

2022

## Principals' Transformational Leadership Practices in Increasing Reading Achievement for ELLs

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# Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Michelle Jeffrey

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2022

Abstract

Principals' Transformational Leadership Practices in Increasing Reading Achievement

for ELLs

by

Michelle Jeffrey

MS, University of Houston - Clear Lake, 2006

BS, University of Houston - Downtown, 2000

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2022

## Abstract

Principals in public schools are being challenged to improve English language learning (ELL) student achievement through transformational leadership practices. This qualitative study aimed to explore the aspects of transformational leadership that principals use to reduce the disproportionate level in state summative reading assessments between ELL students and their non-ELL peers. The conceptual framework that supported this study was Burns' theory of transformational leadership. The research question focused on how principals in public school settings employed transformational leadership practices to support a reduction in ELL students' disproportionate achievement in reading. Semi structured interviews were used to collect data from 10 principals from elementary, junior high, and high school public school. Data from interviews were transcribed and reviewed to extrapolate trends and themes. Findings showed that use of transformational leadership qualities improves ELL student achievement in reading. To boost ELL student achievement in reading, findings indicated that principals should possess a desire to be lifelong learners, build relationships with staff and students, use strategies linked to success, offer mentoring and training, be able to disaggregate their schools' data, and be flexible to try new ideas and change whenever needed. These findings could contribute to positive social change by informing the educational field about practices needed by principals using transformational leadership to enhance the learning of ELL students leading to higher achievement by students.

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## Dedication

To my mother, Karen. During this process, she was always there for me, and I wish she could be here to see the conclusion. To my husband, James, for all the long hours of encouragement and tough love to keep going and never give up. To my children, Rebecca, and Joshua, for giving me so much love and understanding.

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## Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| List of Tables .....   | v  |
| Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....                    | 1  |
| Background.....  | 3  |
| Problem Statement .....                                      | 5  |
| Purpose of the Study .....                                   | 6  |
| Research Question .....                                      | 6  |
| Conceptual Framework (Qualitative) .....                     | 6  |
| Nature of the Study .....                                    | 7  |
| Definitions.....   | 8  |
| Assumptions.....   | 9  |
| Scope and Delimitations .....                                | 9  |
| Limitations .....  | 10 |
| Significance.....  | 11 |
| Summary .....  | 12 |
| Chapter 2: Literature Review.....                            | 14 |
| Literature Search Strategy.....                              | 14 |
| Conceptual Framework.....                                    | 15 |
| Transformational Leadership Theory .....                     | 16 |
| Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable ..... | 17 |
| Increasing of ELL Academic Needs .....                       | 17 |
| Principal Influence and Student Learning.....                | 20 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Principals ELL Knowledge.....                                       | 23 |
| Principal Use of Transformational Leadership.....                   | 24 |
| Summary and Conclusions .....                                       | 25 |
| Chapter 3: Research Method.....                                     | 27 |
| Research Design and Rationale .....                                 | 28 |
| Role of the Researcher .....  | 29 |
| Methodology .....   | 30 |
| Participant Selection .....   | 30 |
| Instrumentation .....   | 32 |
| Interviews.....   | 32 |
| Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection..... | 33 |
| Data Analysis Plan.....   | 34 |
| Trustworthiness.....  | 34 |
| Ethical Procedures .....  | 35 |
| Summary.....  | 36 |
| Chapter 4: Results.....   | 38 |
| Setting .....   | 39 |
| Data Collection .....   | 39 |
| Data Analysis .....   | 41 |
| Results.....  | 41 |
| Question 1 .....  | 42 |
| Question 2 and 3 .....  | 43 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Question 4 .....  | 44 |
| Question 5 .....  | 45 |
| Question 6 .....  | 46 |
| Question 7 .....  | 49 |
| Question 8 .....  | 50 |
| Question 9 .....  | 52 |
| Question 10 .....   | 53 |
| Question 11 .....   | 54 |
| Question 12 .....   | 55 |
| Question 13 .....   | 55 |
| Evidence of Trustworthiness.....                              | 56 |
| Summary .....   | 57 |
| Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations ..... | 59 |
| Interpretation of the Findings.....                           | 60 |
| Lifelong Learning .....                                       | 60 |
| Building Relationships.....                                   | 61 |
| Use of Strategies .....                                       | 62 |
| Mentorships.....  | 63 |
| Data .....  | 64 |
| Flexibility .....   | 65 |
| Limitations of the Study.....                                 | 66 |
| Recommendations.....  | 67 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Implications.....                                     | 68 |
| Positive Social Change .....                          | 68 |
| Implications for Future Research.....                 | 69 |
| Conclusion .....                                      | 70 |
| References.....                                       | 71 |
| Appendix A: Principal Interview Guide Questions ..... | 77 |

List of Tables

Table 1. Common Themes .....41

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

English language learning students show a disproportionate level of reading achievement throughout their school career as opposed to students not identified as English language learning students (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Anderson (2017) identifies transformational leadership as the leadership style that the majority of educational researchers feel is the correct avenue for today's schools. Research is still unclear, however, about the exact actions principals in a K-12 public school setting need to acquire to shape teaching practices for English language learning students (Padron & Waxman, 2016). The problem is school administrators are challenged to implement transformational leadership practices to support ELL students in a school district in a southern state.

English language learners (ELLs) are the fastest-growing student population group, according to the National Education Association (2018). By 2025, an estimated 25% of public-school students will be ELLs (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The disproportionate level of reading achievement on state summative assessments in a large southern state for ELL students remains stagnant as students move from elementary through middle school and into high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). While the ELL population is increasing exponentially, the disproportionate level in reading achievement on state summative assessments between ELLs and students not identified as ELL (non-ELL) within the same age group has been the focus of minimal research, and there is a need for further research to explore this disproportionate inequality (Sherwood, 2018). According to a 2018 report by the education agency in the state where

this study was only 29% or about 4,060 of the ELL students passed the state summative reading assessment, while the remaining non-ELL general education students met state-level requirements and 44% passed. This means that in 2018, almost 10,000 ELL students did not meet state summative achievement goals. Comparing these percentages to the entire state, 64% of ELLs passed reading state summative assessments, while the non-ELL general education students passed with 74% according to a 2018 report from the state's education agency.

Exploring the elements of transformational leadership that principals practice in an effort to address the disproportionate levels of academic achievement of ELL students is a central component of this study. Researching principals' transformational leadership practices when addressing underperforming ELL students on the state summative reading assessment may offer insights into the practices principals are using to decrease this gap. This qualitative study focuses on exploring the transformational leadership practices of principals at K-12 public schools, establishing a link between the principal and state summative scores for ELL students (see Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016; Kwan, 2020).

This study focuses on principals in a K-12 public school setting and the transformational leadership practices these principals employ related to ELL reading achievement scores. This study may help identify the type of leadership strategies principals are using to enact and promote an acceleration of ELLs state summative reading achievement. The research may also inform principals in a K-12 public school setting on what transformational leadership practices other principals are using in an effort to increase the academic achievement of ELL students.

Understanding the practices principals need to enact a positive environment could foster advancement in state summative reading assessments for ELLs. The study is grounded in transformational leadership theory. The methodology is described below in the nature of the study section, followed by definitions of terms, assumptions, the scope and delimitations, and limitations. Finally, the potential contributions of this study to the field are explained. The background section below briefly explains this study's objective, transformational leadership, including how supports are offered to teachers in an effort to increase ELL reading performance.

### **Background**

Few studies have been conducted on transformational leadership relating to the education field, which involves K-12 public school principals and ELL students, and how the two connect within state summative assessments. The studies that can be found relating to education concentrate on school culture (e.g., McKinney et al., 2014) or review older articles involving transformational leadership (e.g., Anderson, 2017). There are no studies that relate transformational leadership to principals in a K-12 public school setting and their efforts to increase the academic performance of ELL students. Other studies have been conducted to compare ELL's low performance to that of their non-ELL peers (Jimenez-Castellanos & Garcia, 2017; Zepeda, 2017), but the data is limited, with little to no mention of principals and their roles, but more studies are starting to emerge due to the advancement of the ELL population in United States schools. Most studies involve research on qualities principals in a K-12 public school setting need to impact or influence school performance overall (Dhuey & Smith, 2014, 2018; Huguet, 2017), while

other studies look into the perception's principals in a K-12 public school setting have about ELLs (Padron & Waxman, 2016).

Conceptualized by Burns (1978), the idea is that transformative or transformational leadership could bring about real change in those around them. Burns identified qualities, such as passion and enthusiasm, in leaders who successfully led others in their programs. In the study, Burns also went on to show how these transformational leaders interject their persona into projects, bettering the chances of success. The Burns study concluded that those positive qualities shown in transformation leaders directly resulted in their program's viability and success. Using the conclusions drawn in the Burns study, ELL programs directly involved with transformation leadership should have a better success ratio.

Bass (1985), using Burns's (1978) study, extrapolated his work and devised "Bass's transformational leadership theory." The Bass theory identifies four specific practices of a transformational leader: (a) idealized influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individualized consideration. Bass's study theorized that all four of these key practices work in conjunction with basic leadership tenants such as respect, encouragement, and influence to create a positive atmosphere and achieve greater success. Identifying such key practices and understanding the matrix and the interconnectivity these roles play in successful programs can benefit leadership's understanding of their direct effect on success or failure. ELL program leaders who possess and understand their key role seek to help grow a positive atmosphere and

increase performance through direct and positive involvement (Bodnarchuk, 2016; Mendez-Keegan, 2019).

Studies by Bass (1985) and Burns (1978) relate well to transformational leadership's doctrine. As the primary leader, a school principal in a K-12 public school setting is by default the transformational leader of the entire organization. Their example should create an atmosphere that encourages others to emulate them and motivate them to a higher degree of success. Leaders who possess and portray those key elements of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, should help those around them to grow and prosper. ELL programs focus on students from different cultures; the leaders looking for success in these difficult programs must foster a successful atmosphere that will inspire others to create a positive transformative atmosphere.

### **Problem Statement**

In a large southern school district, only 29% of the 10,000 ELL student population achieved grade-level passing standards on state summative reading assessments in 2018 according to the state's education agency. The problem is school administrators are challenged to implement transformational leadership practices to support ELL students in a school district in a southern state. Huguet (2017) explained that leadership is a critical factor in creating a successful learning environment. However, Dhuey and Smith (2018) noted that few studies have been done to understand the contribution principals in a K-12 public school setting have on students' learning. Research is still unclear about the exact actions principals in a K-12 public school setting

need to acquire to shape teaching practices for ELLs (Padron & Waxman, 2016). The gap in the research that I addressed was the lack of understanding of how principals in a K-12 public school setting are using transformational leadership practices to lead ELL teachers to increase academic achievement in reading for ELL students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the aspects of transformational leadership principals are using in an effort to reduce the disproportionate achievement levels in state summative reading assessments between ELL students and their non-ELL peers. To achieve this, 10 principals from public schools in elementary, junior high, and high school were interviewed regarding their leadership practices to support academic achievement in reading for ELL students.

### **Research Question**

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What transformational leadership practices do principals in a K-12 public school setting employ to support a reduction in English language learners (ELLs) disproportionate achievement in reading?

### **Conceptual Framework (Qualitative)**

The framework for this study was Burns' (1978) theory of transformational leadership, which has been used extensively in research (see Bass, 1985; Litz & Scott, 2017; Prelli, 2016). This theory advocates leaders work with teams on their campus to identify needed changes, create a vision, guide the change through inspiration, and execute the change in tandem with committed members of a group (Nadelson, et al., 2020). The theory addresses working to change the system and shows that old patterns do

not fit or work (Anderson, 2017). Giving more power over to a group of members to enact change brings more commitment to the ideas they are introducing (Anderson, 2017). Transformational leaders are described as leaders who work with their staff to identify needed changes, create visions that encourage buy-in and execute changes with the help of group members within the school (Nadelson et al., 2020). Anderson (2017) stated that K-12 public school principals helping to guide the educational process creates an environment with more opportunities to direct student learning. In other words, transformational leadership guides people to utilize the tools they possess to make changes for the betterment of themselves and, in this case, their students (Anderson, 2017). Understanding what choices, tactics, and skills K-12 public school principals employ to empower their teachers to create an educational system that minimizes the division in achievement can lead to a better transformational school (Anderson, 2017).

### **Nature of the Study**

Qualitative research is consistent with understanding how principals in a K-12 public school setting approach the creation of a successful support system, which was the primary focus of this study. According to Yin (2011), semi structured interviews allow the interviewer to gain insight into the methodological thinking of the interviewee. Structured question and answer interviews elicit rigid answers from subjects, not fully allowing the subject to delve into the methodology of their thought process. Adhabi and Anozie (2017) also support the semi structured interview process, not only to fully understand the answer to a question but the methodology of the answer as well. Interviews were framed yet conducted in a semi structured manner, allowing participants

to comfortably express what they felt their strengths were, in an unpressured environment. Interviews were recorded with their permission and transcribed verbatim. Using knowledge gained from interviewing principals in a K-12 public school setting, I identified successful choices as well as choices that may have been unsuccessful in their programs. While focused on ELL students and the leadership practices necessary for success, leadership practices gleaned from the interviews may be utilized by other principals in a K-12 public school setting to enact positive change.

This study was grounded in the notion that leaders are successful because they inspire confidence, fostering a positive atmosphere with the tools to succeed and work to grow that positivity. Keeping the focus on how principals in a K-12 public school setting relay their expectations to ELL teachers should be consistent with transformational leadership theory. Findings from this qualitative analysis can identify positive ways other campuses can use and share successful leadership styles.

### **Definitions**

The following terms are used in this study.

*English Language Learner or ELL:* students who are unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English, who often come from non-English-speaking homes and backgrounds, and who typically require specialized or modified instruction in both the English language and in their academic courses (National Education Association, 2018).

*Reading Achievement:* Reading achievement is a widely used term in education to cover a range of information about students' reading performance. Reading achievement

usually refers to being able to use the skills that are needed to read grade-level material fluently and with understanding. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (2018) defines reading achievement at three levels: basic, proficient, and advanced.

*Transformational Leadership*: a theory of leadership where a leader works with teams to identify needed change, creating a vision to guide the change through inspiration, and executing the change in tandem with committed members of a group (Bass, 1985).

### **Assumptions**

This qualitative interview study was conducted to gain knowledge about the real-life practices principals in a K-12 public school setting employ in relation to the transformational theory. The first assumption was that these principals would answer the interview questions honestly and without pausing to answer. The second assumption was that principals in a K-12 public school are working to increase the academic achievement of ELL students. To avoid assumptions related to differences due to grade levels, principals from elementary, middle, and high schools were included in the study to gain perspectives about diverse leadership traits.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this qualitative interview study was to further understand the relationship school leaders in a K-12 public school setting have on the achievement of ELL students in the state summative assessment in a large southern school district. The study focused on how impactful leaders work to achieve their goals and minimize their specific schools' disproportionate achievement scores related to state summative reading

assessment of ELL students. During an audio-recorded semi structured interview process, a series of questions were asked of each of the principals. The specific questions designed by me were asked in a manner to elicit a conversational answer pertaining to identifiable traits that support positive transformational leadership qualities. Their responses were recorded and coded so that identifiable and repeatable rich, supportive data could be drawn to understand key traits employed by the interviewees. The interview conclusions were drawn from a subset of area principals in a K-12 public school setting who have been effective leaders in closing the disparity between ELL and non-ELL students in state assumptive reading assessments.

### **Limitations**

Due to the requirements in the study of participants having to be on a campus for 3 years and how participants were chosen, one limitation was the low number of schools that fit the requirements of having both a large number of ELL students and showed a disproportionate level on reading assessments between ELLs and non-ELLs. Another limitation was that the study was conducted in a particular area in the southern United States; based on this, the generalization of the findings should be used cautiously in other areas of the country that have lower ELL population numbers. Another limitation was that participants might not be forthcoming if they felt others would know who they were to avoid this issue; I assured them that their answers and identity would not be exposed to anyone or in the study findings. I provided a transcript to each participant before including anything in the study. Participants had the opportunity to verify their responses before any of the data was included in the study. I also notified participants that Walden

University requirements state that transcripts are kept for 5 years, and then they must be destroyed.

### **Significance**

Information derived from the study would be of the greatest benefit to ELL students who have fallen within the disproportionate levels of achievement. An understanding of the leadership practices used may offer principals strategies that could be employed to influence ELL achievement. The study focused on the link between principals' transformational practices and the disproportionate reading achievement levels of ELL students. The findings may benefit principals in a K-12 public school setting to understand what steps can be taken to be more effective in their leadership roles of ELL students. Educators at the classroom level may also benefit and understand what steps their leadership should be taking to create the atmosphere needed for quality instruction.

Educators have strived to understand the educational process and how it applies to student learning and retention within all achievement levels (Huguet, 2017). With a better understanding of this process and its application, educators can have a greater knowledge of those underserved student populations. Practical, thoughtful, and instrumental education begins with great leadership, leaders who know they play an essential role in the education of the students under their care. A better understanding of the impactful relationship between leadership and ELL students can help educate these students more effectively by identifying the positive practices that educational leaders use to effectively educate ELL students. The research gathered could create a syllabus of practical

measures that leaders can implement within their schools to benefit their ELL programs. Quality impactful ELL education can be realized through transformational leadership and staff, positive changes, identifying key elements, understanding the impact on student learning, and working to replicate key points in other programs that have seen more success with ELL students (Steele, 2017). Researching the role principals in a K-12 public school setting play in providing successful leadership to enhance ELL students' learning processes can be a learning opportunity for schools. A better understanding of such vital elements would help create more successful learning programs (Buchheit, 2019). The goal of this study was to better understand how transformational leadership of school principals in a K-12 public school setting can have a direct and measured effect on ELL students.

### **Summary**

Principals in a K-12 public school system have distinct personalities and leadership styles; those practices play an important role in the support they give to educational programs and the students under their care. This study identified key practices in successful leaders and how they benefit ELL students' progress. In this study, the practices principals employed were analyzed to determine if certain practices help ELL students.

This chapter has provided the background that supports the study as well as the problem and purpose statements which are aligned to the research question presented. The conceptual framework included transformational theory, which was presented to help support this study by finding the transformational practices principals in a K-12 public

school setting use to increase ELL growth further. The nature of the work included a discussion of the methodology for this study and what goals are intended to be attained. Definitions of key terms were provided to clarify the meaning of these terms. Assumptions of this study were identified and discussed to inform the reader of possible preconceptions that might arise from the participants. The scope and delimitations of the study explain the impact and its possible usefulness for other areas of the state and country. Limitations were defined to detail the limited participants and possible disadvantages within the limited number of participants. The significance stated how this study will inform the profession and the way it can lead to positive social change. In Chapter 2, the conceptual framework is developed, and the literature review is presented.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter presents a review of literature used to support the topic of leadership related to ELL students not achieving at their non-ELL peers' reading level. Identifying practices employed by successful leaders and those that have enhanced ELL students' teaching and learning process in reading is important to understand what is needed to further ELL learning in the future. There is a gap in the literature on how transformational leadership can best achieve favorable outcomes for ELL students in reading. The purpose of this study was to bridge that gap by conducting a qualitative interview study.

The review of literature includes the knowledge required of principals in a K-12 public school setting about second language programs, the preparation required by these principals to lead and influence student learning, and how principals use transformational leadership skills to bring about a positive change. The next section of Chapter 2 provides a literature search strategy that includes keywords and databases used. Following is a conceptual framework over transformational leadership theory.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

When beginning to research topics pertaining to the criteria, I started by narrowing down the area of research. When searching the term *transformational leadership* alone, the return was 27,496 articles. When the term *education* was added to the search query, the results returned 6,305 articles. As I continued to refine the search topics, I searched *transformational, leadership, education, and ELL*, and the search returned three articles. Adding the final category to refine the findings further, the term

*principal* was added, returning only one article, which referred to science education and not reading. With my relevant findings, I used the information to develop the theme for this research work. To find relevant literature, the following databases were utilized through Walden University: Educational Source, ERIC, SAGE Journals, ProQuest Central, ProQuest Dissertations, Theses Global, and Academic Search Complete. In addition, various websites with statistical information and websites with data specific to the region/state in which the study's school district is located were utilized. The search process was extensive within the parameters of scholarly publications within the last 5 years. The key terms and phrases used for searching were as follows: *school principals in a K-12 public school setting, administrators, ELL students, English Language Learners, Limited English-proficient students, transformational leadership, effective school leadership, second language programs, bilingual education programs, qualitative research and ELL, leadership responsibility, and administration effectiveness*. Resources were compiled that were relevant to this study. These resources were organized and comprehensive as terms and term combinations and were modified along with the use of synonyms and contextual terms.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this qualitative interview study was the transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978). This theory frames the study as it pertains to the expectations that leadership roles have to identify needed changes, create a vision to guide the change through inspiration, and execute the change in tandem with committed members of a group. Transformational leadership theory supports this study as

it helps identify practices employed by leaders, affecting the teaching teams and their motivation toward student learning.

The research question for this study was drafted with transformational leadership theory in mind. The purpose of this study was to identify practices employed by successful leaders and those who had enhanced the teaching and learning process for ELL students in reading. Using transformational leadership theory was appropriate because the question addresses the practices employed from this theory to learn about the leadership practices of principals in the K-12 public school setting that support the reduction of the disproportionate academic achievement for ELL students in reading. Keeping in mind what is best for the team, making difficult decisions, being inspirational, listening to others, having adaptability, being proactive, and leading with vision are all concepts of transformational leadership which this study was based on.

### **Transformational Leadership Theory**

Transformational leadership theory was introduced in the late 1970s as a system of supervision (Burns, 1978). It is a type of leadership where leaders and staff work with one another to achieve higher levels of motivation and morale. Instead of dictating changes to their staff, transformational leaders inspire people to change their perceptions, expectations, or motivations to work toward a common mission or goal. According to Bernard Bass, who expanded upon this theory, it garners higher levels of respect, trust, and admiration (Bass, 1985).

Transformational leadership is the leadership style most researchers feel is appropriate for today's schools (Anderson, 2017). According to Bass, there are four main

components of transformational leadership: individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence. Individualized consideration involves the leader mentoring and coaching consistent with an individual's needs, and intellectual stimulation requires those individuals to look for new ways of thinking and embracing change. Inspirational motivation requires leaders to communicate at a high level of expectations in an encouraging way. Idealized influence is where the leader has a vision that they are committed to and translates to the different individuals providing a sense of mission. The systemic factors of transformational leadership are considered by educational scholars an essential modern practice.

Anderson (2017) stated that transformational leadership promises to enhance school leadership's ability to meet accountability and improve performance demands in the 21st century. Principals in K-12 public school settings are responsible for transforming schools to meet local, state, and federal accountability demands. Transformational leadership is centered on leaders making changes to the norms of a school, changing attitudes of the staff, creating a vision that everyone can agree upon, and creating a culture where students can thrive (Anderson, 2017; Bass, 1985). While not a cure-all, the transformational leadership style is supported by decades of research in business organizations and, for the last 10 years, in school settings (Anderson, 2017).

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable**

#### **Increasing of ELL Academic Needs**

Establishing background and precedence for ELL students' growing needs is of vital importance to the educational community. Across the United States (US), the ELL

student population continues to rise, as does the gap between ELL and non-ELL students. To understand these needs, other researchers have worked to better understand the issue, such as identifying an underserved student population. Sherwood (2018) advocated building upon the model as defined by Alfred Tatum in his work to close the literacy gap in African American students and establish a model for ELL students in the United States. Sherwood (2018) concluded that the attention given to ELL education programs had not been held to a high enough standard to reduce the achievement gap. Working with the current model for ELL literacy, educators must update reading achievement, relationship, rigor, and responsiveness gaps, which would boost policies, attitudes, and curriculum (Sherwood, 2018). Educators who can visualize and work to minimize the disparity gap in ELL students also understand the future contributions those students can make to our country.

Educators who are trained and prepared are better suited to work with underserved student populations to help with closing the achievement gap (Brown, 2019). Steele (2017) conducted a quantitative project study using simple linear regression and factor analysis to conclude that teacher preparedness is critical in meeting the needs of ELL students. Steele (2017) also found that effective instruction with the use of research-based strategies addresses the needs of the ELL population and mitigates a needed change in the area of teaching ELL students. Mixing and matching best practices to meet the diverse needs of the ELL population fosters an environment for all students to learn, specifically the ELL population (Brooks et al., 2010).

Jackson (2016) stated that educators who receive proper training and instruction are more effective teachers. Identifying the need to adjust teaching methods to best practices in correlation to student needs is a key element. It can be better served through additional training as research in this qualitative study of 12 teachers across ten districts. Teachers who specialize in ELL teaching would greatly benefit from training specifically tailored to their student group sector's increased needs. Jackson (2016) used a semi-structured interview and sorted the findings using inductive and axial coding to discover that ELL student performance has a strong correlation to the preparedness and knowledge teachers have to teach English. Teachers are receiving minimal training on teaching ELL students and relying on districts to provide professional development to gain new knowledge. More training for teachers and campus collaborative work can strengthen teachers' understanding of ELL learning while helping close the gap in reading (Jackson, 2016). Additionally, Zepeda (2017) conducted a qualitative study comparing current research and case studies to a charter school in California. Zepeda (2017) found that ELLs are not making significant enough gains compared to their non-ELL peers within the charter school. She also discovered that teachers need professional development and strategy training to implement successful practices within the classroom setting. Proper training and knowledge of socio-cultural factors will supply teachers with the necessary skills needed to close the gap for ELL students.

The studies show that training for teachers is essential to meet the needs of ELL students. Additional training of educators, as research suggests, also increases the need for additional funding. Jimenez-Castellanos and Garcia (2017) conducted a one-way

ANOVA comparing per-pupil expenditures from the top-quintile schools to the bottom-quintile schools. They found that schools that put more money into basic education and instruction receive higher academic performance from ELL students. ELL academic achievement results are extremely low in the southern state where the study will be conducted. The conclusion was for this southern state to increase the amount per pupil to expedite student achievement for all students. The more money added into the system, the more potential to close the ELL achievement gap.

### **Principal Influence and Student Learning**

Principals in a K-12 public school setting are the de facto leaders of a school; those that are effective provide a solid grounding for successful educators and students. Research has shown that; the longer a principal is at a specific school, the more positive influence they have on the students' overall academic achievement. Babo and Postma (2017) retrieved data from the Department of Education in New Jersey to identify 172 principals in a K-12 public school setting for their study. Using a quasi-socio-economic rating scale and a two hierarchical multiple regression analyses, Babo and Postma (2017) concluded that their research shows leadership to be a crucial part of any organization's success. Those principals in a K-12 public school setting with little training and support after initially taking the role of the school principal are leaving the profession at high rates after one to two years of service. Babo and Postma (2017) also concluded that it is paramount principals in a K-12 public school setting receive continued training after assuming their role to enable them to succeed in having a positive effect on students' achievement.

Stable leadership promotes an effective, stable team atmosphere; Huguet (2017) conducted a literature review evaluating effective leadership attributes on school performance. Huguet (2017) found that effective leadership from public school principals creates an environment conducive to academic success. Public school Principals that hire quality teachers promote teacher leaders implement collaboration, and professional development achieves a favorable environment for high academic achievement. Schools that implement these measures and demonstrate a system of support for students can increase the possibility of academic achievement. To increase student achievement, principals need to understand their influence on the turnaround rate within their schools. Hitt et al. (2018) interviewed 19 principals out of 200 candidates to discover several competencies that capture the specific characteristics and actions principals exhibit to increase a turnaround potential. Hitt et al. (2018) concluded that principals need to initiate and persevere, build capacity, inspire, and commit to student learning. Using these competencies will ultimately advance student learning and lessen turnover within the school.

Educational leaders must evaluate their role in the societal structure of the school. Conducting a meta-synthesis on current literature, Bodnarchuk (2016) examined and found that principal roles are shifting from managers to instructional leaders. As instructional leaders, principals are helping with the increase of student achievement. Along with an increase of responsibility within the instructional area, principals also must manage the school in an orderly fashion. This study concludes that further research is required to discover the factors that are providing the increase of achievement by the

practices the principals are implementing. Many studies look into the effect that teachers have on students, but few studies look at the value principals add. Dhuey and Smith (2018) found the value-added effect of principals should be based more on leadership at the school level as opposed to solely based on achievement testing. This study found that principals have a clear effect on student achievement. Effective leadership at the principal level is more than test scores; principals who identify with their teachers and students tend to show greater success in their overall effect.

Leaders who are effective influence those around them; Buchheit (2019) interviewed 11 principals to identify six themes using a combination of priori and open-coding. One of the top themes was that principals have a significant influence over student achievement (Buchheit, 2019). Data shows that schools with effective principals are closing the achievement gaps between different types of students. Effective teaching begins with educators, leadership plays a role in the educational process, but qualified and trained teachers have the most significant influence. Effective principals get significant results in student achievement and reducing the achievement gaps at schools.

Leaders who work towards an effective educational process can empower those around them to excel (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Goddard et al. (2017) conducted a mixed-methods study using hierarchical linear modeling with focus groups in six schools to identify that collective efficacy, empowering school staff to excel, positively affects students' academic achievement. The higher the collective efficacy is among a school, the more the achievement gap closes. Principals that empower teacher leaders have schools with higher collective efficacy, which trickles down to the students to empower

them to learn and grow, thus closing achievement gaps. Other research uses the framework of the five essential supports to examine the pathways from school leadership to school organizational process and student outcomes; Sebastian et al. (2016) found that the school learning climate is the most important aspect in student achievement. Teachers that are empowered by the principal to influence their classroom improves student learning. Principals should work on professional development and school program coherence while sharing this work with their teachers to improve the learning climate. When the principal includes teachers and looks to them to be leaders within their classrooms, the student's achievement levels rise.

### **Principals ELL Knowledge**

Teacher instructional capacity grows if led by effective principals that understand and champion best instructional delivery practices. Padron and Waxman (2016) surveyed and interviewed 22 school principals to discover insights into second language programs within the schools. Findings show that principal's knowledge of ELL programs is lacking, and they are dependent on the teachers running the programs (Lawrie, 2019). Principals are instructional leaders on their campus and should have in-depth knowledge about how programs are conducted and implemented. With more knowledge on the ELL program and how to support teachers within the program better, principals can help close the achievement gap for ELL students (Seidlitz et al., 2014).

Additionally, Fonseca and Lawrie (2019) conducted a qualitative study using an interview structure to discover what Missouri principals' and teachers' thoughts were on their preparedness to lead the ELL program within their school. The largest finding in

this study was that ELL teachers' efficacy decreases when principals do not have a full understanding of the programs within their campus (Fonseca & Lawrie, 2019).

Professional development and training need to be provided to principals and teachers to ensure they have the skills required to support the diverse population in their building.

### **Principal Use of Transformational Leadership**

Effective, transformative leaders can create positive, impactful relationships that correlate to successful educational programs. Miller (2020) used a combination of priori and open coding to support thematic analysis of the eight principals chosen within Title I schools. Miller (2020) identified building teams, having a caring environment, solving problems, promoting a desire to achieve, and continually reaching for improvement as just a few of the main ideas behind what principals need to do to utilize the concepts of transformational leadership in education. Continued professional development is a necessity to ensure principals receive the knowledge required to promote effective transformational leadership. Research has shown that a principal's leadership is powerful and necessary to improve educational outcomes.

Transformational leadership styles have been used in the business world since the end of the 1970s. Within the past 15 years, education has been looking into this style to enhance the leadership's understanding of how to increase performance by students and teachers, along with how to make changes and how to approach those changes. Anderson (2017) analyzed the recruitment, selection, and placement of school principals in a systematic literature review based on the transformational leadership system. Anderson (2017) learned that training and preparation programs for school principals lacked to give

them the skills needed for leadership, which is necessary to achieve student growth.

Anderson (2017) concludes that transformational leadership has been supported by decades of research within business and is showing considerable positive impactfulness in the educational world.

Transformational leadership and student achievement are relatively new concepts being studied. The link between student success and a principal's transformational leadership styles shows a positive correlation within the quantitative study of Mendez-Keegan, 2019. Using a two one-way analysis of variance with 595 elementary schools in New York City, Mendez-Keegan (2019) found that the more a principal uses transformational leadership, the higher student achievement scores. The results show that a teacher under a transformational leader has higher morale and personal motivation to help students achieve better in reading and math.

Berkovich's (2016) study informs that transformational leadership positively contributes to learning, strengthens teachers' efforts by using a shared vision, and even reduces teacher burnout. Berkovich (2016) suggests that by using transformational leadership from a principal's viewpoint, understanding the role demands and how they influence teachers and students serves as a better way to show successful leadership in education using transformational leadership. Transformational leaders empower those around them to work together to achieve their goals.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

This chapter began with the explanation of transformational leadership practices principals employ that enhance the academic achievement of ELLs in reading. The

literature research strategy was defined by search terms and different databases to explore literature related to this topic. The conceptual framework of transformational leadership theory was explored within the literature to further the understanding of the qualities needed to be a successful transformational leader. The literature review emphasizes the significance of transformational leadership used to change an educational setting into a motivated and inspirational environment for the staff and students.

Each of the literature review topics was selected to improve understanding of the need ELL students require to be successful and understand the principal qualities that will enhance the learning of ELLs. It is evident that research has improved the understanding of transformational leadership in educational settings but only as it relates to the principal with staff, lacking the link from principal to students. In addition, much research has been performed to study the disproportionate achievement within ELL students and their non-ELL peers but limited as it relates to what the principal can do to foster a change and improve this population's educational success. The lack of research in these combined areas justified the need for this dissertation to explore integrative factors that truly inspire principals to explore their leadership practices to advance the ELL population so each person, principal, or student can have a successful future.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

This qualitative study was conducted to help identify practices that successful leaders employ which have enhanced the teaching and learning process for ELL students in reading. The particular southern district where the research took place has between 70-80 schools; not all campuses have an ELL program, and many have principals with less than 2 years of tenure at the campus. Some schools have principals that moved or left the campus and don't meet the required 2 years of tenure. Once determinations were made on criteria, invitations were made to all schools that qualified, tentatively 35 schools. The goal of those invitations was to acquire 8-12 principals who would agree to partake in the interview process. Guest et al. (2020) stated that saturation is the point where no new information is derived from further interviews. The goal of interviewing respondents within the range of 8-12 subjects was to reach 85-90% saturation of rich data once the coding was complete. With a cross-section of approximately 1/3 of principals who meet criteria and respond positively, the interviews supported my projected saturation levels. Principals from public elementary, junior high, and high school were interviewed regarding their transformational leadership practices they employ to reduce the disproportionate levels of academic achievement in state summative reading assessments for ELL students. Chapter 3 details the research design and rationale for the study, as well as my role as a researcher, along with the methodology used. This chapter addresses the trustworthiness of the study, ethical issues, and concludes with a summary identifying the key point in the chapter.

## **Research Design and Rationale**

This qualitative study focused on the key question of ascertaining the knowledge level of the qualities that principals have that help them achieve success within their ELL population related to reading.

This qualitative study sought to identify possible practices employed by principals who had successfully closed the disproportionate level of achievement for their ELL students in reading. Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated that qualitative research is used to learn about people's experiences and how they view the understanding or interpretation of different situations. Individuals hold differing perspectives; an interview process with questions was used to better put those perspectives into context (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Merriam and Grenier (2019) stated that a qualitative study seeks to understand, discover, interpret perspectives, and use interview questioning by the researcher to delve into meanings with more precision. Interviewing principals individually allowed them to be candid to provide details that helped expand the research scope. Ravitch and Carl (2016) describe qualitative research as largely an inductive process where the researcher builds theories and hypotheses from the data based on the interviews. In this study, each participant's interview was coded, analyzed, and reported.

Qualitative methods must be very descriptive due to the need to understand participants' perspectives (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Flick (2018) points out that qualitative research uses people's perspectives as empirical data, making different contexts visible. Post-interview data was analyzed and coded so that the overall qualities were identifiable. The information can help inform others about what may be useful in

creating a successful program to close the disproportionate levels of ELL students' achievement in reading.

Grounded theory was not selected for this study because I did not aim to develop a theory, but rather tried to learn and understand what qualities principals possess that help ELL students. Glaser and Strauss (2017) describe grounded theory as a discovery of theory from data, which would provide predictions, explanations, and interpretations. Ravitch and Carl (2016) further explained that grounded theory is an inductive process that relies heavily on the data and using a constant comparison method; a singular theory, however, was not the intention of this research.

Case studies work to extrapolate details to predict possible trends; research interviews are conducted to understand past and current success and understand their impact instead of trying to forecast future teaching methods. As my research was not intended to forecast specific trends, a case study was not chosen as the research methodology.

Finally, a phenomenological design focuses on the experience of the participants with an examination of shared findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Therefore, a phenomenology design was not chosen since the research discusses commonality but not specific experiences. For this reason, I chose a qualitative study because this approach was better suited due to only interviewing the participants to gather data.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I have held many different teaching positions from 1st grade to 8th grade, which included ELL students within my classes. Currently, my position is overseeing that state

testing is conducted within the state requirements in one of the many junior high schools in a public school district. I do not have a supervisory role in the schools included in this study.

Ravitch and Carl (2016) indicate that conceptualizing the researcher as the primary instrument has significant implications throughout the research process. They suggest that committing to a reflexive process to help identify personal influences will help shape the research study. Keeping this in mind, my sole priority was to plan out my research, identify willing participants, interview, collect and analyze data, and then report the results in an unbiased manner.

### **Methodology**

This section will provide the needed information on participant selection, instrumentation, and procedures for recruitment, participation, data collection, and data analysis plan. A portion of the overall work was to interview participants to learn of their transformational leadership qualities that impact closing the disproportionate level of reading in ELL students. The reasoning for the methodology and selection of participants follows.

#### **Participant Selection**

The participants for this study were ten principals from the three different levels of schools within the district. Having 40 schools that fit the requirements for this study, there were only 10 acceptances. State testing data was used to find schools that have a large number of ELL students within an ELL program and also shows a disproportionate level of achievement between the ELL students and the general population in reading.

The research can work to understand how these schools have worked to successfully close the disproportionate achievement levels.

Upon Institutional Review Board approval, I contacted the Research, Assessment, and Accountability department at the district to receive approval from the Research Review Board to start the recruitment process at schools that meet the standards for this study. After receiving IRB permission, I contacted select principals whose ELL programs fit the study parameters through their district email or via letter to their physical office. The correspondence had a description of the study and interview questions so each principal would have full knowledge of the study's focus. The letter explained the study's objective and reassured the participants' privacy through the anonymous coding methods. Ravitch and Carl (2016) advocated that confidentiality is maintained through hiding the individual's identity. Principals who chose to accept or decline in the interview process sent their choice to my district email or office address with their decision. After I received agreements from 10 principals, I provided them with a consent form via email or physical mail that reiterates that their response will be kept confidential and provide possible dates and estimated times needed to complete the interview. Currently, I do not have a role on any of the campuses that were considered for recruitment.

Individual meetings were scheduled through my Walden email account, requesting either a Zoom meeting or a face-to-face interview following current social distancing protocols. Interviewees were asked to find a quiet, comfortable, and relaxed atmosphere to partake in the interview. These interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed by the end of the day. These files are kept secure and held as needed for study

provenance, and files were not shared or used for any other research. After transcription, I submitted it to each principal for their review and approval. Once everyone approved their transcription, I analyzed to find trends that follow the research question in this study.

### **Instrumentation**

The instrument used to collect data was a semi-structured open-ended question interview to explore why ELL students are underachieving in reading in relation to their non-ELL peers. To gather the information needed for the study, participants were in a meeting place of their choosing. Questions posed were open-ended, so the participants could expand upon their answers about the qualities they felt helped them in their work with ELL students. The interview questions had follow-up questions to help clarify and elaborate on answers. Each of the participants were asked the same set of initial questions, followed up by sub-questions that differed to ensure their responses were clarified.

### **Interviews**

The interview questions were written specifically for this study and pertained to transformational leadership and ELL students. The questions were open-ended so that the interview would be more conversational and lead to follow-up questions that clarified and helped to elaborate on answers. Each interview was conducted individually, and each principal was assigned a letter code to differentiate their responses. Each interviewee had an opportunity to review, approve, or edit their responses. After the data was finalized, it was analyzed and coded to establish reliable themes. Reliable interview protocols are

crucial to obtaining good qualitative data (Yeong et al., 2018). Yeong et al. (2018) stated that an interview process facilitates a systematic and consistent process that increases data effectiveness by staying within time limits. The purpose of this semi-structured conversation was to elicit the participant's thoughts on their expertise that may affect the achievement of ELL students. To increase validity, the participants had an opportunity to review the transcribed interviews and add or change what they felt needed adjusting. After coding the responses, the data was grouped to establish themes to explore practices that emerged, giving ideas as to why ELL students have disproportionate levels in state reading assessments in relation to their non-ELL peers.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Ravitch and Carl (2016) suggested that recording conversations through interviews have proven an essential aspect of ongoing reflection that later becomes a part of the research process. Once I received permission to gather volunteers, I scheduled interview dates via email correspondence directly to the participants. Each principal had an individual, face-to-face interview that was audio recorded. I used a 30 to 60-minute window for each interview, including follow-up questions and clarifications. I transcribed the interviews on the same day to ensure accuracy. Once the interviews were transcribed, I provided a copy to the principal for their review and feedback via physical mail with an email that included a reply option to verify receipt and agreement to its accuracy. If any of the principals wanted to meet again, I scheduled another date and time for a follow-up conference. After each transcription was approved, I coded the interviews and established themes and sub-themes for each group.

After all interviews were transcribed, reviewed, approved, and no other follow-ups were required, each principal received a thank you email for their participation. The participants were not compensated.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Using open-ended questions was used to elicit authentic responses from each K-12 public school principal about what transformational practices they employ and how they support ELL students on state achievement assessments. Once interviews were completed and transcribed, the transcriptions were subjectively compared to identify commonality of themes. Each common theme was analyzed and coded to inform the study about trends each K-12 public school principal elicited. After I read and transcribed all interviews, I identified all commonalities and general themes categorized by the interviewees. Saldaña (2021) references that codes are used to translate data into a format used to identify patterns, themes, and categories. She points out that there are seven attributes that a qualitative researcher should have: organizational skills, flexibility, creativity, perseverance, ethics, extensive vocabulary, and able to accommodate ambiguity (Saldaña, 2021). Once data was synthesized, emergent themes were linked to theories identified in this study, and research questions were answered through analysis of these themes.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthy research is important and needs to be verified through dependability, confirmability, and credibility. Saldaña (2021) stated that a study's trustworthiness includes detailed notes, detailed transcription, and checking with the participants to make

sure interpretation is accurate. I achieved dependability by providing the participants with their transcribed interviews for their review and edits and repeating the same process for each interview. I achieved confirmability by keeping detailed records of interviews and the process taken during data collection and using the recordings as further confirmation. Also, participants had the opportunity to review, edit, give feedback, and omit discrepancies from their transcripts.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Ethics requires a reflexive approach to research that includes developing and maintaining openness to feedback and change (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Acknowledging our biases and actively monitoring them is crucial to ethical research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Institutional Review Board documents were prepared and utilized accordingly. To gain access to participants, I first contacted the school district and submitted a letter of permission to gather data. After I gained approval from the school district to recruit principals, I sent a formal letter via email or mail to each principal that meet the criteria for this study. Once principals accepted, denied, or asked for more information on the study, I sent out an informed consent form for final acceptance.

Once participant selection was made, interviewees received an email from my Walden email account confirming this acceptance and outlining the interview process. Within the email, privacy efficacy and neutrality concerns were addressed to ensure all parties were clear as to the research material being gathered. I ensured that the participants understood that their input would not be shared with other district

administrators. Merriam and Grenier (2019) suggested that taking data back to the participants promotes the trustworthiness needed to help with ethical issues. Since I work for the same school district where the study was conducted, I had to be conscious of bias even though my assigned campus is not included in the study. The interviews were conducted in a comfortable environment that protects privacy, ensuring each participant spoke freely, giving valuable and real information toward this study. I let the participants choose their interviewing site preference if they wanted privacy from their own staff.

The research process was transparent, and each participant had the opportunity to ask questions about anything that transpired throughout the interview or questions about the process. The participants had the option of opting out at any time, and their responses were not included in the study. If this did happen, other participants would have been recruited to take their place.

I ensured that the participants' responses were secured on a non-school district computer where they cannot be accessed by anyone else other than me. I am the only person with access to their information, the transcriptions, and the coding software. Each participant received detailed information about the study and its objective and knowledge about their information being kept secure and not visible to anyone else. The data will be destroyed after five years of secured storage.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 stated the design and rationale for this study. It restated the research question and defined the central concept, and it detailed the interview process, which is the research chosen for this study. Upon receipt of IRB approval, I actively sought out

participants. This chapter also included my role as the researcher, along with the methodology, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures. The results of the data collection will be presented in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4: Results

Minimal research has been conducted on the elements of transformational leadership within an educational environment to determine if there are strategies that will improve student success. Prior research on transformational leadership has been conducted in the business and medical fields, but the theory is being used in the education field with no tangible evidence of beneficial use. It is imperative that research be conducted of school administrators to learn of practices being used between transformational leaders and their support and improvement in ELL student success.

The purpose of this general qualitative interview study was to explore the transformational leadership practices of principals at K-12 public schools, establishing a link between the principal and state summative scores for ELL students. The research question was as follows:

RQ1: What transformational leadership practices do principals in a K-12 public school setting employ to support a reduction in English language learners (ELLs) disproportionate achievement in reading?

Included in this chapter are the results of the qualitative study based on data gathered through individual, face-to-face interviews of elementary, junior high, and high school principals on their experiences relating to supporting ELL students. First, I present conditions that influenced volunteers to participate or not. Next, I present the data collection process and data analysis, as well as the trustworthiness. Last, I present the results of the study.

## **Setting**

The participants in this study work in a school district located in a large southern state in the United States. This area has many students from all over the world contributing to the substantial number of ELL students within this district. According to a local state nonprofit organization, 20% of the state's 5.4 million public school students are English language students. Within this large district, 18.7% of the student population are ELL students taking English Language (ESL) classes. Due to the large number of ELL students within this southern district, I focused on finding participants that would inform better practices to advance ELL students. Working within the district, as well as working on a campus that has a high number of ELL students, helped to focus on those schools that fit the criteria.

Principals from elementary, junior high, and high school levels were selected for this study; they all worked at schools within the same district and they all had a high percentage of ELL students in their schools. Participants had a range of leadership experience within the principal position, ranging from 5 years up to 18 years. All participants had been in education for more than 10 years and were familiar with ELL students and the need for improvement in their state summative reading scores. I did not encounter any personal or organizational conditions that influenced the participants at the time of the data collection that would have influenced the interpretation of the results.

## **Data Collection**

Upon IRB approval (# is 09-15-21-0990813), invitations were sent to principals at 40 campuses identified as schools with high ELL populations, where the schools had low

reading scores for ELLs on state summative assessments, and who been a principal for more than 3 years. Respondents were from five elementaries, three junior highs, and two high schools. A total of 10 principals interviewed and contributed to the data providing insight to the study.

It was difficult to set up interviews due to the principal's busy schedules and dealing within their time constraints and deadlines for the research. However, I was able to get all 10 interviews set up within a 3-week window. Overall, the principals fully understood all the interview questions and the direction the study was going. There were a few instances when clarifying questions were asked of the principals during the interview to better understand the background of the information, and I asked a few follow up questions asked to get more details.

Data collection was done with each participant on an individual basis, at their choice of location, and face-to-face interviews ranged from 35 to 45 minutes. All interviews were recorded with an audio and transcribing application named Rev Recorder. After each interview, the audio was uploaded to the application and transcribed. As soon as the transcription was complete, it was emailed to each participant for their review and approval. There were a few corrections made by respondents for the clarity of the conversation. For example, one principal pointed out that one of the state testing words was mistyped in the transcription and asked for it to be fixed, while another noticed a sentence was incomplete and wrote out what the sentence should have said on the transcription. There were no principals that wanted to add anything more to the transcriptions. All data is stored on a USB in my home office safe. This USB holds the

interview transcriptions, the notes for coding, and all personal information acquired from the volunteers.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis included transcribing the interviews and correcting any errors when comparing the transcription to the interview audio. The transcriptions were edited to exclude any identifying information for the principal, the school, or the district. Each principal was given a number and letter based on the school level, such as JH1 for the junior highs, H1 for the high schools, and E1 for the elementary schools.

After all the transcriptions were complete, each interview was reviewed to find trends and themes based on the interview questions. Based on responses to interview questions, I extrapolated four main themes: lifelong learners, mentoring, strategy usage, and building relationships.

**Table 1**

*Common Themes*

| Themes                 | Frequency    | School Level                                   |
|------------------------|--------------|--|
| Life-long Learners     | 10 out of 10 | H1, H2, JH1, JH2, JH3, EL1, EL2, EL3, EL4, EL5 |
| Building Relationships | 10 out of 10 | H1, H2, JH1, JH2, JH3, EL1, EL2, EL3, EL4, EL5 |
| Use of Strategies      | 8 out of 10  | H1, H2, JH2, JH3, EL2, EL3, EL4, EL5           |
| Mentorships            | 7 out of 10  | H1, H2, JH1, JH3, EL1, EL2, EL4                |
| Data                   | 6 out of 10  | H1, JH2, EL2, EL3, EL4, EL5                    |
| Flexibility            | 5 out of 10  | JH3, EL1, EL2, EL4, EL5                        |
| Goal Setting           | 4 out of 10  | JH2, EL1, EL3, EL5                             |
| Foundational           | 3 out of 10  | H2, JH3, EL5                                   |

### **Results**

The results are based on the interview questions, which were developed using the research question. Principal responses yielded four main themes and several subthemes:

life-long learners, building relationships, use of strategies, mentorships, data, flexibility, goal setting, and foundational groundwork.

### **Question 1**

Q1: Have you learned a second language? If so, which ones and how.

To have the principals understand what an ELL student must go through to learn the English language, the first question asked was whether they had ever learned a second language. Out of the ten interviews, all 10 had attempted to learn a second language, but only three were fluent. The fluent speakers learned at an early age while the nonfluent waited until high school and/or college to learn. One principal stated that when he was a kid, “I learned more from the guys that I worked with than I ever did in the classroom.” Several other principals were “somewhat self-conscious,” “very self-conscience,” or as one stated, “it’s hard to learn a language when you’re not utilizing it all the time.” Another principal talked about learning a language in school as “feeling like I was learning more of the academic part... but would have learned more with a social piece.”

From responses, the prevalent themes were lifelong learner (10 out of 10), building relationships (10 out of 10), use of strategies (8 out of 10), mentorships (7 out of 10), and flexibility (5 out of 10). Past experiences involving what may be as simple as growing up in a multilingual home to an unfamiliar work or school environment that helped to shape the opinions of the respondents, to understand the difficulty associated with learning a second language and the burden of feeling inferior because of the communication barrier.

**Question 2 and 3**

Q2: What was your college and postgraduate experience like, and how did it relate to your role as a teacher/principal?

Q3: Why did you choose to become an educator?

Researching the background of the principals helps in understanding why they took on the task of becoming an educator. Out of the ten principals interviewed, only four principals wanted to be a teacher since they were little. One principal has a degree in “science and education” along with another degree in “counseling.” An elementary principal “wanted to be in education from a really young age.” Another majored in elementary education with a minor in special education. The fourth “always wanted to be a teacher his whole life.”

The other six principals had non-traditional routes into education. One principal “started working in television” while another returned from a military deployment and had two jobs available, one teaching Spanish and the other as a stockbroker. As a stockbroker, the “first day was miserable.” The next day “I went to teach.” Another principal taught English in Thailand, but upon returning to the United States, he went into biblical studies. He “really liked the experience of teaching in Thailand” and so changed his major. One junior high principal went to college not knowing what she wanted because her whole family was in the health industry, but her dad told her she “had to graduate in four years” so she “went into the teaching program and never thought she would love it.” An elementary principal went to college in the business school for accounting but “missed the social aspect” and “fell back on her minor, which was in

psychology.” In the final year, she was missing a few credits, so the advisor told her to take some education classes. After college, she worked in banking but got tired of it and said, “I’ll just try teaching.” Another elementary principal went into marketing and then pharmaceuticals and then came back into education because “that is always what was in my heart from when I was very young.”

Common themes from the respondents were lifelong learners (10 out of 10), building relationships (10 out of 10), mentorships (7 out of 10), and flexibility (5 out of 10). The respondents can build and grow from their past experiences and life choices. Those formative decisions affect their goals and objectives as leaders as well as educators. Understanding that not all choices made life or learning easier for them directly affects those they have interaction within the educational system.

#### **Question 4**

Q4: What was your experience like as a teacher? Did you have ELL students in your classes? If so, how did you teach to them?

When principals think back to their teaching days, some must go back many years to remember what it was like, but several had a mutual consensus that “the first years were very hard... it was difficult.” However, all principals remember that “I loved every minute of it because I love learning.”

Three out of the ten principals started their careers in Northern states with an ELL population of zero within their classes and schools. “Teaching in a northern state, my class was all white, and diversity did not exist,” and “My first job was in an all-black school.” When the principals moved to a southern state, it was a “culture shock” because

“I have never had so many languages in one room before.” Many taught classes that did not have ELL students because they were either advanced classes or specialized classes like debate or speech. One principal remembers having a few ELL students, but “there wasn’t an emphasis on ELL or focusing on and identifying strategies to connect their learning.”

When it came to teaching the ELLs, “more visuals, pictorial support, and chunking of materials” were used along with “scaffolding and supporting a sheltered instruction” approach. “Attending reading and writing workshops to learn strategies has been helpful and encouraged for the entire staff.”

Common themes within the responses were lifelong learner (10 out of 10), building relationships (10 out of 10), use of strategies (8 out of 10), data (6 out of 10), flexibility (5 out of 10) and foundational (3 out of 10). The respondents had extremely broad and somewhat colorful past experiences in the classroom, coming from such diverse histories, the underlying themes are still quite similar. ELL educational programs have had a dramatic shift over the years, with an increased need to adjust best practices as the need arose, regardless of geography or chronology.

### **Question 5**

Q5: Why did you choose to become a principal?

As the principals continued with their backgrounds, they were asked what moved them into continuing their education to get a principal certification. “Mentors” was given as one of the main reasons by seven out ten principals. Each interview contained, “I was pushed into mentoring others and being lead mentor for a subject,” and “I had great

teachers who pushed me to be my best and supported me.” As they continued, more details came out about the role of becoming a principal. “I wanted to reach more students, and as a leader, I can influence the teachers that then influence the students,” I wanted to be a change maker,” and “I enjoyed learning and wanted to be challenged.”

Themes within the responses were lifelong learners (10 out of 10), building relationships (10 out of 10), mentorships (7 out of 10), flexibility (5 out of 10), and goal setting (4 out of 10). The respondents were very adamant about the effect mentors had on their career. The positive aspect of a sometimes-gentle push to lead, to grow, and learn is a commonality within these school leaders. Using that grounding as a leader and understanding the direction needed to move those others is quite important. The relationship that is built between mentor and mentee is an effective and important bond that is prevalent in the responses.

### **Question 6**

Q6: What is your experience like as a principal? What are your successes and challenges you have found relating to your ELL population?

When going into a school as a principal for the first time, there are many different scenarios that may come about. One such scenario may be like having a school within a school: a general population, an ESL population, and an emersion language population. The task was given from the superintendent “make this school just one school and not three.” Due to this almost cliquish division of the school, a success came about to teach the adults that each population had “commonalities” and only the language was a barrier. “The students were never the issue it was the adults” and once they came around, the

school was now more like just one school. “Making decisions and not knowing if they will have a positive impact or not” were many conversations that principals had because “you have to be a leader and make those big decisions” and hope for the best and “adjust as you go.” Another principal talked about “digging into data” to help the school find focus when they started because the school “was very disjointed.” And another started with the mindset of “growing all the kids, no matter where they are at.”

Majority of the successes revolved around the students themselves and a few about leading the staff where they need to be to reach that success. One principal said, “I do what the teachers do. If I want them to learn something new, I will attend the training with them and show them I am here with you.” “Growing kids” came to the forefront of many conversations. “If a student can show growth, then we have been successful.” Another principal was hired at a school that split their students into two distinct categories, bi-lingual and monolingual. When he got on the campus, his first goal was to “bring the school together as one campus and not two.” Several principals mentioned “data” as showing success and using it to fine tune resources and direction. Other successes look like “when you see a kid helping another kid translate,” “growth on State testing,” “data,” and “vocabulary development.” When one principal started out, she saw a need to encourage “teachers to become ESL certified” because the percentage of teachers on the campus that were certified were “minimal.” Another success was “when the teachers actually understand and learn that our kids are very capable of learning the language while supporting their native language and keeping it and still being successful in English.”

When it came to challenges, “COVID” was the predominant challenge over the past 2 years. Another big challenge expressed was “parent involvement.” Getting parents from other cultures to enter the school and be a part of their student’s education was a difficult process. “Teacher mindset” was a challenge that arose with “getting teachers to use strategies that are good for all students and not just ELL,” “teachers not vested in their ELL population,” and “it’s the English teacher’s responsibility to get the ELL students to succeed.” A principal shared that a student who spoke only Chinese and no English stayed out of school and online for two years and never learned any English. The school called and had translators, but the “parents were scared” so the student never came to face-to-face school and therefore was behind. These challenges “are out of our hands to control.” More challenges were “bridging the language barrier and working together,” and “not having enough support for ELL students.”

Common themes from the interviews were lifelong learners (10 out of 10), building relationships (10 out of 10), use of strategies (8 out of 10), mentorships (7 out of 10), data (6 out of 10) and flexibility (5 out of 10). This question evoked an expected vocal and varied response. It’s difficult to summarize the polarizing responses from the interviews. Each principal has such a varied group of teachers and students that while their themes are similar, their experiences are not. But as the responses show understanding how those experiences manifest into the commonality of the underlying themes. The importance of lifelong learning, the use of strategies, and flexibility help principals, be more effective leaders.

**Question 7**

Q7: What do you believe about student achievement? Is it possible to get all students to achieve?

Following along with successes and challenges lead to the question of if the principals thought every student could achieve. The answers ranged from “Depends on if there is a disability” to “every kid has a talent, and we need to help them find it.” Each principal went into what achievement would look like for different students. “With support, proximal development, and scaffolding” teacher and students can grow. “Not all students are going to get to the same achievement level, but all will grow.” “There are blocks and barriers to their learning” but with “high expectations” all students can achieve.

Principal response to this question was quite varied and elicited some lengthy responses. Collated themes were lifelong learners (10 out of 10), building relationship (10 out of 10), use of strategies (8 out of 10), flexibility (5 out of 10), and foundational (3 out of 10). Once again, there are some easily discernible common threads of lifelong learners and building relationships. The interviewees understood how those key elements are essential to learning, growing, and achieving and the responses echo their opinions. The principals also commented on the use of strategies and flexibility. Regardless of a student’s ELL or non-ELL status, using strategies to be an effective educator are very important. Those strategies can equate to baby steps or quantum leaps in the educational process, however, depending on the child, those may need to be changed to accommodate the learning process of a student or group of students. This was where the data point of

flexibility was gleaned. We can use strategies to teach, but they must be accommodating to some degree. Not all students' process information and key elements in the same way, even those students who share a large commonality need the educational process to be flexible for them to garner the most from their educational program. As in the past, with rigid educational ideology, as was implemented in early days of education with a basic rote style of learning, some students flourished, and others struggled through their entire school career. Another less prevalent theme with this particular response was that of foundational. Some of the respondents felt that there was more to creating the foundation for positive educating than two plus two or ABC. While those are important concepts and that which our basic school system is built upon, students need to feel accepted and integral, creating a true foundation to grow from. Transformative leaders strive to create a community and cohesiveness that students identify with and creates a basis for them to feel safe and satisfied in their learning experience.

### **Question 8**

Q8: What do you know about best practices in ELL instruction, student engagement, and school culture?

Talking about best practices for ELL students led to making sure that "visuals, cues, and sentence stems" are being used in all classrooms and not just for the ELL students. "Best practice works for all students" even if the trainings are specific for an ELL student. "Creating background knowledge" for those students who have never been to a museum or aquarium. Taking field trips to build knowledge "leads to better understanding" and "more confidence."

“Make connections to what kids know... otherwise, they are just learning in isolation and memorizing things.” Using strategies and scaffolding were mentioned, along with using the specific strategies that the state gives out. For ELLs, vocabulary and real-world connections became a theme the principals understood to be important for ELL learning. One high school principal talked about “class size, getting students in the library, and giving them an achievable purpose.” “Visual cues are especially important in a high ELL population along with having the students speak.” The oral aspect was found to be lacking at some schools, so the principals talked about implementing more verbal acquisition so the students would be more comfortable speaking in public, such as, “turn and talks with peers.”

Having students come to a place where they are “cared for and feel good about themselves” is a key strength in ELL learning. Also, “you can never give students too much or too many resources.” A common thread was “parent involvement” to help build the multi-cultural aspect of the campus. The principals expressed that getting parents involved led to the students being more “comfortable” at school, and they “tried out for different organizations and sport teams.”

When discussing culture, the principals had to stop and think with one stating “I don’t think we do anything, but I need to change that. I never thought about that question.” Another campus has cultural heritage festivals to highlight the many different cultures within the campus to encourage others to learn new things. “International nights” are implemented into the yearly calendar to have students learn about other cultures and see that “everyone is different yet the same.”

Responses to this particular question were very thoughtful and cognitive from the respondents. Many themes were covered, building relationships (10 out of 10), use of strategies (8 out of 10), flexibility (5 out of 10), and foundational (3 out of 10), and many of the principals took their time answering as they were contemplating not only what they felt they were doing correctly but what they could be doing better to help their underserved population of their students. During the course of the responses, each of the principals touched on almost all of the main themes as well as other less prevalent themes. The purpose of the study was to create a better understanding of how those effective principals achieve their goal to ensure ELL students perform to their fullest and are on the same educational plane as their peers. The previous questions helped those respondents to think about what they have achieved and how they did so, while this question was directed at the main point of the research, what are we doing as educators and how can we do more to achieve greater success.

### **Question 9**

Q9: What events in your school do you think have the most influence on ELL student achievement?

Before and after school tutoring is used to bring in many ESL students so they can get extra help and practice. One elementary campus goes as far as having a “family literacy project” where the parents come in and learn English along with their students after school. This promotes “more parent involvement.” Another elementary campus uses “community circles” in the mornings for the students to interact with other students, not in their classes, and they get to know one another. When it came to the junior high and

high school campuses the principals struggled with thinking of ways the campus really influences the ELL population. These campuses all had the same in school classes for ELL students, but nothing that stood out as extra for the students to get more involved.

The principals in the study focused on the common themes such as lifelong learner (10 out of 10), building relationships (10 out of 10), strategies (8 out of 10), and data (6 out of 10), and two themes were expressed that quantify the responses. Mentorships (7 out of 10) and foundational (3 out of 10) were prevalent. While principals at the higher grades didn't have the support system for their students that are in place at the lower grades, they stressed how important mentorships are and a strong foundation. This does, however, put students who enroll later in their school career at a slight disadvantage compared to those who enroll in a school earlier in their education. Students who enroll later can be paired with other students who share a common background to form a peer group and ease the transition. The same theory about creating a strong foundation for students who have adapted well can work with leaders and educators to help others grow and achieve. Principals rely on those themes to help other ELL students to achieve better. While admittedly, some of them are lacking in their programs, the introspective nature of the question helped those principals identify some key areas for them to focus on and excel.

### **Question 10**

Q10: How did you improve academic outcomes for ELLs at your school?

“Differentiation,” “relationship building,” and “quality instruction” along with “training teachers” were the key components to improve an ELL’s academic standing.

Being able to get teachers to understand that a “language barrier” is not a “learning barrier” and that as a teacher “you can’t give too much help” to an ELL student came across many of the interviews. Providing different avenues to learning is “basic teaching” and needs to be used more readily.

This was another question respondents touched on nearly all the key themes as well as a multitude of others. Effective transformation leaders recognize and adapt to their student’s needs, flexibility (5 out of 10). Each student learns in their own way and at their own pace. ELL students are no different, with the exception of the language barrier. Key themes that were very prevalent were lifelong learners (10 out of 10), building relationships (10 out of 10), strategies (8 out of 10), and mentorships (7 out of 10). All of the principals felt as continuing education was really one of the most important themes. Ensuring educators have received the best training and all opportunities to continue training to help them grow their own skillset so their students are learning in the most effective way possible was suggested as a key to improving ELL student success. Principals also spoke at length about building relationships and their own use of strategies in their recruitment program. One such item was finding the best educators to bring on staff and help them become an integral part of their school community to meet and raise the achievement goals for ELL students.

### **Question 11**

Q11: What do you think would hinder your work in improving outcomes for ELL students at your school?

When it came to items that could hinder the growth of ELL students, “COVID” came up again as a problem, along with having a “young staff,” “fast growth of the district,” and “changing the mindset of teachers.” Other hindrances were “time,” “resources,” “hiring the right teachers,” and “building capacity within the school and staff.”

### **Question 12**

Q12: What are the characteristics of a high performing school where ELL students are researching and exceeding standards towards successful graduation rates?

To have students exceeding their own standards, a school needs to possess “strategic thinkers,” “be language rich,” “provide opportunities in leadership,” “be flexible in all aspects,” and “have a dedicated college and career facilitator” to help students learn all their options.

### **Question 13**

Q13: What characteristics (traits) do principals have to possess to be an effective leader for school improvement, specifically for ELL students?

For principal characteristics, it was stated you need to be “knowledgeable,” “forward thinking,” “a lifelong learner,” “a problem solver,” “a good listener,” and “be able to create systems that work.” Each one of these characteristics listed by the principals that were interviewed are the same characteristics that a transformational leader needs to possess to be an effective leader.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

The validity and reliability of this study was addressed by coding the transcribed interview data and providing the participants with the opportunity to review their interview transcriptions. I established credibility by interviewing principals that fit the requirements established to learn about transformational leadership. I further established credibility by forwarding each principal their transcribed interview for their review and comments. Overall, all principals approved their interview transcription, and only two made a correction of a single word that was mis-transcribed and a sentence that was not completed.

To be accepted as trustworthy, qualitative researchers must demonstrate that data analysis has been conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner through recording, systematizing, and disclosing the methods of analysis with enough detail to enable the reader to determine whether the process is credible (Nowell et al., 2017). I established trustworthiness by providing the roles volunteers played in the research, the methodology used to obtain responses to research questions, and each aspect of the research has been detailed. At the beginning of every interview, I provided the volunteers with a brief synopsis of the study so they would respond toward that context.

I provided dependability in this research by transcribing all recorded interviews. I reviewed each transcription as it related to the audio recording to ensure accuracy. I have detailed the process of gathering data and transcribing interviews to determine themes throughout the interviews that can be replicated in another study.

I achieved confirmability by keeping detailed records, including consent forms of all participants. I have all interviews stored on a password protected USB to which I only have access. All recordings and paperwork are confidential and only accessible to me. Themes were created from the data analysis that support the overall research question.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this general qualitative interview study was to explore the transformational leadership practices of principals at K-12 public schools, establishing a link between the principal and state summative scores for ELL students. I collected data through one-on-one interviews of ten principals within a large southern district. The research question guided the questioning of each principal to gain knowledge of their background, standards they have for ELL successes, and characteristics they possess that are transformational and lead to ELL success on state summative reading assessments.

Interviews yielded the same themes throughout each interview, with several additions of details to explain each theme further. The top themes were “life log learners,” “mentors,” “use of strategies,” and “love the job.” The transformational leadership details that were derived from the interviews were that leaders need to be “flexible,” “good listeners,” and “problem solvers.” Having ELL students reach goals of higher achievement on state summative tests schools need to “get parents involved,” “provide background knowledge,” and “use visuals, cues, and sentence stems,” to grow each student.

In Chapter 5, I include the interpretation of the findings, an analysis of the findings in the context of the conceptual framework, discussion, conclusion, and recommendations.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the aspects of transformational leadership principals have used in an effort to reduce the disproportionate level in state summative reading assessments between ELL students and their non-ELL peers. Exploring how principals have implemented transformational leadership strategies to support ELL students in this large southern district was needed. School administrators are challenged to implement transformational leadership practices to create successful learning environments that push the ELL students in their schools to a status equal to their non-ELL peers. Few studies have been done to understand the contribution principals in a K-12 public school setting have on students' learning. Research is still unclear about the exact actions' principals in a K-12 public school setting need to acquire to enhance the learning of ELLs (Padron & Waxman, 2016). It was imperative to gain a better understanding of the strategies being used to achieve this type of student success.

The findings that emerged during the data analysis process revealed several key strategies that transformational leaders need to possess in order to support ELL students. The key findings were: (a) principals need to have a desire to be lifelong learners, (b) principals need to have a way that builds relationships with all staff and students, (c) principals need to be able to pull from strategies they have found that work, (d) principals need to have the capacity to mentor their staff in using strategies and encouraging staff members to mentor students in the same capacity, (e) principals need to understand their

data and what to do with it once it is disaggregated, and (f) principals need to be flexible when ideas don't work to change and try something new.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The key findings from this study were reflected throughout the literature. The findings confirmed the need for principals to implement transformational leadership strategies to support staff and ELL students. Following is a discussion in detail of the findings.

#### **Lifelong Learning**

A central finding that emerged from the data was that 10 out of 10 principals interviewed expressed a need to learn. Several principals had completed a doctorate degree while a few more were in the process of completing their doctorate; all said they continue to attend trainings on new ways of incorporating ideas for teaching and learning. With the continued change in how education is delivered, participants asserted that they need to remain current with these changes so their staff can benefit from new methodology and how to best incorporate it. From a practical standpoint of a lifelong learner, one needs to be a teacher as well as effectively communicate new ideology and practical application to others around them, ensuring those around them embrace continued learning, principals should understand the needs of their school as reflected in the hiring process, ensuring teachers who are willing to learn and grow are on board. School leaders can help to ensure their school does not stagnate with the addition of new educators.

There were several studies reflected in the literature relating to the role of training and learning. For example, Jackson (2016) stated that educators who receive proper training and instruction are more effective teachers. Identifying the need to adjust teaching methods to reflect best practices in correlation to student needs is a key element. Thus, it is essential for not only principals but teachers to continue learning and growing to advance student needs. Similarly, Anderson (2017) learned that training and preparation programs for school principals was lacking in the proper skills needed for leadership, which is necessary to achieve student growth. Getting the right training is important for every role in a school and needs to be flexible and have people that want to learn and grow.

From an educator's viewpoint, being able to understand the love of learning is more likely to impress upon students that education is a lifelong journey that does not end at graduation. Lifelong learners grow and prosper as their education continues. ELL and non-ELL students who see this in their teachers and principals are more likely to achieve their goals.

### **Building Relationships**

Another central finding among 10 out of 10 principals interviewed was the need to build relationships with not only the staff but with students as well. Working with the current model for ELL literacy, educators must update reading achievement, relationships, rigor, and responsiveness gaps, which boosts policies, attitudes, and curriculum (Sherwood, 2018). Hitt et al. (2018) revealed that principals need to initiate

and persevere, build capacity, inspire, and commit to student learning. As the principals talked about their relationships in their buildings, it revolved around them being the lead in each situation when transformational leadership theory builds the capacity in others to lead, once trained. Building relationships among the staff gives the staff more buy-in to the school and to the students around them. Each school is a community of mentors and peers and a cohesive bond is built with strong leaders who understand the value of the community within their domain. The positive transformational leadership within a school creates a community where others are included, and new ideologies are welcomed.

Relationship building does not pertain only to principals and teachers, educators who know and understand the needs of their students are far more productive. Favored teachers who have or had an impactful role in our lives are important, but educators are also impacted by students as well. Creating positive relationships in a safe productive atmosphere is a key to a more fruitful educational system for all students.

### **Use of Strategies**

Steele (2017) found that effective instruction with the use of research-based strategies addresses the needs of the ELL population and mitigates a needed change in the area of teaching ELL students. Zepeda (2017) discovered that teachers need professional development and strategy training to implement successful practices within the classroom setting. Miller (2020) identified building teams, having a caring environment, solving problems, promoting a desire to achieve, and continually reaching for improvement as just a few of the main ideas behind what principals need to do to utilize the concepts of transformational leadership in education. The majority of principals (8 out of 10)

described that having an array of strategies for the teachers, students, and themselves was an important building block within their school system. Being able to give strategies to teachers is essential to the growth of all involved, including students. Once a teacher is using a strategy, and it is showing improvement for the students, the students will pick up on the idea and use or modify that strategy to fit what they need and become a better learner and grow within. Anderson (2017) learned that training and preparation programs, in other words – strategies, for school principals was lacking and needed to give them the skills needed for leadership, which is necessary to achieve student growth.

ELL and non-ELL students are directly affected by the use of strategies in the classroom. Understanding those strategies and how they can be used as best practice in a given setting is another key element. Educators who are able to understand and tailor fit strategies for their students to be more effective learners can help those students grow and thrive.

### **Mentorships**

Babo and Postma (2017) concluded that it is paramount principals in a K-12 public school setting receive continued training after assuming their role to enable them to succeed in having a positive effect on students' achievement. Goddard et al. (2017) found that principals that empower teacher leaders have schools with higher collective efficacy, which trickles down to the students to empower them to learn and grow, thus closing achievement gaps. Several principals (7 out of 10) talked about mentoring their teachers. The principals talked about how they would lead by example and help within the classrooms and have group discussions with teachers on what is working and what

needs improvement. Having these mentor discussions helped not only build the mindset of the teachers but showed the principal wanted to be involved and help with the growth of the school and the students. Understanding and learning from best practices that others have achieved can help principals to achieve greater results within their own school. Peer groups, discussion groups, and mentoring are paramount to continuing to learn as well as share ideas with others in the same position. As educational practices continue to evolve, leaders could become lax and complacent, surrounding yourself with peers and mentors can keep positive transformation leaders looking forward to professional and personal growth.

Mentorships at all levels of education are important. Administrators, principals, teachers, and students can help others to grow and prosper in their education. Reinforcing a safe learning environment, where needs and counseling are met, reinforce that education is important. At all levels of the educational process mentors are important to the direct growth and continued learning of all involved and benefit the students.

### **Data**

Padron and Waxman (2016) findings show that principal's knowledge of ELL programs is lacking, and they are dependent on the teachers running the programs. The largest finding in this study was that ELL teacher's efficacy decreases when principals do not have a full understanding of the programs within their campus (Fonseca & Lawrie, 2019). Mendez-Keegan (2019) found that the more a principal uses transformational leadership, the higher student achievement scores. The results show that a teacher under a transformational leader has higher morale and personal motivation to help students

achieve better in reading and math. When it comes to data, there are many forms in an educational system. You have data that comes from numbers and scores, and then you have data that comes from growth and knowledge. The principals (6 out of 10) talked about both types. They each knew that raw number data is important to show growth or where the growth is lacking, but they also understood that data is within the everyday items that happen on campus. Data was related back to lifelong learning because if they were not continuously learning, then the school would become stagnate, and there would be no growth. They also related data to mentorships and use of strategies. Without mentorships, the staff would not have a clear vision of what the goal of the campus is, and thus the data would show this. Without strategies, how do the students get the knowledge to succeed on tests and show that they are growing as individuals. Data comes in many varieties, and transformational leaders understand the difference and the need to be flexible.

Education in its simplest form is the learning of the data presented. Educators and students who are better suited to realizing which types of data is important for retention and growth can be challenging. Educators and students alike are presented with an enormous amount of data each day and understanding that the growth of our education system and our varying students depends on knowing the data. Effective, concise presentation, and instruction of this data to students and staff will benefit all involved.

### **Flexibility**

Dhuey and Smith (2018) found effective leadership at the principal level is more than test scores; principals who identify with their teachers and students tend to

show greater success in their overall effect. Sebastian et al. (2016) found that the school learning climate is the most important aspect in student achievement. Teachers that are empowered by the principal to influence their classroom improves student learning. When the principal includes teachers and looks to them to be leaders within their classrooms, the student's achievement levels rise. Nothing is ever perfect in an educational setting, and principals must understand this and be okay with constant change when needed. Being able to become flexible is a transformational leadership quality that 5 out of 10 principals used but can be difficult to learn however is a requirement for leading a school. Having the wherewithal to change in mid-stream when things are not working out is a must, and if it can be taught, then that is yet another strategy a principal can put into their learning and understanding.

In decades past rote learning was standard practice and educators were taught that effective learning was through repetition. Some educators and students did well with this style of learning but as our understanding of education grew our understanding of learning changed. To be an effective educator, changing and being flexible is a key to ensuring students and educators are able to garner the most from their experience.

### **Limitations of the Study**

With a limit of between eight to twelve principals and being able to interview ten principals, this allowed for interviews to be in-depth, which eliminated the concern of semi-structured interviews not providing precise measurement. Adhabi and Anozie (2017) support the semi-structured interview process, not only to fully understand the answer to a question but the methodology of the answer as well. Sample size was not as

important in this qualitative study since the principals' provided responses to interview questions that provided depth to the study, and this eliminated the concern of transferability of the findings. The requirement of being a principal at a campus with an ELL program eliminated the possibility of systemic and research biases. Participant validation and member checks were also instituted.

### **Recommendations**

Principals in K-12 public schools are doing their best to provide support to teachers, staff, and their ELL population to influence the closing of the achievement gap between ELL students and their non-ELL peers. The following recommendations will strengthen the support the principals are already providing and may address some of the limitations associated with the achievement gap.

1. **Building Relationships with staff and students** – It is recommended that principals receive continual training on a yearly basis about how to build and use relationships within their building to improve the mindset and growth of their staff.
2. **Implement Strategies** – It is recommended that principals are given different strategies to implement on their campus and still have the flexibility to change to the needs of their campus.
3. **Mentorship Training** – It is recommended that principals receive training on how to lead mentor groups and how to empower their staff on leading mentor groups with the teachers and the teachers with the students.

4. Using Data to build capacity – It is recommended that principals are trained on ELL programs and how they function, along with what works for these students and how their raw number data is used differently when updating the program.
5. Flexibility – It is recommended that principals are given the freedom to change and adjust their on-campus concepts to improve the campus, staff, and students.

### **Implications**

#### **Positive Social Change**

This study may contribute to positive social change by helping to identify transformational leadership strategies that will help school districts hire principals that can grow and learn not only themselves but others around them. Enhancing the growth mindset set forth with transformational strategies may improve the overall culture of a campus and the district as a whole. There is a need for principals to promote positive social change. Anderson (2017) found that transformational leadership promises to enhance school leadership's ability to meet accountability and improve performance demands in the twenty-first century. School principals have the capacity to bring down many social barriers related to ELL students within the United States of America and among their peers. Positive social change may occur when principals implement strategies to support their school staff which may influence ELL student achievement.

The methodology of this study followed the characteristics related to qualitative research: (a) the study occurred with one on one meetings, (b) data was collected through

semi-structured interviews, (c) the principals thoughts and ideas were presented in the findings, (d) the study may help prevent the scope of the research from expanding beyond the original intent, (e) the study allows for a comprehensive understanding, (f) the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis. I was the primary data collector and primary analyzer. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. I collected data from the principal interviews, then sorted and collected patterns, categories, and themes.

This qualitative study addressed an identified gap within principals' transformational leadership traits and how these missing traits can influence the ELL achievement gap. Findings may also provide insight to schools throughout the Southern states that have high numbers of ELL students showing a gap in the Reading Achievement scores.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The current research focused on the need for principals to embody transformational leadership characteristics to improve the achievement gap between ELL students and non-ELL students with state reading achievement scores. However, there is a need to provide future studies related to each of the individual characteristics of transformational leadership relating to both the teachers and students. Further research needs would include following transformational leaders from inception into a new building up to five years to clarify results of success on all persons within the building.

## **Conclusion**

As a result, this study confirmed the need for principals to have transformational leadership traits to support the campus, staff, and students they are beholden to help achieve. During this qualitative study, I interviewed 10 elementary, middle, and high school principals in a large southern school district that has a large number of ELL students. Each principal had 3 or more years of experience as a principal with a school that has an ELL program. This study aligned with the research question and purpose. This study provided a detailed account of the principal interviews and an analysis of strategies to implement to support each campus. In this study, I explored the traits and perceptions of principals to gain information on the strategies used and needed to achieve an effective campus.

This qualitative study provided an in-depth description of strategies used by transformational leaders that may influence ELL student achievement. Findings from the study provide insight on strategies to implement in support of principals to have an impact on closing achievement gaps between ELL and non-ELL students. Additionally, findings may provide insight on strategies for a district to align their hiring process to weed out future principals that do not have the necessary transformational traits needed to run a successful campus.

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## Appendix A: Principal Interview Guide Questions

### Appropriate Probes after a comfortable pause:

1. Tell me more about that please.
2. What do you mean by that?
3. Explore a laugh with “Can you explain that in a little more detail please?”
4. Follow a hunch with “You have been telling me \_\_\_\_\_, but I get the impression that there is more to your experiences than you are telling me. Is that a fair assessment?”

1. Have you learned a second language? If so, which one and how.

2. What was your college and postgraduate experience like and how did it relate to your role as a teacher/principal?

3. Why did you choose to become an educator?

4. What was your experience like as a teacher? Did you have ELL students in your classes? If so, how did you teach to them?

5. Why did you choose to become a principal?

6. What is your experience like as a principal? What are your successes and challenges you have found relating to your ELL population?

**7. What do you believe about student achievement? Is it possible to get all students to achieve?**

**8. What do you know about best practices in ELL instruction, student engagement, and school culture?**

**9. What events in your school do you think have the most influence on ELL student achievement?**

**10. What characteristics (traits) do principals have to possess to be an effective leader for school improvement, specifically for ELL students?**

**11. How did you improve academic outcomes for ELLs at your school?**

**12. What do you think would hinder your work in improving outcomes for ELL students at your school?**

**13. What are the characteristics of a high performing school where ELL students are reaching & exceeding standards towards successful graduation rates?**