WHAT LIES BENEATH: AN EXPLORATION OF THE INFLUENCE OF
SOCIAL IDENTITY ON SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

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Dedication

To my children, my unlikely partners and a source of inspiration in this endeavor.

And to Michael Tracy, whose friendship has grounded me through the years.
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The magnitude of my gratitude to those who have helped to shape my thinking about this research and who have supported me – both professionally and personally – in its completion is without bounds. There are a number of key people, however, who I would like to take a moment to acknowledge publicly.

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ABSTRACT

WHAT LIES BENEATH: AN EXPLORATION OF THE INFLUENCE OF
SOCIAL IDENTITY ON SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

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Recent literature highlights the importance of principals on school improvement efforts and suggests that the tasks and responsibilities of educational leaders are becoming increasingly complex. While a growing body of research exists examining the impact of identity, beliefs, and prior experiences of students and teachers on teaching and learning, much less is known about how the lived experiences and identities of school leaders might influence the ways in which they lead schools. This collective case study examines the relationship between social identity and leadership for three principals – one public, one charter, and one independent – all located on the East Coast of the United States. It explores how school leaders draw upon aspects of their identity to make meaning of their experiences and how such interpretations influenced their leadership development and current thinking and practice.

Key findings focus around three major themes. First, participants tended to identify at least one important social identity which impacted their decision to become leaders and thus their development as principals. Secondly, social identities of value shape the ethic by which they choose to lead, and lastly, considerations of congruence between the ecology of the school and the principal’s valued social identities influences
his or her perception of leadership challenges. These findings suggest that not only are issues of social identity important contributors to a sense of belonging, credibility, and authority within the context of schools, they can lead to an increased willingness by the principal to take risks, to be vulnerable with others, and can contribute to an increased need to “compensate” for aspects of who they are which they perceive as stigmatized in regards to their ability to lead. Questions emerge, however, regarding methodological challenges in studying such personal issues related to social identity and the limitations of a leader’s own awareness of the ways in which they influence their work in schools and communities. Implications of this research suggest the need for a more nuanced approach to how school leadership is understood and researched and thus how principals might be better prepared and supported.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

In low- and high-resourced schools alike, shifts over the last decade in federal educational policies (such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top) towards increased accountability as well as decreases in state and local budgets are placing increasing demands and responsibilities on school leaders across the country. Though it can be argued from a historical perspective whether these shifts are more challenging than in times past, growing anecdotal evidence suggests that educational leaders are increasingly needing to make complicated and difficult decisions with severely limited resources and time under the conditions of today’s changing ecology of schools (Mendels, 2012; Lytle, 2012; Ginsberg & Multon, 2011; Badams, 2012). For principals in particular, the shifts have greatly added to the list of tasks and actions for which they are responsible, forcing many to make tough decisions about important organizational, programmatic, and staffing priorities while being held under high levels of public scrutiny (Lortie, 2009). This dissertation argues that such difficult choices made by school leaders often result in smaller, daily challenges tied to everyday school operations and dealings with teachers, staff, and parents. The interplay of factors is thus contributing to the increasingly tricky nature of leading schools and is beginning to weigh heavily on the shoulders of many. Considering that the professional and personal toll can contribute to burnout and turnover, the potential negative impact on the quality of leadership has dire consequences, particularly for those in some of the country's most challenged
schools and communities. Deepening our understanding of how principals perceive their role and responsibilities and what they may draw upon to address and navigate challenges may provide potentially powerful insights into the increasingly complex nature of leading schools today.

Extant literature on leadership suggests a number of important actions necessary for a principal to be effective or to be able to set the conditions for improvement. However, there is very little that discusses how individuals both understand their charge as school leaders and how that understanding might impact the ways in which they go about implementing such change. For instance, Fullan (2003) asserts that:

leading schools… requires principals [who have] the courage and capacity to build new cultures based on trusting relationships and a culture of disciplined inquiry and action… School leaders with these characteristics are in short supply… Leading schools through complex reform agendas requires new leadership that goes far beyond improving test scores. Admittedly, developing trust and discipline in an organization that doesn’t have it is a huge challenge. But again, this is the point: There are cases where it has been done. We need to learn from these schools, focus on the right things, and create the conditions under which new leaders can develop and flourish. (p. 45)

To acknowledge school leaders as active interpreters of the world around them and thus their work more specifically is to more deeply interrogate what factors may be at play in those few instances of “success” – cases, as Fullan argues, “where it has been done” (p. 45). Therein lies the problem. Very little research on leadership broadly and school leadership specifically addresses these concerns. And although a few interpretivist approaches in social science research have both acknowledged and attempted to delve deeper into these issues, only emergent research on social identities and leadership does so with school leadership explicitly in mind.
Experience, Identity, and Leadership

Schools are organizations that are greatly impacted by the people within them. Classrooms, schools, and the communities in which school leaders, teachers, and students reside are ecologically nested contexts and feature a cast of characters who contribute important knowledge and understanding that establish the "reality" of these social worlds. Research suggests the context of schooling impacts the formative experiences of the individuals within them (Florio-Ruane, 2002; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997). Thus, how an individual’s experiences shape their understanding, assumptions, and expectations of how to operate in these contexts lies at the heart of his or her everyday thinking and action (i.e., one’s practice). A substantial and growing body of research exists which examines the impact of beliefs and prior experiences of students and teachers as related to issues of culture and identity on teaching and learning. However, much less is known about how the lived experiences and identities of school leaders might impact the ways in which they lead schools.

In this dissertation, I draw upon research on social identity and leadership as a way to potentially address such challenges. Social identity theory, which emerged from the field of social psychology, has received a great deal of attention in the study of leadership over the last twenty years and thus provides a foundation from which to study the work of school leaders. Social identity theory asserts that individuals carry or represent multiple identities based on their membership in a given social category “to which one feels one belongs… [providing] a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category – a self definition that is part of the self-concept”
(Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995, p. 259). Membership based on social roles (e.g., as a parent or as a teacher) as well as affiliations (e.g., as a member of a certain religion or geographic region) are also of significance (Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, & Ethier, 1995; McKee, Boyatzis, & Johnston, 2008). And though social identities are heterogeneous (meaning, not all members of the same group may make meaning of a shared social identity in the same way), social identities are powerful influences that “serve to structure (and restructure) people’s perception and behavior: their values, norms and goals; their orientations, relationships, and interactions; what they think, what they do, and what they achieve” (Haslam, 2014, p. 4; McKee et al., 2008; Crow & Scribner, 2014).

Despite an increase over the last twenty years in studies examining the relationship between social identity and leadership, the study of school leaders’ beliefs and practices, particularly through a social identity lens, has been far less researched. Interpretivist research traditions in education, however, make social identity an appropriate paradigmatic match to the issues and challenges involved in schools. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) argue that:

Questions emerge from day-to-day practice and from discrepancies between what is intended and what occurs. These are often highly reflexive, immediate, and referenced to particular… situations. But they also have to do with how [principals as] practitioners theorize their own work, the assumptions and decisions they make and the interpretations they construct. (p. 42)

Hence, the use of social identity theory in the study of school leaders aims to make “visible processes that are ordinarily hidden beneath the surface of habitual behavior” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 12). Nakkula and Ravitch (1998) further add that “the systematic deconstruction (critical taking apart) of our interpretations is an ethical responsibility
because it allows for an increased understanding of the values and biases that underlie and direct our efforts” (p. xi).

In my own personal and professional experiences, I have come to understand the ways in which my understanding of challenging situations has been influenced by my experiences and identity in both positive and negative ways. As a teacher, for example, in a predominantly low-income urban school district, my upper-middle class, suburban upbringing complicated the expectations of what I thought "quality" student work and "good" behavior should look like. In my role as a program manager for a state-wide juvenile justice education initiative, I struggled with leadership decisions made by those above me which I felt undermined programs in which I deeply believed, mostly because they undervalued teachers or neglected the needs of the large numbers of youth of color in institutional care – many of whom reminded me of friends I grew up with and students for whom I had cared a great deal. My work became increasingly personal and difficult to manage, and when I left both experiences, I still recall feeling depleted and conflicted about leaving work I cared deeply about behind. It has been through my study of qualitative modes of inquiry – particularly, practitioner research – in combination with my study of leadership over the last few years that has pushed me to reflect on issues of subjectivity and positionality in practice and research. In particular, this self-reflective and self-critical period has elucidated the ways in which my own ability to lead was directly impacted by the ways that my perceptions of who I am in this work shaped the way I understood and navigated challenges in the workplace. It has shown me how my perspectives of past challenges can be simultaneously valid and problematic in regards to
how they helped or hindered me from moving through challenge towards more productive or generative ends.

The significance of the personal nature of leading and the ways in which it may be mediated or complicated by social identity and prior experience are important for the field to better understand. Over the last four years, I have had multiple opportunities to observe and learn from school leaders in the Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership. I have been privy to a wide range of conversations about the challenges of leading in schools today, and my observations both reflect the tricky interplay of identity and leadership evident in my own experiences and affirm growing anecdotal evidence indicating that the professional and personal toll of dealing with challenges under current educational reforms is negatively impacting overall job satisfaction and emotional health. Some common themes related to challenges in leading schools that have emerged include: struggling with the highly political nature of the work, dealing with a sense of isolation as leader, and managing high levels of emotional drain. Indeed, it is of little surprise that a number of the educational leaders involved in these conversations have since left their positions.

Emerging research highlights the importance of school principals to school improvement efforts, and given that there is only one of these positions in each school, the study of principals holds the promise of providing researchers deeper insight into the challenges of school leadership today. Lortie (2009) argues that:

Principals interact constantly with the key parties involved in schooling—teachers, students, parents, and central officials… what we learn from and about principals can deepen our understanding of how American schools and school districts function; that understanding, in turn, can provide a more reliable base for
Hence, given the importance of principals in school quality and improvement efforts (see Lortie, 2009; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008), insights regarding the role social identity may play in understanding and navigating challenge in educational leadership holds promise but is largely missing from the greater body of research. These gaps in the research illustrate that the field-at-large continues to struggle with understanding the indirect ways in which quality leadership impacts student achievement, particularly when it comes to dealing with difficult issues, many of which involve issues related to social identity, power, and control. Instead, many leaders on the front line are often doing the best with what they have, relying heavily on professional and personal experiences which may carry unrecognized assumptions and biases.

It is important to note that although some existent research frameworks – such as the study of emotional intelligence in leadership and the occupational study of educational leadership – address aspects of the complex and social nature of leading in schools, they do not explicitly provide us with a comprehensive understanding of the underlying issues and factors that may be complicating the work that school leaders do. My intention in doing this research is not to qualify one approach or one person’s understanding as "better" or "more valuable", but to look at the ways that meaningful aspects of a leader’s social identity (via personal and professional experiences) might support or complicate the work they do as principals.

Explanation of the Study

What we know about how school leaders understand and navigate their roles and
responsibilities, particularly in what is considered to be an increasingly complex system, is sparse. In this dissertation, I explore potential connections between principals’ social identities and the influence of this understanding on their work as school leaders. Tied to this line of study are research questions regarding how prior experiences and identity might provide us with insights into local leadership practices, especially critical at a time when current assumptions underlying educational policies and reforms seem to dictate that professional experience and training is not necessarily needed to improve schools (e.g., school turnarounds or charter management organizations that value a business, not education, orientation to schooling).

**Conceptual Framework**

How the interconnections between formative experiences, identity, and their impact on action or behavior presented here are understood in the existing literature is broad and varied. Most notably, Bordieu’s concept of *habitus* states that:

> the beliefs, values, conduct, speech, dress and manners… are inculcated by everyday experiences within the family, the peer group and the school. Implying habit, or unthinking-ness in actions, the habitus operates below the level of calculation and consciousness, underlying and conditioning and orienting practices by providing individuals with a sense of how to act and respond in the course of their daily lives… (Mills, 2008, p. 80)

Though researchers argue whether Bordieu’s explanation of habitus provides for simple forms of social reproduction or whether individuals are instead agentic, Mills (2008) notes that “within the Bourdieuan literature… habitus is both ‘generative (of perceptions and practice) and structuring (that is, defining limits upon what is conceivable as perception and practice)’ (Codd, 1990, p. 139 as cited in Mills, 2008, p. 81). Embedded within the concept of habitus is its own relationship with “specific social contexts or
‘fields’ within which individuals act on the other” (Thompson, 1991, pp. 13-14 as cited in Mills, 2008, p. 85). These contexts, it has been argued, include the historical, political and social worlds in which individuals live and interact every day.

**Overarching Assumptions**

It is thus through an interpretivist lens that I locate this research. Specifically, I draw primarily on the postmodernist assertion that “self” cannot be separated from understanding and action and that “knowledge claims must be set within the conditions of the world today and in the multiple perspectives of class, race, gender, and other group affiliations [i.e., social identities]” (Creswell, 2007, p. 25). This research study is further guided by two key, overarching assumptions: 1) that school leaders are interpreters of the applied work that they do and that their interpretations are influenced by an array of factors including those related to social identity; and 2) that context matters, particularly as it relates to identity development and management and its influence on perceptions and understanding of challenges in school leadership.

Drawing upon moderate hermeneutic theory (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998; Gallagher, 1992), which claims that the realities that matter to us are those we help create and interpret, I argue that school leaders are active creators and interpreters of their own practice of leadership. Their practice of leadership, therefore, is less something I choose to study objectively from the outside and more fundamentally a daily construction that they interpret and act upon which I will strive to understand subjectively from their point of view. Their work can therefore be understood as applied and developmental in nature. Nakkula and Ravitch (1998) assert that “every act of applied development work is an act
of interpretation… the self-interpretations of [people], including interpretations of their location within the social structure and the effects this has on their functioning in the world” (p. xx). It is important to note that this interpretation and application differs from traditional understandings of hermeneutic theory. However, the hermeneutic approach as put forward by these authors "places the interpreter… [i.e., principal] at the core of the interpretive process" (p. xxix), highlighting a constructivist understanding of leadership practice. Still, how exactly does who an individual is – or as Nakkula and Ravitch (1998) refer to it as what an individual brings to their work (as shaped by personal experience) – determine or shape the way they interact with others and with the work at hand? This underlines the importance of conceptualizing leadership as interpretive action but also raises questions regarding the specific ways that school leaders might understand and interpret key factors and people integral in influencing their leadership practice.

This dissertation focuses on “the specifics of meaning and action in social life [for school leaders] that takes place in concrete scenes of face-to-face interaction, and that takes place in the wider society surrounding the scene of action” (Erickson, 1986, p. 156). Understanding leadership as applied, interpretive work has implications for not only how principals make meaning of their personal and professional experiences, but it begs consideration of the role social identity might play in interpreting those experiences. In their study of leadership, McKee and her colleagues (2008) argue that “social roles and identities, whether chosen or imposed, greatly influence what we believe we can be or can accomplish in life” (p. 121). Further, “to fully understand ourselves [as leaders], we must examine how we fit into the social fabric of our organizations, communities, and
families” (p. 121). The social, cultural, historical, and political contexts of schools and school leadership are important to consider in research on educational leadership (see Crow & Scribner, 2014; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and are particularly important given the impact that current educational reform and economic conditions are having on schooling today, especially urban, public schools (Crow & Scribner, 2014).

Given that research on school leader thinking and beliefs is sparse, I draw here instead on existing research which examines the work of another key actor in the world of schools, teachers. Research on teacher thinking asserts that "teacher behavior is substantially influenced and even determined by teachers' thought processes" (Clark & Peterson, 1986, p. 255). Spillane (2000) argues that teachers’ enactment of educational reform efforts (or of their everyday classroom practice) "depends on who they are, their sense of self, and their habits of mind… their identity as teachers and as learners about their work… [their] way of understanding and being in the world… and orientations toward work and change" (p. 308). In one case study, for example, Spillane found that a teacher's identity as a learner in different subject matters in which she taught influenced the types of learning opportunities that she provided to the students in those classes. Her sense of confidence in math was linked to an unwillingness to take "risks" in teaching which resulted in less student-centered learning and fewer opportunities for critical thinking in the math classroom than in her English class, in which she had greater comfort and confidence in her knowledge of the subject matter. The author, however, focuses on a small part of the teacher's broader social identity, and in so doing, does not fully articulate ways that other aspects of social identity and experience might drive or
inform her teaching. For example, Spillane notes that "another interesting issue [the] case highlights is the role that teachers' moral purposes as educators can play in their efforts to reconstruct learning" (p. 328). This idea of moral purpose in education is tied to how teachers understand the goals of education. And though the author notes that investigation into the relationship between moral purpose and the reconstruction of learning is warranted, he misses the opportunity to more deeply explore how the teacher's personal experiences and background – socio-economic, racial, ethnic, religious, etc. – may influence or shape this understanding of moral purpose in the first place.

Research on teacher thinking and beliefs thus elucidates the interconnected nature of the "private" (i.e., unseen and often subconscious) and "public" (i.e., observable) world of the classroom (Spillane, 2000). If teacher identity influences enactment of classroom practice and educational reforms, how might school leaders be similarly impacted by aspects of identity? Are educational leaders aware of the ways in which their experiences and identity might impact their leadership practices (e.g., decision-making, prioritization of programs under pressure)?

An Applied Social Identity Approach (ASIA)

The concept of social identity, though conceptually similar to Spillane's definition above, includes more broadly personal characteristics beyond that of teacher and learner. In their studies of differences between social identities, Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, and Ethier (1995) found 64 different types of categories (e.g., based on race, profession, family relationships, etc.). These types of social identity were thus further clustered into five distinct groups – social identities based on "personal relationships, vocations/avocations,
political affiliations, ethnic/religious groups, and stigmatized groups" (p. 280). A significant finding of their research is that social identities are believed to be both multidimensional and heterogeneous. It is thus not expected necessarily that members of the same social groups would share identical perspectives and make meaning of these aspects of social identity in the same way. For "although identities may share some common properties", it is more likely that "individuals may vary in the value or the functional satisfaction that identities provide them" (p. 289).

For this reason, I draw a distinction between the use of social identity theory alone and instead employ an Applied Social Identity Approach (or ASIA) to represent issues of social identity in this dissertation (Haslam, 2014). ASIA includes both social identity theory as well as self-categorization theory. Haslam (2014) argues that these two theories contribute to researchers’ understanding of how social identities are defined, influence behavior and interaction with others, and are applicable “to a broad range of relevant phenomena” (p. 3). From the research on ASIA, a small number of important lessons have been learned that are particularly important to consider in this dissertation. First, “social identities matter”, for better or worse. Social identity, for example, has been found to both “[help] people to deal with challenging life transitions” as well as have a serious negative impact on an individual’s health (both physical and mental) “when people’s capacity for social identification is compromised (e.g., because a valued social identity is lost)” (p. 5). Secondly, research on self-categorization theory highlights the importance of individuals having the ability and freedom to choose the social identities of most value to them (i.e., to self-identify) as opposed to having a social identity externally
placed upon them. And lastly, the management of social identities, especially in leadership, is almost always political and involves issues of power (Haslam, 2014).

It is critical to note here that social identity is only one of many theories that have attempted to address questions of identity and leadership over the last forty years. Others include critical race theory, critical feminist theory, and intersectionality (the ways that specific identities, namely race, gender, and class, may interact or overlap in their impact on experience) (Cole, 2009; Weber, 2010). Despite a growing interest in research that utilizes these theoretical frameworks, available studies on issues of identity and leadership through these lenses are sparse compared to other perspectives on studying leadership (e.g., systems or personality traits approaches). And though a significant body of research has grown over the last twenty years focused on issues of social identity and leadership broadly (see Haslam, 2014), little addresses educational leadership specifically. What we have learned about identity and experience in school leadership has come primarily through the scholarly work of African American researchers (Crow & Scribner, 2014) as well as critical feminist researchers in education and related fields of study (see Okin, 1998; Christman, Hirshman, Holtz, Perry, Spelkoman, & Williams, 1995). In addition, qualitative research approaches in education such as practitioner inquiry and other forms of self-study have provided additional insights from the field on how school leaders perceive issues of identity and challenge (see, for example, Beckford-Bennett, 2009).

From these bodies of literature, implications for research and practice have emerged addressing the role that meaningful aspects of identity and experience may have
on both generating what we put out in the world (i.e., action) as well as how we might filter the feedback we receive about our surroundings and interactions with others (i.e., understanding and interpretation). However, studies of leaders using these lenses often do not address other identities that may carry significant meaning to individuals and thus impact their leadership practice. For example, in her qualitative study of African American women leaders in predominantly White organizations, Byrd (2009) finds that a common and shared experience includes “disempowering encounters with race, gender, and social class” (p. 600). Yet, it is of interest to note that one of the study’s participants, a senior level school district administrator, explicitly and frequently refers to God in her interviews as a source of resilience in facing such encounters. It is clear that some element of this participant’s faith (i.e., religious identity) plays a role in protecting her from or helping her to cope with the negative experiences with race, gender, and social class that she encounters as a district leader. Yet, although the author is explicit in her use of critical race theory and Black feminist theory, Byrd fails to address this interesting finding likely because it falls outside of her conceptual framing. Similarly, a limitation of practitioner inquiry and self-studies of/by leaders lies in the fact that the analysis is often limited by the particular frameworks through which the leader as researcher chooses as a lens as well as their willingness and openness as researcher to interrogate their own assumptions and biases. I refer here to an example of self-study, a dissertation by an alumnus of the Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership. In his analysis of leading his school district through a particularly difficult budget crisis, Jay Badams, Superintendent of Erie School District in Pennsylvania, frequently speaks to the
importance of relationships and recognizing the emotional nature of the process to those involved (himself included). Yet, in his analysis, the author does not address how his male gender may have influenced or complicated his ability to show emotion (a traditionally female attribute) or how his doing so may have impacted the ways in which his approach to solving the challenges at hand were received by others (Badams, 2012).

How might gender as a social identity be either foregrounded or backgrounded for him as a researcher? As a leader? Was its absence from his analysis evidence of how he perceives the world? And if so and more importantly, what might be gained or lost by his not addressing it as a critical factor in influencing his success in leading the district through this particularly challenging crisis?

Because of the limitations of existing research in comprehensively addressing issues of identity and experience in school leadership (which I have briefly explained here and will further discuss in the literature review section of this proposal), I forefront the use of an Applied Social Identity Approach in this dissertation for its broad inclusion of multiple identities and for the choice it provides to potential research participants to self-identify those identities which hold the greatest value and meaning to them. In addition, though I have discussed theoretical frameworks here which address issues of identity and experiences specifically, it is essential to also acknowledge other perspectives in the study of leadership that attempt to understand the complexity of the role and responsibilities of those who lead – specifically the occupational study of school leadership and research on emotional intelligence and leadership. Because neither framework explicitly addresses how issues of identity might help or hinder leaders in
their perception and navigation of challenge, I do not include them here. However, because context is critical to deepening our understanding of social identity and leadership, I further discuss both in my literature review in the next chapter. For a concept map of my conceptual framework, see Appendix A.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

The way in which educational leadership is studied and understood is incredibly varied, and existing theoretical frameworks often fall short in capturing the interplay of multiple factors – specifically those related to issues of identity – which may contribute to challenges experienced by school leaders, namely principals, in schools today. Despite a growing body of research that highlights the importance of school leadership to improved student and teacher outcomes, there is little consensus in research on educational leadership “on which educational goals leaders should strive for and use as criteria for judging their effectiveness” (Levin, 2006, p. 40). Building from the assertion that leaders as practitioners are interpreters of and active agents in navigating their roles, responsibilities, and challenges inherent in their work, this literature review is intended to provide background insights into what we know about the complex nature of principals’ work within today’s increasingly multi-faceted context, and to discuss the strengths and challenges in existent theoretical frameworks used in the study of educational leadership and which most closely align to issues related to social identities.

Current Challenges in School Leadership

Challenges originating under the current educational reform conditions are exacerbating a growing sense of lack of control by principals over important aspects of leading schools all while continuing to be held accountable for student outcomes. As many principals note, they are expected to do more with less, raising questions regarding how individual leaders go about prioritizing what gets funded and what gets cut, what is
valued and what is seen and understood to be currently at stake. Recent trends in research on the importance of school leaders has focused heavily on the impact that the quality of such leaders can have on student achievement specifically (Mendels, 2012; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). The potential impact, however, that principals are able to have on improving student outcomes is largely indirect and is often achieved through organizational management and working with teachers and staff to establish the conditions needed for success to occur (Lytle, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004). The multifaceted and intricate practice-based realities of educational leaders raises questions regarding the means by which this occurs (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008).

In a review of key studies on the quality of leadership and its impact on student achievement, Lytle (2012) identifies at least eleven tasks that research suggests a school leader must focus on and implement well in order to positively impact student outcomes. They include duties related to: the hiring and retention of teachers; the provision of professional development, guidance, and support around instruction and leadership; training others on the use of data; engagement of staff, families, and community members; the building of trusting relationships with key stakeholders both inside and outside of the school; establishment and maintenance of a positive and safe school climate; and the strategic structuring and allocation of school resources including personnel and funding aligned with the priorities identified by the school or district. These tasks not only highlight the complex and varied nature of the responsibilities of principals in today's schools, but the specialized knowledge and experience needed to execute the varied responsibilities of school leadership raises questions regarding the
legitimate ability of individual leaders to effectively tend to the wide variety of tasks and responsibilities required of them. Further, these responsibilities include actions which may conflict or hinder others. Consider, for instance, that dealing with the management of processes and structures within schools is often coupled with the taking on of a more active role in instructional leadership within classrooms or with individual teachers. And negotiating restrictive budgets and the loss of personnel and critical resources must often be dealt with while principals attempt to build and preserve relationships and trust with teachers, parents, and the community of people who rely on them.

Leithwood and his colleagues (2008) add that it is not simply the enactment of key leadership practices that matter, but how they are applied in "contextually sensitive" ways (p. 31; see also Crow & Paredes Scribner, 2014). For example, qualitatively different approaches to developing teachers and staff or managing instructional leadership responsibilities based on whether a school is in the beginning or the end of a major turnaround effort may be required to successfully lead a school given its current situation. How an educational leader understands and interprets the situation at hand may help to set the stage for how they motivate teachers and staff and instill feelings of being supported – in other words, how they set the agenda and thus indirectly impact student outcomes. Spillane (2002) argues that there is indeed an element of interpretation in the enactment of educational leadership tasks which draws upon personal and professional pre-conceptions of the work and greatly influences the ways in which understanding shapes implementation of policies. Thus, how principals go about making these types of difficult decisions (i.e., what they value or prioritize) as active interpreters of their work.
in an increasingly complex educational climate is an area lacking in current research.

Further complicating the work of principals is the fact that schools and communities are situated within a larger context which influences and impacts those within them. An example of this can be seen in both the subtle and overt ways that the economic downturn coupled with increased accountability measures have played out in schools. A recent survey published in 2011 found that educators who report lower satisfaction with their job also tend to report having seen increases in not only class size but “students and families needing health or social services… students coming to school hungry… and students being bullied/harassed" (*The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Teachers, Parents and the Economy*, 2011, p. 7). The hardships impacting students and families thus not only complicate the work of schools and teachers, but they create dynamic challenges for those that lead them (*The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership*, 2012). Challenges originating from "beyond school doors" (p. 3) under the current educational reform conditions are exacerbating a growing sense of lack of control by principals over important aspects of leading schools all while continuing to be held accountable for student outcomes. As many principals note, they are expected to do more with less, raising questions regarding how individual leaders understand and navigate the challenges at hand.

**The Personal and Professional Toll**

Anecdotal evidence and emerging research suggests that the challenging nature of leading under today’s educational reform policies and economic conditions is negatively impacting both the mental and physical health of school leaders (Ginsberg & Multon,
Emerging evidence also indicates that job satisfaction has greatly decreased and grave levels of stress reported by principals is on the rise (2011; Grissom & Andersen, 2012). The academic literature on the negative toll that leading in today's schools may have on school leaders specifically is sparse. However, *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership* (2012) found that approximately 69% of principals surveyed "say [their] job responsibilities are not very similar to five years ago" (p. 5), and 75% of principals included in the study report feeling "that the job has become too complex, [with] nearly half [reporting] feeling under great stress several days a week or more" (p. 3). Perhaps adding to this growing sense of burden is the persistently high sense of responsibility and accountability that principals maintain in regards to ownership of overseeing activities within the school. Approximately 89% of principals surveyed report that they "should be held accountable for everything that happens to the children in a school… in 2012, compared with 60% in 1989" (p. 5). The survey also found that job satisfaction for public school principals has decreased considerably in the last few years, and those who report lower job satisfaction also tend to have greater levels of stress and work in some of the most challenging schools. As the highest-need schools are often found in urban areas, it is also significant to note that principal turnover is particularly common in large urban school districts that are struggling (Burkhauser, Gates, Hamilton, and Schuyler Ikemoto, 2012; Grissom & Andersen, 2012) and can have a profoundly destabilizing effect on the teachers and students who are often most at risk.

Further, in a study of principals and superintendents whose schools and districts
underwent difficult budget cuts, Ginsberg and Multon (2011) report that over half of the leaders surveyed admit to not only worrying about their overall health but feeling "that their health had gotten worse due to budget cuts" (p. 44). Respondents also expressed serious concerns about their quality of life outside of work (i.e., in their personal relationships and how they spent their time away from the job). Approximately 70% of principals in the study "used the term stress or described stress-related symptoms in their responses" (p. 45), and the researchers argue that such stress manifests itself in both mental and physiological ways (e.g., increases in sleeplessness, headaches, etc.). Budget cuts were considered to have hampered leaders' abilities to encourage innovation, implement reform, and maintain positive morale among teachers and staff. Participants in the study instead report a growing need to just survive, and "many feel that the good work they had done for years is being tossed aside as efforts to just stay afloat dominate" (p. 44). And despite the growing tension, leaders in the study report feeling that "they must appear calm and collected during difficult times… [leaving] little room for them to publicly express simple human emotions" (p. 46).

Understanding leaders as human is to allow them the range of emotions – both good and bad – associated with being scrutinized and held responsible for fulfilling the expectations of both the school as an organization and often the larger community. In this sense, leadership involves a certain amount of what Murphy (2007) refers to as internal pain. The isolation or "loneliness of authority" (p. 136) often underlying the story of the inspirational or energetic individual leader as well as those who struggle ignores the fact "all... leaders are themselves supported and led in ways that focus their energy and
attention productively on the improvement of teaching and learning” (Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, & Portin, 2010, p. 4). Ginsberg and Multon (2011) caution that "tending to the health-related and emotional needs of administrators makes sense, given their crucial role in leading schools… school leaders are a resilient breed, but areas of concern are emerging" (p. 47). This highlights the dangers of the personal burdens of this work, and raises considerations for how to research and study leadership challenges in a way that provides us insights not only into how increases in the complexity of leading in today's schools may impact the future trajectories and successes of its leaders, but in how leaders understand the challenges they face and thus navigate through them.

**Existent Research Perspectives on the Challenges of Educational Leadership**

The study of educational leadership includes a wide range of perspectives and approaches, all of which understand the role and responsibilities of school leaders in different ways. Yet emerging research focusing on the personal toll that leading in schools is currently having on principals is beginning to highlight gaps in existent research. In particular, little is known about the varied and rich ways that individual leaders may understand work-based challenges and how such understanding might influence their navigation of these obstacles. Thus, I do not attempt to outline or characterize the field at large. I will instead focus in on two key theoretical perspectives for studying educational leadership that have shed light on the complex and interpersonal nature of leading in schools – specifically the occupational study of principals and the study of emotional intelligence and leadership.
The Occupational Study of Principals: A Sociological Perspective

The occupational study of leadership seeks to describe how the responsibilities of school leaders are shaped by institutional and organizational forces. A strength of this perspective is that it provides insight into how history and institutional structures established years ago continue to influence the contexts and parameters in which school leaders operate today. There are thus two key considerations related to understanding perceptions of increasing complexity in leading schools that have been gained through this body of research. First, the establishment of a leadership hierarchy within school districts intentionally placed principals in middle management positions, overseeing some while answering to others. In addition, the location of schools within the social fabric of communities places school leaders and the work that they do under high levels of public scrutiny compared to similar leadership positions in other organizations.

At the turn of the twentieth century, as one-room schoolhouses merged into larger, consolidated schools (i.e., with multiple classrooms and teachers), questions of authority related to how schools should be managed emerged (Tyack, 1974; Lortie, 2009). Prior to the formal position of principals, the closest equivalent was the “head teacher” (Rousmaniere, 2013). Under the assumption that a designated individual was needed to oversee and control the school’s staff and constituents, these head teachers (who were predominantly male at the time) were commonly promoted to the role of principal (2013; Tyack, 1974; Lortie, 2009). In turn, as the number of schools grew, “conceptions of scientific management that dominated managerial thinking” in business at the time emphasized “the need to concentrate planning and specialized intellectual
capacities in headquarters (central office) rather than in individual schools” (Callahan, 1962 as cited in Lortie, 2009, p. 13). This gave rise to the establishment of district-level staff and to the superintendent as a district’s leader. The superintendent, however, then as it is now, was hired by and responsible to a higher authority, the local school board. Thus, the molding of school administration as we know it today was purposefully guided by a desire to set in place a “vertical hierarchy” (Lortie, 2009, p. 13). In this sense, principals serve as “middle managers” (Lortie, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013) overseeing and managing the work of others while being held accountable to someone with higher authority. This positioning within the vertical hierarchy persists today and often places principals in situations involving complex negotiations of relationships between those they oversee and those to whom they must answer.

Understanding the role and responsibilities of school leaders in this way has allowed researchers to examine the work of school leaders as “middle managers” to that of other managers in related fields (Lortie, 2009). It should be noted, however, that though this has expanded the ways in which school leadership is studied, it also tends to overshadow important factors differentiating the complex nature of leading in schools from other organizations. Though Lortie (2009) notes that using the language of management is “general enough to accommodate what principals say are the tasks and meanings they see as central while permitting comparisons with other occupations in which persons oversee the work of others” (p. 6), he and others also point out that the work of school leaders, their experiences and expectations, are all highly contextualized, complex, and unique from other industries (Lortie, 2009; Meyer & Rowan, 2008;
Callahan, 1962). Consider, for example, that “staged entry” into the principalship (i.e., the requirement to have served as a teacher prior to becoming a principal) is still standard policy and practice in most traditional public schools. Research suggests that the transition from teacher to principal impacts the ways in which school administrators approach their work with teachers, who, once their peers, are now people they oversee and manage (Lortie, 2009). For school leaders who value their social identity as a former teacher, this socialization into the principalship can be a source of complexity, especially in the early phase of their careers.

Organizational context is therefore a critical consideration in the study of school leaders (Lortie, 2009). Riggan & Supovitz (2008) found that in the current climate of high stakes, test-driven reform, principals who take a hard stance with regard to creating pressure for change in implementing education reorganization and reform efforts in schools are likely to be met with resistance if interpersonal and contextual factors in implementation are not taken into serious consideration. Those positioned to actually implement reform activities, such as teachers and other important educational staff in schools, can determine the extent to which a reform effort is either embraced or fails to take root. The issue of teacher autonomy and school coherence is a well-studied issue, and in this way, schools can be seen not just as distinct units to be managed but as entities with multiple autonomous classroom units within them. Thus, how a principal perceives the structure and operation of the school as well as the people within it determines how they understand the work they are expected to do and how they go about doing it (Lortie, 2009).
Another important complicating factor in comparing school leaders to other middle management positions emanates from the highly public nature of leading in schools today. Lortie (2009) argues that principals tend to “have greater public presence than middle managers whose terrain is less distinct and visible” (p. 45), and in turn, they must manage working relationships both inside and outside of the school. More so, public schooling has historically been seen as a public good, stoking a sense of investment in its operation and outcomes by members of the larger community. Schooling and learning is transactional; it involves an interpersonal element that results from required interactions between school leaders with key stakeholders both within and beyond the school’s immediate community. This holds the public’s attention making schools a unique institution subject to public scrutiny, and the high level of visibility and accessibility of principals greatly contributes to the complex nature of the work they do (Lortie, 2009).

It is important to consider the weight of this combination of being constrained by the middle management nature of the principal’s position while being held under the watchful eye of the public. Particularly in a modern day context, challenges originating from outside of the school often come to bear within its halls and classrooms through events ranging from the traumatic to the dramatic. School violence, bullying, death and loss as well as more common socio-emotional challenges connected to child and adolescent growth and development have not diminished, for example, as budgets dwindle. Youth, teachers, and broader school communities are continuing to deal with such events despite economic cuts which have made it difficult to add or maintain existing physical and mental health support services and personnel. School leaders are
thus faced with making critical staffing decisions while simultaneously being expected to establish and maintain a positive school climate. Further complicating such matters, advancements in technology and the ubiquitous nature of cell phones and mobile devices are changing the nature of communication management within schools. Through both regular and social media alike, today's school leaders are often ill prepared to deal with how quickly news – be it true or false – spreads across communities regarding challenging events happening in their own schools.

Thus, based on the blueprint of the vertical hierarchy built into school and district governance, there exist both stated and implied controls and limitations on power and action built into the principal’s position. This, in turn, has been an influential factor in shaping the nature of the work that principals do and also greatly impacts the growing complexity inherent in leading schools. In addition, because of the extremely public nature of schools, school leaders, unlike other managers in other fields, are held to extremely high levels of visibility and critique in the public eye. Lortie (2009) found that principals have become hyperaware of “proper behavior for those in a position of authority” (p. 37). Success in leading schools is therefore often tied to some form of “adapting the self” (p. 33) and modifying what they say and do (p. 37). Challenges that principals face are therefore not perhaps unique on their own, but in combination and in the context of the school system, they are layered with a complexity that invokes such a deep level of professional response that it becomes arguably personal.

Leadership and Emotional Intelligence: A Psychological Perspective

The study of emotional intelligence (or EI) involves considerations of the
intrapsychic dimensions of individual thought and understanding, of the interpersonal dynamics involved in relationship management, and how both may impact resulting action and behavior. Within existing emotional intelligence research, a wide variety of models exists. It is thus important to note that the following analysis focuses on a competency-based approach to researching emotional intelligence as it relates to issues of “performance at work and organizational leadership” (Goleman, 1995, p. xiii). In particular, I will discuss here the ways that this research framework explicates how leaders may understand or deal with the challenges of leading inherent in the social nature of schools as organizations.

A key strength of the competency-based, emotional intelligence (EI) framework is that when compared to many other research perspectives for studying educational leadership, EI is more responsive to the social nature of working with people, a deeply rooted characteristic of schooling. Hence, the emotional intelligence perspective legitimizes what principals already report experiencing in their roles as they manage and negotiate relationships with multiple stakeholders inside and outside of schools. EI thus provides insight into seemingly ordinary aspects of leading such as daily interactions with teachers and staff as well as making difficult decisions that will directly or indirectly impact those in the school community. Leithwood et al. (2008) argue that “school leadership practices explain significant variations in teachers’ beliefs about and responses to their working conditions” (p. 30). These practices include “building collaborative cultures... [as well as] building productive relations with parents and the community” (p. 30). Further, Lortie (2009) notes that “when we bear in mind that school management is
fundamentally interactive in nature, it is not surprising that the major complexities that emerge focus on relationships with other people” (p. 124). Of the principals in his study, for instance, those “ready to concede mistakes link most of them to day-in, day-out relationships… [connecting] 68% of the mistakes to interactions with others” (p. 128). Hence, there exists a personal aspect to leading in schools that challenges educational leaders to think about and conceptualize their work differently than they may have done before. Lortie (2009) found that “the transition from teacher to principal… required changes in how these principals managed their emotions and their dispositions” (p. 39).

EI has thus emerged in both research and practice with the aim of directly addressing the interpersonal nature of school governance but argues that the challenges that educational leaders face can be resolved through gaining deeper understanding of self in relation to others. In this sense, a competency-based approach to EI integrates intrapsychic thought and reflection intrinsic to the individual with external considerations for potential action and behavior. This in turn allows individuals the means by which to identify, address, and thus navigate (or move through and past) obstacles they may face in the work that they do leading schools.

Referring back to research of what school leaders must focus on and implement in order to positively impact student outcomes, it is important to remember that a number of these action items involve interactions with others in the school community – not only engaging staff, families, and community members but building trusting relationships with all key stakeholders both inside and outside of the school. Yet, how a principal is perceived or received by these groups of people may depend on their awareness of self.
For example, Shulman, Sullivan, and Glanz (2008) found that teachers participating in New York City reform programs tended to hold very different views of instructional supervision by their principals than the administrators themselves. What principals saw as guiding and supportive behavior was instead described by teachers as “‘evaluative’, ‘rigid’, ‘undemocratic’, ‘unproductive’, and ‘confusing’” (p. 413). Bryk and Schneider (2002) add that relational trust – a key ingredient they have found to be important in school improvement – “is forged in daily social exchanges” (p. 136) and that “principals establish both respect and personal regard when they acknowledge the vulnerabilities of others [and] actively listen to their concerns” (p. 137). But how does one learn to do this if doing so is unfamiliar or uncomfortable to do? Based on their studies of business leaders, Goleman and his colleagues (2002) assert that “managing relationships skillfully boils down to handling other people’s emotions. This… demands that leaders be aware of their own emotions and attuned with empathy to the people they lead” (p. 51).

Research on leadership and EI has found that failure to tend to people’s emotions actually impedes the extent to which they may be effective in their work. Goleman (1995), drawing on studies from “affective neuroscience” (p. xi), argues that “when emotionally upset, people cannot remember, attend, learn, or make decisions clearly” (p. 149; Kreamer, 2011). This becomes particularly important as we consider the growing complexity of the current educational context and the unique nature of schools as organizations. Given, for example, popular educational reforms which replace large portions (if not all) of a school’s administrators and teaching staff, changes implemented via policies passed down from up the vertical hierarchy can be particularly jarring for
those at the receiving end. In a review of research on the sociological study of stress, Pearlin (1989) suggests that it is not change itself which poses the problem, “but the quality of change is potentially damaging to people. Specifically, changes that are undesired, unscheduled, nonnormative, and uncontrolled are most harmful” (p. 244). It can therefore be argued that “the work” at hand in schools and districts today – however defined – is greatly impacted and shaped by the motivating factor of fear (not aspiration), and fear has detrimental consequences for a school’s efforts towards learning and growth (Senge, 1990).

Thus, educational leaders play an important role in mitigating the challenging and increasingly complex charge of schools for those they lead. As Goleman et al. (2002) assert:

Because the leader’s way of seeing things has special weight, leaders manage meaning for a group, offering a way to interpret or make sense of, and so react emotionally to, a given situation… one of the most crucial emotional tasks of leadership…[is helping] people find meaning and sense, even in the face of chaos and madness. (p. xii)

Aligned with this thinking, school governance and leadership are indeed emotional in nature, particularly given the challenging dynamics of leading in schools under increasingly complex and restrictive conditions. Yet, from the acknowledgement of the professional burdens and the personal toll of leading in schools emerge key questions that the study of emotional intelligence and leadership does not directly address. Do all leaders experience and respond to challenge in similar ways? If not, what factors might contribute to differences in the ways that individual leaders understand and navigate particularly difficult issues at work?
Understanding the Importance of Social Identity, Experience, and Leadership

Emotion and issues of identity intermingle and play out through daily social interactions (Hogg et al., 1995), and these interpersonal encounters grow increasingly complex for school leaders as they are expected to do more with less in today’s current reform climate. The concept of social identity asserts that individuals lay claim to and manage multiple identities including those related to profession, geographic region (including community and neighborhood), and family status as well as one’s gender, religion, ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation. These multiple social identities shape thinking and action in both overt and subtle ways (Hogg et al., 1995). It is important to take into consideration the ways that issues of identity may influence and complicate how leaders reflect on and understand themselves and others. And though there is benefit in taking personal elements out of the work at hand, challenges in group and organizational dynamics emerge when focus is allowed to (or is understood as) being totally on others and not oneself. Thus, “a reductionist interpretation of emotion largely ignores the qualitatively significant importance of bringing to the surface and drawing upon the many ‘unstated assumptions and implicit theories carried in the heads of [leaders]’” (English, 2008, p. 200 as cited in Morrison & Ecclestone, 2011, p. 210). Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) add that “leaders cannot effectively manage emotions in anyone else without first handling their own. How a leader feels thus becomes more than just a private matter; given the reality of emotional leakage, a leader’s emotions have public consequences” (p. 46). Issues of identity, however, can be complicated and difficult to confront on one’s own let alone in front of or with others.
and especially if one feels held to high levels of public scrutiny.

Tied to issues of subjectivity (and positionality) in practice as well as research, sociocognitive processes tied to social identity are part of the shaping of behavior in relation to groups with whom the individual identifies and interacts. For example, in the case of school leaders, Lortie (2009) found that many learn that “in becoming principals, there was no way to avoid at least some social distance between themselves and faculty members, no matter how hard they hoped for the closeness they preferred” (p. 91). For a principal who deeply values his or her social identity as a former teacher, this may be particularly problematic in regards to how that individual might navigate the sense of isolation typical of leading in schools (Murphy, 2007; Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). Further, in regards to how individuals may experience stressful events, Pearlin (1989) notes that:

Many stressful experiences… can be traced back to surrounding social structures and people’s locations within them. The most encompassing of these structures are the various systems of stratification that cut across societies, such as those based on social and economic class, race and ethnicity, gender, and age. (p. 242)

Aligned with this thinking, Kreamer (2011), for example, argues that “because women tend to be ashamed of public tears, and feel obliged to disprove the… gender stereotype, they often become the most hard-line opponents of public crying” (p. 141). This display of emotion, the author asserts, differs between male and female leaders with assumptions that such an emotional response in the latter is tied to a loss or lack of control in ways that are seldom attributed to the former under similar circumstances. Awareness of one’s gender identity in this way can influence the expression of emotion and the sharing of vulnerability. These, in turn, can contribute to a sense of emotional distance thus
negatively impacting the building of relationships and rapport in an inherently social organizational context. Further, Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) add that “the situation facing women of color [in leadership positions] is more complex than that faced by White women” (p. 173). Specifically, the authors argue that women leaders of color may struggle with emotional self-management in ways that White women do not because of “the influence of race and ethnicity on perceptions of [their] leadership” (Suyemoto & Ballou, 2007 as cited in Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, p. 173).

It is essential to acknowledge questions regarding how practitioners and researchers learn to deal with issues of identity and subjectivity that may complicate the work that they do. Given the larger social, political, and historical contexts in which schools and the people within them operate, analysis of the occupational and emotional intelligence perspectives yields two important thematic challenges in school leadership – namely, issues related to power and control and complicating considerations related to social identity. First, due in particular to the middle management status of principals, issues of power and control complicate the work that school leaders do. For instance, in his study of principals, Lortie (2009) highlights that school leadership carries with it both implicit and explicit limits on decision-making power (e.g., hiring, fiscal decisions, or instructional oversight, etc.). Yet, principals are held highly accountable for everything that happens within a school, even those things over which they may have little to no control. As Deci and Ryan (1985) contend, however, it is not simply an issue of control that is problematic. Instead, the desire to feel competent (that is, to be able to have an effect on one’s environment) and to be self-determining (or to have choice) has a direct
impact on intrinsic motivation on the job. The authors assert that “having control does not ensure self-determination. If people feel pressured to attain certain outcomes or if they feel pressured to exercise control, they are not self-determined. Self-determination means that people experience choice” (pp. 37-38). Hence, in light of the increasingly multifaceted nature of school leadership under dwindling economic resources and high-stakes accountability measures, the absence of choice more than the lack of control may be detrimentally affecting the ability of leaders to do more with less. Ball (2003) argues that this can “[bring] about change in ‘our subjective existence’” (Rose, 1989, p. ix as cited in Ball, 2003, p. 217) detrimentally effecting one’s social identity as an educator and as a leader. As a result, it follows that the complexity of the task environment in schools and districts today could potentially be contributing to increased rates of burnout and turnover of principals.

Thus, linked to issues of power and control, a second thematic challenge stems from the lack of research on the potential influence of issues of social identity on how educational leaders understand difficulties inherent in the social and transactional nature of leading schools. Given the paucity of available research on this topic, I draw here instead on anecdotal evidence gathered through my observations and conversations with students and alumni in the Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership. In a series of meetings held in AY 2012-13, approximately 40 participants gathered to discuss problems of practice they were experiencing as principals, superintendents, and other educational leaders. What emerged from these conversations were five categories or sources of stress and challenge, one of which included issues of gender, race, and
sexuality. The conversation which preceded the lumping of these identities into a single category was tense. A small group of participants, predominantly Black and female, led the debate contending that, in their experience, race and gender each demanded considerable focus and attention on their own. They felt that by placing the multiple identities into one group, the significance of each as problematic would be lost. Consensus of the larger group, however, determined that they be left together. And despite the weight and gravity of this conversation, when it came time to break into smaller groups to discuss one of the five categories of challenge with others, no one chose to discuss issues of gender, race, or sexuality. This experience highlighted for me the way in which aspects of social identity can be simultaneously valued and threatened in the work educational leaders do.

On the one hand, identity plays a part in the degree to which stressful events may be experienced as troubling to individual leaders. On the other, there is a reluctance to give priority to these issues, especially for those for whom they are most challenging (i.e., leaders from traditionally under-represented and marginalized groups). The potential impact of this dilemma on how leaders understand and navigate challenges in school governance thus carries great significance. Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) argue that especially “in a crisis, a threatened identity constrains action as individuals and teams lose important anchors about themselves” (p. 563). By either choosing to discuss such issues or to minimize their importance, what is gained or lost by leaders and how might this further complicate their ability to make hard decisions or to deal with the consequences of such action? Of the little research that exists on social identity and
school leadership, it is also important to note that most of what is available “has focused singly on gender or racial/ethnic differences and paid little attention to investigating them in combination” for example (Sanchez-Hucles and Davis, 2010, p. 176). Hence, the question of leadership and social identity, specifically “intersectionality – [or] the manner in which multiple aspects of identity may combine in different ways to construct social reality” (p. 176; Weber, 2010), becomes particularly significant in regards to future research of how principals perceive, understand, and thus approach solving the challenges before them (Jussim, 1991; Weick, 1995).

The potential ramifications of issues of identity and leadership as well as the generation of local school leader knowledge on the depth and strength of the contributions research on educational leadership might have on wider research, policy, and practice communities and audiences is critical. Crow and Scribner (2014) argue that “researchers in multiple international contexts have demonstrated that dispositions, values, and beliefs make a difference in the motivation and practice of leadership” (Day and Leithwood, 2007 as cited in Crow & Scribner, 2014, p. 287) and that “understanding identity as lived experience also means that identity shapes and molds the roles leaders undertake” (p. 293). This dissertation thus aims to deepen understanding of how principals draw upon aspects of their identity to make meaning of their experiences and how such interpretations influence how they understand the work of leading schools and navigate the multifaceted challenges inherent in school leadership.
Chapter 3

Methodology

This dissertation focuses on school principals’ perceptions of their social identities and how that understanding may influence how they understand the work of leading schools as well as how they choose to present themselves as leaders. The process of meaning and sense-making (here as it relates to practice as well as research) is both a social and cognitive one (Weick, 1995; Leithwood et al., 2004; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). It involves an individual’s efforts to understand and explicate a situation and is “‘influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others’” (Allport, 1985, p. 3 as cited in Weick, 1995, p. 39). Aligned with an ontological assumption validating multiple realities, especially as each relates to the heterogeneic nature of social identities, the process of sense-making hints at how perceptions of the world can have an impact on the social reality that comes to bear through action (1995; Jussim, 1991). Park (2010) explains that experiences that help to shape social identity inform the construction of “orienting systems… that provide [individuals] with cognitive frameworks with which to interpret their experiences” (p. 257). The importance of how an individual therefore filters and makes meaning of new information and experiences is consequently tied to the social, cultural, and historical nature of knowledge and the socially constructed contexts and structures within which that knowledge is valued or understood.

The aim of this study is exploratory and descriptive in nature and seeks to illustrate how individual participants might value or prioritize their own social identities in the context of the work that they do as leaders. In addition, through a collective case
study approach, this research also seeks to deepen understanding of how principals’ perceptions of who they are and the beliefs/assumptions they embrace which are rooted in their social identities might influence the way that they conceptualize and approach the role and responsibilities of being leaders in schools.

**Research Questions**

I chose to conduct a collective case study focusing on the lived experiences of three school principals. Of particular note, I initially sought to capture both similarities and differences in the ways that individual participants view their experiences navigating challenges in school leadership through a social identity lens (Creswell, 2007). However, based on my initial findings, questions regarding the strength of the data to link leader thought to action specifically around issues of challenge emerged. In addition, in consideration of the limits placed upon this research in both the methods chosen as well as the time-bound nature of the dissertation, I chose to reframe my study to better focus on the findings that began to develop out of the data I collected. Thus, building on a hermeneutic framework in how I have understood this research, I chose to revise my research questions “in response to incoming data” (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998, p. 44).

My research question thus seeks to explore how the social identities of principals influence their understanding of the work of leading schools as well as how they choose to present themselves as leaders. Additional questions include:

- How do principals understand their role and responsibilities as leaders of schools?
- How might school leaders’ perception of their social identities influence the way they choose to present themselves as leaders or the type of leader they choose to
be?

- What can we learn from the interaction between principals’ social identities and their perception of challenges leading schools?
- How does the congruence of social identity and the ecology of one’s school impact principals’ prospects for effective school leadership?

By reframing my research, I intentionally allowed for a broader exploration of potential connections between school leaders’ perceptions of their social identities and the ways that their understanding might impact how they think about themselves as leaders and their leadership practice. This approach is better aligned with my initial findings and has allowed me to highlight variations in the ways that the principals in this study perceive their social identities and how that understanding influences interpretations of who they are as leaders and the daily work that they do in moments of both success and struggle.

**Participant Selection**

Collective or multiple case studies, in general, are not intended to be generalizable (Creswell, 2007). Further, because of the social constructivist nature of this study in describing the lived experiences of individuals, it was important to focus “on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). For this reason, considerations of setting (e.g., urban/suburban, public/parochial/independent, etc.), personal and professional characteristics of potential participants (e.g., years of experience, race/ethnicity, gender, etc.), and sample size were included in the design of this collective case study. A brief list of my final sample is noted below and shows the varying ranges of
experience, backgrounds, and school settings involved.

- Case A = Black, female, 42 years of total experience in education (16 as teacher; 26 as school and district administrator); has served primarily in urban, public schools (both elementary and secondary levels)
- Case B = Biracial (Latino/White), male, 18 years of total experience in education (5 as teacher; 13 as school administrator); has served primarily in independent Catholic secondary schools (both suburban and urban locales)
- Case C = Biracial (Black/White), male, 18 years of total experience in education (4 as teacher; 14 as school administrator); has served primarily in suburban, public secondary schools and currently at an urban, public charter secondary school

Beginning with a “theoretical sampling” method which focuses on selecting “people on the basis of their potential manifestation or representation of important theoretical constructs” (Patton, 2001, p. 238), I initially recruited six school leaders as participants with a focus placed on balancing representation based on race/ethnicity, gender, and school type – social identities which I assumed would be more easily determined. These personal characteristics were all confirmed with each participant prior to his or her inclusion in the study. Further, these individuals were identified as key informants who had been known to reflect on issues of self in relation to their work. It should be noted, however, that due to personal and health reasons, two of the original principals initially recruited for this study had to be excluded. In addition, although four participants were ultimately interviewed, based on the emergent findings, I chose to focus on three of
whom aspects of their social identities were more readily identifiable in the data.

Data Collection

In this study, I relied on multiple forms of data and data collection. These different approaches are briefly outlined below.

Individual Interviews

In-depth interviews served as my primary source of data as they are useful in exploring participants’ perceptions of what they have experienced as well as how they have experienced it (Weiss, 1994; Creswell, 2007). Two rounds of one-on-one interviews were conducted, no more than approximately six months apart. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and sought to understand how “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work… [and] develop subjective meanings of their experiences” (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). In line with the original research questions, the first interview protocol focused on gaining a deeper understanding of what the individual had experienced in terms of challenges in school leadership as well as what meaningful aspects of his or her social identities influenced the individual’s understanding and navigation of those challenges. Initial interviews foregrounded discussion of perceptions of challenge, providing participants with tangible events to describe their leadership practice. Follow-up questions included in the first interview focused more deeply on specific aspects of social identities mentioned by the participant. After initial analysis of these first interviews, a second round of interviews was conducted that addressed additional social identities which emerged from examination of the initial interviews as well as through other forms of data collected. The second interview also sought to clarify
potential connections or relationships of meaningful social identities (as identified by the participant) with the individual’s thinking and decisions made as a leader.

Again, it is important to note that a large portion of the interviews involved the building of relationships given the personal nature of the topics that surfaced related to issues of social identity. This included the collection of personal and professional histories which were not initially intended to be included in the data collection. Further, because of the importance of self-categorization and self-identification (Haslam, 2014), the somewhat loose approach to these interviews was intentional. It was meant to allow participants to share those social identities which hold the most meaning to them within the context of their roles as principals (i.e., versus being told by the researcher which social identities to discuss). Copies of the interview protocols used for both the first and second rounds (including follow-up questions) are included in Appendix C and D.

Written Documents and Other Archival Data

In this study, I also analyzed documents written by each participant (specifically, each person’s own dissertation research study) as well as other public documents about the individual. These archival documents were meant to provide additional insight into those social identities which the participant may already be readily aware of and has previously reflected on. In addition, given the highly public nature of school leadership today, I was also interested in reviewing public documents and discussions about the individual such as local and national newspaper articles, internet articles or blogs, as well as Twitter and Facebook discussions. These documents helped to reveal additional clues important to understanding the contexts in which they led at varying points of time in
their careers.

Data Analysis

Data collected from these multiple sources was transcribed and analyzed inductively. Given the paucity of existing literature on social identity and school leadership, my analysis of the data focused on a “ground up [approach], rather than handed down entirely from [existing] theory” (Creswell, 2007, p. 19). I then conducted a thematic analysis of the interview data using the other sources of data (e.g., observation, written documents, etc.) to either support or challenge my findings. Again, although the emergent themes from this small collective case study are not generalizable, I was able to identify some commonalities that became apparent across all three cases. These significant themes (included in Chapter 7 of this dissertation) helped to describe the essence of how principals’ perceptions of their social identities influenced their understanding of the role and responsibilities of their positions as school leaders. Lastly, given the deep nature of data collection on each participant and small sample size, I synthesized a case narrative for each participant focused on key social identities that they shared as being of particular importance to them.

Because of the personal nature of this topic of study, it has been essential that I represent the participants’ experiences with care and accuracy. As such, two member checks will be conducted that will allow me to share my findings with participants and collect their feedback on the accuracy of the data (Schwartz-Shea, 2006; Maxwell, 2007). The first occurred during the second interview with each participant as I indirectly presented my initial findings from the first interview through the follow-up questions and
the topics on which I chose to focus. The second member check occurred towards the conclusion of my overall analysis.

**Positionality**

It is important to note that there are many aspects of my own social identities which provide me with both potential insight and challenge in my role as researcher. First, my own ethnic and gender identities, for example, have played a large part in the challenges I myself have experienced in my professional work but have also shaped my understanding of those challenges. As an Asian American, I have always been acutely aware of the ways in which my own racial/ethnic identity places me as both insider and outsider to multiple conversations and situations. Secondly, I have never been a school principal, and it will be important for me to acknowledge the limitations of my insights into the work that these leaders do. Yet, I have had multiple opportunities to work with and learn from school leaders over the last ten years – through my prior work with alternative high schools in Boston and through my work supporting various efforts in the Mid-Career Program such as the “Problems of Practice” discussion, the Wallace Foundation grant, the Penn Educational Leadership Simulations (PELS) program, and most recently, the Leading from an Inquiry Stance book project. In particular, I have paid careful attention to the ways the participants in these programs have grappled with issues of social identity and leadership. These opportunities to learn with and from principals have shaped my thinking, and this learning has provided me with opportunities to see things that those enmeshed in the everyday challenges of leading schools may not. As a result of these issues, however, I actively engaged in memo writing as I progressed in this
research as a tool to help me understand how my perceptions and interpretations of the data may be influenced by my own experiences and social identities (Maxwell, 2005; Creswell, 2007).

**Presentation of Findings**

This study aimed to explore the potential connections between how principals perceive their own social identities and the influence this understanding might have on how they present themselves as leaders and think about the their role and responsibilities as principals. In this endeavor and due to the personal nature of social identities as a topic, much of what was discussed during case interviews focused primarily on establishing a foundation from which participants could talk more openly with me about their experiences and insights. In this process of relationship-building, a good portion of the interviews tended to focus on discussion of personal histories – namely, in order to establish personal and professional timelines and to capture descriptions of their formative experiences (both early in life and in their careers). The information that each participant shared has served to raise important questions regarding the nature of social identities and the influence they might have on how principals understand their work as school leaders.

Given the complex nature of attempting to address these research questions, there were a variety of approaches I considered in presenting my findings. Two key considerations, however, emerged from the data that ultimately shaped my analysis and understanding of the findings. First, given the time-bound nature of this research study, it became evident to me that attempting to capture what lies within and outside of an
individual’s awareness underlies important methodological challenges, particularly as it applies to the exploration of individual leaders’ perceptions of their own social identities. Despite these challenges, data collected here suggests that the ways in which school leaders perceive – that is, talk about, understand and describe – aspects of his or her own valued social identities does in fact bear influence on the way that he or she thinks about who they are as leaders and about their role and responsibilities as such. Although identifying connections between such intrinsic thoughts and beliefs to actionable practices and events proved to be a challenge, I sought to hone in on the evidence that emerged from the data available which pointed towards the identification of primary social identities of value that participants tended to identify when discussing their leadership thought and practices.

In his longitudinal study of personality development, White (1966) argues that case study research of this kind is nonetheless appropriate in attempting to address such challenges:

What [the participant] is today grew out of what he was at earlier points in his life. Such reconstructions always contain a substantial amount of guesswork, and we should not deceive ourselves into thinking that we can be certain about what really happened. Nevertheless we are justified, if we pay proper respect to all the facts at our disposal, in trying to increase our understanding by weaving into an intelligible fabric the loose strands of event, attitude, and feeling that have made up the narrative of [the participant’s] career. (p. 57)

In a related vein, a second significant consideration in how I have chosen to present my findings focuses on the importance that formative experiences were noted as being significant in shaping social identities that individuals identified as important to them, both as people and as professionals. This finding was evident across all three cases and
made it necessary to illustrate these relevant aspects of their lives as a whole (i.e., versus presenting chunks and excerpts out of the context of fuller versions of their stories). To be able to examine the development and evolution of these primary social identities across each person’s personal and professional lifespans, I hope, helps to elucidate the ways in which various factors and experiences related to key social identities interacted over time and in changing contexts to influence each participant’s values and beliefs about the goals and aims of schooling and their roles as school leaders.

**Emergent Themes**

Based on my understanding of the data, three key themes emerged from this study: 1) considerations of how a social identity (noted by the participant as being of particular importance to them) impacted their initial decision to lead and their development as a leader, 2) the effects of valued social identities on the ethic by which they choose to lead, and 3) how considerations of congruence between a principal’s social identities and the ecology of one’s school influences their perception of challenges in leadership. To better speak to these themes as well as highlight the importance of formative experiences, I have chosen to present my findings through individual case narratives – one for each of the three leaders in this study (see Chapters 4, 5, and 6). These narratives are intended to describe and synthesize relevant aspects of each participant’s personal and professional histories through the lens of one or two key social identities which he or she identified as being of particular value in his or her thinking about the work they do as school leaders. Accordingly, this approach is meant to capture the participant’s “self-narrative (Huberman, 1995)—that is, the self that is being formed.
in what is being told” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002, p. 95; see also Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Thus, the use of case narratives as a format to present the findings here is intended to illustrate the ways that significant events and the meaning made from those events had an impact on important decision points in each participant’s career. Each case touches upon these core themes in response to my research questions and will be further addressed in the Discussion section of this dissertation.

Framing of Case Narratives: Important Considerations

What emerges from this study is an important reminder that issues of identity can be deeply personal and complex, especially when discussed in the context of one’s professional work. In exploring such issues, it became necessary to look back to the individual’s formative experiences (e.g., childhood, schooling experiences as well as entry into the field of education) as a way to examine the roots of their current thinking and understanding of their work. This dissertation is thus aligned with research traditions in the study of leadership which have used biography as a tool to uncover the importance of life events in shaping who a leader has become (Haslam et al, 2011; Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). In this way, the descriptions presented in the case narratives in this study present stories of how each leader came to lead, beginning with critical and meaningful memories they have of experiences in their childhood and adolescence as well as earlier in their careers. This study departs, however, from the traditional use of biography in that the formative experiences themselves are scrutinized for the meaning they held for each individual through the lens of specific social identities to which the leader has expressed membership. Their ability to self-identify with particular social
identities (i.e., instead of pre-designated ones chosen by the researcher) provides insights into the meaning that the individual has made of those experiences. This is also of particular significance as research suggests that the ability to self-categorize (versus being labeled with a social identity by another) is of paramount importance (Haslam, 2014). Accordingly, I am intentional in my heavy use of block quotes in presenting these findings – specifically, excerpts from our interviews or their dissertations – as it was important to me in this research to allow for the participants’ own descriptions and words (i.e., word choice) to be presented alongside my analysis and interpretations. This, in turn, is intended to provide the reader with opportunities to gauge the strength of each assertion and interpretation presented.

Lastly, it is also of significance to reiterate that social identities are heterogeneous, meaning that they may be experienced and understood differently by members of seemingly similar groups (Deaux et al, 1995). So, although participants in this study may appear to share the same identity (e.g., via occupational identities such as teacher or principal; or based on race/ethnicity, etc.), how each individual makes meaning of that identity and thus the ways that it has influenced their thinking or behavior is also likely heterogeneous and diverse. Social identities are fluid, and individuals possess multiple identities in which they find meaning. These case narratives, as they are presented here, are thus meant to serve as examples of the ways in which social identities may have influenced an individual’s thinking and action as a school leader and how that understanding shaped the way that he or she understands the role and responsibilities of the work that they do. Consequently, the specific social identities identified in each
narrative should not be considered to singularly define each participant. Given the limitations of time and data collection tied to this research study, the named social identities should instead be acknowledged as ones which were most apparent in analysis of the data available.
Chapter 4

Case A Narrative: Social Action and Teacher Identities

“…a child of the Civil Rights Movement”

Of the three cases included in this study, Case A – Linda Bennett – is somewhat unique. Not only is she the only female school leader included in this small sample, but she has by far the greatest amount of experience as both a teacher and as an administrator. Another factor that sets Linda apart from the other cases in this research is the fact that her dissertation, completed approximately ten years ago, is a self-study of her work as a principal in three of the five schools in which she served and captures approximately 15 years of service. As a Black woman born and raised in the southern United States before the Civil Rights Movement, her educational career spans over 42 years so far and provides unique insights into her understanding of the roles and responsibilities of being a school leader. Beginning in the early 1970s, Linda’s career in education includes 16 years of teaching and approximately 26 years of school- and district-level leadership experience. This expansive career ultimately includes her serving at seven different public schools in two different districts in two different cities, and as such, it details a first person perspective on her perceptions of the challenges involved in her experiences leading schools. In particular, this has included issues regarding what it means to enter a school as the new leader, to feel and be perceived as an outsider, and to create communities and cultures in which one can become a “leader of instruction” (p. 200, Dissertation), all of which have greatly influenced how she has chosen to present
herself as a leader as well as raised questions regarding the ecology of schools and her
ability to effectively lead through a social identity lens.

**Childhood Experiences and Her Family’s Influence**

Linda grew up in rural South Carolina during the 1950s and 1960s. In our
interviews, she spoke at length of her family’s strong commitment to “community
service”. However, their dedication to supporting and bettering the lives of others,
specifically members of the Black community in which they lived, may be better
understood within the social, historical, and political context of the times. What her
family refers to as “community service” reflects what is now more commonly understood
as social action and social justice. This “duty”, as Linda’s grandfather referred to it, has
played an influential part in shaping how she has understood her purpose in the world, as
an educator and as a school leader.

It is thus important to better understand the context in which Linda grew up. At
the end of the nineteenth century, southern lawmakers “began the process of replacing
slavery with segregation, installing the Jim Crow system that separated the races in every
aspect of life” (Irons, 2002, p. 12). These laws were at the time legal in many southern
states – South Carolina included, mandating segregation by race and “accompanied by a
system of southern ‘customs’” that “inflicted daily humiliations on blacks of both sexes
and all ages” (p. 12). Central to the Jim Crow system was the institution of segregated
public schools, and despite the Supreme Court’s 1954 landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board
of Education* calling for an end to this practice, Linda’s entire K-12 education was in
segregated schools. In addition, her recollections of growing up during the decades
leading up to the Civil Rights Movement include clear memories of the work that her
grandfather and mother committed themselves to in service of improving the lives of
other African Americans in their rural community. This dedication eventually manifested
itself as a strong sense of social consciousness and action for Linda, one in which she
identifies as continuing to have a strong influence over the way she lives and works.

Growing up, Linda had a close relationship with her maternal grandfather, a
Baptist minister. In the late 1950s, he preached at three different churches and was known
back then as a “rural route preacher” because he would travel to each of the churches on
different Sundays of the month (p. 38, F2 Interview). Her grandfather was a respected
leader in his community and was eventually elected as the moderator of the larger,
regional Baptist association in his area of the state. These Baptist associations (which are
still active today) were dedicated to serving the Black community, and they also built and
owned a portion of what are now referred to as historically black colleges and universities
(or HBCUs). As moderator of his association, which included approximately 30-40
churches, Linda’s grandfather served as a board member on one of the two HBCUs
established by his association. This position carried great weight and provided him with
the opportunity to “instill not only in his children, but also in his grandchildren this…
duty and responsibility for community service and for doing jobs where you are helpful
to people” (p. 1, F2 Interview). Linda recalled the following about the role he played in
the community:

I can remember the phone calls of people to my grandfather’s house... in my
grandparents’ home, the dining room was really the family room, and that's where
the phone was and the fireplace... and that's where everybody congregated... that's where we did our homework on the dining room table. Everything happened
in the dining room in their house. And people [would] call and say, "Reverend… um, (pause) I don't have the money to pay for my daughter to go to college, for my daughter's tuition for this semester. And they're gonna send her home. Is there anything you can do to help me?" He was the board member. He said, "Well, I'll call you back," blah, blah, blah. And he got on the phone, and he'd call the president of the college… [He’d say,] “I'm calling, because you know the deacon at blah, blah church. Daughter is there. Yeah, you know her. This is her name… Mom and dad don't have the money to pay for her tuition. Is there any way we can help them out, so that girl won't have to come out of school?" And they would do whatever negotiation or whatever they would do to come up with a way... And ultimately in most instances he would say, "Okay, I'll see you next week. Uh-huh. I’ll have a truck load of potatoes and a fresh hog for you." (p. 40, F2 Interview)

Linda’s grandfather himself only had a 7th grade education, something that would have been more common for a Black man of his age and time. Yet, he believed in the power of education as a lever for systemic change, a way for each generation of African Americans to improve themselves, and “he expected his children and his grandchildren to do better than he did” (pp. 40-41, F2 Interview).

And true to the intentions of the Jim Crow laws, education was indeed an important key to accessing one’s rights as an African American in the South at that time. When Linda was in middle school, it was required in South Carolina that anyone registering to vote be able to read the U.S. Constitution and interpret its meaning. Given his limited formal education, this obstacle kept Linda’s grandfather (and many others in his generation) from being able to exercise his right to vote. And so it was that Linda not only learned firsthand the importance of the education she was receiving in school but came to understand the impact it could have on raising social and political consciousness and participation. In our second interview, she shared:

I remember being in 8th grade myself, and my 8th grade teacher teaching us the Constitution. And I was at my grandparents’ house, and I was talking on the
phone, and [my grandfather] heard me telling my friend about... the Constitution and we were going through the amendments. So when I got off the phone, my grandfather said, "You know... would you help me learn?" And so from then on, every day my grandfather and I would read that Constitution. He said, "What did your teacher say?" And I would tell him what the teacher said it meant, and that formed I think a very special bond, that time period for us. So when he felt, um, comfortable enough... that spring, he said, "I'm going to register," and I walked with my grandfather to the... County Courthouse for him to register to vote. And, um, here I was a little girl, 12 years old, and I was so proud that my grandfather could register to vote, that he could read that Constitution flawlessly. And anything that they asked him, he could answer. (pp. 6-7, F2 Interview)

This feeling of pride is something she carries with her still, guiding her thinking about the aims and goals of schools and her leadership of them. And although her path to teaching and a career in education was not immediately evident here, the deep influence of her personal, formative experiences in childhood with influential members of her family – her grandfather, in particular – planted important seeds from which her social action identity would grow.

Transitions: College, Early Adulthood, and a New City

By the late 1960s, Linda had left her rural South Carolina community to attend a four year university in a nearby state. The school, an HBCU, provided her with opportunities to take part in the social and political activism of the time, and this would play a part in shaping her understanding of challenges she would later face as she transitioned into the world of work after graduation. As an extension of her family’s influence and focus on issues of social action and community service, Linda studied political science in college. Her ultimate goal was to become a lawyer, not a nurse or teacher, two of only a handful of professions really open to women, particularly women of color, at that time. And this choice was purposeful. She recalled:
Growing up during the time that I grew up, um, young ladies were expected to be either a nurse or a teacher… But I was the rebellious kind. I didn’t want to be a teacher! And I certainly didn’t want to be a nurse because I couldn’t stand the blood, the scents, all that… And so I went away to college with the idea that I would become an attorney. (p. 3, F2 Interview)

Here, Linda hints at an intentional “rebellion” to the social norms of the time. In our discussions, she alluded to having gone through a “militant phase”. Although she was not actively involved in the Black Power movement on campus, its influence on both thought and fashion particularly for younger people at the time was inescapable. Linda, for example, wore her hair in an afro – which was considered then as both a political statement meant to demonstrate resistance against the historical assimilation of Blacks to predominant White culture as well as a symbol embracing the previously unrecognized beauty of natural, Black hair tied to this history of oppression. She participated in Vietnam War demonstrations, the presidential campaign for George Wallace, and the beginning of the labor rights movement started by Dr. King. And though she did not readily share many details of her activities or memories of these more activist years initially in our interviews, the fact that she does mention them gives rise to questions regarding the extent to which the values and beliefs instilled in her through these experiences continue to resonate within her, shaping and fortifying the social identities that have emerged and evolved throughout her career and life.

There came a transitional moment in Linda’s personal life, however, that shifted her professional path away from a career in law. During her senior year in college, she fell in love with a man. She graduated, and they married, and as was somewhat common at the time, “his career came first” (p. 3, F2 Interview). This marriage was unfortunately
short-lived, but they welcomed a child into the world as a result of their brief time together. And that is how she came to move to a new city. Newly divorced and a young mother, she chose to pick up her life and move to a large city on the East Coast of the United States, believing that it held the promise of providing her with more opportunities than returning to South Carolina.

Responding to an urgent need to find a job and eager to support herself and her child, Linda took a corporate position with a large telephone company downtown. Having just come from a more activist mindset and mode of living in college, her initial entry into the workforce challenged her racial, ethnic, and gender identities. She was hired by the company to assist with the writing needed to train telephone operators and service representatives, a position that required a college degree. This immediately placed her at odds with her coworkers, many of whom were women who had worked or were in the process of working their way up the company hierarchy. To play the part, Linda remembers straightening her hair and giving up the afro she had worn during her more politically active college years. But this act did little to protect her from the discrimination she would endure at the company while also making her an outsider to the vibrant, Black activist community alive in the streets of downtown as she entered the building each morning. She left after less than a year. In thinking back, she shared the following:

I just quit. I just walked off the job and told them, “I’m done”. Because to go in the bathroom, nobody talks to you… Or you know they are talking… about you and everybody [goes] silent. Or you can’t sit and have a cup of coffee with anyone. And remember, we’re in the early ’70s. And I was… 22 at the time… coming from a predominantly Black college where I had gone through an extremely militant stage. And when I tell you it was a turbulent time, I had worn
an afro. Can you imagine? I got this job… and I got rid of my afro. I straightened my hair, and then to get off the subway and to go into [this company] and… Black people are on the street, Black activists are the street… I mean, there’s just a lot going on… So, you are trying to transition from this collegiate atmosphere into um, this corporate atmosphere and you get off the subway and people say, “Oh, who are you? What? You aren’t Black. Why you got your hair like this?” Dah dah dah… So you are criticized for things that you value, but now you’ve got to go [into]… this place, and you are rejected. So you were rejected on both ends. (pp. 28-31, F1_First Interview)

At the time, Linda was living with her uncle and his wife. Her uncle, also a pastor at a local church which she attended, was of a different generation. He embraced a more peaceful approach to civil rights and did not agree with the militant perspective that she had experienced in college and framed the way she understood the challenges she faced. Thinking back, she says, “I had the realization but I didn’t have the understanding of what was really going on. I mean, I’m still thinking about it… I had the realization that something’s wrong here… And I think that’s why I quit that job…” (p. 33, F1_First Interview). Her aunt and uncle were the only people she knew in the city at that time. With the generational differences and the raw emotional nature of these events, Linda found little solace at home and instead struggled with the personal affronts and challenges to her sense of identity in this new city. This would be the first major incident of her feeling like an outsider, even in communities (such as the Black activist groups) in which she had felt a part in the past.

Thus, her next job would provide her with the personal respite she needed, working as a secretary for the Episcopal Diocese in a more residential area of the city. Linda recalls knowing that this would be a temporary position, but refers to it as “necessary” given what was happening for her personally at the time. And indeed her
time spent working there would ultimately provide her with the space to heal and acclimate that she required before later entering the world of teaching. She recalled:

At that time in my life, I think, that was a good job for me. Because it was in a church… It was quiet and it was calming. Um, the priests were very accepting… And I worked there for two years. And I needed that because it was away from [downtown] and all that rhetoric and that noise and (pause) that tension. (pp. 34-35, F1_First Interview)

Here, Linda alludes to the importance of her religious identity, something that she rarely discussed in our interviews. Yet, at the time, church would play an important role in connecting her with the next step in her career, a job in teaching. With her strong desire to still become a lawyer, Linda took the advice of a woman at her church – a teacher – to consider teaching as a stepping stone towards achieving her goal of attending law school. It would be this woman’s advice that eventually persuaded Linda that teaching would provide her with a source of income which she could put towards law school while also allowing her to work hours conducive to raising a small child. And thus she considered taking on a line of work she had rebelled against considering only years earlier, in turn, illustrating the ways in which deeply personal events can influence and impact decisions made in the professional sphere.

The Teaching Years and Her Path to the Principalship

In the early 1970s, Linda began her career in education as a substitute teacher at an alternative high school program in the city’s school district. She recalls that she and the other teachers received very little guidance or support from the main high school with which the program was affiliated. As a result, she relied heavily on her own political science background to teach that first year. As an alternative program, her students were
youth “who had for all purposes dropped out of school” (p. 22, F1_First Interview) and many of whom were adjudicated. That same year, the mayoral race was in full swing, and Linda took advantage of this real-life opportunity to teach her students about how the government worked and how they could actively participate in that process. In our first interview, she recollected:

Because I was new [to the city] and because we were in an offsite location, no one had bothered to explain to us the rules of the district, of what you can do, what you can’t do with kids. And so there were eight of us [teachers and staff] over there, and we just had a good time doing what we thought we could do. And so with the election, I was teaching them about the electoral process, and we didn’t have much in the form of text books… we didn’t have the internet. We didn’t have computers. But you know, I had to teach them uh, supposed to be teaching them American history and government, right? So we used the newspaper in the elections, and… I taught them about polling… We used the newspaper to do that and to follow the elections. (pp. 22-23, F1_First Interview)

During that same interview, she and I talked about the richness of this first teaching experience as it related to the social action and activist mindset from which she had recently transitioned. Again, Linda had not initially wanted to become a teacher, but the ways in which this initial entrée to the field overlapped with her social action identity drew her to the work in a way she did not anticipate. That exchange follows: (p. 24, F1_First Interview)

*Interviewer:* So you didn’t go into substitute teaching because you wanted to be a teacher… you were just there because it was a position and…

*Participant:* And I needed some money. I needed to live.

*Interviewer:* Right, right, because you had just moved to the city.

*Participant:* I had just moved to the city… And it was a time… Remember the 60s, 70s, was the Vietnam War. I participated in demonstrations [in college]. It was the Black Power Movement. A lot of social things were going on. It was an exciting time. It was a challenging time. It was a frightening time… I mean you mix all of that together. And then coming to the city, you know… was just very different. It was a very different experience. And so to have this election and now I’m
teaching these adjudicated youth; I’ve got to teach them their rights. I’ve got to get them to understand what their role is in this society… So that was just wonderful and that was my first teaching experience, and I loved it. It hooked me.

*Interviewer:* Why did you love it so much?

*Participant:* Because I thought… it helped young people who were, who were possibly going astray, um, understand… a system that they need to know. And it really helped them maybe change their lives in some way.

Ironically, the lack of structured oversight from the main high school in this first teaching setting resulted in a level of instructional freedom that allowed Linda to tap into personal and internal resources and knowledge tied to identities related to her family’s commitment to community service and her own notions of political consciousness and activism. Education was a lever for systemic change, and it is likely that this connection between her initial teaching experience and a valued social identity she already possessed reframed and solidified the ways that being a teacher could allow her to achieve the same goals to which she had aspired through her dreams of becoming a lawyer.

Thus, her enthusiasm and passion for teaching during her substitute years at the alternative high school eventually caught the attention of someone from one of the local universities. Though it is unclear what formal position this person held, the individual often visited the school to work with another teacher enrolled in the university’s teacher certification program. With this person’s encouragement, Linda decided to enroll in graduate classes and received her teaching degree. After two years as a substitute teacher, Linda was hired to teach at a traditional public middle school for the 1975-1976 school year. Here, she would dedicate fourteen years as a teacher, teaching 8th grade U.S. History in one of the oldest cities in the United States.
As evidenced by her tenure at this school, Linda speaks endearingly of her time teaching this particular grade level, providing hints of the strength and important value of her professional social identity as a teacher. And again, her passion for teaching this group of students and her creative approaches to pedagogy and instruction eventually drew the attention of her principal, someone who would eventually become a valued mentor and encouraged her to make advancements towards a career in school leadership. Linda’s first year teaching was also the year of the U.S. bicentennial, an event the entire city was preparing to celebrate. Working with a team of five other teachers and across different disciplines, she coordinated the creation and execution of a bicentennial play that would be prepared throughout the academic year and be presented to the school in June. The play was a success and reflected extremely positively on the school. Her efforts in collaborating with her fellow teachers in this endeavor drew the attention of her principal, Sam Waters, who took note of her work. She remembered that he “saw [her] so actively involved with the kids and in the activities, [that] he began to give her more responsibility” (p. 6, F1_First Interview). These added responsibilities included her becoming the advisor for the student council in her second year of teaching. In this position, she encouraged students to commit to community service projects and to learn appropriate ways to approach the principal about questions and issues of concern in order to give “them a sense of ownership and belonging” within the school (p. 5, F2 Interview). Principal Waters also put her on the scheduling committee for the school in addition to assigning her to the discipline office, which “became an uproar, because they had never had a woman in the discipline office before” (p. 7, F2 interview). And it is through these
recollections of the experiential learning opportunities her principal provided her that we begin to see the role that Sam Waters played as Linda’s mentor. She credits him for getting her into school administration. She recalled that “he was the one that encouraged me to do it. It wasn’t that I set out to be a principal… I guess he recognized something in me” (p. 6, F1_First Interview).

When I asked Linda why she thought the idea of becoming a principal never occurred to her after having taught for so long, she took a long pause and responded:

I don’t know, I don’t know if it’s because I was a woman. I don’t know if it was because I was African American… I think it was more the gender thing than anything else. Also, I had come from the South… And being in [this new city], as I’ve learned over the years being any place, the principalship is also very political. (p. 7, F1_First Interview)

But her mentor, Sam Waters, a Black man and native to the city appealed to the values and beliefs that connected back to her social action and racial/ethnic identities. She recalled:

He was a [native]… He was concerned about education in [this city], and he was particularly concerned about Black children… And he said to me, “We need, I need to make sure and my job is to influence enough young Black people to go into leadership because we must be in positions of leadership policy.” He said, “We must go into policy, and we must go into executive leadership because this city has more Black children in the system, and we should not always rely on somebody else to make decisions for our children. We have to be at the table…” He saw himself as a catalyst of promoting leadership so that Black and Brown children could have someone who had similar experiences be in places to make decisions about their education… And having been reared in the South, having been a child of the Civil Rights Movement that stayed with me. And it stayed with me all these years. It has broadened, because I don’t just see it as my role to be… in a leadership position so that I can make sure that Black kids [can] get a good education… and civil rights has broadened. I see it as my role to help every child get a good education… but I understood what he was saying. And it touched me… coming from a family where civil rights was extremely important. That was the era I grew up in. (p. 15, F1_Second Interview)
It is important to note here that Linda’s consideration of becoming a school administrator began during a unique period of time in the district. The then superintendent was the first Black female superintendent, and she had instituted several new policies regarding principal recruitment including the establishment of an alternate pathway to the principalship meant to address the social nepotism and politics of before. The program was meant to place vice principals and principals on merit and involved a three-step process: a written test, an interview, and an internship with two different veteran principals. Thus, in Linda’s fourteenth year of teaching, she enrolled in the district’s program and began to prepare to apply for a principalship with the support of her mentor, Sam Waters.

To start, her principal got her involved in the Educators’ Roundtable – a group of Black school leaders in the city that focused on preparing and promoting the hiring of aspiring Black educators to school administration positions. And this type of group, at the time, was not unique; there existed a number of different associations of this sort for each of the different racial/ethnic groups in the city (see pp. 8-10, F2 Interview). The Educators’ Roundtable held trainings facilitated by current principals in the district who provided insights into current reforms and policies. Later that year, Linda took all of the principal and vice principal tests, placing in the top 3 for each. She then recalls having done well in the interview process; however, based on the negative recommendation of one of the two principals with whom she interned (a Black male principal), she failed to be placed as a principal that year. She refers back to this incident as “devastating” and
“embarrassing”, and she shared her disappointment in our first interview: (pp. 10-11, F1_First Interview)

Participant: … what was supposed to happen is you were going to be appointed a principalship based on where your number was on this list… And so there was a separate exam given for each level of the principalship; whether it was a vice principal, elementary, middle, or high school [principal]… So, I took every test.

Interviewer: Why did you take every test?
Participant: I wanted the job… I took all of them and I scored… in the top three on each one… Then after you did that, they put you through 12 weeks of internship with two different principals… It was really grueling. And so you were in one school for six weeks and another school for six weeks, and then these two principals would get together to say whether you were going to be a principal or not.

Interviewer: They had that much weight?
Participant: Supposedly… I went through 12 weeks, one year. And one principal said no… After I had scored [so well]. So, that knocked me out from becoming a principal that year… It was the most crushing thing that ever happened to me in my life.

Linda’s disappointment and confusion about this outcome are understandable. However, because she had taken all the tests and done well, she was in fact placed as a vice principal at a school in the district. It was the fact that she had not obtained a principal position specifically that she found, as she put it, both embarrassing and devastating. To her colleagues back at the middle school, it appeared that she had succeeded in her endeavor. Linda recalled that “publicly people didn’t really know… if you’re a teacher, you don’t understand. So they were congratulating me… on going to [this new school as a vice principal]. They didn’t really know that I had truly failed. I felt like a failure” (p. 15, F1_First Interview).

From this initial disappointment, however, two things emerged. First, she did in fact move on the following year and take on a vice principalship at a high achievement,
magnet school. In addition, at the behest of the deputy superintendent (second in charge to the superintendent at the time), Linda decided to re-apply for a principalship position the following year. In this latter exchange, Linda recalls that the deputy superintendent called her to her office and told her that because she had done so well in the district’s principal program process but failed to be placed as a principal, something had gone wrong. The deputy superintendent appealed to Linda’s social action identity by asking for her help in fixing the system, a call for action that this former activist was sure to respond. Linda remembered how she reacted to this conversation noting, “So… I went through the process again because [the deputy superintendent] had confidence in me, and she, she made me (pause) say, you’ve got to prove something. You’ve got to help the system correct itself” (p. 14, F1_First Interview). Although she did not explicitly connect this conversation with her earlier discussions with her mentor, Principal Waters, it is important to remember that for Linda, the initial call to becoming a principal which he had put forward appealed to not only her social action identity but her racial/ethnic identity as well, demonstrating the important interplay of social identities and how they can be foregrounded or backgrounded based on the meaning made by the individual. Thus, Linda went through the application process again, and this time, her hard work paid off. After one year as vice principal, Linda was placed as the principal at a different elementary school in the city the following year.

Initial School Leadership Experience, City 1

In the late 1980s, Linda began her career in school leadership as a vice principal. She would go on to serve as principal at two more schools before transitioning to a
different district in a different city. Of particular import is the fact that each of these three placements in City 1 were the result of district mandates. It would be ten years before she actively chose and applied to a school to lead, and this fact provides important context in understanding her experiences in school leadership during this time. Specific to her school leadership experiences in City 1, the consequences of such mandated school placements fueled perceptions of her being an outsider – both by her and by others – and required Linda to be increasingly resourceful in finding ways to create organizational change from the inside out. This influenced the way that she understood the challenges inherent in leading in each school, and it required her to tap into her own valued social identities – particularly her social action and teacher identities – in search of resolution.

It is important to note that given my interest in the potential relationship between social identities and leadership and the time-bound nature of this dissertation, I have chosen to focus on the school leadership experiences for which I have the greatest data. In all, her service at these three schools in particular spans a period of fifteen years, and the events discussed here reflect those discussed in both our interviews as well as her own dissertation and which provide insights into Linda’s key social identities of value.

A1 Elementary School

It was late spring during Linda’s only year as assistant principal when she received her first principal assignment from the district. The form letter she received informed her that she would report as the principal at A1 Elementary School, a school of which she knew nothing and which was located in a vibrant but impoverished area in the northern part of the city (a different region of the city and district than she had worked for
the last fifteen years). A1 Elementary School, however, would be the location of her first three years as a principal, and both her appointment and entrance into the school and community would bring with it significant challenges.

She was contacted a few days after receiving her assignment and asked to attend a meeting with the Regional Superintendent. Linda was told that the “current principal was being transferred to a middle school” and “was expecting [her] to make contact”. Further, she “should expect [to receive] from the principal a transition booklet that would outline… the school improvement plans and goals, budget information, bank accounts, staff roster, access codes for security for the building and the building keys” (p. 52, Dissertation). It all sounded straightforward until she actually met with the former principal later that summer. Linda recounted this challenging encounter in her dissertation:

The former principal… remarked upon my entry [to our meeting], “I wonder why they chose you to replace me. Do you think that you can walk in my footsteps? You’ve got big shoes to fill.” I was taken aback by her arrogance and her anger. I was led to believe that her leaving the school was a promotion. I did not know that she did not want to leave the school and was unprepared for the onslaught that I received. I had not heard of this person before. I did not know her reputation. I did not know the legacy she was leaving, as I had worked in another region as a classroom teacher and was not privy to the administrative hotline…Her tirade continued for a few more moments and she ended by saying, “I guess you’ll do, but I do not see you fulfilling the goals I have in place for the school”… She told me that she would be keeping an eye on me and that there were many people in the [school] community that were her personal friends and would give her reports. (pp. 52-53, Dissertation)

By the end of the meeting, it became clear that Linda would not be receiving a transition booklet or be given the keys or access codes to the building as she requested. She did, however, learn that the former principal had put into place a number of social services for
students and their families at the school such as laundry services for families to use. And at first, Linda was excited to hear about these programs, but as a former teacher, she took note that there was little information shared regarding the state of academic instruction. In fact, she was “told not to be concerned about the academic needs of the children, because the teachers would take care [of] that” (p. 54, Dissertation). And although this provided some encouragement, Linda left the meeting nonetheless “feeling tired and intimidated, not knowing any better, and having no one [she] could really reach out to [initially] for assistance” (p. 53). Thus, with the opening of school soon approaching, she reconnected with the Regional Superintendent who helped her to obtain “a copy of the School Improvement Plan… as well as budget information. She [also] arranged for the access code and keys to the school to be changed [and] an audit of the school’s accounts was conducted” (p. 55).

Linda also received much-needed support from her former principal and mentor, Sam Waters, who came to her new school to meet with her shortly after she became principal. The insights and guidance he offered ensured that the remaining operational considerations needed for the school to run smoothly were in place. In our second interview, Linda shared:

He walked with me that first year and taught me: “Make sure that you have a couple of flashlights with plenty of batteries,” you know, “[in] this drawer, so if the power goes out”… the common sense things that you need to know, um, for operational purposes, he was there. “Know where your boiler is”… those were the kinds of things, he walked back there with me several times, “Look at this. Look at that”… You know, so I mean, I am just, um, eternally grateful to him for his guidance. And I can’t say that enough, but it was because of Sam Waters that I became a principal… He mentored me up to that point in my life. (p. 12, F2 Interview)
Thus, with the support of district leadership and her former mentor, many of the operational and management pieces tied to Linda’s first principalship fell into place. This allowed her to focus more on two key remaining issues – the legacy of the social service programs and practices put in place by the former principal and issues surrounding academic instruction.

*Building Relationships in the Community*

After the cold welcome Linda had received from the former principal, she was uncertain of how she would be perceived by members of the school and the wider community. The former principal’s focus on providing social services to members of the community and the school had allowed her to build relationships, ones that she had noted she would use to monitor Linda as she transitioned into the principalship. However, Linda’s ability to take on this particular aspect of the principal’s role would be tested within the first months of her appointment to the school. And as such, it would provide her with a chance to craft her own narrative of who she was as principal with members of the school and community.

Early in the fall semester of her first year, Linda was visited by the widowed husband of one of the school’s paraprofessionals who had died the summer before. The former principal had assisted neighborhood “residents, particularly the elderly [who] had limited literacy skills… [and] helped these people when there was a legal, medical or other issue that may require the skills of reaching and writing” (p. 56, Dissertation). Moreover, the community had come to expect this of the principal, and this was indeed why the gentleman came to her that day. With a bag full of insurance papers and other
legal documents, he sought Linda’s assistance in settling his wife’s affairs. In her
dissertation, she recollected this experience:

He told me that he felt that the Principal of the school was the only person who
could help him and who he could trust because living in the neighborhood he
lived in, he knew that if people knew that he was going to be receiving money, he
would become a target for foul play. I felt very humbled and honored at his trust
in me. I also felt very inadequate… as I had never had that kind of experience of
helping to settle anyone’s estate. I did not know what to do. What I did was read
through the documents. I explained to him what I thought the documents said and
what they meant. I helped him put his documents in some type of order. And with
the assistance of the Home and School Coordinator, I was able to learn that the
State Representative’s office was around the corner from the school. Together he
and I walked around the corner where I had the opportunity to meet the State
Representative and to explain to him my visit… since the employee had not died
with a will, I felt that the gentleman needed the assistance of an attorney… and
that although the State Representative may not be able to help him, he would be
able to direct him to someone that could provide him with more guidance than I
was able to do. This experience helped me to establish myself with a tenured and
respected member of the community. I was also able to make contact with a
strong political figure who would be able to serve as an advocate for the school
and an ally for me in working with the community. These introductions and
connections helped me better understand the culture and needs of the community
and contributed to the design of an instructional and outreach program that would
assist students and their families with issues in the community. I wanted to help. I
wanted to build their capacity to handle their own issues and not have them
dependent on others. (pp. 56-57, Dissertation)

Again, this encounter provides an interesting look into Linda’s thinking about this
particular challenge as it related to the expectations of the principal’s role held by the
school and the community. She could have chosen to tell the gentleman that she was not
qualified to help him or delegate the task to the Home and School Coordinator. However,
she chose to walk with him both literally and figuratively that day, assisting him in
finding his way to someone who could provide him with more guidance and knowledge
about the process than she was able to provide. In this, there are elements reminiscent of
her earlier years spent with her grandfather. For both gentleman, Linda understood that
their limited literacy was not a reflection of their worth or status within the community. And true to her family’s social action identity, she knew that the goal and rationale for her support of members of the school community was not simply to provide acts of kindness. It was instead meant to encourage them to become their own agents of change, an approach that would extend to her work in other areas of the school.

This is how Linda began to deepen her understanding of the students, family, and community of the school, by personally taking on the responsibility for tasks she could have otherwise delegated to others. A key example of this approach revolved around the school yard – which she had noted was full of debris, broken glass, and other litter and which reflected the illicit drug and violent activities that often occurred in the neighborhood surrounding the school. She committed herself to cleaning it at the beginning of every school week.

Because of the weekend activities in the neighborhood, the school’s yard was used as a place for gambling, beer drinking and bottle tossing. All types of paraphernalia would be found in the yard at the conclusion of the weekend. The clean up [sic] of the yard became a part of the routine that the custodian, the non-teaching assistant and I performed every Monday morning. We came prepared with a pair of jeans, ready to use the large brooms, trash cans, bags and rubber gloves to make sure that the yard would be a safe place for student play. (p. 73, Dissertation)

The school yard became a central point from which she was able to make herself visible as the school’s leader. In what she referred to as “the power of the yard’s activities” (p. 74, Dissertation), this applied to students and their families as well as to teachers and staff. For the former, her daily presence in the yard every morning provided her with a chance to talk with students and their parents, providing her with insights into their needs and about which she admitted early on that she knew little. Her learning through these
informal conversations provided her with insights into how the school could be more responsive and challenged her own assumptions about what parents and students needed. For example, she came to realize that many of the male parents she met were in fact single parents raising their child or children on their own. This led to a branching out of the PTA (which many of the men felt was overly female-oriented in their activities) to include a separate “support group for single fathers” at the school (p. 75, Dissertation). In regards to how Linda’s daily presence in the school yard impacted teachers and staff, it allowed her to monitor attendance and tardiness. She recalled that “teachers knew that [she] was watching and they knew that [she] would document their attendance”. As a result, “daily attendance of staff was almost 100%” during her time as principal (p. 74, Dissertation). Thus, in both cases, the school yard became a place from which she was able to be both accessible and hold others accountable, and her presence sent a message. She noted the following regarding the ripple effect this had on her presence as a leader:

I found that one relationship led to another and that a web of support began to develop. My presence in the yard served as a stimulant in gaining support for the school. As a by-product I gained support for myself as the new administrator. The community learned that my style was different but my commitment to the needs of the children was genuine. (p. 77, Dissertation)

Linda was a leader open to learning, to questioning her own assumptions. And though it would take time, her willingness to place herself directly in the work to be done would be an integral factor in her acceptance by others into the school community.

Teaching, Learning, and Leadership

In regards to academic instruction, something the former principal of A1 Elementary School was reticent to discuss, Linda managed to learn from the Regional
Superintendent that the school was struggling. The former principal had told Linda that issues surrounding learning and teaching would be handled by the teachers, and this encouraged the former teacher as she began her principalship. Unfortunately, however, Linda’s attempts to meet with the school’s instructional team (e.g., math coach, counselor, reading specialist, etc.) prior to the start of the school year were met with great resistance. She eventually came to find that this had a great deal more to do with the relationship they had with the former principal in addition to the politics and perceptions of Linda being an outsider to the school. She reflected on this in her dissertation:

They [the instructional team] did not want to place themselves in a position to be criticized for lack of loyalty to the previous administrator and her programs. Not having met me or being sure of my “agenda” they were not going to put themselves out until they had some indication of the direction I would take. (pp. 55-56, Dissertation)

As a former teacher, instruction was and continues to be a strong focus of Linda’s goals for school improvement as a school leader. And after giving her initial opening address to the staff later that September in which she outlined her hopes and vision for the school, she found that the faculty “genuinely welcomed” her (p. 58, Dissertation). She recalled:

I discovered that the teachers had such a yearning for educational leadership and they were willing to follow the lead of anyone who would help them develop a strong instructional program… They did not want a school where their roles were relegated to supporting social programs [as it had been before], but one where social programs supported student learning. (p. 58)

The responses she received from the faculty focused in on Linda’s potential to be a strong instructional leader, something they seemed desperate to have. Thus, Linda knew that she needed to develop a strong plan of action for instructional improvement at the school, but once again, she “felt somewhat inadequate to the task… as [her] background was in
secondary education. [The school] needed someone who understood early literacy and beginning mathematics... someone who could help teachers integrate language arts skills through the curriculum” (p. 59, Dissertation). Still aware of her perceived outsider status to the school community and to elementary education, she drew upon her teacher identity and her own intellectual curiosity to identify a way that she could not only learn quickly but begin to build support and trust with the faculty. Knowing the immediate need, Linda chose to reach out to the school’s reading specialist, someone who had expressed support and optimism regarding Linda’s potential to be a strong instructional leader. Linda recalled:

I confessed my situation to the reading specialist and told her that I needed to be reliant on her knowledge to help guide [the] school to the level of proficiency needed to improve student achievement. She took this confession in confidence and we became a team in creating the skeleton plan for the school’s renewal. She began bringing me books on early literacy and together we attended every workshop or professional session in the region on literacy development that would help me learn and that would inform our plan. We began to share our plans with other members of the instructional support team and they became excited about the work and began to contribute to its development. The bonding that began to take place in the team was strong and we realized that we were creating something special. Our major concern was presenting the plan to the school and getting buy-in from the staff about the changes we wanted to make in the instructional program. (p. 60, Dissertation)

In this example, we see how Linda again placed herself working side-by-side with the teachers in the school, learning alongside them and from them. There was an element of risk to her willingness to reach out to the reading specialist, to make her vulnerabilities known, but the potential benefit of identifying a much needed ally in facing her challenges as a new leader proved greater than the risk to this new leader. In this way, her social identity as a former teacher contributed to her willingness to present herself as a
leader in the way that she did by focusing on the needs of the students and acknowledging her own areas of needed growth.

Thus, this particular example raises questions regarding the extent that her teacher and social action identities had in shaping her understanding of her role and responsibilities as the school’s leader. If, for example, she had purely approached this from the former role she had as a teacher, she could have assumed that the teachers as professionals could handle the development of an instructional plan and taken a more hands off approach of delegating the task. Instead, she chose to work alongside them, creating opportunities for collaboration and as she called it, “collective action” (p. 62, Dissertation). Hence, Linda built her own insider community, slowly transforming both academic instruction and the climate of the school from the inside out.

Linda’s focus on academic instruction would also prove instrumental in the transition of her key social role identities within the school – from teacher to principal. Her work with the instructional team eventually had a ripple effect on the impact it had on other teachers in the school. By year 2, it gave Linda the confidence she needed to more seriously address issues of quality classroom instruction. A description of the strong stance she took and the resulting consequences of reprimanding lackluster teachers, some who had been “protected” under the former principal’s administration, was included in her dissertation:

A clear message was sent that I was serious about the instruction of the students and that, regardless of your tenure in the school, there was an expectation for your performance. Many teachers, who felt that there had been, under my predecessor, a dual system in the school for evaluations applauded my actions… For them the sacred cows were now being exposed. The recipients of less than adequate
observations felt that that they were being inappropriately singled out and resented the critiques. (pp. 68-69, Dissertation)

As expected, Linda’s actions led to challenges with the teachers’ union, and though at first “frightened,” she acquired the support of the district’s labor relations specialist who reinforced her “authority to have an employee comply to labor expectations” (p. 69, Dissertation). And through these turbulent negotiations, Linda began to build her own deeper understanding of the distinctions between her former teacher identity and her newly established identity as a school leader. She recounted:

These experiences with the teachers over their instructional delivery made me the principal of the school. I was no longer the young lady who came in to make changes. I was now taken as the serious administrator who not only talked the game about instructional delivery and about student achievement but a person who would take action on her expectations. I had gained the power I needed to go with the authority I had. (p. 70, Dissertation)

This transition was, in many ways, necessary. Though Linda would continue to draw upon her extensive time as a classroom teacher in the years to come, how she came to establish her social identity as a principal would set the conditions for her own future success.

As a result, in her three years at A1 Elementary School, her collaborative approach, focus on relationships, as well as her willingness to address ineffective teaching led to increased faculty and community involvement and eventually higher student achievement. She received the New Principal of the Year award from the district. Her efforts brought her to the attention of system-level leadership, specifically the Regional Superintendent, who at the beginning of her fourth year at A1 would abruptly re-assign her to a new school, one in desperate need of improvement.
A2 Middle School

In the early 1990s, Linda was transferred to a different school in a different region of the city. This transition would happen quickly, three weeks into the school year, and as noted before, she would play no active part in the decision. The details of her move would result in a tumultuous entry into the principalship at this new school, placing her as interim principal at a time when the district was attempting to move towards site-based management. This approach, meant that the district would “allow school staff and parents to have a voice in the selection of a permanent principal” (p. 84, Dissertation), and it left Linda particularly vulnerable to threats of being an outsider to an already adversarial and volatile school community. Though her tenure at this school would over time prove to be productive towards making strides in improving academics and overall school climate, the obstacles she faced would challenge her both professionally and personally.

Located in the northwest region of the city, the school was in a different part of the district than she had served in her either of her last two positions. And though the academic challenges rivaled those of safety and discipline, it would be months before she would be able to address issues surrounding instruction and learning. Instead, her first three months included challenges not only from students but from faculty and staff.

*Discipline Concerns, Defiance, and Dissent*

At the time of her arrival, the school was broken into “houses” – subgroups into which the school was organized (similar to, based on Linda’s description, what more recently would be referred to as small learning communities). However, instead of collaborating towards the achievement of common goals benefiting the school, the houses
and the teachers within them often “competed with each other viciously and… rules in one area of the building were not necessarily followed in another area” (p. 86, Dissertation). Therefore, with no shared student discipline practices governing the entire school, the first major incident of dissent occurred during Linda’s second week as principal.

Given the expansive geography and wide range of neighborhoods served by the middle school, there were many students who qualified to receive bus tokens distributed for free by the district if they lived more than two miles from the school. The distribution process was a serious process involving a part-time accountant who would come to the school and meticulously record the dispersal of tokens to the appropriate students and to prevent issues of inaccurate records or theft. Principals at each school were held personally accountable for any tokens which went missing, often having to pay for the cost out of their own salaries. Thus, on the particular day that the accountant arrived at the school to distribute tokens, students were less than cooperative. They refused to listen to the instructions from the accountant who asked them to line up so that she could “verify each child and their status before issuing the tokens” (p. 87, Dissertation). Students began to chant as they resisted, and the accountant eventually came to Linda and the security officer at the school to seek their assistance. In her dissertation, she makes a point to describe that “the security officer came, watched from a distance but did not say anything to the students” (pp. 87-88). In addition, her attempts to reason with students unfortunately and eventually turned almost riotous as they realized that the buses were about to leave for the day. Her description of the event is as follows:
Students became more unruly and began to push forward, toward the door of the accountant. We both became afraid that someone was going to get hurt in the pushing and that someone might try to grab the tokens and run. We looked at each other and I nodded for her to close the door. The students became more incensed… [and] this helped me gain their attention. I informed them that they would not receive tokens that day and would have to find other means to get home. Some of them requested to use the office phone to call a parent, others borrowed a token from friends, some started walking home and there was another group that had enough money to pay regular bus fare for the day. I reported the incident to the appropriate district offices and wrote a letter for mailing to parents explaining the situation. I thought the matter was closed. The next morning to my surprise, I received a phone call from the Director of the District’s Internal Affairs Department saying that they received a report of my endangering the lives of children by forcing them to walk through dangerous territories and by not taking into consideration their security, health or welfare. Two detectives were sent to the school to investigate my handling of the token incident and to determine the soundness of my judgments with regard to student safety. (p. 88, Dissertation)

As a result of the investigation, Linda learned that it was the security officer who had reported the incident against her. As a member of the staff who had witnessed the challenges of the situation, she was both upset and confused by the accusation. She confronted the officer in a conversation that would launch a battle between them for months to come. She recollected:

I summoned the security officer to my office. He was quick to respond. I asked him why he made the report with such accusations. He informed me that he felt that I was unfit to be the children’s principal. He further stated that he had been at the school for over 15 years and that he loved the school, and he was not going to allow just anyone to become its principal. He felt that the district had done wrong by overlooking one of the vice principals and that he saw it as his duty to make sure that my interim status did not become permanent. (p. 89, Dissertation)

Tied to the extreme nature of insider/outsider conflict related to a mandated principal placement, this particular staff member would be the root of several more acts of sabotage before some resolution would be reached. Most outrageously, however, was the part he played in instigating weeks of bomb threats to the school, all in an attempt to have
Linda dismissed. His guilt was revealed only when the security officer confided in one of the school’s disciplinarians that he was not only responsible for the threats but had also planted a handful of inactive, “low-level” explosives around the school which were discovered during one of the recent incidents. Appalled at what he heard, the disciplinarian reported the conversation to Linda, the principal, who then notified the authorities. Shortly after, the security officer was arrested.

There is no doubt that the aforementioned example was indeed extreme, and many principals would struggle being placed in similar positions. In this case, however, what is revealed is less about Linda’s social identities as principal or based on her racial/ethnic or gender identities. Based on her description, the school population was predominantly Black. The challenges she faced were more about the social identities of groups within the existing community in response to hers as an outsider, the extent to which individuals in the school risked their own livelihoods out of loyalty to social identities to which they identified. And unfortunately, this would not be the only incident in which staff members would stand strongly in opposition to Linda’s appointment as principal.

Another instance in which Linda’s authority was outright challenged was connected to work a group of teachers, led by one of the vice principals, were doing as a result of a large grant they had received from a major foundation. The focus of the grant was to facilitate “teachers in developing interdisciplinary thematic units… [and to support] a team approach and [encourage] collaboration” (p. 92, Dissertation). Given Linda’s own middle school teaching experience and her desire to find a way to begin to
focus on the academic issues facing the school, she was excited to learn more about the work of this group. Her inquiries, however, were met with silence; none of the teachers or the vice principal involved with the project would speak to her about the grant or the work that they had been doing over the last year. This led her to contact the grant provider directly for more information who was happy to hear of her interest and encouraged her participation and support. She was sent a copy of the grant and information about the professional development activities tied to this work. In these materials, she learned that the team from her school “was scheduled to present their unit at a district-wide professional development” session later that fall (p. 92, Dissertation).

Linda did not tell anyone on the team of her plans, but she attended the presentation hoping to show her support. She recalled that she “wanted to demonstrate to the staff that [she] was there to support them in their efforts and that [she] was proud to be their principal” (p. 92). Upon her arrival, she did not speak with any of the team members, but they nonetheless “introduced” her as the principal of their school before starting their presentation. Unfortunately, the acknowledgement was merely a formality for when Linda attempted to approach the team afterward to congratulate them, they once again refused to speak with her. Linda recalled:

The… team gave a wonderful presentation. They were able to explain the concept of their unit and showed artifacts of student work that demonstrated the unit’s effectiveness in soliciting student engagement. After the presentation, I went to the team to compliment them. I was snubbed. The teachers had gathered around the vice principal and I overheard her say, “She has nothing to do with this. We will not allow her to get credit for our work. We must stick together as a group. I don’t care if she is the principal. If we stick together, she won’t be for long.” I was shocked. The vice principal continued, “You know the site-based team will select the principal. We have to make sure that team hears our voices and she will never become principal.” I turned and left. I was heartbroken. I was angry. I got to
my car and cried but I also became more determined that my appointment to [the school] would be a permanent one. I was stubborn enough not to be pushed away. They would not get the best of me, I thought. (p. 93, Dissertation)

The following Monday, the day seemed to proceed as expected, that is until the end of the day. That afternoon, Linda had been in an instructional meeting with another group of teachers when she noticed through the window that a group of people had congregated outside of the school. What ensued is described in her dissertation as follows:

I wondered why they were there and commented about their presence. My secretary responded, “They are waiting for you. They are protesting you and your presence at the professional development on Saturday and your appointment as principal.” To my surprise, the group had done some politicking over the weekend. Their intent was to frighten me into not returning. I was perplexed. I sat down and called the district superintendent and asked what he had gotten me into. I explained what was happening outside and asked for assistance as I was becoming afraid of being in this school. He told me to sit tight, that he would be right over. He, along with a security officer, arrived about ten minutes later. He stopped to address the assembled group. He listened to what they had to say and they replied. In his reply he indicated that I would remain principal of the school until a permanent principal was named. He also told them that their picketing was against their contract and that if it continued he would have each of them transferred. The group dispersed and left the area. The superintendent escorted me to my car and told me to hang in there. It would be all right. The next day the vice principal was transferred to the district office for assignment. (p. 94, Dissertation)

Here, as was the case in the example before, those who opposed her placement at the school (i.e., the group of protesters and the former security guard) took action against her appointment as “interim” principal in both overt and subversive ways. The site-based management approach the district employed at the time provided opportunity for shared group identities already in place at the school to make moves that would ensure, in their minds, her dismissal.

Yet, these resistant social identity-based groups within the school did not represent the whole of the community with which Linda was working. Her secretary
provided her – here and in other instances – with honest responses to her queries including the sharing of details privy to her as an insider in the community. (In the former example, the disciplinarian had come to her when he learned of the security officer’s role in the bomb threats.) In addition, there are a number of descriptions included in Linda’s dissertation which illustrate that other teachers with whom Linda was working during the same period of time seemed open and responsive to her attempts at leadership. The questions raised through these examples thus highlight not a question of the congruence of the principal’s social identities to the ecology of the school but the ways in which inherent and deeply held values of different social groups within the community can impact thought and behavior. The principalship in this way is indeed political, and it is a position left vulnerable to the varied expectations of the multiple stakeholders of the school. Linda described this sentiment in reflecting on the incident in her dissertation:

These experiences… provided new meaning for me about the importance of the principalship. People viewed the role in so many different ways. They expected so many different things. I found out that people are willing to risk their own careers over this office and the perceived power that they think the principalship carries. (p. 94, Dissertation)

This demonstration of the strength of a group’s convictions tied to their perceived membership (i.e., social identities within a school community) and the threat of outsiders to the goals and expectations they have of the principalship raises questions regarding the underlying issues of power and hierarchy in schools. Though Linda felt that her only recourse was to reach out to the district administrator who had facilitated her appointment to the school in order to address the teacher protest, her doing so and the regional superintendent’s response to the protesting crowd placed the principal and the district on
the same side of the power differential. The results of this incident therefore tapped into issues of real and perceived power that provided Linda the authority she needed to begin to address the needs of the school as its leader.

Although the two aforementioned conflicts resulted in the dismissal of key personnel who openly opposed Linda’s appointment, it did not completely eliminate all of the faculty and staff who resisted the recent change in leadership. However, the ways that these two major incidents were handled contributed favorably to the building of her reputation as a no-nonsense school leader who had the support of the district. Further, it would become known that she was willing to exercise the power provided to her by the district and her position to enforce needed changes in the way that the school and its teachers functioned.

In addition, it is significant to note that there were two key resources to which Linda had access as she began the principalship at A2 Middle School that played an important part in supporting her success at that school. To start, after having taken on a principal intern the year prior, Linda had the opportunity to enroll in a graduate level course at a local university in return for the mentorship and supervision she had provided. Thus, during her challenging first year at A2, she was also enrolled in a graduate level class focused on issues of educational leadership. Given the extreme difficulty of facilitating the challenging discussions required in her reform efforts at the school, she made up for her lack of facilitation skills through strategies she learned in the course.

Secondly and perhaps more importantly, her involvement with the university during that turbulent first year connected her with her second key mentor, David Smith,
who was not only the instructor for the course but was also an assistant superintendent in the school district overseeing several different regions. This included the one in which Linda’s school was located, and in her small graduate course of approximately eight students, she was the only educator who worked in the city’s school district (and not in the surrounding suburbs or independent schools). Thus, in addition to the support she received from her previous mentor, Sam Waters, it is also highly likely that her new mentor, David Smith, was able to provide insights into the politics and inner workings of the district in a way that her former mentor may not have been able.

Based on the available data in this study, it is difficult to determine if her trust in district administration – either overt or unrealized – was perhaps tied to the positive support that her mentoring relationship with David Smith provided. We do know, however, that it is likely that aspects of her own social identities (namely, her identity as learner and her emergent identity as principal) influenced her interest in enrolling in the graduate-level course, and the fact that this is the setting in which she and her second mentor met also indicates some overlap in shared social identities influential in establishing what became a significant mentoring relationship in her leadership trajectory, one that greatly influenced her eventual move to a new city in which she would begin the most challenging phase of her career.

*Extended Leadership Experience, City 2*

By the late 1990s, Linda had committed ten years of her career to successfully leading schools in City 1. The last six of those years were dedicated to her work as principal at A2 Middle School at which she eventually earned a second, coveted, district-
level Principal of the Year. However, an opportunity emerged that would allow her, for the first time in her career, to choose the school in which she would lead. Her next placement would be her first and only high school principalship, and the choice to apply for this position would bring her to a different city and district. Because this opportunity would come to her by way of her second mentor, David Smith, then superintendent of the school district to which she would move, Linda was influenced in this move and in her work by his presence and guidance.

In reflecting on the influence that her mentor, the superintendent, had on her decision to apply for this position, she shared:

*That's why I went to [City 2]... I followed him because he had mentored me. People didn't understand that. "Why would you go to [City 2]?" But I trusted him! And we had that relationship where, you know... he's gonna push you. And he still pushes me.* (p. 17, F2 Interview)

Linda placed (and continues to place) great weight and value on this mentoring relationship which, for her, is inherently rooted in a sense of trust in her mentor to challenge her to grow and develop as a leader. The extent to which this then guided her decision at this point in her professional career is significant, and this mentoring relationship would serve as both a source of support as well as tribulation for her in the next phase of her career, inadvertently serving as a type of social identity in and of itself.

**A3 High School**

In the spring of what would become her last semester serving as a principal in City 1, Linda was invited to apply for the principalship position at the high school in City 2, a smaller city nearby. Her second mentor, who was the superintendent in that city at the time called her on the phone. He was aware that she was looking to move on from her
current position and told her about the opening at A3 High School. Located less than an hour away but in a different state, the school was the only high school in the city. Having grown up herself in “a one high school town”, Linda thought that the school “represented the possibilities of creating something that was reflective of part of the best of [her] past” (p. 117, Dissertation). Thus, for the first time in her career and for both professional and somewhat personal reasons, she found that she “wanted this school, and… wanted to try to make it [a] better school” (p. 117).

The high school included a number of different buildings which encompassed a square city block, and at the time, it served over 2400 students. The school’s architecture detailed its once great history, but like the city in which it sat, both had declined considerably with the loss of industrial jobs and work over the years. The high school was not only in physical disrepair but was struggling in other ways. When Linda applied to the principalship, “the dropout rate had reached an all time [sic] high of 65% and violence in the school was high” (p. 121, Dissertation). These, however, would not initially be the issues of greatest concern. Instead, in what she would later refer to as a “push/pull relationship” with the school community, issues surrounding the deep history and social identities of some of the school’s key stakeholders would color and shape what would become a “tumultuous beginning” for her as she transitioned into the principalship (p. 122).

*Entry into the High School Principalship*

Although Linda would learn of the position opening through her mentor, he was very deliberate in informing her that she would not receive any assistance from him
during the application process. She recalled that “he had hired a consulting firm to work with the school management team… to set up the protocols for hiring a new principal” (p. 16, F2 Interview). Linda would have to successfully pass two rounds of interviews with various members of the school’s and district’s administrative teams, and if she was able to make it to the final round – an interview with him, the superintendent – she would be his first choice (pp. 15-16, F2 Interview; p. 119, Dissertation). Thus, the transition to a new city, district, and school was in many ways precipitated and encouraged by her positive working relationship with her mentor. As we have seen in her past, she seldom made such major changes career-wise without the support of an inside perspective on her expertise and qualifications for the position (e.g., entering the master’s in teaching program as a substitute teacher or considering the principalship after fourteen years as a certified teacher). Her recruitment was thus purposeful.

Not only had Linda proven her ability to improve both the safety, social climate, and academic performance of two struggling urban schools prior, but her mentor, the superintendent would have known the inner workings of how she approached challenges and of her deep commitment to bettering the lives of disadvantaged youth. Further, given their shared experiences in higher education and valuing of ongoing learning in addition to their previous work together, it likely made sense to him to recommend a principal for the only high school in the city with whom he would need to work closely and who he already sensed would share in his vision for the district. Further, he chose her for the very reason that she would ultimately struggle, because she was an outsider to the politics of the school district and the city. In the formal selection process of which he was not a part,
Linda excelled through the interviews, and in her sixth and final year at A2 Middle School, she was hired to be the principal of A3 High School.

**Outsider’s Perspectives and Community Expectations**

From the start, the expectations held by members of the community and the high school for both the role of the principal as well as the goals of the school would prove to be Linda’s first and perhaps greatest challenge in her position as school leader at A3 High School. She described the deep-seated investment and beliefs held by the community as follows:

Everyone had perceptions about the school based on their personal experience, or from what they had heard from a relative who had attended the school. No one believed that anything had changed about the school over the years and, thus, the stories persisted, true or not about the school. Many of them were good, but often, as in many urban schools, in recent years it [had] been the problematic stories that received the most attention… (pp. 120-121, Dissertation)

In our interviews, Linda commented that the insider/outsider conflict that she faced in City 2 was thus far worse than what she had encountered in her previous city. This is a variation of a recurring theme in her leadership experience which continually challenged her work. Focusing solely on the data available in this study, however, it is also highly likely that the increased sense of scrutiny that she felt in City 2 was related to her leading the only high school in the city. Given the significance of the school as a sociological institution, it would be expected that her role as principal there would have been a great deal more political than the elementary or middle school principalships which she had previously held in a much larger city district. Nonetheless, as she transitioned into her new school leadership role in City 2, she found that she would have to filter through
truths versus deeply held, often false beliefs about the school in order to help move it forward.

Based on her initial assessment, the two key areas of improvement that would require the most immediate attention involved issues regarding how the school was organized and therefore functioned as well as challenges related to curriculum and instruction. However, according to Linda, the initial inquiries from parents and alumni of the school were not about academics but focused on requests to bring back a beloved tradition called “sports night” (see pp. 121-122, Dissertation). As someone new to the community, she researched what the tradition entailed and found out that it not only involved the expenditure of money for costly costumes but the loss of instructional time as the events would require students to miss classes in order to rehearse. She decided that the school could “ill afford to continue [with the tradition]… until the academic programming and student achievement had both been overhauled and increased results indicated improvement” (p. 121). Her decision not to revive this coveted tradition thus serves as an example of both how her outsider status allowed her the freedom through mental and emotional distance to say no to bringing back a school-wide event that required a great deal of resources and time with little contribution to improving the academic woes of the school, but it was a decision that “was met with much resistance” (p. 122) and was the start of what she describes as her oppositional relationship with the school community that would play out in different ways for years to come.

Challenges in School Leadership
Linda continuously found herself entangled in the resistance to change that many members of the school and community held. One key example involved an incident with the vice principal of curriculum and instruction regarding student testing and the loss of potential instructional time. The vice principal was responsible for creating the school’s state testing schedule, and due to a snafu the year before involving the misplacement of a testing booklet, the administrator had taken extra precautions to create a delayed start to school for non-testing students and those who had already passed. It was discovered that the missing test booklet was not in fact stolen by a student but instead lost “among the paperwork of a staff member” (p. 131, Dissertation). Yet the imposed half day for non-testing students stood, and Linda disagreed with its need, feeling that valuable instructional time was being sacrificed. She recalled what happened when she addressed the issue with the vice principal in her dissertation:

When I directed [the vice principal] to schedule the test with school in session for untested students, he appealed my decision to the deputy superintendent, who agreed with him. I became so angry that I lost my cool for a moment. I called the superintendent who reversed the decision of the deputy. This exchange, however, was the beginning of war that continued throughout my tenure in the district. Little did I know of the deep feelings of distrust and unfriendliness from the locals toward outsiders. This incident stirred up those feelings and created resentment because it was felt that I had the ear of the superintendent and thus I was allowed to do anything I wanted without regard to the caution that had been put in place to protect the district. Many felt that I was placing the district in danger. I would pay for this perception of my relationship with the superintendent many times over. (p. 131)

Linda went on to explain that her interest in prioritizing a reinstatement of instructional time was, in her mind, directly related to a need for the teachers of the school to be able to “prove to themselves that as professionals they could administer a [state] test without incident” (pp. 131-132, Dissertation). As a principal with a strong social identity as a
former teacher, she found the state’s oversight of the school “disturbing” and thus focused her energies to “remove doubts about the school’s competence” (p. 132).

A second key challenge that Linda faced in her reform efforts at the school stemmed more directly from issues of curriculum and instruction. Resulting from a decision by the state’s Supreme Court, the city had been chosen as one of 31 economically disadvantaged school districts to receive additional state monies in support of improvement. Yet, the funding came with certain mandates which included that the school be required to select a school-wide reform model focused on academic improvement and to be able to show progress in this area. As it was at her past two schools, instructional leadership was particularly important to Linda. However, the high school curriculum was considerably outdated. Additionally, there was no curricular “alignment” between the high school and the middle schools that fed into it. In attempting to address these issues, Linda felt isolated as she found very little support from the district in addressing the curriculum needs of the high school. Her sense of neglect, however, was somewhat legitimized in that there was no one in central administration except for the superintendent who actually had any high school knowledge or experience. Linda’s own prior teaching experience was in the middle grades, and despite her focus on collaboratively restructuring instructional improvement at her last two schools, they were elementary and middle schools respectively.

Thus, as she had done before, she began researching and learning as much as she could about high school curriculum and instruction while making a point to recognize “knowledgeable teachers who until this point had no voice in helping to change and
create the school as a positive place for learning” (p. 136, Dissertation). As a way to accomplish this, she made sure that “as the principal, [she] participated as an equal… [assuring] the teachers… that the [learning sessions and discussions] were not evaluative and that together [they] would be examining ways to improve” (p. 135). This encouraged productive dialogue among members of the school’s staff and slowly allowed Linda to position herself as an insider within a newly created and collaborative community of teachers. For content and instructional areas lacking internal expertise, Linda brought in outside supports (e.g., educational consultants from the College Board who could develop and strengthen advanced placement courses offered at the school). After a challenging first year, she also took advantage of an opportunity to hire a number of new vice principals who she felt could bolster the strength of her team not only in “shared philosophy” but in regards to further supporting issues of “curriculum, professional development and student services” (p. 150).

Challenges surrounding the lack of academic alignment, however, between the high school and the middle grade schools which fed into it would prove equally as taxing. Yet, tackling these issues would once again surface deeply held feelings of animosity and distrust from those who opposed Linda and her work in the district. As a result of the work the school was accomplishing to improve the quality of curriculum and instruction at the school, they “discovered that each of the feeder schools had adopted a different whole school reform model under the [state Supreme Court] regulations” (p. 138, Dissertation). Thus, as challenging as the academic reform process was for the teachers and principal at the high school, each of the middle schools had been undergoing similar
processes but without any intentional alignment with other schools in the district. As expected, this created problems as “there were no district benchmarks that focused specifically on student achievement within the district… [making] it difficult to determine where students were when entering the [high] school and thus provide them with the supports they needed to be successful” (p. 138). The work that Linda and the high school teachers completed during that first year revealed to them the importance of finding ways to share their learning with the feeder schools and better support the preparation of younger students prior to their entering high school.

In an attempt to address the issue of vertical articulation – or the alignment of all aspects of academic learning (curriculum, instruction, and evaluation) across progressing grade levels within an educational system – Linda took the initiative to set up a meeting with all of the middle school principals in the district. Her past professional experiences in similar circumstances of struggle included multiple examples of her taking similar out-of-the-box approaches, but this time, her actions would be met with contempt. She recalled the incident and her reaction as follows:

All of the [middle school] principals responded favorably to my invitation and I began the process of planning for an overview of the high school’s curriculum and sharing our concerns with the idea that together we could develop an action plan that would help the students become more successful during their initial year at the high school. To my surprise, I was summoned to the deputy’s office and asked to explain myself… I was told that I did not have the authority to call for a meeting of principals and I certainly did not have the authority to talk about changes in curriculum for middle schools. In other words, I was put in my place…. I knew… that in order to get support for my idea I had to use subterfuge. District personnel were intent on keeping me “in my place”. (p. 139, Dissertation)

Although it is not clearly stated whether this is the same deputy superintendent with whom Linda previously contradicted during the testing schedule incident, we can assume
that the response from central administration nonetheless contributed to a building animus towards her. The depths to which the school and district community valued former structures of organization and function would have been further provoked by Linda’s seeming disregard for the previous ways things had been done. She continued, however, with her work with the high school teachers but quickly realized that their progress would be hampered without the chance to work directly with the middle schools.

Hence, at the beginning of her second year as principal, she focused on extending her personal and professional learning by attending a conference on vertical articulation. She was struck by what she learned and was eager to share the importance of this work with the other principals from each of the high school’s feeder schools. So, once again, she invited the principals from the middle schools to a meeting, this time without the knowledge of central administration. She recounted this process and its discovery in her dissertation:

I called my principal colleagues after the conference and invited them to lunch. I shared what I learned and solicited there [sic] support in continuing our conversations about students and their needs. We agreed to meet twice a month on Friday afternoons to discuss the issues and to develop a plan. Each of us brought our math and literacy coaches with us to the meetings. We did not share these meetings with district personnel. We met for the year writing eighth and ninth grade curriculum in mathematics and language arts. The superintendent discovered our meeting one Friday as he visited the school and was profoundly amused at our efforts to be secretive. He was unaware of our previous attempt to meet. He agreed to keep our secret and told us to proceed. He was proud of what we were doing. He said, “This is a case of the tail wagging the dog.” (pp. 139-140, Dissertation)

A couple of key considerations emerge from this description of her work as a principal through this challenge. First and in the same way she had done so working with teachers through various school reforms, she places herself side-by-side in the work with the other
principals who she refers to as her “principal colleagues”. By doing so, she not only crafted a small community of leaders, in which she was now an insider, but she did so within an existing larger insider/outsider dichotomy already in place. Historically, the vertical hierarchy of decision-making power from central administration to principals to teachers has contributed to implied distinctions between these different groups of professionals within the district. Thus, by gaining the buy-in of the middle school principals regarding the importance and need for vertical articulation, she emphasized the mutual benefit of their working together while also placing herself at further odds with district administration (particularly, the deputy superintendent). The exception to this, however, is of course the superintendent, who was also her mentor. His amusement at her “subterfuge” despite the deputy superintendent being part of his leadership team arguably indicates evidence, beyond his good humor, of their positive working relationship. It raises questions regarding the potential overlap of social identities that Linda and the superintendent may have shared, for example, such as one of social action which might explain his being “proud” of her engaging in this work after having been told by someone from his administration that she did not have the authority to do so.

Consequently, despite Linda’s efforts towards building trust and a sense of community within the district which would have shifted her perception of being an outsider, it becomes increasingly apparent the ways that she, in her position and role, may have also been further stigmatized. Tied to her own deep-seated values and beliefs, the toll that the persistence of this insider/outsider conflict would have on Linda became an important contextual piece to her tenure as principal at that school.
“The Pain of Leadership” and Burnout

It is important to note that despite the eventual success Linda experienced in shifting the academic focus and quality of curriculum and instruction at the high school, the process also exacerbated her own feelings of being an outsider. And though she would do her best to disregard this fact, it inevitably framed much of what she experienced in her first years as a principal at A3 High School. She reflected on the impact of her outsider status on work-related challenges in leadership in the following excerpt from her dissertation:

Getting help that first year was non-existent. I was lonely and I cried frequently. I did not have colleagues to share my dilemmas; I was a stranger, an outsider who other administrators did not know. I had not been “home grown” and therefore I was removed from the people who might have given me support. It was rumored across the district that a “pool” had been established with bets being taken on how many days I would remain at the school. This rumor did not increase my confidence or my moral. In fact, I thought long and hard about helping those who had the short bet to become winners. My resolve, however, held and I remained, although no one was forthcoming in providing me with assistance. (p. 150, Dissertation)

Looking back at both of the aforementioned challenges regarding updating the high school curriculum and addressing the issues of vertical articulation in the district, Linda was purposeful in placing herself side-by-side the teachers and the other principals in the work, to intentionally create opportunities to build trust and to establish herself as an insider to these newly formed communities. Yet, the sense of isolation that she continued to experience through ongoing conflicts of identity with others in the school and community would contribute greatly to her eventual burnout and fatigue as school leader. It may also be important to note here that in reviewing the available data, a discrepancy emerged regarding whether Linda ever truly moved to the new city.
Residency has long served as a point of contention for many high profile school and district leaders. Anecdotally, lack of residency in the city in which one serves is often seen as a lack of investment or commitment, and though she noted in her dissertation that she moved for this position (see p. 149), she clearly noted in our interviews that even after sixteen years in different leadership roles in the district, she never actually moved to the city. Although the commute between the two cities is less than an hour by car or train, the discrepancy raises two key questions. First, if she set up a temporary residence in City 2, did she commute back to City 1 during the week after long hours as principal of the high school? This would have implications for issues of burnout that she eventually faced in regards to the amount of physical and emotional drain that appointment had on her. Secondly, if it was perceived that she was not a committed resident of the city (e.g., if she spent her weekends in City 1 with her family), this may have influenced the way that she was received and understood by other members of the community. It may have also explained any additional, focused efforts Linda may have committed to her work as a way to off-set being seen as an outsider.

The amount of energy and time that Linda put into her leadership of the high school may not have been unique compared to other principals placed in similar situations. However, the ways in which she understood her role and responsibilities as the school’s leader as seen through the lenses of her own social identities may have contributed to an increased sense of burden, isolation, and ultimately burnout. She had dedicated six years to the high school as principal, leading it through a restructuring process that helped to improve academic quality, encourage teacher leadership, and
promote student achievement and outcomes. But in that sixth year, she also quietly set out to begin looking for her next step professionally. As a measure of self-care, she confided in her mentor, the superintendent, that she was contemplating a move, and the following year, when an opening became available in central administration, Linda took advantage of what was to her a new learning opportunity in her career, and in the mid-2000s, she moved to central administration.

The years that followed prior to her retirement last year were turbulent, though the details of those years are less clear based on the data available. What we do know, however, is that within a year of her taking on her new position at the district-level, the superintendent (her mentor) would eventually depart from the district. The details of both his leaving as well as what followed for Linda are hazy as the politics involved have made it difficult to decipher fact from editorialized commentaries. Yet, what is known is that Linda would eventually return to being a principal of an elementary school in what might be considered a demotion of sorts given her success at the high school. In our interviews, Linda was reticent to discuss the events of this time in her career – both the superintendent’s departure and her experiences in central administration and subsequent move to the elementary school.

Linda’s recruitment to this new city in part resulted from her positive working relationship with her mentor. Despite the opportunity they had to work together during her time as principal of the high school, she nonetheless found the after effect of his departure somewhat jarring. Having begun her doctoral studies during her time as principal at the local high school, however, she recalls willingly accepting the elementary
school principalship position as both a way to exit the politics of the district and to focus on completing her dissertation. Thus, although her time in City 2 was particularly challenging towards the end of her time there, she remained in the city’s schools for a number of years thereafter, even returning to a position in central administration, before finally retiring from her work in public schools last year.

**Interpretive Summary**

Given the length of Linda’s career in education, her story is expansive and provides unique insights into how both her personal and professional histories and the social identities that she values have influenced her thinking about leading schools. The roots of her social action identity are particularly clear and present in the stories that she shared, and for her personally, it was important that I knew of her family’s impact on shaping this commitment in her, particularly that of her grandfather. In this way, she carries on her family’s commitment to “community service” within the Black community specifically as it has shaped the way she understands the goals and aims of her work as a principal. This is further demonstrated, for example, in the important influence her mentor and former principal, Sam Waters, had on her decision to lead. He appealed to her social action and racial/ethnic identities by framing her move into school administration as fulfilling the need for Black educators such as themselves to be of service to the Black and Brown youth in the city’s schools. And although she does not overtly discuss her race as a social identity per se, this sense of purpose in why she became a school leader and for whom demonstrates the racialized nature of how she sees the world and understands her role within it.
Through the lens of an applied social identity approach, the importance of the individual leader’s perception and ability to self-categorize are paramount. And in Linda’s case, there were multiple social identities of import to her that further informed how she understood her role and responsibilities as a school leader and which more importantly influenced her perception of challenges she faced as a principal. These not only include her social action and racial/ethnic identities but that of geography (e.g., being a southerner in a new East Coast city or being from City 1 when taking on a position at the high school in City 2) as well as of profession (e.g., her teacher identity and eventually that of school administrator as well). Given her rough transitions and turbulent entries into each new position and school which she led, Linda’s case illustrates the importance of deepening our understanding of the role that identities of groups within a school community can have on how a principal understands and negotiates her role and responsibilities as a school leader, particularly when viewed through a social identities lens. Though not explicitly based on more readily discussed identities – such as race/ethnicity, for instance – the shared social identities that sub-groups within each school and community and which Linda was seen as an outsider each held strongly to deep reservoirs of beliefs and values intrinsic to each sub-group. Resistance in such forms is not uncommon for school principals to face upon their initial entry into a school, but framing these challenges through a social identity lens helps to explicate how and why Linda may have chosen to lead through each in the manner that she did. For instance, as a former teacher, Linda often focused on issues of instruction as a tool to work side-by-side the teachers and staff at each new school. This, in turn, helped to mitigate her outsider
status by allowing her to cultivate relationships with key stakeholders within the school and to build an insider community of which she was an integral part.

It is important to note, however, that these efforts required a great deal of mental and emotional energy from Linda. Her hesitancy in discussing some of the more troubling details of these challenges in our interviews gives us a glimpse of the personal nature of leading schools, particularly as many of these events challenged key social identities of value to her. In this case, I was able to fill in missing information in some of Linda’s stories through excerpts from her dissertation, a self-study in which she chose to interrogate aspects of her own practice. Yet, without this important source of data, there would have been many questions left unanswered based on our interviews alone. This highlights the gravity of the personal burden – both emotional and mental – that challenges in school leadership can have on a leader, particularly when valued social identities are at risk. It thus also raises questions regarding the importance of issues of social identity in how principals experience challenges in leading schools, how they choose to navigate those obstacles, and ultimately how they learn to sustain themselves through the personal toll of such events.
Chapter 5

Case B Narrative: Religious Identity

“…as perfect as you could come on a day when the whole sky was falling”

As a dedicated educator for almost twenty years, Case B – James Santos – has been a teacher, coach, and a school administrator in three different schools. All of his teaching and leadership experience has been in independent Catholic schools, the same type of institutions in which he was educated. And although he tends to distinguish between his personal faith and his professional work, his story reveals how his perspectives of the role and responsibilities he holds as a school leader are deeply intertwined with aspects of his religious identity. Raised Catholic in a conservative household, James has always had a strong faith. His introduction, however, to Ignatian spirituality and the teachings of the Jesuits in high school transformed in his early adolescence years his already strong faith towards an orientation of social justice and systemic change. Thus, in many ways, James’s journey in both his faith and his professional role as a principal have evolved in tandem.

Over the last ten years of his career, he has served as the new principal at two different high schools – both independent and Catholic, embracing seemingly similar missions, but very distinct in history and culture. One was a high profile preparatory school with a deep, long history and faculty who held strongly to traditions; the other is a newly founded school, part of a larger network whose mission focuses specifically on providing support and opportunities to low-income youth. Both principal transitions were difficult. However, James responded to each challenge in dramatically different ways.
based on his sense of who he was as a leader and the number of years of experience he had at the time. In this sense and through a social identity lens, James’s evolution as a school principal has been deeply rooted in his personal attempts to find the version of himself that is more authentic to who he is as a person as well as a leader. Not only has this forced him to question his faith and sense of purpose as a school leader, but it has pushed him to re-evaluate what drives him in this work. Referring to it as “his calling”, he is now the principal at a school dedicated to supporting and creating opportunities for young people placed at risk and who might otherwise have little chance gaining entry into college and professional careers. This choice has allowed him to be more honest and transparent in his attempts to build and fortify a community of teachers by rallying them around the mission of the school, finding success in their collective efforts and heartbreak in the shared struggle. But this process has also meant that for the last few years, as the new high school grew, each year has been full of “firsts”, bringing with it new challenges and tough decisions for him as a leader.

It is important to note here that similar to Case A, James spent time during his doctoral studies studying the challenges he was facing in his practice as a school leader. And although he did not complete a self-study, he did examine the experiences of other Jesuit high school principals as they transitioned into their first year leading a new school. Completed more than five years ago, his dissertation was crafted during an important time for James – the year in which he was bringing closure to his time at his first school and preparing to open his second school as principal. And although he was not the subject of his own research study per se, he shares insights and thoughtful
reflection on issues of his own positionality as they relate to his findings and descriptions of the experiences of others. Hence, the context of the school – both in his work and in his dissertation – provides a unique opportunity to explore the social identities of religion and profession and their potential influences on each other. For James, his religious identity plays a significant role in not only why he has become the type of school leader he is today but how he thinks about the role and responsibilities of his position. Further, because his Ignatian spirituality stems from his commitment to issues of social justice and vice versa, he is driven by his current school’s mission to serve the marginalized. It shapes how he understands the challenges before him as a principal while simultaneously demanding a great deal of energy and dedication from both him and his staff, raising questions regarding sustainability of his approach to leadership over time.

**Childhood, Adolescence, and the Impact of Religion and Family**

Born in the early 1970s, James grew up approximately thirty minutes outside of New York City. His neighborhood was predominantly White and middle class and was located in an urban, residential area typical of smaller, satellite cities that surround the larger city. He is the third and youngest child in his family, and his parents hail from very different racial and ethnic backgrounds. His father, who emigrated from Central America to the United States as an adult, met his mother, whose parents are both Eastern European, at work. Both in the medical field, they married and settled down in the neighborhood in which James was raised. And as religion was important to both parents, they raised him and his brothers as Catholic which James recalls was simply part of who his family was and how they functioned. He shared:
My parents were pretty religious, very religious. They still go to church every Sunday. My dad's family… his brother is a priest. He's… very Latino, uh, stereotyped, very religious… his sister was a nun…. my parents, my mother came from Poland. My grandparents, very religious… so it was a family… It was just part of growing up. (p. 9, B2 Interview)

Accordingly, James’s formative years were ones spent within multiple contexts of the Catholic faith – home, extended family, and school. His understanding and beliefs in that faith, however, would grow and develop as he did as a person – beginning with acceptance of what he was told as a young child and evolving as his sense of self did in adolescence. Specifically, he attributes this transformation over the years to the experiences and teachings he gained when he attended a more liberal, all-male, Jesuit high school in a nearby town. He explained that transition as follows:

I went to a Catholic grade school, K through 8. And it was very conservative… followed all the Catholic traditions. And I, I had a very strong faith growing up. Um, I'm not sure why. But it, it was very strong faith. And then when I went to high school, it was a Jesuit high school that introduced a completely different way of looking at the world… This sounds silly, but I learned that the Genesis story of Adam and Eve....wasn't a real story and that kind of blew my mind… that I could actually question things, like I was pushed to question things. Question authority was good. In Catholic education, K-8, that was bad… [the Jesuits] stress this idea of God in all things… And that your actions of simply trying your best was a form of prayer as well. That's a way of, uh, utilizing your talents to give glory to God… And I thought that was awesome. (pp. 2-3, B2 Interview)

James expanded on this difference in educational philosophies between the types of Catholic schools he attended by describing his experience of traditional Catholic schooling as more teacher-centered and rote; whereas, he experienced the Jesuit approach to be more student-centered and constructivist. The depth by which his experiences of being encouraged to question what he thought he knew as truth as a young teenager and to acknowledge his everyday actions as being in service to God was profound. The
Jesuits are known to be more liberal in their views, valuing education, self-awareness, and systemic change to improve the lives of the marginalized in society. And as an educational leader, James describes his high school experience as having had the greatest impact on him as a person and as a professional, above and beyond his multiple graduate degrees (two master’s and a doctorate). Although not all young men who attend Jesuit high schools might describe their experiences similarly – his own high school friends, for example, it was a deeply meaningful experience for James given his already strong religious social identity. He explained the influence it had on him:

I wouldn’t say the core of who I am I learned [in college or graduate school]… it was, you know, do things for the greater glory of God, try your best all the time… I had a Jesuit priest say [in high school] that it was my job to change the world. So, at 15 years old, this was a guy I liked and like I believed him. So, when I would make choices about being a teacher or being an administrator… it’s because somebody told me when I was 15 that I’m supposed to do that. (pp. 6-7, B2 Interview)

It is significant that James’s introduction to Ignatian philosophy occurred during his adolescence, a period of time considered in psychology to be particularly important in the development of one’s identity. Erikson (1968) argues that “it is the ideological potential of a society which speaks most clearly to the adolescent who is so eager to be affirmed by peers, to be confirmed by teachers, and to be inspired by worth-while ‘ways of life’” (p. 130). Thus, to a young man with a strong, foundational faith, being told at 15 years old that he can and should change the world is a message that was surely to have resonated with him.

Yet, in this vein, his adolescence was not only an important time for James in regards to the development of his religious identity, but it was also the period of time
during which he recalls becoming more aware of issues of race. In his neighborhood
growing up, “there were no African Americans, no Asians. [They] were the only Latino family” (p. 13, B2 Interview). And like his growing and changing understanding of his
religious identity, his thoughts on his own racial/ethnic identity were being shaped by the
interactions he had with others at the time. Though he is mixed race, James identifies as Latino. His brothers, however, identify as White. This difference in how they see and
understand race and ethnicity may relate in part to James’s close relationship and respect
for his father. His father came to the United States and became a doctor; his mother was a
nurse. Yet, his father’s spoken English when he was growing up was not particularly
strong, and his mother and James do not speak Spanish. James, however, has his father’s
last name which reflects his Latino heritage, and when asked if race mattered to him
growing up, he responded as follows:

Not so much in grade school but in high school. My friends would comment that I
was a spic. But they were my friends. So it was okay to say that, but it bothered me... I check off the box that I’m Latino. My two brothers don’t check off the
box. They check off White or Caucasian. (pp. 13-14, B2 Interview).

I thought that they were [speaking ill of] my father... in my eyes growing up
while he was working all the time... there was an anger towards him not being at
stuff the way my mother was... [but] I was proud of my dad... He bought a place
with not a lot of money and now he’s a... [doctor]... that probably pushes me...
like I have to be awesome, just like my dad... is awesome. (pp. 19-20, B2
Interview)

Although unknown to him then, James’s father struggled growing up poor in his home
country and before he immigrated to the U.S. in the early 1960s. Yet, despite not learning
of all of the details of his father’s story of dedication and hard work until James was in
his mid- to late-twenties, the sacrifices he made for James and his family resonate with
him, highlighting a love for his father which influenced James’s own racial/ethnic identity development in adolescence and solidified it into adulthood.

Such issues of race and culture, however, were never really discussed in James’s family. His parents have always been very conservative, and although questions may have arisen for him as a youth, they were not likely to be discussed at home. He did, however, confide and openly grapple with these and other challenging issues with the adults at his school, highlighting the important role it played in his identity development. He recalled:

I [had] a couple of great counselors that were... terrific. I'm still friendly with [them] today…. [and] the Jesuit priests who worked there were very, um, liberal…. I mean I talked to them about sex, uh, a little bit about race… [and] certainly a lot about faith. (p. 15, B2 Interview)

Here, it is significant to note that James’s process of self-identification played a significant role in the development of his racial/ethnic social identity. By speaking about it in the way that he did during our interviews, he provides insights into the role it has played in his growth as a person and the ways in which it is not necessarily highly prioritized in the formation of his sense of self. However, as we will see later, given the demographics of the school community in which he leads now, the perspectives others have of this social identity will bear significance in how they might influence his ability to lead in certain contexts.

Teaching and the Moment That Moved Him

In the early 1990s, James left home to attend a Jesuit college in a nearby state. After graduation, he went on to receive a master’s in English before returning to his high school alma mater – an all-male, Jesuit independent school – to teach. This phase of his
life is thus strung together in its retelling because of the way that it collectively sets the
stage for the path he followed which led to his decision to become a school administrator.

In many ways, his choosing to teach, particularly at his former school, was an
extension of his adolescent identity. As a first year teacher, the context of the school as a
workplace was similar to what it was when he was a student. Although his role and
responsibilities operating within that space may have changed, it was one with which he
was deeply familiar and for which he had a fondness based on his own transformational
experiences within its walls. In addition, the principal at that time who hired him, Robert
Bielski, was his former high school science teacher and someone who James considered a
mentor. And this personal connection to his principal would play a meaningful part in the
events that would eventually push James to move on from teaching and from his beloved
school in pursuit of becoming a school leader.

He remembers thinking that he would teach at that school for the rest of his life,
recalling his love for teaching English, for coaching baseball, and the joy he found in the
many other extracurricular and support roles he played there. However, located right
outside of New York City, the school was within viewing distance of the World Trade
Center in lower Manhattan, and on September 11th, 2001, James alongside all the staff
and students witnessed the attacks of one of the nation’s most tragic days in recent
history. In our first interview, he recalled:

You could see the World Trade Center out the windows of my school… so, we
saw it happen. We saw 9/11 happen, and um, it was that day that the principal
there… he’s known me for a long time. It was the first time I saw like real fearless
leadership. It had nothing to do with curriculum, had nothing to do with… grades
or expulsions. It was pure leadership, um, because you don’t prepare for… that.
How do you run a school on the day that you think the country’s being attacked?
Um, and he was informative, he was calm, he hugged us, um, he cried with us. He was almost omnipresent… kept the kids in class. There was a structure for parents to come pick them up… it was as perfect as you could come on a day when the whole sky was falling… [The school] was under control… it was there that… I start to realize, like I had no idea why anyone would attack the United States. And to be honest, I didn’t even know the difference between a Democrat and a Republican. All I knew was [the high school], you know… I teach A Separate Peace, and The Catcher in the Rye, and Shakespeare… and I coach baseball. And… I realized that I could, I needed to do something different. (pp. 6-7, B1_First Interview)

The experience of watching someone with whom he had a personal connection and who he considered a mentor lead under such great uncertainty was transformational for James, and it tapped into aspects of his religious identity that resonated with being told as an adolescent that he should commit himself to changing the world. As he describes it, “the tipping point to why [he] realized [he]… was called to be a leader was 9/11” (p. 10, B1_First Interview). James’s use of “called” here signifies the way that this event was experienced through the lens of his religious identity. He was moved when told that he should change the world at fifteen years old. And though occurring years later, this was a moment of reckoning for him both personally and professionally especially as it occurred within the same context in which he grew up and his religious identity metamorphosed. It was a moment in which he needed to choose to stay in the comfort of what he already knew or venture forward towards new challenges.

Initial Leadership Experience

In the early 2000s, James left his teaching position and received his master’s in arts in Independent School Administration at a university on the East Coast. During this time, he was also actively involved in the “Ignatian Leadership Seminars” – a leadership development program specifically for faculty of membership schools in the Jesuit School
Network and to which one is recommended or nominated. Through these seminars, James met a twenty-year veteran principal of a Jesuit high school located in a small city in the Midwestern United States. Like James, the principal was also originally from a large urban area, Chicago, and they immediately “hit it off” (p. 8, B1_First Interview). The Midwestern school was also an all-male, independent, Jesuit high school, and when it came time to apply for jobs, the veteran principal offered James an assistant principalship position shaped specifically to help train and mentor him into the principalship. James, having been raised outside of New York City, was intrigued in the position but remembers doubting whether this school would be a good match for him. He did, however, ultimately decide to move there to “learn to be a principal” (p. 9, B1_First Interview) from this man who had become a mentor and a “great role model” to him (p. 10).

James’s initial plan was to stay at this school and in the assistant principalship for several years, but personal circumstances would shorten his tenure there. By his second year as assistant principal, James had married his wife, also an educator who he had met during his master’s program in school administration. This encouraged them both to consider moving back to the East Coast to be closer to family as they were beginning to think of starting their own. He was 30 years old and still fairly green as a school administrator, but he initiated a job search for principal positions that he in retrospect describes as “heartbreaking”. Having applied to a number of positions, he remembers “over-preparing” and really wanting to present the very best version of himself in every
job interview. But, he says, “Looking back, what the hell did I know at the age of thirty, you know, it would have been tough” (p. 11, B1_First Interview).

Although James began to settle into the idea of staying in the Midwest for the duration of that academic year, in his third year as assistant principal, an opportunity opened for a principal position at a prestigious and high-profile Jesuit high school on the East Coast. It was an opportunity that would have brought him and his wife closer to home. Unlike the year before, he decided that he would be more intentional about preparing less; he wanted to be more himself, and it was an approach that worked in his favor. He recalled his thinking at that time:

… this time I’m not gonna do anything. I’m not gonna practice. I’m just going to go expecting not to get this job, but at least I can say to myself, okay, I know how to interview now… So I did, with no preparation, and I got the job… [and] I’m like, “Holy shit, I’m thirty-two years old, and I have no idea how to be a principal. (p. 12, B1_First Interview)

He was not certain he should take the position and had almost convinced himself not to. But in speaking with his father, he was reminded to have “courage”, to “try”, and not to “give up” (p. 12, B1_First Interview). His father’s words were important to him, and James’s response once again highlighted the significance of their relationship. After three years as an assistant principal, James returned to the East Coast to take on his first principalship and the many challenges that would come with it.

B1 Independent Secondary School

At the age of 32, James became the principal of a high profile, competitive independent Jesuit high school on the East Coast. His entry into this position was particularly difficult. In his own dissertation research, he identified with what researchers
refer to as the challenge of “double socialization” in leadership that he experienced that year, or the “professional socialization to school administration and organizational socialization to [his new] work setting” (Hart, 1993, p. 12 as cited in Dissertation). His inexperience as a school administrator exacerbated his lack of familiarity with the school’s history, politics, and the expectations that were placed upon him as a result. In addition, the turbulent start that he experienced as the new principal was further complicated by the fact that the year before, the school had experienced a major cheating scandal and the sudden departure of the former president. Thus, not only was this James’s first year, but both the president and the Chief Financial Officer of the school were also newly hired. Given that the school operates using a president/principal model, this major turnover in leadership during James’s first year as the school’s educational leader would have created challenges on its own. However, particularly in the context of a school community recovering from scandal and loss, his inexperience as a principal became a focus of attention – a social identity of sorts tied to age as well as his new professional role – by which both members of the teaching faculty as well as James himself felt challenged.

That first year, the average teacher tenure at the school was approximately “eighteen or nineteen years”, and James recollected that “there were people there that were at [the school] longer than I was alive… I had to prove to people that I was smart and that I deserved to be a leader” (p. 17, B1_First Interview). Additionally, James was later told in confidence by one of the older teachers with whom he had built a rapport that other members of the faculty thought that James was part of an “ultra-conservative” sect
of the Catholic Church. When he inquired why teachers thought this, the older teacher told him, "Well, you told us that we should be unashamedly Catholic and unashamedly Jesuit. And people took that as, you know, you have to… follow every single rule of the Catholic Church" (p. 34, B2 Interview). Within the context of an independent school with a religiously-oriented mission, this would be James’s first major experience related to having to manage and choose how to represent his religious identity to the school as a principal.

The scrutiny that he thus underwent as a young, inexperienced, and unknown principal new to this already “polarized” community led to a type of hyper-awareness and insecurity in James. Because of what he would later refer to as a lack of confidence, he was particularly careful about how he presented himself and was often a more guarded and less authentic version of the leader he hoped to be. He shared:

… when I was hired, I had this idea of what a head of school, what a principal of a prestigious prep school should be, so I tried to be that way… I had to buy suits… I thought as a principal, I should wear suits… it sounds silly, but I was dressing the part… [the teachers] rarely saw my sense of humor… I was formal… And after a couple of years of doing this, um, and realizing what I was struggling with, somebody said to me, “Remember, you weren’t hired because you’re a great principal, because you’re not. You were hired because you’re James Santos, so just be James Santos.” So, it sounds silly, but that was eye opening to me. (pp. 14-15, B1_First Interview)

The person who gave him this advice was the athletic director of his former high school, someone whom he refers to as a mentor and who knew James well given his time at that school as both a student and a teacher. Yet, in addition to having had a pre-conceived idea of what a principal at a “prestigious prep school” should look and act like, James also shared in our interview an aspect of what Lortie (1975) calls “the apprenticeship of
observation”, or a reliance on what we ourselves have experienced or observed of others in the same position. The principal at the school in the Midwest, for example, “was pretty professional and kept a distance from the teachers” (p. 17, B1_First Interview). This had an impact on James, one which he thinks influenced the way he initially represented himself as a leader. Although he is a highly personable individual, he followed the model set before him and interacted with faculty at this new school keeping some distance between him and them, never showing them parts of his true self.

In time and with great effort on his part, James was eventually able to establish himself and his credibility as a school leader at the school though he notes that this required a great deal of time as well as mental and emotional energy on his part. He would go on to serve six years as principal. However, there was a particularly tempestuous challenge that occurred during his time there that tested the strength of the interconnection between his religious identity and how he thought about his role and responsibilities as principal. Not only was this school well known for its competitive academic program, but it boasted a very strong sports program as well. Halfway through his tenure, James made the decision to let go one of the school’s award-winning coaches – a gentleman who was an alumnus of the school and had a loyal following who supported and were invested in that particular sport at the school. He described his decision and the fallout of the choice that he made as follows: (pp. 26-28, B1_First Interview)

*Interviewer:* What was it about his coaching style that [was problematic]?
*Participant:* He was just abusive to the kids, verbally and not in line with our mission... There's a difference between firm and abusive.

*Interviewer:* The missions are always set by the school, correct?
Participant: Mm-hmm (affirmative)…
Interviewer: So when the fallout happened with that particular situation, were you feeling personally attacked?
Participant: Yep... personally attacked… my character. I felt defeated. Uh, I wanted to crawl into a hole… embarrassed. I couldn't believe these kids… whom I loved… were attacking me and being nasty to me. Um, you know, I questioned my own leadership. Uh, it was, it was, it was horrible.
Interviewer: So what did you do?
Participant: … Um, [long pause] I just called people that… from outside the school, different principals that I had talked to. Um… in the school, I did nothing, and that was a bad … I didn't do anything. I just kept going about my business. I didn't talk about it… I didn't do anything... because I didn't know what to do… now, looking back on if it was the right decision, I did it in the wrong way. I handled it the wrong way, but I stood my ground, and I took all this abuse. And I still [showed] up for work every day and still did my job.

This incident was extremely emotional for James. Because of the high profile nature of the school, not only were the details of the event publicly debated on local radio and television stations, but as principal, James felt that his “integrity” was being questioned, something that was deeply enmeshed with his sense of religious identity and that had driven him to lead. After years of building relationships with faculty, students, and families within the school community, he felt isolated. Seen through the lens of his religious identity and how he understood the mission of the school as well as his role and responsibilities as a school leader, the rationale underlying why the coach’s behavior was troubling to him is somewhat clarified. Yet, these considerations also highlight an important realization that likely emerged for James at that time. The incredibly caustic response that he received from the members of the school community would have served to illuminate for James the ways in which the school was incompatible with his emerging sense of identity as a leader – both professionally and spiritually – and his leadership...
philosophy. He wrote about this mismatch in his dissertation, reflecting that “the interactions of the history of the principal and the history of the school impact the transition year in that it decides what the principal pays attention to and how he focuses on it” (p. 178, Dissertation). James’s decision to lead was deeply rooted in aspects of his religious identity, and although the school was open to members of all faiths, it is likely that the aftermath of the turbulent incident involving the former coach prompted James to question whether his responsibility to the school’s mission and his ability to fulfill it were compatible.

In thinking about the importance that the aforementioned incident may have had on James’s eventual decision to stay or move on from his position at that school, there are two other significant things to note which were also occurring around that same time. First, mid-way through his tenure, James made the decision to return to graduate school to pursue his doctorate in educational leadership. The executive-style degree program allowed him to remain in his leadership position at the school, but it was also structured in such a way that both provided and encouraged him to make sense of his real-life experiences as a school leader. Secondly, an opportunity presented itself that would inadvertently force James to question the goals and aims of his work as a school leader. A Catholic, independent school was opening nearby whose mission focused primarily on educating and supporting young people from challenging, low-income backgrounds. In this way, the school’s mission was more explicitly tied to addressing injustice and promoting systemic change in the world, a challenge that harkened back to why he was drawn to the teachings of the Jesuits as an adolescent and to his reasons for wanting to
lead. But it was not an easy decision for him to make. After much deliberation and “prayer”, James decided to apply for the principalship position at this new school, a decision that would greatly transform who he has become as a leader. Thus, in his sixth and final year at the high-profile school, not only was James finishing his dissertation – critically writing and reflecting on his own experiences as a school leader, but this period of self-reflection while still enmeshed in the daily work of being a principal likely contributed to his choice to move on from his former school. In what was deemed by many to be a risky professional move, James decided to become the founding principal at a new urban, Catholic independent school whose mission was specifically dedicated to changing the lives of young people placed at risk.

**B2 Independent Secondary School**

James’s transition to becoming the principal at the new Catholic independent school in the city has been a challenging few years. But a number of important positive considerations emerge when talking with him now about his current position and leadership experiences. To start, it is clear that he feels that he can be much more himself at this school – as a leader and as a person, and this has impacted the way that he interacts with his faculty and community partners as well as permeated every aspect of programming offered at the school. Additionally and perhaps more importantly, the new school context (and his role in it) has allowed James to be more transparent about the ways in which his spiritual identity influences the way he chooses to lead as a principal, embracing, for example, the Jesuit principle of love (or “agape”) in his approach to building and sustaining the teachers’ sense of community and commitment to mission.
The differences in his experiences between this and his former school are clear, and he described his thinking behind making the decision to switch schools as follows:

… I’ve never started a school before, I never worked with students behind grade level before. What if I fail?... So I kept thinking about [whether to take this new job], and then I thought of… all of the things I would be losing if I left [my old school]... then, what would I gain by starting this [new] school, and… like we didn’t’ have any teachers, and there’s no curriculum, we didn’t have a building, and we didn’t have any kids. So, it’s just this… dream, and then it was… picturing these kids that I… didn’t know, who… had a 10% chance of graduating from college [in their current circumstances]. Picturing them running down the hallway with these acceptance letters in their hands, and it…. blew me away… There was no reason to have nothing to do with it. It was just a feeling, like how can I not try this? So, I said to [my former school president], “I want to do this.” And he said, “That’s great! That’s what I was hoping you’d say, you’re supposed to do this…. This is in the Jesuit tradition, you’re supposed to reach out to [the] marginalized. (pp. 45-46, B1_Second Interview)

It’s a calling… I didn’t make this up, I did not plan this… my mentor, the guy who hired me [as a teacher] at [my alma mater], the [principal] who I saw run the school through 9/11, he said our God is a God of surprises… thinking of all those things that I lost at [my former, prestigious school], I don’t miss any of them… I… have the greatest job…. I love the people I work with. We’re doing good work here. (p. 47, B1_Second Interview)

Here, the importance of mentors in shaping James’s thinking and actions particularly during this moment of transition becomes apparent. Not only did both mentors – his former school president and his former principal/teacher – support his choice to take on this professional leadership challenge, but they encouraged James to do so through the lens and using the language of their shared religious identity. This, in turn, not only framed James’s entry and transition into his current school principalship position but it shaped his understanding of his role and responsibilities as the school’s leader.

Further, elaboration of James’s decision to lead his current school thus includes a heavy focus on the identities and backgrounds of the students. As outlined in the mission
of the school and in his own words, students “have to be… [from] families with limited financial means… [they] have to be poor to go to school here” (p. 40, B1_Second Interview). The socio-economic backgrounds of the student body therefore also unfortunately means that many of them come to school with additional personal and social challenges of their own. James shared:

75% of our kids come from single-parent homes… over 25 [percent] of our students have a parent or sibling that’s been incarcerated… 15-16 [percent] have a parent or sibling that’s died or been murdered… we have 70-something grade schools represented here… from all over [the city]… and [the city over the river]… You know, we [called] child protective services 30 times for sexual abuse or physical abuse in the home, and that’s in 2-2 ½ years. [At my old school,] I called twice in 6 years… all of our kids have, uh, have something in their invisible backpack that they’re dealing with. (pp. 40-41, B1_Second Interview)

Thus, compared to the students at all of his former schools, the young people at his current school are demographically distinct. The school’s mission of supporting them and all the challenges that they face in their journey to college is therefore personal. As James explained, “It just hurts more when I see them not get in… Because it’s not fair… it’s a justice issue… there’s not a lot of people in their corners, my kids” (p. 42, B1_Second Interview). Further, it has weighed heavily on him as a school leader needing to make difficult decisions about student discipline and academic integrity. At his former school, as a principal, if he had to dismiss a student, he “knew that they were... from structured families, and they were going to go to another school, and they were going to go to college, and everything [would be] fine” (p. 30, B1_First Interview). In contrast, when he discussed having to dismiss a student at his current school, he shared:

I have no idea what the future is going to be. He was this close, uh, to you know, going to an Ivy League school… Now, is he gonna go to an Ivy League school
from [his city high school]? Maybe, I hope so. It’s also a lot of drugs and gangs and he might not be alive in, three months from now. (p. 30, B1_First Interview)

His connection to the young people at the school drives him, and it is a relationship deeply rooted in how James understands his role and purpose in the world and as a school leader. But there is also a consideration of how he is perceived within such a diverse community of students and their families. Last academic year, the school reported that just over 60% of the student population identified as African American, just over 20% as Hispanic/Latino, just over 5% Asian, just under 5% as White and just under 5% as Multiracial or Other (B2 Independent Secondary School website). Given James’s last name, I asked what expectations, if any, he thought his students and their families might have of him as a school leader. That discussion follows: (pp. 16-17, B2 Interview)

**Participant:** I don't wonder what ... I've not until you just mentioned that, like what people's expectations of me are... I think the Black students here think I'm White. And the Latino students think I'm Latino.

**Interviewer:** Why do you say that?

**Participant:** Um, (long pause) like I, I just in hearing like conversations... When I would talk about, um, you know, uh, I don't want my kids... growing up in a world where... [pause] I relate to the violence that's happening to our students, which I relate to in a different way, I would say. Um, but you know, the, the Black kids are like, "Well, your kids are White." And a couple of Hispanic or Latina girls would say, "No, he's not. He's Santos. He's Hispanic." It's probably more of a perception in my head based on a couple of conversations.

James himself identifies as Latino, and though his racial/ethnic identity is not one of high priority in how he thinks of himself as a school leader, it might have an impact on how he is perceived by those he hopes to lead. For example, just as his young age was thought to indicate inexperience at his former school, how might his racial/ethnic identity gain him credibility with students and parents of the different racial/ethnic groups at his school?
Instead, James tends to focus on aspects of his religious identity in how he thinks about the ways in which he presents (and is thus received by others) as a leader. When asked how he thinks that parents and students would describe his leadership style, he said “they would probably say I’m pastoral, um, above any of those things…” (p. 22, B1_First Interview), alluding to a sense of spiritual guidance that is inherent in his work as principal. In his current school context, he has thus intentionally integrated two important social identities – that of principal and of his spirituality – both of which mutually guide him in his leadership thinking and approach.

**A Key Challenge in School Leadership: The Jesuit Principle of Love**

This intersectionality of social identities is most visible in James’s thinking and approach to hiring and supporting his teachers and faculty. In some ways, his rationale behind hiring and building a community of educators at the school was in response to the challenging experiences he had during his first principalship. He shared:

I knew I was not going to go through my first year again… I was gonna hire different types of people... I was gonna hire people that I liked, people that I want to hang out with, people that were idealistic, people that worked really hard, people that want to change the world, people that I could picture myself being in a meeting and saying, “Please tell me what I’m doing wrong” and I could trust them to tell me… At [my former school]… people were not transparent, including me. (pp. 38-39, B2 Interview)

The most significant way that James’s thinking manifests itself in his leadership practice is through the message and expectations that he puts forward to his staff. In our first interview, he described this as follows:

One of the promises that I make to our teachers is that if they do what I’m asking them to do, that we are going to change the world. We are transforming lives, and it is, in our very humble way, it’s a tiny bit of doing God’s work…. There was a, uh, Jesuit priest whose name was Pedro Aruppe, and he came up with this phrase
called, “Being a man for others…” which turned into, later on, “Men and women for and with others”… this was in 1973, and it kinda spread to all the Jesuit high schools that that’s our job to be men for others, which meant that we, um, we try as best as we can to live simply, um, to not support unjust structures, and change those unjust structures, reach out to the marginalized, and truly make a difference in the world… (p. 30, B1_First Interview)

In turn, this dedication to mission and his interpretation of it places very high levels of responsibility on him and his teaching staff regarding the outcomes of the young people at the school. And it is both a source of pride for him as a principal as well as an aspect of their collective mission that wears down on them daily. He explained this dichotomy in our second interview:

I would put our adult culture up against any other. People love each other, they like each other… they work… tirelessly for these kids… there's a sense [that]… people are rooting for me as teacher… for other teachers and… there's definitely, um, relational trust… people trust me to hire the right people, they trust me to get rid of the right people… (pause) I trust them…You know, you hire people that are resilient, that are mission-driven. Come and go as you please, just get the job done. I'm pretty proud of that… We make 3 promises to our teachers. The first is that they will grow exponentially as a teacher in one year more than any other graduate school of education… The second is, I promise that you will change the world by working here, if you do what I ask you to do. And the third is, I promise that you will… be heartbroken and emotionally drained and crushed, and you will fail, and you will question yourself as a teacher, and you will be miserable on some days… I’d rather be very transparent about that. And we deliver on all 3 of those promises, but promise number 3 goes back to hiring people that have large hearts and love these kids, and if you love them, when they fail, you’re heartbroken. And when they make wrong choices, you're heartbroken. Um, now is that good leadership, bad leadership, uh, is that a good way to teach? I don't know. But that's why we're here. (pp. 47-48, B1_Second Interview)

It is important to note that unlike “love” in the everyday or material sense, James’s use of the term reflects a particular style of leadership promoted by Jesuits that “[engages] others with a positive, loving attitude” (Lowney, 2003, p. 9). It is a value espoused by a Jesuit leadership approach that is inherently connected to other values of “self-
awareness”, “ingenuity”, and “heroism” (p. 9), and it argues that “individuals perform best when they are respected, valued, and trusted by someone who genuinely cares for their well-being” (p. 33). However, the conceptual meaning of “love” here, though meant in reference to a particular leadership style, is not divorced from deeply personal considerations that may exacerbate the unacknowledged emotional burden carried by a leader for his team, and by his teachers for their students. When asked, for example, what James would want others to know about his leadership style, he took a long pause and responded:

I think they know that I love them… and… I think our teachers would use that word… [long pause] I think, for better or for worse, I’d want them to know… how much it hurts when I see them fail, teachers or students. That they know that I care… I don’t know if they know that, you know, you go home and you think about it and you lose sleep over them… that the emotional investment is more than they think it is. (p. 24, B1_First Interview)

Hence, the personal connections established through James’s approach to leading with “love” increase the sense of personal responsibility he seems to have for the work of his teachers and students alike.

Building the school from the ground up, he has been intentional in hiring “really good, big-hearted people” (p. 20, B1_First Interview). What this has meant in practice is that the majority of the staff are younger and less experienced than the teachers at his previous school. James has recruited and crafted a community of teachers dedicated to the mission of the school and has brought in individuals who understand (at least initially) the extremely high expectations to which they will be held. This hands-on approach gives him the confidence that he is surrounded by teachers who take ownership of their work, who he can trust, and allows him to delegate responsibility or “distribute
leadership” to others. However, it is also accompanied by an emphasis on James’s role as an instructional coach and leader. He shared that he spends approximately 50% of his time in classrooms and in meetings with teachers trying “to inspire people to be creative, to get the mission done” (p. 22, B1_First Interview). This is an extremely high percentage of time for a school leader to spend on this responsibility alone. And despite the support he provides, he also acknowledges that part of his work as principal has been to help the staff cope with the weight of the work they are expected to accomplish. He describes this aspect of the work as follows:

… a lot of the times it's just listening to the teachers and they'll cry. And I hug them and I say, it's gonna be okay. You're doing a good job. Don't give up… I think, uh, sometimes I'm marriage counselor, sometimes I'm therapist, sometimes I'm instructional leader… sometimes it's friend… Um, like this year, out of 20 something teachers, you know, maybe 7 of them didn't cry in my office, uh, at least once… Like, I like these people… I hired them. So there's an investment in them that I spent so much time in that… it is emotionally draining for me, but I wouldn't tell them… the research will tell me that… a happy, uh, refreshed principal is better for everybody. But my idiotic way of thinking is that, um, as long as I can convince people that I am refreshed and happy and proud… I don't need a vacation. (p. 49, B2 Interview)

*Magis*… means “more” in Latin…. one definition of that is to go further still... Go further still than serving wholeheartedly. So how do you go further than serving wholeheartedly?... It's a mindset. It's a push that I can, uh, am I really giving 100%?... And that's always driven me, probably driven me to therapy, to be honest… but that, that's been a push of, I can do better. And my, um, I have to be… not the best, but I have to give 100% in everything. (pp. 2-3, B2 Interview)

Here, we see how his expectations of his teachers as well as for himself tied to his understanding of his role and responsibilities as a school leader come at some cost for the well-being of all.

It is significant to note, however, that something in James’s approach works, and it works well. As he and I sat down for our second interview, the school was facing a
significant change in teaching staff. With the addition of senior level courses and some turnover at the school, they began that school year with approximately 40% of the staff as new and unfamiliar to the sense of community and trust that he and others had built over the previous three years. How would it impact the adult culture of the school? Would James be able to maintain the relational trust he had worked so hard to establish? As the academic year came to a close, it was reported that every member of the school’s senior class had been accepted to four year colleges, a goal for which the school – its principal, teachers, students and families – had all worked towards achieving despite incredible odds.

**Interpretive Summary**

James’s story is one of dedication and commitment to the school, but it is also one that highlights the impact of a leader’s deep connection between a valued social identity and how he understands the goals and aims of his work as a principal. First and foremost, James’s formative experiences with religion, in childhood but particularly in adolescence, greatly impacted the development and fortification of his religious identity. Adolescence is a period of life particularly important in identity development, and although James notes somewhat casually the significance religion had in his family growing up, his experience in high school was integral in concretizing that strong foundational faith and transforming it into a religious social identity that continues to be of deep importance to him today. Additionally, the influence of key mentors at this age – individuals who he not only “liked” and respected but who shared in his religious identity – had a great impact on how he saw the world and understood his purpose in it. It is thus the meaning that
James’s religious identity holds for him – the way that he understands it and the value he places on it – that influences and shapes his thinking and approach to his role and responsibilities as an adult, and specifically as a school leader.

Consider, for example, that in James recounting of his experience of the tragic events of 9/11, he noted that it was the first time that he witnessed “real fearless leadership” by his former principal, a man who shared in his religious identity and who had mentored James since his adolescence. This event was a pivotal moment that pushed him to question his purpose in this world, and more importantly, it was an incident that demonstrated for James the powerful impact he could have helping others through the position of school leader. Through the lens of his religious identity, this not only prompted him to enter into school administration, but he did so explicitly because it would serve as a vehicle for him to make a difference in the world. This rationale behind his decision to lead highlights the importance of how his understanding of his experiences directly tap into his sense of moral purpose – something which stems directly from his faith – and why it has played such a large role in guiding him toward finding his most authentic self as a leader.

James’s first principalship position leading a prestigious independent school with long-standing history and traditions involved professional challenges not uncommon to many school leaders. However, the particularly turbulent incident involving one of the school’s coaches challenged him professionally as well as personally, particularly as it related to aspects of his religious identity. Not only was his sense of being an outsider within the school exacerbated, but he felt that his integrity (which he attributes directly to
his faith) was being questioned. Thus, his understanding of this leadership challenge involved a troubling level of conflict between deeply held values tied to his religious identity which increased the gravity and, in turn, the sense of burden for him in dealing with the issues at hand.

This question of fit and friction between himself and the school and community that he was meant to lead thus likely played an integral part in his eventual decision to leave. More importantly, however, it served as the impetus behind James’s pursuit of what many considered to be a risky professional move, becoming the founding principal at a fledgling school whose mission focuses on serving marginalized youth and families. In this sense, the decision to lead his current school was not, at heart, a difficult one for James. As his former school’s president stated, through the lens of their shared religious identity, it was an appropriate move for James to be able to serve the marginalized in his capacity as a principal, allowing him to fulfill his sense of moral purpose as a school leader. And this has resulted in him not only being more open about the ways in which his religious and professional identities overlap, but his faith shapes the ethic by which he chooses to lead.

At his current school, James admits to being more himself, having established and choosing to present a more authentic version of who he is as a leader. He openly leads in a way that is guided by his religious identity, and this ethic of leadership impacts his thinking and action as a principal in multiple ways – from his hiring practices and how he rallies his staff behind a shared sense of purpose to the level of expectations to which he holds his teachers, staff, and himself. More so, James’s religious identity influences the
way that he thinks about his responsibility as a leader more broadly – how he understands for whom this work is for and what is at stake. Hence, as noted in the latter portion of the case narrative, this deep level of professional investment raises concerns regarding the extent to which such deeply personal dedication drains him personally and professionally. Though stemming from his religious and professional identity as a principal, how might the high expectations that he has of himself and his teaching staff wear on his ability to sustain himself and others in the years to come?
Chapter 6

Case C Narrative: Racial/Ethnic and Gender Identities

“…how to question the world or worlds of which I was a part”

Case C, Owen Campbell, began teaching immediately after college, launching an impressive eighteen year career as an educator. And although he is the youngest participant in this study (by only a few years), he taught for four years and has been a school administrator for almost fourteen. Owen’s story, however, differs somewhat from the other cases included in this study in other ways. Of particular note, he is very open and reflective in discussing two key social identities which seem to have had the greatest influence on his work as a school leader – namely, racial/ethnic and gender identities. Standing close to 6.5 feet tall and a former star basketball player in high school, Owen has spent a great deal of time over the last decade attempting to make sense of the challenging formative experiences related to race and gender that he experienced in his adolescence. Identifying as biracial – Black and White, Owen speaks frankly though somewhat cautiously about the ways in which his understanding of these social identities influence how he thinks about and approaches his work as an educational leader. In particular, the meaning he has made of his formative experiences as a Black, male youth and now a Black educator provides insights into the decisions he has made over his professional lifetime thus far, though none of which was as great as his choice to leave the predominantly White, affluent, suburban school districts in which he began his career to lead an all-male, urban public charter school serving predominantly low-income, Black youth.
Growing up in Central Pennsylvania, Owen and his family lived in the suburbs of a small city whose community was fairly diverse. And though his area of town was considered “sort of [the] poor Black neighborhood of the community” and his family did not have a lot of money, he recalls the feeling of growing up there as having been a “real synergetic, beautiful kind of diversity” (p. 11, C1_First Interview). This diversity, as he described it, was across multiple categories – racial, socio-economic, and religious, and Owen distinctly remembers never really feeling separate or divided along these lines as a child. This would be significant as it served to frame an important and troubling incident later in high school that would forever change his understanding and outlook on his own identity and on the world.

Born in the 1970s, Owen is biracial. His father is Black and his mother is White, and only a decade before, their marriage would have been considered illegal in the United States under “miscegenation” laws that prohibited interracial marriage between Whites and Blacks. In 1967, a landmark Supreme Court case, Loving v. Virginia, declared these state bans as unconstitutional, and thus it was in the years that followed this ruling that Owen’s parents were married. Throughout recent American history, there are many personal accounts and stories regarding the slow and challenging nature of how societal expectations and biases regarding interracial marriage were maintained in communities across the U.S. At the family-level, in particular, it has complicated the experiences of biracial and multiracial families who are often separated – willingly or unwillingly – from older generations of their families. Such was the case for Owen and his brother, yet
only in retrospect, has he began to grapple with the meaning it held for him growing up and how it shaped the importance of his immediate, nuclear family. He recalled:

My grandparents did not ... this probably is a pretty important seed for me. My [maternal] grandparents did not approve of my parents' marriage, and so I did not know the story that my folks often repeat... laughing, in a joking way... Sadly, the one time my [maternal] grandfather called the house, I was probably 10. Um, now, my dad's dad died when I was 11 months old. Story has it that he would have been like this loving grandfather who took care of everyone and was warm no matter what. He was also Black. So, he died and I knew that... I knew that he died when I was a baby. So, fast forward 10 years, you know, I'm ten-ish or so. And my mom's dad calls the house, and I say "Hello." "Hi Owen, this is your grandfather," and I said ... maybe I wasn't 10, I was probably younger, but my response was "Oh, I thought you were dead." So, I clearly... I didn't have any understanding of grandparents. And so all that we kind of had was there in that family, and I never felt at a loss. I had plenty of love there, but that family unit became... it was a small rock but that was my rock. (p. 6, C1_Second Interview)

In many ways, Owen’s close, traditional family unit was a source of strength for him growing up. There were multiple times, for example, in our interviews when he cited the love and support they provided him as an important factor in his personal development.

However, this also served to set him apart from others within his community in that having “a nuclear family... was not the common thing in that neighborhood” (p. 7, C1_Second Interview). Coupled with the fact that he and his family also happened to attend a Mennonite church less than a few blocks away – considered a bit of an anomaly in some Black communities, he remembers how he and his family were seen as “a little bit different” (p. 7, C1_Second Interview).

Thus, despite his general recollection noted earlier of his childhood community as being diverse and nurturing, there were moments – subtle as well as definitive – that challenged the way that he saw himself and his family. In our first interview, for example, he shared: (pp. 1-2, C1_Second Interview)
Participant: ... my experience in the moment was different than my experience looking back… it really [was] this beautiful vibe thing that we had going on there, but there were definitely choices that had to be made... you know, so... I'm in the Black neighborhood of this broader community, and I'm in the Honors and AP classes and not a lot of the guys from my part of the neighborhood are in those classes. Um, but then I also was on the basketball team and so that gave me... a little bit of street cred[ibility], so there... was that to navigate… Then… to further nuance… having a Black father and a White mom for me was another piece of trying to figure that out… I remember, for instance, getting into a shoving match with someone who... I don't know if we were filling something out or ... For some reason we were talking about race and being Black, and I remember saying, “You know, I'm half White too,” and he said, "Well, that's Black." I was like “Well, yeah, I know, but my…” I was trying to give props to my mom. And I remember for some reason getting into a shoving match about that for stupid reasons that kids do but… in retrospect that's all trying to figure out the identity and embrace it or deny it. I think that was me embracing it but, I'm sure there are moments too… where there's like denial and keeping things at arm's length… And for what it's worth, this context seems like it might be relevant, it was in a basketball locker room… um, before a game or something like that.

Interviewer: Why do you feel that might be relevant?
Participant: Um, because of the fact that, um… [long pause] that basketball is a link to (pause) part of that community. Whereas, AP calculus is a link to a different part of that community.

Adolescence is a time in which one’s sense of identity is emerging, and the “influence of peers on student development and identity is well established” in the literature (Renn, 2008, p. 19; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Erikson, 1968). Although Owen did not expand on any deeper meaning this experience may have held for him at the time, it does signify ways in which he was both aware of being “different” based on his racial/ethnic identity as well as the impact this had on how he navigated within and between the Black and White communities in his school.
It is therefore of particular note that through a racial/ethnic identity lens, Owen’s experience as a biracial youth are distinct from what we might identify as simply the development of a Black or White identity. In line with emergent research over the last twenty-five years focused specifically on the experiences of biracial and mixed raced individuals, Owen’s story noted above supports claims that existent theories of monoracial identity development do not sufficiently explain or apply to “aspects of mixed-race experiences” (Renn, 2008, p. 19). Thus, as he alluded to in his story, the idea of a fluid, situational identity had already emerged for him, allowing him the use of cultural “passports” (see Renn, 2008, p. 19) such as basketball or high-level academic courses to enter and connect with racially distinct sub-groups within his school and its larger community. He was able to cross racial and cultural borders (or divides) to which he was only somewhat aware of growing up (see Giroux, 1993; Campano, 2007).

In his own dissertation research completed approximately ten years ago, Owen reflected on this transition – one which shifted from an innocence of not knowing or acknowledging these divisions to no longer being able to ignore them. He wrote:

Being biracial was not a factor that affected life on a daily basis. I never felt divided or torn between two worlds. I never really felt pressure to choose. However, in retrospect, I do not know how I could not have recognized the chasm which I straddled every moment of those days. I think back to the Honors and Advance Placement courses in which I was enrolled, a rare dash of color in an otherwise whitewashed room. And I reflect on the status I enjoyed in my black community, all stemming from my experiences and wins on the basketball court. Never was this division so conspicuous to me as the night of [the] homecoming dance. (p. 2, Dissertation)

In a story that he recounted both in his dissertation and in our second interview, Owen retold of an incident in high school that was defining and transformational for him,
particularly as it related to what he learned about race and other people’s perceptions of him.

In his junior or senior year in high school, Owen chose not to attend the school’s homecoming dance. He had decided instead to spend a “quiet night at the pizzeria” with other members of his basketball team. Towards the end of the evening, however, he drove to the high school to pick up his girlfriend who he joked had been “an eager contributor to the committee responsible for the bad decorations and music” at the dance that night (p. 2, Dissertation). While waiting for the dance to wrap up, he recalls two young, Black men approaching him in his parked car who he did not know. Being familiar with almost everyone at his school, he simply assumed that they must be from a different school. Owen rolled down the window of his car, and with cigarettes in hand, “they asked for a light” (p. 2). He pressed in the lighter button that used to be in the lower dashboard of most vehicles, and they all waited while it heated up. The young men continued talking while Owen went back to listening to the “West Coast rap playing in [his] car” (p. 2). Then, in what seemed like seconds, Owen remembers seeing a couple of police officers approach his car, calling out, though he could not hear what they were saying. In turning back to look at the young men who had asked him for a light, he saw them run but not before one of them threw something through the open window of his car. It would take a moment for Owen to realize that the object was in fact a gun, and he watched as it fell to the floor. By the time he looked back up, one of the officers was at his car window, pointing his own weapon towards Owen and shouting at him to “Freeze!” It was the unraveling of the events that followed, however, that struck the
deeper and more uncomfortable chord with him. In our first interview, he shared his recollection of those events:

So, the cops pull me out, and they handcuff me… shove me up against the car and everything like that. Um, and I remember … [the] dance is over. So I remember people driving by at the time and I particularly remember nobody stopping… now again, small community… I don't know exactly who was in those cars, um, but I remember nobody stopping… then on the flip side I remember probably 15 minutes later, my principal coming out because I guess he knew something was going on, drama wise. He walked my girlfriend out, and I remember him like shouting at the cops… my virtues and accomplishments, essentially saying let him go, like, let Owen go. So he really advocated for me, and um, [long pause] and so then I remember… eventually, they did let me go. They uncuffed me, and then I remember going home that night. I remember keeping up a pretty good front for my girlfriend but going home that night and crying as I kind of processed all of it. I think it was probably just being scared. And then I also remember the next day, um, teachers sort of like applauding me for… being a gentleman through the whole experience, like being, um, compliant. (p. 3, C1_Second Interview)

I’ve deconstructed this whole thing, probably too much since that day, through all the coursework that I’ve done. But… I do give a lot of thought to what the teachers were applauding the re and would I have been wrong for being angry in the moment with the cops. And you know, it's particularly interesting given the context of what’s going on in our world, or country right now. Um, (pause)… even who I [needed] to be in the moment with my girlfriend [who was White], versus who I was when she wasn't around. And who I was, you know, when I was doing homework with the kids at my AP Honors classes versus who I was if that was their parents driving by me in that moment not stopping. Even when those same cops were the cops at our basketball games in the months that followed, you know, who I was to them there that night with handcuffs versus who I was playing basketball. (p. 3, C1_Second Interview)

The impact of this incident that occurred over twenty years ago is still profound for Owen. Not only did we discuss it in our interviews together, but he made a point to use it to frame his own doctoral research study which explored the experiences of young, Black, male students in predominantly White schools. His dissertation was written while he was an assistant principal at a high school, the first administrative position he held.
Thus, as an adult but more importantly as both a practitioner and researcher, he grappled with the meaning the incident has had on his own understanding of himself:

I took steps toward understanding that night. I learned a lesson about race. I began to see for the first time the chasm over which I stood – one foot in a black world and one in a white world. I would never be permitted to go on living without boundaries. Everyone was too bent on defining me. Others were too trained to impose limits on my potential. It was a lot easier for the world to define and confine me than allow me to overlap into different worlds. I learned how to question the world or worlds of which I was a part – worlds much bigger than my small high school experience. What part of me were achieving in these worlds?... What part of my identity was nurtured by the school, and what part of me was suppressed? Why did my teachers commend me the next day for handling the situation like a gentleman when in retrospect I had every right to be angry? And if I had grown angry, which part of me would be the angry part – the black part or the white part? (pp. 4-5, Dissertation)

Thus, despite the seeming acceptance Owen experienced within and across different social groups in school, his confrontation with the police in his late teens served as a moment of realization and loss. Emergent frameworks focused on biracial identity development agree that due to “societal racism and internalized oppression… biracial teens…[can enter] a period of turmoil and possibly a ‘dual existence’ (p. 200) when they might appear popular but feel as though they do not fit into any social group” (Root, 1990 as cited by Renn, 2008, p. 15). In this way, this formative experience in adolescence has not simply shaped how he understands who he is as a person, but it informs and influences the way he views the world and his work as an educational leader.

**Teaching Years and Early Leadership Experience**

In the mid-1990s, Owen attended college in a nearby state. Both he and his brother are first-generation college graduates. And before the end of his first year, he knew he wanted to pursue a career in education. In particular, two key volunteer
experiences that year – with the Big Brothers, Big Sisters Program and with Latin American Community Center – showed him the power of and his natural affinity for building relationships with young people in helping them to grow and develop (C1_First Interview). As he prepared to graduate, he attended a job fair for teachers, one from which he noted that he himself has recruited on behalf of his last three schools. At this event, he would meet a gentleman who would become a mentor to him, and their first encounter highlights an overlap in shared social identities between the two men.

At the job fair, Owen recalled walking down the aisles, somewhat nervous and anxious about how this event would shape his next steps after college. He remembers a man called out to him in a “gravely southern accent… ‘Don’t walk past me, boy’” (p. 7, C1_Second Interview). The voice then grabbed his arm, and Owen turned to see an older, Black school administrator standing there noting that this made the man’s use of the word “boy” “okay” (p. 7). After interviewing Owen, the man who stopped him, Steve Truman, ultimately hired him to be a teacher in the predominantly White, affluent, suburban public school district in which Truman was an assistant principal. The significance of this encounter is best captured by the fact that this school administrator would go on to mentor Owen, guiding him through his first few years of teaching as well into his first and subsequent administrator positions. When asked to think back to that first meeting and consider whether racial/ethnic identity mattered, Owen inhaled deeply, took a long pause, and responded:

I recall liking… I mean, I liked him. Um, I'd like to think that I would have liked him if he were a White man or you know…But I liked him. And part of what I liked about him were the stories he told… just informally… You know, because he had been there since… the late 60's. He'd been there through times where
racism was a lot… more okay (laughs). You know, it was a little more socially acceptable. So, it was cool to hear his take on things. Particularly as someone who... He started off teaching there, his career was there. I don't think it was a factor in why I went there, although it was in that he approached me that way. Um, but it certainly was a factor in why I felt like it was a home for me there. (p. 8, C1_Second Interview)

Owen’s response in some ways is more reflective of my own focus on issues of race in his story than it was at the forefront of his recollection of it. And though we are provided with some evidence of the racialized nature of their mentoring relationship, what stood out more for Owen was the quality of his relationship with this man. The nurturing, care, and honesty that Truman showed for Owen was influential, and has therefore been significant to his own thinking and understanding of the responsibilities and nature of school leadership.

I remember vividly…. My first year… [as a teacher], I remember… thinking I was doing well a couple of months in, and I remember a mom came in… before school started… she came in with her son in tow and pretty much just reamed me for the fact that he failed this grammar quiz, and it wasn't taught well. And she left, and I remember feeling just deflated. I had a prep period first period that day, so I got through homeroom. And I remember all the kids left, and I turned the lights off and I was just sitting there at my desk, and I remember being teary eyed or crying about it. And he walked by and saw me there. And he came in…. to say hi, turned the light on, saw I was upset, and turned it back off and sat next to me and talked to me for awhile. And I remember one of the things he said ... [and] he said it in a way that was not dismissive… after expressing a great deal of empathy, but he said, "One day, you'll be more thick skinned about these things." Um, and I've since reminded him of that, you know, going through the stuff that you go through now and the people who, particularly as a school leader, understand that you're going to make these decisions. And no matter what, there are going to be people who don't like the decisions, don't like you, whether it's you or the role you're in... There are people who don't like stuff that you do, and finding a comfort level in that despite all of that… I think that is a huge part of leadership… As I've worked with aspiring administrators… one of the things I tell them to prepare for is the loneliness of leadership and um, feeling like you're on an island sometimes and having systems, personal strategies in place to cope and navigate that. (p. 9, C1_Second Interview)
This focus on relationships, specifically the power of relationships to mitigate difficult challenges and to help individuals grow, served as a powerful model for Owen. In his own way, he embraced the building of relationships as a tool in his own practice as an educator and leader, and it ultimately served as the impetus for his decision to become a school administrator.

Hired to teach right out of college at a middle school on the East Coast of the United States, Owen credits the relationships he built with his first group of students in his own development as a professional. He shared that “they taught me how to… be an adult in this world… From my signature to what I wore and what I said and how I acted, it meant something. It was influencing them” (p. 2, C1 First Interview). Within the first couple of years as a teacher, Owen eventually pursued and received his administrative certification. At that point, he knew he wanted to be a school administrator, but it was one particular student and one significant incident in his fourth and final year of teaching that prompted him to make the move away from the classroom.

Owen recalls having a young male student that last year of teaching who “worked hard” in his class but was seen as problematic by others in the school. The student’s family situation was challenging – his mother was incarcerated, and he was in the care of his immigrant grandmother and grandfather who were very traditional and rigid in their handling and care of his behavior. One day, the young man got into a fight outside. Owen was the one who took hold of the student and escorted him into the school building, and because the fight had drawn a large crowd, he had to turn the young man over to one of
the assistant principals to be disciplined. This incident gave Owen pause. He shared his thinking as follows:

I remember thinking… I wish I could be the one sort of handling the situation… there was some thought at the moment about being in this role, a classroom teacher. It's great and it's wonderful, but in the times of greatest need, the kids go and they're working with these other folks. I remember wanting to be that, wanting to be the one who was there, who was sitting at the table with them in these moments of extreme hardship… so that was sort of a moment for me that… prompted me to make this decision to pursue more actively a leadership position. (p.8, C1_First Interview)

The district was a small community, and after central administration took note of Owen’s interest in moving into a new role, he eventually interviewed and was hired to be the assistant principal at the town’s only high school.

C1 High School

In the early 2000s, Owen began a four year tenure as a school administrator at the high school in the same district in which he had taught. Given the importance of relationships, this assignment was especially significant to him as it allowed him to transition with his former middle school students as they began high school. This, in turn, proved to be both a benefit and a challenge. On the complicated side, he went from being a beloved teacher to the disciplinarian, a shift in role and responsibilities with which he recalls parents having a particularly difficult time. On the side of potential benefits, however, his pre-existent relationships with many of the students and their families, he felt, gave him a sort of automatic credibility with others in the high school community. This was particularly important as a young, new school administrator. He recollected:

I feel like part of my success there had to do with the foundation I had established with [the students]… in the classroom… and ultimately with the community in that, that success afforded me the latitude to mess up, you know, latitude to try
new things, um... you know, to be able to communicate candidly about what was going on with the kid... because of my reputation with the students, I think some of the teachers, some of the faculty, with whom I was working in that new capacity, um, were willing to accept this 26-year-old coming in to be the assistant principal. (p. 4, C1_First Interview)

As a result, this period of time during Owen’s assistant principalship was important in helping to shape his emerging professional identity as a school leader. Yet, there was another major event that occurred during this same time that was of particular significance in the formation of that identity. Shortly after he began this position, Owen enrolled in a doctoral program, and as noted previously, this provided him with an opportunity to revisit and critically reflect on not only his own experiences growing up but on those of a sample of Black male students at his current school.

C2 Middle School

After completing his doctoral degree, Owen took on the principalship at a middle school in another suburban community approximately 2 hours away in the same state. He was 30 years old at the time, and although he and I spent very little time discussing this period of his career, its significance is found in the fact that it was his first principalship. This position, its role and responsibilities, subsequently served as the context in which Owen likely began to once again grapple with the ways in which he “enacted” aspects of his racial/ethnic and gender identities within that community. It is important to note here that Owen is extremely grateful to the community and for his experiences there. However, just as questions emerged after his high school incident regarding expectations he perceived from others regarding “who” he was supposed to be – how he should have presented himself and/or handled himself, for example, when the cops cuffed him outside
of the school, questions regarding this complicated interplay of internal versus external perceptions of his racial/ethnic identity persisted. More so, they may have been reawakened, in some sense, after the thought and effort he put into his dissertation research in making meaning of his own formative experiences in adolescence. In his dissertation, written when he was the assistant principal at his former school, he wrote:

> there are too many [Black] students in the current school that I oversee as an administrator who are not learning… They are falling into the same traps that snared many of my peers in high school. These students are marginalized members of the [predominantly White] school community. They are disenfranchised from the spirit of the building. They are a world removed from academic achievement because it is not expected of them or valued by them. Sadly, it is easy to visualize the disconnect [that] these students are experiencing from the rest of the school – mainly because the chasm divides along racial lines. (pp. 6-7, Dissertation)

Although Owen was in a different district at the time that he wrote the excerpt above, it would have been fresh on his mind as he began his principalship at his current middle school. And despite the two schools being in different towns, he has described both as having been predominantly White, affluent, suburban communities. A contextual consideration that likely played a significant role in shifting Owen’s next career move.

**Transitions: C3 Charter Secondary School**

After five years as principal at a public, suburban middle school, Owen decided to make what was considered by some to be a risky move. Roughly four years ago, he made the move to become principal of an urban charter school in the nearby city whose mission focused on serving young, Black males. This, I argue, is illustrative of what was likely an emerging conflict based on issues of race in his work as a school leader. During our second interview, Owen responded to a question regarding the use of the term “beloved”
in a couple of local newspaper articles which described his transition from his former school district to his current charter school. The exchange went as follows: (pp. 11-12, C2 Interview)

**Interviewer:** … you had said something… in our last conversation… You… described yourself as someone who, “right or wrong, fairly or unfairly, uh, often represented people of color”… And so I wonder because… both from your description but also just how it's kind of portrayed in the media, the community that [your previous school] represents and the community here at [your current urban school] and who they serve and represent. Um… if that kind of juxtaposition… how that stood out for you?

**Participant:** Yeah… So this is gonna be a little bit of a cynical response to that… What would be really interesting to me, um, is (pause)... I wonder, so that… theme that you’ve identified. I'd be curious about whether or not folks here in this community would use that same piece, because that would be telling to me. And here's where the cynical part comes in. It makes me wonder if… my (pause)... the interpretation of me in a place like [C2 Middle School] and how I represent myself in a place like [C2] um, is “beloved” because it's so far or at least somewhat removed from preconceived notions that they would have of me, of ... who I'm supposed to be… Um, so I don’t know the answer to that. But, but it makes me wonder about that.

He further elaborated on these issues of how his racial/ethnic and gender identities might influence how others perceive him: (pp. 4-5, C1 Second Interview)

**Participant:** You know … I used the word “compliant” before and “gentlemanly”… I probably convey them… with a negative twist like, “Oh, you don't want me to be the angry Black man.” That said, those are things I really do value. I value being a gentleman, I value being kind, um, being well mannered, and so I don't want to totally just diss those things... I strive to make them inherent to who I am and not just, um, part of some sort of façade to please others. Um, [long pause], that said, I’m riding both sides of the fence on this…. I very much recognize that... the color of my skin, my size, my voice play a role in how others are going to perceive me, and so I often, you know, wonder... I probably do at least, some of it is on a subconscious level… go out of my way to, um, (pause) to temper all those things with warmth, with smiles, with
kindness. Um, so it's tough to say how much of it is just because, and how much of it is because of that other stuff.

Interviewer: Where do you think that comes from? Why are those things important to you?

Participant: I’ll hypothesize. Part of my hypothesis is... I really like for people to feel comfortable… (laughs)… [But] I believe that people naturally have some insecurities. Natural is the wrong word, because it’s not natural…It’s something that they are conditioned to feel, but I think people have insecurities around a big Black guy… so I think a part of it comes from trying to temper that. I think along those same lines, it's not wanting to… fit or contribute to a negative stereotype. Um… [long pause] I think part of that, why I value that also probably comes from how I was raised… um, my folks. I think part of that comes from faith, from my faith and wanting to live a certain way… Faith now, here on earth today is about, um, you know, on this plane is in loving one another and supporting one another and caring for one another. Um, so I think in part that has to do with how I try to carry myself. Um, and I think it probably, to go full circle, has to do with why work like [my work at C3 Charter Secondary School] is important.

On the one hand, his comments here support what Renn (2008) argues in that “gender differences among mixed-race [individuals] may exacerbate or alleviate the effects of racial discrimination” (p. 15). However, Owen’s mention of faith (that is, religious identity) here also highlights the ways in which social identities which he has identified as valuable – racial/ethnic, gender, and now, religious – interact and how this overlap influences his professional thinking about the goals and responsibilities of being a school leader of his current school. Hence, although Owen asserts that his decision to leave his principalship position in the suburbs was less about the former school and its community and more about the mission and promise of the urban charter school, both seem to be true. There is evidence to suggest that over the past ten years, his journey has been transformational for him personally thus impacting his thinking and action professionally.

The excerpt above highlights the ways in which considerations of valued social identities
lay below the surface for him, perhaps brought forward during his reflection process completing his dissertation then acted upon when the opportunity at his current school became available.

At the time of his decision to switch schools, Owen was still principal at his former suburban school, working with a program at a local university as a mentor to aspiring school leaders. One of his mentees was a teacher who worked at C3 Charter Secondary School. Owen recollected his first impressions of the school and the sense of challenge he encountered in making the decision to become its principal:

I came over to visit [the school] one day to… see what [the teacher] was doing, have some meetings with him, and was very taken by the place… I just thought that the vision for the place, the mission for the place, was admirable and worthy and something I wanted to be a part of. And … that was just a visit. Months later, the founder and CEO of the school and I met up, and they were looking for [a principal]. And so then it became… this big decision for me… because it was really veering in… a different direction for me professionally… I'd say it wasn't hard for me, I guess, to decide that I wanted to be a part of this. I guess what complicated the decision for me was that all of these folks who I really respected, and I still respect them… But all these people whose opinions I valued, a lot of them… questioned, “Why would you do that?”… It was not a very traditional decision to go from this place that was this reputable, well-established community, where I had… a good reputation, and make this big transition. Um, so that complicated it a little bit because I was like, “Oh, I hope I'm not messing things up for myself.” (laughs) I felt it was the right decision and that was immediately affirmed for me once I began to work. (pp. 5-6, C1_First Interview)

Owen was clear on his choice to be part of his current school and its mission. It was others whom he felt he needed to convince. However, given the persistence of issues of race in his journey – both personally and professionally, his decision is an understandable one when considered through a social identity lens, specifically that of racial/ethnic and gender identities.
Challenges in School Leadership

Prior to serving as principal of his current school, Owen had always been one of the few Black educators let alone administrators in both of his former, suburban public school districts. Additionally, as a more seasoned educator and leader, he has found some comfort in his experience though this is arguably enhanced by the context and community in which he now finds himself. It is thus also important to note that, like Case B, the communities that Owen left behind were older and therefore more steeped and invested in history and tradition. He was a young school administrator working with teachers and other faculty who tended to be older and have more teaching experience than him. But at his current school, he has played an active role in creating the community of teachers and staff of which he is now a part (i.e., through hiring and the shaping of the growth and expansion of the school). He has had a hand in shaping a school community in which he is professionally and personally seen as an insider. When talking about that transition and how he might describe his leadership approach in that regard, he noted the following: (p. 18, C2 Interview)

Participant: I really want [teachers] to be able to take chances and take risks, and I want to encourage that... and I want them to know that they can mess up and recover and recuperate. And so, I think I model that in what I do... by saying, "I goofed on that, you know. What a stupid decision that was." And... being willing to, to say that, I think, is important. Um (pause)... now how is that different from when I was [at C2 Middle School]? [Long pause – exhales sharply]. I think a lot of those core pieces are the same. I've had to be different I... I've been allowed to be different. I felt more liberated here, but I don't know if it's as much about the com-... Part of it is the community. I mean, I could not be (pause)... as candid with the community in [C2]. Um, but I would say the bigger difference would be more of an internal one about how I felt. You know, [at C2 Middle School,] I was ... younger, I was...
a 30-year-old, and... the vast majority of teachers there were older than I was. I mean here... everyone's in their 20's (laughs) and... so there's some liberation there.

Interviewer: With the age and the experience?
Participant: Right... there's some liberation there. But... I believe, uh, I think those core things I described were still true. But it feels different to me... I don't feel as judged here.

There are likely many factors that contribute to Owen’s increased sense of comfort to be more himself (i.e., his authentic self as a leader) in his current school. However, it is also important to consider the context of who his students and their families are in relation to how he is perceived by others as a principal. Take, for instance, the following example he shared:

I think that...[long pause]... I think that there, there definitely have been some cases here where... the color of my skin... in this setting gives me some automatic, um, validation... I believe it's solely based on the color of my skin in at least some cases... I mean, I remember the first month or so of my first year here... a parent calling with concerns about her son in algebra class. I remember the teacher and everything, and talking about him, and then sort of part of the conversation was [the mother] asking me about whether or not... She didn’t use this word... “racist”, but essentially whether or not this teacher was supportive of Black students. Um, and so she didn't know me well enough to like... and so... that would be a case where the color of my skin validated it in her eyes who I was and that she could trust that... don’t know if trust is the right word... that she asked me that, but ... she felt that she could ask me that. (p. 13, C2 Interview)

His awareness of the ways in which his racial/ethnic identity provide him credibility in a sense in his new school community is important, but it is not without complication.

Because of his own journey in understanding his biracial identity and based on his prior experiences in communities and schools demographically different from his current situation – both socioeconomically and racially, Owen has grappled with confronting his own preconceived notions of others in this space. Now the father of three young children, he and his family still live, for example, in the suburbs of his former school district. Thus,
his coming to the city and this school still feels “new” to him despite this being his fifth year as principal. He has spent the last few years learning the culture and politics of the school which he leads as well as that of the larger city district in which it is located. However, in what may be his most valued lesson in coming to this school, Owen confessed the following:

I've shared this before because I think it's important, but it's also kind of embarrassing... as a person of color and as someone who, um, right or wrong, for better or worse, fairly or unfairly, was representing people of color, all of these different communities I was in [before], I would have thought that I had, um, a relatively progressive sense of race, for instance, as a social construct as opposed to race being sort of the core of one's identity, if that makes sense... But when I came here, this is where it's embarrassing... I remember being surprised at how different all the kids were. Like I remember... thinking like, oh, this kid’s a nerd, and this kid’s a skater, and this kid’s a gamer, and this kid's kind of a tough guy. And I remember being surprised by that, which prompted me to think, I guess, somewhere in my head, I thought that all these [urban] Black boys... were all gonna kind of be the same. [But] just like in [the community of C2 Middle School], just like in [C1 High School], even though they share that one demographic piece in common... there's so many differences... the reason it's important to share, is because it's just so important for everyone, the surrounding community, the world, the world beyond [this city], to recognize that these are... our babies... they're kids. They still have all of those same insecurities and idiosyncrasies and worries and aspirations that... kids have. And I really fear that if I was surprised by that and felt that way and didn't give due credit to who these kids really are, that I wonder if others are going to struggle to see them for the kids they really are... (pp. 10-11, C1_First Interview)

Beyond the mission of the school, this is personal for Owen. As someone who has struggled with the assumptions placed on him as a young, Black, male youth and as a grown, Black man, his disclosure here of some of the same biases and assumptions that he has always assumed others have had of him is significant. He has spent a great deal of time, energy, and thought into making sense of formative experiences from his adolescence tied to his biracial and gender identities. Through a social identities lens, we
thus begin to see how Owen’s decision to lead at this particular school has allowed him the freedom and ability to both represent himself and to lead in ways that are more aligned and true to the goals and values that he holds about the power of education and schooling.

**Interpretive Summary**

In many ways, Owen’s life story – both personally and professionally – is full of experiences tied to his negotiation and crossing of socially-constructed borders within the communities in which he has lived and worked, particularly along lines of race. His narrative thus explores how overt and acknowledged aspects of his individual perception of his social identities, namely race/ethnicity, are simultaneously distinct and often in conflict with the ways others may perceive him both personally and professionally as a school leader. In this way, Owen’s case provides evidence of the ways in which identity is both fluid and evolving as well as social in nature, highlighting the significance of considerations of context on how an individual understands and thus enacts his own social identities.

In his adolescent years as a young, biracial youth, Owen recalls a number of small, subtle moments in which his own understanding of his racial/ethnic identity came into conflict with how others perceived him. However, the major event which happened in high school was a jolting turning point for him in this regard. Continuing into adulthood, the assumptions and expectations placed upon him by others based on their perceptions of his racial/ethnic and gender identities have not only deepened the value of these social identities for him but they continue to push Owen to grapple with his own
understanding of his social identities in the contexts of the schools and communities in which he leads. He notes, for instance, a distinction between his level of comfort and authenticity as a leader at his former affluent, White suburban schools compared to his current urban, charter school serving young, Black male youth. In the former, he was constantly aware to varying degrees of his status as an outsider based on his race, and in his current school setting, he notes feeling less “judged”. It is significant to note that although his outsider status at the charter school may persist in some ways because of his relative newness to the city and its politics, the meaning he has made of his formative experiences focused on race has been particularly important to him in this context. It continues to influence and shape his understanding of his role and responsibilities as a principal, and more importantly, it anchors his sense of purpose in helping to support and transform the lives of young people who share in his racial/ethnic and gender identities.

His desire to address inequity along racial lines does not simply stem from Owen’s own personal experiences in his youth as formative experiences early in his professional career are also of significance. Particularly key is the impact and influence of his mentor, Steve Truman – the veteran, Black school administrator who hired Owen out of college and drew him to the socio-economically advantaged, White suburban school district in which his career began. Although Owen does not readily attribute their shared racial/ethnic identity to the importance that Truman’s guidance has provided him, evidence suggests that it has been an important factor in both the establishment and building of this valuable mentoring relationship over time. As a mentor, Truman openly shared with Owen his own experiences leading schools in that community including
stories explicitly involving issues of race. In so doing, he has served as a model for Owen demonstrating the complexity of being both a school leader and a man of color. Although Owen does not explicitly describe “mentoring” as part of his work as principal at his current school, he does allude to the important opportunity his position provides him in supporting and advocating for the Black male youth in his charge. Helping to prepare them to navigate the challenges they will likely encounter based on others’ perceptions of their racial/ethnic and gender identities has become an underlying purpose driving his work as a school leader.

In this regard, it is important to recognize that although a shared racial/ethnic identity may have brought Owen and his mentor together (and thus him to the students at his current school), Owen chooses to identify the greatest lesson learned from his mentoring relationship with Truman as the powerful impact that relationships can have on his leadership practice. This has guided and shaped the way that Owen thinks about and approaches his work as a principal. And although a self-described introvert, Owen’s ability and focus on building relationships with others is not only a valuable asset but has served as a tool in helping him to build bridges toward achieving the goals related to his work as a school leader. Yet, based on the insights he has shared, this focus on relationships could also be considered in some ways a form of compensation (i.e., a way to counteract any negative perceptions of his racial/ethnic and gender identities), something that he is open in discussing and in so doing attributed to his faith (i.e., religious identity). This, in turn, highlights the ongoing presence and continued influence of issues of race and gender on his thinking and action as a school leader. His story
therefore provides examples of “intersectionality” and raises questions regarding the ways in which school leaders learn to make meaning of their experiences through multiple social identity lenses and what influence this may have – consciously or subconsciously – on how they choose to lead.
Chapter 7

Discussion & Implications

Based on these three case studies, we learn how social identities impact leadership practices particularly in relation to how leaders understand their role and responsibilities as school leaders and how they choose to present themselves as principals. In addition, a number of important considerations responding to the research questions emerged from my analysis of the data (interviews, informal observations of participants during these interviews, and archival documents). Of these, three major themes became evident across all three cases involved. First, participants tended to identify at least one key social identity which impacted their decision to become leaders and thus their development as principals. Secondly, the key social identity noted to be of value to the individual shapes the ethic by which they choose to lead, guiding, for instance, their values and beliefs about their role as a school leader and the goals of the work that they do. Lastly, considerations of alignment or congruence between the ecology of the school and the principal’s valued social identities influences his or her perception of challenges related to leading.

Thus, in this chapter, I will explore each of these three themes further as they relate to the cases presented. I will also briefly discuss the limitations of this study which include challenges in methodology and positionality given the nature of the research questions before concluding with thoughts regarding the implications and future considerations of this research.
**Major Themes**

**Theme 1: The Influence of Social Identity on the Decision to Lead**

The personal stories shared by the three participants in this study illustrate the ways in which social identities develop and evolve over the lifespan. For these participants, this process occurred in two parts. First, all of the school leaders spoke of formative experiences from their youth which they felt played an important part in establishing social identities that are particularly valuable to them. By “valuable” I mean that the social identity was both referred to often and was also described as being influential to how the individual sees and understand his or her purpose as a school leader. For Case A, this included childhood experiences she shared with her grandfather regarding the importance of race and education prior to the Civil Rights Movement and which contributed to the shaping of her social action identity through a racial/ethnic identity lens. Cases B and C, in turn, described experiences from their adolescence which awakened their awareness of self in relation to others. For the former, it focused on issues of religion and faith and finding ways to serve those who are marginalized. For the latter, his experiences were in response to internal versus external perceptions of his racial/ethnic identity and his desire to play a part in the stories and development of other young men like him. Secondly, for all of the participants, the understanding that they had of their social identities further shaped how they experienced key events in their careers later in life. Hence, seen through the lenses of valued social identities, these incidents impacted, for instance, Case A and B’s decision to enter into school administration generally as both felt compelled to do so following a sense of moral purpose in their work.
based on their social action and religious identities, respectively. However, for cases B and C, their understanding of their social identities also served as a significant factor in what drew them to their current leadership positions in mission-driven schools, providing them with opportunities to act on that understanding.

Hence, not only are formative experiences – particularly those which occur during adolescence – of significance in the construction of social identities, but the meaning made of those experiences is in turn further shaped by the social identities themselves through reflection in the years that follow. This development occurs within the immediate as well as the changing social, cultural, and historical contexts in which the individual is located, and it indicates an evolving notion of social identity. Reflective of existing literature focused on the study of identity, social identity is thus “a process that is continuous and incomplete… a constructed and open-ended process” (Yon, 2000, p. 13). As opposed to a fixed concept of identity, this conceptual understanding of social identity as process highlights the importance of how individuals may continuously make new meaning of past and present experiences through the lens of particular social identities of value to them and in relation to their concept of self. It also underlines the importance of self-categorization in regards to which social identities individuals forefront or background in different contexts and how these might frame their understanding of the world and their work, whether knowingly or unknowingly.

In this vein, all three principals shared significant formative experiences linked to one or more social identities described as being of particular importance to them while also providing evidence of other social identities of value which, though not always
explicitly mentioned, influenced how they made meaning of events in both their personal and professional lives. For example, Case B’s religious identity evolved in tandem with his professional identity as a principal, each informing the other in a reciprocal and cyclical process of action and reflection. It is thus important to note that the findings suggest that the use of social identity as a framework in studying these issues of leadership is particularly powerful as it allows for and acknowledges the potential influence and interplay of more than one identity of value at the same time. More importantly, however, it helps us to understand how these school leaders have continued to make meaning of their formative experiences – both in early life and career – throughout the years and through the multiple lenses of their social identities of value. Thus, by revising past assumptions or integrating new learning to their understanding of these experiences, the three cases illustrate the ways in which their meaning making was guided by and shaped by key social identities and which served as important touchstones in guiding key decisions that they have made as principals.

Theme 2: The Ethics of School Leadership through a Social Identity Lens

Building on research on moral development and gender, the concept of an ethic of school leadership identifies the ways in which valued social identities influence and guide the principles and beliefs participants’ have about their professional role and responsibilities and thus how they think about and approach the work that they do as leaders. The assertion of differences based on sex or gender in moral orientation raised by Carol Gilligan’s Ethic of Care framework and in response to Lawrence Kohlberg’s Ethic of Justice perspective elucidates “the ways in which moral problems are conceived and
reflects different dimensions of human relationships that give rise to moral concern” (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988, p. 73) by women versus men (i.e., based on gender identity) (see also Gilligan, 1977). In studying the ways that women talk about moral dilemmas based in real-life, Gilligan “recognized a conception of morality not represented in Kohlberg’s work” (Lyons, 1988, p. 23), which many have argued is biased in favor of men. In contrast, she argued “that there are two distinct modes of moral judgement – justice and care – in the thinking of men and women [respectively, and] that these are gender-related” (p. 23). Thus, Gilligan hypothesized that gender differences exist in the way that individuals understand moral challenges and therefore how they choose to respond to them. In essence, based on gender as a social identity, women and men weigh and value different considerations when faced with real-life problems of morality – particularly as it relates to conceptualizations of self in relation to others.

In this study, social identities of value not only served specific functions in shaping the leadership development trajectories of principals but also greatly influenced how they have chosen to lead in varying contexts. This is evident in how named social identities influenced understanding of the goals and aims underlying their work but also in the establishment of important mentoring relationships that have greatly influenced the way that each principal thinks of his or her role and responsibilities as a principal.

Consider, for instance, that all of the participants in this study expressed an explicit interest in addressing issues of inequity, justice, and systemic change in schools and saw their positions as school leaders as a vehicle by which to achieve those goals. And although each participant came to that understanding through different social
identity lenses, they attributed the identification of those goals to aspects of the valued social identities to which they belong (e.g., social action, racial/ethnic, and religious). In addition, all three school leaders spoke to varying extents of people who had guided and supported them into their careers as school administrators. These individuals – mentors who are seasoned, veteran school leaders – tended to share the same valued social identities with the principals in this study, an important consideration even if the study’s participants did not directly attribute shared social identity as the reason why that mentor was important to them in their development as a leader. In this regard, Haslam and his colleagues (2011) add that:

At the personal level, social identities are immensely important to individual group members. They give us a sense of place in the world: who we are, what we should do, and how we relate to others. Identities also give us a sense of connection to those who share our sense of self (i.e., other in-group members), and the group itself is typically a source of belongingness and pride… What is more, individuals’ connection to other group members gives rise to a sense of effectiveness in shaping the world. (p. 144)

This highlights the importance of social identity (i.e., the role of social groups and membership) in the development of school leaders thinking about the work that they do, a finding that departs from predominant literature on leadership more focused on individualistic traits. It also, however, raises two important questions. How might shared social identities hold distinct meanings or functions for different individuals? And in what ways might a social identity bear influence on a school leader’s thinking if he or she does not acknowledge it as important or germane to the situation at hand?

In response to these questions, we refer back to the data presented by the cases in this study. It is, for instance, important to note that although both Cases A and C identify...
as Black (Case C at varying points throughout the data), there are distinctions in how each speaks about her or his racial/ethnic identity. This is particularly true in regards to the understanding of and meaning that the identity holds for each person in relation to their work as school leaders and how this might influence the ethic by which they lead. As an example, despite embracing a biracial identity, Case C often speaks of being perceived as a Black man within educational contexts in which he has worked. This monoracial identity challenged him personally in adolescence, and that conflict carries over into his professional identity as he admits wondering if and how it might influence how others in the school community perceive him. This was particularly true during his time in his former school districts which he described as predominantly White and affluent suburbs, and it made him question how he presented himself as a leader. Case C, therefore, tends to problematize his racial/ethnic identity; whereas, Case A rarely mentions it in relation to her work as a principal. And though there are generational differences to consider – including differences in what might be socio-culturally valued and which might contribute to how these individuals discuss aspects of this social identity in the context of school leadership, the heterogeneity illustrated by this example in how racial/ethnic identity is understood is significant in the extent to which it impacts their perception of the school community and the role they play within it.

This theme and its related issues also raise questions regarding the importance of what lies within and outside of a school leader’s awareness. Accordingly, Schon (1983) asserts that a school leader as “practitioner has built up a repertoire of examples, images, understandings, and actions… [and that] a practitioner’s repertoire includes the whole of
his experience *insofar as it is accessible to him* [emphasis added] for understanding and action” (p. 138). This highlights the complex nature of research aimed at connecting social identities to leadership thought and action and is an issue that will be further discussed later in this section.

**Theme 3: Question of Fit: Social Identities, Leadership, and Schools**

Acknowledging the importance of social identities in the formation and enactment of school leaders’ professional identities, this theme addresses questions of congruence (or lack thereof) between the values and beliefs to which the leader is committed and aspects of the school’s ecology (e.g., operational habits, commitment to mission, sense of community, etc.). This, in turn, highlights the inevitable nature of how different social identities might contribute to a principal being seen as an insider or outsider to sub-groups within an existing school community, and more importantly, raises questions regarding how principals perceive the challenges they face when valued social identities and their sense of moral purpose in leading are questioned or placed at risk. From the three cases included in this study, we learn that this is significant not only in relation to leadership transitions (i.e., when leaders enter new schools and communities as principals) and how school leaders implement change from within the school, but it also provides important insights into a leader’s decision to stay or leave particularly challenging circumstances.

Consider, for instance, examples from each case. Due to mandated district assignments, Case A was assigned to her first two schools in which she served as principal. In both situations, she was met by resistance from certain subsets of the faculty
who shared an identity stemming from loyalty to the school’s former leader(s) or in their
distrust of her as an outsider. Case A, however, tapped into her social action and former
teacher identity to place herself side-by-side in instructional and curricular reform efforts,
helping her to slowly build a community of followers and supporters from within the
school’s teacher community. Through a social identity lens, this example recognized that:

Leadership… is rooted in a social relationship between leaders and followers—
and framed by their membership of a social group… leaders are only leaders to
the extent that they are seen as such by followers… [and] only exert leadership to
the extent that they recruit followers to their cause and recruit those followers’
energies to the promotion of that cause… But followers… can also play a part in
persuading their fellows to support any group project and to realize any leader’s
vision. (Haslam et al, 2011, p. 199)

Thus, Case A created her own insider community (or in-group) from which she was able
to shift the school’s ecology to better fit the operational goals and practices of the schools
that she had put in place.

For Cases B and C, their initial principal placements involved a great deal more
choice. Nonetheless, both leaders attributed the challenges they faced in their first schools
as principals to a mismatch between their having been young, new principals working
with older, more experienced teachers in schools that heavily valued tradition and history.
Not only did this make them outsiders to these communities, but perceptions of their
social identities (e.g., age) were tied to assumptions about their lack of qualifications and
inability to be effective school leaders. The extent to which this was the reality or simply
the perceptions of both gentleman is unclear, but they admit to having felt hyper-aware of
and somewhat restricted in how they chose to present themselves as leaders of the school
as a result. In this way, Haslam and his colleagues (2011) note that the study of social
identity and leadership “argues that the operation of psychological processes always depends upon social context” (p. xx). And although their gaining experience over the years has helped to build their professional self-confidence which has mitigated these perceptions in more recent leadership transitions, there were instances where they found the behavior and actions of others at these former schools to be in conflict with deeply held values and beliefs they held tied to valued social identities. In this sense, Fullan (2003) argues that:

> it is far more damaging if principals lose track of their moral compass. Why did I become an educator in the first place? What do I stand for as a leader? What legacy do I want to leave?... These are all-powerful questions that should be continually revisited; otherwise the principal’s role becomes overloaded with emptiness. (pp. 19-20)

In effect, the adversity they faced during their time at these schools raised questions regarding whether they were in schools that would allow them to be true to the moral purposes they held for their work as educational leaders and which were rooted in their valued social identities. These realizations, in turn, likely played a significant role in their bold decisions to leave these schools and move on to what others initially deemed less prestigious and riskier challenges at institutions whose missions embrace goals and philosophies more closely aligned with their own.

These stories thus illustrate the ways in which context matters in school leadership but not necessarily in manners we might expect. Participants’ perceptions of challenge were tied in both seemingly small and major ways to aspects of their social identities – who they are as people – in relation to social groups within the school community. In situations in which the social identity in question is one of deep value to
the leader, evidence suggests that incongruence between the principal and the ecology of the school may have been experienced as more burdensome to their sense of self and who they are as school leaders.

**How Do These Three Cases Answer the Research Questions?**

In sharing aspects of both their personal and professional histories, the principals included in this study have described a strong investment in social identities which they feel influence and help to define who they are as school leaders. For all three, this is connected to a desire to change inequities within our education system and in the world. Rooted in different social identities, they each also share in the vision that such change is part and parcel of the goals inherent in their role and responsibilities as school leaders. Yet, how each principal perceives their social identities influencing the way that they present themselves as leaders and how they understand the challenges which emerge from leading schools depends greatly on matters of context. Their understanding of these aspects of their leadership is situated within set periods of time and further influenced by the larger social, historical, and political contexts of the communities in which their schools are located. In this respect, not only are issues of social identity important contributors to a sense of belonging, credibility, and authority, but they can lead to an increased willingness to take risks (i.e., to commit to decisions that may not necessarily be well supported by those who they trust), an openness to sharing aspects of their human side – exposing a form of vulnerability (i.e., willingness to share and reflect on their own perceived failures with their staff), as well as an increased need to “cope” or “compensate” for aspects of who they are that they feel are perceived as weaknesses or
stigmatized in some way in regards to their abilities to lead (e.g., age, lack of experience or knowledge of community, etc.). A school leader’s perception of their social identities therefore impacts their ability to be authentic leaders – to be more themselves, comfortable, and therefore confident in their abilities and decisions as principals (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). This, in turn, impacts their thinking and approach to leading, the way they choose to present themselves as leaders, and their ability to lead effectively.

**Limitations**

Analysis of these findings yielded a number of limitations regarding the study of issues of social identities and leadership. In particular, these included: 1) methodological challenges in collecting data that allow for analysis of both the personal and the professional lives of school leaders; 2) in instances when this data is collected, the ethics related to the handling of what is often considered deeply, personal information; and 3) issues of researcher positionality tied to the importance of self-categorization by the participant.

Accordingly, it is important to acknowledge that school leaders in their professional capacity are often accustomed to managing not only their identities within organizational or public settings but their responses to questions regarding such personal issues and stances. This held true despite my intentional recruitment of principals who were identified as key informants. All the participants in this study were selected because they had been known to think about these issues of identity as well as issues of self in relation to others and because they had demonstrated in the past some depth of personal
reflection regarding their professional work. Yet, methodological challenges in attempting to explore what lies within and outside of an individual’s awareness emerged.

Additionally, the study of social identities relies on gaining insights into formative experiences which in many circumstances can be perceived as deeply personal to the individual. In this study, it was common for participants to comment that our conversations felt like “therapy” (Case C) or that they were not certain how all of the personal information they shared related to a study on school leadership. In this way, talking about their lived experiences – especially relationships and events that hold great meaning to the participants – prompted responses that were either deflection in nature (i.e., dismissing of important details or topics) or were, as was seen with the three cases in this study, tinged with emotion and difficult to discuss. Case A, for example, noted in sharing her reflections that “sometimes it hurts just as deeply now as it may have back then” (pp. 12-13, F1_Second Interview). She and I later shared the following exchange:

*Participant:* … you made me think about some things I hadn’t thought about in a long time. But I like that when I talk about who I am (pause), I often just go back to my childhood, and my family and how important they are to me and how they influenced me… I think that, um, in my opinion, I think that my childhood experiences and how I was raised has had the greatest influence on why I became a teacher.

*Interviewer:* Would you also say that they’ve had the greatest influence on why you lead the way that you do?

*Participant:* Yes.

Thus, the potential to uncover connections between the personal and the professional emerge through hints provided in the data but also reveal additional questions regarding the ways in which social identities might influence leaders’ understanding of their work.
Positionality in Interpretive Analysis

My interest in this topic is rooted in my own personal and professional experiences and the meaning I have made of them. My own experiences therefore color the way that I have conceptualized the work and backgrounds of the leaders in my study. As a researcher, it is important to discuss questions which emerged for me regarding the liberties I may have taken in connecting aspects of social identities to the thoughts and actions of the case participants, and vice versa. Because I have understood my own experiences professionally to have been very much influenced by social identities that I value, I am aware and sensitive to the possible projection of those assumptions onto the ways that I conducted my interviews and in my approach to analyzing the data.

One example of such challenges occurred during an interview with Case C. In my attempt to reflect back what I heard the participant say, I used a particular value-laden word in my phrasing of my follow-up question. Case C described a challenge he faced with a young female teacher and the tricky dynamic created in attempting to resolve the situation in coordination with the CEO of the school, an older gentleman who he described as being “grandfatherly” towards the young teacher. In his description, I took it to mean that the CEO had been somewhat paternalistic and dismissive of how upset the teacher had become. In turn, I asked if the principal had perceived the CEO’s behavior or response as “patronizing”, a term that the participant than incorporated into his response to me. In reviewing this exchange, however, I wonder to what extent my use of such a word that carries inherent implications of gender and power (issues of which are readily
on my radar because of who I am) shaped the discussion that followed. In this respect, Yon (2000) argues that:

Since talk of identity merges with the practices of identity, identities cannot be separated from the knowledge and representations which they express and repress… Nor is identity beyond what Giddens describes as the ‘double hermeneutics.’ This is a reference to how those we research may internalize the language of the researcher and talk and act through the concepts and meanings that language produces. There is, in other words, an intimate relationship between the various discourses and representations of identities and how identities are made and performed. But this observation… draws attention to the self-reflexivity entailed in identity construction, to how individuals mediate and reflect upon these trends and make them their own. (pp. 2-3)

Here, the author provides a potential explanation for why the aforementioned example may have occurred. However, because of the highly personal nature of social identities, questions related to the ethics of my research approach and the strength of my analysis of the data remain.

Future studies on issues of social identity and leadership should consider the necessity to expand the length of time as well as sources of data included as ways to both gather potentially wider and deeper data, to substantiate aspects of participants’ stories, and to help uncover significant social identities which might lie outside of the leader’s awareness. This would greatly reduce concerns regarding “leaps of interpretation” (i.e., analysis based on potential connections for which less evidence may be available) as well as questions of researcher positionality. In turn, this would also help to clarify which social identities might truly be of value to participants in their roles as school leaders and why.
Implications and Future Considerations

My intention in doing this research is not to qualify one approach or one person’s understanding as “better” or “more valuable”, but to look at the ways that meaningful aspects of a leader’s social identity (via personal and professional experiences) might support or complicate the work they do as principals. Based on my findings, it becomes important that we recognize the increased need to more deeply understand the personal and human factors at play in leading schools – characteristics and considerations purposefully removed from earlier scholarship and conceptualizations of leadership generally. Principals must be acknowledged as agents navigating the challenges before them and therefore as active interpreters in their own work. As school administration continues to grow increasingly more complex (Levin, 2006), the field must gain a deeper understanding of how personal and professional experiences shape and inform daily practices and thus leadership thinking and action particularly during moments of challenge or crisis. By focusing on the details of everyday decisions and struggles, research has an opportunity to explore the intricate nature of school leadership and deepen our understanding of important factors in how the work of leaders is conceptualized and implemented by those on the ground.

As previously discussed, school leadership is inherently social in nature; yet, a sense of isolation in leading, especially through challenge and crises, is not uncommon. Given the importance of identity management in building and sustaining relationships (Haslam, 2014) as well as the importance of relationships in tending to the emotional burdens of leading (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005), it is important to better understand who
the key people are with whom the principal interacts and the nature of those connections as they relate to the school leader’s perceptions of social identity and challenge.

Lortie (2009) argues that “traditions, often unnoticed, have built up over the decades, which affect our thinking in ways we do not fully comprehend” (p. 14). Thus, what does it really mean to be an outlier in the current climate of high stakes accountability – either successful or struggling in one’s role as a principal? And what can we learn from the lived experiences of educational leaders’ that is in service of deepening scholarship in this field? Rousmaniere (2013) contends that “the principal’s office carries within itself many of our deepest questions about public education… the history of school principals epitomizes the many conflicts and contradictions, highs and lows, of American public schooling” (p. 152). Current challenges in school leadership necessitate different ways of thinking about and researching the lived experiences of principals. This dissertation aims to contribute to bridging existing gaps in educational leadership research, specifically focused on issues of identity and leadership, and puts forth considerations regarding how principals are prepared to and supported in dealing with the realities of the job at hand.

Deepening our understanding of self and self in relation to others is thus critical in learning situations and when working with people. If we do not question, search, position, and strive to make meaning of who we are in our work, we never truly risk the possibility of working through difficult questions or situations toward something better. Deaux and her colleagues (1995) posit, there is an “underlying psychological significance” to social identities and question if “different types of identities have distinct
meanings or serve distinct functions for the individual? Only by understanding what the
basis for differentiation is can we begin to think about what the consequences of different
identity categories might be” (p. 280), particularly in the significance they might bear on
leadership thinking and actions. For example, in reflecting back on his time as
Superintendent of Trenton, New Jersey, James H. Lytle (2010) documented a similar
process of grappling with these challenging issues and what it meant for him as a leader:

The answer [to dilemmas in our district] was within us. We had to act on what we were learning. For me this has meant dealing with people and situations I’d rather avoid; acknowledging my discomfort with conflict; recognizing my tendency to intellectualize and analyze rather than just do it; admitting that for all my espoused comfort with chaos and complexity, I still have a need to control (better to lead than to follow); and sensing when I am reverting to my comfort zone. (Lytle, 2004, p. 25 as cited in Lytle, J., 2010, p. 132)

Reflecting on our experiences as practitioners through the lens of social identities thus helps to bring a sense of "consciousness" to our thinking about research of school leadership that frames and then reframes conflict or dissonance into something more generative and meaningful. Further, the implications for practice are equally as great. Schon (1983) argues that leaders:

seldom reflect on their reflection-in-action. Hence this crucially important dimension of their art tends to remain private and inaccessible to others. Moreover, because awareness of one’s intuitive thinking usually grows out of practice in articulating it to others, [leaders] often have little access to their own reflection-in-action… Since he cannot describe his reflection-in-action, he cannot teach others to do it… Yet one of a [leader’s] most important functions is the education of [others]. (p. 243)

Hence, this research raises questions regarding the importance of interrogating who we are in relation to our work, why we do what we do, and to challenge ourselves to consider the potential negative and positive impact of the conditions we establish and the decisions
we make. This, I argue, has direct implications on both research and practice (e.g., how school leaders are prepared and supported through challenge), requiring us to not only acknowledge what hidden agendas (good or bad) might be driving or informing our work as educators and as leaders, but to question the systems and rules that may confine us to conventional and culturally-determined practices and ways of thinking (see Levin, 2006). By making this explicit, such lines of research on social identity and leadership can push us to more deeply and honestly reflect on the lens with which we see the world and to find a balance between the expertise we bring as "knowers" and the need to be open to learning from moments of intellectual and emotional dissonance tied to the realities of what is happening around us.
Appendices

A. Conceptual Framework

B. Consent Form for Current and Former School Leaders

C. Interview Protocol: 1st Interview

D. Interview Protocol: 2nd Interview
Appendix A: Conceptual Framework

Overarching Assumptions:
- “Self” cannot be separated from behavior and action (Postmodern theory; Creswell, 2007).
- School leadership is applied work and principals are active interpreters of this work (Moderate hermeneutic theory; Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998; see also Gallagher, 1992).
- Context matters (Erickson, 1986; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997; Weick, 1995).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Frameworks</th>
<th>Key aspects of theoretical frameworks on which I draw...</th>
<th>Implications</th>
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<tr>
<td>Applied Social Identity Approach (ASIA) – includes both social identity theory and self-categorization theory</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical Race Theory, Critical Feminist Theory, Research on Intersectionality</td>
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<td>Practitioner Research – specifically research conducted by school leaders</td>
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- Identity matters, value-neutral (see Haslam, 2014).
- Individuals possess multiple identities (or social identities) in which they find meaning.
- Individuals’ perceptions influence understanding and action.
- There is heterogeneity in social identity groups. Thus, individuals with seemingly identical social identities may not make meaning of them in the same way and thus may not understand and behave the same in similar situations.
- The ability to self-identify with a social identity (versus being assigned to one) is paramount (See Haslam, 2014).
- More than one social identity to which an individual meaningfully connects may be foregrounded or backgrounded at the same time (see Haslam, 2014).
- Social identities play a part in how individuals perceive and interact with the world around them. This applies to both everyday challenges as well as large-scale crises.
- Schools and thus school leadership are inherently social and interactional in nature.
- Leadership is not “apolitical” (Haslam, 2014, pp. 12), and issues of power and politics are involved in the leadership of schools.
- Perceptions of challenge (as filtered or understood through the lens of social identities) have an impact on:
  - The physical, mental, and emotional health of school leaders;
  - Sustainability of one’s self under stress (e.g., social identities serving as both coping strategies as well as protective factors);
  - Leaders’ effectiveness at work; and
  - Potential school leader burnout and turnover.

This dissertation represents a small piece of a larger puzzle regarding deepening our understanding of how individuals understand the role and responsibilities of school leadership. It thus has potential implications for both research and practice in regards to what we might be able to learn about principals, their perceptions of challenges, how to better prepare and support them, and considerations for practice and policy.

In this dissertation, I use an Applied Social Identity Approach (ASIA, and referred to here as simply “social identity”) as my guiding framework as it best reflects existing perspectives in current research on leadership.
Appendix B: Consent Form for Current and Former School Leaders

CONSENT FORM FOR CURRENT & FORMER SCHOOL LEADERS


Principal Investigator: (name, address, phone and email)
Michael Nakkula, Ed.D.
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Emergency Contact: (name, address, phone and email)
Kathy Rho
3700 Walnut St. City 1, PA 19104
(832) 651-4275
krho@gse.upenn.edu

You are being asked to take part in a research study. This is not a form of treatment or therapy. It is not supposed to detect a disease or find something wrong. Your participation is voluntary which means you can choose whether or not to participate. Whether you decide to participate or not to participate, there will be no loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Before you make a decision you will need to know the purpose of the study, the possible risks and benefits of being in the study, and what you will have to do if you decide to participate. The researcher is going to talk with you about the study and give you this consent document to read. You do not have to make a decision now, and you can take the consent document home and share it with friends, family doctor and family prior to making your decision.

If you do not understand what you are reading, do not sign it. Please ask the researcher to explain anything you do not understand, including any language contained in this form. You may also ask to have this form read to you. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and a copy will be given to you. Keep this form, in it you will find contact information and answers to questions about the study.
What is the purpose of the study?

This research study aims to explore school leaders’ perceptions of their own social identities and how this understanding might impact the way that they understand and respond to challenges in leading schools.

Why was I asked to participate in the study?

You are being asked to join this study because you have been identified as a current or very recent (less than one year) school leader. In addition, as an alumnus/a of the University of Pennsylvania’s Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership (Mid-Career), you have also been identified as having demonstrated prior interest in issues of identity as it relates to your role and responsibilities as a school leader.

How long will I be in the study? How many other people will be in the study?

The study will take place over a period of five months, and you will be interviewed approximately two to three times if you choose to participate. Interviews will last between 60-90 minutes, and there will be between four to six people total involved in this study.

Where will the study take place?

The interviews will be conducted in your office or at a location mutually agreed upon by you and the researcher.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to provide your perspectives on how your own social identities might impact the work that you do leading schools.

What are the risks?

There is minimal risk associated with this study. All schools and participants will receive pseudonyms and descriptions of each will be made anonymous. There is, therefore, limited opportunity for the information you share to be attributed to you. However, it is important to note that there is no way to guarantee complete anonymity.

All data will be kept on a password protected computer. In addition, as a participant, you will be given the opportunity to review a draft(s) of any descriptions and findings related to you and the information you provide prior to any public sharing of this information with others.

How will I benefit from the study?

Generally, there is no direct benefit to you. However, your participation could help us deepen our understanding of the ways school leaders understand their social identities and the impact this might have on their role and responsibilities leading schools.
In some individual cases, it may be possible that participation in this study might result in increases in self-awareness of issues that may influence you in your work as a school leader.

**What other choices do I have?**

You are not obligated to participate in the study. Therefore, the alternative to being in the study is to simply choose not to be in the study.

**What happens if I do not choose to join the research study?**

You may choose to join the study or you may choose not to join the study. Your participation is voluntary. There will be no negative consequences if you decide that you do not want to participate. Non-participation will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled nor will it have any impact on your standing as a member in the Mid-Career community and network.

**When is the study over? Can I leave the study before it ends?**

The study is expected to end after all participants have completed interviews and all the information has been collected.

You have the right to drop out of the research study at any time during your participation. You will lose no benefits or advantages to which you are entitled that are now coming to you, or would come to you in the future.

If you no longer wish to be in the research study, please contact Kathy Rho by e-mail at krho@gse.upenn.edu or by phone, (832) 651-4275. In your message, be sure to give your name and state that you no longer wish to participate in the study.

**How will confidentiality be maintained and my privacy be protected?**

The researcher will use pseudonyms for all schools and participants and each will be made anonymous in all transcriptions and publications. All data will be stored on a password protected computer in which the researcher is the only person with knowledge of the password. All data will be destroyed after data analysis is complete.

**Will I have to pay for anything?**

There are no costs associated with the study.

**Will I be compensated for participating in the study?**

You will not be compensated for participating in the study.
Who can I call with questions, complaints or if I’m concerned about my rights as a research subject?

If you have questions, concerns or complaints regarding your participation in this research study or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you should speak with the Principal Investigator listed on page one of this form. If the principal investigator or the researcher cannot be reached or you want to talk to someone other than those working on the study, you may contact the Office of Regulatory Affairs with any question, concerns or complaints at the University of Pennsylvania by calling (215) 573-2540.

When you sign this document, you are agreeing to take part in this research study. If you have any questions or there is something you do not understand, please ask the researcher before you sign this document. You will receive a copy of this consent document to keep for your records.

Signature of Subject

Print Name of Subject

Date
Appendix C

Interview Protocol: 1st Interview

1. How long have you been [principal/head] of this school?

2. Where were you before? How longer were you at [previous school]? And were you also the [principal/head] at that school?

3. What brought or drew you to your current school? Or to your current role at this school?

4. Thinking back, what made you decide to go into school leadership?

5. How would you describe your leadership style?

6. How do you think the teachers at your school would describe your leadership style? Parents? Students?
   a. Potential follow-up questions:
      i. Do you agree with that description? Why or why not?
      ii. (Or if there is a mismatch between the descriptions given) It sounds like ____ group might describe your leadership style as _____. Why do you think there’s a difference in the way you and them/others see your leadership style?
      iii. What do you think would be important for them to know that perhaps they may not in terms of your approach to leading this school?

7. (Potential lead-in/follow-up question:) You mentioned [characteristic of work – e.g., working with specific groups of youth, communities, etc.], why is that important to you?
   a. Interviewer’s Note: Additional follow-up questions will focus on clarifying any key characteristics of work that might allude to social identities which may be important to the interviewee.
   b. Example: Where do you think [characteristic of work] comes from?

8. (If connecting to Q 5 above) Can you give me an example of a leadership challenge where [characteristic of work mentioned] played a key role?
   a. (If do not ask Q 5 above, reframe conversation to challenges) Can you tell me about a leadership challenge that you think really tested you as a leader?

9. How did you address the challenge?

10. What was particularly difficult for you about this challenge? Or what was
particularly difficult for you in addressing the challenge the way that you did?

a. **Potential follow-up questions:**

   i. You mentioned [aspect of social identity], how did being [social identifier] play into your thinking about that challenge? Or how did it play a part in how you addressed it?

   ii. It sounds like [aspect of social identity] is important to you. What does [social identity] mean to you in the work that you do as a school leader?

**Repeat Qs 8 – 10.** *(Focus on getting more than one example of challenge, time permitting.)*

   a. Interviewer’s Note: What types of challenges might the school leader choose, prioritize, or continually find themselves facing?

11. We’ve talked a lot about some key challenges you’ve faced as a school leader. What do you think you do well as a principal/head of school? What are you most proud of in the work that you do as a school leader?

   *(Closing)* I really appreciate your taking the time to talk to me about these issues. That’s all the questions I have for today. Is there anything else you’d like to share or that you think is important for me to know?
Appendix D

Interview Protocol: 2nd Interview

Interviewer’s Note: Second interviews for each participant will focus on clarifying aspects of social identities about which each individual spoke about in his or her first interview. The following question prompts provide guidance to the types of questions which might be asked in follow-up interviews. Although some modifications will be made to the wording of follow-up questions in different interviews, no significant changes will be made. Any modifications made to individualize questions in each follow-up interview will not alter the nature of the interview.

1. Last we spoke, you talked a lot about [characteristic of work]. How would you describe what [characteristic of work] means to you?

2. Where do you think your [belief/value/practice tied to characteristic of work] comes from? Why is it important to you?

3. How do you think [aforementioned characteristic of work] relates to your being [social identifier] or to your identity as a _____?
   a. Potential follow-up questions:
      i. How has [social identifier] influenced the direction that your career has taken?

4. What do you think you struggle with most as a school leader? Or you’ve mentioned struggling with _____, how does it complicate your work as a school leader?
   a. Interviewer’s Note: Additional follow-up questions will focus on clarifying any key characteristics of work that relate to social identities found to be significant to the interviewee in previous interview and archival data review. Additional social identities which may have not yet been documented will also be explored.
   b. Potential follow-up questions:
      i. Can you give me an example(s) of some of the challenges you have faced because of [challenge mentioned in Q4]?
      ii. How do you think your struggle with ____ is influenced by your [social identifier]?

5. Who would you say you turn to for support as a leader?
   a. Interviewer’s Note: Follow-up questions will focus on clarifying both the relationships between the interviewee and the named persons as well as those similarities, differences, and the nature of the relationships between those individuals’ social identities and those of the interviewee. If mentioned,
additional social identities which may have not yet been documented will also be explored.

6. What is a major success that you have had as a school leader?
   a. Interviewer’s Note: Additional follow-up questions will focus on clarifying any key characteristics of work that relate to social identities found to be significant to the interviewee in previous interview and archival data review. Additional social identities which may have not yet been documented will also be explored.

(Closing) Thank you again for taking the time to talk to me about your work. That’s all the questions I have for today. Is there anything else you’d like to share or that you think is important for me to know?
References


Oaks, CA: Corwin, a SAGE company.


