled to [a local nursing home] for the manor's "Princess Day." This is a day the manor sets aside to help make the residents feel like princesses by pampering them with any number of services. The cosmetology students provided services for the residents like doing their make-up, hair, and giving them manicures. And, even though when you think of princesses you think females, we had a few "princes" who received manicures as well. This event provides the residents with some wonderful services, but also provides the students in the cosmetology program

at [Q-Tech] with the chance to hone their skills while giving back to the community. (n.a., Cosmetology Service Day, 2016).

Larry described his commitment to combatting misinformation and bias that existed in the community when he first arrived at Q-Tech. Attending political events and taking students to board meetings were just a couple strategies that he used to educate the public.

Culturally, this place's image for a long time impacted the outcome of students that came through here. That was one item that needed to be addressed, on the way in the door. That this isn't a place for misfits. Educating the public about what the outcomes were. Getting out to local political events and talking about it. Getting out to board meetings and talking. One thing I will say is, every year I take these kids out to the home school board meetings... I don't tell them what to say. I invite whoever wants to go, and I want them to tell their stories. I looked out at one of the board meetings, last year, and I took seven kids with me. Two of them were foster kids, one of them transgender, one adopted. I'm sitting there with all these kids that came through, and I thought of the individual supports that each of those kids have had with us. You listen to each of them talking about their long-term goal of starting a business, and then standing there at school board [meeting] where these people are amazed because they knew these kids in middle school. These people are amazed at how articulate, how prepared they were, and how every single kid that went up to that podium talked about family at [Q-Tech]. (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020).

Larry spoke a couple of times about his efforts to work with county commissioners to inform them of the good work at Q-Tech, while staying ahead of local opportunities that could benefit students and support the health of the local community. Larry created an opportunity for

Q-Tech students to meet directly with commissioners, telling their unique stories and demonstrating the diverse competencies they are able to master in their respective programs. This is an early opportunity for students to begin to network with local leaders while promoting the Q-Tech programs.

Community-School Engagement

Larry's (2016) address to Q-Tech staff sent an important message about community engagement:

The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation has joined us to empower even more students to realize their career goals. 130 new students chose to come to [Q-Tech] this year because they and their families understand the opportunity that awaits them. We have strengthened our relationship with the Workforce Development Board, State and Local Chambers of Commerce and our local employers. We have revitalized our connections with Alumni. Grant Funding of over \$565,000 has eased the burden on local taxpayers and helped us to update equipment and expand opportunities for students.

In his interview Larry stated, "I work very hard with the county commissioners to stay in front of...what's coming in. I work very hard to speak with industry members...[focusing] on getting kids work experience in...the right environment for them" (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020). These are work experiences that align with student competencies, provide safe opportunities to grow and learn, and pay a highly competitive wage. Larry told a story about adapting to changing needs in the community by starting a meat cutting program for students:

[The] County Commissioners tell us, look, there's \$33 million of beef sold right in a 50-mile radius from [here]. So, we can grow more, we can sell it, obviously, nobody can cut

it. So, that's why we're starting that program, because...our local meat cutters are telling us we'll hire somebody for \$25 an hour, if they know what they're doing. So, we are constantly evolving. [Responding to] ...job data. (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020).

Participants spoke of advisory councils as important to informing curriculum development, competencies needed for successful employment in specific trade areas, modern equipment relevant to each respective field, soft skills and dispositions necessary to sustain employment over time, and providing employment opportunities in the field for students in the cooperative education program. Larry provided a spreadsheet which provided an overview of the Occupational Advisory Councils that partner with Q-Tech. An analysis reveals a total of 52 community-based members on Occupational Advisory Councils for 14 technical programs within Q-Tech. A total of 4 administrators and 40 Q-Tech staff also serve in that capacity. Larry stated that these committees were not really active when he arrived at Q-Tech. He made it a priority to refresh them and renew the commitment to having representation from all stakeholder groups on each council, including a current student and parent.

Place of Parents Within Community

Educational leaders within the Q-Tech study saw parents as being a valuable part of the community. They indicated the importance of treating parents as welcomed guests at different events and also engage them in decision-making through participation on occupational advisory committees. Parent engagement overlapped with both dimensions of community engagement identified by educational leaders in this study.

One example that surfaced in the study illustrates Q-Tech's commitment to making parents feel welcomed. They want parents to have enjoyable interactions with the school. Q-

Tech invites all students and parents for a Christmas dinner at the school each year. In the most recent year, nearly 500 students and their families were served. Larry seemed to be quite committed. “Every kid gets a Christmas, like we and our families do. We have events every season that bring parents into our building that are fun events that are also open to the community” (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020). He seemed sad that this year the dinner was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Doug said, “...they might not have a traditional going to grandma's house for Christmas dinner. So, out of the building leadership team we came up with the Christmas dinner. Every kid is invited, family, siblings, to get free Christmas dinner” (Doug, personal communication, November 4, 2020). In 2019, 16 community organizations came together to finance the dinner, which included gifts for students and families, including the Q-Tech staff. This is another illustration of how the school and the greater school community is committed to explicitly welcoming parents and families as part of the community.

Chrissy described an annual tradition of giving gifts to families at different holidays. She had selected the same family for multiple years. Chrissy thought it was important to get to know families and let them know they were valued and appreciated. This was a sentiment shared among many teachers in the building.

Larry pointed out that each occupational advisory committee has a parent of a current student on the committee. He feels it is important to have the parent perspective and that has been reinforced by years of positive participation by parents. Their voice helps industry partners and school leaders have a better understanding of the parent and student perspective, particularly barriers to access and other areas of need, and informs curriculum improvements.

In summary, community engagement was seen by educational leaders in the study as a means of improving the health of rural communities, aligning school practices to maximizing

long-term opportunities for students, and making parents feel welcomed and supported within the school. Educational leaders at Q-Tech are fond of the rural communities they serve and are dedicated to connecting their students to real-time opportunities for success within them.

Access and Opportunity

“Educational outcome disparities are the result of inequities, of unjust distributions of access and opportunity, not the result of deficiencies in the mindsets, cultures, or grittiness of people experiencing poverty” (Gorski, 2018, p. 30). The participants in this study all communicated an understanding of this concept and the need to remove obstacles and create opportunities for students and families. Providing all students with access to a quality education, high expectations, and employment opportunities are essential to the Q-Tech mission. As Larry voiced, “...it just comes down to understanding each of these kids can make it, and having that expectation” (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020). A commitment to access and opportunity was clear in a (2016) speech he made to staff:

The powerful work that we have undertaken can be seen in many ways as our staff remains tremendously committed to expanding opportunities for our students. We have started the following classes: Psychology, Art, Computer Science, Science of Technology, Applied Chemistry, Applied Physics, Mechanical Math, Geometry by Discovery, [and] Spanish...We started two new career areas - HVAC/R and Drafting, Design and Engineering... All of these lead directly to employment in high wage, high skill, high demand areas. We built an enrichment period into our schedule and we are able to provide targeted academic support for each student or allow for students to have extra time in their career area or Cooperative Employment placement. Cooperative Employment and internship activities led to 60 students taking part in job related

opportunities, already starting their careers in the last school year alone. We are moving to an online instructional platform to make curriculum content even more readily available for our students and their families.

Q-Tech has made emotional support services, special education, and cooperative education foundational components of their organization; opening access and creating opportunity for students with a continuum of needs. John describes how these needs have become a barrier:

...it seems that more and more, you know, in general society...there's more students that are more emotional, and how their emotions are affecting them, you know...can be a huge, huge, huge barrier for a lot of students. You know, they're just so up and down...and that just plays a huge factor in their learning... (John, personal communication, October 29, 2020).

Chrissy described the intentionality behind establishing support services as a means of promoting access and opportunity for students. This required them to advocate for approval to each of the sending district's board of school directors:

Over the past two, three years...we were getting more students interested from our sending districts in those areas, especially emotionally disturbed. And they weren't able to come, because we didn't have the services on site to support those students. So, it just so happened that we [started] our own emotional support program...because we felt...it would better serve the needs of our students... (Chrissy, personal communication, October 27, 2020).

She went on to describe that traditionally, the emotional support students would only come half days, but they wanted to stay for the full day as they enjoyed being there. Staying all

day was too much without necessary supports. The implementation of regulation stations, relaxation areas, and specialized supports to address students' trauma allowed emotional support students to access the full curriculum. She went on to clarify,

...So, I mean, we have quite a variety of students and what we're doing now is providing those kids the opportunity to learn a trade and be there all day, and be comfortable, and kind of work themselves back out into the regular education...classroom. (Chrissy, personal communication, October 27, 2020).

Q-Tech has reimagined access to the curriculum and has taken specific steps to increase access beyond the normal school day and traditional academic calendar. A significant undertaking was to move toward a competency-based grading system for all areas. Although this was a familiar concept for the teachers within the trades, the academic classroom teachers struggled with the idea. As Chrissy put it, "...it is a little extra work on the teacher's part, and you know there's been grumbling, but they've done very well." She went on to say,

...it's good for students. [Students] may be a little behind...but it's allowing students to not miss a year of school, or fall a year behind, because instead of taking the course over, they just work on the tasks that they didn't master. And they're allowed to do that over the summer and especially now with building our Google Classrooms. (Chrissy, personal communication, October 27, 2020).

Janice described how geography, transportation, and money were obstacles that prevented access to student success in her program. She advocated for solutions to opened access and opportunity:

In the past...our school has been very supportive, as far as letting me take my students to the exam sites to test. Because, I found when I first started teaching here, with it being a

rural area, you know, a lot of times the kids couldn't get to the test site, or they didn't get to the test site on time and that counted as a failure. [Test sites were hours away] I asked my administration, "Can I go the night before?" ...I used to run like a van, and I would take the kids the night before, then we would stay over. I had some kids that maybe didn't have the money for the test, you know, it's \$103 for the test. So, I talked to the school administration and my Occupational Advisory Committee, and they suggested [that we offer] a practice test, and if they reach a certain benchmark then the school would pay for their testing fee. So, what a better way to give them a leg up to start...because a lot of them, they just couldn't come up with it, with the money for it. (Janice, personal communication, October 20, 2020).

Doug repeatedly reinforced the importance of stability to providing students access to learning. Not only has he never missed a single day of work in his career at Q-Tech, he supports the school being open during the COVID-19 pandemic, as a matter of equity, when many schools are closing or leveraging remote learning options:

That's what we try to do here, and that's why we're open today [during the COVID-19 pandemic], stability and continuity. ...our students needed that regimen, that continuation of education, and the stability that they have someplace to get breakfast, lunch, somebody to care about them. (Doug, personal communication, November 4, 2020).

Family-sustaining employment was discussed by all participants as a means to disrupting economic inequities prevalent in rural communities. Larry expressed an unapologetic commitment to the cooperative education program and opening employment opportunities for students as a strategy:

My goal is 100% employment...our entire focus is getting them to work, starting a career they can stay in. They're simple. They're no-brainers. We had four kids on co-op when I got here. Now, we [have] the highest placement rate in the west, western half of the state. So, you know, what's your goal...defines you. (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020).

There are currently twenty employers listed on Q-Tech's website; all providing employment opportunities to Q-Tech students in the cooperative learning program.

John also reflected on the importance of connecting students with authentic work experience. He also is committed to strengthening the rural communities by showing students they can excel, even when staying local:

[We encourage them] to focus on their skills and get their skills in order here, you know, in their shop area. [We try] to get them placed, you know, on co-op here...at least by senior year, but a lot of them by the end of...junior year. We try to focus...on the people skills, the social skills, the work skills that go along with...maintaining a job. We have a philosophy here...every student gets that work experience before they graduate. We really try to, you know, build that confidence early in each student. Just because we're from, you know, rural areas, doesn't mean you can't make it. If you could just find that entry level job in their area, they're probably not going to be hitting that poverty level...so, that's what we try to really focus on. (John, personal communication, October 29, 2020).

Chrissy acknowledged the priority to connect students with employment opportunities and how overcoming the transportation barrier is critical to helping students access those opportunities in a rural area:

[We] try to give them opportunities. And, so with our co-op program, we really, really pushed that co-op program. And it's sometimes...it's a hard thing to get going, because they don't have transportation. But, we always seem to figure out a way to get them there. So, even those kids that thought they weren't ever going to be able to do it, get the opportunity to do it. (Chrissy, personal communication, October 27, 2020).

Larry reinforced the importance of attending to this detail, "We arrange for transportation if it's needed for kids to get to work when they finally get that career opportunity." He went on to tell a story of having to be quite pragmatic in this pursuit:

The other day I had a kid come in on the rim on his car, you know, so we got him a tire, and got him going because he needed to get to work...It's just responding to current needs of kids. (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020).

Part of cultivating opportunity for students in rural, high-poverty spaces is promoting the local community and helping students see sustainable opportunities for them in the region:

...that's the other chip on my shoulders. I want everyone that wants to be here, to be able to have a landing spot with a career that supports a family. That...foundation and belief in themselves that they belong here. We've done, in some cases, irreparable harm to our communities, and that feeds the poverty thing, too. Because...we're constantly pushing people out instead of finding out what people can do here for themselves and for our region. I think we've spent too long pushing our best or brightest, our most ambitious, to go seek something somewhere else. In fact, there's so much opportunity [here]. There's opportunity right here. So, we need to do a better job of educating for the long term for this community's health... (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020).

Q-Tech also has a well-established SkillsUSA program providing students opportunities to develop and display their personal, workplace, and technical competencies. The SkillsUSA organization has the following mission:

SkillsUSA empowers its members to become world-class workers, leaders and responsible American citizens. We improve the quality of our nation's future skilled workforce through the development of SkillsUSA Framework skills that include personal, workplace and technical skills grounded in academics. Our vision is to produce the most highly skilled workforce in the world, providing every member the opportunity for career success. (SkillsUSA, 2021).

In a (2019) photograph provided by Larry, 22 Q-Tech students participated in a District-level competition in which they could demonstrate their competencies while networking with other students from around the region. Of the 22 participants, 8 were male and 14 were female. It's interesting to note that approximately 36% of Q-Tech students are female, yet nearly 64% of the participants in this event were female. In the photograph, 3 of the 8 male participants were wearing medals; 6 of 14 female participants were wearing medals (n.a., SkillsUSA Districts, 2019). Janice, who has been a SkillsUSA advisor for three or four years, emphasized the value of networking with other students and her willingness to provide that opportunity:

I've always had a passion for that, you know, and encourage my students to participate in it. I think it's an excellent, excellent organization. It is very time consuming...but I really enjoy taking the kids...to the district competitions and to states to see them be able to interact...and meet with other kids from other schools. (Janice, personal communication, October 20, 2020).

Larry and Chrissy both referenced their qualified and committed staff as a critical resource for students and foundational to providing students access and opportunity to a quality education. Larry spoke of having to get rid of three teachers in his time at Q-Tech:

We've had to fight with teachers to...understand that they hold the power to dehumanize a kid. They are going to meet our expectations for how you treat kids or they're going to hit the road, no matter what it takes... We've done it three times now. (Larry, personal communication, October 16, 2020).

To ensure a qualified, competent, and engaged staff, Q-Tech has established a Building Leadership Team which collaborates to inform administration on important issues and decisions that are critical to the vision and mission of the school. This team is committed to being present at public events, raising awareness about the school and combatting stereotypes of career and technical programs. They serve as peer mentors, facilitating instructional improvements and building relationships among colleagues. This group also ensures all students have access to a high-quality education by promoting practices and policies that are research-based, standards-aligned, and reflective of a growth mindset.

Educational leaders in this study see barriers to student growth and achievement and are committed to alleviating them. Hiring and developing a high-quality teaching force, delivering a rigorous and aligned curriculum, providing a continuum of social-emotional and academic support services, addressing transportation gaps, and connecting students with employment and post-secondary educational opportunities are just some of the strategies used to address the access and opportunity gap. This is an example of systems leadership focused on continuous school improvement.

CHAPTER V
RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Introduction

This study was informed by key principles of critical discourses, leadership research, systems leadership theory, and emotional intelligence theory. These frameworks provided me with a deeper understanding of a class-based analysis of education, failures to redress the systems that continue to marginalize students and families experiencing poverty, and leadership actions that are necessary to challenge those failures; bringing equity to a highly inequitable system. The literature allowed me to take a more informed look at leadership practice, and the social justice implications of those actions, in the context of an effective rural high-poverty school. The results led to the generation of a leadership model, with the intent of informing the professional practice and growth of practicing educational leaders in rural high-poverty spaces.

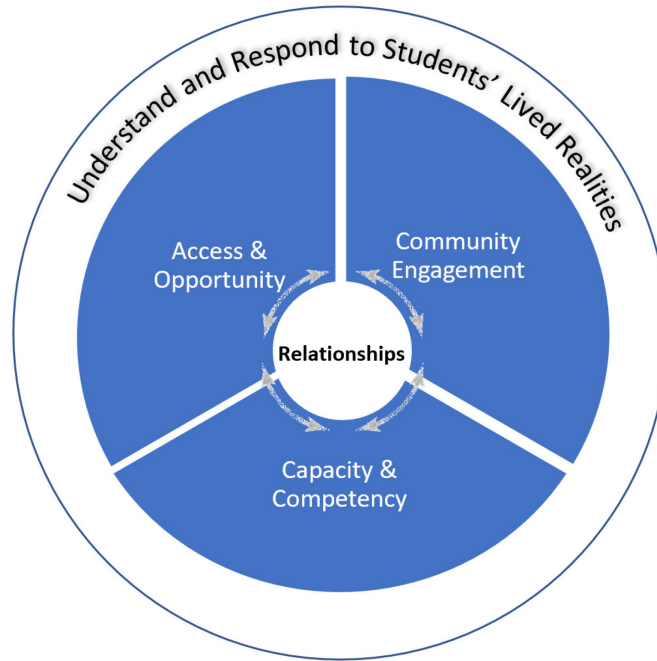
As presented in the previous chapter, five overarching themes emerged from this study: 1) Understand and Respond to Students' Lived Realities, 2) Relationships, 3) Community Engagement, 4) Capacity and Competency, and 5) Access and Opportunity. In the following chapter these themes are brought together into a theoretical framework for effective leadership in rural high-poverty schools represented in Figure 5.1.

I intentionally unpack this theoretical framework in a style that connects big ideas to leadership action. I seek to bridge the gap between theory and action by aligning each theme with achievable leadership actions. It is important to note that the leadership actions presented in this section are not a comprehensive list of possible leadership actions aligned with each theme, rather they are starting points that are representative of key actions that surfaced in participant interviews and document analyses.

Figure 5.1

Theoretical Framework for Effective Educational Leadership in Rural High-Poverty

Schools



Overview

Through a comprehensive and iterative analysis of interview transcripts, field notes, and documents, a theoretical framework for effective educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools emerged; providing insight into the three research questions: 1) What is it about educational leaders that contribute to significant improvement of rural high-poverty schools?; 2) What are the behaviors of effective educational leaders who have been successful in mitigating the achievement gap between students with low-SES and otherwise advantaged students?; and 3) What are the social justice implications for the meaning and interpretations of effective educational leadership in rural, high poverty school districts?

In this theoretical framework for effective leadership in rural high-poverty schools, effective educational leaders take a systems leadership approach to guiding their organizations to more equitable and socially just ends. Such leaders honor student and family voices and actively seek to understand and respond to those lived realities. They nurture interpersonal relationships with all stakeholders inside and outside of the school as a means of establishing trust, building a cohesive vision, and cultivating a deep commitment to transformative change.

Effective educational leaders in rural high-poverty schools cultivate opportunities for students to learn and succeed, removing obstacles to access. They engineer educational systems supported by people, policies, and practices that expand students' capacity to learn and their ability to apply that learning to real time opportunities within and beyond their high school educational experience. These same leaders are inextricably connected to their local communities and generate opportunities for their students and families to authentically engage with both the school and the greater school community.

In what follows in this chapter, this theoretical framework is reinforced with extant literature. I provide a summary of effective leader behaviors relevant to each component of effective leadership in rural high-poverty schools. These behaviors are not presented as an all-inclusive list of leader actions and dispositions serving rural high-poverty students. Rather, they represent key leader actions aligned with those inherent in the Q-Tech study.

Intersections

Germane to this theoretical framework is that all components of the system are integrally interconnected. A deep understanding of students' lived realities and the complex social structures that impact them inform all other decisions and actions. It is only with informed

intentionality that educational leaders can be architects of systems that produce truly sustainable, socially just outcomes for the diverse populations they serve. Although each individual component is a necessary part of the whole, transformative change comes from their interaction within a cohesive model of educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools.

Relationships

Relationships are placed, quite intentionally, at the center of effective educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools. “Building caring and trusting relationships between you and your students is your first, most powerful strategy for successfully teaching any student, but especially those who live in poverty” (Budge & Parrett, 2018, p. 51). Healthy and positive relationships allow the educational leader, regardless of role, to connect with students, families, and the greater school community. This requires visibility, vulnerability, and frequent, authentic communication with stakeholders.

Establishing meaningful relationships with students and families experiencing poverty requires exploring how they experience school and how school systems (e.g. people, policies and practices) impact them. It requires educational leaders to reflect on that experience, those systems, and their role within them. To cultivate trust is not passive, but rather an active and quite intentional process that demands not only seeing the issues, but being courageous enough to respond to them. Productive, meaningful relationships with students and families experiencing poverty are strengthened through a sense of family within the school community which is actively nurtured with great attention to culture and love. Two of five participants in this study unashamedly referenced love as part of their professional leadership practice. Freire captured this concept of leading with love in his work on dialogical love.

Dialogical love, in Freire's terms, is not only a function of relationships between people, it is a core ingredient of emancipatory leadership. It is the kind of leadership needed in rural high-poverty spaces.

Dialogue cannot exist in the absence of profound love for the world and for people. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself... Love is an act of courage, not fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause... (Freire, 2005, p. 89).

Contrary to traditional school leadership beliefs, redressing inequities that impact student learning and achievement (i.e. the "cause") is not, nor should be, solely the role of the principal or superintendent. It is the shared work of a continuum of stakeholders working cohesively within a framework for effective educational leadership serving marginalized students. To reinforce this point, Hesbol (2013) cites the work of Kleine-Kracht (1993). She states that in truly inclusive learning communities, roles have been "...dramatically shifted, so that everyone-student, parent, teacher, and leader- shares in the practice of learning" (Hesbol, 2013, p. 21). She goes on to emphasize the importance of shared decision-making and leadership among teachers, and the role of administration is to provide "...consistent, explicit and visible support for teacher leaders and their work" (Hesbol, 2013, p. 23). In such spaces, every student, parent, and school employee is valued and appreciated; contributing to a strong sense of belonging and mutual respect. As Hesbol (2013) states, this philosophy and action are "...readily observable throughout a school's culture" (p. 21). In the words of MacNeil et al. (2009), "...real and sustained change is more readily achieved by first changing the culture of the school, rather than by simply changing the structures of the way the school operates and functions" (p. 74).

A summary of key educational leader behaviors that contribute to forming and maintaining healthy, trusting relationships in school communities is presented in Table 5.1.

Figure 5.2 describes the prominence of relationships to effective educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools.

Figure 5.2

Prominence of Relationships to Effective Educational Leadership in Rural High-Poverty Schools

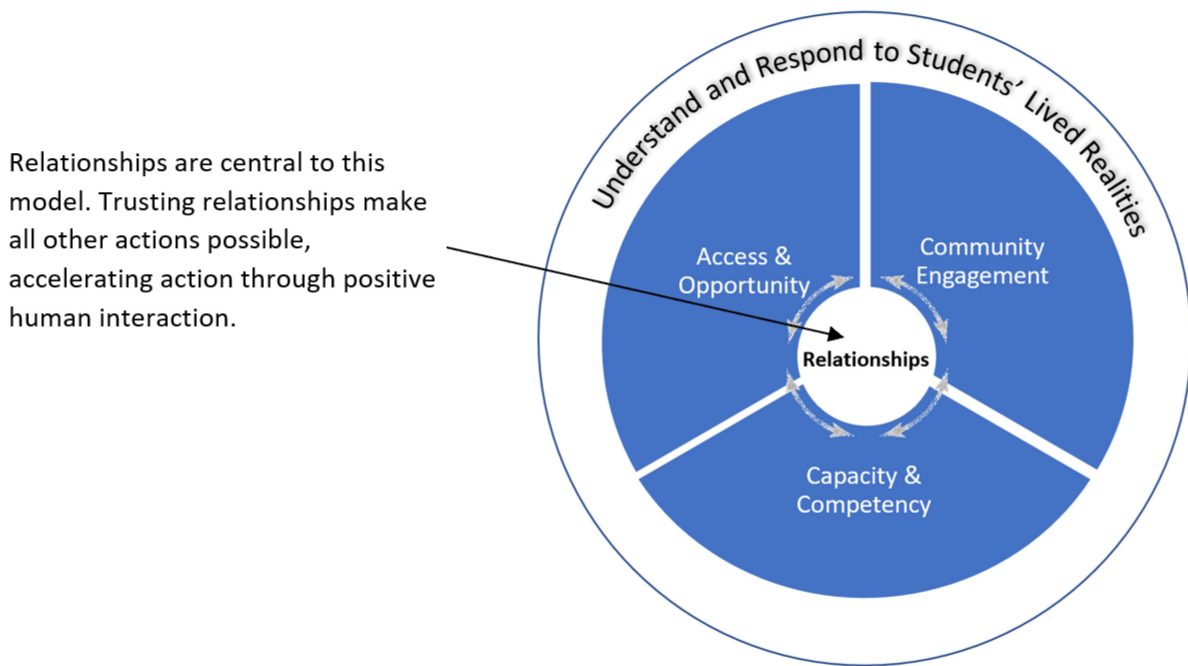


Table 5.1

Leader Behaviors: Building Trusting Relationships

Big Idea	Description
Practice emotional intelligence	Caruso (2008) reinforces that the core of emotions is to move us to “effective, adaptive action” (p. 5). These abilities influence an educational leader’s capacity to establish sound interpersonal relationships.

Action: Show calm in intense situations. Be sensitive to your own facial expressions and body language and how others perceive them. Don't hide your emotions or ask others to hide theirs. Be honest about how you feel and make it safe for others to express themselves.

Be visible

Educational leaders must think and act beyond the contract. Being visible during and outside of the school is important to breaking down barriers, developing relational trust, and increasing the opportunity for positive interactions with stakeholders.

Action: Educational leaders have myriad ways to be visible within the school community, inside and outside of the contracted day. Greeting students and visitors at the door, joining student lunches in the cafeteria, attending extra-curricular events, supporting student organizations, joining community organizations, attending local leadership meetings, and doing home visits are a small sampling of leader actions that demonstrate commitment to the school community and help in fostering trusting relationships.

Communicate

Communication requires telling your story and listening to the stories of others. This means educational leaders need to create opportunities to connect with all stakeholders.

Action: Writing news releases, attending formal and informal gatherings, positive phone calls home, presenting to community groups, and taking advantage of impromptu moments to talk with

stakeholders are all valuable communication strategies.

Honor all voices

Different stakeholders experience school differently. Some stakeholders, particularly those experiencing poverty, have limited access to the school due to barriers of time and transportation. Removing barriers to communication and hearing all voices will not only foster positive relationships between educational leaders and stakeholders, it will ensure those perspectives are represented in the policies and practices that guide school operation.

Action: Distribute surveys in multiple ways to ensure everyone has the opportunity to respond. Analyze who didn't respond and determine how to reach those stakeholders. Attend concerts and sporting events; move around and speak to different families. Hold regular focus groups with diverse representation. Audit outreach practices to ensure barriers to feedback are removed.

Be a family

Creating a sense of family was referenced by three of five participants in the Q-Tech case. They described behaviors similar to “nurturing attitude”, “dependability”, and “friendship”, three of Taulbert’s (2006) “habits of the heart”. Being family requires “...unselfish caring, supportiveness, and a willingness to share time...being there for others through all the time of their lives...[and] taking pleasure in each other’s company”; listening, laughing, and sharing both good times and bad (p. 27).

Action: Be available when people need you. Engage families in conversation at concerts and other school

events. Attend student events that aren't school sanctioned. Ask questions that show a personal interest in students' and families' lives. Contribute to individual causes when you can. Send cards on special occasions.

Be vulnerable

In Brené Brown's (2010) research on vulnerability, she discovered that "in order for connection to happen, we have to allow ourselves to be seen, really seen...deeply seen" (Brown B. , 2010). Vulnerability is essential to transparency and truth, allowing authentic relationships to thrive.

Action: Share emotion with students and families. Be open about your thoughts and struggles. Laugh and cry with students and families. Be genuine about your feelings and concerns.

Lead with love

Love is often a taboo term in education. Effective educational leaders understand that leading with love matters. As Freire (2005) stated, "Love is an act of courage, not fear, love is commitment to others" (p. 89).

Action: Tell students you care. Make time to speak with students about their lives, needs, and concerns. Give your undivided attention. Allow every student to start fresh each day.

Understand and Respond to Students' Lived Realities

In his work on equity literacy, Gorski (2018) states, "We cannot understand the relationship between poverty and education without understanding the barriers and inequities people experiencing poverty face in and out of school" (p. 29). Complex contexts keep people in

poverty. Anyon (2005) states “faulty schools, few work opportunities, inadequate health care, a lack of a living wage, geographic isolation, poor child care, and a host of other factors weave together to threaten the chances people in poverty have of getting out” (as quoted in Ullucci & Howard, 2015, p. 176). Families can rise out of poverty if structures are put into place to help them do so. This includes significant changes to schools, curriculum, pedagogies, processes, and policies; the work of educational leaders. This level of change requires a clear understanding of the lived realities of families experiencing poverty and a commitment to taking clear, intentional, and strategic action to respond to their unique contexts.

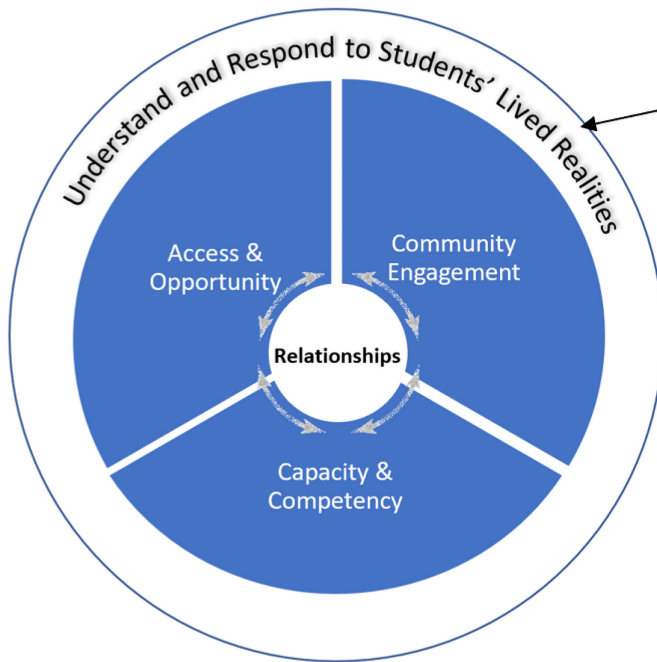
Furman and Shields (2005) describe the need to reach an altered consciousness, a heightened awareness of how day-to-day lives of people, structures, and cultures interact to create inequitable social conditions. This demands directly confronting the harsh reality of students’ lives and inequities that exist inside and outside of school walls; some of which are propagated and perpetuated by schools themselves (Gorski, 2018). It’s this direct confrontation of one’s personal bias and institutional bias that leads to a better understanding of the complex social systems that keep families in high-poverty situations and prepare educational leaders to combat them.

Seeing policies, practices, pedagogies, and curricula that perpetuate injustices to the less privileged is foundational to effective educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools. Effectively responding to such inequities requires a commitment to improving access and opportunity for high-poverty students and families, developing capacity and competency in learners experiencing poverty, and authentically engaging the community in those efforts. Table 5.2 summarizes those leader actions that are central to truly understanding and responding to the complex circumstances impacting students’ lives. Figure 5.3 illustrates the relevance of this

principle to the theoretical framework for effective educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools.

Figure 5.3

The Foundation of Effective Leadership Practice: Understand and Respond to Students' Lived Realities



This is the foundation of effective educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools. It informs all other actions and is enhanced by trusting relationships. This is the ability to see complex systems that perpetuate poverty and having the courage to redress them.

Table 5.2

Leader Behaviors: Understanding and Responding to Students' Lived Realities

Big Idea	Description
Systems thinking	<p>Maintain a systems view of students' lived realities and the role of the school in influencing those systems to improve education and create social justice outcomes.</p> <p><i>Action: Leverage continuous school improvement teams to analyze different systems and offer solutions. Use multiple measures of data to assess progress and effectiveness of programs and policies.</i></p>

Be personally engaged in the community, see it all first hand. Speak with students and families formally and informally to understand what is happening in their lives. Complete routine policy analysis. Complete equity audits. Network with other organizations who are realizing success or have specific strengths that complement your own.

Opportunity for all

Maintain organizational commitment to providing opportunities for all. Make this form of accountability part of the organization's mission, vision, and values; collaboratively created and constantly reinforced through action.

Action: Engage teachers in developing a mission, vision, and shared values for the school. Use the guiding question, "What opportunities do our students need and deserve?" Review how people, policies, and practices within the school and community limit or expand opportunities for students and families.

Recognize student and family voices

Provide authentic opportunities for student and family voices to be heard. More informal opportunities and smaller groups are less intimidating for many families. Meet families where they are.

Action: Solicit input through a variety of means; personal meetings, electronic surveys, focus groups, informal discussions. Be aware of who isn't communicating and personally reach out to them. Create advisory committees that have diverse

representation. Be sensitive to student and parent work schedules and obstacles to communication.

Be courageous

Have courage and commitment to respond to and redress those issues that are silencing students and families experiencing poverty.

Action: Build equity-focus into the comprehensive planning process. There is power in numbers; create school improvement teams with strong, equity-minded members. Assess progress regularly and celebrate successes.

Act intentionally

Transformative change doesn't happen by chance. Redressing inequities is an intentional process that requires deep thinking and strategic action. The NISL Conceptual Framework for Strategic Thinking theorizes that strategic thinking: "requires a continually high level of analysis, vision setting, goal making, strategy, ... focuses on a specific context and includes a systems logic about assumptions, events, resources, people in groups, interests, challenges, risks, and objectives, ... centers on a better future state, and therefore is in constant need of reevaluation; and is intricately intertwined with systems for leadership and learning" (NCEE, 2020). This model helps educational leaders become "strategic practitioners", leading toward transformative outcomes.

Action: Create a strategic vision founded on equity. Align resources equitably, including programs, facilities, and financial and human resources. Create a strategic leadership team. Draft action plans that align with the strategic vision. Create and apply

metrics to measure achievement of those strategic goals.

Access & Opportunity

Socioeconomic status is just one factor that has historically limited student and family access to a quality education. Families experiencing poverty are often blamed for their own circumstances. The complex social systems that contribute to their socioeconomic status are ignored or explained away by those who enjoy hegemonic privileges of the dominant class. Gorski (2018) describes this reality and how it manifests in schools,

...the condition we call an ‘achievement gap’ is more rightly understood as an opportunity gap. We have decided as a society to put more access in some students’ toolboxes than others... We pretend to offer equal opportunity, then blame people whose toolboxes we’ve least filled for not doing as well as those whose toolboxes we filled to the brim. (p. 97)

Gorski (2018) goes on to explain how “vague notions of culture” are often blamed for disparities in performance between people experiencing poverty and those with more wealth, power, and privilege. “Educational outcome disparities are the result of inequities, of unjust distributions of access and opportunity, not the result of deficiencies in the mindsets, cultures, or grittiness of people experiencing poverty” (Gorski, 2018, p. 30). “There is no path to educational equity that does not involve a redistribution of access and opportunity. This might include the redistribution of anything from access to classes with high expectations to access to validating school cultures” (Gorski, 2018, p. 25). In their extensive research in high-performing, high-

poverty schools, Parrett and Budge (2020) concluded that those schools sought "...equality in outcomes...by committing to equitable opportunity for learning" (p. 12).

Sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally, the structure of schools prevents access to students and families experiencing poverty. Schools that serve underprivileged populations of students often lack the necessary financial, physical, and human resources necessary to address their students' and families' needs. Too often, people, policies, and practices of schools do not reflect a critical, social justice mindset and, in contrast, promote behaviors indicative of a deficit ideology. Such behaviors serve only to reproduce a growing opportunity gap. Gutierrez (2014) fittingly describes this pervasive failure of our school systems:

Access refers mainly to students' opportunities to learn (Nasir & Cobb, 2007). It includes the kinds of material and resources that are available to students, such as teachers being available before, during, and after school; updated and rigorous textbooks and learning materials; advanced technology as a tool for learning; teachers who are credentialed in their subjects and engaged in ongoing professional development; classroom environments that invite deep learning; reasonable class sizes; and supports for learning outside class hours. Access is a necessary but insufficient condition for learning... (p. 23).

Smith, et al. (2017) describe the educational leader's role in creating opportunities for students, "The opportunity to learn (or not) is a function of the systems we create in our classrooms and schools" (p. 72). They went on to discuss parents and community members as education partners, "Opportunities to learn are not limited to the school day, and teachers are not the only ones who provide learning opportunities..." (Smith et al., 2017, p. 99)

The educational leaders in the Q-Tech study spoke about tending to basic student needs by ensuring they are fed during the week and on weekends. They even employ a payroll deduction program to ensure families in need get weekend meals. Over the past few years they have advocated for a complete range of support services to provide students full access to the curriculum. Community members and industry partners work with the school to provide students with mentorship and work experience opportunities and the school ensures obstacles to those experiences are removed; including transportation.

In a truly equitable learning environment, students need to be guaranteed access to a continuum of adaptive and inclusive practices. Students' unique learning needs are addressed within the classroom through differentiation and individualized learning pathways. More intensive student supports are also imperative and made available inside and outside of the classroom. Supplemental supports, like speech services, various counseling services, and occupational therapy are also vital (Smith et al., 2017). Leader behaviors foundational to creating access and opportunity for students are summarized in Table 5.3. Figure 5.4 illustrates the importance of leadership in removing barriers and creating opportunities for underserved students and families to access a high-quality education.

Figure 5.4

Access and Opportunity for Students and Families Experiencing Poverty

Removing barriers to accessing a rigorous and high-quality education is a major leadership function in rural high-poverty schools. Educational leaders must reflect on the people, policies, and practices of the school; ensuring they are aligned with providing access and opportunities for underserved students and families.

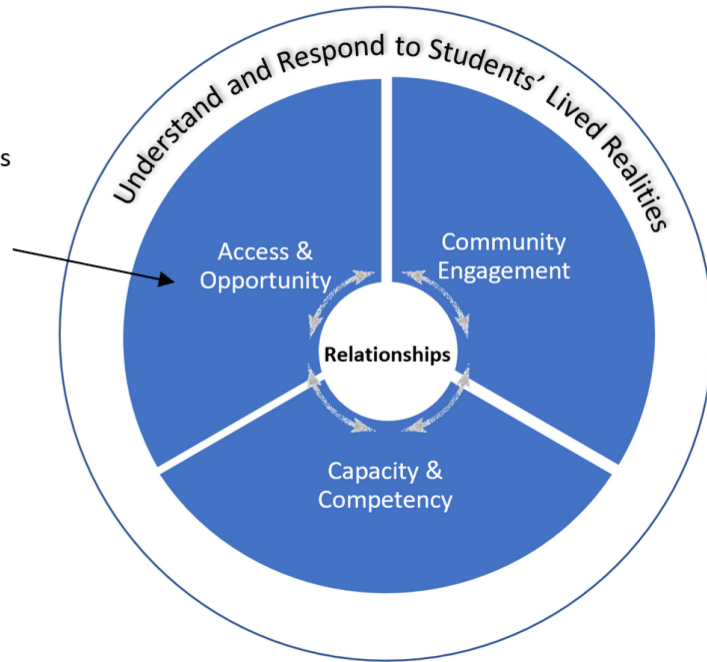


Table 5.3

Leader Behaviors: Creating Access and Opportunity for Students

Big Idea	Description
Start with basic needs	<p>Be sensitive to students’ basic needs (i.e. feed kids, maintain a safe environment, social opportunities and sense of belonging). These are prerequisites to learning.</p> <p><i>Note: Apply for community certification for free lunch and breakfast for all students. Start a summer food program. Start a free dinner program. Send backpacks of food home on weekends. Create social opportunities for students (e.g. dances, family game nights, student organizations). Make a clean, well-maintained physical plant a priority.</i></p>

Welcome students by name at the door each morning and during transitions. Visit with students at lunch. Invite local law enforcement to visit often and build relationships with students. Make counseling services easily accessible. Provide safe, immediate, and confidential ways to report safety concerns of any type.

Recruit and maintain high-performing and committed staff

Hire applicants who are not only highly qualified, but also have a passion for teaching and a demonstrated ability to develop relationships with students (Tucker, 2016). Align professional learning opportunities with the building vision and student needs and differential by staff strengths and areas of need. Engage staff in decision-making and intentionally build leadership capacity throughout the organization. Be attentive to staff needs and morale.

Note: Volunteer to offer workshops or mock interviews for area teacher preparation programs. Offer opportunities for pre-service teachers within the school. Provide job-shadowing opportunities for aspiring teachers. Employ a “family first” approach for staff (e.g. cover for family emergencies, early leave needs, etc.). Align interview practices and questions with the vision for teaching excellence. Pay competitive salaries and benefits. Offer frequent, differentiated, and high-quality professional learning opportunities. Be a value-added leader; do the small things that make it fun for staff to come to work.

Identify and remove obstacles

Identify and remove obstacles to student opportunities (e.g. transportation, equipment, clothing). This includes rethinking the ‘traditional’ school day and academic year, leveraging technology

and human resources to expand access and opportunity to align with student availability.

Action: Ask students what they need to be able to participate in certain programs. Maintain student advisory groups who identify obstacles to access and opportunity. Include students and families in strategic planning activities. Network with other schools and organizations to identify most effective practices. Seek grant opportunities to support initiatives.

Engage with the community

Align practices with real-time opportunities for students and families. This requires engaging with the community often. Program planning, cooperative education opportunities, curriculum development, and purchasing priorities should be responsive to matching community needs with future opportunities for students. Community engagement is a two-way street. Students should have opportunities to serve the greater school community and the community should be invited to be inform school leadership decisions.

Action: Connect with non-profit groups and offer for student groups to lend time and talent to advance their mission. Support students in presenting at local meetings including Rotary, local and county government, and regional educational councils. Create advisory committees that provide networking opportunities between industry professionals, students, and educators. Support 'educator in the workplace' events. Make job shadowing a requirement; embed related activities in the core curriculum.

Systems of Supports

Establish a robust system of supports for students with specific needs. This includes emotional support services, learning support, social and emotional learning, mental health interventions, and career mentoring.

Action: Complete routine audits of special services to ensure full compliance. Provide ongoing staff training to better serve all students within the regular education program. Have an active Student Assistance Program that is well publicized. Maintain a list of agencies and contact information for parents who may need services outside of the school. Publish resources on the school's website.

Community Engagement

Establishing a strong sense of community is foundational to educational improvement. Commonplace solutions for educational woes have little impact without first building community (Taulbert, 2006). “Important consequences play out in the day-to-day social exchanges within a school community” (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 40). Taulbert (2006) describes the consequences of those exchanges, what he describes as “individual acts of unselfishness” (p. 14).

The community I encountered as a child was characterized by individual acts of unselfishness – “the human touch” that makes “community” real. Without those daily acts of personal unselfishness...my life experience would have been drastically different. I would later learn that community is just a word without the unselfishness that infuses it with life. (Taulbert, 2006, p. 14).

Fullan et al. (2006), a leading authority in systems leadership, writes about community engagement as linking with both parents and the greater school community:

Home, school, and community partnerships involve linking with the home, with feeder schools, and with the community; they are important at all levels of schooling. But for school to be effective, it is not enough to establish links with the home: What are needed are comprehensive and permanent programs of partnerships with families and communities. (p. 94)

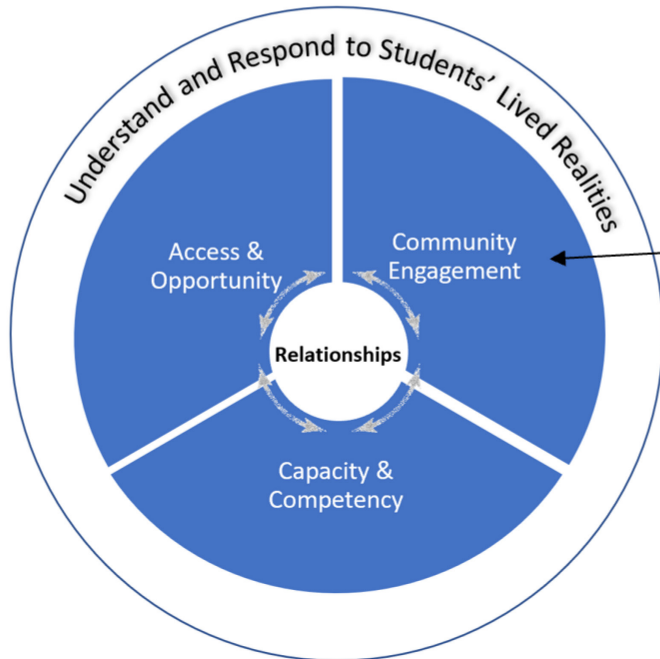
“An interrelated set of mutual dependencies are embedded within the social exchanges in any school community... All participants remain dependent on others to achieve desired outcomes and feel empowered by their efforts” (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 41). These “mutual dependencies” speak to the idea of “collective action”, which is central to Parrett and Budge’s work in high-poverty, high-performing schools. Parrett and Budge (2020) found “place-conscious social justice leadership” as effective practice of high-performing, rural, high-poverty schools (p. 13). This is represented in the “Spheres of Influence” driver of their “Framework for Collective Action: Leading High-Poverty Schools to High Performance” in which interactions between the community, family, and school all contribute to high levels of student learning (Parrett & Budge, 2020, p. 11).

In the theoretical framework for effective educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools, two dimensions of community engagement are identified as being foundational to supporting student success: school-community engagement, and community-school engagement. Parent engagement overlaps both dimensions of community engagement. Educational leaders in the Q-Tech case spoke of the need to engage with the community through advocacy and local political action, creating and maintaining active occupational advisory councils, providing opportunities for families to interact positively with the school, and creating authentic opportunities for students to serve the greater school community. Leader behaviors relevant to

authentic community engagement are outlined in Table 5.4. Figure 5.5 illustrates key components of community engagement as a core leadership function.

Figure 5.5

Community Engagement: A Core Leadership Function



Community engagement in this framework has two dimensions: the school serving the community, and the community serving the school. Parent engagement overlaps both dimensions. Effective educational leaders in rural high-poverty schools advocate for their students in the greater school community, engineer opportunities for students to serve their community, and welcome parents as active participants in core school functions. Trusting relationships and removing barriers to access accelerate success in this critical leadership function.

Table 5.4

Leader Behaviors: Community Engagement

Big Idea	Description
Create service opportunities	Create opportunities for students to serve the community. This gives students a chance to contribute to their community's health. In their review of literature on service learning, Miron and Moely (2006) noted that service learning increases self-esteem and informs career goals while contributing to "positive outcomes related to students' acceptance of people from diverse backgrounds; personal development, such as

greater self-knowledge; and interpersonal development, such as increased leadership and communication skills” (p. 27).

Action: Make service learning a graduation requirement. Embed service learning into the core curriculum and make it a priority of all student groups. Publicly celebrate service learning projects. Promote events/opportunities on social media or local media. Encourage students to document their service and present at board meetings each month. Serve on boards of local non-profits. Help write grants to support community efforts. Encourage students to lend time and talent to special community projects. Build “service days” into the academic year. Send music groups to the local nursing homes or senior center. Host computer and Internet help sessions for senior residents, supported by student helpers. Maintain an ongoing list of service opportunities where students and staff have regular access. Celebrate staff who engage in service to their community.

Commit to healthy communities

Rural communities are experiencing a “hemorrhaging of people, specifically the younger generation” and this is “hollowing out many of the nation’s small towns” (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p. 1). Students need to be able to see beyond the aesthetic and purely recreational benefit of the rural community and see genuine opportunities to thrive. Messaging should reinforce a commitment to growing rural communities, connecting students with genuine, family-sustaining local careers.

Action: Promote place-based education throughout the K-12 curriculum. Create opportunities for students to

serve their local community. Always speak positively about the community, avoid negatives. Be part of creating the vision for long-term success. Tell students your own story and why you appreciate the rural community. Buy local. Advocate for businesses that are current, relevant, and attract younger residents. Give young families opportunities to engage with the school and have a greater sense of belonging. Create and/or promote distance-education opportunities for adults, young and old.

Establish Community
Partnerships

The school is often the center of the community. Community members want to help, but may not know how. School systems are often mysterious and overly bureaucratic. Establishing school-community partnerships with clearly defined goals dissolves artificial barriers and can be rewarding for both parties.

Action: Start by asking community members what they need from the school. Look to serve before asking to be served. Do your part to support them. Buy local whenever possible. Volunteer to serve on local leadership panels and boards. Make the school transparent by creating easy access to information and expertise. Open the school to adults in the community. Be a site for continuing education programs for adults.

Be an advocate

Advocate on the local, state, and national levels for equitable opportunities for students in rural high-poverty spaces. Engage policymakers in making equitable decisions that support opportunities for students to learn and succeed. Ensure decisions promote the long-term health of the community

while addressing the immediate needs of current students and families.

Action: Invite policy makers to visit the school. Write letters advocating for critical change. Communicate facts and be prepared to defend them. Tell your story often and in diverse ways.

Engage families and the community in the school

In their (2020) research on rural school leadership, Hesbol et al. concluded that “inviting the community to participate actively in important decisions has validated their role in the education of their students.” “Community-based advocacy leads to trust between the educational leader and members of the community they serve” (p. 39). Such relationships should take the form of authentic partnerships that value contributions from all.

Action: Invite parents and community members to be guest speakers and mentors. Form ongoing focus groups and advisory committees to inform big decisions. Enlist parent and community volunteers. Create opportunities for diverse groups to socialize and see each other’s perspectives (e.g. school-family picnics, fireside chats). Offer free admission nights to concerts or sporting events. Send personal, hand-written correspondence when possible.

Capacity & Competency

Educational leaders in the Q-Tech study spoke candidly about an unapologetic commitment to preparing students for family-sustaining employment. They are attentive not only to technical skills, but also the soft skills that employers seek. The educational leaders at Q-Tech are intentional about developing student capacity for critical thinking and problem solving;

qualities necessary to successfully adapt in a world and global marketplace that is constantly evolving.

For the purpose of this theoretical framework, ‘capacity’ is defined as “the potential each of us has to do more and be more than we are now” (Daft 1999, p. 333). It extends beyond practical skill and involves intellectual and emotional capabilities. ‘Competency’ refers to “the knowledge, skills and abilities, and other requirements that are needed for someone to perform a job successfully. Competencies define not only what a person must know and do, but also how a person does it” (Auburn, 2018).

Congruent with Tucker (2016), The Pennsylvania Department of Education describes the need for a robust system of career and technical programming:

There isn’t a one-size-fits-all postsecondary path for every high school student, so it is critical for them to be prepared for success on whatever path they take after graduating – whether they enter the workforce, join the military, or continue their education. Career and technical education (CTE) in Pennsylvania offers students the opportunity to develop critical skills through a combination of classes and hands-on learning experiences, which allow them to apply academics to real-world problems. (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2021, para 1).

This speaks to the demand for promoting rigorous study in both the academic classroom and a technical program of study; mastering “critical skills” or competencies while nurturing students’ capacity to adapt and evolve to realize success in whatever path they choose. Curricula, instruction, and assessment should be aligned to this end.

As described in Smith et al. (2017), assessments and grading should reflect subject matter mastery and competencies development. In equitable schools, grades should illustrate

competence over compliance. These principles and actions are summarized in Table 5.5. Figure 5.6 summarizes the role of capacity and competency development in the theoretical framework for effective educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools.

Figure 5.6

Capacity and Competency in the Theoretical Framework for Effective Educational Leadership in Rural High-Poverty Schools

Effective educational leaders in rural high-poverty schools promote a curriculum that allows ALL students to excel in both technical and academic pathways. Emphasis is placed on developing learners' capacity to grow and adapt in a hyper-evolving global marketplace. Care is taken to ensure such practices reflect high expectations. Leadership actions in this domain must be liberating and must not limit students to rote learning and competency development designed for menial service work; perpetuating systems of inequity and poverty.

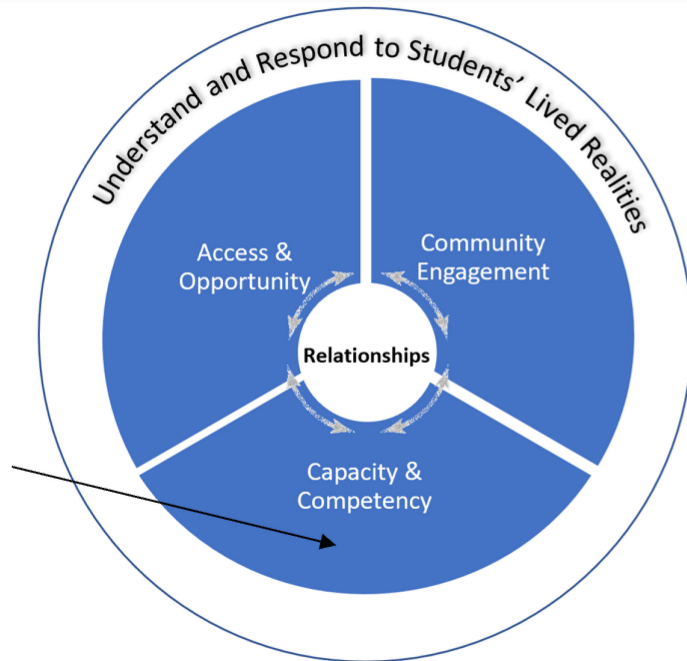


Table 5.5

Leaders Behaviors: Developing Capacity and Competency

Big Idea	Description
Promote a robust Career and Technical Programming	Tucker (2016) citing years of research on top performing schools worldwide, it is necessary to “create an effective system of career and technical education and training” (p.

11). Such programs embed “modern technical skills on state-of-the-art equipment” to match skilled workers with industry demands.

Action: Engage with a regional CTE provider for relevant programs. Preserve trade programs that are not necessarily approved CTE programs, like Industrial Arts, Drafting, and Technology Education. Regularly seek grant funding for modern equipment. Partner with industry leaders for program support.

Employ competency-based grading

Competency-based grading reduces grade inflation and bias inherent in standard grading practices, placing the focus on what students can demonstrate in real time; irrespective of time.

Action: Support teachers in understanding what learning “looks like” in practice. Implement student information systems that support competency-based grading. Provide regular professional learning and support for teachers. Provide informational opportunities for parents to understand the new system. Network with other organizations who are doing competency-based grading well.

Promote a growth mindset

Encourage students to view success as learning. Create a learning culture in which students embrace challenges, persist in the face of setbacks, persist to master, embrace criticism as part of the learning process, and are inspired by success of others (Dweck, 2006).

Action: Reinforce positive messages about the growth mindset to parents and students through

posters, social media, and parent-teacher conferences. Disband grading practices that conflict with the growth mindset and do not honor mastery as the ultimate goal.

Occupational Advisory
Committees

Forming and sustaining occupational advisory committees comprised of diverse stakeholders advise curriculum and content and support employment opportunities for students.

Action: Reach out to stakeholders with key skills and knowledge. Engage them in conversation about what is important to them and key trends in the field. Leverage local industry partners as guest speakers.

Stay informed

Authentic partnerships with industry professionals and constant analysis of employment trends informs decisions that are directly aligned with immediate and long-term opportunities for students and families.

Action: Subscribe to and read professional journals. Join local organizations like the Rotary or Chamber of Commerce. Host periodic round table discussions with local professionals. Engage local industry leaders and human resources personnel in mock interviews for junior and senior students.

Teach universal competencies

Community needs change over time. Aligning technical competencies to industry needs is important and supports attainment of employment. However, teaching universal competencies like teamwork and strategic thinking will

maximize students' ability to adapt and evolve to changes in the local, state, national, and global economy over time. The term "universal" in this context is meant to describe skills that allow students to be successful in multiple pathways. Caution needs to guide this principle as schools can perpetuate inequities through limiting students to rote skills designed to fill menial jobs in the service industry.

Action: Build these competencies into routine instructional practices. Employ competency-based grading systems that accurately assess progress toward mastery of these skills. Create authentic opportunities for students to demonstrate these competencies through career development events through SkillsUSA or other relevant youth organizations. Emphasize those competencies that prepare students for success in diverse career and college pathways.

Contributions to the Field of Educational Leadership

The field of educational leadership is extremely broad and many improvement models focus on specific strategies for improvement that don't appropriately consider context. This is especially true for the very complex contexts that influence how families experiencing poverty experience school. The foundation of the theoretical framework for effective educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools is an understanding of critical discourses and a willingness to respond in ways that are relevant to that context. This is intentional. This theoretical framework posits that strategies employed devoid of critical reflection are misguided ventures. This framework calls for educational leaders in rural high-poverty spaces to be architects of systems that specifically address students' and families' needs; systems with

purpose, hope, and high expectations for sustained transformation. This is true to the Freirean idea of praxis, “reflection and action upon the world to transform it” (Freire, 2005, p. 15). As Giroux (2003) reminds us, critical discourse is more than just thoughts and ideas, it is an active process of critique leading to social transformation.

This study provides an authentic case of effective leadership in a rural high-poverty school. This particular school serves students from four different sending districts, each with its own culture and unique dynamics. The poverty level of the building studied is disproportionately high compared to each of the individual sending schools. The educational leaders in this study have a challenging context by most standards, but not one referred to poverty as a deficit. Each voiced an understanding of their students’ lived realities and the challenges they face, yet seemed to believe in the promise that students can succeed. There were no excuses in leader statements, rather vision, commitment, and pragmatism.

Leadership is a primary driver of school improvement. In his analysis of improvement in Chicago schools, Bryk (2010) emphasizes the prominence of the leader in driving systems improvements, adding that the “actual execution of improvement is more organic and dynamic” (p. 26). This study reinforces educational leadership as a necessary driver for sustainable, transformative change; while galvanizing the idea that educational leadership is present at all levels of the school system and is not limited to formal title or organizational hierarchy.

The theoretical framework for effective educational leadership for rural high-poverty schools provides a lens through which to view leadership decisions and actions. It is a frame for leadership practice in rural high-poverty spaces, providing utility to practicing educational leaders to analyze their own professional practice and growth. Practitioners, should they see

relevance to their own contexts, now have another example of effective practice to help them make decisions that are more likely to have intended outcomes.

Recommendations and Implications for Educational Leadership for Social Justice

Poverty is an urgent matter facing our nation's schools and educational leaders. Rural poverty is growing and is impacting a larger number of students than ever before. With 9.3 million students being educated in rural school nationwide, rural educational leadership is an area that deserves explicit attention (Hesbol et al., 2020). The body of research on the nuances of rural poverty and education in rural spaces is limited and needs to be expanded.

Preparing Students for the New Economy

A conversation with an elementary school teacher on the topic of homework comes to mind. This veteran teacher was loved by all and was extremely dedicated to her work. She was asked why homework was such an important part of her instruction. She replied, "I need to prepare them for the reality of college." It was in that moment that the disconnect between teachers' realities and the realities of the world students need to be prepared for became clear.

In his work on leading high-performance school systems, Tucker (2019) describes the type of student we need to be preparing. He describes key understandings and competencies students need to be successful in the new economy. Students need to have literacy skills that exceed what the average high school student demonstrates today. Tucker (2019) goes on to write,

...employers will expect candidates for jobs to be ready to do them, your students will have to be job-ready with considerable technical competence to get their first jobs, whether they apply for that job from high school or from college. (p. 53).

Students need to have capacity to grow and adapt to everchanging conditions. Future graduates must be skilled communicators. They need to be comfortable working with precision while being

“better and better at what is essentially human” (Tucker, 2019, p. 54); being creative, loving, courageous, tolerant, and empathetic. Quite importantly, the graduates of the future need to understand the people of the world and approach their own role within the world with strong values and morality.

Schools need to be more focused on preparing students for a more diverse and global marketplace. Educational leaders need to lead with compassion and understanding. They must create systems that support students in gaining deep core literacy skills while mastering technical competencies necessary for success in both employment and continuing education.

It is important for educational leaders to be conscious of the propensity for schools to be slaves to the demands of industry, reducing the educational experience to rigid uniformity and control; eliminating creativity and freedom from the curriculum. There is a historical trend of students experiencing poverty being deprived of an engaging and rigorous curriculum in exchange for a basic and regimented course of study designed to prepare them for menial service work. Consequently, “the learning for poor children in many contexts [becomes] prepackaged, predetermined, and rote” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 9). Imagination and intellect of low-income students are disregarded as key variables in future educational success; valuing compliance over innovation (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Effective educational leaders in rural high-poverty schools must maintain critical consciousness and reconcile the pragmatism of preparing students for achieving short-term economic stability with the potential to compromise other long-term freedoms in the process.

The theoretical framework for effective educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools provides a framework for social justice action in this domain. Not only does the framework illustrate the prominence of critical discourses in understanding the complex systems

that perpetuate poverty, it provides a framework by which to measure leadership action in pursuit of socially just outcomes for students and families experiencing poverty.

Leader Preparation

Fullan (2020) writes that educational leadership today is not an impossible endeavor, rather he contends that educational leaders are simply not prepared for the complexity and demands of their role in the 21st century.

I am reluctant to draw a conclusion that the job of education leader is simply too demanding. Rather, I believe many education leaders have not prepared themselves for the real job of leading change in the 21st Century (and, of course, we can implicate the systems for not cultivating and supporting such leaders). (p.11).

Fullan's position is powerful and suggestive of substantive and targeted change in educational leadership preparation. Effective leadership action is inherent in the theoretical framework for effective educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools. A "no excuses, just results" approach to educational leadership drives transformative change. Educational leaders who are not appropriately prepared for the complex challenges of their role in the 21st century will either not last in the profession or they will remain in positions of power resulting in mediocre outcomes at best, oppressive and destructive outcomes at worst.

In "Leader Shift", Maxwell (2019) speaks of needing to think and act differently to be an effective leader. "If you want to be an effective leader...you cannot be the same, think the same, and act the same if you hope to be successful in a world that does not remain the same." As a practicing educational leader with an unprecedented worldwide pandemic clearly in view, I am comfortable saying that no truer words have been spoken.

In that same work, Maxwell (2019) goes on to reinforce the important idea of leadership actions following the heart. He talks about the necessary evolution of what he calls “trained” leadership to transformational leadership; leadership that is contagious, far reaching, and empowers people to make a difference. Although effective leaders come in all shapes and sizes, Maxwell identifies five common actions among transformational leaders. These are actions with real relevance to the theoretical framework for effective educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools. Transformational leaders “See things others do not see... Say things others do not say... Believe things others do not believe... Feel things others do not feel... and Do things others do not do” (Maxwell, 2019, pp. 218-222).

In order to prepare future educational leaders who are informed and prepared to address the social justice challenges we face in education, core concepts of social justice leadership and a commitment to action should be deeply represented in teacher, principal, and superintendent preparation programs. Future educational leaders must be prepared to redress the challenges of the past while preparing our most vulnerable populations for a world that is changing at hyper-speed. Transformative change will only come from committed educational leaders who are informed beyond content and curriculum, and are fully prepared to serve with the head, hand, AND heart (Sergiovanni, 1992). Hesbol (n.d.) writes, “Principal leadership that effectively improves teaching and learning for all students... is an exceptionally dynamic and complex constellation of contextually bound practices” (p. 3). This is true for all educational leadership and must be representative in all educator preparation programs for transformative change to occur and sustain with socially just outcomes.

The theoretical framework for effective educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools has potential to inform core concepts in educational leadership preparation. Connecting

theory to action brings an important level of pragmatism to the exceptionally complex field of educational leadership. This framework begins with a social justice mindset represented by a call to understand and respond to students' lived realities. This is an important foundation for effective educational leadership in all schools, particularly in schools serving high-poverty students and families. All other leadership actions can be viewed through that social justice lens. Doing so promotes intentionality in specific actions designed to promote student success; keeping each student, family, community, and organizational context clearly in view.

Limitations

A limitation to this study was small sample size. A single case with five participants provides rich data into the success of that specific organization. Participants in this study told their story only, and this study sought to capture that emic perspective. Personal and practical limitations on time and access made a more robust study spanning multiple cases over time impractical.

This study was conducted in the midst of a pandemic which restricted physical access to the school building in the study and interviews had to be conducted virtually to ensure participants' and the researcher's safety. Extensive direct observation can provide rich data which can add to the depth of theory and improve trustworthiness.

Researcher bias is present in all studies. To minimize the influence of researcher bias on the outcomes of this work, care was taken to repeatedly reflect on artifacts that were explicitly provided by participants in the study. The three-phase design of the study ensured the voices of the participants in the study were accurately represented while minimizing researcher bias. My experience as an educational leader who was raised in rural poverty and has served multiple rural

high-poverty communities provided a unique lens through which to view data in this study, adding to the richness of interpretation.

Implications for Future Leadership Agenda and Growth

The themes which emerged from this study and informed the resultant theoretical framework align well with findings from the work of Bryk, Gorski, Hesbol, Fullan, and others. It was a challenge to limit the depth of the theoretical framework for effective educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools to just those themes and leader actions which came directly from participants' voices in this study. With an extensive body of research in view, it was tempting to add various components of that research to this framework. That desire will inform future research, expansion, and refinement of the theoretical framework derived from data in this study.

Additionally, it may be productive to consider the utility of this same theoretical framework to any educational leaders serving marginalized populations. Critiquing the nuances of rural contexts as compared to more urban environments will help refine the framework and possibly expand it to be more relevant to different contexts. What are the critical differences? Are the leadership behaviors transferable between contexts or would there be different leader actions needed in those spaces? What is the impact of racial and ethnic diversity on leader behaviors and what added dimensions of educational leadership emerge from that specific context? These are all important questions that need to be explored in greater depth. That said, the intention of this framework was to specifically represent effective rural educational leadership. This study was true to that objective and true to the spirit and process of grounded theory.

Specific future areas of study which were inspired by this research are school size, vulnerability, and love. With relationships taking such a prominent center position in the theoretical framework for effective educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools, I am interested in exploring vulnerability and love as accelerators to school improvement.

Brené Brown, in her (2010) TED Talk, “The Power of Vulnerability”, speaks about the importance of vulnerability to forming and strengthening relationships. Those people are “...whole-hearted people, living from [a] deep sense of worthiness.” She went on to describe these same people having the “...the courage to be imperfect...To be seen, really seen.” Their connection with people is a direct result of a willingness “...to let go of who they thought they should be in order to be who they were...” Particularly powerful, and directly aligned with certain statements from participants in this study, was a commitment to love and a commitment to “do something where there are no guarantees.” People in Brown’s study spoke about being willing to say, “I love you” first (Brown B. , 2010).

These interconnected concepts of worthiness, courage, love, and vulnerability have the potential to be accelerators of transformative change, particularly in schools serving marginalized students and families. Vulnerability as a leadership construct is intriguing. Intuitively, there seems to be real value to leadership in rural high-poverty spaces; an area that deserves deeper exploration.

Specific questions that could provide substantive value to this framework in the future include:

1. To what extent does school size impact effectiveness of educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools?

2. How does vulnerability impact relationships and leader-follower interactions? What are those essential leader actions?
3. Dialogical Love as a construct impacting educational leadership serving marginalized populations. How is this measured and developed in leaders at all levels within the organization?

This study has motivated the researcher to examine his own professional practice through the lens of the theoretical framework for effective educational leadership in rural high-poverty schools. Developing a theoretical framework with true utility for practicing educational leaders was the goal of this study. Examining more cases through this framework will help to refine the framework and make it more valuable as a tool across more diverse contexts.

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Appendix A

Strategies Principals Used to Disrupt Injustice

Injustice 1: School structures that marginalize, segregate, and impede achievement.

- Eliminate pullout/segregated programs.
- Increase rigor and access to opportunities.
- Increase student learning time.
- Increase accountability systems on the achievement of all students.

Injustice 2: Deprofessionalized teaching staff

- Address issues of race.
- Provide ongoing staff development focused on building equity.
- Hire and supervise for justice.
- Empower staff.

Injustice 3: A disconnect with the community, low-income families, and families of color

- Create a warm and welcoming climate.
- Reach out intentionally to the community and marginalized families.
- Incorporate social responsibility into the school curriculum.

Injustice 4: Disparate and low student achievement

- Confluence of all efforts and strategies.

Appendix B

Five fundamental principles of New Zealand's Joint Initiative for Education Systems

Improvement

Principle 1: Children are at the center of a smooth and seamless whole of educational pathway, from earliest learning to tertiary options.

Principle 2: Parents who are informed and engaged are involved in their children's education and part of a community with high expectations for and of those children.

Principle 3: Teachers and educational leaders, supported by their own professional learning and growth, and those of their colleagues, will systematically collaborate to improve educational achievement outcomes for their students.

Principle 4: Teachers and educational leaders will be able to report measurable gain in the specific learning and achievement challenges of their students.

Principle 5: Teachers and leaders will grow the capability and status of the profession within clearly defined career pathways for development and advancement.

Note: Taken from Fullan (2015), p. 24.

Appendix C

Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. Talk about your role as an educational leader in a rural high-poverty school.
2. What specific life experiences have significantly contributed to who you are as an educational leader.
3. What is it about you that you believe lends to your effectiveness with rural low-SES students?
4. What is your vision of success for low-SES students?
5. How does your approach with low-SES students differ from your approach with other students?
6. How does your ability to perceive, understand, and manage emotions impact your effectiveness in serving rural, high-poverty students?
7. In your experience, how has your emotional management contributed to achieving specific goals that have benefitted your rural high-poverty students?
8. Tell me about a specific situation or circumstance in which a low-SES student or group of students met with success. Provide me with details about your contribution to this success story.

Appendix D

Suggested Artifacts

<p><u>District Level</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vision statement • Mission statement • Comprehensive plan • District budget allocations • Title I plan • Longitudinal assessment data • Longitudinal graduation data • Longitudinal attendance data • District “launch” documents • District communications to employees • District communication to families/community • District communication to students • District leadership training agendas • District press releases • District discipline referrals • Parent engagement activities • Family supports 	<p><u>Building Level</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty meeting agendas • Building-level achievement data • Building-level growth data • Building-level attendance data • Building-level discipline referrals • Building goals • Social media posts • Outreach activities and communications plan • Building “launch” documents • Building communication to employees • Building communication to students • Building communication to community/parents • Building professional learning/PLC plans • Parent engagement activities • Family supports • Internal support programs
<p><u>Classroom Level</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum frameworks/maps • Course syllabi • Lesson plans • Instructional resources • Inclusionary practices • Classroom rules/norms • Classroom management strategies/ discipline philosophy • Instructional activities • Assessments • Classroom-level growth data • Classroom -level achievement data • Classroom -level attendance data • Classroom-level discipline referrals • Student Learning Objective (SLO) goals • Equity audit • Parent/Family engagement strategies • Communication to students • Communication to parents/families 	<p><u>Leader Level</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any artifact that illustrates your personal or professional history that you believe has influenced your work with rural high-poverty students • Relevant photographs • Personal narratives • Personal contacts from students, parents, community contacts, or others • Thank you cards or letters • Awards and other accolades • Educational philosophy • Personal and/or Professional goals • Resume • Professional learning experiences (e.g. Act 48, Act 45, PIL, internal and external workshops) • Graduate coursework and course descriptions

Appendix E

Technical Programs Offered at Q-Tech

Program Title
Advanced Manufacturing
Automotive Mechanics
Building and Property Maintenance
Automotive Collision Repair
Computer Technologies
Cosmetology
Culinary Arts
Diesel and Heavy Equipment Maintenance
Digital Media Arts
Engineering Technologies
Health Occupations
Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning, and Refrigeration
Network Engineering
Welding and Metal Fabrication