Beating the Odds: Towards Understanding How Principal Leadership Practices in High Schools Support School Completion for African American Males with Learning and Emotional Disabilities

Elaine Butler Gould

College of William & Mary - School of Education

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Beating the Odds: Towards Understanding How Principal Leadership Practices in High Schools Support School Completion for African American Males with Learning and Emotional Disabilities

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Philosophy

by

Elaine Butler Gould

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Beating the Odds: Towards Understanding How Principal Leadership Practices in High Schools Support School Completion for African American Males with Learning and Emotional Disabilities

by

Elaine B. Gould

Approved May 2015 by

Jamel Donnor, Ph.D.
Chairperson of Doctoral Committee

Michael DiPaola, Ed.D.

Sharon deFur, Ed.D.
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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the beliefs, practices, and policies that three high school principals perceive to be instrumental in the achievement of African American males with learning and emotional disabilities. Principals who participated in the study lead in schools with high percentages of minority and economically disadvantaged student populations. Using Furman’s (2012) Praxis-Dimensions-Capacities Framework (PDCF) to structure the analysis of the principals’ approach to school leadership, three predominant themes emerged including: steadfast empathy that guides leadership practice, a strong focus on the success of all children, and a commitment to promoting equitable practice. These three findings support the PDCF and the social justice leadership literature.
Beating the Odds: Towards Understanding How Principal Leadership Practices in High Schools Support School Completion for African American Males with Learning and Emotional Disabilities

Elaine B. Gould

College of William & Mary
Chapter One

Introduction

We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us; we already know more than we need to do that; and whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far.

--- Ronald Edmonds, Educational Leadership, Effective Schools for the Urban Poor, 1979, p. 23

Beginning with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975, the federal government has become increasingly more involved in special education and protecting the rights of students with disabilities and their families (Yell, 2012). The EAHCA (1975) initiated the evolution of special education legislation that currently, through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), holds each State Educational Agency (SEA) accountable for (1) providing students with disabilities access to a free appropriate public education\(^1\) (FAPE), (2) including students with disabilities in standards based curriculum and assessments, and

\(^1\) Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) is special education and related services that - (A) have been provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge; (B) meet the standards of the State educational agency; (C) include an appropriate preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education in the State involved; and (D) are provided in conformity with the individualized education program required under section 614(d). (IDEA, 2004)

\(^2\) a written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and
(3) the percent of the school day that students with disabilities are included in general
education classrooms (IDEA, 2004; Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005; Yell, 2012).

Furthermore, each SEA is required to develop Individualized Education Programs (IEP)
and specially designed instruction that meet the unique academic and functional needs of
students with disabilities and improve their in-school and post-secondary outcomes
(IDEA, 2004; Yell, 2012).

IDEA emphasizes through the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandate, that
students with disabilities be “educated to the maximum extent appropriate with peers without
disabilities” (Yell, 2012, p. 270). This effort must include the incorporation of supplementary aids
and services (e.g., instructional interventions, behavior management plans) that support the child’s
inclusion in general education before placing students with disabilities in more restrictive settings
(Yell, 2012). Moreover, school districts must provide a continuum of special education placement

---

2 A written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and
revised annually that includes (1) a statement of the child’s present levels of academic
achievement and functional performance, (2) measurable annual goals, (3) how progress
toward annual goals will be measured, (4) description of special education and related
services and supplementary aids and services, (5) the extent to which the child will not
participate with nondisabled children in the regular class, (6) date, frequency and location
of services, and (7) beginning no later than the first IEP to be in effect when the child is
16 years old, secondary transition planning including measurable postsecondary goals
related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living
skills, transition services (including courses of study), and beginning not later than 1 year
before the child reaches the age of majority under State law, a statement that the child has
been informed of the child’s rights under this title, if any, that will transfer to the child on
reaching the age of majority

3 To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in
public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are
not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with
disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or
severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of
supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (IDEA, 2004).

4 Aids, services, and other supports that are provided in regular education classes or other
education-related settings to enable children with disabilities to be educated with
nondisabled children to the maximum extent appropriate (IDEA, 2004; Yell, 2012).
options including the general education classroom, special classroom, special school, homebound instruction, and hospital and institutional instruction that meet the unique needs of children with disabilities and enable special education programs to be implemented (Yell, 2012).

In 2001, the United States Congress authorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) (ESEA, 2001, Yell, 2004). NCLB includes accountability measures for the purpose of closing prevalent achievement gaps between economically disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers and between minority and nonminority students. The purpose of Title I of NCLB (2001) is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments (NCLB Act of 2001, 1 U.S.C. § 1001).

Also included in the purpose of NCLB (2001) is language that highlights the importance of meeting the educational needs of the lowest achieving students, including those children who live in poverty, who have limited English proficiency, and who have disabilities. NCLB (2001) mandates the creation of state accountability systems that publicly report disaggregated student academic performance results on state assessments (e.g., standardized tests) and how the state and its districts and schools are progressing towards state performance targets (NCLB, 2001; Nolet & McLaughlin, 2005). States must set incremental performance targets and academic goals for all subject areas and student subgroups that establish movement towards minimum proficiency on state assessments by 2014. In addition, for each of the aforementioned subgroup of students, states are accountable for 1) increasing the number of secondary students who graduate with a regular diploma, 2) decreasing grade retention rates, 3) improving attendance
rates, and 4) increasing the percentage of students completing gifted and talented, advanced placement, and college preparatory courses, respectively (NCLB, 2001).

Further, the United States Congress explicitly addresses in IDEA (2004) the disproportionate representation of minority children in special education and in particular disability categories (Beratin, 2013).

(A) Greater efforts are needed to prevent the intensification of problems connected with mislabeling and high dropout rates among minority children with disabilities.

(B) More minority children continue to be served in special education than would be expected from the percentage of minority students in the general school population.

(C) African-American children are identified as having mental retardation and ED at rates greater than their White counterparts.

(D) In the 1998–1999 school year, African-American children represented just 14.8 percent of the population aged 6 through 21, but comprised 20.2 percent of all children with disabilities. (IDEA, 2004)

When considering the aforementioned federal legislation, IDEA and NCLB appear well intentioned and focused on protecting the civil rights of historically underserved student populations (e.g., minorities, children with disabilities, children from disadvantaged backgrounds). However, some researchers suggest that school district policies and educational practice do not reflect the intent of the legislation to reduce the overrepresentation of minority groups in disability categories (Beratan, 2013; Theoharis & Cosier, 2010; Theoharis, Hoffman, Causton-Theoharis, & Cowley, 2011). Theoharis and Cosier (2010), in a study that included participation from representatives of local education agencies in more than 200 school districts
nationwide, examined student demographics, and district level policies and educational practices related to the placement of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. The researchers discovered that among all variables that were studied including race, socioeconomic status, students with IEPs, and district size, race was the only variable that significantly predicted the likelihood that a school district’s policies were non-inclusive (Theoharis & Cosier, 2010).

According to Theoharis & Cosier (2010), “the fact that the presence of students of color in a school district is related to increased likelihood of employing policy that limits students with disabilities access to the general education classrooms and curriculum has potential racially discriminatory effects” (p. 15).


…the collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people. (Macpherson 1999, p. 28; Beratan, 2013, p. 339).

To protect the constitutional rights of children with disabilities, IDEA mandates through FAPE and LRE that public schools make a “good faith” effort to serve students with disabilities in integrated educational settings (Beratan, 2013; Yell, 2012, p. 271). Unfortunately however, the language in each mandate also leaves to broad interpretation by district and school level leadership the meaning of inclusion and for which students it is appropriate to educate in more restrictive settings (Beratan, 2013; Theoharis & Cosier, 2010; Yell, 2012). Educators are therefore permitted to use subjective measures to determine the educational environment in
which students with disabilities will receive their education (Beratan, 2013; Theoharis et al., 2011). These practices have maintained discriminatory segregation of African American students with disabilities, because they are disproportionately represented in both special education and restrictive or separate educational settings (Beratan, 2013; Theoharis & Cosier, 2010; Theoharis et al., 2011). Furthermore, the disability categories (i.e. intellectual disability, emotional disturbance) to which a disproportionate number of minority children are most likely to be assigned experience some of the poorest in-school and post-school outcomes (e.g., high dropout rates and behavioral difficulties) than any other disability categories (Beratan, 2013).

Race, class and dis/ability cannot be examined as separate entities, as special education has become the socially justifiable means to sort, marginalize and segregate students in the 21st century (Ferri & Connor, 2005). In fact, Mickelson (2001) called ability tracking the second generation segregation and in it’s purist form, the most “effective and pernicious means of resisting desegregation has been to over-refer students of color to segregated special education classes (Ferri & Connor, 2005).” (Theoharis et al., 2011, p. 3)

Including all children in public education continues to be one of the most contentious and inconsistently defined issues in education (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Artiles et al., 2006; Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Baglieri, Bejoian, Broderick, Connor & Valle, 2011; Goodman, Hazelkorn, Bucholz, Duffy & Kitta, 2011). Inclusion discourse in the United States is narrowly focused on children with disabilities and increasing their access to the general education curriculum and classroom (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Baglieri et al., 2011). Although physically placing students with disabilities in general education is in compliance with federal special education regulations, this practice does not address educator beliefs, knowledge, and skills related to diversity.
effective instructional practices for students with disabilities, or their capacity to change academic outcomes for students with disabilities (Christensen & Dorn, 1997; Goodman et al., 2011).

**Significance of the Study**

Within the inclusion literature, particular emphasis is placed on the importance of the social and cultural context in which students attend school, and the role leadership plays in supporting practices that communicate a commitment to providing high quality instruction to all students (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Burstein, Sears, Wilcoxen, Cabello, & Spagna, 2004; Edmonds, 1979; Jordan, Schwartz & McGhie-Richmond, 2009; Kugelmass, 2006; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002; Salisbury, 2006; Waldron & McCleskey, 2011). Context is not only defined by the physical space in which students learn or participate in activities, but also by the dominant values, beliefs, and practices that either support or discourage student academic and social growth (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2008-2009; Kugelmass, 2006).

Educator beliefs strongly influence professional behavior, instructional practice, and, in the case of school principals, powerfully predict the success of inclusion in their school (Brown, 2006; Hertberg-Davis & Brighton, 2006; Goddard, Neuremski, Goddard, Salloum, & Berebitsky, 2010; Ryan, 2010; Theoharis & Cosier, 2010). Given the strong relationship between principal beliefs and the success of inclusion, it is important for school leaders to have knowledge of special education laws, to understand the consequences of special education placement decisions, and to comprehend the positive impact of inclusive practices on achievement and postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities (Theoharis & Cosier, 2010). Theoharis & Cosier (2010) studied factors that contributed to the achievement of students across all categories of
disabilities. When controlling for factors that impact student achievement (i.e. race, socio-economics, gender, district size) "the most significant contributor to the achievement of students with disabilities was the time they spent in general education...this was true across all categories of disabilities and even more pronounced for students with significant disabilities" (Theoharis & Cosier, 2010, p. 4-5). These findings suggest that a principal’s beliefs about inclusion can effect positive change for students with disabilities when they are demonstrated through meaningful action in schools (e.g., policies, professional development, dialogue) and explicitly communicated through high expectations for inclusive instructional practices, equitable placement decisions, and improving academic outcomes for students with disabilities.

Similarly, a principal’s expectations, support, and commitment to inclusion are instrumental in shaping a school’s culture, bringing about sustainable change, and implementing instructional practices that improve outcomes for students with disabilities (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Aron & Loprest, 2012; Burstein et al., 2004; Fitch, 2003; Jordan et al., 2009; Kozleski, Sobel & Taylor, 2004; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002; Salisbury, 2006; Waldron & McLeskey, 2011). For instance, Salisbury (2006) identified similarities and differences among the perceptions of school leaders towards inclusion and the relationship of those perceptions to the levels of inclusiveness found in their schools. Regardless of student demographics, teacher beliefs, and other perceived barriers to inclusion, the principal’s view and support of inclusive education had the greatest impact on the success or failure of effective inclusive schools (Idol, 2006; Salisbury, 2006).

By nature of the position, school administrators possess the authority to expect and create environmental structures that support inclusion and to make decisions that consider what is “right” and “fair” for all students in the school community (Williams, 2001, p. 39). Further,
research suggests that this process begins with reflection and discussion, and is followed by action to change underlying personal and organizational beliefs about culture, race, and disability (Brown, 2006; Furman, 2012; Theoharis & Cosier, 2010). For instance, a study of white principals who successfully implemented inclusive education and increased academic achievement for African American students found that these principals had engaged in reflective practice around their beliefs, experiences, values, and assumptions about race (Theoharis & Cosier, 2010). Theoharis (2008), in his study of primarily white urban school principals, who were purposefully selected based on their self-identified commitment to social justice leadership, found that each principal had experienced impactful life experiences, both positive and negative, that contributed to their sense of responsibility and desire to foster equity in schools (Theoharis, 2008). These principals stated that reflection about underlying beliefs before taking action is necessary for leaders of urban schools, because instructional, disability, and disciplinary issues are often complex and have multiple underlying concerns (Theoharis, 2008).

The state and federal systems of increased academic accountability calls for principals to understand their role in developing the requisite contextual structures, practices, and belief systems that are effective at raising the academic achievement for African American students with disabilities in general education classrooms. By examining the forgoing leadership behaviors, perspectives, and knowledge, principals and policy makers can gain an understanding of what successful school administrators are doing to meet the requirements of the law and to confront the entrenched beliefs and practices that are barriers to achieving an inclusive culture in their schools.

Conceptual Framework

**Social justice theory.** Social justice theory is a theoretical view that supports the
reorganization of inequitable environments and procedures to ones that are committed to the fair and equal distribution of resources to benefit all members of society, especially those for whom resources have formerly been denied (Christensen & Dorn, 1997; Gale, 1999). In his theory of social justice Rawls (1971) suggests that the principles of social justice must first be applied to the institutional inequalities that are “inevitable in the basic structure of any society” (p.7).

Further, Rawls (1971) explains that the most profound inequalities exist when the social and economic position into which a person is born influences their achievement expectations and the opportunities to which they will have access (Rawls, 1971). Social institutions value “certain starting places over others”, and therefore create pervasive and unjustifiable inequalities that prematurely limit access to the success experienced by those individuals who enter society in a more favorable social position (Rawls, 1971, p. 7).

Inequalities exist in the U.S. educational system where there are distinct patterns of school success and failure discernable by individual or group characteristics such as ethnicity, economic status, ability, and disability (Brown, 2006; Ryan, 2010). Students from poverty backgrounds are at increased risk for academic and social failure, and are more likely to have learning, emotional, and behavioral challenges than students from higher socio-economic backgrounds (Cuthrell, Stapleton, & Ledford, 2010; Stichter, Stormont, & Lewis, 2006). For example, reading and mathematics readiness and academic achievement gaps between these same groups can be seen as early as the primary grades (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Stichter et al., 2006). These gaps exist in every state and are wider in large urban school districts (McKinsey & Company, 2009).

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics, the Center for Education Policy, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data for public schools, and the College
Board show that fewer than 31% of fourth-graders from low-income households scored at or above the basic level on the NAEP in reading (McKinsey & Company, 2009). Forty-eight percent of fourth and eighth grade black students are below the basic level in math and reading compared to 17% of whites, and economically disadvantaged black students have the largest achievement gap than any other student subgroup (McKinsey & Company, 2009). The “NAEP data suggests that the average non-poor white student is about three and a half years ahead in learning compared to the average poor black student” (McKinsey & Company, 2009, p. 13).

When allowed to persist, these gaps have cumulative effects on a child’s achievement and negatively impact their educational and postsecondary opportunities (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Cuthrell et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Huang & Moon, 2009; Lynn et al., 2010; McKinsey & Company, 2009; Stronge, Ward, Tucker, Hindman, 2007). Each year one third of U. S. high school students (approximately 1.3 million) do not earn a diploma before exiting school, and in large urban areas, the dropout rate is as high as 47% (Lacefield, Zeller & Van Kannel-Ray, 2010). The high school graduation rate for students with disabilities is about one half the rate for students without disabilities. Black students with disabilities dropped out at a rate of 44.5%, compared to 33.9% of white students with disabilities (National High School Center, 2007).

Among students with disabilities, the highest rate of dropout occurs among students with emotional disturbance (Bakken & Kortering, 1999; Smith, 2008; Stout & Christenson, 2009). African American males are disproportionally represented in the emotional disturbance category, the group that experiences the worst academic and social outcomes than students in all other disability categories (Trainor, Lindstrom, Simon-Burroughs, Martin & Sorrells, 2008). In 2002, among students with disabilities, 61.2% of students with serious emotional disturbance dropped
out of high school followed by students with specific learning disabilities 35.4%. In a study of the secondary school placement and exit patterns of students with emotional or behavioral disorders, dropout was their most common form of exit from school (Landrum, Katsiyannis & Archwamety, 2004). Youth with emotional disabilities account for 6.8% of students age 6-21 who are served under the category of emotional disturbance (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] Data, 2009), yet, four years after high school, 39% of out-of-school youth with emotional disturbance are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system than any other disability category whose involvement ranges from 2-18% (USDOE, IES, & OSER, 2009). These same adults are also more likely to be arrested (60%) than out-of-school youth in other disability categories (1-16%) (USDOE et al., 2009).

These patterns continue in postsecondary education and employment (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). In 2003, 64.9% of out-of-school youth with disabilities in the lowest household income category were engaged in postsecondary education, paid employment or job training compared to 87.6% of those from the highest income category (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], Institute of Education Sciences [IES], National Center for Special Education Research [NCSER], 2009). Additionally, 66.7% of black out-of-school youth with disabilities were engaged in postsecondary education, paid employment or job training compared to 78.9% of white out-of-school youth with disabilities (United States Department of Education [USDOE], Institute of Education Sciences [IES], & Office of Special Education Research [OSER], 2009).

**Liberal-democratic theories of social justice.** Liberal-democratic theorists of social justice [sometimes referred to as deficit model theorists] contend that all individuals have the same basic needs and that in order to compensate for the lack of equity in society, goods should be redistributed to meet unmet individual needs (Gale, 2000, p. 255). These needs are determined
by the dominant group who both possess the resources and set the standard for what is considered to be economically, educationally, and socially essential (Gale, 2000). This distributive model of social justice is dominant in education and is aligned with the modernist, medical model of disability that views disability as a physical or cognitive limitation found exclusively within the individual (Artiles, Harris-Murri, & Rostenberg, 2006; Danforth, 2008; Imrie, 2004; Furman, 2012; Ryan, 2010; Zaretsky, 2005). From this perspective, educators are influenced more by their knowledge and beliefs about the characteristics of specific disability categories, rather than by the environmental barriers that may influence the manifestation of the student’s disability (Danforth, 2008; Imrie, 2004; Jackson et al., 2009; Zaretsky, 2005).

Therefore, educational policies, beliefs, and practices, determined by teachers, administrators, policymakers (i.e. the dominant group), focus on fixing the child and provide justification for segregating students in order to meet their unmet needs (Danforth, 2008; Gale, 2000; Imrie, 2004; Jackson et al., 2009; Shepherd & Hasazi, 2007; Zaretsky, 2005).

**Social-democratic theories of social justice.** Social-democratic theories of social justice move beyond individualized equalization and distribution of social goods to providing equal access to previously denied opportunities that allow individuals or groups to compete for resources (Gale, 2000).

In education contexts, deserts and entitlements are often discussed in terms of academic merit: the notion that students can be individually ranked according to their academic performances (a function of their talents and efforts) and that they should be similarly rewarded (often through entry to privileged positions in schooling, employment and within society generally). What is seen by Nozick as unfair, then, are measures that both limit individuals’ freedoms to exercise
their talents and efforts and those which limit the rewards individuals receive from them (Gale, 2000, p. 257).

Students who have established a pattern of academic challenges, and who are considered disadvantaged by disability, poverty, and race, have received limited opportunities to access quality learning environments thereby restricting their chances for academic success and perpetuating their failure in school and society (Brown, 2006). These limits are evident in NAEP data that shows African American students are both overrepresented in the cluster of students scoring below basic level proficiency, underrepresented in the cluster of students who achieve at the highest level of proficiency in reading and math, and underrepresented in Advanced Placement courses (McKinsey & Company, 2009).

Across reading and math, less than 3 percent of black and Latino children are at the advanced level; by twelfth grade it is less than 1 percent (Exhibit 5). And despite a modest increase in the proportion of American students at the top level as defined by NAEP over the past 15 years, less than 10 percent of this increase involved black and Latino students. Moreover, very few blacks have access to challenging programs like Advanced Placement, and those who do have not fared well. Less than 4 percent of black students score a 3 or higher on an AP test at some point in high school, compared to 15 percent nationwide. This lagging representation among top performers matters to economic outcomes, because high achievers tend to be those who attend the top colleges and reap the highest earnings over their lives (McKinsey & Company, 2009, p. 11).

Urban schools have roughly twice the population of minority and poor students and are more likely to receive Title I funding through NCLB than both the national average and the average
found in suburban schools (Jacob, 2007). The communities in which these schools are located have higher unemployment and violent crime rates than those in all public and suburban schools (Jacob, 2007).

Students in urban schools also have limited access to quality instruction provided by a licensed teacher. In urban schools 12.4% of teacher contracts were either not renewed or were terminated, compared to 3.1% of all public school teacher contracts and 3% of the suburban teacher contracts (Jacob, 2007). The demand for qualified teachers in all subject areas is higher in urban schools than in suburban schools, and classrooms are more frequently staffed with unlicensed teachers (Asher & Fruchter, 2001; Cuthrell, Stapleton, & Ledford, 2010; Jacob, 2007; Trainor et al., 2008). The negative effects of teacher quality on student achievement are measureable and cumulative, and when students are repeatedly assigned to ineffective teachers they experience lower achievement gains than students who benefit from several years with an effective teacher (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Huang & Moon, 2009; Stronge et al., 2007).

Widely cited as the ‘achievement gap’, these disparities in the experiences of students in schools and the measure of what they have learned are both familiar and deeply troubling. The essential argument is that students are not finding equitable access to high quality teaching and learning opportunities, and, therefore, systematic differences in learning outcomes are magnified, especially in the nation’s urban centers (Portin, Knapp, Dareff, Feldman, Russell, Samuelson, & Yeh, 2009, p. 4; Edmonds, 1979).

Social justice leadership. To break the pervasive patterns of social inequity and marginalization of children because of their race, disability, or economic status, researchers advocate for an approach to school leadership that actively engages in confronting deep-seated
contextual values and changing school leader’s beliefs and practices to ones that support the academic success of all students (Artiles et al., 2006; Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Brown, 2006; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Edmond, 1979; Ryan, 2010; Shepherd & Hasazi, 2007).

Shepherd & Hasazi (2007) define social justice in education as “a commitment on the part of institutions – in this case schools – to ensure that all students have access to equal opportunities and outcomes that will in turn lead to full citizenship and actualization of their full potential” (p. 476). The actions of socially just leaders communicate a commitment to social justice and the belief that all students can achieve high educational outcomes (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Shepherd & Hasazi, 2007). Principals are in a unique position to effect change for marginalized children and youth. A study on the effects of leadership on student learning completed by researchers for The Wallace Foundation found that only one factor, teacher effectiveness, had a stronger impact (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). The impact of effective leadership is especially powerful in turning around the lowest performing schools (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Praxis-dimensions-capacities framework. Gale (2000) contends that the concept of social justice “‘describes an ideal, not a method of achieving it’” (p. 259); however, Furman (2012) developed the Praxis-Dimensions-Capacities Framework in order to both conceptualize the tenets of socially just leadership and to identify the prerequisite skills, knowledge, and actions required to practice it. Furman’s (2012) framework is structured around three essential ideas. First and foremost, social justice leadership is viewed as “praxis” “involving both reflection and action” (Furman, 2012, p. 202). Secondly, social justice leadership encompasses and crosses several “dimensions” of leadership practices – “the personal, interpersonal, communal, systematic, and ecological” (Furman, 2012, p. 202). Finally, each dimension of social
justice leadership requires specific “capacities for both aspects of praxis - reflection and action” (Furman, 2012, p. 202).

As previously mentioned, there are alarming discrepancies between the academic achievement and postsecondary outcomes of African American students generally and, more specifically, African American students with disabilities. Further, environmental barriers profoundly impact the success of these same students who attend urban schools. I have chosen this framework to understand how principals in schools where African American male students with disabilities have achieved at higher levels have approached the dimensions of social justice leadership proposed by Furman (2012).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is first identify principals who have been successful at raising the number of African American male students with learning disabilities or emotional disturbance that have earned a standard or advanced diploma. As such, this study will describe the beliefs, practices, and policies that these principals suppose to be instrumental in the achievement of these results. To assist me in this endeavor, I use the principles of social justice leadership to examine the “leadership arrangements” that create contexts that support the academic and social development of African American male students with disabilities (Ryan, 2010, p. 8).

Research Questions

As previously mentioned, socially just leaders challenge negative beliefs and practices regarding inclusion and disability, and actively engage in processes that alter the trajectory of failure for students with disabilities. It is through the lens of social justice leadership, that this study will examine the perceived and actual practices of school administrators that contribute to
the high graduation rates of African American males with learning disabilities and emotional disturbance. This study will also examine how the school context supports their learning needs. That said, this qualitative study is guided by the following research questions: What are the most important leadership actions that principals attribute to the graduation rates of African American male students with emotional and learning disabilities; How are the principal's beliefs and perceptions of inclusion, special education, race, and disability reflected in the implementation of academic and social programs and practices for students with disabilities?

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

The focus of this dissertation study is school principals and the leadership actions they perceive to be instrumental in improving outcomes for African American males with learning disabilities or emotional disturbance. In order to answer the research questions, I choose to view the challenging issues faced by school leaders and African American students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbance through the lens of social justice.

In the first section of the literature review, I examine Rawls' (1999) theory of social justice and apply it to educational leadership and the laws that are intended to protect African American children and children with disabilities. In the second section I cite literature on Disability Studies to provide an understanding of how different groups view disability and how these views have influenced and shaped educational policy and practice as it relates to race and the disproportionate representation of African American males in specific special education categories. This section ends with a discussion of the environmental factors and educator beliefs that contribute to disproportionality.

This discussion leads to the final two sections of this literature review, in which I put
forth the literature that supports the need for social justice leadership in schools that serve high percentages of minorities and children and youth who live in poverty. I also connect social justice leadership to educating students with disabilities since there is a limited social justice leadership research literature around this topic (Theoharis, 2007). Furman’s Praxis-Dimensions-Capacities Framework (PDCF) for Social Justice Leadership (2012) is outlined to understand the leadership beliefs and capacities to implement equitable practices in schools and the importance of this mindset to effectively lead special education in high school environments.

Social Justice Theory and Education

**Social justice theory.** Rawls (1999) contends that social justice is the “first [and most important] virtue of social institutions” (p. 3), meaning that organizational behavior is guided by standards and expectations set forth in a universal agreement of what is just and unjust (Degoey, 2000; Edmonds, 1979; Rawls, 1999, p.4). Rawl’s (1971) theory suggests that there are several underlying principles in organizational justice: 1) organizations, regardless of efficiency, must be eradicated if they are unjust; 2) the welfare of society cannot override the welfare of individuals; and 3) equal citizenship is universally recognized and accepted (Rawls, 1971). Rawl’s (1971) theory states that in a just society, all citizens are bound by certain “rules of conduct” (p. 4) and work cooperatively towards a common goal. Further, special interest groups do not easily influence the universally shared “conception of justice”, because everyone is working towards the collective advancement of society and its citizens (Degoey, 2000; Rawls, 1999, p. 5).

Rawls (1971) recognizes that societies are not ideal in this regard and that conceptions of justice and injustice in organizations are socially constructed and played out in multiple ways (Rawls, 1971, p. 5). Society is not impartial or in agreement about how and to whom goods and services are distributed, and conflict arises when one group is perceived to receive advantages
Rawls (1971) suggests that a *conception of justice* is ultimately defined by the individuals who collectively reach agreement regarding what is just and unjust and the structure through which goods, services, and social advantages will be distributed (p. 10). This agreement forms the group’s “initial status quo” and the foundation for all subsequent decisions and actions (Rawls, 1971, p. 11).

**Social justice and education.** Creating a universal *conception of justice* in education is challenging, because, as with other organizations, the application of social justice in schools is heavily influenced by the complexities of individual school contexts and cultures (DeMatthews & Mayhinney, 2014; Theoharis, Tracy-Bronson, & Bull, 2013). The meaning that educators ascribe to social justice is varied and shaped by previous life experiences (DeMatthews and Mayhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007). These experiences shape the set of values and beliefs that guide teacher and administrator practices in the school context (Reed & Swaminathan, 2014). Students’ past experiences, their academic achievement, and their cultural background and ethnicity contribute to the school’s climate and culture, their perceptions of school, and their understanding of justice (Reed & Swaminathan, 2014).

DeMatthews & Mayhinney (2014) discourage labeling school principals as social justice leaders, because leading for social justice is an ongoing “experiential” process of reflection, capacity building, and action to eliminate marginalizing policies and practices (p. 4). The role of the principal is varied and demanding. Their responsibilities include managerial duties such as facilities management as well as teacher development and supervision, staying current on state, national, and district level policies, monitoring student progress, and establishing a positive school climate and culture (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Principals can more effectively and proactively approach and respond to unique contextual circumstances (e.g., leading for
social justice in schools) after becoming fluent in their application of these fundamental leadership skills (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Social justice leadership requires both personal reflection on beliefs and values and action to implement practices that are fair and just (Furman, 2012; Gale, 2000). There is not one universal definition of social justice leadership; however, school leaders who are guided by the principles of social justice take an action-oriented approach to 1) recognizing and correcting inequitable systemic structures that perpetuate failure for marginalized students; 2) creating compassionate and inclusive school cultures; 3) keeping issues of diversity and equity central to their leadership practice; 4) recognizing their personal beliefs about diversity and fostering socially just values and beliefs of school personnel; and 5) ensuring the implementation of socially just instructional policies, practices, and resource allocation (Burnstein et al., 2004; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012, Gale, 2000; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002; Ryan, 2010; Shields & Mohan, 2008; Theoharis, 2008, 2010; Theoharis et al., 2013; Trujillo & Cooper, 2014).

Another tenet of social justice theory suggests that when organizations violate the universal system of social justice, they must implement mechanisms to stabilize equity and create systems that proactively prevent barriers to justice (Rawls, 1999). Both IDEA (2004) and NCLB (2001) have been instrumental in both improving educational opportunities for students with disabilities and holding schools accountable for their progress (DeMathews & Mawhinney, 2014). Before leaders and policy makers can address these injustices they must first concede that inequities exist (DeMathews and Mawhinney, 2014). Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia and Nolly (2004) assert that accountability policies such as NCLB originated from the federal government's acknowledgment that long-standing achievement gaps between racial, ability, and economic
subgroups were “educationally and ethically deplorable” and that systems for closing them must be implemented (p. 133).

Rawls (1999) contends that while organizations can adopt and internalize the principles of social justice, the strength, stability, and integrity of this belief system must be demonstrated in the sustained implementation of unbiased policy and practice. Through the legal principle of equal protection, lawmakers adopted landmark legislation including *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and IDEA (1997) that cast a spotlight on the harmful effects of segregated education on African American children and children with disabilities (Boone & King-Berry, 2007; Zion & Blanchett, 2011). Inherent in their decisions was a pledge to reverse the trajectory of educational outcomes for these groups of students (Boone & King-Berry, 2007; Zion & Blanchett, 2011). Equally important is the scholarly assertion that *Brown* established legal precedent that resulted in the “successful challenge to the constitutionality of a ‘separate but equal’ doctrine for students with disabilities” (Boone & King-Berry, 2007, p. 337; Zion & Blanchett, 2011). In addition to *Brown* and IDEA (2004), NCLB is another means by which achievement disparities between student subgroups have been brought to light. The aforementioned court case and federal laws can be viewed as stabilizing mechanisms for the injustices experienced by marginalized student subgroups.

Other researchers, however, are skeptical of this argument. While monumental changes in public school access and accountability have been made as a result of *Brown*, (1954), IDEA (2004), and NCLB (2002), the academic and social achievement gaps between white students and African American children and children with disabilities remain unacceptably large (Beratan, 2013; Boone & King-Berry, 2007; Fowler, 2011; Gardiner et al., 2009; Zion & Blanchett, 2011). These researchers maintain that the LRE clause within IDEA preserves the
practice of disproportionate referral and identification for special education and placement in racially segregated classrooms (Blanchett, 2006; Beratan, 2013, p. 343; Danforth, 2008; Imrie, 2004; Jackson et al., 2009; Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges & Jennings, 2010; Shepherd & Hasazi, 2007; Theoharis & Cosier, 2010; Zaretsky, 2005). The over-referral of students of color to special education and segregated classrooms has become the “invisible hand that defends, exonerates, and affirms social/educational inequality” (Gallagher, 2011, p. 66) and “the most effective and pernicious means of resisting desegregation” (Ferri & Connor, 2005).” (Theoharis et al., 2011, p. 3).

Blanchett (2006) argues that there are separate subsystems in which white and black students with and without disabilities receive their education. African American students are more likely to be taught in separate educational settings for the majority of the school day by less qualified teachers than white students with disabilities (Blanchett, 2006). They are also more likely to earn special diplomas or certificates of attendance, thereby limiting their potential for employment and postsecondary education or training (Blanchett, 2006). Other researches suggest that accountability measures set forth in NCLB encourage class and racial tracking, incentivize the misrepresentation of state assessment results, and justify the exclusion of low performing students who are perceived as preventing schools from achieving academic benchmarks (Gardiner et al., 2009; Giroux & Schmidt, 2004). Beratan (2013) contends that the deep-seated and “uninterrogated beliefs” and practices attached to discriminatory educational policies and practices, “subvert even the most well-intentioned policies” and preserve “existing hierarchies” (p. 338).

Fraser (1997) illustrates the social justice principles of redistribution and recognition. The goals of redistribution are specifically focused on destabilizing group differences and
removing economic inequalities through the reallocation of resources (p. 16). The practice of recognition, on the other hand, establishes the "‘equal and moral worth of persons’" and their innate value to society (Fraser, 1997, p. 16). Fraser (1997) contends that issues of cultural inequality cannot be solely addressed by redistribution and that "people who are exposed to both cultural injustice and economic injustice need both recognition and redistribution" (p. 16).

Keddie (2010) applies Fraser’s principles of recognition and redistribution to the educational context and suggests that students must have equal access to educational opportunities in order to be prepared for meaningful employment as adults. In the field of education, efforts to provide an equal education are primarily focused on the distribution of material goods (redistribution); however, social justice advocates in education suggest that schools must stretch beyond equality and provide an equitable education (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Keddie, 2010). What might be considered stabilizing mechanisms within IDEA (2004), Brown (1954), and NCLB (2002) are actually insufficient acts of recognition by the federal government that educational inequality exists for certain subgroups of students. Without redistribution (i.e., providing FAPE), policies and practices that sustain inequality in schools and accentuate individual and cultural differences will remain (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014).

An equitable education suggests resource allocation based on context, which would include attention to funding and teachers but in a manner that pays closer attention to the specific needs of a community. An equitable education is better defined as a culturally relevant education (Ladson-Billings, 1994) in that it is designed to address the material conditions of students’ lives while maintaining a high level of intellectual rigor. At the same time, an equitable education encourages students to embrace the sociocultural
richness of the community as a resource, rather than as a barrier to be overcome (Duncan-Andrade, 2007, p. 681).

African American male students with disabilities belong to groups that require cultural recognition (e.g. as people with disabilities and as African Americans) and redistribution (e.g. as students who are economically disadvantaged). Race, disability, and their overrepresentation in disability groups that experience the highest dropout rates and the lowest graduation rates put them at high risk for long-term failure (Wilkins & Huckabee, 2014). While redistribution in the form of program funding is required, recognition of each student’s worth in the school setting and society is also essential (Keddie, 2010).

Disability Studies and Disproportionality

Disability studies (DS) scholars view disability as a “natural human difference” and challenge the mindset that disability is a pathological limitation in an individual’s physical or cognitive capacity (Artiles, Harris-Murri, & Rostenberg, 2006; Baglieri et al., 2011; Connor, 2008; Danforth, 2008; Imrie, 2004; Reid & Knight, 2006; Ryan, 2010; Zaretsky, 2005). DS researchers in education view disability through a social constructivist lens and contend that disability is manifested as a result of environmental barriers that interfere with the progress of a child’s learning and social development (Beratan, 2013; Connor, 2008; Cosier, 2010; Gallagher, 2011; Riddell, 2007; Reid & Knight, 2006; Riehl, 2000; Ryan, 2010). For example, Anyon (2009) describes learning disabilities as a “mismatch” between instruction and the needs of the student instead of as an inherent disability that prevents the child from learning (p. 49). Once students are recognized as having a disability, “the system of classification provides the means by which professionals are able to conceptualize, speak about, and respond to the identified individual” without regard to whether the child has been afforded the opportunity to learn in an
effectively taught and well-managed classroom environment (Baglieri et al., 2011, p. 2133; Coldren & Spillane, 2007; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Gottfried & Johnson, 2012). According to Reid and Knight (2006), social constructivists also challenge the notion that children with disabilities should receive their education outside of the general education classroom.

DS scholars also raise questions about the relationship between the process of disability determination, educational placement, and the disproportionate representation of African American children in special education (Reid & Knight, 2006). Contrary to social constructivists, proponents of the medical or deficit model, conceptualize disability as an “individual and inherent deficit” that interferes with learning (Beratan, 2013, p. 343; Danforth, 2008; Imrie, 2004; Jackson et al., 2009; Reid & Knight, 2006; Shepherd & Hasazi, 2007; Theoharis & Cosier, 2010; Zaretsky, 2005). Consequently, this disability mindset supports and justifies the overt and perhaps well-intentioned beliefs that segregated special education is a justifiable means to address the student’s learning needs (Beratan, 2013, p. 343; Danforth, 2008; Imrie, 2004; Jackson et al., 2009; Reid & Knight, 2006; Shepherd & Hasazi, 2007; Theoharis & Cosier, 2010; Zaretsky, 2005). Unfortunately, students who are taught in segregated classrooms do not perform better academically than those educated in general education (Anyon, 2009).

Social justice scholars argue that the principles of the medical model are also applied more covertly to those who are racially and culturally different as evidenced by the disproportionate referral of African American males for special education and their identification as having a learning or emotional disabilities (Baglieri et al., 2011; Coldren & Spillane, 2007; Reid & Knight, 2006). According to a report by the Office of Civil Rights (2006), the school age population consisted of 17% black students, yet they accounted for 29% of those having
emotional and behavioral disabilities and 20% of those having a learning disability (Ford, 2012). These high incidence disability categories are identified using more subjective or “clinical judgment”, leaving to wide interpretation the function of a student’s academic and social behaviors and subsequently their educational program and placement (Blanchett, 2006; Ford, 2012; Gardner & Miranda, 2001; Harry & Anderson, 1994, pg. 603; Harry & Klinger, 2007; Hoge, Liaupsin, Umbreit & Ferro, 2012; Serpell et al., 2009; Zaretsky, 2005). The issues of overrepresentation of minority groups in special education is concerning, yet little progress has been made since the Office of Civil Rights began publicly reporting disproportionality in 1992 (Harry & Anderson, 1994; USDOE, 2010). IDEA (2004) requires states to have policies and procedures in place to prevent disproportionality and to review, disaggregate, and monitor data around this issue.

**Environmental impact on disproportionality.** Gardner & Miranda (2001) argue that social, psychological, and environmental variables have an impact on the learning of African American urban youth and contribute to their overrepresentation in special education. Urban schools located in large inner cities have significantly higher unemployment and violent crime rates than those in suburban areas (Gardner & Miranda, 2001). They are more likely to be the target of accountability policies that sanction schools for not reaching academic benchmarks (McMunn-Dooley & Czop-Assaf, 2009), yet they have fewer resources and educate roughly twice the population of minority and poor students than both the national average and the averages indicated in suburban schools (Boone & King-Berry, 2007; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Gardner & Miranda, 2001; Gottfried & Johnson, 2012; Jacob, 2007).

According to the NCES (2011) African American students represent 16% of the total school age population, yet they constitute 25% of the population in urban schools and 14% of the
population in suburban schools. The same report indicates that white students represent 52% of
the overall student population and 30% and 52% of the students in urban and suburban schools
respectively. Yet another interesting pattern is seen in the statistics provided by the NCES
(2011). As the size of the city increases, white enrollment decreases and black student enrollment
increases. For example, in large cities, 20% of the students are white and 28% of the students are
African American. The population of schools in small cities includes 46% white students and
only 18% black students. As previously indicated, large urban schools have the highest
concentrations of poverty, so these data suggest that African American students are more likely
to attend public schools with high concentrations of poverty than their white counterparts.

Unfortunately, schools with high levels of poverty do not have high levels of academic
achievement (USDOE, 1996). Data from NCES (2011) indicate that 42% of urban and 29% of
suburban 4th grade students scored below basic levels on the NAEP Reading assessment.
Furthermore, 71% of urban school teachers are white and 76% are female, suggesting a cultural
disconnect between teachers and their students in urban schools (Boone & King-Berry, 2007;
Ford, 2012; Gardner & Miranda, 2001, p. 258; NCES, 2011). Both teachers and students in
urban schools reported more personal threats of violence, the presence of gangs, observations of
poverty, higher absenteeism, and higher rates of tardiness than in suburban schools (NCES,
2011).

Dropout rates are substantially higher in school districts that serve a large percentage of
minorities, students who live in extreme poverty, students with disabilities, and English language
learners (Orfield, Losen, Wald & Swanson, 2004). In the nation’s largest cities, the graduation
rates for African American students is as low as 30%, and “in schools where 90% or more of the
enrollment were students of color, only 42% of all the freshmen advanced to grade 12” (Orfield
et al., 2004, p. 6). Consequently, students in these schools have fewer opportunities to interact with high achieving students (Orfield et al., 2004).

**Educator beliefs and disproportionality.** Studies suggest that principals and teachers engage in “pathologizing the lived experiences of students” when they assign responsibility for low academic achievement on a child’s disability, their families, and their economic circumstances (Gardiner et al., 2009; Lynn et al., 2010; Shields, 2004, pg. 112). In a study that examined the beliefs of African American teachers about the chronic underachievement of African American male high school students in a low performing urban school district, Lynn et al. (2010) found that the majority of teachers acknowledged little or no responsibility for their students’ learning and had strong doubts regarding their ability to effectively teach them. Instead, these teachers blamed their students for their failure in school (Lynn et al., 2010). Consequently, families and their children begin to internalize these beliefs, viewing obstacles as insurmountable and believing that external factors determine their success (Coleman et al., 1966; Finn, 1989; Lynn et al., 2010; Shields, 2004; Smith 2008). Accordingly, children and families become discouraged and unmotivated to change their performance in school (Lynn et al., 2010; Shields, 2004; Smith 2008). Scanlon and Mellard (2002) studied the perceptions of young adults with learning and emotional disabilities who dropped out of high school, and they found that students most often reported factors such as a lack of interest in school, challenges resulting from their disability, and absenteeism as reasons for dropping out (p. 247).

**A Call to Action**

The aforementioned research literature indicates an urgent need to achieve equity in urban schools. Urban schools educate 25% of all students and those who live in poverty and almost 50% of students from minority backgrounds (Gottfried & Johnson, 2012). In large U.S.
cities like Chicago and Los Angeles black students are the majority, and the availability of
teachers whose instructional practice is most effective in high minority, urban schools is scarce
(National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004). In addition to the multiple
risk factors associated with attending urban schools, when young black men experience the
added stress of a disability, their risk for dropping out of school, experiencing poor
postsecondary outcomes, engaging with negative peer groups, and participating in unlawful
behaviors increases (Christie, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Jones, 2011; Murray and Naranjo,
2008).

Murray & Naranjo (2008) studied the persistence to graduation of eleven economically
disadvantaged, black, urban high school youth with learning disabilities. Of the 70 students with
learning disabilities who entered the school’s freshman cohort, only these 11 students were
eligible for graduation in their senior year (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). Multiple studies identify
common “protective” influences that are present when students, in spite of multiple risk factors,
persist to graduation (Murray & Naranjo, 2008, p. 150). These include family support, positive
peer interactions, relevancy of the course of study to students’ postsecondary goals, and caring
and effective teachers (Alliance for Excellence in Education, 2009; Dunn, Chambers & Rabren,
2004; Murray & Naranjo, 2008). Internal attributes identified as influential on their success
included self-determination, a willingness to take responsibility and seek help from adults in the
school, and to understand the connection between school completion and attaining postsecondary
education and employment goals (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). Students with high levels of self-
determination achieve more positive school and post-school outcomes, are more likely to
graduate from high school, to be engaged in their learning, and to recognize their control to
effect positive change in their lives (Zhang & Law, 2005).
Furthermore, researchers have identified teacher practices in high performing urban schools that help students to achieve positive academic outcomes (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Outreach Partnerships at Michigan State University, 2004; Silva Mangiate, 2010; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson & Rodriguez, 2003). In addition to having content expertise, effective teachers in urban schools have strong feelings of responsibility to help students achieve (McMunn-Dooley & Czop-Assaf, 2009; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Huang & Moon, 2008; Silva Mangiate, 2010). Reeves (2005) analyzed data from more than 130,000 students in 228 urban, suburban, and rural schools in order to find instructional strategies associated with high student achievement in schools with high minority and poor student populations. Teachers in these schools were intensely focused on academics, frequently assessed and collaboratively monitored student progress, and increased instructional time in reading and mathematics interventions (Outreach Partnerships, 2004; Reeves, 2005).

High unemployment and crime rates, a reduction in tax revenue, and increased social welfare costs are all consequences of the high school dropout rate and should command society’s attention (Christie et al., 2007; Murray & Naranjo, 2008; Zion & Blanchett, 2011). According to a report of the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011), “if the students who dropped out of the Class of 2009 had graduated, the nation’s economy would have benefited from nearly $154 billion in additional income over the course of their lifetimes”. It is projected that if dropout rates remain stable, the cost to the nation will be in excess of $1.5 trillion (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011).

Furman & Gruenewald (2004) contend that in order to disrupt the status quo, society must execute practices that shift the pattern of failure for marginalized students. Skrtic (1991) suggests that educators adopt the perspective of “critical pragmatism”, a mode of analysis in
which social practices, instead of the child, are treated as problematic. Shepherd & Hasazi (2007) contend that the alignment of educational practices with the democratic ideals and standards of educational excellence can be achieved when school leaders adopt a social justice framework to guide the school’s academic and social programs and practices.

Furman & Gruenewald (2004) argue that, in order to achieve social justice, the existing educational system’s policies must shift from enforcing accountability for student achievement on state assessments to ones that support “community well-being as well as other important ‘moral purposes’ of schooling” (p. 48). Social justice leaders confront the realities faced by historically marginalized students and recognize and actively exercise their positional authority to change educational environments that create barriers to student success (Gardiner et al., 2009; Khalifa, M., 2010; Place, Ballenger, Wasonga, Piveral, & Edmonds, 2010). They support the school community to appreciate diversity and to develop the skills and knowledge to teach students in the ways that most effectively support their academic and social development, empower them to successfully navigate their current circumstances, and prepare them to achieve their postsecondary goals (Cummins, 2009; Giroux and Schmidt, 2004).

Place et al. (2010) conducted focus groups to study U.S. superintendent and principal perceptions of their leadership practices. Although principals were not questioned specifically about social justice, their responses indicated a moral obligation and sense of purpose to exercise their positional authority and influence to expedite action on the behalf of historically marginalized students. Overwhelmingly, principals communicated that they could no longer “ignore” historically marginalized subgroups of students and expressed with certainty that “schools perpetuate social injustices” (Place et al., 2010; p. 535, 537).

According to Grant & Gibson (2013) social justice in education is a human
rights issue. Protection and enactment of fundamental human rights are at the core of these twenty-first century calls for social justice. This remains as true in education as in other justice movements. While critics decry calls for social justice as class warfare, the rise of the welfare state, or even anarchy, we believe that calls for social justice are simply calls for fundamental human rights (Grant & Gibson, 2013, p. 81).

**Furman’s Praxis-Dimensions-Capacities Framework for Social Justice Leadership**

Furman’s (2012) Praxis-Dimensions-Capacities Framework (PDCF) for social justice leadership emphasizes the requisite skills and knowledge required to implement equitable practices in schools and captures the reflection and action that is needed across five dimensions of leadership practice. These dimensions include the personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological (Furman, 2012). Furman (2012) refers to the application of each dimension as *praxis* and defines it as, in this context, an understanding of the injustices in education while engaging in a continuous cycle of reflection and action to transform unjust environments. The leader must have knowledge of social justice at the systems level, and the capacity to continuously reflect and act upon that knowledge to facilitate change (Furman, 2012).

Leading low achieving schools with diverse student populations requires a critical and unique set of leadership skills (Furman, 2012; Shields, 2004). The increased prominence of scholarship related to social justice in education, and more specifically in educational leadership, has placed greater emphasis on the “moral purposes of leadership in schools and how to achieve these purposes.” (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004, p. 49); however, there is limited literature related to how to best develop socially just leaders who can change inequitable educational systems (Trujillo & Cooper, 2014). Furman (2012) proposes this framework as a means by
which to both identify social justice leadership in schools and to further examine their skill sets. The requisite skills, knowledge and actions required within each dimension are outlined in Table 1 (Appendix B).

**Leadership themes in social justice literature.** Furman (2012) developed the PDCF by identifying common themes in the social justice leadership literature. These themes are identified and described in the next section. I have chosen Furman’s (2012) framework and social justice theory to guide this dissertation study and to understand how high school principals perceive their beliefs and leadership actions to be instrumental in supporting African American males with learning and emotional disabilities to complete school and earn a standard or advanced diploma. My findings will enable me to determine how these school leaders approach the dimensions of social justice leadership in a particular school context.

**Action-oriented and transformative.** “Perhaps the most prevalent theme in the social justice educational literature is that social justice leaders are proactive change agents who are engaged in ‘transformative leadership’ (Shields, 2004).” (Furman, 2012, p. 195). Shields (2004) proposes that transformative leaders anchor themselves in the “moral and ethical values in a social context” and work earnestly to build strong relationships (p. 113). They “take seriously their accountability” for creating socially just learning environments (Shields, 2004, p. 113). In order to support sustainable change, leaders must have the capacity to analyze school contexts and identify high impact changes that move an organization closer to achieving its mission (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Theoharis & Cosier, 2010). As such, transformative leaders encourage open discussion about diversity and critically assess current structures, beliefs, and practices for equity (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Furman, 2012, p. 195; Shields, 2004; Theoharis, 2010). When inequitable practices are
discovered, they engage stakeholders in changing entrenched beliefs and practices that exclude and marginalize to ones that include and value all students (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Furman, 2012; Place et al., 2010; Theoharis, 2010). These changes go beyond superficial policy changes and one-time workshops to “ongoing actions, skills, habits of mind, and competencies that are continually being created, questioned, and refined” (Ainscow & Sandill 2010; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014, p. 4). It is especially important for leaders in urban schools to create cultures that are responsive to diversity and facilitate the implementation of culturally sensitive practices (Blanchett, 2006; Gardiner et al., 2009).

**Committed and persistent.** Socially just leaders are courageous in their commitment to remove inequitable barriers to student achievement (Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2010). Place et al. (2010) found that school principals’ frustration was most often related to external barriers, over which they had no direct influence, which interfered with student learning and performance. In spite of these challenges, the principals continuously worked to improve the teaching and learning process and to refocus teacher attention on student learning instead of state assessment pass rates (Place et al., 2010, p. 537). They used their authority to circumvent rules and harmful laws, and to establish programs that supported school completion for at-risk students (Place et al., 2010; Theoharis, 2010).

Theoharis (2010) studied the strategies used by principals committed to social justice to implement equitable practices in their buildings. The leaders were met with “‘enormous’”, “‘never ceasing’”, and often “‘unbearable’” resistance from unsupportive teachers, parents, other principals who did not share their views (Theoharis, 2010, p. 339). For example, principals faced resistance from teachers who did not want students with disabilities placed in their classroom and from district level professionals who implemented policies that required students with specific
characteristics to be removed from general education (Theoharis, 2010). Place et al. (2010) found that leaders oriented towards social justice were deeply affected by the negative beliefs and inequitable practices of teachers. These negative beliefs transformed into negative and prejudicial comments about students (Place et al., 2010). When making instructional and hiring decisions, one principal stated that he placed the highest priority on ensuring that students had the “best staff possible” and that he would “help anybody on staff get better” (Place et al., 2010, p. 538). Principals stayed committed to their cause through networking with other like-minded principals and keeping central to their focus their goals for social justice (Theoharis, 2010).

**Inclusive and democratic.** Social justice leadership scholars contend that students achieve equitable academic and social outcomes through inclusive educational practices (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014, p. 3; Furman, 2012; Theoharis et al., 2013). Implementing inclusion in schools involves a change in adult behavior. It requires a shift in educator beliefs about diversity, teaching and learning, and providing specialized instruction to students with disabilities in general education (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Burnstein et al., 2004; Jordan et al., 2009; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002; Ryan, 2010; Ryndak, Reardon, Benner & Ward, 2007). Leaders for social justice shift beliefs from “acceptance” and “watered-down tolerance” to create inclusive mindsets that value the contribution of all students, families, and educators (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012; Grant & Gibson, 2013, p. 91; Place et al., 2010, p. 541). For example, research studies have found that principals invested substantial time and resources in increasing teachers’ instructional capacity to implement inclusive practices across school contexts (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Aron & Loprest, 2012; Burnstein et al., 2004; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; DiPaola et al., 2004; Fitch, 2003; Fullan, 2006; Furman, 2012; Idol, 2006; Jordan et al., 2009; Kozleski, Sobel
& Taylor, 2004; Kugelmass, 2006; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002; Ryan, 2000; Salisbury, 2006; Smith & Leonard (2005); Waldron & McLeskey, 2011). Principals instituted shared leadership and decision-making practices, created professional learning communities, remained visible to teachers and students, and established structures to support professional collaboration (Burstein et al., 2004; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Ryan, 2000; Ryndak et al., 2007; Sautner, 2008; Smith & Leonard, 2005; Theoharis et al., 2013; Waldron & McLeskey, 2011).

Implementing inclusion also requires leaders to clearly articulate to the school community their vision for inclusion and to then communicate their commitment to this vision through focused and strategic action (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Artiles et al., 2006; Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Burstein, Sears & Wicoxen, 2004; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2008-2009; Kugelmass, 2006; Paliokosta & Blandford, 2010; Ryan, 2010; Ryndak et al., 2007; Salisbury, 2006; Waldron & McLeskey, 2011). Researchers who studied the socially just actions of principals have found that they stand up for what is best for children by eliminating segregated educational programs, addressing directly issues of race and disability, and creating a welcoming and inclusive school climate (Place et al., 2010; Theoharis, 2010). When school leaders implement inclusive education with integrity, teachers are more invested in the principal’s belief system and “organize themselves accordingly” (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Jordan, Schwartz & McGhie-Richmond, 2009; Sautner, 2008, p. 144; Smith & Leonard, 2005).

While there are common themes and practices that are universal to the implementation of inclusion in schools, leaders may need to tailor their strategies to appropriately accommodate for unique contexts (Burstein et al., 2004; Ryndak et al., 2007). For example, Theoharis et al. (2013) found in their study of urban elementary school leaders that when the principal’s beliefs created
barriers to implementing inclusion, those principals reached out to informal school leaders and to higher education community partners to initiate change and successfully implement an inclusion model.

In order to effectively implement inclusion in their school, principals must also have a strong knowledge of special education laws and evidence-based instructional practices that are effective at supporting students with disabilities and others at risk of school failure (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Principals can then organize systems to support the implementation of special education services and supports in general education and better communicate with families of children with disabilities (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; DiPaola et al., 2004; Hertberg-Davis & Brighton, 2006; Salisbury, 2006; Theoharis et al., 2013).

**Relational and caring.** Socially just leaders are committed to the practice of relationship building and identify it as a fundamental strategy used to foster dialogue among stakeholder groups including those in the local community (DeMatthews & Mawhiney, 2014; Furman, 2012; Reihl, 2000; Shields, 2004). Furthermore, leadership for school improvement is achieved through collaboration, shared expectations, and the exchange of resources among the internal and external school community (DeMatthews & Mawhiney, 2014; DiPaola et al., 2004; Leithwood et al., 2004; Ryan, 2010; Smylie et al., 2002). For example, DeMatthews and Mawhiney (2014) found that school leadership publicly advocated for inclusion while also ensuring that it was implemented effectively. They provided ongoing professional development and support to teachers to ensure that they had the skills and knowledge to meet the learning needs of their students (DeMatthews and Mawhiney, 2014).

Lastly, socially just leaders nurture the critical school-family partnership by creating an inviting school climate and keeping them informed of all school and district policies, activities.
and initiatives (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Gardiner et al., 2009; Gardner & Miranda, 2001; Pivik, McComas & Laflamme, 2002; Place et al., 2010; Reihl, 2000; Salisbury, 2006).

Specific actions were taken in one school to eliminate confusion about inclusion and to increase partnerships with families. The principal held informal gatherings to share the benefits of inclusion with families and also worked closely with teachers to meaningfully include families in the IEP meeting process (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Principals in urban schools recognize that many urban families and families of students with disabilities do not have a visible presence in their child’s education (Gardner & Miranda, 2001; Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein & Sumi, 2005). Theoharis (2010) found in a study of elementary, middle, and high school principals that negative behavior and communication between staff and school stakeholders had marginalized certain families and community members. These principals took an active role in educating staff on effective communication with families and creating welcoming school cultures (Theoharis, 2010).

**Oriented toward a socially just pedagogy.** As illustrated in this literature review, school effectiveness in urban schools is complex, and the impact of the school’s principal on student achievement is, although indirect, instrumental in setting a direction for the school (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 4). While challenging and time consuming, it is important for principals in urban schools to be continuously involved in the instructional process, and, through ongoing observation and feedback sessions, to support teachers’ understanding that instructional practices have a direct and lasting impact on student learning and performance (Coldren & Spillane, 2007).

Like principals in effective schools, socially just leaders have the capacity and commitment to facilitate the appraisal and equitable allocation of resources and to evaluate the
curriculum and pedagogy to ensure both quality and equity (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012). In order to accomplish this, it is necessary for school leaders to have a deep understanding of the distinct instructional practices that support student learning in urban schools (Trujillo & Cooper, 2014).

Leaders in inclusive schools are committed to encouraging ongoing professional learning that fosters collaboration between special and general education teachers and builds teacher capacity and confidence to make learning accessible to struggling learners (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran & Walther-Thomas, 2004; Waldron & McLeskey, 2011). Special education teachers are trained to design instructional interventions that ameliorate the negative impact of the child's disability on their academic progress while general education teachers bring to the relationship a deep content knowledge and a variety of instructional approaches (Danforth, 2008; Imrie, 2004; Jackson et al., 2009; Ryan, 2010; Zaretsky, 2005). Differentiating instruction to meet the needs of all learners is a skill that requires both teachers to be mindful of the various skill, experience, and readiness levels at which students approach learning tasks (Tomlinson, 2000). These differences impact what we teach, the pace at which we teach it, and the level and intensity of supports that students require while learning (Tomlinson, 2000).

The first step to improving special education involves examining and evaluating educator beliefs and assumptions about students with disabilities and their capacity to learn (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Skrtic, 1991). Teacher and principal beliefs about student learning and disability strongly influence instructional practices. Unless children believe that their teachers and leaders have faith in their ability to learn, struggling learners will find it challenging to feel connected to the school community (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Fitch, 2003; Hertberg-Davis &
Chapter Three

Methodology

For this dissertation study I used qualitative research methods. The empirical data were collected within a descriptive, multi-case study design using ethnographic interviewing techniques and document reviews (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). Employing a descriptive case study approach allowed me to 1) investigate and describe the lived experiences of principals in their everyday environments, and 2) discover the meaning ascribed to this phenomenon by the principal (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach & Richardson, 2005; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009, p. 18). In this dissertation, the phenomenon described is principal leadership, and the everyday environment is the school contexts in which they lead. Further, this multi-case study of three high school principals attempted to gain insight into their beliefs and perceptions regarding their leadership practices. I moved toward further understanding the leadership actions that principals attribute to the outcomes achieved by African American males with disabilities. In this dissertation study each principal was treated as a case.

Theoretical Considerations

Social justice theory and Furman’s (2012) conceptual framework bound this case study. Furman’s (2012) framework for social justice leadership involves the application of knowledge and skills that requires both reflection and action across several dimensions of leadership. For example, principals must not only possess the requisite knowledge and skills required to create inclusive and equitable school environments, but they must actively engage the school community in this process (Furman, 2012). This requires the principal to have knowledge of
1) the multiple contexts (e.g., school, district, community) in which their leadership is situated; 2) the interrelationships between those contexts; and 3) the school’s role in navigating these contextual factors (Furman, 2012). In postulating that principals create environments that promote the academic and social development of African American male students with disabilities, I attempted to give meaning to principal beliefs, perceptions, and experiences within this particular context (Merriam, 1998). I also wanted to know how their beliefs, perceptions, and experiences were demonstrated in their actions to achieve equitable outcomes for students with disabilities (Williams, 2001). I studied three contextually similar cases which allowed me to compare across contexts the ways in which each principal approaches the dimensions of leadership in Furman’s (2012) PDCF. *Figure 1* identifies the principals or cases, and data sources that informed this dissertation study.
Participant Selection and School Setting

For this dissertation study, I used purposeful sampling techniques to select cases that would provide the richest and most relevant information regarding principal leadership in high minority and high poverty schools where African American males with disabilities achieved VDOE graduation and dropout targets (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). I originally proposed that, in order to be identified as a site for data collection, the principal must lead in a school with poverty concentrations of 40% or higher and with racial or ethnic minority student populations of at least 49% (USDOE, 1996). I secured participant consent in four of the seven schools in the state that
met the criteria; however, after receiving approval in each school district, two principals withdrew their consent to participate. In order to preserve the integrity of the study, it was important to interview at least three principals. Consequently, I used VDOE data to purposefully broaden my criteria to those principals who lead schools that achieved high graduation (≥50%) and low dropout (<2%) for students with disabilities, but who had lower concentrations of either students who are considered economically disadvantaged or who belong to ethnic or racial minority groups (Table 3). From the resulting list of schools, I requested participation of four additional principals who met these criteria. Two of the four principals agreed to participate; however, one principal was excluded from the study, because he had served as principal of the school for less than one year. Extending the selection criteria allowed me to gain the perspective of an additional veteran principal in a similar school context and provided insight into the similarities and differences between principals’ perceptions of their leadership practices, the experiences leading in a diverse school, and the supports provided for students to reach graduation targets. Each case examined in this dissertation study is identified in Table 2.

Table 2.

*Description of Cases Examined*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ms. Barrett</th>
<th>Mr. Richards</th>
<th>Dr. Harris</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years as Assistant Principal or Principal</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years Principal at School</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As indicated in the literature review, each criterion adds to the accumulation of student risk factors and can create barriers to student success. The principals selected for this dissertation study lead schools that have overcome these challenges. Additional selection criteria included (a) each school in which the principal leads must have met the 2013-14 state target for dropout\textsuperscript{5} for students with disabilities, and the percent of students with IEPs graduating from high school with an advanced or standard diploma must be $\geq 50\%$. The use of both graduation and dropout rates as criteria for selection further strengthened the findings of my research, because I focused on principals who have implemented policies and practices that prevent dropout and encourage persistence to graduation. It also prevented the selection of principals who have achieved graduation targets, yet exceeded dropout targets for students with disabilities; (b) African American males with learning disabilities or emotional disturbance must be represented in the school's graduation, completion, and dropout cohort reports as receiving a standard or advanced diploma. This study focused on the impact of principal leadership practices on the outcomes these students have achieved, so it was important for this population to be included in those students who have earned standard or advanced diplomas. Students with learning or emotional disabilities who complete high school with a standard or advanced diploma is significant, because these students have historically experienced the worst academic and social outcomes than students with disabilities in other disability categories; (c) finally, I considered it important that the principal has led in the school for at least half of the students' high school education in order to impact their educational program. Thus, each of the principals selected for participation in the study have been employed as the principal for at least three years. Information about each school in which the principals lead is presented below (see Table 3).

\textsuperscript{5} Indicator 2: Percent of youth with IEPs dropping out of high school ($\leq 2\%$).
Table 3.

School Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Howard High School</th>
<th>Lakeside High School</th>
<th>Davis High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms. Barrett</td>
<td>Mr. Richards</td>
<td>Dr. Harris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>1,717</td>
<td>2,231</td>
<td>1,645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities with Standard/Advanced</td>
<td>&gt;50%*</td>
<td>53.66%</td>
<td>65.79%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma 2013-14 Dropout Rate for Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority Enrollment</td>
<td>33.31%</td>
<td>73.38%</td>
<td>64.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>24.34%</td>
<td>56.93%</td>
<td>42.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>9.69%</td>
<td>20.71%</td>
<td>10.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Males Enrolled</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>55.45%</td>
<td>14.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Males in Special Education</td>
<td>19.14%</td>
<td>40.91%</td>
<td>32.35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The number of students who earned either an Advanced or Standard Diploma has been withheld in one of these categories, because the number of students in the group could lead to the identification of a single student. Groups of 9 or less are typically withheld. For this study, it has been determined that the percentage of students earning diplomas in one of these categories meets or exceeds the state target independently or with 1 added to the number of students earning the credential in the withheld categories.

Data Collection

Interviews. The unit of analysis for this study was the school principal. I was interested
Data Collection

Interviews. The unit of analysis for this study was the school principal. I was interested in studying this unique sample (Merriam, 1998, p. 62) to determine how they perceive their leadership dispositions, qualities, and actions as contributing factors to the outcomes of African American male students with disabilities. After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I sent a letter to each principal requesting his or her participation in the study (Appendix D). Once I received an affirmative response from the principal, I followed school district procedures for requesting and obtaining authorization to conduct research in each of the identified schools. I presented each district with a copy of the approval for Human Subjects Research. Once approval was received from the district, an interview was scheduled with each participant. Before the interview, each principal received and signed an informed consent form (Appendix B), a requirement in the IRB procedures. The consent form notified the study participants that 1) their participation in the study was completely voluntary, 2) that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence, 3) pseudonyms would be assigned and used to protect their anonymity, 4) all data collected would be seen only by the researcher, 5) interviews would be recorded and transcribed, and 6) a copy of the transcripts and the research findings would be shared with the participants (Creswell, 2007). Before the interview began, I explained the purpose of the study and described how the data from the interviews would be used (Creswell, 2007).

I conducted three semi-structured, face-to-face ethnographic interviews as the primary means of data collection for this dissertation study (Merriam, 1998, Spradley, 1979, Yin, 2009). Interviews lasted from 1 hour 15 minutes to 3 hours 15 minutes. The use of ethnographic interviewing techniques required the researcher to ask the informant descriptive, structural, and
contrast questions interchangeably (Spradley, 1979). A semi-structured formal interview protocol (Appendix A) was sent to the participants in advance of the interview and was used to engage in an exploration with principals about their beliefs, perceptions, and experiences and to allow principals to respond to each question as they uniquely experienced it (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). I used a semi-structured interview protocol to allow for open-ended questioning during the interview process while also keeping the questions focused on a particular topic (Merriam, 1998). Additionally, semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility with the sequence, addition, and deletion of questions based on the participant’s responses (Merriam, 1998).

The interview protocol incorporated Furman’s (2012) PDCF, social justice and disability theories, and the literature related to social justice leadership in high schools with high minority and economically disadvantaged youth. Furman’s (2012) PDCF is organized around common themes in the social justice leadership literature and emphasizes the importance of both reflection and action in leading for social justice. I developed interview questions from the framework to understand the principals’ beliefs around inclusive education, their commitment to creating inclusive schools, and how they overcame obstacles, if any, to improving academic outcomes for African American students with disabilities. For example, a question formed from Furman’s PDCF includes: How would you describe what an equitable education looks like to you? What about an inequitable one?

The literature on social justice leadership in urban schools was consulted to understand the contextual and environmental factors that increase the risk of academic failure for African American students and the protective factors that support students to persist to graduation. A question informed by the research literature also address the gaps related to principal’s influence
on the outcomes achieved by African American males with learning and emotional disabilities and include: An additional criteria used to select schools to participate in this study include high concentrations of poverty and minority representation. How has your knowledge of these risk factors influenced how you support teachers to most effectively meet the needs of the students?

Social justice theory and disability studies were used to understand how educational leaders create environments that remove marginalizing environmental barriers to achievement for African American males with disabilities and communicate a vision for equity in the school. Questions informed by these theories include: What things have you done since becoming principal to promote equity at this high school? Why? Can you describe for me the particular incident of incidents that led to your engaging in this promotion of equity?

**Document Analysis.** I requested each district’s permission to analyze school documents including master schedules, professional development and school improvement plans to gain a better understanding of how the principals’ views are reflected in the instructional programs for students with disabilities (Spradley, 1979). One school district declined my request to review documents, and the remaining two principals provided master schedules and their school improvement plans. The principals did not have school-based professional development plans. One principal indicated that a district-wide approach to professional development had been implemented and was based on VDOE recommendations for the district’s schools in improvement. The analysis of school improvement plans and two master schedules supplemented and validated the interview data and allowed me to gain insight into the levels of inclusive practices and the school’s focus for improvement. By viewing the master schedules, I gained additional information about course offerings and the service delivery models used for courses required for graduation. Information regarding the master schedule was also gained
through participating principal interviews. Additionally, I learned how the instructional program is scheduled through document reviews and extensive discussion regarding the school’s approach to the master scheduling process. The school improvement plans provided insight into the circumstances under which the plan was created and the impact, if any, that state and federal accountability had on the structure and focus of the school’s instructional program (Merriam, 1998). An additional research strategy included analyzing online VDOE public records, statistics, and school documents related to student achievement and graduation and dropout rates over time.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis strategies for this dissertation study were ongoing, beginning with the first interview and document review (Merriam, 1998). According to Stake (2005), “issue development continues to the end of the study” and the study “write-up” is initiated immediately following the first data collection. In other words, data collection and analysis is a recursive process that culminates in the final research product (Merriam, 1998). Preliminary reflections and critical thoughts about the data collected and their relationship to the theoretical framework, Furman’s PDCF (2012), and the research questions were recorded in analytic memos immediately following data collection and during first-cycle coding (Merriam, 1998; Saldaña, 2013). Participant interviews were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy by the researcher. Each interview transcript was read in its entirety and phrases and words were assigned codes to guide further analysis, category and theme development, and comparison across cases.

In the next phase of the data analysis process, I used second cycle coding and constant comparative methods to construct categories or themes from the first cycle codes (Merriam,
The categories were informed by the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the commonalities found in the meaning created by the study participants (Merriam, 1998; Saldaña, 2013). This method involved the ongoing comparison of the smallest, yet meaningful units of what is said, observed, and reviewed throughout the case studies (Merriam, 1998). I recorded these comparisons in the analytic memos and later organized them into categories or themes based on commonalities (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). I repeated this process for each case while comparing the categories generated from the preceding case to determine if the same ones were present in the most current case (Merriam, 1998). This process continued until the final case’s data had been analyzed. The categories across cases were combined to reflect common and contrasting themes that supported answering the research questions. The use of multiple cases in this study required both within-case and across-case analysis in order to create meaning and understanding that can be applied to each case (Merriam, 1998).

**Trustworthiness**

Triangulation and member checking strategies were used to enhance the validity and reliability of the research findings. I triangulated the data by conducting a multiple case study to explain the findings of this dissertation study and using multiple sources of evidence (Creswell, 2007). When done effectively, triangulating the data results in a “convergence of evidence” that explains a central theme or “fact” instead of an isolated analysis of each data source (Creswell, 2007, Yin, 2009, p. 117). For example, the analysis (e.g., coding, analytic memo writing) of school improvement plans and master schedules supported the same findings and conclusions that were generated from the interview transcripts (Yin, 2009). Because triangulation may also surface inconsistencies in the data across cases, this type of analysis prevented the researcher
from forcing the data into categories that best answer the research questions (Merriam, 1998).

Next, I conducted member checks. Member checking involves revisiting the study informants and requesting that they review the themes and interpretations generated from the data for credibility (Merriam, 1998). After analyzing the data and developing themes and conclusions, I sent an electronic copy of the study's findings to each participant for their review. I requested their substantive feedback regarding their agreement or disagreement with the themes that emerged from the data and any additional feedback that would support the accuracy of the findings. Lastly, I asked a university faculty member with expertise in the area of social justice leadership in education to review and provide feedback regarding the accuracy of themes that emerged and to assess the study's findings (Merriam, 1998). Once participant and faculty member feedback was received, I reviewed my themes and incorporated their feedback into my report.

**Report of Findings**

Following the analysis of data collected for this multi-case study, I wrote a report providing a description of each case followed by a cross-case analysis and results (Yin, 2009, p. 171). Pseudonyms will replace the names and sites used for data collection purposes to ensure confidentiality. The findings will constitute the majority of the report and will be sectioned by themes that emerged obtained from the interviews, memos, and document reviews (Merriam, 1998). The convergence of the themes and findings with the literature, the theoretical framework, and Furman's (2012) conceptual framework of social justice leadership will be identified and explained in the case study report. Attention will also be given to inconsistencies in the data and to findings that do not align with existing literature and theories.

The conclusion of the case study report will highlight the significance of the findings and
identify and explain how, if at all, the study adds to the existing literature and theories on the topic and/or contributes to the knowledge about an important and contemporary problem in education (Yin, 2009).

Chapter Four

Reporting the Data

This dissertation study used Furman’s (2012) PDCF for social justice leadership to examine the beliefs and leadership practices of three high school principals who lead in schools where students with disabilities met graduation and dropout targets during the 2013-14 school year. The study attempted to further understand the leadership actions, as perceived by each principal that attributed to school completion for African American males with disabilities. Using Furman’s (2012) PDCF as the conceptual framework for this study enabled me to determine how these school leaders approach the dimensions of social justice leadership in a particular school context.

Furthermore, the study examined how the principals’ beliefs and perceptions of student differences are reflected in the programs and practices that support students with disabilities. The three predominant themes that emerged from the data analysis include steadfast empathy that guides leadership practice, a strong focus on the success of all children, and a commitment to promoting equitable practice. In the description that follows, I will explain the themes that emerged from the data analysis and how these themes support Furman’s (2012) PDCF.

Steadfast Empathy That Guides Leadership Practice

Shields (2004) contends that an “empathic education” is explicitly connected to building caring human relationships and foundational to creating socially just schools (p. 124). Developing relationships with students creates mutual understanding and eliminates “deficit
thinking” about the lives and value systems of students and their families (Shields, 2004). In the case of schools, educators must actively seek out and build relationships with all students in the school community and create learning environments that demonstrate genuine understanding for student circumstances (e.g., poverty, learning differences) (Shields, 2004).

Empathy is a value that requires a “cognitive commitment” from educators to actively engage with students and to reflect on our “own stories” as they relate to socially just pedagogy (Shields, 2004). Shields’s (2004) explanation of empathy in schools aligns with the personal dimension of leadership in Furman’s (2012) PDCF framework. Both empathic education and socially just leadership require: 1) a commitment to reflection on personal beliefs and values about diversity and 2) action to change inequitable or unjust school environments.

Ms. Barrett, principal at Howard High School (HHS) indicated throughout the interview that she is a reflective practitioner. She expressed empathy towards her students and a desire to take action to engage them in the school community.

I love everything about school. I always have. It resonates with me. I think for most folks who became educators - it did. But that's not the case for many of our students and their parents. Just keeping in mind that not everybody is here and loving every minute of being here. They are abiding it. They are tolerating it. So what do we do to make it a more invitational education? It's an old term, but we want to make them feel like they are invited to take part in this. Not that they are here just to walk out the door as quickly as possible.

Empathy for students was a value expressed explicitly by all of the study participants, most notably as it pertains to the lives, value systems, and academic achievement of the students they serve. They understand how life outside of school can be burdensome and creates barriers to
their students’ education, however, they never allow that to become an excuse for underachievement. The participants also expressed empathy toward teachers and the students’ families. In the discussion of the theme, steadfast empathy that guides practice, the leaders demonstrate their thorough knowledge of the diverse students they serve and the varying communities in which they live.

All of the participants reported tension between their personal values related to education and the realities of the students and families they serve. Each principal recalled events in their daily practice that required them to look beyond their personal beliefs and to act based on their understanding of the circumstances surrounding the child. Ms. Barrett candidly shared with the researcher that, while she is empathetic, she regularly struggles with this reality.

I feel like I examine my belief system every day. There is something that happens that calls that into play in some way shape or form. While it's very easy for me to say, "You're job is school, you're job is not daycare for younger siblings". But if that person doesn't leave school early and go home and take care of those younger siblings, the parent isn't able to go to work and they can't pay their rent. I've always said, "You've got to focus on your job. This is your job. You are getting paid. You're getting a diploma. That's your pay". It's really easy to say, but...this child has to go translate for this parent who is going to D.C. to the immigration office or going to the doctor. There are all kinds of reasons. Everyday I discover that our students are called... One of the other foundations of where I came from is that this is the most important thing, and education is your ticket to whatever you want to do. Why can't everybody see that, isn't it clear? Just kind of examining that belief. And when I have a conference with students, recognizing that I have to frame the
conversation based on where I think their experience might be, not my experience. And that's a lesson that's hard to learn sometimes.

In her statements above, Ms. Barrett recognized the reality of her students’ lives without "pathologizing" their experiences and demonstrates that she has engaged in ongoing reflection on this topic (Shields, 2004, p. 112). Ms. Barrett actions also demonstrate empathy. She offers alternate course formats including independent study, credit recovery, and online courses so students can remain on track with their course of study and graduation requirements while also supporting family responsibilities.

Mr. Richard's empathy for his students is expressed throughout the interview. The data indicate that Mr. Richards “fights” numerous battles on behalf of LHS students, because he understands the environments to which they return at the end of the school day. He reports “battles” with students to keep them focused on school, “fighting” with teachers to take ownership for all types of learners, and going to battle with the state and district over resource allocation. He grew up poor, and is accustomed to working hard as a young man to reach his goals; however, he does not expect that his students possess the same motivation to achieve. “They don’t know what else is out there”, and he views it as the school community’s responsibility to move kids beyond what they know to something that is better. He further thinks,

The nature and types of neglect or abuse that we see here...I think I've seen it all, then something else happens. It's like you're heart goes out to these kids. You kind of understand why they are the way they are. It makes you want to work harder for them. Maybe they'll see that and maybe they'll break the cycle. If not, they'll repeat the same behaviors their parents did...We have a lot of gang things here...The gang offers family
and some type of support. We have to sell something better than that, and our teachers understand that.

For social justice leaders, reflection on personal beliefs and values is not a solitary event, but an ongoing process of reflection and capacity building to remove marginalizing policies and practices and implement equitable ones (DeMatthews & Mayhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012; Gale, 2010). Mr. Richards shared his growth as a school leader. As assistant principal at LHS, he thought his role was to educate only those students who wanted to be in school; however, he learned that after suspending 1,000 students in one school year that “There was no substance to it. You weren’t really getting them anywhere. “The willing were getting what they wanted. The unwilling just fell by the wayside.” His words demonstrate reflection and leadership growth since his tenure as an assistant principal at LHS. They also suggest reorganization of his beliefs about equitable education. His behavior as an assistant principal was based on his prior knowledge and perception of the school and the students who attended it.

Mr. Richards describes below how he supports teachers to develop empathy for students below:

We do a lot of talking with the teachers about what the lives of these students really look like...you wonder, how does this kid go home to this and function? They don't have lights, they don't have stability, they don't have quiet, there is no culture of school...and yet we expect them to do homework...I ask them, do you really think this kid is going to go home and do four hours of your chemistry? Is there some way you could meet them? Most of our kids, it's not that they don't want to do. Their conditions are next to impossible. We've got more homeless kids...They are in and out of the extended stay places if they're lucky. If not, they are living in cars, and there are tons of these kids here. Teachers may not
understand, so we take a look at this. Most of them get it, but there are a few...How would you survive? I have no idea how I'd survive. I grew up poor, but I don't have the skills any more...but these kids do.”

Unlike Mr. Richards, Dr. Harris was raised by “white, middle class, college educated parents” in a neighborhood outside of a large metropolitan area, and expressed that he never experienced the “sting of inequity”. Dr. Harris has developed empathy for students by “living vicariously” through their experiences and stories. He began his career and served for 10 years as a principal at an alternative school in the same school district. The school served as a “dropout prevention program” for students who wanted to graduate from school, but who also wanted to “work on cars” for example. “They weren’t bad kids, they just wanted to do something different...school just wasn’t their thing.” He recalled a story involving students who had recently immigrated to the United States. One day, he took them to the cafeteria for lunch, and the students were amazed that there was food available for them at the school. They were not accustomed to having food at school. This and other similar experiences provided Dr. Harris with reminders of how life experiences shape one’s views and expectations for student behavior. “That gives you enough drive to want to do the right things” for students. This story illustrates that Dr. Harris has capacity in the personal dimension of Furman’s (2012) framework. He engaged in self-reflection about his beliefs in regards to the students he serves and demonstrated how those beliefs contributed to his growth as a school leader.

Educator beliefs have a strong influence on student learning and on a student’s perceived ability to overcome environmental barriers to achievement, and when educators blame their students for failure, they become unmotivated to learn (Coleman et al., 1966; Finn, 1989; Lynn et al., 2010; Shields, 2004; Smith 2008). Often educators feel helpless at best in their ability to
change the direction of students’ lives (Lynn et al., 2010). Dr. Harris struggled with this early in his career as a teacher and football coach. He wondered what he could possibly offer to young men who had experienced such a different life from his own. Dr. Harris went on to speak about our society’s unhealthy tendency to assign blame for poor student outcomes on their families or other external barriers over which we have little control (e.g., poverty, parental choices).

According to Dr. Harris:

Kids don’t have any choice. Kids are born into it...So when we do things that damage kids, we are perpetuating that cycle...I worked with some of these kids, especially as a football coach. You know out of eastern end public housing, and you are trying to show them. What could a 35-year-old white guy possibly relate to an African American kid who has known nothing but poverty his whole life? How can I show them that there is something else out there? I think just developing that level of empathy and never judging a kid by what their value system is...they didn't develop that in a vacuum. But if you don't try to actively change that cycle, you have no reason to expect it to not continue.

Mr. Richards and Dr. Harris took significant action to improve academic outcomes for their students by hiring and supporting a staff of highly effective teachers. Mr. Richards stated that it was difficult to keep high quality teachers, because teachers did not want to work at LHS. Building the teaching staff at LHS has been a long and gradual process. He no longer has significant teacher turnover, and both he and Dr. Harris have a long line of teachers who want to become part of the faculty in their schools. Mr. Richards and Dr. Harris stated that teachers “know what they are getting into” when they make the decision to become teachers in their schools. They report that teachers are attracted to the challenge of working in these
environments; however, they require time to talk with others about their students, time for reflection, and professional development to keep the unique needs of students central to their work.

Teachers are attracted to the thought of teaching in a school where they can make a positive difference in the lives of students; however, that does not prevent the initial feeling of "culture shock" experienced by some teachers when they come to LHS. Teachers may be accustomed to high student achievement and work ethic in their previous school assignments and are "crushed" by the results they achieve at LHS. Mr. Richards expresses that these teachers have strong instructional skills, but he works with them to adjust their practices and pacing to meet the needs of students at LHS. Many of the students at LHS have never been expected to work at school, and, therefore do not have a strong work ethic or the stamina to meet the academic expectations at LHS. While this is acknowledged, it is never accepted as an excuse for not doing work.

… work is what you have to do and be accountable for it. So we have to talk about that. We have to build the desire and willingness to work, but work stamina? They go to class for 20 minutes in a 90-minute block, and they're just dead. The teachers would have the t.a. [teacher assistant] walk the kid around the building. We'll talk to you, but you can't put your head down.

Mr. Richards emphasized to the teachers that students are expected to work hard at LHS. Instead of blaming the student or the student’s home environment for the student’s lack of work ethic, Mr. Richards continues to encourage relationship building and mutual understanding between teachers and students.

All principals reported that the students with the most significant learning challenges are typically those who are considered economically disadvantaged or students with disabilities,
putting them at greater risk for academic failure. The combination of these risk factors often impedes student attendance, health, academic stamina and work ethic, and sense of self-efficacy to persist at academic tasks. Dr. Harris was asked how his knowledge of risk factors that students face influences how he supports teachers to most effectively to meet the needs of students. He stated that while addressing poverty and individual students' needs is important, school leaders need to “be careful” about highlighting certain subgroups, because it can lower teacher expectations for those students. “I think that kids as a general rule will rise or sink to whatever your level of expectation is regardless of where they come from”.

...but the other thing is getting the teachers to empathize – and they do. I have a wonderful staff. I have an awesome staff...but just trying to get teachers to understand the culture of our kids and be patient, I think is the best thing. I don’t think we have major issues with equity per se, but just patience and tolerance and understanding.

The majority of students who attend LHS live in the most poverty stricken part of the city. All of the participants acknowledge the impact that poverty and language barriers have on the students' families. As school leaders, they struggle to keep this in perspective when they are working hard to keep students in school and on track for graduation. Dr. Harris communicates throughout the interview that he values the students' families and perceives them as hard working. He believes that all parents love and care about their kids and “want a better life for them” than they had. He believes that promoting equity begins with helping teachers to empathize with families and to work to get families engaged, involved, and feeling welcomed in the school. His desire to engage families is also reflected in the goals of the school improvement plan, and his direct involvement in the activities related to achieving them. Similar to Mr. Richards, Dr. Harris reports a thorough understanding of the community and cultural groups served by DHS. The
school serves a large population of “immigrant families”, and he confronts the biases of a portion of society that views immigrant families as a “burden to society” and “draining resources” in the United States. He passionately asks those people,

What would it take for you to leave your country to go somewhere else? To a place where you didn't speak the language, the culture was different? You have to think of what they see as the opportunity here, and rather than looking at these folks as a burden to society, change your lens and look at them as a resource.

On the evening of the interview, there was an event at the school for families. Dr. Harris had gone to great lengths to ensure that it was inclusive of all families. The event was designed to inform families about graduation requirements and was organized by a leadership team consisting of guidance counselors, teacher leaders, and the principal. He shared with me a flyer written in Arabic advertising the event. Further, he had hired multiple translators to record a phone message that was sent to the families to encourage them to attend. Inviting families to the school is difficult. The students represent 61 nationalities and 39 world languages, and it is hard for him to know if he is reaching them.

**Relationships matter.** Socially just leaders value relationships. Relationships that support teachers, collaborative relationships with the community, and partnerships with families are and essential part of social justice leadership (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Gardiner et al., 2009; Gardner & Miranda, 2001; Pivik, McComas & Laflamme, 2002; Place et al., 2010; Reihl, 2000; Salisbury, 2006). Dr. Harris further explains his desire to engage families in the school community when asked what things he had done since becoming principal to promote equity at DMS. Dr. Harris stated that “Trying to get parents involved, because parents love their kids…and getting them engaged and feeling welcomed is a big piece”. This goal is also reflected in the
school's improvement plan, and Dr. Harris is directly involved with the goal of increasing the
number of families engaged in school events, increasing family knowledge about school support
mechanisms, and making the school more accessible to non-English speaking families. He also
suggested that his actions to support equity at DHS are reflected in his efforts to support teachers
to become more empathetic towards students.

Mr. Richards and Ms. Barrett also discuss the power of relationships and creating a caring,
family atmosphere for students at school. "I don’t think our kids think of one another as black or
white. They’re Lakeside kids.” Ms. Barrett described activities that celebrate cultural and ability
differences at HHS school. She suggested that they “blend” students together, make them feel like
they are part of the “school’s family”, and prevent them from becoming a “we and they” type
environment.

All three of the principals reported that they have to “stay on” the kids, “stay in their ear”,
and “stay in their hearts” to keep them engaged in school and persist to graduation. For many of
the students the principals serve, receiving a diploma is “life changing”.

We talk to the teachers about that all the time. Whenever you find that moment,
where you can move in, and get a little bit close to their heart, do it... You have to catch
them here first (points to his heart). They don't trust anyone... We can't disappoint them.
And so our teachers, I think they own that.

These school leaders have demonstrated both reflection and action in the personal and
 communal dimensions of Furman’s (2012) model. They have all engaged in “honest self-
reflection” about their beliefs and how they impact their leadership, but they have also acted to
support other educational professionals to develop these capacities through dialogue and
modeling of practices that support the students and communities they serve (Furman, 2012).
A Strong Focus on the Success of All Students

The literature on social justice leadership in education emphasizes the importance of student access to educational opportunities and leaders communicating their beliefs that all students can achieve these outcomes (Shepherd & Hasazi, 2007). The leaders who participated in this study stand up for what is best for children by creating inclusive schools, addressing directly issues of race and disability, and creating a welcoming and inclusive school climate (Place et al., 2010; Theoharis, 2010). The theme a strong focus on the success of all students is discussed in the following section and explains how each leader has capacity within the communal and systemic dimensions of leadership.

Mr. Richards described the transformation of the LHS faculty from one that did not support the students to one that is truly committed to helping the students to be successful in school. Students have access to academic support and they know how to access it. Students understand that academics are the focus at LHS and that they are safe from the violence of their neighborhood. Teachers understand that their job is critical in supporting students to change the course of their lives, and Mr. Richards makes clear his expectations that this is central to their practice.

You either make a difference here or you repeat the same cycle for these kids. If you don’t want to do this, get out. Go somewhere else. It’s easier. The kids will learn because of you or in spite of you somewhere else. The kids here will only learn because of you, so you have to be good. You have to be good.

Each of the three participants emphasized the importance of hiring and supporting effective teachers, and two of the three participants accentuated the significance of teacher
autonomy and protecting instructional time. Mr. Richards accomplishes this by replacing weekly faculty meetings with professional learning communities where teachers analyze data, share lesson plans and effective strategies, and discuss student progress. Dr. Harris also limits the number of scheduled meetings and does not overload teachers with SOL score analysis.

I know they are working hard and doing the best they can...Teach. The battle for student achievement is won or lost in the classroom with the interaction between the teachers and the students. And anything I do that takes away from that time better be well worth it. So hire good people, leave them alone, and support them.

The purpose of this study was to further understand the leadership practices that principals perceived to support positive outcomes for students with disabilities. I postulated that school leadership is instrumental in the success of inclusion and that principals who successfully implement it have a strong understanding of effective special education practices for students with disabilities; however, when I asked the participants questions regarding specific supports available to assist African American males with disabilities, all three principals reported that they do not focus on student achievement by race. “If you need support, we are going to make sure you get it, it does not matter what your race is”.

This sounds so cliché, but it’s the truth. Every single kid matters, and when we do our at-risk list for graduation...we look at our senior rosters who are credit deficient, SOL score deficient, attendance deficient...We don't look at it by race...We're looking at each individual kid and making those connections...If someone were to tell me, ‘You need to get your African American percentage up’, I'm not sure how I would do that in an appropriate way. A lot of times the kids don't want you to single them out that way, because you're basically saying ‘Well you guys...you know who you are. We really need
to work on you.' Well, that's not what you want to tell kids. They're all kids. They all need to graduate.

In response to this question, Mr. Richards reported that he could share multiple success stories related to African American males with disabilities. "I don't think we're failing them at all. I don't know anyone that thinks about it that way. They are all our kids here." Each principal communicates that they hold high expectations for student achievement and believe that when you do, students will rise to those expectations. Interestingly, they all stated that their "Hispanic" population was currently experiencing the greatest academic challenges. Mr. Richards explains,

The only one that has jumped out at me is the Hispanic population. We're not having much luck there, and they aren't buying into school for a variety of reasons. We've been talking about things we should do differently on our end...the other ones [African American males with disabilities], I think we're doing things in a good way. They feel the school is there for them, and we expect the same out of everybody here...They will have a plan and know what's going to happen after high school.

Influence of NCLB and IDEA on leadership practice. Mr. Richards and Dr. Harris also shared their tendency to focus on "all students" when they were asked if NCLB had influenced their leadership practices. While Mr. Richards and Dr. Harris reported that they did not focus their attention and effort on federal subgroup data, Mr. Richards shared multiple scheduling and time challenges associated with high stakes testing. The school is testing or providing opportunities for students to re-take SOL tests they did not pass every month in the school year. Computers cannot be used to support instruction, because they are exclusively used for SOL testing. Both
administrators questioned the law's integrity, its unrealistic goals, and its impact on practices at the local level.

Mr. Richards is quick to turn the focus to what he considers an important and positive outcome of NCLB. He stated that NCLB has helped their school to take more seriously their accountability for “every single kid in the building”.

That part has helped us to focus on those things, forced us to be more serious about those things. We know that we are accountable for all of these kids...Just because you are listed as special ed, it doesn’t mean you’re not supposed to get something...You’re going to work towards something, and we’re going to work towards getting you there. We don’t have to fight that battle with teachers anymore. They know they are supposed to get diplomas...and not just a certificate of showing up. We used to give those out by the dozens.

While both Mr. Richards and Dr. Harris “keep an eye on the subgroups” to make sure they are on track with all students, their top priorities are state standards, state accreditation, and meeting graduation requirements for all students. Dr. Harris stated, “We want our kids to do well, but if I’m not fully accredited, life on this campus changes dramatically”. Similarly, Mr. Richards reported, “I don't care what gap group you're in. I don't care about that. I see who is on my dropout list and we're going to find a way to get those kids down...You have to do things a little bit differently for those kids.” He was proud that the on-time graduation rate at LHS is higher than other schools within and outside of the district that have significantly fewer students who are economically disadvantaged.

I don't go into the gap groups much, because the whole school is a gap group...Just assume that you've got sped kids in each class, because you do. Just assume you have free
and reduced in each class, because you do. That’s working conditions. Doesn’t matter who is who, but just figure out how you’ll get them all achieving. They [teachers] don’t really care too much about sped, not sped, economically disadvantaged, black, white, they could care less. They just take care of the kids.

Similarly, all three principals stated that they do not have programs strictly focused on African American male students with disabilities. Dr. Harris stated,

I don’t think it’s anything that we wouldn’t give to anybody. That’s the tough part about closing the achievement gap... It’s one thing if you are in a school that’s all black or a school that’s in east LA that’s 98% Hispanic. But when you are in a school like this... kids figure out quick enough who’s in the club... How do you go about picking a specific group without being exclusionary... to the other groups that want to be a part of that? So how do you create programs in today’s political environment, and even politics aside, I don’t know if I want to do that. I want something to be open to everybody. You need extra help with Algebra? You want to be a part of this? Be a part of it.

Contrary to the report of the other two principals, Ms. Barrett indicated that NCLB has “completely” influenced her leadership practice in multiple ways. It has influenced the master schedule, teacher assignment to courses, and course offerings. The pressure of NCLB on her practices was evident in her description of the many incoming freshmen who are not prepared for Algebra I and other high school courses. She asked, “How can it not influence you?”

The impact of NCLB can also be seen in the school’s improvement plan. The plan includes goals to increase the performance of low performing subgroups in courses required for graduation. The actions to accomplish these goals include analyzing previous and current academic data for students at risk of failure, delivering interventions during periods designated in
the master schedule, and progress monitoring. During the interview with Ms. Barrett, she explained the continuum of services that is available for students with disabilities at HHS. Her explanation of the service delivery systems was also reflected in the master schedule. The HHS master schedule indicated support for inclusion and the presence of principal support of a co-teaching model in core content and electives classes required for graduation. The schedule also provided students with the opportunity to attend resource classes when they needed additional academic support.

Ms. Barrett shared that keeping students on track for graduation requires careful planning and attention to individual student progress, because many of them are not prepared for high school. This requires additional coursework in an already congested high school course of study. Each student has a plan to earn high school credit that keeps them on track for graduation; however, she sometimes is required to include in their course of study, English preparation for language learners and courses to close skill and knowledge gaps for other students before enrolling them in SOL courses. Invariably, these are the students who have disabilities, are economically disadvantaged, are minorities, and who are English language learners. “And sometimes, one person fitting three subgroups.” “It’s a barrier.”

I think the one thing that they probably don't know until they come in and spend some time in the cafeteria, or stand in the hall as we change classes, or look at our data, they don't have a clue the number of ESL or economically disadvantaged, or our potential dropouts, or our students who are at risk of not graduating. That really is something we fight every single day to accommodate and to help raise the bar a little bit to get those folks to where they need to be.
She also works to get minorities and other subgroups of students enrolled in Advance Placement (AP) courses, a place where they are largely underrepresented. She uses an AP "potential report" to identify students and specific courses in which they show potential to be successful. Ms. Barrett is clearly committed to providing opportunities for student growth, but wants to ensure that the students are challenged, but not placed in courses where they cannot be successful. "It’s more that just access…it’s maintaining it that’s really hard and succeeding once you are there…We want to do what we can to encourage folks to get there, then we need to do what we can to support them…that’s what’s really hard for teachers”.

When asked about the impact of IDEA on their leadership practice, each of the study participants stated that IDEA is a law that “permeates everything…it’s something you have to be mindful of in everything you do”. Research literature on disproportionality indicates that African American students are more likely to be taught in separate educational settings for the majority of the day; however, the data analyzed in this study indicated that this is not the practice in these leaders’ schools. All of the schools’ master schedules indicated collaboratively taught honors, advanced level, and college preparatory core content area and elective courses required for graduation with minimal services being provided in self-contained environments. These data were aligned with the interview data where principals each reported providing a continuum of services for students with disabilities and providing self-contained classes for students with the most significant learning needs. Two of the three principals talked specifically about the strength of the co-teaching partnerships. Dr. Harris struggled with building strong co-teaching teams despite investing a variety of resources to improve the model. It “invariably separates to a teacher/teacher-aide type arrangement”.
Mr. Smith, however, reported that special education is the largest and strongest department at LHS. He reports that the assistant principal who oversees special education has built a team that is “nothing short of amazing”. Special educators are all highly qualified and effective at designing instructional interventions that are specific to their students’ needs. Special education teachers co-teach in their students’ core academic classes and, during the master scheduling process, are strategically placed to ensure that they have multiple opportunities to interact with their students during the school day. This scheduling approach has allowed teachers to remain cognizant of their students’ progress toward graduation and to build strong relationships with students and their families.

I dare say we have the best special ed staff in the city...Our teachers are the best. Our TAs [teacher assistants] are the best. We only have a couple that really can't and won't change...We've put pressure on them to transfer, retire, or something happens, and we were able to get rid of them...That department, instead of always being an after thought, they are one of the main focuses in the school. We love our sped department. And the [general education] teachers know. They look for partnerships with the sped teacher, because they know they are going to get a good co-teacher in the classroom. Rock solid. Mr. Richards and Dr. Harris both report challenges in recruiting and maintaining effective special education teachers. Dr. Harris talked about the barriers to maintaining high quality special educators at DHS.

I've got a really good team. One thing that has complicated things is the whole highly qualified teacher part...Every single teacher I have that has gone back to get the highly qualified endorsement then bails out of special education and wants to be a content teacher. They don't want to go get that qualification [highly qualified] and then continue
on with the caseload, dealing with all the things they go through, plus teaching classes.

That's something that is a challenge for us, is trying to meet those goals and expectations from the state and [district] levels, while still maintaining a solid staff. The thing that troubles me with special education is, particularly with the provisional license, anyone can get one with a two week class at community college, and then I can put you in a classroom with our most vulnerable and challenged kids...I'm a strong proponent of our profession, and I think we cheapen it immensely, and politicians cheapen it immensely, when we allow these - so many pathways to the classroom - without holding some fidelity. I've been teaching for 25 years, and I don't feel qualified to teach the most vulnerable children we have.

The removal of the modified standard diploma as a pathway to graduation for students with disabilities was something that mentioned by and caused concern for Mr. Richards and Dr. Harris. Mr. Richards reported that moving forward, the standard or advanced diploma would be the default diploma option for all freshmen entering LHS. He acknowledges that achieving that goal “will be tough”. Dr. Harris emphatically opposed the decision to no longer offer the modified standard diploma as an option for students with disabilities and “guaranteed” that it would have unintended, yet negative consequences for students.

So what you've got is two competing things. You've got a graduation rate that needs to be hit, period. And bad things happen to you if it doesn't happen. And then you got what's best for the kid in this diploma...I don't think it will impact us as greatly as other schools,

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6 The Modified Standard Diploma is intended for certain students at the secondary level who have a disability and are unlikely to meet the credit requirements for a Standard Diploma. NOTE: The Modified Standard Diploma will not be an option for students with disabilities who enter the ninth grade for the first time beginning in 2013-2014. Credit accommodations allow students with disabilities who previously would have pursued a Modified Standard Diploma to earn a Standard Diploma.
but you're going to see that, rather than having dropouts, you're going to have schools that will push that diploma down [to a special diploma] in order to meet their graduation rates.

Principals reported additional obstacles for students with disabilities to graduate with a standard or advanced diploma including the requirement to pass end of course SOL tests and being academically prepared for high school courses. Mr. Richards explains that students can achieve a standard diploma with locally verified credit\textsuperscript{7}, but when their scores are significantly lower than the minimum passing score, it is a challenge.

You've got to pass those courses and pass the SOLs to move on, and that's pretty tough. When you look at the SOL scores and see those in the 330-340 range, that's a long way to go. It can be done, but it's a long way to go...so you're chasing something that's moving a little too fast right now. When you're reaching something that you feel you can reach, it's not so bad, but sometimes it feels like it's way up here (gestures)...That's heavy when they come to high school and they have a disability, and maybe it's not a disability, but it's the culture you come from. Some of our feeder schools, the kids can't read. We have to change that. We have to teach them to read, to do math, and get them through those courses in a four-year window.

Two of the three principals described specific efforts to increase graduation rates for their students who are considered “at-risk”. Mr. Richards and the scheduling team spend an extraordinary amount of time hand scheduling all students with disabilities and students in other

\textsuperscript{7} Credit accommodations provide alternatives for students with disabilities in earning the standard and verified credits required to graduate with a Standard Diploma and may include: alternative courses to meet the standard credit requirements; modifications to the requirements for locally awarded verified credits; additional tests approved by the Board of Education for earning verified credits; adjusted cut scores on tests for earning verified credits; allowance of work-based learning experiences through career and technical education (CTE) courses.
specialty or magnet programs in the school (e.g. International Baccalaureate, AVID, students in the music program) to ensure students are assigned to the most effective teachers. LHS has found that scheduling Algebra I, a barrier to graduation for students with disabilities, in two parts has been successful.

Ms. Barrett shared other examples of leadership practices that may impact the graduation rates for students with disabilities. She made scheduling adjustments by eliminating “basic” level courses and including students considered “at-risk” into college-prep, honors, and, when appropriate, AP level courses. Those basic or “S level courses” were the most diverse, “and the vast majority of the students in the S level are ESL, black, economically disadvantaged” and one student might be represented in multiple categories. This accumulation of risk factors puts these students at increased risk for academic failure and dropping out of school (Wilkins & Huckabee, 2014); however, Ms. Barrett is committed to providing opportunities for all students to be challenge themselves and to be academically successful.

We are looking very carefully at the scheduling. The teachers struggle with doing away with S level, because that presents a huge challenge. That middle group of college prep. There's a huge gap anyway, then you throw in the truly disadvantaged learner, struggling learner, and that makes it that much bigger. So we're really trying to work with the teachers to help them learn how to approach working with...every one in college prep. And that's been a huge adjustment, because we've done it across the board, across the content areas. Something as simple as just doing away with S level, really isn't simple at all. And met with a lot of resistance. Most notably by the English and math teachers, who are feeling like they really need to target their instruction for this group, and how do I keep this group challenged while teaching this group how to read?
Teacher resistance is common when principals implement inclusive practices or those designed to remove academic barriers for students with multiple learning needs (Theoharis, 2010). All principals reported that teachers could be very direct in their resistance to teaching students with disabilities in general education. The principals responded to teacher resistance by providing professional development around their role in supporting students with disabilities in general education classrooms. For example, Ms. Barrett encouraged her teachers to engage in professional learning and reflection on their grading practices. She further spoke about grading practices:

Having them read articles - just food for thought - I'm not telling you to do this, I'm asking you to read this and to have a good professional discussion about your grading practices. Are you using this grading practice, because this is the way you were graded in school? Or have you studied them and determined that this is the best way to grade students? Do you really recognize how this one grade that you are assigning, what impact it has? Often, people really haven't thought about their grading practices. In fact we had a long conversation about this at lunch administratively, and that's kind of a push that we're looking at now. The unintentional consequences of grading practices.

Ms. Barrett monitors grades very closely and has what she describes as a “global perspective” on student achievement trends in the building. The administrative team and teachers identify academic and environmental circumstances surrounding the student and make decisions about the most effective ways to support them. Knowledge of these trends has also resulted in some “difficult conversations” about high course failure rates and student progress. She described one troubling aspect of these discussions.
The other thing that I’ve struggled with most is that teachers say, Is it fair? That’s just not fair. That’s really a tough word. I encourage folks to eliminate that word, because we’re not talking about what’s fair - what’s fair to me is how do we structure something so we can include as many people as possible? And that might mean doing something differently for this student than you do for this student. But that is a really tough concept for people…I think that while the results end up being positive results, the road getting there is a rough one for the student, their parents, and their administrators.

Commitment to Promoting Equitable Practice

Furman (2012) suggests that equity is a powerful term used to assign meaning to the concept of social justice leadership. As indicated in the literature, the meaning ascribed to social justice may be contingent on the organizational lens through which one is looking (Furman, 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising that the principals who participated in this study have differing and, at times, conflicting perceptions of what is considered equitable distribution of resources for example than those at the district and state levels.

In order to promote equity in schools, school leaders must have skills in the systemic and ecological dimensions of leadership described in Furman’s (2012) model. The final theme discussed in the research findings, commitment to promoting equity, describes the student support systems that have been developed and implemented to ameliorate larger ecological contexts in which the school is located and the students live.

Barriers to equity: resource allocation. When asked to describe an equitable and an inequitable education, all of the principals suggested that resource allocation was a barrier to equitable educational practices. They indicated that resources should be allocated throughout the district and within the school based on student need, not equally distributed. Mr. Richards
explained, “Their starting point is totally different. If you know the starting point is different, but you expect the same outcome, it seems to me you would shift some more resources that way”. Dr. Harris explains the difference between what he perceives to be the difference between an equitable and inequitable education:

There's a big difference between equity and equality, and I think a lot of folks lose that. To me an equitable education is providing whatever needs to be done to maximize each kid’s potential. And that's going to look very different for an IB kid, who you could give the SOL test to on the first day of school and they would ace it, versus the kid that can't add 7 plus 5 and is expected to take an Algebra test at the end of the year. So an equitable education is when you channel the resources and the time and the energy so that every kid is getting their maximum benefit so they can achieve whatever they are capable of achieving. An inequitable one is where you are trying to give the same to everybody.

Mr. Richards invariably described his actions as “going to battle” with the school district over equitable resource allocation. “Staffing wise, funding wise, all sorts of things… I've been fighting”. He knows the number of staff and additional resources required to achieve positive academic results for the students at LHS, and he is fearless in his efforts to secure them. “These folks will do a great job, but we need more of them [teachers] and more bells [time in the school day] to do it. You’re getting bang for the buck. They’re getting the kids to graduate with a diploma - they're getting it done”. LHS is on a “four by four” schedule and Mr. Richards is convinced that this bell schedule does not meet the needs of his students. Currently, students receive academic intervention outside of the normal school day. “We've got to get that intervention in during the day, and we can only do that if we scrap four by four… That was one of
the promises that we made to our teachers." He made the request to the school district to change the bell schedule; however, he thinks it will take years for the district to act on his request.

Dr. Harris and Ms. Barrett also discussed equitable resource allocation at the school level and the resistance they receive from teachers pertaining to class size and make-up. Dr. Harris discussed the broader district level issues with equitable resource allocation that do not directly impact DHS. He suggested that teacher student ratios, for example, should be lower in the district’s schools that have the greatest needs. He indicated that it is essential for districts to address the issue of equitable resource allocation when district accreditation is at stake.

Regardless of systems level allocation of resources, Dr. Harris and Ms. Barrett implement practices at DHS and HHS that they perceive to be equitable. They coordinate higher student teacher ratios in advanced and senior level courses (e.g., calculus, U.S. government), because students can “handle” the larger class sizes. Fewer students are assigned to freshmen and lower level courses (e.g., earth science, Algebra I) that include more students who struggle with high school course content. Dr. Harris explained that the district has moved to teaching Algebra I in 8th grade. This has created another barrier to graduation for students who are not developmentally ready for this course in 8th grade. They are considered “behind” before they even enter 9th grade.

Algebra is based on concept thought or abstract thought. You have to be able to think abstractly for Algebra work. It’s a developmental thing...some of them aren't there yet. So to sit there and demand that they do that in 8th grade? For some kids, it’s just not going to work. By the time they get to 9th grade, we're up against the graduation requirements; they need 3 years of math, and not just any math...You can give them elective credit but not a math credit, so you're against that clock. You don't have a lot of time.
Ms. Barrett reported that she faces the same challenges with freshmen and English language learners who are not prepared for Algebra I. She applied for and received a grant to offer two fundamental math courses to students. Both courses meet the needs of students who need additional preparation before enrolling in Algebra I in the 10th grade. One course is designed specifically to meet the needs of English language learners. She emphasized that the students enrolled in these courses are typically students at highest risk for dropping out of school – students who are racial and ethnic minorities and those with disabilities and economic disadvantages.

Mr. Richards adjusts the sequence of the high school course of study to increase student engagement and persistence to graduation. Freshmen take the most interesting and relevant courses in the first semester of 9th grade. For example, students with disabilities take Biology in the 9th grade. “It’s more about living things and the body...So we do co-taught classes in Biology...and then to Earth Science. So you change the order and it works well for them.” He believes that you have to reflect on instructional decisions and ask yourself, “Why are we doing this? What makes sense? Why don’t we think about doing it another way? We’ve done some of that, and we’ll probably do more of that”.

Mr. Richards expressed that he experiences a great deal of resistance from central office related to equitable resource allocation. He understands the larger state level context in which the allocation of staff is situated, and he fights it every year. LHS educates the poorest students in the city, and he regularly confronts the practice of equal distribution of resources. For example, the number of buses made available for after school activities (e.g., athletics, study hall) are distributed equally throughout the city, meaning each school receives the same number of buses. Mr. Richards has witnessed “50-60 kids” get on the activity buses at LHS. Other schools have
very few students who use the buses, because “all of their kids have cars” or a family member picks them up from the school. The availability of the buses meets a need greater than transportation.

I’ve got a bunch that would do anything to stay here. [He provides the names of several students]. I basically have to chase them out of the building; I have to shut the place down. They ask, “Can I help Mr. Smith”? They will do anything to stay here. Anything to stay here so they don’t have to go home to that. Well if you’re going to stay here, let’s do some work. We’ve changed our study halls to 3 days per week…Finally, this year they gave me another bus, because I threw a fit for 4 or 5 years.

I have to fight every year to get the football bus to pick them up in the summer for pre-season conditioning. They [district leadership] say, “Just tell them to drive”. I say, “They don’t have transportation and they don’t live near the school”. I have to go through the same battle every year. [The district says], “We’re going to charge you”. I don’t care, charge me. Our football players graduate high school, and they go to college. And a bunch of them are special ed…They want to go out there and wear that uniform and be part of that, because that’s more than anything else, they want to be part of that. That’s one thing that can make them feel good.

When asked about experiences that may have challenged his beliefs about equity, Dr. Harris expressed that his equity beliefs have not been challenged at DHS; however, there have been “things that have caused me great frustration”.

Nobody likes being told they are a failure…Even your biggest messed up kid who you think doesn't care about anything and has failed tests his whole life, he still doesn't like it. And when we sit there and institutionalize this SOL requirement where these kids come in
and within one year, we have to test them, and we have to test them on these SOL tests in English...And if you don’t pass, you’re a failure, and by the way, your school’s a failure too. That’s the type stuff that drives me crazy.

**Disproportionality.** The literature indicates that the disproportionate representation of African American males in special education is a national concern (NCES, 2011). As the participants have indicated, most of the students who experience learning difficulties are also those who have other risk factors that add to the stress of having a disability and increase their risk for dropping out of school (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Jones, 2011; Murray and Naranjo, 2008). This reality requires educational leaders to understand their school environments, assess the need for transformative action, and engage stakeholders in implementing equitable practices (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Furman, 2012; Place et al., 2010; Theoharis, 2010).

When participants were asked about the disproportionate representation of African American males in special education, all three of the principals responded that the majority of students with disabilities were identified and found eligible for special education in a different school. Mr. Richards states that they look very closely at eligibility paperwork and student IEPs when they enter LHS as freshmen, and, when appropriate, they create plans for students to exit special education. Mr. Richards has been successful at addressing this issue by scheduling African American males with ED for example, with the special education teacher and case manager with the expertise and disposition to most effectively meet their needs. Many students with disabilities have graduated high school with honors and attended college. That said, Mr. Richards suggests that the kind of support provided to students is not based on their race.
I examined VDOE demographic reports for LHS, DMS, and HHS and found that LHS did not have disproportionate representation of African American males in special education. Based on the documents provided by LHS, the percentage of students with disabilities who graduated with a standard or advanced diploma has risen over time from 26% in the 2007-2008 school year to over 50% in 2013-14. The modified standard diploma was awarded to 23% of students with disabilities in 2007-2008 and to 19% in 2013-14, indicating that the school is working towards its goal for all students with disabilities to earn a standard or advanced diploma.

Both Ms. Barrett and Dr. Harris liken themselves to the quarterback on a football team. Dr. Harris stated that, “You are the most visible, but you can’t do anything if you don’t have the other 10 guys on the field working as a team”. As principal (and quarterback), you have the perspective of the whole field, but you are also “in tune” with multiple elements of the school environment. Ms. Barrett states that everything is a “team approach”, not just special education.

While there is one administrator who is in charge of the exceptional education department, it has to be a group effort. It's really important that we be active members on the child study team, a member of the eligibility, at the IEP meetings and being active participants on what makes sense and making suggestions… We talk about that a lot. Everything is a team approach. None of us is out there operating as an island. Whether it is SPED or discipline…We do still have a higher representation of black students in our OSS [out of school suspension] than we do for white students. But now that we're aware of it, we can work on it…But it's also led us to having really good conversations with peers who are black and white. And we can talk about it honestly…We used to call them courageous conversations. I don't think we have to call them that anymore. It's just a matter of how we do business.
**Student diversity.** Shields (2004) suggests that educators focus more on reform initiatives and not enough on developing strong relationships to effect change for marginalized groups. Furman (2012) suggests that “social justice leaders work to develop caring relationships based in authentic communication” (p. 197). Shields (2004) further contends that instead of engaging in communication, educators remain silent about issues of race, class, and disability for fear that they will further marginalize or stigmatize children; however, because of the poor outcomes achieved by diverse school populations, it is critical that dialogue as it pertains to human difference remains open among educational stakeholders. According to Shields (2004), remaining silent about diversity stigmatizes children further, because they view their experiences as abnormal and feel devalued. By acknowledging these differences, educators create opportunities for others to value diversity instead of ignoring it (Shields, 2004).

When asked about poor academic and social outcomes faced by African American males with disabilities, Dr. Harris responded that he could not “argue with the numbers”. He further suggested that changing these outcomes would require educators to have meaningful conversations about race, something he believes Americans in general struggle to do. “In a point in our history where race is becoming more and more of an issue, I still don’t think we’re talking about it the right way. That’s just me.” He suggested that the better question to ask is why African American males with disabilities achieve such disparate outcomes than other children with disabilities. He speculated about reasons why this may be the case, but admitted that he had not researched the topic. He suggested that educators could do a better job of communicating and planning across school levels and educating families about the special education process. Dr. Harris and Ms. Barrett both perceived that families of African American children with disabilities
rely strongly on the school to guide them through the special education process, and do not advocate as strongly for their children as white families.

**Summary of the Data**

Several dimensions of leadership in Furman's (2012) PDCF were supported by this study's findings. The participants also demonstrated several characteristics of socially just leaders identified in the literature and used by Furman (2012) to create the framework.

The participants in this study demonstrated skills and knowledge in the *personal dimension* of the framework through their empathy for students and their approach to school leadership. According to Furman (2012), the *personal dimension* of leadership is the foundation for social justice leadership. Participants of this study engaged in reflective practice to closely examine their personal belief systems around diversity and their role and responsibility as a school leader. These principals also acted to build capacity in other educators (Furman, 2012). This was the most predominant dimension of leadership that was expressed by the participants and permeated the interview responses.

The leaders demonstrated their skills and knowledge in the *interpersonal dimension* of the framework through their ability to develop relationships with staff, teachers, and students. Each of the principals considered themselves to be part of a strong administrative team that worked together to create systems to support student achievement. Two of the three participants stated that faculty attrition was low in their schools despite being very high before they became principal. They all cited multiple actions they had taken to support teachers to meet the high demands of the work that was required in their school.

The principals also demonstrated capacity within the *communal dimension* of Furman's framework (2012). Capacity within the *communal dimension* of leadership requires a
comprehensive understanding of the school’s surrounding communities and the cultural groups "served by the school" (Furman, 2012, p. 209). The principals who participated in this study possess a keen awareness of the environments in which their students live, the presence or absence of their external support systems, and the barriers to school completion that these circumstances often create. Therefore, they use their position as principal and act on that awareness to support students and educators in their schools (Furman, 2012). The communal dimension of leadership also encompasses the building of school community “through inclusive, democratic practices” (p. 209). These school leaders understand their school’s population of students and have the skills and knowledge to implement inclusive practices (Furman, 2012). Activities and academic support was open to all students and the decisions regarding student schedules, course offerings, and extra curricular activities were made with the specific needs of students in mind. All three principals had high expectations for all students and made decisions independent of a student’s socio-economic background, their race, ability, or ethnicity.

Leaders with skills in the systemic dimension of the framework assess the barriers (e.g. resistance, inequity) to inclusion and student learning both at the school and district levels and work to remove those barriers and create systems that support student learning (Furman, 2012). The principals in this study actively work to remove school and larger systems level barriers to achievement for students with disabilities and other students considered at-risk for school failure. This is accomplished through alternative scheduling of courses, advocating for equitable resource allocation, and supporting teachers to effectively meet the needs of their students.

All of the leaders demonstrated some level of capacity in the ecological dimension of leadership (Furman, 2012). They understand the issues that they face in the school are positioned within a social and political environment that has its own set of barriers (Furman, 2012). Each
principal referenced broader social issues around race, ethnicity, and poverty that complicate the academic challenges students experience at school. They all also described ways in which their teams solved problems related to issues such as poverty and English language proficiency.

Chapter Five

Implications and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to identify principals who have been successful at achieving graduation and dropout targets for students with disabilities, and to describe the beliefs, practices, and policies that these principals attributed to these results. Using Furman's (2012) PDCF and the principles of social justice leadership to further understand the leadership actions and educational contexts that support the academic achievement of African American male students with disabilities in particular. To that end, I interviewed three high school principals to answer the following research questions: (a) What are the most important leadership actions that principals attribute to the graduation rates of African American male students with emotional or learning disabilities; and (b) How are the principal’s beliefs and perceptions of inclusion, special education, race, and disability reflected in the implementation of academic and social programs and practices for students with disabilities?

In this chapter, I discuss my interpretations of the findings and themes discussed in chapter four. In addition, I discuss how this study supports social justice theory, and Furman’s (2012) PDCF and contributes to the social justice leadership literature. I will subsequently submit the limitations of the study and conclude by offering recommendations for leadership practice and future research as it pertains to social justice leadership in public education and improving outcomes for students with disabilities.
Principal Actions That Support Graduation for African American Males With Disabilities

The data from the participant interviews and master schedules collected in this study suggested that the most important leadership actions that the principals attributed to the graduation rates of African American male students with disabilities were similar to those attributed to the graduation rates for all students. Each principal in the study described a commitment to providing all students with access to inclusive educational opportunities and the academic support required to be successful in school. A student’s race, ethnicity, disability status, and economic disadvantage neither limited nor increased their access to these opportunities. Students were identified for support by teacher and administrator teams as part of a regular practice of analyzing student performance data, evaluating course offerings, adjusting courses of study and assessing early warning reports to confirm that students remained on track for graduation in four years.

Rather than offering programs that target and potentially stigmatize specific student subgroups, the principals and other educational personnel in this study have deep knowledge of the interaction between the student and their school and home environments; therefore, they design targeted approaches that focus attention on what students’ perceive as attainable. While their students face multiple risk factors (e.g., disability, economic disadvantage), the participants refused to use and did not allow students to use them as excuses for academic failure. Rather, they help students to recognize their capacity to overcome barriers and to understand that earning a high school diploma is a means to changing the course of their lives.

Participant interview and data from the document reviews indicate that all three principals value inclusive education and act to achieve it. From the highest achieving students, to those students who require targeted support, the principals are committed to the needs of the
success of all students. They used a collaborative teaching model in core courses required for graduation as well as extended support mechanisms within the school day for students with disabilities and English language learners. Co-teaching teams varied greatly in their strength; however, all principals viewed them as providing support to help students access core content in general education.

While the participants in this study were selected because they had achieved high graduation and dropout rates for students with disabilities, none of the principals identified unique programs that targeted specific groups of students. They accomplished these results by developing strong relationships with students, teachers and problem-solving teams.

The principals had common approaches to providing an inclusive education, keeping students on track for graduation, and supporting teachers to effectively teach all children. All principals reported providing an equitable education by accessing and allocating resources and even “bending the rules” on occasion to meet the needs of their students. This often required both administrators and teachers to shift their thinking about course expectations and to alter instructional practices to keep students engaged school. The principals were open to discovering alternate means through which students could achieve for achieving course credit such as independent study or “promoting” students to Algebra IB while still providing remediation for skills they had not mastered in Algebra IA. All administrators reported that they stayed informed about student grades and progress toward graduation or relied on special education teachers and professional learning communities to monitor students and target specific academic areas that needed attention.

The participants shared their personal beliefs about education and how these beliefs are often in conflict with the reality of their students’ lives. They were often, sometimes daily,
required to put those beliefs aside in order to effectively serve students with personal needs that conflicted with academic ones. This required personal and deep reflection, empathy, and release of judgment about students, their families, and their perceived value systems. Regarding issues of race, all three principals shared their perceptions of what others believe about race. For example, when asked about the disproportionate representation of African American males in special education, Dr. Harris suggested that until our society engages in meaningful conversations about race, we will remain challenged to answer why African American males students with disabilities experience more discouraging academic and social outcomes than other students with disabilities. Two of the participants stated their students “all got along” and did not report racial tensions as a problem in their school.

All of the principals have created contexts that support students to be successful, but they can also identify areas that present opportunities for growth. Each principal reports that a team approach is essential to their work, and two of the principals are working to either create or strengthen partnerships with feeder middle school educators. All principals are committed to discovering ways to make their educational programs relevant to their students from “Hispanic” backgrounds so they will be motivated to complete school.

**Contribution to the Literature**

**Contribution to social justice theory.** The data from this dissertation supports social justice theory. Social justice theory maintains that organizations should organize themselves to ensure equitable distribution of resources to all members of society, especially those who have been marginalized (Christensen & Dorn, 1997; Gale, 1999). Rawls (1971) suggests that the most profound inequalities exist when the social and economic position into which a person is born influences their achievement expectations and the opportunities to which they will have access
Dr. Harris and Mr. Richards reported a belief that resources from the district level should be distributed according to student needs at each school rather than equally distributed among all of the schools. He contended that when school district level personnel view school district accreditation as critical, they should analyze resource allocation practices to insure that personnel, for example, is allocated to support those schools that could benefit from lower student-teacher ratios. There were sometimes startling differences in the communities served, socio-economic levels, and racial and ethnic diversity in the school districts that participated in this study, yet, as Mr. Richards adamantly suggested, resources were not allocated equitably. In fact, multiple schools in each of these divisions attained the graduation and dropout targets for students with disabilities. They did not meet the criteria for the study, because they served very small percentages of students from minority or disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, Table 4 illustrates an example of the demographic differences between schools in one of these school districts.

Table 4.

*Description of District Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LHS</th>
<th>School #2</th>
<th>School #3</th>
<th>School #4</th>
<th>School #5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>2,231</td>
<td>2,094</td>
<td>1,495</td>
<td>1,766</td>
<td>1,632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>73.38%</td>
<td>36.50%</td>
<td>34.56</td>
<td>18.69</td>
<td>64.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically</td>
<td>56.93%</td>
<td>12.94%</td>
<td>18.02%</td>
<td>9.10</td>
<td>42.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantaged</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with</td>
<td>20.71</td>
<td>10.74</td>
<td>12.79</td>
<td>9.40</td>
<td>17.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mr. Richards contends that LHS is being provided with instructional staff in the same manner in which they staff a school that is both smaller and serves a more stable community. “How can you justify that? What's easy and what you think is equal is not fair. They're different. This is about what's needed and what's right. This isn't right...I don't give up very easily”.

Mr. Richards’ opinions are aligned with Rawls’ (1971) suggestion that social institutions value “certain starting places over others”, and therefore create questionable inequalities that limit the access to opportunities for some that are experienced by those who are born into a more favorable social position (p. 7). For example, Mr. Richard’s district’s allocated the same number of after school buses for study hall and athletic participation than students at other schools who had access to personal transportation to and from school. This created barriers to learning and full participation in the school community for LHS students, because they could not participate in after school study halls and athletic programs.

The participants discussed the pattern of failure that had been experienced by the families of their students. Specific actions were taken to support students to achieve positive results, and each principal stated that it required persistent leadership and teachers to get students to participate. All of the principals reported having high expectations for their students to graduate from high school and feared that, for many, it was the only encouragement they received. The data from this study would suggest that the principals strive to provide equitable access to quality teaching and learning environments, thereby increasing students’ chances for academic success (graduation) and preventing school failure (dropout).

Mr. Richards vividly described the neighborhoods where the LHS students live as “third world”. He perceived that their families just exist, because “they have nothing”, and the neighborhood is all they know. Mr. Richards takes responsibility to show his students something
different, because he wants them to be aware of other options and then show them how to achieve them. Mr. Richards realizes that there are large gaps in his students' current understanding of what the world has to offer; however, he and the LHS team expose students to multiple opportunities to attend college or to work and learn job skills. Mr. Richards recognizes that this is a gradual process, but hopes that by intervening the students will eventually learn to interact in a world they never knew existed.

**Support for the conceptual framework and social justice leadership literature.** The school leaders who participated in this dissertation study demonstrated some level of capacity in each of the dimensions of leadership in Furman’s (2012) PDCF; however, all of the principals engaged in reflective practice and acted to not only transform inequity, but to develop innovative ways to alter school based policies and practices in order for all students to graduate from high school. While all principals had an understanding of the injustices of education, the degree to which principals engaged in challenging those injustices was varied. For instance, Mr. Richards expressed most frequently his engagement at the district level to transform what he perceived to be unjust practices and universal policies that were not relevant to his students (e.g., four-by-four bell schedule).

The data indicated that the principals had high levels of skill and knowledge in the *personal dimension* of leadership. Principals had a firm grasp on their beliefs and values around diversity and their development as socially just leaders, and were able to empathize with their students' environmental circumstances. While we did not discuss social justice leadership, these principals displayed many of the fundamental characteristics that would indicate their propensity towards social justice. This was demonstrated in their efforts to provide equitable access to educational opportunities so students could achieve positive adult outcomes and the high
expectation that all students could achieve their goals. Another dimension in which the leaders demonstrated strong capacity was the communal dimension. They had a very strong knowledge of the communities in which the students live, and they made decisions and adjusted the academic environment in consideration of those environmental variables. For example, Mr. Richards knew that students remained at school for hours after dismissal, because they did not want to go home to their neighborhoods. Mr. Richards knew the community and his school’s role within it, so he responded to this need by arranging for buses so students could participate in after school study halls. While he is considers the school to be a “safe haven” for students, he must also protect the safety and function of the learning environment. Ms. Barrett expressed sensitivity to the needs of students by providing alternate means to achieving credit for courses that permitted students to concurrently fulfill family responsibilities.

All of the principals demonstrated knowledge and skills in the dimensions of leadership; however, the degree to which the principals shared their actions related to those skills and knowledge varied. Mr. Richards shared openly his disregard for district level policies that he perceived as marginalizing to LHS students and reported multiple actions to transform inequity. While Dr. Harris discussed openly how he would allocate resources at the district level, he did not discuss actions he had taken to change those practices. All of the principals reported both reflection and action at the school level.

This dissertation study contributes to the social justice leadership in education literature. This study represents one of the few studies related to high school principal leadership and the graduation outcomes for students with disabilities. There have been a few studies that examined the leadership practices of principals who were drawn to lead in schools where they could fulfill their commitment to social justice leadership (Theoharis, 2008; Theoharis, 2010); however, this
study contributes to the limited literature related to principals who were first identified for participation because of the results achieved in their schools (Place et al. 2010). None of the participants in this dissertation study suggested they came to their schools because the students were marginalized or they wanted to engage in social justice work. There are scholarly and theoretical publications written on the topic of social justice (Furman, 2012; Grant & Gibson, 2013; Ryan, 2010; Shields, 2004); however, there are very few empirical studies written on social justice leadership in education. The principals had various reasons for becoming principals at their respective high schools; however, none was related to transforming the marginalizing practices occurring in the building. The findings from this study enabled me to determine how these school leaders approached the dimensions of social justice leadership in their school context.

Limitations of the study

There were several limitations to this dissertation study. The first limitation was the number of participants (7) who met the initial criteria for the study, and from the initial request for participants; I received replies from four principals. Because of the later attrition of two principals, I purposefully broadened my criteria for inclusion in order to recruit more participants. Ultimately three principals participated in the study.

That said, an additional limitation of the methods of this study includes the criteria used for participant selection. The limited number of principals in the state who met the criteria for the study supports the literature related to the quality of schools that serve large numbers of students who are minorities and who are economically disadvantaged (Edmonds, 1979; Portin et al., 2009, p. 4). This also contributed to the small number of participants in the study.

Another limitation of this dissertation study was the possibility that participant responses
were inhibited because of my researcher status. While I informed the participants of my purpose in conducting the study, they may have withheld some responses in regards to race and district level structures that they perceive as marginalizing or unjust. The approval to do research in one school district was also a limitation in this study. The district declined my request to collect the master schedule and school improvement plan from Mr. Richards. I can only speculate as to why they denied my request, but suspect that because the documents include the names of employees in the school district, they did not want me to be in possession of these documents. I will consider this as I approach future studies. While Mr. Richards discussed in great detail the master schedule, we did not discuss the school improvement plan since the district gave permission to ask only the questions on the interview protocol.

The final limitation of the study was one related to the data collection method. As mentioned in the previous section, the data indicated that each of the principals demonstrated some level of praxis in all of the dimensions of leadership put forth in Furman’s (2012) PDCF. The interview protocol incorporated Furman’s (2012) framework as well as the literature related to social justice leadership in education. Perhaps narrowing the focus to one or two of the dimensions would have allowed me to go deeper into each dimension instead of more broadly covering each area. The data did indicate some skills and knowledge in each area; however, focusing on one or two dimensions may have allowed me to explore the action required to achieve praxis in the dimensions more deeply.

**External review.** I requested that an external university professor review the themes discussed in chapter four. While she found the themes themselves “interesting and engaging”, she felt that it was difficult to extrapolate themes with only three study participants. She suggested that 6-7 participants would have provided sufficient data to infer themes, and that 12
participants would have provided enough data to reach saturation. She commented that the study would have benefitted from more in-depth conversations with each participant so a deeper, richer story of each principal’s experience could be described. Then, after telling each principal’s story, she suggested that I could develop and discuss some of the common themes found in each of the three stories.

That said, she found the themes that I inferred to be plausible and well connected to the literature and Furman’s (2012) framework. She stated that the literature used for chapter three was relevant and highly regarded in the field of social justice leadership. She suggested connecting the relationships matter section of chapter four with the empathy theme. I agreed with her assessment and have made the adjustments in chapter four. She questioned me about the analysis of the documents reviewed and why they were not discussed more frequently as part of the evidence. Per her suggestion, I made some minor adjustments to the discussion in chapter four as it pertains to the documents analyzed in the study.

Finally, she felt that some of the principal responses regarding African American males were interesting. While I was looking specifically at a certain subgroup, and asking questions directly related to it, she noted that the principals always took the conversation back to the overall student achievement. She wondered if the questions made them uncomfortable or if they were simply unaware of the achievement of African American males with disabilities. I agreed with her and incorporated her feedback into chapter five. I connected it to the literature related to the acknowledgement of ethnicity and class while engaging in social justice leadership in education (Shields, 2004).

**Recommendation for Practice**

Developing knowledge, skills, and action for social justice work is complex (Furman,
2012), so to suggest that universities or school districts incorporate teaching these skills into their curriculum or professional development model would likely minimize the work that has been done by social justice scholars and theorists. Furman (2012) has drawn from the work of these scholars and developed a framework for what reflection and action “means for leadership in schools” (p. 203). My recommendation involves using Furman’s (2012) PDCF as an assessment tool to determine how universities and school districts currently approach the topic of social justice in their leadership and in-service professional development programs. Depending on the programs’ readiness to begin developing these capacities in others, a plan of action to expand their own knowledge of social justice leadership in schools and later incorporate instruction related to teaching the capacities in the five dimensions of leadership praxis illustrated in Furman’s (2012) framework.

Mr. Richards mentioned his desire to support this dissertation study, because the “topic is of great interest” to him. He also mentioned several times throughout the interview that he had a great interest in learning about the effective practices of other principals who lead in schools that are contextually and demographically similar to LHS and are achieving positive results for students. While university preparation is critical to effective school leadership, I also recommend that principals, who lead in schools with demographics similar to those who participated in this study, engage in long-term relationships with and observations of veteran principals in their daily practice who also lead in these environments. Given the small number of principals who met the criteria for this study, successful leadership in these environments is limited.

Future Research

Furman (2012) contends that there is a need to engage in more in-depth case study analyses of how leaders approach the dimensions in the framework would contribute to a more
“a more holistic” approach to the further study of social justice leadership in education (Furman, 2012). I propose to conduct an in-depth case study of a principal who leads in high achieving schools with high minority and economically disadvantaged student populations in order to gain a more thorough understanding of how they approach the dimensions of leadership put forth in Furman’s (2012) PDCF.

Conclusion

Looking back at the quote that opens this dissertation, I recognize that the leaders who participated in this study have made a choice to successfully teach all children, because they have a genuine interest in the outcomes their students achieve. The principals I interviewed for this dissertation study are beating significant odds for students with disabilities given the demographic make up of their schools. While all of these schools either meet or are close to meeting VDOE graduation and dropout targets, and given that seven schools in the state met the criteria for the study, extensive room for improvement remains just to meet minimum standards. The answer may lie in the sustainability of the practices implemented and the school personnel’s continued exploration and evaluation of their practices to ensure that they are socially just practices (Shields, 2004).
References


Appendix A
Interview Protocol

Date and Time of Interview:
Location of Interview:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:

Briefly describe the project and the details of informed consent:
*I am interested in learning about your beliefs and philosophy that inform your approach to improving the academic and social outcomes for African American males with disabilities.*

Warm-up Questions:
1. What influenced your decision to become a high school principal?
2. What about regarding your decision to become the principal at _____________ High School?

Interview Questions:

Personal
1. Can you describe for me what it is like to be the principal at _____________ High School?
2. How do you think others would describe _____________ High School?
3. Why do you think others describe it or perceive it this way?
4. Has NCLB or IDEA influenced your leadership practice? If so, how?
5. How would you describe what an equitable education looks like to you? What about an inequitable one?
6. Have you had any life or personal experiences that were instrumental in shaping this definition of equity for you?
7. Have there been any experiences at ____________ High School that may have challenged your beliefs about equity? Explain.

Communal
8. What things have you done since becoming principal to promote and support equity at _____________ High School? Why?
   a. Can you describe for me the particular incident or incidents that led to your engaging in this promotion of equity?

Ecological
9. An additional criteria used to select schools to participate in this study include high concentrations of poverty and minority representation. How has your knowledge of these risk
factors influenced how you support teachers to most effectively meet the needs of the
students?

Systemic
10. Do you think that African American males with learning and emotional disabilities
experience poor academic and social outcomes compared to other students with disabilities?
To students without disabilities?
   a. If yes, explain
   b. If not, explain
11. Do you think that African American males are disproportionately represented in special
education? If so, why do you think that is? If not, why do you think other groups are less
likely to be represented?
12. Describe experiences, positive or negative, that you have had with teachers as it pertains to
providing special education services for students with disabilities. What about African
American students? Were there any instances in which you intervened? Why or why not?
13. What do you believe ____________ High School is doing to improve the graduation rate
for students with disabilities? What about with respect to decreasing the dropout rate for
students with disabilities?
14. Are there particular supports available to assist African American males with disabilities? If
so, can you describe for me what they are? If not, why is that the case?
15. When thinking of other school leaders either within your or in surrounding school districts,
describe for me the similarities and differences between you and these leaders in regards to
improving graduation rates for students with disabilities? What about decreasing the dropout
rate for students with disabilities? Why do you think these differences exist?

Concluding Question
16. Is there anything that you would like to add regarding your leadership of special education
programs at ____________ High School that I did not ask?
### Appendix B

Table 1

*Requisite Skills, Knowledge and Action in the Dimensions of Furman’s Model*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Skills and Knowledge</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Knowledge and exploration of own beliefs and values around diversity</td>
<td>Commitment to continuous development and transformation as socially just leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>Knowledge of relationship building across dimensions; self-knowledge about communication style and the impact on relationships</td>
<td>Active in building caring and respectful relationships across dimensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal</td>
<td>Knowledge of cultural and community groups served, democratic education and communities, and inclusive practices</td>
<td>Establish democratic and inclusive dialogue and decision-making;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systemic</td>
<td>Critical understanding of the injustices of the school’s and the system’s structures, policies, and practices;</td>
<td>Engagement in the transformation to socially just schools and systems; overcoming barriers and engaging others in professional learning and dialogue around socially just practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecological</td>
<td>Knowledge of the broader contexts in which social justice is situated and the interrelationships between those contexts; knowledge of the school’s role in navigating these contextual factors</td>
<td>Provide professional learning opportunities to clarify the role and relationship of the school in dealing with contextual variables</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix C

Participant Consent Form

Dear Participant:

You have been invited to participate in a dissertation study. The general nature of this study entitled, “Beating the Odds: Towards Understanding How Principal Leadership Practices in High Schools Support School Completion for African American Males with Learning and Emotional”, will be conducted by Elaine Gould, the researcher. Before your participation, your role will be fully explained to you.

Your participation in the study will include engaging with the researcher in two sessions. The first session will be an interview that should take about 90 minutes. I will begin by asking you general questions about your position as principal. These questions will be followed by questions that will help me to further understand your role in the leadership and implementation of special education programs in the school. Further, I will seek to understand the leadership actions to which you attribute the success of African American males with disabilities. In the second session, I will provide you with my research study findings for your review. Further, I am also requesting to review school documents including the school’s master schedule, school improvement plan, and professional development plan to gain insight into the levels of inclusive practices, how the school approaches instructional planning, and the school’s focus for continued improvement.

Your responses to the interview questions, your identity, and the school’s identity will remain confidential and will be known only to the researcher. Your name or the school’s name will not be associated with any of the results of this study. You may refuse to answer any question that I ask, and you may discontinue your participation at any time. In appreciation of your participation, you will be provided with $50.00, and receiving this payment will not be affected by your responses or for exercising any of your rights regarding this study.

It is unlikely that you will experience any risks resulting from your participation in this project. You may report dissatisfactions with any aspect of this research study to the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee at 1-855-800-7187 or rwmcco@wm.edu.

Your signature below signifies your voluntary participation in this project, and that you have received a copy of this consent form.

Print Name of Participant: ___________________________
Signature of Participant: ___________________________
Date: ___________________________
Appendix D

Letter to Potential Participants

[Date]
[Principal’s Name],

My name is Elaine Gould, and I am a Doctoral Candidate in the Educational Policy, Planning and Leadership program at the College of William and Mary. My dissertation is focused on principal leadership practices in schools where students with disabilities have met Department of Education (DOE) Indicator targets for 1) graduation (i.e. greater than 53.67% of students with disabilities graduated with a standard or advanced studies diploma) and 2) dropout (i.e. less than 2% of students with disabilities dropped out of school). In this study, I will focus on the achievement of African American males with learning disabilities and emotional disturbance.

You are one of the seven principals in the state who lead schools that have met both of these Indicator targets. Furthermore, VDOE data indicates that ___________ High School is diverse and serves a high percentage of students who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The purpose of my dissertation study is to move towards understanding the beliefs, practices, and policies that principals suppose to be instrumental in achieving these results. In order to further understand how your leadership supports students with disabilities, I am writing to ask you to participate in my study. Participation would include a 60-90 minute face-to-face interview for which you will be paid $50. My methods also include a review of relevant documents including 1) the school improvement plan; 2) professional development plan; and 3) master schedule. My goal is to complete the interviews and document reviews by March 13.

If you agree to participate, I will call to schedule a time that is convenient for us to engage in the interview process, and I will forward a copy of the interview protocol. This will give you the opportunity to review and reflect on the interview questions in advance. I have gone through the appropriate channels and have secured permission from your school district (attached). I have also attached the participant agreement form that you will be requested to complete before beginning the interview. Your identity and the name of your school will be kept confidential and you will be provided the opportunity to review my data analysis before its submission.

Thank you for your consideration and please feel free to contact me with any further questions regarding your participation in the study. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Elaine B. Gould, M.A.Ed.
College of William and Mary