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Leadership Practices Principals Believe Reduce Reading Achievement Gaps for Economically Disadvantaged Students

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Andrew Richard Buchheit

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Dr. Sarah Everts, Committee Member, Education Faculty
Dr. Christina Dawson, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

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2019

Abstract

Leadership Practices Principals Believe

Reduce Reading Achievement Gaps for Economically Disadvantaged Students

by

Andrew Richard Buchheit

MA, Marymount University, 1993

BA, George Mason University, 1988

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

November 2019

Abstract

Evidence suggests that principals' practices influence student achievement. The purpose

of this qualitative study was to examine the beliefs elementary school principals in the

mid-Atlantic United States had about which leadership practices have been instrumental

in reducing the achievement gap between economically-disadvantaged students and all

other students at their schools. The leadership model that Kouzes and Posner developed,

which identified 5 practices of exemplary leaders, served as the conceptual framework

for this study. Eleven principals who were leaders at schools where the achievement gap

in reading had been reduced compared with the state average were interviewed. A

combination of a priori and open coding was used to support thematic analysis. Six

leadership practices, aligned with transformational and instructional leadership practices,

were identified as influencing student achievement positively. The participants indicated

the importance of *leading by example and developing positive relationships* with all

stakeholders and *communicating and inspiring all stakeholders* with their vision for their

schools, believed in *shared decision making and developing teacher leaders*, and

understood the value of *risk-taking and innovation* along with a strong *instructional*

focus. The results of this study add to the research supporting the influence that principals

have on student achievement by identifying practices principals could implement at their

schools to increase student achievement. It is recommended that school division

personnel and principal preparation program personnel use these results to inform their

training programs and school improvement initiatives. Positive social change may occur

when principals implement these 6 practices at their own schools, thereby increasing the

reading achievement of economically-disadvantaged students.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my mother, Ilse I. Buchheit for her support, love, and guidance and my daughters, Victoria C. Buchheit and Jennifer A. Buchheit for being the motivation of almost everything I do in my life. My mother raised me to believe in education and to become a life-long learner and my two daughters remind me to be best person I can be every day. I am very proud of both of them and how they have also embraced education, learning, and making the world a better place.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank my committee Chairs, Dr. Andrew T. Alexson and Dr. Sarah (Sally) Everts for their support, guidance, and input. I learned so much from both of them about doctoral research and writing a dissertation. I would never have completed the dissertation without their support. I would like to also thank my colleagues in my own school and school division who inspire me to do my best each day.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The influence that principals have at their schools is complex, sets the tone for their school communities, and has been the focus of much educational research (Fullan, 2014; Stein, 2016). The accountability for student performance is often considered the responsibility of the principal. National and state standardized test results and other data identify achievement gaps still exist and are affecting disadvantaged students (The National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2017a). Some schools are reversing the trend with school principals leading the changes that have increased student achievement (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Dhuey & Smith, 2014; McKinney, Labat, & Labat, 2015; Ni, Yan, & Pounder, 2018). School leaders have long been identified as a critical contributing factor in turning schools around from being designated as "at risk" to improving uneven student achievement (Brown & Green, 2014; Dutta & Sahney, 2016; Fullan, 2014; Litz & Scott, 2017; Tan, 2018). Although principals can positively influence school culture and achievement (Fuller, Pendola, & Hollingworth, 2017;McKinney et al., 2015), a clear understanding of how principals affect student achievement does not exist (Al-Mahdy, Emam, & Hallinger, 2018; Lunenburg & Irby, 2014).

The leadership practices of school leaders have been described as having the most effect on student achievement after an effective classroom teacher (Fullan, 2014; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Wallace Foundation, 2012). Brown and Green (2014) recognized that through effective leadership practices, low-achieving schools can be transformed into high-achieving schools. Effective principals had

significant influence on student achievement in reading and math as well as a substantial positive effect on reducing achievement gaps at schools (Day et al., 2016; Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

NAEP results described a continuous achievement gap for multiple years starting in 1970 between the students identified as economically disadvantaged and other students (NAEP, 2017b). The 2017 NAEP reported only 22% of fourth-grade economically disadvantaged students were at or above proficiency levels compared with 52% of all students (NAEP, 2017b). However, throughout the United States, not all schools are reflecting this trend and instead are showing results reducing the achievement gap affecting economically disadvantaged students (NAEP, 2017; State Department of Education, 2018).

One reason for this improvement in student achievement is the school leader and their leadership practices (Klar & Brewer, 2014; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). School leaders using transformational leadership practices significantly and positively affected school achievement (Allen, Grigsby, & Peters, 2015; Chin, 2007; Woods & Martin, 2016). Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) research on transformational leadership practices is an effective framework to use to understand the leadership practices of exemplary school leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Litz & Scott, 2017; Palmer et al., 2014).

Background

Students identified as economically disadvantaged, as described in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) due to their eligibility for the National School Lunch

Program (NSLP) to receive free and reduced meals, continue to score lower on state and

national assessments in reading than non-economically disadvantaged students (NAEP,

2017a; State Department of Education, 2018). The number of students who are

considered economically disadvantaged has grown from 40% in 2003 to 50% in 2017

(NAEP, 2017b). This trend also mirrored the increase in the number of students younger

than 18 years living in poverty. In 2017, 15 million children were identified as living in

poverty (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Child poverty rates have fluctuated between 16% in

2000 and 23% in 1993 and 1964 and at the time of this study poverty rates were at 17%

(Child Trends Databank, 2019).

Table 1

Poverty Rates

1964	1993	2000	2004	2006	2010	2014	2017
24%	23%	16%	18%	17%	17%	21%	17%

Note. Reprinted from Child Trends Databank (2019).

The achievement gap for students identified as economically disadvantaged also

affects Black and Hispanic students disproportionally and at higher rates than White

students (Wixom, 2015). Not only have poverty rates and the divide between the top

percent and the lower percent in our country increased, but results show students of color

are disproportionately affected by poverty with 38% of Black students, 35% American

Indian, and 32% of Hispanic students living in poverty compared with 12% of White

students and 21% for all students (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). The reading achievement

gap between students from families in the 90th percentile of the income distribution and

those students from low-income families at the 10th percentiles was approximately 9.9 of

a standard deviation from 1950 thru the early 1990s. Students identified as economically

disadvantaged scored 13 points lower than all students in reading for the 2017-2018

school year. The passing rate of students identified as White was 86% for the end of the

year reading assessment while only 66% of students identified as economically

disadvantaged earned a passing score for this assessment.

Table 2

NAEP 2017 Reading Results

White	Black	Hispanic	ELL	NonELL	SWD	NonSWD	Econ	NonEcon
47%	20%	23%	9%	49%	12%	49%	22%	52%

Table 3

State Department of Education 2016-2018 Reading Results

Year	All	White	Black	Hispanic	ELL	SWD	Econ	Asian
2018	79%	86%	67%	67%	59%	48%	66%	90%
2017	80%	90%	75%	71%	65%	52%	69%	89%
2016	80%	89%	74%	71%	61%	49%	69%	89

The ongoing achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and all students continues to be a challenge facing many schools in the United States (NAEP, 2017b). Some school personnel have reversed this trend and turned around their schools and reduced achievement gaps as their schools (Dutta & Sahney, 2016; McKinney et al., 2015; Tan, 2018). Researchers have noted it is through effective school leadership that the achievement gaps in reading and math can be reduced or closed (Brown & Green, 2014; Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Fullan, 2014).

Problem Statement

The problem is there is a lack of understanding of principals' beliefs about their leadership practices that positively influence the reading achievement of students identified as economically disadvantaged. Researchers have identified a connection between the leadership practices of school principals and student achievement (Dhuey & Smith, 2014; McKinney et al., 2015; Ni et al., 2018). Although research indicates principals can play an important role in closing the achievement gap and improving student achievement at schools, it is not clearly understood what principals believe are their own leadership practices influencing student achievement (Chibani & Chibani, 2013; Day et al., 2016; Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Litz & Scott, 2017; Quin, Deris, Bischoff, & Johnson, 2015). Understanding the leadership practices that principals, at schools in a mid-Atlantic state where the achievement gap in reading has been reduced, believe are effective may lead to other school principals applying these same practices at their schools to achieve similar results.

I explored what principals believe are their own leadership practices that positively influenced reading achievement of economically disadvantaged students and how these views fit into the framework of transformational leadership practices as defined by Kouzes and Posner (2017). Transformational leadership practices, such as Kouzes and Posner described, have had considerable influence on reducing students' uneven academic achievement (Allen et al., 2015; Chin, 2007; Day et al., 2016; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Woods & Martin, 2016). The Kouzes and Posner (2017) model of transformational leadership, identifying five practices used by exemplary leaders, served as the conceptual framework of this research study. The five transformational leadership practices are (a) model the way, (b) inspire a shared vision, (c) challenge the process, (d) enable others to act, and (e) encourage the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

My purpose in this study was to gain an understanding of leadership practices principals believe have reduced the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and all students. Principals of high performing elementary schools, in a mid-Atlantic state, with a smaller than average gap between economically disadvantaged students and all students as shown on the end of year state assessments for the 2017-2018 school year elementary schools were interviewed. The responses from the participants of this study were analyzed within the context of the seminal work on transformational leadership by Kouzes and Posner (2017). Kouzes's and Posner's leadership model served as the framework for this research study, including: (a) model the way, (b) inspire a shared vision, (c) challenge the process, (d) enable others to act,

and (e) encourage the heart. My findings from this study provide principals with the leadership practices that can be implemented to reduce the achievement gap of economically disadvantaged students and move low performing economically disadvantaged students closer to achievement levels of higher performing students.

Research Question

RQ: What do elementary school principals believe are their leadership practices that have been instrumental in reducing the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and all students?

Conceptual Framework

The framework underlying this research study is Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) model described as the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership. Their theoretical framework of transformational leadership, developed and refined for more than 30 years, is based on the most effective leadership experiences of leaders from various occupations (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Litz & Scott, 2017; Palmer et al., 2014). Kouzes and Posner analyzed their results, found patterns, and identified five practices of exemplary leaders. The five leadership practices include (a) model the way, (b) inspire a shared vision, (c) challenge the process, (d) enable others to act, and (e) encourage the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

I explored what elementary school principals, at schools where the achievement gap in reading for economically disadvantaged students has been reduced, believe are their leadership practices instrumental in increasing student achievement. Transformational leadership strategies have been shown to have a positive and substantial

influence at turned around schools where achievement has increased (Allen et al., 2015; Day et al., 2016; Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Interview questions examined principals' beliefs about their own leadership practices. I used one-on-one semistructured open-ended interviews with predetermined questioning allowing for new ideas to flow and open the way for new thinking. Data analysis was grounded in the framework of Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) five practices of exemplary leadership and transformational leadership practices. Themes and patterns of principals' leadership practices, including those that are aligned with Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) 5 practices of exemplary leaders, emerged during the coding processes.

Nature of the Study

The research design is a qualitative case study. Qualitative researchers seek to explore and understand a phenomenon in s specific context (Queiros, Faria, & Almedia, 2017). A qualitative case study can help us answer how or why about a certain phenomenon in a given context (Starman, 2013).

I chose a case study design because I explored, examined, and described what elementary school principals at schools, where the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students has been reduced, believe their leadership practices positively influence the students' reading achievement. Creswell and Poth (2018) described a case study approach as a type of qualitative research in which the researcher examines in detail a current authentic bounded phenomenon or phenomena by collecting data using various forms of information. A case study approach allows the researcher to shed light

on a theoretical concept (Yin, 2018) such as Kouzes's and Posner's leadership model, which is the conceptual framework for this research study.

The most important aspect of a case study is the case itself, which could be one individual, a group, an organization, and others (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this research study the case was elementary school principals, at schools where the achievement gap in reading for economically disadvantaged students has been reduced. Yin (2018) stated that a case study design is appropriate when the researcher is asking "how" questions about a phenomenon on which the researcher has minimal or no control. I explored what principals believe are their leadership practices positively influencing reading achievement for students identified as economically disadvantaged.

The population is elementary school principals, in one school division in a mid-Atlantic state, who led schools where the achievement gap in reading, as measured by the end-of-year standardized state assessment, were reduced compared to other schools and the overall state average. I identified this population from annual state report cards and school profiles posted online. The sample was 11 elementary school principals who led schools where the achievement gap in reading as measured by the end-of-year standardized state assessments for the last 3 years has been reduced compared with other schools and the overall state average.

The sampling technique was purposive sampling. Purposive sampling illuminated a stronger understanding of what a specific subgroup of principals, who are at elementary schools having reduced the achievement gap in reading between economically disadvantaged students and their peers, believe as the leadership practices positively

influencing student achievement. This research study is bounded by the selection of 11 principals from one school division in a mid-Atlantic state who met specific criteria. Principals were selected if they led schools where the achievement gap between all students and economically disadvantaged students were less than the state average of 13 points on the state testing profile. In addition, the overall achievement of students in reading was in the 80 percentiles for the last 3 school years while students identified as economically disadvantaged had achievement rates no less than at the 68% percentile for the same time period.

I collected the data through one-on-one semistructured open-ended interviews with 11 elementary school principals, from one school division in a mid-Atlantic state, who are at schools having reduced the achievement gap in reading for economically disadvantaged students as indicated on end of the year state assessments for the last 3 years. The rights of participants were protected by informed consent, confidentiality, and the absence of any identifying data that could reveal the participant or his/her school, school division or county.

Definitions

Achievement gap: The difference in performance as measured by specific standardized assessments between reporting categories (i.e., those defined by race, gender, economic status, language, and/or disabilities) (State Department of Education, 2016).

Economically disadvantaged: A student is considered economically

disadvantaged if they qualify for free or reduced meals, are receiving Temporary

Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and/or are eligible for Medicaid (State

Department of Education, 2016).

Transformational leadership: A leadership style that focuses on fostering change

by inspiring and motivating individuals and organizations toward a common vision or

goal (Karadağ, Bektaş, Çoğaltay, & Yalçın, 2015; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Rao, 2014).

Assumptions

One assumption that I made in this research study is that principals answered

questions truthfully and were reflective and articulate enough to convey their beliefs

thoroughly. I also assumed that the leadership practices of principals positively influence

student achievement. Previous research supports the positive affect effective that school

leaders have on raising student achievement (Day et al., 2016; Gates, Baird, Master, &

Chavez-Herrerias, 2019; Günal & Demirtaşlı, 2016; Kalman & Arslan, 2016; Ni et al.,

2018). After researching the influence of school principals on student achievement,

Louis et al. (2010) identified school principals as having the second most important effect

on student achievement after an effective classroom teacher. I also assumed that students

who are identified as economically disadvantaged can, if given appropriate and equitable

instruction, achieve their academic goals at the same rates as their peers who are not

identified as economically disadvantaged. Researchers have identified examples of

schools where the achievement gap between all students and economically disadvantaged

students have been reduced (Allen et al., 2015; Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Dutta & Sahney,

2016; Lunenburg & Irby, 2014).

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was limited to 11 schools, from one school division in a mid-Atlantic State, showing a decreased achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and all students as measured by the end of year standardized state assessment. Principals and schools were identified using the annual state report cards and school profiles posted online in the state department of education website. Criteria for initial selection included schools achieving end of the year reading assessment scores for the last 3 school years for all students at 80% or higher, and the achievement gap between all students and economically disadvantaged students being less than the state average of 13 points. In addition, the participant has been the principal at the school being considered for the last three school years.

Limitations

Generalizability is limited due to purposive sampling of only 11 principals. Another limitation is that I used only 3 years of data to identify schools and principals. This study was also limited due to only principals being interviewed and no other staff.

Significance

My findings from this research study contribute to a better understanding by educational leaders and scholars of the leadership practices helping to reduce the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and all other students. My findings from this study may contribute to positive social change by identifying themes, patterns, and commonalities among the leadership practices of principals at

highly effective schools in the mid-Atlantic state where the achievement gap in reading between economically disadvantaged students and other students has been reduced.

The achievement gap for students who are identified as economically disadvantaged crosses all subgroup reporting categories (i.e., race, ethnicity, special education, and English Language Learners). Furthermore, this gap affects Black and Hispanic students disproportionately and at higher rates than white students (Wixom, 2015). The findings of this study may increase student achievement for students in all subgroup reporting categories. School principals at other schools may be able to use these leadership practices to reduce achievement gaps and increase economically disadvantaged students' reading achievement at their schools.

 School division, state leaders, and principal preparation programs may be able to use the findings from this study to inform the professional development and training of new and current principals in establishing similar leadership practices in their own schools. In addition, students who are reading on grade level are more successful in school, engaged in the learning process, receive less behavior infractions, graduate high school, attend postsecondary institutions at higher rates, and are able to access more opportunities in life and society (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016; Peterson, Petti, & Carlile, 2013).

Summary

The problem is there is a lack of understanding of principals' beliefs about their leadership practices that positively influence the reading achievement of students identified as economically disadvantaged. My purpose in this study was to gain an

understanding of leadership practices principals believe have reduced the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and all students. The findings of this study provide principals with the leadership practices proven to reduce the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and higher performing students.

This qualitative case study may contribute to positive social change by identifying effective leadership practices principals of high performing schools used to improve student achievement among economically disadvantaged students. Other principals can implement these leadership practices at their own schools to achieve higher academic performance among their student populations. In addition, school division, state leaders, and principal preparations can use the conclusions to update their training and programs. The results of this study have a positive effect on social change by increasing student reading achievement among economically disadvantaged students in school and providing more opportunities for them to progress in the future.

In Chapter 2, I describe my review of literature on the influence of school leaders on student achievement, transformational leadership practices, and the challenges facing economically disadvantaged students. In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology, research questions, sampling, population, and the data collection methods and process of data analysis in detail. In Chapter 4, I shared my data collection and analysis processes and procedures. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the results and findings, recommendations for future studies, and implications for social change.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Researchers have identified a connection between the leadership practices of school principals and student achievement (Fullan, 2014; Fuller et al., 2017; Litz & Scott, 2017; Tan, 2018; Woods & Martin, 2016). The research problem is the lack of understanding of principals' beliefs about their leadership practices that positively influence the reading achievement of students identified as economically disadvantaged. Although research reveals principals play an important role in closing the achievement gap and improving student achievement at schools, it is not clearly understood what principals themselves believe are their own leadership practices influencing student achievement (Chibani & Chibani, 2013; Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Dutta & Sahney, 2016; McKinney et al., 2015; Quin et al., 2015). Understanding the leadership practices school principals implement to close the achievement gap and perceive as effective may encourage other school principals to apply these same practices at their schools to achieve similar results.

The ongoing achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and all students continues to be a challenge facing many schools in the United States. (Bellibas, 2016; Claro, Paunesku, & Dweck, 2016; Dixson, Keltner, Worrell, & Mello, 2018; Lam, 2014; Morrissey, Hutchison, & Winsler, 2014). Some school personnel have reversed this trend and improved their schools by reducing achievement gaps at their schools (Day et al., 2016; Fullan, 2014; Gates et al., 2019; Litz & Scott, 2017; Quin et al., 2015; Tan, 2018). Although researchers have noted through effective school leadership practices achievement gaps in reading and math can be reduced, the problem of unequal

achievement of economically disadvantaged students continues throughout our country and the world (Brown & Green, 2014; Dhuey & Smith, 2014).

Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) leadership practices have had considerable influence on reducing students' uneven academic achievement (Allen et al., 2015; Day et al., 2016; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Chin, 2007; Woods & Martin, 2016). Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) transformational leadership practices served as the conceptual framework of this research study.

My purpose in this study was to gain an understanding of leadership practices principals believe have reduced the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and all students. The findings of this study provide principals with the leadership practices proven to reduce the achievement gap of economically disadvantaged students and move low-performing economically disadvantaged students closer to achievement levels of higher performing students. I interviewed principals from high performing elementary schools, in a mid-Atlantic state, with a smaller than average gap between economically disadvantaged students and all students as shown on the end of year state assessments for the 2017-2018 school year elementary schools. I then analyzed responses from the participants of this study within the context of the seminal work on transformational leadership by Kouzes and Posner (2017). In their leadership model, Kouzes and Posner identified five exemplary leadership practices including (a) model the way, (b) inspire a shared vision, (c) challenge the process, (e) enable others to act, and (e) encourage the heart which served as the framework for this research study.

This literature review included research on achievement, challenges, and learning experiences of economically disadvantaged students. I also comprehensively examine literature studies surrounding the influence principals and school leaders have on student achievement within the literature review. I also reviewed research on various leadership styles including instructional leadership and transformational leadership as well as research on the importance of reading. I reviewed Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) work on exemplary practices of leaders because it is considered an influential theory in the field of transformational leadership and has important implications for school leaders. Their research also served as the conceptual framework of my research study.

Literature Search Strategy

I conducted a comprehensive and systematic search of current literature by using different electronic online databases through Walden University's Library including ProQuest, Education Source, ERIC, Google Scholar, and SAGE. Key Words helping guide the literature review included *student achievement, educational leadership, school principals, principal leadership practices, transformational leadership practices, principals' beliefs, economically disadvantaged students, poor students, poverty, low socioeconomic status, student achievement gap, reading, literacy, Kouzes and Posner, reducing the achievement gap, influence of school leaders, instructional leadership, turnaround principals, leadership styles,* and *transactional leadership.* In addition, I carefully and critically studied available literature related to the conceptual framework of this study including reading educational books, searching for peer-reviewed articles cited by other articles and journals, accessing references cited in other dissertations, and

examining other research published within the last 5 years at the time of this study. I

included references more than 5 years old only to provide foundational and seminal

thinking, theories, and research.

Conceptual Framework

A social constructivism framework focuses on trying to understand more clearly

the world (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this research study, I wanted to understand what

leadership practices school principals believe they use to improve the reading

achievement of economically disadvantaged students. The research of Kouzes and

Posner (2017) served as the conceptual framework for this research study.

Kouzes and Posner (2017) developed a transformational leadership model

described as the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership more than 30 years ago. In their

work, they theorized the best leaders apply the same leadership practices while leading

their organizations. I explored what elementary school principals believe are their

leadership practices influencing student achievement at their schools within the context

of Kouzes's and Posner's research.

Kouzes and Posner (2017) refined their leadership model in the course of 30

years. They researched exemplary leaders from various fields and identified the most

effective leadership experiences these leaders had in common and continually updated

their findings through the years (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Litz & Scott, 2017; Palmer et

al., 2014). Kouzes and Posner analyzed the responses from a comprehensive survey of

exemplary leaders in a variety of organizations, found patterns, and identified five

practices common to exemplary leaders. The five transformational leadership practices

include: (a) model the way, (b) inspire a shared vision, (c) challenge the process, (e) enable others to act, and (e) encourage the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

Kouzes and Posner (2017) used a case study approach with structured interviews of leaders and their followers from a diverse selection of companies throughout the world (Caza & Posner, 2019). They examined the leadership practices exemplary leaders used to motivate others to accomplish transformative positive changes in their organizations that led to notable achievements and successes (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Their findings and subsequent model of leadership aligns with transformational leadership practices. Researchers have identified that transformational leadership strategies have a positive and substantial influence at schools where achievement has increased from especially low rates (Allen et al., 2015; Day et al., 2016; Kouzes & Posner, 2017). In addition, researchers have noted that transformational leadership practices can be taught and learned (Nash & Bangert, 2014). This recognition means that transformational leadership practices which could improve student achievement can be potentially learned by all principals.

Students identified as economically disadvantaged have historically achieved at lower rates than all other students. In 2017, there was a 28-point discrepancy in reading between students who were eligible for the NSLP and those who were not eligible, and this gap has not shown a significant change since 1998 (The NAEP, 2017a). Principals who are reducing the achievement gap of economically disadvantaged students are using practices, as described by Kouzes and Posner (2017), to reverse this historical achievement gap and turn challenges into successes (Karadağ et al., 2015). The

researcher examined what principals believe are their leadership practices, as defined by

Kouzes and Posner (2017), positively influencing student achievement of economically

disadvantaged students in reading.

I chose the leadership model developed by Kouzes and Posner (2017) for this

research for a number of reasons. Their research has been identified as a valid model to

assess leadership for over 30 years (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Litz & Scott, 2017;

McKinney et al., 2015; Palmer, et al., 2014; Posner, 2015b; Quin et al., 2015; Salleh &

Khalid, 2018). Over 5 million leaders and managers from a variety of public and private

companies over 150 countries around the world have taken their leadership survey giving

them a huge database of participants to support their model (Caza & Posner, 2019).

Their five practices of exemplary leaders are identified as transformational leadership

practices which have a positive effect on student achievement especially lower

performing students (Day et al., 2016; Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Transformational

leadership practices can be taught and learned and are able to be generalized and used by

principals at other schools (Nash & Bangert, 2014). After conducting research on

effective practices, Quin et al. (2015) concluded schools and programs planning to

prepare individuals to become principal should implement Kouzes's and Posner's

Transformational Leadership Model to develop them into exemplary and effective

leaders.

The five practices Kouzes and Posner (2017) identified as practices of exemplary

leaders from across a broad spectrum of organizations and companies throughout the

world are: (a) model the way, (b) inspire a shared vision, (c) challenge the process, (d)

enable others to act, and (e) encourage the heart. Each practice has two actions associated with it with the concentration on the leaders' behaviors not their qualities or agenda (Caza & Posner, 2019).

The first two practices focus on aligning practices with an inspiring and overarching vision. Leaders model the way by establishing credibility thru aligning their actions and message with the goals and vision of their organization and acting as a role model and example for others to follow (Caza & Posner, 2019; Litz & Scott, 2017). Principals can inspire a shared vision by clearly looking past the current moment and articulating a specific vision while passionately enlisting others to join them in helping make this vision come to life (Lindsey, 2016; Posner, 2016).

The next three practices focus on moving away from traditional transactional practices by challenging the status quo, involving others, and creating a positive and collaborative work environment. Leaders who challenge the process are not afraid to take risks and look at different and innovative ways for them and their followers to disrupt the status quo by taking risks, experimenting, learning from their mistakes, and searching for different solutions and opportunities to improve and grow (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Palmer et al., 2014). Principals enable others to act by building trust and leadership capacity and encouraging collaboration and shared decision making while helping teachers and staff feel positive about what they are doing (Lindsey, 2016; Litz & Scott, 2017; Palmer et al., 2014). Leaders encourage the heart by considering the social-emotional needs of others in their organization and by being transparent while supporting the professional development of their followers, celebrating them and creating a positive

environment where people feel valued and part of a community (Caza & Posner, 2019; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Posner, 2016).

Economically Disadvantaged Students

Economically disadvantaged students consistently have one of the lowest educational performance rates of any reporting category group of students except special education students, cross all racial, ethnic, and other subgroup reporting categories lines, and are one of the most frequently chosen variables in educational research because family socioeconomic status is one of the strongest predictors of academic achievement (Bellibas, 2016; Calzada et al., 2015; Hair, Hanson, Wolfe, & Pollak, 2015; Owens, 2018; Thompson, McNicholl & Menter, 2016). Students identified as economically disadvantaged, as described in the ESSA of 2015 due to their eligibility for the NSLP to receive free and reduced meals, continue to earn lower scores on state and national assessments in reading than other students (NAEP, 2017; State Department of Education, 2018). Students who are identified as being below grade level in reading and math are disproportionally comprised of economically disadvantaged students (Brown, 2015).

Poverty is clearly associated with poor academic achievement among students and family socioeconomic status is one of the strongest predictors of academic achievement (Barr, 2015, Bellibas, 2016; Bloom & Owens, 2011; Claro et al., 2016; Dixson et al., 2018; Lam, 2014; Morrissey et al., 2014; Strand, 2014). In a meta-analysis of over 101,000 students, Sirin (2005) concluded socioeconomic status appears to be the most frequently chosen variable in educational research because of the influence on student achievement, success, and wellbeing. In one mid-Atlantic state, 1 in 3 children were

identified as living below 200% of the poverty level. This result is equal to 621,843

children (Voices for State's Children, 2016).

      In 1966, researchers studied over 650,000 students for the United States Office of

Education to determine educational equity and concluded students' socioeconomic status

and family situation had a greater influence on students' achievement and educational

outcomes than schools (Coleman, 1966). It is important to note since the study was

completed, other researchers have identified flaws with the study. At the time of this

study, researchers noted Coleman (1966) overlooked the importance of differing

educational opportunities that could change the trajectory of students' lives and focused

too much on educational outcomes (Hoxby, 2016; Jacobs, 2016). In any case, it is clear

from a wide body of research that the socioeconomic status of a student's family has

direct connections to school readiness and other educational outcomes (Micalizz, Brick,

Flom, & Ganiban, 2019; Solano & Weyer, 2017)

      For the 2018-2019 school year, students from low income families represent the

majority of students in public schools in the United States (Gorski & Banks, 2018; Hair et

al., 2015; Suitts, 2016). Economic gaps have grown steadily since the 1960s (Owens,

2018). The number of students who are considered economically disadvantaged has

grown from 40% in 2003 to 50% in 2017 (NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment, 2017).

Suitts (2016) noted 52% of students in the United States were eligible to receive free or

reduced-price meals in 2016. This trend mirrored the increase in the number of students

under 18 living in poverty. In 2017, 15 million children under 18 were identified as

living in poverty (Musu-Gillette, de Brey et al., 2017). Almost 1 out of 4 children in the United States live below the poverty line (Darling-Hammond, 2015).

At the time of this research study, the NAEP results, assessing students in various subjects at 4th, 8th and 12th grade, described a continuous achievement gap over multiple years starting in 1970 between the students identified as economically disadvantaged and other students (NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment, 2017). The 2017 NAEP reported 22% of 4th grade economically disadvantaged students were at or above proficiency levels compared to 52% of all students (NAEP Mathematics and Reading Highlights, 2017). Poverty achievement gaps continue to be major issue for wealthier countries including the US and economically disadvantaged students consistently have one of the lowest educational performance rates of any reporting category group of students except special education students (Charalambous, Kyriakides & Creemers, 2016; Eamon, 2002; Hair et al., 2015; Thompson, McNicholl & Menter, 2016). This achievement gap continues to be an academic and social concern across our country.

Students in poverty are consistently found less likely to be successful in school and attend post-secondary school than students with higher socioeconomic status (Belfi, Haelermans, & De Fraine, 2016; Bellibas, 2016; Calzada, Barajas-Gonzalez et al., 2015; Hagans & Good, 2013; Krashen, 2016; Owens, 2018, Stinnett, 2014). Poverty and the socio-economic status of a child's family situation affects the development of children's neural structures, cognitive development, and brain functions (Rosen, Sheridan, Sambrook, Meltzoff, & McLaughlin, 2018; Takeuchi, Take, Nouchi, Yokoyama, Kotozaki, Nakagawa, Sekiguchi, Iizuka, Yamamoto, Hanawa, Araki, Miyauchi, Sakaki,

Nozawa, Ikeda, Yokota, Magistro, Sassa, & Kawashima, 2019). Hair, Hanson, Wolfe, and Pollak (2015) noted the longer students are in poverty the larger the academic achievement gap. Eamon (2002) found, in a seminal study of 1,324 students in New York, poverty had a statistically significant negative influence on reading and math achievement. This finding has been supported by other researchers examining students throughout the country (Chung, Liu, McBride, Wong, & Lo, 2017; Eamon, 2002, Lee & Slate, 2014). Students from higher socioeconomic family situations have more advanced executive functioning and higher school readiness skills than students from low familial socioeconomic circumstances (Micalizz, Brick, Flom, & Ganiban, 2019).

Researchers identified students from low socioeconomic background have a greater chance to have reading issues and score lower than their peers on phonological awareness assessments (Hagans & Good, 2013). The reading achievement gap between students from families in the 90th percentile of the income distribution and those students from low income families at the 10 percentiles was approximately 9.9 of a standard deviation from 1950 thru the early 1990s, however, today this deviation is more than 40 % larger (Reardon, 2013). Lacking exposure to reading, minimal or no access to books, or limited family focus on reading correlates to low reading achievement (Holder, Wilson-Jones, Phillips, Jones, & Jones, 2017; Krashen, 2016). These issues may affect students not just in their current year but for the rest of their school career and beyond.

Children from poverty achieve at lower rates and have higher dropout rates than other students for many reasons. (Hagans & Good, 2013; Kyriakides, Bert, Creemers, & Charalambous, 2018). Economically disadvantaged students' lower academic

achievement may be a result of a combination of factors including less educationally enriched experiences outside the school, less emotional supportive and attentive home lives, and more behavior issues resulting in less focus on instruction in school (Eamon, 2002; Micalizz, Brick, Flom, & Ganiban, 2019). Students who are identified as economic disadvantage also tend to have higher number of absences and tardies from school than their peers (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2015; Morrissey et al., 2014). Students who are economically disadvantaged have a greater risk of being suspended from school as well (Balfanz, et al., 2015). When students are suspended this means they are missing instruction.

In addition to their academic struggles students in poverty also may have health issues related to the circumstances created by their economic status. Students from low income families have increased levels of stress (Casey, 2014). This level of stress may lead to them missing more school and more instruction. Tucker-Drob and Bates (n.d.) noted students in poverty in the United States did not have the same quality of health care and education as other students or even students in poverty in Western Europe or Australia. In the United States, families with more money have access to more resources and opportunities for more educationally rich experiences (Hagans & Good, 2013; Owens, 2018). Students from lower socioeconomic families often lack quality health care and food for nourishment (Krashen, 2016).

When students are absent from school, suspended from school, or suffering from food deprivation there is a negative effect on learning (Balfanz, et al., 2015; Morrissey, et al., 2014; Krashen, 2016). Economically disadvantaged students often need the most

support in school and out of school (Suitts, 2016). However, students who are in poverty often attend schools with less qualified and effective teachers, limited or minimal resources, and fewer enrichment or remedial opportunities (Goldhaber, Lavery, & Theobald, 2015; Goldhaber, Quince, & Theobald, 2018; Goldhaber, Theobald, & Fumia, 2018; Kraft, Marinell, & Yee, 2016). Family income levels also determine locations of homes and often the quality of the neighborhood schools (Goldhaber, Theobald, & Fumia, D, 2018; Owens, 2018; Owens, Reardon, & Jencks, 2016; Reardon & Owens, 2014).

The achievement gap for students who are identified as economically disadvantaged crosses all subgroup reporting categories (i.e., race, ethnicity, special education and English Language Learners). This achievement gap also affects Black and Hispanic students disproportionately and at higher rates than White students (Calzada et al., 2015; Jeynes, 2015; Owens, 2018; Wixom, 2015).

The findings of this study may lead to increased student achievement for students in all subgroup reporting categories. Not only have poverty rates and the divide between the top percent and the lower percent in our country increased but results show students of color are disproportionately affected by poverty with 38% of black students, 35% American Indian and 32% of Hispanic students living in poverty compared to 12% of White students and 21% for all students (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). According to the Voices for State's Children (2016) snapshot of Economically Disadvantaged Children in one mid-Atlantic state (2016) 1 out of 2 Black and Hispanic children are in families living below 200% of poverty level (Voices for State's Children, 2016). With regard to

educational performance, economic differences and inequality have surpassed disparities due solely to race over the last few years making this income achievement gap the largest factor negatively influencing student achievement at all levels (Reardon, 2013).

NSLP was founded in 1946 to provide lunch at no cost to students with a family income less than 130% of the poverty line or at a reduced cost to those students with a family income is between 130% and 185% (Domina, Pharris-Ciurej, Penner, Penner, Brummet, Porter, & Sanabria, 2018). Approximately 60% of students nationwide receive assistance from this program (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). Confidentiality guarantees of child nutrition programs, including the NSLP, means it is not permitted to identify students who receive free and reduced lunch unless parents give consent (Lane, 2018). This level of confidentiality, meant to protect the student and family, makes including economically disadvantaged students for additional support services and resources problematic (Domina et al., 2018; Lane, 2018).

Although there are challenges involved, Gorski and Banks (2018) believed education is the key to making changes and improvements in the educational lives of lower socioeconomic students. Through effective leadership and school practices achievement gaps in reading and math for all children in poverty could be reduced (Brown & Green, 2014; Dhuey & Smith, 2014, Edmond, 1979). The question for school personnel is how to ensure the success and achievement of economically disadvantaged students.

School personnel are answering this question effectively and showing increases in the achievement of economically disadvantaged students and reductions between the

achievement of economically disadvantaged students and other students. School leaders

are often credited with influencing this improved achievement (Brown & Green, 2014;

Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Dutta & Sahney, 2016; Fuller et al., 2017; Litz & Scott, 2017;

Lunenburg & Irby, 2014). School leaders who have taken up the challenge to turn

around a school and improve student achievement for struggling students are employing

transformational leadership practices (Allen et al., 2015; Day et al., 2016; Kouzes &

Posner, 2017; Woods & Martin, 2016). Understanding the practices school leaders

believe are most influential in improving the student achievement of economically

disadvantaged students help other school leaders facing similar challenges.

Reading

Reading is the foundation of education and was chosen for this research study

because prior researchers have shown that students who are reading on grade level are

more successful in school (Fletcher & Nicholas, 2016; Jeffes, 2016; Suitts, 2016)

Students identified as economically disadvantaged consistently achieve lower scores on

reading assessments than students from higher socioeconomic family situations (Krashen,

2016; Loewenberg, 2016; NAEP, 2017b; Whitten, Labby, & Sullivan, 2016). The

researcher focused on schools that have improved reading achievement among

economically disadvantaged students and all students because the development of on

grade level reading skills is critically important to student achievement and success in

school as well as in their future lives (Jeffes, 2016).

Students who are reading on grade level are more successful in school and when they are doing well in school students are more engaged in the learning process, receive less behavior infractions, graduate high school on time and attend post-secondary institutions at higher rates and are able to access more opportunities in life and society (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016; Farris, Ring, Black, Lyon, & Odegard, 2016; Horbec, 2012; Peterson et al., 2013; Suitts, 2016). Students who do not learn to read on grade level in elementary schools confront even more challenges in schools at the middle and high school levels (Fletcher & Nicholas, 2016). Students who lack the basic reading and writing skills face many challenges in academics and later on in life (Jeffes, 2016).

Closing the achievement gap in reading also supports students' mathematics achievement. Improved reading comprehension is one of the greatest supports for mathematics achievement (Akbash, Sahin, & Yaykiran, 2016). Effective principals recognize the importance of helping students learn to read to support academic growth in all subject areas. Students identified as economically disadvantaged students have been shown to have lower cognitive abilities, linguistic skills, reading, and math achievement (Chung et al., 2017).

Economically disadvantaged students struggle with reading and other academic subjects for many reasons. Students in poverty often have limited exposure to reading experiences, no access to books, minimal family interest in reading, and lack of recognizing the value and importance of reading (Holder, Wilson-Jones, Phillips, Jones, & Jones, 2017; Krashen, 2016). Students who qualify for free and reduced lunch often struggle with reading skills because they have less opportunities to access literature and

to read for enjoyment (Hagans & Good, 2013; Krashen, 2016). Furthermore, students who enjoy reading show increased academic growth regardless of economic status for most of the school year except during the summer (Whitten, Labby, & Sullivan, 2016). Because many students in poverty have limited access to books and are not encouraged to read, they often do not read for pleasure (Krashen, 2016).

Research shows students from low income families benefit not only from early intervention but by increased access to books (Krashen, 2016; Loewenberg, 2016). Effective school leaders understand the importance of providing time to read in school, effective intervention programs, and encouragement to read for pleasure outside of school to all students (Horbec, 2012; Loewenberg, 2016; Whitten et al., 2016). Leaders who use transformative leadership practices look at ways to challenge the process and come up with unique ways to address the challenge (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Principals who are turning around their schools understand how students learn best and have a strong vision to make the needed changes positive influencing student achievement in reading and other academic subjects (Bloom & Owens, 2011; Cruickshank, 2017; Dhuey & Smith, 2014).

Influence of School Leaders on Student Achievement

Although federal and state accountability measures continue to identify an achievement gap between economically disadvantaged and other students in reading, some principals throughout the country are closing this gap and steadily increasing academic achievement rates (Babo & Postma, 2017; Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Fuller & Hollingworth, 2014; NAEP, 2017a; State Department of Education, 2018). The

challenges facing public education from reforms, lack of funding, changes in society, and different accountability measures continue to grow while national and local assessment measures have placed increased expectations on the principals to improve student achievement at their schools and decrease student achievement gaps (Cruickshank, 2017; Dragojlović, Mihailović, & Novaković, 2018; Fuller & Hollingworth, 2014; Lee, 2016; Ni et al., 2018).

It is suggested by these federal, state, and local expectations and supported by researchers, principals do have a positive effect on student achievement (Al-Mahdy et al, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2012; Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, & Brown, 2014). Gates et al. (2019) noted the crucial role principals play at their schools and that research, over the last few decades, has clearly identified effective principals as positively influencing student achievement. Hoy and Smith (2007) concluded that the school principal was the most influential factor determining the effectiveness of their school. Other researchers support the influence principals have either directly or indirectly on student and school achievement (Aldrich, 2018; Babo & Postma, 2017; Brown & Green, 2014; Orphanos & Orr, 2014; Pourrajab & Ghani, 2016). A common characteristic of schools which have been described as effective is an effective school principal (Thoukididou, 2015).

School leaders have been identified as being a critical contributing factor in turning around schools designated as *at risk* (Cruickshank, 2017; Day et al., 2016; Fullan, 2014; Loewenberg, 2016; Tan, 2018; Woods & Martin, 2016). At risk schools are school consistently underperforming at lower levels than other schools have been turned around or moved out of an at risk designation by the leadership practices of school leaders

(Fuller et al., 2017; Kalman & Arslan, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2004; Litz & Scott, 2017). Louis et al. (2010) concluded only the teacher's classroom instruction had more influence on student learning than school leadership.

According to Brown and Green (2014), low achieving schools can be transformed into high achieving schools through effective leadership practices. Previous research concluded effective school principals had significant influence on student achievement in reading and mathematics (Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Hussain, Haider, Ahmed, & Ali, 2016; Louis et al., 2010; Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; McKinney et al., 2015;). The practices principals use at their schools clearly has a substantial positive effect on reducing achievement gaps at schools. (Chibani & Chibani, 2013; Günal & Demirtaşlı, 2016; Ni et al., 2018; Wallace Foundation, 2012).

Gale and Bishop (2014) noted school leadership accounts for more than one fourth of the total school effect on student achievement. School leaders who have effective instructional skills are key in supporting students' achievement and school improvement (Bloom & Owens, 2011, Leithwood et al., 2012; Pourrajab & Ghani, 2016). The longer a principal serves in the role of principal the greater his or her influence on student achievement (Babo and Postma, 2017; Garza, Drysdale, Gurr, Jacobson & Merchant, 2014). This fact serves to underscore the importance of principal credibility with their staff (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

A recent meta-analysis study identified principals as having a medium-level positive affect on student achievement (Karadag, 2019). However, the ways school principals influence student achievement is varied and their influence on student

achievement can be mediating or moderating, depending on their approach. Some researchers concluded the principal only has an indirect effect on student achievement while other researchers concluded a principal can have a direct influence on student achievement (Urick & Bowers, 2014). Furthermore, the leadership practices of school principals can positively influence different components of the school environment including student learning, academic achievement, and stakeholder attitudes (Marfan & Pascual, 2018; Preston, Claypool, Rowluck, & Green, 2017; Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, & Brown, 2014; Woods & Martin, 2016).

Researchers have identified how administrators can directly influence student achievement. School leaders directly influence the culture of the school by keeping the focus on the whole student, maintaining quality and equitable instruction, supporting and growing teachers, and fostering a positive social emotional climate (Learning First Alliance, 2018; Savas & Toprak, 2014). Administrators act directly with students by their interactions with students for discipline situations and the academic and behavioral messages they relay directly to students (Dhuey & Smith, 2014). Additionally, many principals work with small groups of students to support their academic needs and model effective instructional strategies for teachers to help improve student achievement within their schools. Principals have a direct influence on teacher behavior and motivation through their vision, communications, expectations, and professional development (Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016).

While acknowledging the positive influence of principals at a school, other researchers believe principals only have an indirect effect on student achievement

(Hussain, Haider, Ahmed, & Ali, 2016: Pina, Cabral, & Alves, 2015). According to

Dutta and Sahney (2016) and Orphanos and Orr (2014), researchers believe principals

influence student achievement indirectly by their effect on teacher job satisfaction and

school climate and noted student achievement increased when teachers felt they worked

in a supportive and positive school culture. Principals are not able to make whole school

changes alone but inspire others, foster the climate of the school, set expectations, and

remove barriers while engaging people to improve the areas needing improvement (Klar

& Brewer, 2014; Ni et al., 2018, Pina, Cabral, & Alves, 2015). A principal who can help

create a positive school climate can indirectly support the academic achievement of

economically disadvantaged students (O'Malley, Voight, Renshaw, & Eklund, 2015; Sun

& Leithwood, 2012).

Although it is not always clear if principals have a direct or indirect influence on

student achievement, researchers consistently conclude they do have a positive influence

(Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Karadağ et al., 2015). It is important to understand the

principal's perspective as the principal influences the school environment which affects

student achievement (Urick & Bowers, 2014). Principals who are credible can have a

greater influence on the faculty at their schools (Geiger, 2014; Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

Credibility can be fostered by trust, competency, forward-thinking, and living the school

vision (Geiger, 2014). Trust in the principal is fostered by being transparent, modeling

the school vision, and treating everyone fairly. It is a key element for stakeholders to buy

in and support leadership decisions (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015).

Principals need to be both managers and leaders in order to effectively accomplish all aspects of their positions (Bloom & Owens, 2011). Effective leaders are able to manage organizational needs to accomplish organization wide objectives (Savas & Toprak, 2014). Effective leaders need to understand their managerial or administrative aspects to their positions as well. However ultimately principals as leaders in their building need to move their followers in a new direction or to do more than they have been doing or in some other way change the way things have been done in order to make improvements at school (Drysdale, Gurr, & Goode, 2016).

Woods and Martin (2016) identified the influence a principal had as a change agent, supporter of effective instructional strategies, and champion of a clear vision at their school. In other words, principals made changes and improvements at their school by influencing the way staff members thought or acted (Marfan & Pascual, 2018; Panganiban, 2018). Strong leaders inspire excellence regardless of external issues (Kafele, 2018). Ni, Yan, and Pounder (2018) recognized the value of principal fostering the right balance of collective decision making at schools to positively influence student achievement.

Federal, state, and local school division leaders as well as researchers recognize successful schools are led and managed by exemplary principals (Babo & Postma, 2017; Günal, & Demirtaşlı, 2016; McKinney et al., 2015; Ni et al., 2018; Pourrajab & Ghani, 2016; Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, & Brown, 2014). How principals lead and manage their schools to bring about increased student achievement and turn their schools around is more complex. Successful principals who have increased student achievement at their

schools and transformed their school cultures use different leadership practices than principals who are not able to turn their schools around or who could not reduce achievement gaps at their schools.

Leadership Styles

How principals decide to lead their school is an important factor in creating, nurturing, and sustaining a positive and effective school culture (Fullan, 2001). Researchers have demonstrated the leadership style of the principal can affect student achievement, instruction, and the school environment (Menon, 2014). There is a clear correlation between teacher understanding of expectations and organizational processes as the leadership style of the school principal (Savas & Toprak, 2014). Principals employ different types of leadership styles including (a) transactional leadership, (b) instructional leadership, (c) transformational leadership, and (d) ethical leadership, to meet the needs of their school communities (Bush & Glover, 2014; Mette & Scribner, 2014, Smith, 2016; Urick & Bowers, 2014).

Each of the different leadership styles have proponents and positive aspects and they are also not mutually exclusive (Fullan, 2014). In addition, leadership styles and practices can vary based on the situation of the school and the context of the school goals (Urick & Bowers, 2014) When looking at closing achievement gaps or turning around schools, principals need to consider both the organizational aspects of the school as well as all aspects of climate of the school (Mette & Scribner, 2014). Principals should use practices from the different styles as needed in their schools and for their specific circumstances. Researchers have concluded a synthesis of leadership styles or an

integrated leadership approach is the most effective for influencing student achievement and improving schools (Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Menon, 2014).

The leadership styles of principals are related to their decision-making process (Hariri, Monypenny, & Prideaux, 2016). Urick and Bowers (2014) noted that transactional, transformational, and instructional leadership styles have all been shown to affect student achievement in different ways. Each of the three leadership styles have a different type of decision-making style associated with it. Leadership and decision-making styles also influence staff satisfaction which can affect student achievement (Hariri, Monypenny, & Prideaux, 2016). One common characteristic of effective leadership is followers are opting to follow the leader (Stravakou & Lozgka, 2018).

Transactional leaders follow clear procedures and processes and tend to influence followers by defined rewards and consequences (Smith, 2016). Transactional leaders tend to reward followers to influence them and focus more on managerial or administrative tasks of the position (Urick, 2016; Urick & Bowers, 2014). School principals who practice this type of leadership style exclusively rely on their positional authority to influence their followers (Blom & Alvesson, 2014).

Transformational leaders tend to involve staff in decision making (Hariri, Monypenny, & Prideaux, 2016). Hauserman's and Stick's (2013) comparison of schools with transactional leaders and transformational leaders identified that teachers were much more positive about the leaders who had higher transformational leadership styles. Instructional leadership practices center on improving the quality of instruction at schools often show the highest effect on student achievement (Urick & Bowers, 2014).

Instructional leadership styles often are more top down while transformational leadership is more comprehensive and inclusive of teachers' input (Cruickshank, 2017; Hariri, Monypenny, & Prideaux, 2016). Ethical leadership keeps the focus on what is best for students by being student focus and ethically driven (Mette & Scribner, 2014).

Principals need to understand the practices that transactional leaders use in order to implement the same strategies in their schools to achieve higher student achievement rates. In fact, principals needed to be more than managers at the school, but leaders who could inspired people and adapt their leadership practices to meet the needs of their unique situations (Stein, 2016). According to Stravakou and Lozgka (2018), teachers felt effective leaders were supportive, inspiring, fair, and had good communication. Additionally, effective administrators need to keep a focus on the tenets of ethical leadership and make decisions as to what is best for students (Mette & Scribner, 2014).

Teachers are looking for leaders who can inspire them to achieve a clear vision, are regarded as a role model, and have solid understanding of effective instruction (Stravakou & Lozgka, 2018). These characteristics are often related to both instructional and transformational leadership practices. In fact, instructional leadership and transformational leadership are the two most frequently cited leadership practices in educational leadership research at the time of this study shown to positively influence student achievement (Cruickshank, 2017). Researchers have noted effective principals use both instructional leadership practices and transformational leadership practices to meet the needs of their students and schools (Hariri, Monypenny, & Prideaux, 2016; Shatzer et al., 2014; Smith, 2016; Urick, 2016; Urick & Bowers, 2014). A synthesis of

both instructional leadership and transformation leadership practices maintains focus on specific classroom instruction needs and over school improvement goals. Instructional leadership and transformational leadership practices are explored in more detail.

Instructional Leadership

Shatzer et al. (2014) compared the influence of instructional and transformational leadership practices on student achievement and concluded instructional leadership practices had a stronger positive correlation to student achievement as opposed to that of transformational leadership practices. Instructional leadership means the principal is focusing his or her efforts on improving student learning and classroom instruction (Cruickshank, 2017; Pietsch & Tulowizki, 2017; Smith, 2016). Principals work with teachers to improve student achievement by focusing on effective classroom instruction (Rigby, 2014; Sebastian et al., 2018).

Lemoine and Greer (2014) recognized principals need to provide clear instructional focus to teachers to help them meet the needs of their students, so all students can achieve at their fullest potential. Instructional leaders focus on achieving specific instructional outcomes by providing aligned professional development to help teachers achieve those specific goals (Urick & Bowers, 2014). All principals regardless of their preferred leadership style need to do the following: (a) spend more time in the classrooms, (b) analyze data, (c) review current classroom practices, and (d) continue to work with teachers on improving their instructional practices (Smith, 2016).

According to Heck and Hallinger (2014), instructional leadership had a significant effect on improving achievement. Principals' practices as instructional leaders have direct influence on teacher and student actions in the classroom (Rigby, 2014). Researchers have concluded principals can in this way influence student achievement by putting an emphasis on the quality of teaching and learning (Cruickshank, 2017; Grobler, 2013; Shatzer et al., 2014).

Transformational leaders focus more on nurturing a positive school culture while instructional leaders look toward the success of student achievement through effective instruction as achieving a positive school atmosphere (Urick & Bowers, 2014). Principals should understand effective instruction because all educational leaders need to have an instructional and student focus regardless of their chosen leadership style (Smith, 2016). Instructional leadership practices alone are not able to meet the needs of all students but integrating those practices with transformational leadership could lead to greater school success (Menon, 2014).

Transformational Leadership

Instructional leadership tends to be more top down while transformational leadership is more disruptive with leaders challenging the status quo and looking to shake up the standardized ways of doing business (Cruickshank, 2017). A principal who practices transformational leadership focuses on developing the followers in his or her organization to be change agents in their organization in order to achieve the organization's mission and goals (Rao, 2014). In a Meta-analysis of 57 research articles

with almost 29,000 study subjects, Karadağ et al. (2015) identified transformational leadership as having one of the most significant effects of all the leadership styles.

Smith (2016) noted principals who are transformative leaders have a huge influence on the climate of their schools. Transformational leadership has been described as doing what is right even if what is right challenges or goes against established processes (Nash & Bangert, 2014). In contrast to other leadership styles, transformational leadership "can develop the potential of followers, change their values and beliefs, and influence them by broadening and elevating their goals and providing them with confidence to perform beyond their expectations" (Liu, 2018, p. 372).

Transformational leadership strategies have been shown to have a positive and substantial influence at turned around schools where achievement has increased (Allen et al., 2015; Anderson, 2017; Boberg & Bourgeois; 2016; Day et al., 2016; Karadağ et al., 2015; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Nash & Bangert, 2014; Orphanos & Orr, 2014; Pietsch & Tulowizki, 2017; Pina, Cabral, & Alves, 2015; Smith, 2016; Sun & Leithwood, 2012; Woods & Martin, 2016). Asby and Mason (2018) noted the most effective principals do not simply interact with their staff as managers but inspire and transform them with their vision and goals. Transformational leadership is different than transactional leadership and other types of leadership; it puts the leader in a pivotal position. Effective principals demonstrate proficiency using both transactional and transformative leadership skills, but transformational leadership skills achieve the highest improvements in academic achievement (Hauserman & Stick, 2013).

Transformational leadership practices allow more flexibility and diversity in who is making decisions (Nash & Bangert, 2014). Pietsch and Tulowizki, (2017) identified transformational leadership as an appropriate and effective leadership style for schools needing to be turned around. Anderson (2017) concluded "transformational leadership is the leadership style most researchers feel is appropriate for today's school" (p.1).

Burns (1978) was instrumental in developing and furthering the research of transformational leadership beginning in 1978. Burns (1978) recognized leaders who were able to transform the practices and motivations of workers based on the leader's own personality and vision and are a key factor in creating a positive climate at their schools facilitating effective learning situations for students leading to increased student achievement (Lee & Chiu, 2017). Bass (1998) expanded on components of Burns' framework on transformation leadership by noting how effective transformational leaders create a climate in the workplace that challenges the status quo and followers feel respected and part of the success of the organization.

School leaders who practice transformational leadership practices provide a culture with a clear vision, a sense that everyone is in it together and will do what it takes to achieve the vision and professional development (Urick & Bowers, 2014). Transformational leaders display trust in the followers in their organization to do the tasks before them and are seen by their followers as being credible, ethical, trustworthy and operating in the best interest of the organization (Rao, 2014). Transformational leaders have been shown to be able to transform organizations, people, and cultures (Anderson, 2017; Burns, 2003; Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

Transformational leadership has been an effective leadership style used by leaders at schools having to make substantial changes, improvements and reform (Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, & Brown, 2014). Burns (2003) explained transforming was not just changing but instead a metamorphosis into something new. Sebastian et al. (2018) contrasted transformational leadership with instructional leadership and described transformational practices as being able to motivate individuals and teams to exceed expectations and create opportunities for successful outcomes. Burns (2003) believed changing aspects in an organization was more aligned with transactional leadership whereas transformational leadership was creating something different for that organization

Day et al. (2016) concluded effective principals use a combination of instructional and transformative leadership practices to achieve higher academic achievement. The complex job of being a principal or school leaders includes the following: (a) wearing different hats, (b) using different leadership methods, and (c) responding to various contexts depending on the situation and school (Bloom & Owens, 2011, Bolman & Deal, 2017; Garza, Drysdale, Gurr, Jacobson & Merchant, 2014; Marfan & Pascual, 2018; Woods & Martin, 2016). School principals at higher socioeconomic schools may use instructional leadership practices while principals at lower socioeconomic schools may use transformative leadership practices (Cruickshank, 2017). Exemplary leaders consider the nature and needs of their school community and students when making leadership decisions (Schrum & Levin, 2013).

Since 1978, research on transformational leadership has clearly identified as a successful approach when trying to increase organization effectiveness or transition (Anderson, 2017). I chose a transformational leadership style to be the leadership practice style to frame the research because I focused my research on school principals who were successful at reducing the achievement gap. O'Malley et al. (2015) encouraging positive feelings about the school climate may very well be an effective strategy for improving academic achievement in students from low socioeconomic status.

Transformational leadership styles have also been shown to help nurture teacher self-efficacy at schools (Mehdinezhad & Mansouri, 2016). Teacher self-efficacy is the degree of confidence a teacher has in his or her ability to increase student achievement (Protheroe, 2008). Teachers who believe they can influence student learning regardless of a students' background or situation have a high level of self-efficacy which can encourage support student growth (Mehdinezhad, & Mansouri, 2016). Principals can help create a school climate that supports the development of both individual teacher self-efficacy and collective efficacy for the school through transformational leadership practices (Protheroe, 2008).

Gu, Sammons and Chen (2018) also concluded transformative leaders were an essential component at highly successful schools. Nash and Bangert (2014) believe principals could learn how to use transformational leadership practices to foster change and improvement at their schools. Researchers have identified transformational leadership strategies, such as Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) five practices of exemplary leadership, as having a positive influence on student achievement at low performing and

high poverty schools (Brown & Green, 2014; Cruickshank, 2017; Day et al., 2016; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Litz & Scott, 2017; Prelli, 2016; Quin et al., 2015).

Kouzes and Posner: Five Practices of Exemplary Leaders

Kouzes and Posner (2017) suggested leaders in any field who use transformational leadership practices can make, what they refer to as, exemplary changes to their organizations. Their transformational leadership model was developed over 30 years ago and has been continually researched, updated, and refined. They focused their research on the most effective leadership experiences of leaders from various occupations (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Litz & Scott, 2017; McKinney et al., 2015; Palmer, et al., 2014; Quin et al., 2015; Salleh & Khalid, 2018). This framework started from case studies of leaders in a variety of fields who answered 38 open ended questions with follow up interviews (Posner, 2015b). Kouzes and Posner (2017) analyzed their results, found patterns, and identified five practices of exemplary leaders. The five transformational leadership practices include: (1) model the way, (2) inspire a shared vision, (3) challenge the process, (4) enable others to act, and (5) encourage the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

Kouzes and Posner (2017) are respected authors, scholars, and leaders who have contributed extensively to the study of leadership. They began their research into the field of leadership by asking the basic question of leaders in organizations all around the world, "What did you do when you were at our personal best as a leader?" (Kouzes & Posner, 2017, p. xii). In 1987 they first published their research in the book, *The Leadership Challenge*. It has been updated six times since 1987 with the most recent

update in 2017 at the time of this research study (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Along with

their research they also developed a vehicle to measure the type and quality of leadership

practices in an organization called the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI).

The research of Kouzes and Posner (2017) serves as the conceptual framework for

this study because it has been accepted universally as a model of exemplary leadership

practices and has been used researchers and scholars across organizations and cultures

(Musamali & Martin, 2016; Posner, 2015a; Zaid, Al-Zawahreh, & Olimat, 2012). Their

leadership model aligns with the research demonstrating the influence school leaders can

have on student achievement and describes specific transformational leadership practices

that cultivate positive changes within people in organizations and the organization itself

(Magrab & Brobheim, 2011). Researchers have found the leadership practices in

Kouzes's and Posner's leadership model as being highly effective in bringing the changes

necessary to transform organizations (Posner, 2015b; Salleh & Khalid, 2018). The five

exemplary leadership practices Kouzes and Posner (2017) identified are:

1. To model the way means leaders need to establish credibility by being honest

   and gaining the trust and respect of others and set the standard through their

   own practices and actions for others to follow (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Litz

   & Scott, 2017; Palmer et al., 2014; Posner, 2016; Salleh & Khalid, 2018;

   Zaid, Al-Zawahreh, & Olimat, 2012).

2. Leaders inspire a shared vision by knowing they can make a positive

   difference and passionately enlisting others to join them in helping make this

vision come to life (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Litz & Scott, 2017; Palmer et al.,

2014; Posner, 2016; Salleh & Khalid, 2018).

3. Challenging the process means leaders look at different and innovative ways

to disrupt the status quo by taking risks, experimenting, learning from their

mistakes, and searching for different solutions and opportunities to improve

(Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Litz & Scott, 2017; Palmer et al., 2014; Posner,

2016; Salleh & Khalid, 2018).

4. Leaders enable others to act by empowering others, building leadership

capacity and encouraging collaboration and shared decision making (Kouzes

& Posner, 2017; Litz & Scott, 2017; Palmer et al., 2014; Posner, 2016; Salleh

& Khalid, 2018; Zaid, Al-Zawahreh, & Olimat, 2012).

5. To encourage the heart means leaders should be vulnerable and transparent

while building others up, celebrating them and creating a positive

environment where people feel valued and part of a community (Kouzes &

Posner, 2017; Litz & Scott, 2017; Palmer et al., 2014; Posner, 2016; Salleh &

Khalid, 2018).

Along with these practices there are 10 corresponding commitments with 2

commitments for each of the Five practices. Kouzes and Posner (2017) described each of

the commitments in detail: 1. Clarifying values by finding your voice and affirming

shared values, 2. Setting the example by aligning actions with shared values, 3.

Envisioning the future by imaging exciting and ennobling possibilities, 4. Enlisting

others in a common vision by appealing to shared aspirations, 5. Searching for

opportunities by seizing the initiative and looking outward for innovative wats to improve, 6. Experimenting and taking risks by consistently generating small wins and learning from experiences, 7. Fostering collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships, 8. Strengthening others by increasing self-determination and developing competence, 9. Recognizing contributions by showing appreciation for individual excellence, 10. Celebrating the values and victories by creating a spirit of community. These 10 commitments provide additional context and explanation for each of the 5 practices.

The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership is a solid framework for this research study because it describes the practices of leaders in such a way to make it understandable. Effective and exemplary leaders demonstrate these five practices consistently (Salleh & Khalid, 2018). Kouzes and Posner (2017) identified honesty and trustworthiness as the number primary leadership characteristics followers in an organization felt was important (Zugelder, Greene, Warren, & L'Esperance, 2018). These types of leaders have what Kouzes and Posner (2017) refer to as having credibility. They considered credibility the most influential leadership characteristic (Geiger, 2014). Leaders who are credible have increased influence with stakeholders in their organizations. Principals can cultivate credibility by using these five practices and fostering trust among their stakeholders (Zugelder, Greene, Warren, & L'Esperance, 2018). Kouzes and Posner (2017) described leaders as being credible when they are honest, competent, inspiring, and forward looking. Credible leaders have a greater influence on followers in an organization (Geiger, 2014). Other researchers noted

teachers did not list being seen credible as one of the most important qualities they wanted from their principals (Stravakou & Lozgka, 2018).

Although there is a significant amount of research in this area of scholarship referencing Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) study in diverse types of organizations and business, there is limited references for educational settings. The growing amount of research does demonstrate principals at high performing schools use all five of the leadership practices more often and more consistently than principals at lower performing schools (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Posner, 2015b; Quin et al., 2015). Quin et al. (2015) identified shared vision and challenging the process as having the greatest influence on student achievement. McKinney, Labat, & Labat (2015) identified a strong correlation between the positive relationship principals had with their staff and student achievement. Kouzes and Posner (2017) concluded "exemplary leader behavior makes a profoundly positive difference in people's commitment and motivation, their work performance, and the success of their organization" (p.20).

The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) was developed from the analysis of the responses and a triangulation of both the qualitative and quantitative data (Posner, 2015b). The LPI has 30 statements the participants respond to related to Kouzes and Posner (2017) conceptual framework. It has been found to be both valid and reliable with "sound psychometric properties" (Posner, 2015b, p. 15). The LPI assesses the leadership practices by considering leadership as a quantifiable set of specific practices (Zaid, Al-Zawahreh, & Olimat, 2012). It is an effective measure of the leadership behaviors of individuals and along with the conceptual framework of the Five Practices of Exemplary

Leadership provides a solid model to help understand the practices of leaders in various organizations (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Posner, 2015b; Salleh & Khalid, 2018).

Kouzes and Posner (2017) believed all leaders could learn the exemplary leadership practices they document in their research (Trap, 2016). Instead of subscribing to the belief leaders are born not made; Kouzes and Posner (2017) identified in their research leaders could learn the practices allowing them to be exemplary in their field. This means effective leadership skills can be taught and learned by potentially all leaders (Trap, 2016; Zaid, Al-Zawahreh, & Olimat, 2012). Kouzes and Posner (2017) described five fundamental principles they believed help leaders to succeed: (1) believe in yourself, (2) aspire to be great, (3) challenge yourself to grow, (4) engage the support of others, and (5) practice deliberately.

Knowing these five fundamental principles and the five practices of exemplary leadership can positively influence the followers in any organization including education. Credible and exemplary leaders make sure they say what they mean and do what they say in a competent, motivating, transparent, and forward-thinking way (Geiger, 2014). In this research study, I explored what practices leaders engage in they believe influences student achievement of economically disadvantaged students. Other leaders should be able to take the results of this research and apply the practices at their own schools.

Summary and Conclusions

I began this literature review looking at the unique needs and challenges facing students who are identified as economically disadvantaged. Children who qualify for the National Free and Reduced meal program are in every subgroup and reporting category.

Poverty affects students of every race, ethnicity, and ability; however, it is evident from research that groups with some of the greatest achievement gaps have higher numbers of students in poverty. Knowing that students who struggle in reading have continued struggles throughout school in all areas means that closing the achievement gap in reading is of the utmost importance.

Data from state and national assessments showed a continual achievement gap in reading for economically disadvantaged students. This achievement gap has only gotten increased over the years. Schools across the United States have reversed this trend and reduced the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students in reading. Principals are instrumental in turning around failing schools and creating an environment leading to the changes necessary for increased student achievement. Effective principals who are using transformative leadership practices, motivate their stakeholders to embrace a vision of success for their schools. Successful principals model the way for the teachers in their school, create a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart to increase student achievement at their schools.

In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology of this study. The plans I have made to invite participants, and the details related to the instrumentation, data collection, and data analyses are explained. I include how I am safeguarding the participants' rights and confidentiality and how I strengthened the trustworthiness of the study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

My purpose in this study was to gain an understanding of leadership practices principals believe have reduced the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and all students. The problem is a lack of understanding of principals' beliefs about their leadership practices that positively influence the reading achievement of students identified as economically disadvantaged. Although research indicates that principals can play an important role in closing the achievement gap and improving student achievement at schools, it is not clearly understood what principals believe are their own leadership practices influencing student achievement (Chibani & Chibani, 2013; Day et al., 2016; Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Litz & Scott, 2017; Quin et al., 2015). Understanding the leadership practices principals at schools, that have closed the achievement gaps, believe are effective may lead to other school principals applying these same practices at their schools to achieve similar results.

In this chapter, I outlined the research design, role of the researcher, methodology, methods of data collection, and data analysis process. I have also addressed the ethical issues and procedures used to establish trustworthiness. I used a qualitative case study approach to describe the beliefs of individual principals to better understand their perspectives. Principals from a mid-Atlantic state who led schools where the achievement gap between all students and economically disadvantaged students were less than the state average of 13 points on the state testing profile were selected to participate and be interviewed. In addition, only schools having an overall student achievement in reading in the 75 to 80 percentiles or higher and at least 68% pass rate for economically

disadvantaged students were considered. This criteria for selection of participants bound the case study.

Research Design and Rationale

The research design is the map researchers use to guide them systematically from research problem and research question to data collection and data analysis (Yin, 2018). The research design for this research study is a qualitative case study examining what elementary school principals believe are their leadership practices positively influencing reading achievement for students identified as economically disadvantaged. I chose a qualitative research approach because it gives the researcher a deeper understanding of a situation (Queiros et al., 2017). Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people perceive their experiences or circumstances in order to construct meaning from their experiences and perceptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I used the following research question to guide this research study:

RQ: What do elementary school principals believe are their leadership practices that have been instrumental in reducing the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and all students?

I chose a qualitative case study design to explore, examine, and describe what principals of elementary schools believe are their leadership practices positively influencing reading achievement to inform the practices of other school administrators. A case study approach is a proven research design when examining and exploring intricate phenomena existing in the world around us (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017). A variety of approaches and perspectives may be considered when using a case

study method (Yazan, 2015). Creswell and Poth (2018) described a case study approach as a type of qualitative research in which the researcher examines in detail a current authentic bounded phenomenon or phenomena by collecting data using various forms of information. Case study researchers interpret the case being studied using the lens of their own perceptions and present their versions based on their conclusions (Stake, 1995). A case study gives a researcher the opportunity to better understand the unknown (Starman, 2013).

The most important aspect of a case study is the case itself which could be one individual, a group, an organization, and others (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this research study, the case includes principals from one school division in a mid-Atlantic state who have reduced the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and all students as identified on end of the year state assessment. Yin (2018) stated that a case study design is appropriate when the researcher is asking "how" questions about a current phenomenon on which the researcher has minimal or no control. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Stake (1995) noted that case studies allow researchers to explore the "what" of a phenomenon or the case itself to better understand the issue instead of focusing solely on how the case is being studied.

Using a case study method bounded by the criteria for participant selection was an effective approach as it provided the researcher an opportunity to explore, uncover, and understand the complexities surrounding how some leaders go about reducing achievement gaps (Creswell, 2013; Queiros et al., 2017; Starman, 2013). My study was bounded by the selection of principals from a mid-Atlantic state who led schools where

the achievement gap between all students and economically disadvantaged students were less than the state average of 13 points on the state testing profile from schools having an overall student achievement in reading in the 80 percentiles at the end of the last 3 school years.

A concern with a case study approach is if the findings can be generalized because there can be other reasonable explanations for the results that are noted (Yin, 2018). I addressed the concern of rival explanations by interviewing multiple participants. Interviewing enough participants to reach saturation can help to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discussed that instead of looking to generalize findings, qualitative researchers should consider whether the findings are transferable to other situations. In this research study, the common leadership practices extrapolated from the case study resources may also be effective for other principals and by obtaining a better understanding of the leadership practices of highly effective principals other principals could improve student achievement at their own schools.

Yin (2018) championed case studies as a valid approach to use to explore and understand real-life current phenomena using observations, interviews, or other sources of data. I believed a quantitative approach was not appropriate for this research study because the purpose of the study is to obtain a greater understanding of principals' beliefs on their own leadership practices through semistructured interviews. A mixed-method approach was also not selected for similar reasons of keeping the focus on just the principals' beliefs about their own leadership practices.

Using the Kouzes and Posner (2017) Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) self-assessment provided additional context and ground the study in transformational leadership practices. This focus on principals' self-perception of their leadership practices using the lens of Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) conceptual framework of the five practices of exemplary leaders provided insight regarding effective transformational leadership practices.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative case study research, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). Qualitative researchers conduct the interviews, review all information, and compile data themselves (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As the key data collection instrument, I collected, analyzed, and reported all information. I interpreted the findings and results from data collection and analysis through the filters of my experiences as well as the conceptual framework of Kouzes and Posner (2017).

I am a principal in the school division in the mid-Atlantic state that is the focus of this study. Although I am acquainted with some of the participants, I have no influence or supervisory responsibility for or over them. To conduct an ethical research study, I was critical and reflexive during data collection and analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I obtained university approval from an Institutional Review Board prior to beginning the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I reduced researcher bias by accurately representing data that I collect and avoiding including my personal biases. A reflexivity journal was kept during the process of interviewing and analysis and document my perspectives and attempts at accurately reflecting the data. I also triangulated data from interviews of the different participants in different school settings and only ask questions using interview questions related solely to the content of this study.

I reviewed the interview questions with other experts in the field for their input. I asked six other administrators in a mid-Atlantic state to review the interview questions to be used in this research. I explained my purpose in this study to each participant and confidentiality agreements were signed prior to their review. After revision to the initial interview questions, the updated version was resubmitted to the administrators for further comment and review before I established the final draft of the interview questions.

Prior to interviewing participants, I explained my purpose in this research study to each participant. I reviewed and explained the consent forms to each participant prior to participants signing the forms. I also shared with each participant the interview and analysis process. I checked in with the participants regarding their responses for accuracy during the interview and all participants were given an opportunity to review the transcripts of the interview to confirm accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I shared preliminary findings with nonparticipant colleagues to obtain feedback on possible alternate explanation for the data collected (Yin, 2018).

The rights of participants are protected by informed consent, confidentiality, and the absence of any identifying data that could reveal the participant or his/her school,

school division or county (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I collected and stored information on a hard drive without identifying the names, schools, or school division of any of the participants. I also assigned pseudonyms to each participant interviewed to avoid using names.

Methodology

I chose a qualitative case study. In the next section, I articulated the population and sampling strategies. I also discussed the sources of data, instrumentation, and protocol for the interviews.

Participant Selection

The population is elementary school principals from one school division in a mid-Atlantic state who led schools where the achievement gap in reading, as measured by the end of year standardized state assessment, was reduced compared to other schools and the overall state average. This population was identified using the annual state report cards and school profiles posted online in the state department of education website. Criteria for initial selection included schools earning end of the year reading assessment scores for the last three school years for all students at 80% or higher and for economically disadvantaged students at 68% or higher with the achievement gap between all students and economically disadvantaged students being less than the state average of 13 points. Additionally, the participant needed to have been the principal at the school for the last three school years. Phone interviews were conducted to more readily coordinate schedules with all participants at times that are convenient to them and to preserve their confidentiality.

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research often has a smaller sample size (Patton, 2015). 11 elementary school principals who led schools where the achievement gap in reading as measured by the end of year standardized state assessments have been reduced compared to other schools and the overall state average for the last three school years were included in this study. Specifically, principals from a mid-Atlantic state who led schools where the achievement gap between all students and economically disadvantaged students were less than the state average of 13 points on the state testing profile were selected to participate. In addition, only schools having an overall student achievement in reading in the 80 percentiles for the last three years were considered. This criteria for selection of participants bound this qualitative case study. The size of the sample in purposive sampling is determined when the researcher reaches a point of information saturation where he or she is hearing similar responses, and no new information is gained (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)

Two types of sampling methods researchers use are probability and non-probability. Non-probability sampling is the most common type of sampling for qualitative research studies and is the sampling method which was used for this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The non-probability sampling technique for this research study is purposeful sampling. Purposeful or purposive sampling can provide in-depth detailed information about a certain group, situation, or phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Purposeful sampling is useful when trying to explore and understand a specific phenomenon by studying a sample from which the most information about this phenomenon can be derived (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)

Purposeful sampling gives researchers the flexibility to select participants which provide the context to help answer the research questions of the specific research study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This research study was a unique purposeful sample as it is based on unique or rare situations that are not typical of all schools (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The purposeful sampling strategy used in this research study is called homogenous sampling because the participants were identified by a specific criterion (Patton, 2015). This sampling strategy is preferable because it focuses on a specific subgroup of principals who are at higher achieving elementary schools where the achievement gap in reading between economically disadvantaged students and their peers has been reduced and it increases the understanding of what these principals believe are the leadership decisions positively influencing student achievement at their schools.

Instrumentation

One-on-one semistructured open-ended interview questions were the sole data collection instrument. Qualitative interviewing assumes the beliefs of the participants are relevant and will provide us insight into their beliefs (Patton, 2015). Semistructured interviews are most often used in qualitative research and are guided by specific questions. However, the order questions are asked is not set; instead the order is guided by the responses of participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews are a valuable source of data for case studies and are formatted along the lines of facilitated conversations instead of formal questions (Yin, 2018). Semistructured interviewing was used because highly formalized structured interviews may prohibit the researcher from truly understanding the perceptions and experiences of the participants because the

questioning is more rigid while informal unstructured interviews may not provide common themes and findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Demographic information was collected during the initial phone conversation when recruiting participants and explaining the research study and process.

Questions for the interview were developed by me based on the research of exemplary leadership practices of Kouzes and Posner (2017) and from the literature review on effective leadership practices (Anderson, 2017; Karadağ et al., 2015; Nash & Bangert, 2014; Pietsch & Tulowizki, 2017; Smith, 2016; Sun & Leithwood, 2012; Woods & Martin, 2016). Prior to interviewing participants, interview questions were reviewed with non-participating administrators in the field for their input and comment. I sought out administrators who were at schools where students achieved at high rates but did not meet all criteria for this research study. I explained My purpose in this research study and shared background information from Kouzes and Posner (2017) five practices of exemplary leadership with them to provide additional context. Each participating expert administrator signed a confidentiality agreement. After talking to the administrators and getting their feedback to the interview questions and the demographic information, I updated the interview questions. Once updated, the interview questions were sent out electronically to each of the administrators for further review and comment. A final version of the interview was then created.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Potential participants were chosen based the end of the year assessments in reading for the last three school years. Principals who led schools having at least an

overall 80% pass rate of all students in reading, a pass rate of at least 68% for

economically disadvantaged students and showing an achievement gap for economically

disadvantaged students less than the state average of 13 points over the last 3 school

years were invited to participate in the interview. 11 participants who have been the

principal at the school for the last 3 school years were selected for an interview. The size

of the sample in purposive sampling is determined when the researcher reaches a point of

information saturation where he or she is hearing similar responses, and no new

information is gained (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

After selection of potential participants has been made, principals were contacted

to assess their interest and willingness to participate in the research study. Prior to

interviewing participants, the purpose of the study was explained to each participant as

well as the interview process and plan for data analysis. Consent agreements were

presented, explained, and signed.

Demographic information was collected as part of the interview process on each

participant to provide background and give context on each principal to see if other

factors or commonalities may contribute to the positive achievement of economically

disadvantaged students at each school. Demographic information was collected by me to

help identify possible patterns during coding. (See Appendix A).

After responses were shared, one-on-one semistructured open-ended interviews

were scheduled and conducted with each participant. Interviews were scheduled for 30 to

45 minutes. Notes were taken by the me and interviews were audio taped to be

transcribed after the interview.

The interview consisted of 11 open ended questions exploring what principals believe are their own leadership practices influencing student achievement (See Appendix A). The questions for the interview were shared and reviewed with experts in the field including administrators not included in this study for their feedback and review prior to any interviews. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted it is important to ask clear and concise questions without using technical terms or confusing language. Yin (2018) recommended asking "how" questions during interviews. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Stake (1995) noted case studies allow researchers to explore the "what" of a phenomenon to better understand it. Qualitative interviewing assumes the beliefs of the participants are relevant and will provide us insight into their perspectives (Patton, 2015).

I conducted member checks with participants during the interview and after the interview regarding their responses to confirm accuracy and provide all participants an opportunity to review the transcripts of the interview to confirm accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During the interview, I conducted member checks by paraphrasing or summarizing responses by participants. At the end of the interviews, participants were asked if they had any additional questions, clarifications, or concerns. Transcripts of the interview were shared with each participant within a week of the interview for their feedback, comment, and input.

Preliminary findings were also shared with non-participant colleagues to obtain feedback on possible alternate explanation for the data collected (Yin, 2018). Sufficiency of data collection was reached at the point of information saturation when no new information is obtained from an interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A summary of the

completed research study will be made available to each participant after it has been successfully published.

Data Analysis Plan

Qualitative data analysis draws conclusions logically from the data collected and compares the findings against other situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Stake (1995) considers data analysis as an opportunity for researchers to reflect on their impressions and make meaning from them. For this research study data are to be collected during the interview period of one month. Principals who meet the criteria were invited to participate in the interviews. After two weeks, when the minimum number of participants had agreed to participate, one-on-one semistructured open-ended interviews began. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended data analysis should begin while collecting data and adjustments made to subsequent interviews if information surfaces during an early interview requiring more depth or revision.

Coding was used when reviewing the interview data collected. Coding is a data analysis management strategy in which the researcher assigns a short description or identification to the data to more readily allow the researchers to access data and find patterns (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015; Saldana, 2016). While coding the interview data, categories were constructed, sorted, and named while patterns and themes were identified and formed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldana, 2016; Yin, 2018). Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership served as an overarching guide during the coding process as a priori or emergent codes when identifying categories. The LPI questions and format also helped identify categories.

Although the Kouzes and Posner Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) self-assessment was not used in this research study, I used it to help develop some of the interview questions and when reviewing interview responses to help make sense of patterns and themes that emerged from the interviews. The LPI includes 30 questions. Participants respond to each question with a rating on a 1-10 Likert Scale (Garrett-Staib & Burkman, 2015). 1 corresponds as "almost never" while 10 corresponds to "almost always". The LPI self-assessment has been shown to be both a valid and reliable instrument with sound psychometric properties (Posner, 2015b; Posner, 2016) and is based on the five exemplary practices model put forth by Kouzes and Posner (2017).

The Leadership Practices Inventory self-assessment measures what leaders perceive are their leadership practices (Garrett-Staib & Burkman, 2015). The LPI is based on a data base of over 2.8 million responses from leaders and observers of leaders from many different types of organization including education (Posner, 2016). The Leadership Practices Inventory has consistently been found to be both reliable and valid as shown in validity studies conducted over 15 years (Caza & Posner, 2019; Fornito & Camp, 2010; Garrett-Staib & Burkman, 2015). The LPI was chosen for this research study because it has been proven to clearly measure leadership practices which is the focus of this research study and supports the conceptual framework of this study (Posner, 2015b). The LPI has been shown to be consistently reliable and valid across different organizations and ethnicities (Garrett-Staib & Burkman, 2015; Posner, 2016). Table 4 indicates reliability coefficient for each of the 5 constructs.

Table 4

Reliability Coefficient for Each Subscale Reported by Kouzes and Posner (2017)

Model the way	Inspiring a shared vision	Challenging the process	enabling others to act	Encourage the heart
.77	.87	.80	.75	.87

The meaning of the phenomenon being studied, in this case the leadership practices of high performing principals, is the focus of the data analysis (Patton, 2015). During this process; emerging themes and patterns were examined to help answer the research question driving this research study. Discrepant data was examined, reviewed with other non-participating experts, and reported in the research study.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research the credibility and trustworthiness of the researcher is crucial to the research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). The four elements of trustworthiness for qualitative research are: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Data collected were accurately represented to reduce researcher bias.

Credibility

A reflexivity journal was maintained during the process of interviewing and data analysis. Reflexivity means attempting to examine one's own thinking and feeling during the different phases of a research study (Patton, 2015). A reflexivity journal can be used to record a researcher's predispositions, emotions, and reactions while data are

collected and analyzed to notice, reduce, and avoid biases and reactivity. Reactivity

occurs when participants' responses are influenced by data collection instruments

including the interviewer, or the researcher is influenced by responses of the participants

(Patton, 2015).

Confirmability

Patton (2015) noted that a challenge to trustworthiness is that the researcher has

altered results and analysis to match his or her beliefs. Besides taking notes in a

reflexivity journal, data was triangulated, which is a method to confirm results from

multiple sources of data (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018), from the interviews of the different

participants. During the process of data analysis, alternative explanations and rival

rationales for the results were considered by organizing the information collected in other

ways during the coding process (Patton, 2015). In order to strengthen trustworthiness,

reliability, and consistency of findings for this research study an audit trail was

maintained (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Dependability

Internal validity is a strength of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I

obtained information from interview questions related solely to the content of this study.

Prior to interviewing participants, questions were reviewed with other experts and

administrators for their feedback and input. While data are collected, I kept a reflexivity

journal to document possible biases during the data collection and analysis phases

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, Yin, 2018). Interviews were recorded using a digital voice

recorder. I transcribed the interviews verbatim. I strengthened the dependability of the

findings by checking in with participants during all aspects of the interview process and giving all participants an opportunity to review the transcripts of the interview to confirm accuracy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018).

Transferability

Another concern with a case study approach when considering trustworthiness is if the findings can be generalized or transferred to other situations because there can be other reasonable explanations for the results that are noted (Yin, 2018). Concerns of rival explanations were addressed by interviewing multiple participants. Interviewing enough participants to reach saturation can help strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. Yin (2018) argued that theories can be generalized and derived from case studies research. While other researchers instead consider findings to be transferability and subject to extrapolation if not generalizable (Patton, 2015). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discuss that instead of looking to generalize findings, qualitative researchers should consider if the findings are transferable to other situations. In this research, the common leadership practices extrapolated from the case study resources may also be effective for other principals and by obtaining a better understanding of the leadership practices of highly effective principals other principals could improve student achievement at their own school.

Ethical Procedures

The rights of participants are protected by informed consent, confidentiality, and the absence of any identifying data that could reveal the participant or his/her school, school division or county (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All identifying information such as

participants' names, schools, or school division are kept confidential, Data collected is stored on a hard drive which is password protected and not associated with any devices accessed by others. Principals interviewed were identified only by pseudonyms. Walden University approval from an Institutional Review Board was obtained prior to beginning data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

When recruiting participants, the purpose of the study was shared with them prior to the interview to ensure all participants understand the purpose and process of the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Time was given to check in with the participants regarding their responses for accuracy during the interview and give all participants an opportunity to ask questions, seek clarifications, or make comments at the end of the interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The completed transcript of each interview was shared with the corresponding participant for feedback, comment, and input prior to completing this research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Although principal profile information was taken, including length of service as a principal, number of students at the school being studied, and percent of students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, the information was shared generally and not identified with a specific school or principal. Plagiarism was avoided during all aspects of this research study by carefully synthesizing ideas and citing all sources.

Summary

In Chapter 3 I identified the research design and methodology of this research study. The qualitative case study incorporated semistructured interviews with principals in different settings. The phenomenon to be studied are the leadership practices of

principals at high achieving schools who have reduced the achievement gap of

economically disadvantaged students and all students. This study included purposeful

sampling of 11 principals from high performing schools based on three years of data.

Participants answered demographic questions prior to the interview during the phone call.

Participants were interviewed over their summer break at times that were most

convenient to them. Phone interviews were conducted to more conveniently schedule

interviews with participants and to preserve their confidentiality during the interview

process. After data collection, the data analysis including the coding process was

initiated which produced certain findings which are shared in the following chapters.

Ethical, trustworthiness, and confidentiality issues were considered during the data

collection and data analysis phases of this research study.

Chapter 4: Results

In Chapter 4, I present the findings of the data collected in this qualitative case study as well as a description of the methods that I used for collecting, recording, and analyzing data. The problem that I addressed in this qualitative case study is the lack of understanding of principals' beliefs about their leadership practices that positively influence the reading achievement of students identified as economically disadvantaged. I chose a qualitative case study design to explore, examine, and describe the leadership practices of principals of elementary schools that positively influence reading achievement and inform the practices of other school administrators. A case study approach is an effective research design in examination and exploration of intricate phenomena existing in the world around us (Harrison et al., 2017). Creswell and Poth (2018) described the case study approach as a type of qualitative research in which the researcher examines in detail a current phenomenon or phenomena by collecting data using various forms of information. Researchers who employ the case study research design interpret the phenomena being studied using the lens of their own perceptions and present their versions based on their conclusions (Stake, 1995). A case study gives a researcher the opportunity to better understand the cause of an observable and widespread fact, event, or situation (Starman, 2013).

The data for this qualitative case study were collected through one-on-one semistructured open-ended interviews with 11 elementary school principals from one school division in a mid-Atlantic state. All of the participants were elementary school principals who are at schools having reduced the achievement gap in reading for

economically disadvantaged students as indicated on end-of-the-year state assessments for the last 3 years. My purpose in this study was to gain an understanding of leadership practices principals use that have reduced the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and all students.

The results of this study help to identify effective leadership practices that principals of high performing schools used to improve student achievement among economically disadvantaged students. The results of this study demonstrate to other school leaders, effective leadership practices that could be implemented at their own schools to achieve higher academic performance among their student populations. In addition, school division, state leaders, and principals can use the conclusions to update their training and programs. The findings are presented by first reviewing the setting and data collection methods then examining the data analysis strategies used. This chapter concludes with the results and a review of Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) leadership model. I received permission from the school district to conduct this study as well as from Walden University's Institutional Review Board.

Setting

In this research study, I documented and analyzed the leadership practices that principals believe are positively influencing the reading achievement of economically disadvantaged students. The population examined was elementary school principals from one school division in a mid-Atlantic state who led schools where the achievement gap in reading for economically disadvantaged students, as measured by the end-of-year standardized state assessment, was reduced compared to other schools and the overall

state average. I identified this population using the annual state report cards and school profiles posted online in the state department of education website.

The two criteria for this study required each participant to be (a) principals at schools earning end of the year reading assessment scores for the last 3 academic years for all students at the state average or higher, and for (b) economically disadvantaged students at the state average or higher with the achievement gap between all students and economically disadvantaged students being less than the state average of 13 points. In addition, participants needed to have been the principal at their school for the last 3school years. I conducted one-on-one interviews that were semistructured and open-ended. The interviews were conducted by phone interviews to more readily coordinate schedules with all participants at times that are convenient to them and to preserve their confidentiality. The structure of the interviews remained the exactly the same as those that are conducted in person. This consistency facilitated establishment of reliability and validity of the data collected.

All 11 participants had been in education for several years ranging from 17 years to 40 years, with 24.6 years being the average. These 11 principals have been in administration from 5 to 17 years with 11.5 years being the average number of years the principals in this sampling were in administration. The participants served as a principal from 3 to 13 years with the average being 7.5 years (see Table 5). Almost all the participants, except for two, have been principals at one school for their entire academic career until now. All the participants have earned a master's degree, except for one, who has a doctorate. Eight participants were female and three were male.

Table 5

Demographic Information

Academic career timeline	Range	Average
Years in education	17-40	24.6
Years as an administrator	5-17	11.5
Years as a principal	3-13	7.5
Years as principal at current school	3-11	6.7

Data Collection

This study was a qualitative case study design conducted to analyze qualitative data derived from interviews with participants. I received IRB approval from Walden University on June 7, 2019 (Walden University's ethics approval number for this study is 06-07-19-0755361). After receiving IRB approval, school district personnel gave me permission to conduct my research study and to interview principals within the school division. I obtained signed consent forms from each participant after I contacted them about the study, and the interview requirements, and they agreed to participate. I conducted interviews with 11 principals over a 22-day period. I used an alphanumeric coding system of P1 to P11 to identify the participants and keep their information confidential. Scheduling was a slight challenge because interviews took place during summer break for this school division. I interviewed all participants by phone. This method also helped protect the confidentiality of each participant. I had written all

interview questions prior to the interviews. The interview questions used were written prior to the interviews. Principals were not given any time constraints, and I received their consent to participate prior to the interview.

The interviews took place by phone at times that were convenient to each participant because schools were on break for the summer. I interviewed each principal about the school at which they worked for at least 3 years. The interviews were recorded on my phone using the Temi app with permission from each participant. The length of the interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes, with most interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes. I transcribed each interview using both the Temi app program and my notes verbatim into a Microsoft Office Word document. After each completed transcription, I sent the Word document to each participant electronically to make sure the transcription was accurate, and their transcribed information represented their intended responses. Participants were given an opportunity to change anything or add additional information to the transcript to more completely answer the question. Any changes made by the participants were included in the final transcription. Only one minor change was made by one participant regarding the length of time she has been a principal.

The interview data provided information about the principals' beliefs about their leadership practices. Prior to the start of interviewing, I made some slight modifications of wording to the original interview questions to allow for more detailed responses. There were no unusual circumstances during the data collection process. I took notes on the responses as they took place and immediately after each interview as part of first cycle coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Analysis

During the conduct of interviews, I took notes of my initial reflection and while transcribing. I coded each transcription by hand by carefully reading the responses from each participant for my first round of coding. I used the in vivo coding strategy to identify common words and phrases and to reflect the actual language and intent of each participant during the initial coding (Saldana, 2016). Phrases or words with similar meanings were grouped together. This first cycle identified common words or phrases. I included some of the most common phrases in Table 6.

Table 6

Common Codes

Interview Questions	Common in vivo terms
1	Open door policy. Participant in team meetings. Walk in building with smile. Check in with everyone. Supportive environment. Shared decision making. Approachable. Culture where everyone feels valued. Clear vision and mission. Intentional. Model what you want others to do. Monitor what is most important. Collaborative
2	Monitor what you want done. Focus on data. Take care of teachers. Being visible. Team approach. Shared decision making. Growth mind set for students. Problem solving with teachers. Part of data discussions. Main focus is on effective instruction.
3	Consistency. Be everywhere with your message. Vision is living and breathing. Aligned to all programs and initiatives. Connected to everything. All decisions return to the vision. Communicate at all times. Communicate in all ways. Make sure everyone knows the vision. Use real data to support vision. Monitoring that instructional programs are aligned to vision.
4	Encourage professional development. Trust staff. Risk free. No shame no blame. Highlight success. Encourage risk taking. Connect ideas to vision and instruction. Open to all ideas.
5	Leadership team open to all. Solicit input. Listen to ideas. Shared decision making. Engage families. Encourage teachers and staff to present. Intentional offer opportunities to present. Provide a safe risk-free climate to be a leader. Value their input. Hire leaders.

Table continued

6	No harm, no foul for trying something new. Support new ideas. Say yes. Give the green light. Positively recognize innovators. Celebrate teachers. Growth mind set with staff and students. Risk free. Lead the risk taking by example. Rarely say no to ideas to support kids. Push boundaries. Encourage teachers to take risks. Put data in the hands of teachers to help them identify what they need to do.
7	Allow input from all stakeholders. Put yourself out there with staff and community. Focus on continuous improvement. Professional regarding safety and instruction but silly and approachable at other times. Friendships with staff. Participate with kids in activities. Not just professional colleagues. Listen. Open. Visible. Staff works with me not for me. Let them know that I care about them as a person. Clear communication. Checking with families. Watching out for students.
8	Follow through. Communicate often. Doing what you say you are going to do. Honest conversation. We are all in this together. Modeling. Be sincere. Be real with every person. Transparency. Own up mistakes. Follow up. Authenticity. Transparent. Approachable. Trust. Being in classrooms.
9	Open. Listen to feedback. Caring. Involved. Reflective partner. Model what you expect from staff. Passionate about their success. Encourage Professional Development. Collaborative. Celebrate staff. Innovative. Instructional driven. Transparent. Shared leadership. Team plater. Involves staff in decision making. Supportive. Build relationships. Avoid micromanaging. Give stakeholders voice and choice. Servant leader.
10	Open. Transformational Leader. Very positive. Friendly. Warm. Best interest at heart for students. Care deeply. Collaborative. Supportive. All in for kids. Put kids first. Find time to be with kids. Learn every child's name. Personable. Connect with families. Engage families.
11	Transforming Collaborative Learning Team (CLT) at school. Focus on Professional Learning Community (PLC) process. Strong instructional focus on best practices. Finding what works for their kids. Supporting staff to support students. Building all up. Do what needs to be done for the kids. Principal must juggle many different balls. Safety first at a school. Celebrating success. Monitor data. Build up leaders.

During the next round of coding I used categorical aggregation (Stake, 1995) and

extracted a single word or short phrase of 3-5 words to create a descriptive code that

summarized the data more succinctly and group responses together. Furthermore,

participants described specific steps they use to monitor instruction and student

achievement without necessarily using the word *monitoring*. Nevertheless, the intent of

their practice was clear from the description of their actions. See Table 7 for some

additional examples.

Table 7

Example of Second Cycle of Coding.

In vivo codes	2nd cycle of coding
Participant in team meetings. Transform CLT meetings. Monitor what is most important	Monitor student progress
Follow through. Communicate often. Doing what you say you are going to do. Honest conversation. We are all in this together. Be sincere. Be real with every person. Own up mistakes.	Transparency
Open. Very positive. Friendly. Warm. Best interest at heart for students. Care deeply. Collaborative. Supportive. All in for kids. Put kids first. Find time to be with kids. Learn every child's name. Personable. Connect with families. Engage families.	Positive climate/positive relationships

In the next step, I then grouped and organized the codes into more encompassing

categories. Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) transformational leadership model served as

the conceptual framework of this study. At this stage, I examined the data through the

lens of Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) five practices of exemplary leaders. After

reviewing these categories as well as my reflections, analytical memos, notes,

transcriptions, and initial coding impressions, I identified patterns and themes. I

conducted further member checking by asking each participant to review the themes I

have identified from my analysis of the data to ascertain if these results were aligned with

their beliefs of their practices.

Results

This qualitative case study was conducted to explore and examine the leadership practices principals believed positively affected student achievement at their schools. I used the reading performance of economically disadvantaged students over a 3-year time span to help identify schools which had reduced achievement gaps as compared to other schools in the same school division and across the state. The results and findings of this study are based on my analysis of the data I collected from each of the 11 interviews.

During the interview, principals shared their beliefs about their own leadership practices that positively influenced student achievement in reading for their economically disadvantaged students. The following research question guided this study: *What do elementary school principals believe are their leadership practices that have been instrumental in reducing the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and all students?* From the responses of the participants, the following 6 common and prevalent themes emerged.

Leadership Practice Theme 1 - Positive Relationships: Principals create and nurture a positive and supportive school climate and community by fostering positive relationships with all stakeholders and encouraging family engagement.

All 11 principals shared the importance they placed on creating positive relationships with their staff members, students, families, and even within the community. This leadership practice theme was the most referenced throughout the interviews. According to P10, it all boils down to "treating others like you want to be

treated. The principals talked about becoming proactive by planning ways to recognize, promote, and celebrate all stakeholders.

Kouzes and Posner (2017) identified this practice of exemplary leaders by describing it as encouraging the heart. P1 explained how important it was to let all stakeholders know you care about them. Each participant shared versions of this belief of connecting with the stakeholders at their school by being positive, personable, and friendly. Many of those interviewed talked about coming in the building smiling and remaining calm, welcoming, and encouraging even during extremely stressful moments.

Creating a positive and supportive relationship helps teachers feel safe and comfortable when collaborating with the principal. For example, P3 described her approach as being warm and supportive while noting that teachers indicated that they feel comfortable with her feedback and input but are not threatened by classroom observations. P4 noted that teachers now ask her to come by to observe them trying something new and different to get her feedback.

Positive relationships with staff members

Participants described creating a positive work environment as one of their most important accomplishments. P9 ascribed to the belief that "no one works for me but everyone works with me" and makes sure to let the staff at his school see this in action. According to P4, she cultivates friendships with staff, so they know they are more than just professional colleagues to her. P8 shared similar information and indicated that she takes time to socialize with staff outside of school to build positive relationships with her

staff. She considers the staff as a family. P7 shared that she is very "intentional about being a real person and being personal with my teachers."

Celebrating and recognizing staff was also frequently referenced as important in nurturing a positive school climate. P10 stressed the importance of recognizing staff accomplishments and celebrating staff successes, frequently. P8 noted she works hard to "channel her inner cheerleader."

Positive climate for students and families

Each participant shared their beliefs about the importance and value of creating positive relationships with students and families. P8 shared that she reminds the staff frequently they are "privileged that they get to spend all day every day with someone else's child." P10 makes sure her families know she loves their children. P11 stated that all stakeholders know she is all in for the kids. P5 noted that families have indicated to him that they know he has the best interest of their students at heart. P8 explained that it all comes back to creating and modeling a climate of being kind to others. P8 commented that she has reminded her staff that being kind is not weakness when dealing with angry parents for example. P7 shared she really focuses at making sure the entire school environment is welcoming, friendly, and conducive to learning.

Involving and engaging families and community members.

All principals who were interviewed seemed to recognize that they needed to engage families in the educational lives of their students, especially lower income and English as a Second Language (ESL) families who may not always feel as comfortable at school as other families. P5 shared the importance of making sure all families and

community members feel connected to and engaged in his school. P5 believes this will support the academic success of his students. P4 explained that she makes sure her families know she thinks of each child as her own and takes the time to meet with them.

P8 noted that her families describe her as collaborative, and she believes this is important for them to see she is receptive to their input. P9 explained that he made the effort to change school events to school community events and open it up to the entire community. P9 also tries to know his parents on a first name basis. P1 shared that because she is at a community-oriented school she pays careful attention to involving and engaging all community members. P5 discussed how he finds leaders in the community to help support and promote the vision and mission of the school. P11 noted how important it is for parents to see you out at school and community events.

Encouraging the heart

It was clear that all principals interviewed believed that it was critical to develop, nurture, and grow positive relationships with all stakeholders including staff, students, families, and community members to support student success, progress, and achievement. Their responses echoed the James Comer quote: "No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship." One principal makes it a point that "everyone knows I really and truly care." Participants shared how they accomplished this goal of creating a positive and nurturing school environment by showing interest in each stakeholder, recognizing and celebrating stakeholders, being friendly, and connecting on a personal level. Participants also noted engaging families was critical to student success especially for struggling students. The principals discussed the importance of bringing families into

the school as well as the value of getting out and connecting to the larger community especially in lower income neighborhoods.

The findings described in Theme 1 align with Kouzes and Posner (2017) leadership practice of encouraging the heart. Encouraging the heart is described as building up others, celebrating them, and creating a positive environment where people feel valued and part of a community (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Litz & Scott, 2017; Palmer et al., 2014). All participants repeatedly emphasized how a positive school climate and positive relationships support student achievement and growth.

Leadership Practice Theme 2 - Lead by Example: Principals model the desired behaviors, attitudes, expectations, and culture envisioned for the school to all stakeholders.

All 11 principals interviewed referenced the importance of modeling what they felt was important at their schools especially when being visible, approachable, and accessible to all stakeholders. The participants indicated that modeling was part of the role of a principal and recognized that they set the tone and expectations for their staff. P1 explained how critical modeling is by saying that the "most important thing that I do as the building leader is to model." This leadership practice was the second most frequently referenced practice by the participants in this research study.

Modeling expectations and setting the tone

A few principals called themselves servant leaders and intentionally modeled this type of behavior with their stakeholders. P9 shared that he works purposefully to set a positive example for all stakeholders. P6 shared that he models high expectations for all

of his staff. P4 shared how important this practice is by saying "they (teachers) will follow my lead and this will set the tone" for the school. P2 shared that she models clearly what she expects teachers to do.

P9 said, "you can't ask them (referring to teachers) to do anything that you are not willing to do yourself". P9 noted that if it is raining or snowing, he is out with the staff during arrival and dismissal. P10 models what she expects in all her interactions with teachers. P11's philosophy is to "live your life as a model for others." P3 and P11 shared similar beliefs that modeling is the most important thing that they do to support student achievement.

Being visible to all stakeholders and present in classrooms.

Each participant shared how they believe that being visible, accessible, and approachable has a positive influence on student achievement. Participants ascribed to the belief that credibility and student achievement is increased by being visible and engaged in the classroom with your students. All the participants described different ways they made sure to be seen including being visible in the mornings greeting students and staff and in classrooms on a frequent basis. P9 believes visibility is key to school success and higher student achievement. P9 tries to be visible in classrooms and throughout the building and that he is open and willing to talk to anyone. P3 shared how important it was to be approachable and the value of being in the hallways to greet students each morning and back out again for dismissal.

The participants shared that they had open door policies and worked hard to be approachable and accessible to all staff and families. P2 believes it is important to be

visible, available, and a good listener. P11 shared that she is visible and approachable, greets all students, checks in with all staff, and lets everyone know she has an open-door policy. P4 makes it a point to be approachable and visible by communicating with each parent that she sees who comes in the building. P7 makes sure she is present for all family events.

Frequent communication

All the participants talked about communicating frequently and sharing their vision through their messages. P5 talked about being very clear when sharing his vision and making sure everyone knows whatever they are doing as a school is tied back to that vision. All the participants referenced how important it was to communicate frequently and consistently. P1 shared how she realized it was critical for messages to come from her in her voice and style and not through office staff. She felt making this change enhanced her credibility and relationships with her stakeholders. P1 shared her belief that the consistency of your message is important and noted the more you are communicating the message the more transparent you are.

Transparency

P10 noted that she is "very, very, very transparent with decision making and following through. P9 said if we "screw up, we own it". P2 also shared that if she makes a mistake, she is the "first to own it and apologize." Participants shared how they clearly explain to stakeholders what they are doing and why they are making their decisions. Participants noted that gathering input from different stakeholders and having those

discussions and exchanges helps everyone understand how and why decisions have been made.

Modeling the way

The findings described in Theme 2 align with Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) leadership practice of modeling the way. To model the way means leaders need to establish credibility by being honest and gaining the trust and respect of others and set the standard through their own practices and actions for others to follow (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Salleh & Khalid, 2018; Zaid, Al-Zawahreh, & Olimat, 2012). All participants recognized the connection between the tone they model for their schools and the achievement of students. The principals who were interviewed believe that being visible and present in classrooms positively influence student achievement.

Leadership Practice Theme 3 - Student Focused Mission: Principals establish, articulate, and cultivate a clear and focused vision for the school and student success.

All principals that were interviewed had a vision for their school that they shared with all stakeholders in their school community. It was evident that their vision was clear, known by all stakeholders, and a guiding measure for everything they are doing at their school. Although the visions were unique and specific to the principal and their schools, throughout the interviews it became apparent that their visions guided their decision making and the implementations of programs, recruitment, instructional focus, and prioritization of needs.

Fostering a student focused/centered culture

All 11 principals noted that ultimately it is all about the students. Principals made sure to develop connections and relationships with their students. Comments that were shared included: relationships, connections, high expectations, being silly, being visible and present, being in classrooms, all in for kids, and making sure students know you are there for them.

P4 shared that it begins by creating a positive relationship with students and letting them know she values them. P4 makes sure parents knows she is passionate about their children's success. P11 explained that she makes sure all teachers know they need to have a relationship with their students first before students are ready to learn. P5 shared that his number one focus will be the safety of students and right below this will be making sure each student is reaching their full potential. P8 discussed how she reminds staff to treat other students like they would want their child treated. P9 explained that he takes time to relate to students and let them know he is there for them. P6 noted that he establishes high expectations for students. P11 summarized this leadership practice theme by stating that everything should be about what is best for the students.

Vision as guide

P5 stated that all practices at his school go back to the vision and mission of his school. Principals shared how they embed their visions in all aspects of the school life. For example, P6 used the vision of his school to maintain focus on data and student success while P4 identified and recognized staff for achievements aligned to the school vision. P8 explained how she aligns her school vision consistently across all aspects of

her school and within the community. New academic procedures and policies at the school were aligned and connected to the school visions and principals indicated they felt this alignment helped them decide which practices to consider.

Communicating the school vision

P5 noted that it is critical to make sure "our vision and our mission is exceedingly crystal clear." Repeatedly, participants discussed the ways they communicate the vision to all stakeholders and how they get buy in from all stakeholders. Participants discussed using social media, newsletters, school website, morning broadcasts, parent meetings, and school events as opportunities to share their school vision. Although all participants interviewed went about it in different ways, it was evident that inspiring a shared vision among all stakeholders was a practice they believed positively influenced student achievement at their schools.

Communicating in a credible and transparent manner with all stakeholders.

Participants shared how important it was to be transparent in their decision making to earn credibility and trust and to follow through with what they said they would do. A lack of credibility or trust makes it that much more difficult to make the needed changes to support students and increase their achievement. P8 discussed the importance of being authentic, transparent, and sincere when interacting with all stakeholders. She makes it a point to share the same message and information with all stakeholders at her school. A few comments indicated that some of the principals instill a customer service mentality throughout their school.

Credibility and trust

P2 talked about the importance of building trust with staff by not blaming them for where students might currently be but helping them grow. P3 shared that she tries to just be her true self and be believable. P4 has worked closely with her teachers so they feel safe and comfortable with her and her feedback. She feels people believe what she says because of her sincerity and follow through. P7 shared how she takes the time to follow up with what she said she would do. P9 explained that he has built up a level of trust with his staff who feel comfortable to come to him if they are struggling in an area to ask his support and for him to visit their classrooms to give feedback.

Inspiring a shared vision

The findings described in Theme 3 align with Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) leadership practice of inspiring a shared vision. Leaders inspire a shared vision by knowing they can make a positive difference and passionately enlisting others to join them in helping make this vision come to life (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Palmer et al., 2014; Salleh & Khalid, 2018). The data collected from the interview responses highlighted how principals understand that if they want to have everyone join them in supporting the vision and mission of their school then all stakeholders need to trust them. In this way they can move their school in the right direction to improve student academic success.

It is evident the participants understood elements of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and recognized that students needed to feel safe, connected, and feel a sense of belonging before learning could take place (Fisher & Royster, 2016). All participants brought their decision-making back to what do students need to be successful. A non-wavering commitment to a clear school vision helped increase staff commitment and cooperation to

the vision which participants noted was crucial to the student achievement and school success.

Leadership Practice Theme 4 -Shared Leadership and Collaboration: Principals build leadership capacity, share decision making, and plan collaboratively with all stakeholders.

During the interviews, principals talked about providing leadership opportunities for their teachers and having a shared decision-making approach. Transformative leadership practices embrace the concept of growing leaders in the organization as crucial to the success of the organization. These types of leaders recognize one person cannot do it all alone. P8 shared that when you find the "right people, you need to get out of their way." When hiring new teachers, principals indicated that they wanted to hire teachers to be leaders. P5 shared that when he is hiring staff that he looks for "a leader first and a teacher second."

Professional Learning Communities/Collaborative Learning Teams

In addition, all principals had some version of professional learning communities or collaborative team meetings at their schools. Five of the principals interviewed, placed strong emphasis on the collaborative team approach through professional learning communities and felt these opportunities were instrumental to the increase in the achievement of their students. P2 shared that she spent time early in her career at her current school strengthening her grade level team meetings to focus on student data and for team members to lead meetings.

Teachers as leaders

Beyond team meetings, the participants described other ways for their staff and students to take on leadership roles. P8 shared that she encourages other staff to take the lead in many aspects of the school. P8 also noted that when other teachers see teachers leading and doing things then other staff are encouraged to take leadership roles as well. All principals had some version of leadership teams. P1 noted that she includes anyone interested as part of the leadership team. Staff meetings were another venue that the principals used to provide leadership opportunities for teachers and other staff. P4 explained that 90 percent of her staff meetings are led by teachers and other staff. P7 builds leadership capacity by encouraging staff to see opportunities as leadership opportunities. She is open to their input and ideas.

Shared decision making

The participants talked about the value of letting all stake holders provide input. P6 explained how he makes sure all stake holders feel they have a voice through a shared decision making and a team approach. P10 is a strong proponent of shared decision making and makes sure teachers know she takes their input seriously. P7 has worked hard to develop and nurture a climate of shared leadership. P11 noted that stake holders have a lot of choice and voice at her school. P6 stated that it is important that schools are "building a truly inclusive culture where people feel part of the process, feel ownership of their students with high expectations as part of a team of professionals working for the success" of all students.

Enabling others to act

The findings described in Theme 4 are aligned with Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) leadership practice of enabling others to act. Leaders enable others to act by empowering others, building leadership capacity and encouraging collaboration and shared decision making (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Palmer et al., 2014; Zaid, Al-Zawahreh, & Olimat, 2012). Participants indicated that by building leadership capacity, providing opportunities for input and shared decision making, and working together as a collaborative team supports the success and achievement of all students and brings everyone to the understanding that they are working together for a common goal.

Leadership Practice Theme 5 - Challenging the Norm: Principals establish a safe risk-free school culture where staff feels supported and encouraged to implement innovative strategies to support students.

Many of the principals noted the importance of giving teachers the go ahead to try new things the teachers believed would improve student achievement or positively support their schools. The participants shared the message that they cannot just continue to do what they had been doing if the results were not changing. The principals who participated in this study understand that they had to make changes to their current practices in order to ensure student achievement or improvement in satisfaction with their schools. Each participant that spoke about this had a different approach. Some of the approaches were aligned clearly to the school vision while some focused on a different

instructional practice. P3 said she is open to all ideas from her staff and community if "it

is good for instruction and good for kids."

Encouraging risk taking

P8 explained that she has established a climate of risk taking by letting staff know

that they have permission to fail. P4 shared how she encourages teachers and students to

be risktakers. P11 also agreed and she encourages teachers to take risks, so they don't

worry so much about failing. P11 knows they are worried about the effect on kids even if

they her permission to try something new. P5 explained he models risk taking in his

actions to encourage their own risk taking. P5 shared that his staff knows he is a risk

taker and challenges the norm. P11 shared that she encourages teachers to take risks by

sharing and celebrating their accomplishments.

Saying yes

P8 explained that she says yes to their ideas after vetting them and believes it

important to encourage staff to try to take these risks to support student success. Saying

yes to suggestions and ideas from their teachers, was a common theme from the

participants. The principals interviewed acknowledged that they did their best to be

receptive to new ideas from staff. P2 shared that it is important for staff to know you are

receptive to new ideas that will support students. P2 also shared that it takes time to build

trust with the staff. P10 says she "encourages" her staff and lets them know it is ok to

fail.

Challenging the process

My findings of Theme 5 are aligned with Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) practice of challenging the process. Challenging the process means leaders look at different and innovative ways to disrupt the status quo by taking risks, experimenting, learning from their mistakes, and searching for different solutions and opportunities to improve (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Litz & Scott, 2017; Palmer et al., 2014). Many of the principals, including P5, P6, P9, and P11 talked about the need to raise the bar and recognize that risk taking starts with them as school leaders.

Leadership Practice Theme 6 - Instructional Leadership: Principals focus on instructional best practices and student achievement and progress by providing clear instructional focus, establishing a climate of high expectations for all students, improving classroom practices through feedback and support, monitoring, analyzing, and discussing school and student data and progress, and providing ongoing, targeted, and intentional professional development.

This leadership practice is closely tied to the vision of each participant. The value principals put into ensuring effective instructional strategies that meet the academic needs of students was clear. Their responses echoed that a being an instructional leader was one of their primary roles. P2 echoed the common theme each principal shared about how critical it is for principals to be an instructional leader at their school. P5 explained that "90% of his time has to be on instruction". P6 stated that all staff should high expectations for all students.

Meeting academic needs of school community

The instructional focus was different from school to school and depended on the needs of the students and community from each of the schools. P3 stated that she makes it a priority to have ongoing discussions of best practices which lead to success of students with her staff and families. P1 explained how she worked hard on the planning process -making sure all staff are focused on effectively planning. One principal shared that he focused on working collaboratively with all staff to create a system where students are not pulled out or working at unstructured literacy centers but instead receive push in support by 3-4 other resource staff small group reading support daily in the classroom. He believed this practice had tremendous positive influences on the success of his students as documented in huge increases in end of the year state assessment scores.

Principals used data to help them identify areas of need and then focused instructional improvements around those areas. P7 updated the collaborative team planning room to allow her staff more opportunities to share effective strategies and plan in order to improve student achievement at her school. P9 redesigned the literacy intervention at his school to provided focus interventions for students who are struggling in reading. P11 shared her belief that it is important to continually check for understanding and make this a focus for her staff. P11 felt this focus and change helped support student achievement at her school. P8 shared how she implemented mindfulness systemically throughout her school which she believes has had a positive influence in many areas (i.e., student achievement).

Monitor, analyze, and discuss student and school data, progress, and classroom practices and use information to make intentional decisions.

All 11 participants noted that it is critical to use available data and information to make intentional decisions about instruction, interventions, planning, pacing, and programs to ensure all students are learning at high levels. P1 shared her belief in the need for monitoring and accountability to makes sure students are learning and successful. She noted that data is powerful and helps teachers know where students are and need to go. This comment was echoed by each of the other participants during the interviews. P6 discussed how use of data supports continuous improvement for students, the school, instructional programs, interventions, and staff performance.

Using data to guide instructional decision making

All the principals interviewed take time to share data with their staff and use it to guide discussions to support students. P4 explained that that she believes each weekly team meeting needs to be focused on best practices and student success by knowing their academic potential. P8 shared how she established vertical teams to take the lead in examining data, academic gaps, and lead the improvement process. P9 emphasized how he brings everything back to student data and student progress by taking time with his staff to continually assess student results. P10 also discussed how she monitors student success and the effectiveness of implemented programs in a systematic manner.

Providing ongoing, targeted, and intentional professional development

Each of the principals shared how they continually grow their staff by providing opportunities for professional learning often aligned with their school vision and school

goals. P10 noted that she encourages her staff to provide professional development in areas that they have demonstrated strength in. P1 shared that she sends teachers, often in teams or groups, to professional development. P2 explained that she believes in the importance of continual professional development and has her staff share what they have learned at professional development opportunities or best practices they are implementing in their classrooms. P5 shared similar comments and believes he needs to support and develop his staff. P7 shared that she also encourages teachers to visit other teachers' classrooms to continue their professional development. P11 explained she encourages professional development and sends her staff to various trainings to facilitate their success. P11 also believes it is important to put teachers into other teachers' classrooms.

Instructional leadership practices

The findings in Theme 6 align with instructional leadership practices (Smith, 2016). Instructional leadership means the principal is focusing his or her efforts on improving student learning and classroom instruction (Cruickshank, 2017; Pietsch & Tulowizki, 2017). Participants shared the importance of a strong and clear instructional focus but noted that without staff buy in then the ability to meet the needs of historically struggling students became more challenging. The participants interviewed correlated close monitoring with effective instruction by indicating that you cannot have one without the other. Instructional leaders focus on achieving specific instructional outcomes by providing aligned professional development to help teachers achieve specific goals (Urick & Bowers, 2014). Instructional leaders influence student achievement by putting an emphasis on the quality of teaching and learning (Cruickshank, 2017; Grobler, 2013;

Shatzer et al., 2014). A combination of transformative leadership practices with

instructional leadership practices had a positive influence on student achievement.

In the table below, I identified if a theme was expressed by each participant as

represented by the alphanumeric system of P1-P11. I noted that all themes were

referenced by all participants. Some participants focused more deeply on certain themes.

However, all participants referenced all themes. I think it is interesting to note how each

participant referenced each theme during the interview.

Table 8

Themes Mentioned by Each Participant of This Research Study

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11
Theme 1	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Theme 2	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Theme 3	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Theme 4	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Theme 5	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Theme 6	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

In table 9 below, I correlated the five identified themes with Kouzes's and

Posner's (2017) research on 5 exemplary practices. The representation for each theme is

as follows:

Theme 1. MW is for Modeling the Way,

Theme 2. SV is for inspire a Shared Vision,

Theme 3. CP is for Challenge the Process,

Theme 4. EO is for Enabling Others to act,

Theme 5. EH is for Encourage the Heart.

IL represents Instructional Leadership which identifies practices that would align with the practices identified more closely with instructional leadership strategies.

Table 9

Correlation between identified themes and Kouzes and Posner 5 practices

	MW	SV	CP	EO	EH	IL
Theme 1					X	
Theme 2	X					
Theme 3		X				
Theme 4				X		
Theme 5			X			
Theme 6						X

Kouzes and Posner (2017)

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research the credibility and trustworthiness of the researcher is crucial to the research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). Data collected has been accurately represented to reduce researcher bias. Additionally, I have triangulated

the findings by comparing the responses to each interview questions with all participants and the audio recordings. Triangulation is a method to confirm results from multiple sources of data, in this case 11 different participants (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The emergent themes were common to every participant. Triangulation of the responses helped identify the most frequent and common themes expressed by each participant.

Moreover, I kept a reflexivity journal before, during, and after the interview process and data analysis and was aware of my predispositions, emotions, and reactions while data were collected and analyzed to avoid bias and reactivity (Patton, 2015). As I began coding the transcriptions, I wrote down analytical memos of my thinking and reasons for my choices and kept an audit trail to facilitate credibility of my research (See Appendix B).

I strengthened the dependability of the findings by using the practice of member-checking. In this case, I used member-checking to assess if both the interview and interpretation of the findings were an accurate representation of each participant's beliefs. Member checking is a practice used in qualitative research to strengthen the credibility of the data collected by giving all participants an opportunity to review the transcripts of the interview to confirm accuracy of their statements (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). Member checking was used to validate the leadership practice themes identified in this research study. I asked participants to respond within a 5-day window after first sending them the transcription and then my interpretations of their responses.

Reflecting on my own thinking, triangulation, and member checking helped to support the trustworthiness of this research study. I have maintained an audit trail

starting from the point of obtaining input on the development of interview questions through data analysis (see Appendix B). Additionally, the peer review process was incorporated from non-participating principals to provide feedback to interview questions and to identified themes. There were no discrepancies found during the data analysis. I avoided bias by maintaining careful notes and following appropriate data collection procedures.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I summarized the results of my analysis of the interview responses. My purpose in this study was to gain an understanding of leadership practices principals believe have reduced the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and all students. After analyzing the data, six leadership practices emerged that each participant referenced as having a positive influence on student achievement at their schools. I used member checking with each participant to confirm I correctly identified the leadership practice themes they intended in their responses during the interviews. In Chapter 5, I focus on a discussion of implications for transferability and social change and recommendations for next steps.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Although many studies exist that document the influence of an effective school principal on student achievement and school success, the problem that I addressed in this research study was the lack of understanding of principals' beliefs about their leadership practices that positively influence the reading achievement of students identified as economically-disadvantaged. In this study, I used a qualitative case study design to address this problem and to gain an understanding of leadership practices principals believe have reduced the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and all students. From the analysis of the interview responses, six common leadership practices themes emerged.

I used the Leadership model developed by Kouzes and Posner (2017), which identifies five practices of exemplary leadership, as the conceptual framework for this qualitative research study. The five practices are (a) model the way, (b) inspire a shared vision, (c) challenge the process, (d) enable others to act, and (e) encourage the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). These five practices are embedded in the six leadership practice themes that I identified and helped guide the analysis and categorization of the responses. This framework supported the six emergent themes from the analysis and those participants who noted positively influenced student achievement at their schools.

 In addition, instructional leadership practices were identified as being critical to the success of students. According to Heck and Hallinger (2014), instructional leadership had a significant effect on improving achievement. Principals' practices as instructional leaders have direct influence on teacher and student actions in the classroom (Rigby,

2014). Nevertheless, instructional leadership practices alone are not able to meet the needs of all students but integrating those practices with transformational leadership could lead to better school success (Menon, 2014). Day et al. (2016) concluded that effective principals use a combination of instructional and transformative leadership practices to achieve higher academic achievement.

I selected participants from a population of elementary school principals from one school division in a mid-Atlantic state who led schools where the achievement gap in reading, as measured by the end-of-year standardized state assessment, was reduced compared with other schools and the overall state average. I identified this population by researching the annual state report cards and school profiles posted online in the state department of education website. Criteria for initial selection included schools earning end-of-the-year reading assessment scores for the last 3 school years for all students at the state average or higher and for economically disadvantaged students at the state average or higher with the achievement gap between all students and economically disadvantaged students being less than the state average of 13 points.

I increased my understanding of effective leadership practices that current principals believe positively influence student achievement. Although the six leadership practice themes identified in this research study introduce no new concepts or strategies, this qualitative case study adds to the literature on effective instructional practices and provides insight into the beliefs of current principals themselves. I also examined the correlation of the identified practices to both instructional leadership practices and

transformational leadership practices, particularly the five practices of exemplary leaders as described by Kouzes and Posner (2017).

The six leadership practice themes that emerged are as follows:

- Theme 1 - Positive Relationships: Principals create and nurture a positive and supportive school climate and community by fostering positive relationships with all stakeholders and encouraging family engagement.

- Theme 2 - Lead by Example: Principals model the desired behaviors, attitudes, expectations, and culture envisioned for the school to all stakeholders.

- Theme 3 -Student Focused Mission: Principals establish, articulate, and cultivate a clear and focused vision for the school and student success.

- Theme 4 - Shared Leadership and Collaboration: Principals build leadership capacity, share decision making, and plan collaboratively with all stakeholders.

- Theme 5 -Challenging the Norm: Principals establish a safe risk-free school culture where staff feels supported and encouraged to implement innovative strategies to support students.

- Theme 6 – Instructional Leadership: Principals focus on instructional best practices and student achievement and progress by providing clear instructional focus, establishing a climate of high expectations for

all students, improving classroom practices through feedback and support, monitoring, analyzing, and discussing school and student data and progress, and providing ongoing, targeted, and intentional professional development.

Interpretation of the Findings

It was clear from the research that the leadership practices of school principals mattered to the success of a school and positively affected student achievement (Fullan, 2014; Fuller et al., 2017; Litz & Scott, 2017; Tan, 2018; Woods & Martin, 2016). My findings identified leadership practices that principals in schools which have reduced the achievement gap between all students and economically disadvantaged students believed positively influenced student achievement. It was evident that principals acted as both transformational and instructional leaders at their school. Through my findings, I also identified that although each of the participants saw themselves as instructional leaders that this was only one aspect leading to the reduction of achievement gaps at their schools. Instructional leaders provide clear instructional focus to teachers to help them meet the academic needs of their students (Lemoine & Greer, 2014). All principals should spend time in classrooms, analyze data, review current classroom practices and continue to work with teachers on improving their instructional practices (Smith, 2016).

Nevertheless, the principals I interviewed made it clear through their responses that although instructional leadership is critical, they did not believe it is enough to reduce the achievement gaps at schools. Menon (2016) noted that instructional practices alone are not able to meet the needs of all students but by integrating those practices with

transformational leadership, better school success can occur. My findings supported this research. Transformational leadership practices help transform the practices and motivations of the other members of an organization by inspiring them to make the changes needed to improve (Bass, 1998; Burns, 1978; Lee & Chiu, 2017).

It was apparent from the responses of each principal that they recognized the importance for developing positive relationships with all stakeholders and communicating and inspiring all stakeholders with their vision for their schools, believed in shared decision making and developing teacher leaders, and understood the value of risk taking and innovative approaches along with a strong instructional focus. Day et al. (2016) concluded that effective principals use a combination of instructional and transformative leadership practices to achieve higher academic achievement. The seminal work of Kouzes and Posner (2017) can be seen in the responses of the participants in this study.

Most educational researchers and practitioners will not be surprised by the identified themes of this research study. The six leadership practice themes that emerged from the data confirm many of the best practice approaches that have been identified in previous research and literature. The value of integrating both an instructional leadership approach and a transformational leadership approach was confirmed through this research study. Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) five practices of exemplary leaders were embedded into the responses of the interviews and emerged throughout most of the leadership practice themes that I identified. In this study the effective leaders I interviewed incorporated these five practices into their own leadership style.

Limitations of the Study

This research study was limited by interviews from principals from one school division. It was also limited by the use of only the last 3 years of data. The qualitative case study approach limits the responses to what each of the participants believe were their leadership practices that positively influenced student achievement but may not actually correctly reflect their true leadership practices.

This qualitative case study was conducted just with elementary school principals in one school division and may not be transferable to other levels or school divisions or states. The findings are specific to schools in this one school division that met the criteria established for this research study. Schools that do not meet the criteria may have different results.

Although individual interview questions did not solely focus on economically-disadvantaged students, the overarching theme focused on reading achievement of economically disadvantaged students. Participants kept this theme in mind when they responded to each question. Consequently, an additional limitation could be that the identified practices may only support the reading achievement of economically disadvantaged students.

Recommendations

The findings of this research study identified 6 leadership practices principals believe positively influence reading achievement of economically disadvantaged students. This research study contributes to the understanding of leadership practices affecting student achievement and school effectiveness. The results of this research study

inform principals of practices they can implement within their schools to produce increased student achievement results. The primary recommendation is to share the results with principals at lower achieving higher poverty schools to increase student achievement in reading. A secondary recommendation would be for school division personnel, state leaders, and principal preparation program personnel to use the findings from this study to inform their professional development offerings and the training of novice and experienced principals in establishing similar leadership practices in their own schools. It is further recommended principals implement these practices at their schools to reduce the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their peers.

Recommendations for Further Research

1. Assess teachers at the participants' schools with the Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) for alignment of teacher perspectives with the principals' beliefs as documented in their interviews.

2. Provide the principal participants with the LPI self-assessment for comparison of their results with the interview responses.

3. Interview principals at different levels other than elementary to see if similar themes emerge.

4. Interview principals at schools that did not meet the criteria to assess whether the practices identified in this study were absent.

5. Expand the participant sample by identifying principals who have achieved similar end of the year reading achievement results for a longer period than 3 years.

6. Focus the research question on the Math achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and other students.

7. Examine the leadership practices principals believe influence the reading achievement of students in other reporting categories such as special education or English Language Learners.

Implications

I believe this research study has implications for social change. Students identified as economically disadvantaged, as described in the ESSA (2015) due to their eligibility for the NSLP to receive free and reduced meals, continue to score lower on state and national assessments in reading than non-economically disadvantaged students (NAEP, 2017a; State Department of Education, 2018). The achievement gap for students who are identified as economically disadvantaged crosses all subgroup reporting categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, special education, and English Language Learners). Results from the NAEP described a continuous achievement gap over multiple years starting in 1970 between the students identified as economically disadvantaged and other students (The NAEP, 2017b). The 2017 NAEP reported only 22% of 4th grade economically disadvantaged students were at or above proficiency levels compared to 52% of all students (NAEP, 2017b).

Furthermore, this gap affects Black and Hispanic students disproportionately and at higher rates than white students (Wixom, 2015). The findings of this study may increase student achievement for students in all subgroup reporting categories. Additionally, students who are reading on grade level are more successful in school, engaged in the learning process, receive less behavior infractions, graduate high school, attend post-secondary institutions at higher rates, and are able to access more opportunities in life and society (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016; Peterson et al., 2013). Understanding the practices school leaders believe are most influential in improving the student achievement of economically disadvantaged students help other school leaders facing similar challenges.

Conclusion

The influence that principals have at their schools is complex, sets the tone for their school communities and has been the focus of educational research (Fullan, 2014; Stein, 2016). It is suggested by federal, state, and local expectations as well as by researchers that principals do have a positive impact on student achievement (Al-Mahdy et al., 2018; Leithwood et al., 2012; Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, & Brown, 2014). Although national and state standardized test results and other data identify achievement gaps affecting disadvantaged students (The NAEP, 2017a), some schools with effective principals are closing these achievement gaps (Day et al., 2016; Dhuey & Smith, 2014; McKinney et al., 2015; Ni et al., 2018). School leaders have long been identified as a critical contributing factor in turning schools around from being designated as *at risk* to

improving uneven student achievement (Brown & Green, 2014; Dutta & Sahney, 2016; Fullan, 2014; Litz & Scott, 2017; Tan, 2018).

The leadership practices of school leaders have been described as having the most effect on student achievement after an effective classroom teacher (Fullan, 2014; Louis et al., 2010; Wallace Foundation, 2012). Brown and Green (2014) recognized that through effective leadership practices low achieving schools can be transformed into high achieving schools. Effective principals had a significant impact on student achievement in reading and math as well as a substantial positive effect on reducing achievement gaps at schools (Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Day et al., 2016). One reason for this improvement in student achievement is the school leader and their leadership practices (Klar & Brewer, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2004). School leaders using transformational leadership practices, along with a solid focus on instruction, have had a significant and positive effect on school achievement (Allen et al., 2015; Chin, 2007; Woods & Martin, 2016). Kouzes's and Posner's (2017) research on transformational leadership practices is an effective framework to use to understand the leadership practices of exemplary school leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Litz & Scott, 2017; Palmer et al., 2014).

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Appendix A: Participant Input

<u>Demographic Information</u>

1. How long have you worked in the field of education?

2. How long have you been a school administrator?

3. How long have you been a principal?

4. How long have you been the principal at your current school?

5. What is your highest degree earned?

<u>Non-Demographic Interview queries and probes</u>

1. How do you set a positive example for teachers and staff at your school?

2. How do your leadership practices positively influence student achievement at your school?

    a. Describe your leadership practices.

3. How do you communicate your vision to all stakeholders and inspire them to believe in this vision?

    a. When?

4. How have you initiated innovative practices at your school?

    a. What were they?

5. How do you make leadership opportunities available for your teachers and staff?

   a. What type of leadership opportunities were made available?

   b. How do you recognize them for doing this? (Enable Others to Act).

6. How do you promote and encourage your teachers and staff to take risks and try something different to support students? (Challenge the Process)

7. What type of relationships have you developed with teachers, staff, families, and students at your school and how do you nurture, sustain, and grow these relationships?

8. How do you make sure all stakeholders trust you and believe what you say? (Credibility)

9. How would your teachers describe your leadership style?

10. How would students and parents describe your leadership style?

11. Reflect on a situation where you were at your Personal Best.

    a. Please share the details about this situation (e.g., Who was involved, where/when and why do you feel it was your Personal Best).

Appendix B: Audit Trail

This audit trail describes the steps taken by the researcher to strengthen the degree of trustworthiness of this research study.

Data Collection:

- Asked non-participating principals for their input and feedback on interview questions. (Confidentiality consent obtained).

- Used Temi APP to tape-record and transcribe interviews. Then I reread transcription and compared it to my notes.

- Conducted member check with each participant to make sure transcriptions were accurate. Allowed participants 5 days to respond and provide comments, changes, and suggestions.

- Triangulated data by interviewing 11 principals.

- A reflexivity journal was maintained before, during, and after the interview process and data analysis was used to ensure the appropriate data collection procedures were followed and bias was avoided while data was collected and analyzed *(e.g., June 18, 2019:I am trying to avoid looking at all responses solely through the lens of Kouzes's and Posner's research. It appears there is a great deal of alignment between their research of exemplary leaders and the responses from each principal. However, by keeping an open mind, I have also identified practices that would be more aligned with the instructional leadership style than transformational leadership*).

Data Management

- Utilized an alphanumeric system to identify each participant.

- Used Kouzes's and Posner's (1997) five practices at start of coding.

- Used categorical aggression to code interviews.

- Wrote analytical memos during coding process to document my thinking and decision making. (*Example: June 25, 2019: Visibility continues to be mentioned by principals as a common strategy by all participants as demonstrated by greeting students at arrival, being out for dismissal, and being present in classrooms. Initially this seemed to be a strategy on its own but also possibly as a component of the themes of modeling and positive classroom. July 3, 2019: reviewing the intent of the participants and the emphasis on visibility as a theme, I have moved it into a separate category).*

- Data kept without any identifying names or information to preserve the confidentiality of each participant.

Data Analysis

- Reviewed transcriptions to begin coding process by carefully going through each interview by hand and making first coding notes. Used Dedoose 8.2 software to go through coding for a second time.

- Identified data that answered the research question guiding this study.

- Categorized data into themes.

- Had a non-participating principal serve as a peer reviewer to provide input and feedback on the identified themes, findings, results, and conclusion (Confidentially agreement obtained).

- Conducted a member check by asking participants to provide input, comment, and feedback on the themes that I identified from their interviews.