

Balancing the Role of the Principalship: Creating and Sustaining Equity and Excellence

Jennifer K. Clayton

The George Washington University

Arronza LaBatt

Montgomery County, MD Schools

This study examined the interrelationships between principal beliefs and expectations on the principal's capacity to create the conditions for equity and excellence that result in increased student achievement. The study population consisted of three elementary school principals with demonstrated success in increasing student achievement for all students in the selected schools. Data included semi-structured interviews, participant shadowing, and artifacts observed or collected during the study period. Using the portraiture methodology, collected data informed the development of portraits of the participants to answer the research question "How do personal beliefs, organizational structures, and decision-making processes influence principal practice in leading for equity?" The study found that these three principals demonstrated democratic ethical leadership practices influenced by their personal and professional experiences. The research concluded with the construction of parallels between principal beliefs and the organizational structures and processes they employ to support equity and excellence for all students.

Every school has a story orchestrated through the decision-making processes, behaviors, and actions of its leader. The story of each school is unique and visualized through the images of its cast of characters, setting, and the forces at play that create the storyline. Creating the climate, structures, and practices for academic success of all students in an increasingly diverse student population is a challenge faced by school principals (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Howard, 2010; USDOE, 2010). To address increasing disparities in student achievement, educational policymakers have contributed to a climate where school leaders are faced with the critical task of achieving equity-based educational excellence and balancing instruction that prepares all students for state criterion and achievement tests (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Shapiro, 2009; Valencia, 2010).

By focusing so heavily on standardized testing as a metric for accountability, and by attaching high-stakes consequences to the results of these tests, educational policy has created a narrow definition of educational success focused on summative achievement data, without consideration for other educational academic, social, and emotional goals (Bogotch, 2002; Leithwood, 2001; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Shapiro, 2009). The unintended consequence of the increased accountability and narrowed curricula has been decreased student engagement and alienation for all students and racial disparities in academic achievement and discipline (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Leithwood, 2001; NCES, 2001). To meet these accountability demands, principals must engage in leadership practices that develop culturally responsive school environments that have a high commitment to improving achievement for all students. Thus, an effective study of leadership for equitable and excellent schools must include an analysis of the characteristics and intentional practices and processes deployed by principals that explicitly create an equitable and excellence school context, while balancing the factors that influence or affect the context of the school (i.e. political and social construction of schools; accountability policies, structures, and processes).

We used portraiture methodology to examine the connections between principals' beliefs and expectations and their social justice leadership practices that align with equitable and excellent schools. The study focused on addressing the following research questions:

1. What are principals' beliefs and decision-making processes, and the school structures that support equity and excellence for all students?
2. How do elementary principals balance the role and responsibilities of school leadership and negotiate the school context (i.e. political and social construction of schools, accountability measures) to support equity and excellence for all students?

Theoretical Framework

We utilized critical inquiry theory as the epistemological philosophy along with a constructivist and interpretive research design for data collection and analysis. Critical theory provides a framework for analyzing many sides of issues related to inequities associated with class, race, and gender (Habermas 1973;1987). Habermas (1987) provided a basis for examining the relationship between technical and practical knowledge. His work influenced that of Freire (1970), Giroux (1981), and McLaren (1985) which examined elements that contribute to the social construction of schools that maintain the marginalization of students, as well as serve as barriers to creating and sustaining equitable and excellent schools. Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) theory of social reproduction focused on the replication of societal disadvantages and inequalities in school structures that perpetuate barriers that create inequitable experiences for students. Therefore, according to the theory of social reproduction, schools can create a culture for success or failure of students. As this study focused on the decision-making processes of leaders successful in

creating equitable and excellent schools, the analysis of the context of the school contributed to telling the story of the success.

The conceptual framework included factors that contribute to how principals define their roles and engage in leadership practices that result in educational equity and excellence for all students. Leadership practice is a dynamic and responsive relationship. The first factor, supported in research on social justice leaders and equitable and excellent schools, is personal beliefs (Delpit, 1995; hooks, 1994; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Shapiro, 2009; Theoharis, 2004, 2010). The second factor, based on federal and state educational policy and national reports on student achievement related to race and ethnicity, is accountability measures (Bogotch, 2002; Schott Foundation, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2010, 2014). The third and fourth factors, democratic leadership, and ethical-decision making are interrelated and form the basis for the structures and processes that contribute to the organizational culture for equity-based educational excellence and high academic achievement for all students (Apple & Beane, 2007; Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970; Purpel & Shapiro, 1995; Shapiro & Gross, 2013). While democratic theory addresses participation, critical theory sets expectations for true and honest communication responsive to public needs and established a framework for analyzing the dynamic interplay between leadership practice and the organizational structure in an equitable and excellent school.

The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 describes the research foundation that guided this study. The primary goal of this study was to elevate the intersectionality of principal beliefs and values with intentional structures and processes of principal practice that contribute to an organizational context of educational equity for all students. By examining principal practice, interviewing principals about their beliefs about instruction related to their leadership practices for social justice and educational equity and excellence, and analyzing the findings, school leaders will develop knowledge and skills to identify strategic planning, and implementation processes to support social justice, equity, and excellence for all students.

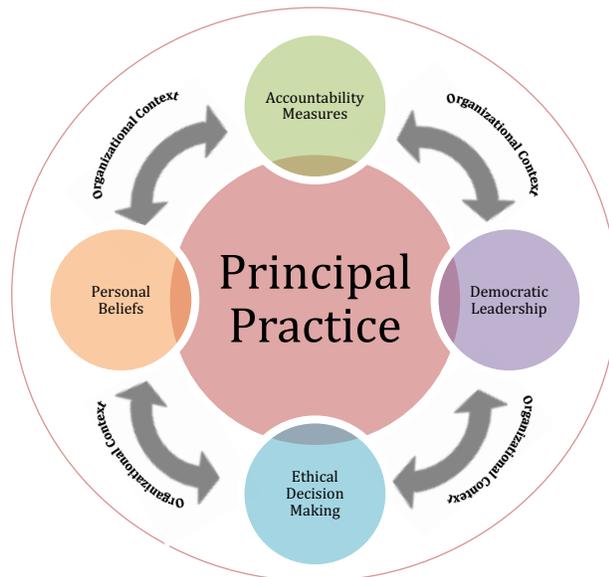


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Leaders for Equitable and Excellent Schools

Background

Historically, the primary focus of schools was to establish social order and mainstream vast numbers of immigrant children into a common school setting to produce economically competent, democratic, and moral citizens (Dewey, 1916). These ideas reinforced the role of education as a study in control and power, constructed on relationships that emphasize structures that weed out undesirables (Dewey, 1916; Johnson, 1972; Spring, 1989). However, the landscape of schools has changed since 1945 when the central goal of American schooling emphasized was to ensure economic power (Spring, 1989). Along with the diverse shifts in political, societal, and economic values that accompany increased cultural diversity, significant changes in educational legislation have increased accountability on state and local levels to close the achievement gap, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. To balance the challenging crisis of meeting high academic accountability standards for all students, principals must be able to lead for equity and excellence.

In the 21st century, educational theorists and practitioners have embarked on a re-conception of schools through the lens of social justice (Apple & Beane, 2007; Darling-Hammond, French, & Garcia-Lopez, 2002; Giroux & McLaren, 1992; Marshall & Oliva, 2009; Theoharis, 2008). The working definition of social justice considered in this study is the promotion of behaviors and distribution of resources that eliminates inequalities and advances the rights and education for all children (Griffiths, 1998; Theoharis, 2008). A concern among advocates for social justice is that principals are not adequately prepared to promote equity and excellence for all students in the face of increasing accountability pressures (Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009). As the instructional leader, the principal must advocate on behalf of all students and create a school climate and culture that ensures all students achieve at the highest levels, without oppressing or neglecting others (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fullan, 2005; Normore, 2004; Purpel & Shapiro, 1995; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). The importance of principals in this role beyond the impact of policy or centralized practices is critical and highly personal (Arar, 2015; Arar, Beycioglu, & Oplatka, 2017). These studies also showed the social justice efforts of centralized education offices as primarily in word, not action.

Educational equity and excellence and the concept of social justice sometimes intertwine as they refer to an ideal state in which academic performance is not predictable by race or ethnicity (Singleton & Linton, 2006; Valencia, 2010). However, the reality is that the lived experiences of students often differ from these ideals of educational equity and excellence. To meet diverse student needs, educators need to rethink leadership practices and commit to ethically transformative leadership and strategies for social justice to create equitable outcomes for all students (Brown, 2004; Marshall & Oliva, 2009, Marzano, 2003; Orr, 2006; Theoharis & Brooks, 2012). Studies indicated the variance in the knowledge, skills, and beliefs of teachers and administrators for equitable instruction and providing rigorous instruction and curriculum for all students impedes principals' ability to foster conditions for social justice (Blair, 2002; Childress, 2009; Collins, 2001; Delpit, 1995; hooks, 1994; Lopez, Magdaleno & Reis, 2006; Norte, 1999; Sather, 1999; Theoharis, 2004, 2010; Walker & Dimmock, 2005). The enactment of federal legislation has increased accountability measures for principals to address the disproportionality in achievement, regardless of a student's race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (De Abreu & Elbers, 2005; Gardiner and Enomoto, 2006; Lee & Wong, 2004; Taylor & Singh, 2005; Walker, 2003).

A social justice perspective allows the leader to discern and negotiate inequitable power structures that exist in the organization, understand the leader's position and role in disrupting the unequal power, and act upon that understanding to foster culturally relevant pedagogy, anti-racist pedagogy, and intercultural teaching among others (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Teel & Obidah, 2008). Principals who lead for social justice must have the knowledge and skills to engage in strategic management and instructional leadership by assessing the needs of their school and deploying resources in such a way to attain racial and socioeconomic equity (Johnson, 2007; Norte, 1999; Orr, 2006; Theoharis, 2004, 2010).

Effective schools have: strong leadership, a positive learning environment, high expectations for achievement, order, structured teaching, and positive relationships with students and with parents and communities (Blair, 2002; Childress, 2009; Linton, 2011; Lopez et al., 2006; Norte, 1999; Sather, 1999; Theoharis, 2010; Theoharis & Brooks, 2012; Wang, 2016). These effective schools espouse the attitude that learning is for all and that the school's organizational structure and form contribute to student achievement (Lezotte, 2009). In the increasingly diverse populations of today's schools, a uniform, "one-size-fits-all" approach does not meet the needs of all learners.

The expectation for schools has shifted from providing a basic education to students to designing learning environments that accommodate diverse student needs, mediate and manage conflict, and result in high academic achievement for all students (De Abreu & Elbers, 2005; Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Riehl, 2000; Walker & Dimmock, 2005). Principals must recognize and value cultural differences to ensure effective teaching and learning (Blair, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Howard, 2010; Norte, 1999). They must also foster a culture where all students, staff, and community members have the same expectation that all students can learn and succeed, regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or existence of a disability (Blair, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Howard, 2010; Sather, 1999; Shields, 2004; Theoharis, 2010). Thus, as principals foster new meanings of diversity and engage in democratic discourse within the school community, the path to a more inclusive school environment is paved.

The principal is essential to creating and sustaining inclusive environments and may be the most critical factor in addressing the challenges of a diverse population of students. Principals must become equipped with the discursive knowledge of institutional barriers presented by traditional school cultures. Principals who embody the characteristics of high expectations for all students, the vision, and courage to engage in change, and a commitment to developing and sustaining culturally responsive learning environments create the conditions for all students to attain academic achievement.

Methodology

To investigate how principals negotiate the complex organizational context of schools, a specific type of narrative methodology, portraiture, was used (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This research methodology focuses on gathering collections of stories, and reporting individual experiences. Portraiture produces a written description of an individual dealing with challenges to capture the essence of the experience by "portraying the individual in the job they do, the challenges they face, and how they are tackling them" (Bottrey, Ping, Wright, & Ngai, 2009, p. 84).

This narrative approach allows for the contextualization of the school and allows the interviewee reflect on how they negotiate the organizational culture of schools. The use of artifacts

and observations provided data that was analyzed using a coding process to identify patterns of behavior that facilitate an understanding of how each principal enacted their role within the school context to cultivate an equitable and excellent school environment for all students.

Schools identified in this study were from a large, urban, Mid-Atlantic public school district and have reduced disproportionality in student achievement and shared commonalities across demographics to provide a context for analyzing principal practice that contributed to equitable outcomes. Each of the three principals were purposefully selected because of: (a) longevity in their current schools, (b) the demographic similarity of the school's student population to that of the district, (c) four year trend data that reflected a reduced disproportionality in student performance data in math and literacy in each school, and (4) willingness to interviewed and shadowed at least twice during the school year.

Data Sources

Consistent with the portraiture methodology, data from interviews, field notes from the shadowing experiences, and other artifacts were used to establish the context, voice, relationships with the participants, and patterns and themes to shape the story to be told about each of the principals involved in the study. The conceptual framework used in this study helped to frame the interview questions. The three semi-structured interviews with each participant consisted of questions designed to understand the principal's views and beliefs about school leadership and in a broader sense, views of the interrelationship between the principal's behaviors and leadership for equity and excellence; how each principal defined and acted upon roles and responsibilities as a school leader; and how each leader prioritized school issues, concerns, or needs to create equitable outcomes for all students. Principals also discussed the extent to which accountability measures and organizational structures influenced practices, behaviors, and the level of involvement in decision-making.

We also observed the principals engaged in their daily interactions and school leadership practices. Transcripts and observations from participant shadowing, which occurred weekly over four months, along with document and artifact analysis, including school climate surveys and administrative memos, contributed to the descriptions and the interdependency of their actions and decision-making on the school structure and processes that led to student outcomes. The design focused on gaining insight on how these principals influence school culture, structures, and processes, and balance managerial and instructional leadership roles, to attain high levels of academic achievement.

Data were analyzed across data sources both across and within cases. First, we reviewed the entire body of field notes, interviews, and documents, chronologically to understand the perspective of the participant. Soon after reviewing notes, we conducted member checks to summarize and clarify events and actions, prior to beginning the coding process (Creswell, 2012). Next, we highlighted any key words, phrases, behaviors, or topics that presented themselves. As themes emerged from the data, they were coded by the action and context demonstrated. This process was iterative throughout the study to identify emerging themes and patterns.

During the follow-up interviews with principals, the dialogue between the researchers and principals was used to reflect on participant actions and the rationale for those actions. In creating the portrait, data analysis followed an iterative process that assisted the researcher in providing a detailed description of the physical and historical context, the voices, and relationships observed during the study and contribute to identification of emerging themes in

the data. The patterns and themes that emerge in each individual portrait were used to generalize and craft a composite portrait that recognized and incorporated the individual and collective narratives. Participant summary information is included in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant Summary Information

Name:	Hope	Cadence	Ivy
School data	Enrollment: 306 Pre-K – grade 5 Autism Prekindergarten Language Class Resource	Enrollment: 466 Pre-K – grade 5 Autism Preschool Education Program Resource	Enrollment: 313 Pre-K – grade 5 Preschool Education Program Comprehensive Resource School/Community- Based
Administrative Team	Single Administrator	Principal Assistant Principal	Single Administrator
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Race	White	African American	African American
Years of Exp. as a principal	20	13	17
Years in Current School	6	10	13

Findings

Each portrait is a snapshot of the beliefs, expectations, and practices of the participants as school leaders. Although none of the participants identified themselves as social justice leaders or leaders of equity, their stories created a picture of who they are as leaders, their triumphs and struggles, and how these perceptions informed their school context, including practices, structures, and decision-making processes to contribute to equity and excellence for all students.

The actions and strategies observed or noted in interview transcripts, shadowing experiences, and document and artifact analysis revealed these principals enacted principles of social justice leadership and democratic-ethical leadership, coupled with high expectations of students. Each participant’s portrait began with a brief introduction establishing the setting and context. Organization of each narrative centered on the four topics elevated in the interview questions: beliefs and views on leadership, leadership and student achievement, influence of leadership on school context, and leadership and decision-making and concluded with emerging themes based on the interviews and shadowing experiences. At the conclusion of the study, each principal read and reflected on their completed portrait. The reflective conversations provided more context behind principal actions and additional insight into their beliefs and values and were included in an epilogue.

Findings-Individual Portraits

Hope. Hope's beliefs and decision-making processes and school structures that support equity and excellence included a focus on the social and emotional needs of students and modeling expectations. Hope set clear and high expectations in a warm and embracing manner. She modeled the positive behavior she wished to see and emphasized the use of data to inform practices and processes. During the participant shadowing experience, Hope reviewed and analyzed data, clarified expectations for staff professional learning, and modeled expectations consistent with those shared during the interview. During grade level team meetings, where staff reviewed reading, math, and behavior goals for their students, Hope tapped into the leadership of the team leader and allowed the team to collaborate and brainstorm practices to support struggling students.

Hope articulated her beliefs and views on leadership as follows: "Leaders model the behavior they wish to see...they have to be visible." Hope recollected a parent conference in which the school nurse stated the student, with significant disabilities, could not attend the school because she was not changing diapers. Prior to moving quickly forward with the meeting, Hope replied, "Oh, that's the only reason? Then I can do that." Hope recalled that about two weeks later, another staff member shared with her that others in the building were still talking about how her actions changed the tone of the meeting. Other views about leadership surfaced during subsequent interviews and observations, which included consistency of expectations. Hope reflected that staff notes the things the leader attends to and assigns importance to those actions and expectations. A repeated phrase Hope used was, "it's the little things" that make a difference. She also stressed the importance of hiring the right people.

One of the things about leadership, I really believe this, is taking the time to hire the right people. You can change people's behaviors. I do not know that you can change their values and their beliefs. Therefore, if you already have people that are sharing your beliefs of the bigger picture, what we want for kids, that just takes all the drama out of it.

Cadence. Cadence implemented school structures based on her beliefs that leadership practice is an art, informed by professional learning and the leader's capacity to model and communicate expectations. She emulated flexibility and adaptive approaches to creating inclusive environments emphasized in the literature related to attaining equity. Cadence is also data driven, and models and implements practices and structures for accountability towards excellence. During my visits with Cadence, she attended special education IEP meetings, visited classrooms, conducted formal and informal observations, provided feedback to staff, and met with small teams and individual teachers.

Cadence emphasized that in addition to a committed belief to do what is needed for students to achieve, it is important for staff to have sound knowledge and practice to support students. Her expectation was that staff examines student data and monitor progress across the continuum of student needs, including struggling and advanced students, and beyond testing to see the individual students and their social and emotional needs. Cadence espoused that it is important to align her school's structures and processes to those of the district.

My role is looking at those strategic frameworks from the system...we have to make sure that whatever our vision is, it is directly aligned with what the system vision is because you know...everything overlaps and plays into each other very nicely...as principals we are closest to the work.

Ivy. Ivy's routines included instructional observations, leading professional learning, and building positive relationships with parents, staff, and students. In exchanges with students, staff, and parents, Ivy focused on instruction and developing positive relationships for increased student engagement and achievement. As she visited classrooms, her focus was on teacher and student interactions. She frequently checked in with students to ask what they were doing and how it connected to the learning outcomes posted in the classroom. Through the hallways, in classrooms, at lunch and recess, it was notable that Ivy was highly visible and connected with adults and students in her school and community. These practices aligned to her expressed beliefs that leadership sets the stage for the learning environment and her role in ensuring the necessary structures are in place to optimize student achievement. It was evident that she paid attention to the details and was monitoring implementation and impact on student learning and achievement as she went through her day. These behaviors parallel those cited for leaders for equity that expand leadership practice beyond the academics to develop social and cultural competency.

According to Ivy, her upbringing and the positive and negative interactions she experienced from her own teachers served as a "springboard for wanting the best for every child and parent." As a school leader, she strives to serve as a role model for instruction, a coach, and a problem-solver. "Leadership matters and everything that happens in a school building" is tied to the leader. She shared that instruction, relationships in the building, and the work staff collectively engage in are instrumental to creating a comfortable, engaging environment for learning. These beliefs were also reflected in the school's school improvement plan that listed that leadership would use a variety of measures to monitor progress toward goals, collaborate to problem solve, strengthen relationships and provide a productive learning environment, and utilize a variety of media to communicate the school's mission, expectations and instructional practices to parents, students, and various stakeholder groups. When these factors do not come together, Ivy suggested that such dissonance is a challenge leaders must address.

The work that we do, all those things that must come together in order to have a building where people are comfortable coming to work, where the learning is focused and engaging, and realizing that it's not always so, and when it's not, what we have to do in order to get it there. That is definitely a challenge of leadership. But also, I see that school leadership is training other people to be leaders.

Findings: Cross-Portrait Analysis

While we placed importance on developing individual portraits, we also examined through a cross-portrait analysis, whether themes existed across our three principals. Interviews and principal shadowing elevated key elements of principal practice that contributed to equity and excellence for all students. The patterns and themes that emerged through the portraits elevated the interrelationship between principal's beliefs and behaviors and provided insight into how principals transition beliefs and expectations from theory into practice. Specifically, four themes emerged: personal and professional beliefs of the principal; shared leadership and common expectations; balancing achievement and accountability through critical examination of data and instruction; and an emphasis on developing people through careful hiring and ongoing professional learning.

Personal and professional beliefs of the principal. When asked what shaped their views about leadership, the principal responses provided insight on their leadership practices. The first key finding was that personal and professional experiences influenced the principals' beliefs and

expectations as educational leaders. Each principal cited examples of experiences from their youth or early professional career that influenced them. Among the experiences mentioned were family values, engagement in volunteerism and civic oriented organizations, and continued professional development.

One principal revealed her parents and the relationships she experienced growing up exerted a strong influence on her practice. The other two indicated professional and personal experiences and educational research were dominant factors in their leadership practice. These principals valued relationships and felt responsibility to develop a school culture that held high expectations for adults and students. The portraits revealed the principals led through the lens of their beliefs to establish school contexts, structures, and processes that supported equity and excellence.

Shared leadership and common expectations. The second theme was that the participants employed institutional practices that valued diverse perspectives in school-wide decision-making and the critical nature of developing common values and expectations modeled by the leader. The lived experiences of each principal provided examples of processes and structures that served to engage staff, students, families, and communities in defining the organizational context of the school.

Leadership practice is dynamic and responsive to an ever-changing landscape. Sergiovanni (1990) described moral leadership as the basis for transforming schools into communities through intertwining the heart, values, and beliefs; the head, mindset of how the world works; and the hand, shows one's decision, actions, and behaviors. These principals created conditions that enabled the active engagement of adults and students in decision-making processes aligned to school priorities. All of the principals described structures that fostered collaboration and input from parents and community members in academic and social events and practices that contribute to the culture and climate of the school. In addition, professional learning and collegiality were encouraged through collaborative team meetings, conferencing around professional development plans and expectations for staff and students to establish goals and monitor learning and growth.

It was also clear that the participants shared common core values about their role as principals and these were transparent to their school communities. Participant perceptions of their role as principals included modeling expectations, personal and professional authenticity, respectful interactions, collaborative practices, and equity. These principals were committed to signaling clear and consistent messages about priorities to ensure coherence and alignment of structures, practices, and processes.

Throughout the portraits, all three indicated that visibility and modeling expectations helped to set the context for their beliefs. According to one principal, staff knew areas of priority by the items she personally addressed. Two others mentioned they communicated areas of priority during team meetings, staff meetings, and memorandum. All three maintained it was important to model the expectations they have for students and staff through their actions. Further, when staff and students know your intentions and that you support them, they will follow your lead and trust you as a leader through the most challenging tasks.

Balancing achievement and accountability through critical examination of data. Accountability to standards of professionalism and achievement were evident in all three portraits. Through data monitoring, professional development plans, and student goal setting, these principals were clear about high expectations. When faced with academic, instructional, or behavioral issues, these principals aligned their responses with established expectations to provide consistent and clear messages to adults and students. According to the examples provided in the

interviews and observed when shadowing, these principals provided specific feedback and used data to drive conversations about adult practice to support equity and excellence for all students. The principals at each school had established protocols for staff to discuss data, set goals, and engage in reflective practice. The intentional structures that contributed to the organizational context established by each principal exemplified the importance principals placed on knowledge and competency of staff, utilization of data to inform instruction, collaboration, constructive feedback, and ongoing professional learning.

Among the school structures shared by the principals were the use of classroom, school, and district data. Each school utilized specific documents and templates for collecting and analyzing student data as well as instructional practice. The leaders engaged in data analysis with staff, often sharing the facilitation of data conversations with teacher leaders. They used processes to engage diverse perspectives and to validate the expertise of students, staff, and community members. Moreover, these principals mentioned that there was a shared expectation for all stakeholders to support the development of a positive learning environment for all students. All the principals utilized structures for data monitoring and accountability, as well as clear expectations for professional growth, and relationship building between and among students and adults. Throughout the portraits, it became clear that these principals focused on creating school contexts that would result in higher achievement and value the diverse needs of their students, staff, and community.

Emphasis on developing people through careful hiring and ongoing professional learning. The most common phrase used by all three participants to describe the principal practice that most influenced the organizational context to achieve equity and excellence for all students was “hiring the right staff.” The principals stated that key to their success was having staff with high expectations and beliefs that all students can achieve at high levels. In addition, each principal expressed beliefs or demonstrated actions that promoted professional learning and collegiality as integral to developing staff capacity. Where one principal stated that she could not believe she could change the beliefs of others, she firmly believed there was power and possibility in changing actions and behaviors to support equity and excellence.

The portraits of these principals revealed that their focus on hiring the right staff went beyond the professional pedagogy of teaching to expand to the importance of having staff that connected with students and had the mindset and belief that all students could achieve. One principal indicated specific practices (i.e. staff and parent survey data, interview questions to surface beliefs and values, observation of instruction, student performance data) aimed to identify potential staff that held these high expectations for students.

The principals shared and demonstrated through actions that it was important to keep a “pulse” on the school climate and staff readiness to engage in new work. For all three principals, it was important that as building leaders, they assess and align new mandates to existing structures. In addition, these principals considered it their responsibility to provide opportunities for professional learning and capacity building during the initial phase of implementation of any initiatives. When faced with new initiatives or mandates, all three shared they weigh the needs of their students and staff against the possibly disruptive mandates to determine optimal entry points. To do so entailed that these principals are highly visible in their schools, engage in daily classroom visits with structured foci, and debrief and consult with others their observations.

Implications and Recommendations

The individual portraits and cross-portrait analysis provided a narrative of how three principals created high expectations for students that improved academic achievement, while also maintaining a focus on social justice and equity. The literature around democratic ethical leadership emphasized the importance of leaders implementing and monitoring institutional practices that disrupt the status quo (Briscoe, 1991; DeAbreu & Elbers, 2005; Canfield-Davis et al, 2009). To do so, leaders must engage in ethical and moral decision-making and create opportunities for teachers and members of the community to build and sustain positive relationships based on shared knowledge and vision. Across the three portraits, these principals implemented school structures and practices aligned to their beliefs that also created a platform for encouraging others to engage in authentic change for equitable and excellent school cultures.

The results from this study support the findings from the current literature that place principal practice as the driving force in establishing the organizational context of schools. This study assumed that the participants led from a social justice perspective although they did not identify as such. The selection criteria used in the methodology allowed for the selection of principals and schools that had demonstrated the characteristics of social justice leadership and equitable and excellent schools described in the literature. None of the principals described their leadership style as democratic and ethical, yet through their beliefs and views about leadership expressed in the interview, principal shadowing, and artifacts, all three demonstrated aspects of democratic ethical leadership in establishing their organizational context. The data support that democratic and ethical leadership contribute to the principal's capacity to implement institutional practices that value diverse perspectives, facilitate climates of high expectations and beliefs for all students and adults, and develop the cultural proficiency of all adults in their organizational context.

The principals also shared a common belief that their role was to minimize distractions and create optimal conditions to meet the individual diverse needs of students. The study found all three principals to be strong, confident, and strategic. They each demonstrated the characteristics of personal and professional authenticity in their daily interactions. All three engaged in collaborative practices and served as advocates for underserved students in their schools.

The use of portraiture allowed for the exploration of the alignment between principal beliefs about leadership and the day-to-day interactions and practices they implemented to support students. Linton (2011) stressed that to achieve equity; there must be attention and a balance to the culture, practice, and leadership within the organizational context. The four main themes which emerged from the cross-portrait analysis as it relates to principal practice included: personal and professional beliefs of the principal; shared leadership and common expectations; balancing achievement and accountability through critical examination of data and instruction; and an emphasis on developing people through careful hiring and ongoing professional learning

The main contribution of this research is in understanding the intersectionality between the principal's beliefs and their actions that contribute to equity and excellence. In looking at the conceptual framework and the overarching questions for the study — what are principals' beliefs, decision-making processes, and the school structures that support equity and excellence for all students; and how do elementary principals balance the role and responsibilities of school leadership and negotiate the school context (i.e. political and social construction of schools, accountability measures) to support equity and excellence for all students— we were able to make connections between beliefs and specific practices that leaders noted that contributed to culture, practice, and leadership within their organizational context. Table 2 Cross Portrait Alignment of

Beliefs and Principal Practices for Equity and Excellence, reflects the interpretation of the portraits as they related to democratic ethical leadership.

Table 2

Cross Portrait Alignment of Beliefs and Principal Practices for Equity and Excellence

Personal beliefs	Structures/processes for equity	Structures/processes for excellence	Principles of Democratic Ethical Leadership
Influenced by parents/ family values	Communicate and model vision and values	Consistent messages to students, staff, and parents about what is important	Strong ethical stance that connects to their beliefs and drives their actions
Personal and professional authenticity			
Responsibility to develop school culture	Hire staff with high expectations Focus on academic, social, and cultural needs	Hire staff with pedagogical knowledge and skills Prioritize initiatives	
Professional learning transforms practice	Monitor transformation of adult practices Specific protocols for discussing academic, social, and cultural needs	Monitor student data Model expectations	Balance ethical responsibilities to members of the community with democratic responsibilities and standardized accountability
Shared ownership for the success of students	Set goals for social/behavioral expectations Collective data monitoring	Set goals for academic expectations Collective data monitoring	
Develop positive relationships	Know individual stories Engage Diverse Perspectives	Establish partnerships with parents and communities Communicate academic and behavioral expectations	Connect individuality of racial and cultural self to have a sensitivity to the personal narratives and experiences of others

Within the narratives were implications for staffing practices, leadership style, and structures and processes that contribute to the organizational context. All three principals stressed the importance of hiring practices and developing the capacity of staff to be culturally responsive. Hearing the principal’s perceptions of the importance of hiring practices and professional learning on student achievement may help other school leaders think strategically about current hiring practices and strategies in their schools for professional learning and collegiality. Additionally, all three principals considered themselves collaborative leaders and established school structures that were welcoming and inviting for students, staff, and community. Developing positive, trusting relationships was instrumental to these principals having the ability to balance current practices and expectations with increasingly more rigorous demands and new initiatives. The three principals utilized specific structures to engage others in decision-making processes, including on an individual and group basis.

The aforementioned implications for practice also illuminate clear additional research opportunities and questions. Two of the three participants in this study were single administrators having more influence on consistency of messages and expectations in the building than when there are multiple administrators. Expanding the study to gather information through a comparative study of single administrators versus administrative teams could contribute to a deeper understanding of the degree of influence of organizational context a principal has when there are other administrative leaders in the building. Based on the selection criteria for the study sites, all three principals involved in the study were female, two African American and one White. Another extension of this study would be a comparative study on the influence of gender or race in the ability of the leader to lead for equity and excellence. Finally, the criteria of the study limited selection to schools with similar student demographics to the school district. Conducting this study in schools with higher disproportional numbers of students by race or other special populations would contribute to the body of knowledge of systemic and strategic change.

Conclusion

Several themes emerged that aligned to the research on democratic-ethical leadership and personal beliefs as they relate to principal practice in equitable and excellent schools. Although none of the principals identified themselves as social justice leaders, or specifically labeled themselves as leaders for equity, the actions and strategies observed or noted in interview transcripts and other documents revealed these principals enacted principles of social justice leadership noted in the literature.

This study gives insight into how principals transition beliefs and expectations from theory into practice. The research indicates the following: (1) personal and professional experiences influenced the principal's beliefs and expectations as educational leaders; (2) participants shared common core values about their role as principals; (3) participants demonstrated democratic ethical leadership in their daily interactions; (4) participants found staffing to be a critical aspect of their job that influenced the organizational context and student outcomes; (5) participants shared common expectations for professional practices in their school context; and (6) participants employed institutional practices that valued diverse perspectives in school-wide decision making. This research examined and provided insight into the relationships between beliefs and practices of three elementary school principals in schools that have demonstrated elements of equitable and excellent schools.

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