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Schools as Societal Change Agencies

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by

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Abstract

There is a call to action to close disparities and address inequalities throughout various institutions across the United States. There is a growing amount of research on the topic of education in relation to how schools can better serve as critical societal change agencies. This qualitative study serves to answer questions on the experiences and perceptions of school leaders, school district leaders, and community agency leaders on the roles and responsibilities of school systems and personnel to serve as societal change agents. This comparative case study is reported through the ethnographic perspectives in individualized interviews around one centralized public school district. The nine participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling due to their work in the school district or partnership with schools. In Vivo and Process Coding with elements of Values and Emotion Coding were utilized to determine themes and responses. First, findings for agency leaders included the inherent good behind the responsibilities of school leaders, hope for change with advancing partnerships, and identified issues preventing change. Findings for school and school district leaders covered the demands of their roles, the value of partnerships, and identified unintended consequences. Secondly, participants shared responses on how they sustain practice and reduce disparities. Finally, the study reports on how participants collaborate to drive change through enhancing and leveraging partnerships, emphasizing the roles of school and school district leaders, and advocating for policy change. The study's final discussion discusses implications and suggestions for ongoing or future research.

Dedication

I believe that in general, people have good intentions. I believe that people are good at heart. However, I also believe that when we know better, we should do better.

I dedicate this to the world's change makers: The educators, scientists, students, nonprofit leaders, professionals, and progressive citizens of the world who live each day selflessly, specifically to help others and make our world a better place for everyone.

Acknowledgements

There are so many people who supported me through this process. I cannot express my gratitude enough.

To my graduate school advisor, Dr. Jafeth Sanchez: You trusted that I could do this far before I even started the program. I am beyond grateful for your advisement, pushes, nudges, and countless hours of support. I strive to be as remotely wise, selfless, and efficient as you! Thank you!

To my dissertation committee: When I first started my collegiate journey at the University of Nevada, Reno in 2000, I became enamored with learning about social justice, sociology, and women's studies. As a result, it was only fitting that I end my formal academic career and be conferred by a group of powerful women in the educational field who are making world changes. I am forever grateful for your support, inspiration, and trust. I am honored. Thank you!

To the participants from this study: Thank you for lending your voices and sharing your personal responses to move our work forward. We do this together!

To my friends, family, and colleagues: I cannot thank you enough for your continued backing and praise. Thank you for really believing that I could accomplish this!

To my husband Michael: I could not have even made it through to the end without your encouragement. You believed in me more than I did in myself. The good thing is, this is now finally off of the list! Let's go do something fun!

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The roles of educational leaders, ranging from school principals to district level administrators, encompass many responsibilities, including the need to effectively establish new structures and systems to positively create change. This positive change is almost always linked directly to student achievement vis-à-vis local, state, or federal mandated assessments and accountability measures. As a result, there is a plethora of literature (Bustamante et al, 2009; Ing, 2010; Rosa, 2008; Sanders, 2013; Schneider & Duran, 2010) centered on the need to learn more about schoolwide efforts that help increase academic achievement in school settings. Moreover, studies on the role of the principal, teaching strategies, and school structures currently saturate academic scholarship (Ovando & Ramirez, 2007; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008; Yoeli & Berkovich, 2010). However, social institutions, schools and school districts have also been identified as having the responsibility to enact critical societal contributions to the communities they serve (Schiro, 2013). This responsibility includes creating structures and opportunities within the school setting to help close academic gaps and create more equitable outcomes for historically marginalized individuals, groups, or communities of people. However, there is limited research that addresses how those tasked with carrying out such efforts perceive their roles in that process. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine perceptions among district-level administrators, site-level principals, and community partners regarding the school's responsibility in enacting societal change.

Schools as Societal Change Agencies

Schools as societal public institutions have a significant role in the social development of a community. This is prevalent in the historic responsibilities and goals

of schools to enhance the development of youth as contributing members to their communities (Schiro, 2013; Valli et al., 2016). Over time, the responsibilities of school personnel and purpose of schools have shifted. Teachers once served as knowledgeable professionals imparting knowledge on students to become knowledgeable and contributing citizens and benefit their communities. Schools today focus largely on school improvement through mandated metrics often used as distinction of public versus privatization of schooling, including testing, standardization, accountability to better support educational systems (Ryan, 2016). Arguably, the roles and responsibilities of school personnel have moved more to meeting compliance-based metrics, rather than creating opportunities to address societal needs. These relatively recent reforms, however, have not succeeded in diminishing achievement gaps. For example, the largest discrepancies have been found among those from historically underrepresented groups, specifically students of color and those living in poverty (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fabricant & Fine; 2013; Hursh, 2007). Given the ongoing calls for schools to support desired social changes in the community, educational leaders are believed to have a shared responsibility to serve the broader community as agents of change. Indeed, Ryan (2016) indicated that educational leaders are strategically minded and need to engage in strategic activities that encourage real societal change.

Shared Interests Between Schools and Community Agencies

It is well known that educational leaders at the school and district site levels are bound by federal and state constraints. These constraints are generalized through teaching standards, regulations, laws, and legislation that drive the day-to-day operation of schools (Fabricant & Fine, 2013). As a result, school personnel struggle to make larger societal

impacts and close societal disparities, despite strategic planning, implementation, and stewardship of daily efforts. Given the challenges in attending to school improvement efforts that support social impacts to close existing disparities, partnerships with community organizations have been sought in order to help serve as a bridge to long-term impacts. Independently, community-based organizations, primarily charitable and nonprofit organizations, are often established to address specific community needs. Staff in these agencies are tasked to report impacts of their work to donors, boards of directors, and the general public, among others. Successful community organizations are known to report how their organizations directly make a positive impact in the communities they serve (Nichols et al., 2015).

As a shared issue, there exists an institutionalized pressure between schools and community-serving agencies to perform and make substantial differences. Additionally, there is a growing interest in collaborations between schools and community agencies to enhance societal changes. Research has included ways that these collaborations support maximizing services, reduce service duplication, build community capacity, and contribute to social change (Dryfoos, 1994; Epstein et al., 2011; Hogue, 2012; Jones, 2013; Nichols et al., 2015; O'Connor & Daniello, 2019; Sanders, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

Societal disparities continue to exist throughout the country. Despite calls to support reduction of disparities in society, including long-standing achievement gaps in education, historically marginalized populations still live under the poverty line, experience overt racism, and lack resources and services relative to dominant populations (Beech et al., 2021; Ryan, 2016). Similarly, schools continue to mirror additional gaps in

academic achievement and social expectations for these same populations. Federal and state mandates require that schools and districts focus on specific standards of teaching and their subsequent federal assessment metrics. As a result, school and district leaders focus on reportable information to improve schools specific to those academic demands. Ultimately, school efforts are generally focused on the improvement of academic and behavior achievement outcomes. Data may be disaggregated and reviewed to support the review and strategic planning of achievement for subpopulations of students; however, more research is needed to demonstrate how such efforts make substantial changes that impact societal outcomes beyond the school setting.

Certainly, there is much literature on the benefits of school and community partnerships (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Creswell, 2007; Epstein et al., 2011; Hogue, 2012; O'Connor & Daniello, 2019; Teemant et al., 2021). Concurrently, the pressures for effective school improvement outcomes that are timely and attend to community needs remain a reality for school leaders and the community. As such, there is a plethora of research centers on meeting compliance measures, supporting school improvement efforts on meeting academic goals, or increasing family engagement (DuFour, 2004; Mayger & Provinzano, 2022; Yurkofsky, 2022). Yet, there is a dearth of research that explores how existing perceptions between school and agency leaders influence collaborative efforts on shared responsibly to strategically address disparities and make substantial societal changes. While existing research has focused on how school-community partnerships reinforce engagement in schools, this study can help uncover existing shifts in leadership processes that have positioned partnerships to serve as societal change agents.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine perceptions among district-level administrators, site-level principals, and community partners regarding the school's responsibility in enacting societal change. While a primary purpose is to identify foundational perceptions across three distinct roles when it comes to societal change, a secondary purpose to this study is to explore distinctions in perceptions across the existing roles, as well as to see where perceptions might align in ways that appear to best situate school leaders to enact desired social changes in the communities within which they live.

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology guided the focus and analysis of this study. Specifically, a qualitative, comparative case study design was used to examine the collective responses of school leaders, school district leaders, and leaders of community-service based organizations on their experiences and perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of schools to serve as societal change agencies. Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Responses were collected, analyzed for common themes, and reported as themes of findings of the study.

The setting and focus of the study are of the Washoe County School District, the public school system in urban Reno, Nevada and surrounding areas within the county. Participants were selected using purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling due to the relationship between the researcher and subjects. The participants included three school leaders (specifically, two principals and one principal supervisor) within the school district, three central office participants, and two community agency leaders as

identified by the school principals as partners. All participants have experience in serving the same generalized population in the Reno, Nevada area. The cases were bound to Washoe County School District and the involvement among participants on working in collaborative partnerships.

The following research questions supported the work of this study in order to better understand the perceptions of the social responsibilities of school leadership within society.

- Question 1: What are the perceptions and experiences of agency leaders who partner with public school systems on the responsibility of school and school district leaders as societal change agencies?
    - Question 1a: What do community agency leaders do to sustain practice and reduce disparities?
- Question 2: What are the perceptions and experiences of school and school district leaders of their responsibilities as societal change agents?
    - Question 2a: What do school and school district leaders do to sustain practice and reduce disparities?
- Question 3: How do agency leaders, school leaders, and district leaders drive social change efforts through partnerships?

Significance of the Study

The findings in this study support a growing base and understanding on the roles and responsibilities of schools as well as leveraging school-community partnerships to potentially enact changes. There are very few studies that specifically address leadership

and their partnering agencies' perceptions of roles regarding community needs for social change. Responses and findings will be supported by current research and historical backgrounds of schools and legislation to better understand the constraints and limitations that have led to inaction. A better understanding of existing perceptions can help support strategic planning for more intentional design of ongoing partnership in K-12 education and their local communities. These perceptions can support in bridging much needed gaps between schools and community agencies and align the overlapping spheres of influences (Epstein et al., 2011) to enact broader change. Additionally, stakeholders will be able to use the data to explore how to systemically address necessarily partnerships while considering the systems that support or hinder opportunities for schools to serve as social change agents.

Delimitations

Delimitations of the study are those boundaries set by the researcher. These limits include: a single, public school system; three school leaders from comprehensive schools within the system; three district-level leaders within the same system; and two community agency leaders serving the same county population. The purpose of selecting and limiting the study to one centralized location was to glean insight, perspectives, and experiences from a central school system. School and school district participants will be selected based on their longevity in their roles and experiences in order to speak to the relationships between schools and agencies and perceptions of the roles schools have in enacting change. Agency leaders were selected by participating principals who selected the agency leaders based on their longevity and experiences in their roles, experiences in working alongside schools, and successes in the community. All participants were

selected based on purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling due to relationships and access from the researcher and principal participants.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the study. Inherent to the nature of this qualitative study, some of these limitations include researcher positionality, using a purposive sample of convenience and semi-structured interviews, and an inability to generalize findings. Another limitation is that the focus of the study might lead to responses being purely focused on impacting social change, rather than being holistic in responses. Also, the study is being carried out post-pandemic, which might have participants more keenly focused on recent discrepancies that could uniquely contribute to responses. Finally, the study is not centered on evaluating the effectiveness of the partnership, which could reveal important considerations in the process. However, the perceptions of why partnerships occur and what takes place can help determine their views of partnering for social change.

Researcher Background

The researcher is a current public education leader with 19 years of experience in the public sector. As a result of his studies and professional and personal work, he has a passion for social justice work with liberal societal change perspectives. He questions archaic, traditional, and limiting systems within education that limit societal advances and changes for students, families, and the generalized community. He has educational and professional experiences in studying and enhancing partnerships between schools and community agencies and families. The researcher’s educational background includes studies, certificates, and endorsements in sociology, women’s studies, education, teaching

English as a second language, educational technology, Deaf studies, and school leadership. As a result, the researcher had access to participants and information readily available and convenient to the understanding of the school system and responsibilities of schools. The researcher is also involved in his immediate community as an outspoken advocate for underrepresented groups including LGBTQIA+ and Latinx communities specifically. Alongside his partner who works in the local nonprofit industry, he actively participates in groups and local organizations as a board or community member to enhance positive and liberal societal change and experiences within the community.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is comprised of five chapters. Chapter One included the generalized review of the study. Components included the overview of the study, key topics, problem statement, purpose, methodology overview, delimitations, limitations, definition of terms, researcher background, and this organization. Chapter Two presents and review of related literature. Key components include literature on school systems as social change agencies, effective school-community partnerships, the history and evolutions of school-partnerships, policies impacting these partnerships, key organizations focused on societal changes, and dominant theoretical frameworks that guide the study. Chapter Three provides a more comprehensive and detailed overview of the study. Components include the research questions, content and design, data sources and collection protocols, sources of evidence and data, data analysis protocols, and researcher experience and stance. Chapter Four reports on the results of the study including the themes that emerged as a result of the participant interviews. Finally,

Chapter Five concludes with a summary and reflection of the results, including recommendations and conclusions from the study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature focuses on the most dominant topics required for understanding the purpose, rationale, and background of factors impacting the study. The focus of this literature, therefore, addresses a short background on schools as societal institutions, the roles and responsibilities of school leaders, effective school-community partnerships, key organizations impacting societal change, and the use of a theoretical framework to frame this study.

Social History of Schools

Rury (2009) discusses the social history and evolution of American schools. Social forces such as industrialization, urbanization, and immigration have made these impacts that show that schools have been both social and academic institutions. This section outlines a brief history of schools as societal institutions.

At the beginning of schooling, American Colonial youth were expected to work. As a result, they were educated informally through the church or family unit. However, during this similar time, due to a focus on acquiring wealth, The Enlightenment promoted capitalist ideals leading to the American Revolution. Education became a national focus in the newly formed United States. In this sense, education was promoted to build citizenship and a national identity. Industrialization and urbanization in the 19th century brought forth common schools, colleges, and universities. These institutions were created to support workforce development and promote middle-class identities. However, not all social classes were considered for social advancement. Rury (2009) explains that many Irish immigrants, Hispanic, and Asian children did not attend public schools due to encountering hostility and violence. As a result, these groups attended segregated and

poor-quality schools. African American education during slavery was also informal. As slavery ended, African American communities established schools, committing to education. In turn, this participation in schools empowered African American culture and brought forth social capital. Despite this growth, disparities between African American and white students increased in segregated school settings. Native Americans were seen as inferior by the Colonists, requiring to be "civilized" by them. By the end of the 19th century, most Native Americans had been forced to settle in established reservations. Rury (2009) notes that Native American education has been one of the most explicit examples on schools as societal institutions and its power on people. Due to the specific focus on white middle-class educational efforts, groups seen as inferior by Colonists and white communities were intentionally less educated. The Progressive Era continued inequities in education. This this time of growth, schools began to develop focuses such as pedagogy and roles of school personnel.

Roles and Responsibilities of School Leaders

Educational leadership and school improvement have been heavily researched, discussed, and argued for many years. While there is extensive literature on how best to operate schools, there is not one key strategy for how leaders can support school efforts to enact social change that removes existing inequities. It is known, however, that schools can support closing disparities within social groups through equity-focused educational efforts (Mayger & Provinzano, 2022; Rawls & Hammons, 2015; Roper, 2020; Teemant et al., 2021). This has contributed to increased societal pressures on school leaders to established structures that will reduce inequities, as the marginalization on vulnerable communities continue to be of concern in the United States (Ryan, 2016). These

pressures have led to increased calls for school leaders to establish systems and structures within the school setting that can help alleviate inequities. Ultimately, this has contributed to one of the many demands and roles carried out by today's school leaders.

The Principal from Manager to Instructional Leader

The responsibility of school leaders has historically been as institution managers and eventually directors of increasing student academic achievement (Ediger, 2014; Kafka, 2009;). The position of the school principal is new relative to the history of schools. Prior to this role, schools were state-run agencies. Early schools were led by teachers or headmasters who reported to the general community or elected community officials (Rury, 2009). Eventually, once schools grew to differentiate grade levels in the late 1800s, the concept of *principal teachers* was created. This role was almost always held by a male teacher who was assigned more clerical and managerial tasks. These included creating a schedule, taking attendance, overseeing the grounds, and ensuring that classes started and ended on time. This principal teacher generally reported to the superintendent of schools who would supervise the position from afar. By the mid-1800s, this manager relinquished his teaching duties to take on the roles in a more authoritative, managerial position. This position, considered prestigious and powerful, now supervised teachers not unlike today's school leaders. Principals would observe and meet with teachers to support best practices; hire, evaluate, and dismiss teachers; and support the running of the school. By the early 1900s principals were seen by their communities as respectable agents and schools as centrally located institutions. Schools were used for various community functions and used as gathering and meeting places. By the 1920s, school principals were seen as pivotal managers of educational efforts (Kafka, 2009).

Over the course of the 20th century, legislation has helped to shape the role of the principal today (Hess, 2010; Sharp, 2016). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 supported longstanding efforts to equal educational opportunity for all students (Sharp, 2016). Since 1965, the ESEA has been modified, adjusted, and renamed to account for accounting metrics, ensuring that school leaders are held accountable for meeting these federally mandated student learning goals (Sharp, 2016). Thus, the role of the principal began to shift from manager to leading educational reform efforts as both manager and instructional leader.

School Leaders and Improvement Mandates

School leaders have also been tasked with the need to attend to accountability measures at the federal, state, and local levels. Certainly, since the inception of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), school leaders have focused greatly on meeting Adequate Yearly Progress with academic scores and maintaining positive standings. Through the NCLB Act (2002), schools receiving federal funding through Title I were tasked with accountability measures to address stagnant or failing student achievement scores from annual state exams. Those not meeting these metrics as adequate yearly progress, would be tasked with corrective action or school improvement plans requiring focused attention on student achievement (McKay, 2011).

Given the increased focus on accountability within school leadership, the role of the principal largely shifted to the importance of meeting school improvement demands. The principal contributes significantly to setting the vision and mission of the school (Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2019; Riswanti Rini, 2022; Stronge & Xu, 2021). More specifically, school leaders directly influence teaching through their philosophies,

providing professional development, and set expectations for instructional staff. More current research has called on authority figures within school systems such as school principals to enact larger scale change (Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2019). One such call includes a push for principals to become increasingly involved in political activism to make substantial changes outside of the school setting (Ryan, 2016).

There is ample evidence and research, both qualitative and quantitative, that supports aligning school improvement with pedagogical variables (Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2019; Renihan & Renihan, 2022; Riswanti Rini, 2022; Schiro, 2013; Stronge & Xu, 2021). Variables include elements such as student learning best practices, aligned standards, data review, setting effective visions and missions, and a wide variety and methods of coined pedagogical practices. As an example, one of the most common and tangible concepts relating to school improvement efforts are professional learning communities (DuFour, 2004). More specifically, the idea of professional learning communities is a concept that focuses on student performance to drive instructional practice. The basis of this idea is through a lens of continuous improvement by school personnel. Actions include identifying standards that are tested frequently on state exams, teaching the standards in a skilled manner designed by the teacher, assessing student performance, reviewing student data, and redesigning instruction accordingly. Concepts such as this attend to school leaders on the importance of aligning teaching to identified standards and continuously reviewing data to make appropriate improvements. Concepts like this serve only to improve instructional practices to increase annual student scores on federally mandated assessments and meet metrics.

In alignment with the responsibility of school improvement efforts, efforts to better address disparities have been enacted by reviewing and tracking of student performance across demographic groups. This includes disaggregating student performance data. Disaggregating data based on identified subgroups has been found to effectively support schoolwide efforts to improve pedagogical practices and target subgroups of students for improved practices (Rawls & Hammond, 2015). These practices serve to address immediate academic needs of student academic performance but might be deemed as siloed efforts to societal impacts outside of the school. Consequently, such data reviews often reveal glaring disparities that exist between students that mirror a larger macrocosm within the community (Ryan, 2016; Teranishi et al., 2020).

The Social Justice Leader

Educational leadership has long understood the benefit of connections amongst school stakeholders as staff, students, families, and communities. Despite benefits that include access to resources and academics, the role of school leaders to advance equity in schools has been often ignored. A review of literature defines social justice leaders as those who understand the innate nature of inequities and actively challenge these in school systems (Bertrand & Rodela, 2018; Rury, 2009), primarily through critical stances with pedagogical approaches.

Critical pedagogical practices are not a new concept in education. Studies using critical studies as a viewpoint have reported on schools utilizing ideologies such as social reconstruction as a basis for learning (Baroud & Dharamshi, 2020; Lac, 2017; Schiro, 2013). These studies have focused on critical studies relating to enhancing making

substantial advancements to learning in the classroom at various levels and content areas. From elementary to higher level school settings, core content and elective courses, and traditional learning to 21st century competencies around collaboration and use of digital resources, critical pedagogy has been studied. Similar to learning centered learning, social reconstruction ideologies of teaching support students discovering learning and making substantial contributions to society as a result of constructing knowledge. Social reconstruction, a theory supported by critical theory, presumes that students can and should learn about power structures that limit society and work to address limitations. Social reconstruction as a pedagogy allows students to participate in projects that lead to societal change or can improve the world around them. Thus, this thinking can lead to social transformation (Schiro, 2013).

Some of the most popular positions of critical theory in educational research have been on the improvement of culture and climate of and student performance in schools. More specifically, researchers have studied and supported critical viewpoints of curriculum and content to drive equitable practices through culturally responsive teaching. Culturally responsive pedagogy is centered in fundamental beliefs around learning, students, their families, their communities, and with a commitment of success for all students (Howard, 2020). It supports that diverse populations of students, families, and staff contribute to a rich and vast experience and knowledge base from which learners benefit. Additionally, culturally responsive teaching practices encourage representation of diverse and oftentimes marginalized or absent people or values. With this thought, minority groups are seen as valuable and with backgrounds and experiences that enrich and enhance learning settings rather than deficits to ignore. Researchers have

long argued that teacher preparation programs have not done enough to encourage or support teachers on culturally response teaching practices and strategies (Fabionar, 2020; Howard, 2020; Welner & Carter, 2013). Fabionar (2020) focuses his study on a call to action to prepare new teachers to be social justice change agents in and out of the classroom. This work includes implications on developing pedagogical practices for systems change, understanding and leveraging culture differences in a school community, participating in educational change policies, and building partnerships within the community for optimal benefits. Critical learning and constructivist opportunities through cooperative learning, discovery learning, and collaboration have supported high yields in student achievement rates. For example, students learning English as a second language almost always perform higher with these types of peer-assisted learning opportunities (Welner & Carter, 2013). As a result, critical strategies such as culturally responsive teaching has shown to support school improvement efforts through climate, culture, and student success metrics. Despite these gains and efforts as social justice leaders, the larger impact of schools as societal change agencies beyond academic efforts is lacking.

Workforce Development and Postsecondary Readiness

There are ongoing efforts to better identify the ways in which society may impact educational systems, specifically focused on schools (Fisher, 2021). Much of that efforts centers on K-12 systems of support that guide students toward college and career readiness (i.e., Upward Bound, afterschool STEM programming, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, etc.). Although these elucidate the critical role of schools in society, programming is heavily focused on workforce development, which centers on one particular area (Oliveri et al, 2017). For example,

Teague (2015) highlighted efforts specific to systems of higher education and indicated how future job preparation programs, specifically for females, can make a difference. Similar to the response on the roles of principals and responsibilities of schools, these targets rely heavily on student success metrics and graduation rates. However, critical research linking schools to societal impacts, such as closing generalized disparities, has not been extensively explored. Therefore, some scholars (i.e., Pandey 2020; Roper, 2020; Ryan, 2016) have more actively taken critical stances on schools needing to serve as societal change agents. Additionally, curricular models, such as those mentioned in the work by Schiro (2013) address specific frameworks and programming that support leveraging curriculum to entice students to make societal changes. Ultimately, calls for schools to address systems or take action outside of the daily school tasks have been made with the hopes of having schools shift toward change efforts that work to close social gaps.

Effective School-Community Partnerships

Increasingly, it has become evident that schools and community agencies can work collaboratively to meet mutual goals that serve the same population with efforts to support closing existing social gaps. There is much literature on effective school-community partnerships and best practices. This includes the history, evolution, and policies of effective school-community partnerships within the United States (Dryfoos, 1994; Epstein et al., 2011; Hogue, 2012; Jones, 2013; Nichols et al., 2015; O'Connor & Daniello, 2019; Sanders, 2014). This makes it critical to learn more about the history of such community partnerships and the many facets involved in establishing efforts within the school setting.

Origins and History of School-Community Partnerships

The basic concept of the school-community partnerships is that students' needs, including educational and social experiences, will improve if schools can attend to a larger repertoire of resources (Valli et al., 2016). Epstein et al. (2011) support this thought through the idea of *overlapping spheres of influence* where various settings provide a context for education. Thus, schools, home, and communities all contribute to greater collaboration and benefit learning and development. The idea of this school and community partnership is far from new, but it has evolved in numerous ways. To illustrate, the Progressive Era in the late 19th century and through the 1920s brought forth a period on widespread social activism and reform in the United States. This brought for the notion that schools should serve as a community's central location. Local community members were encouraged to utilize schools for social activities, adults could be trained for jobs, and community members could learn about one another. As such, community agencies such as faith-based organizations, businesses, and government institutions used school buildings and partnered with educators to support education and address the needs of its community (Valli et al., 2016). A later focus on such efforts, particularly in the 1990s, reveals that the evolution of the school-community partnerships enhanced upon its collaboration efforts. For example, Dryfoos (1994) served as an influential agent in defining the partnership between schools and social service needs. She argued that schools could not address the health needs and challenges of students without the direct support of social services. She argued that this work would lead to full-service schools as "the wave of the future" (p. 205). Today, various schools and districts support school-community partnerships to serve the shared needs of the students and families.

Evolution of School-Community Partnerships

Educators in K-12 educational systems have been tasked with the responsibility of serving as the lead experts and educating students in the classroom (Jones, 2013; Schiro, 2013). Oftentimes, as teachers have struggled to teach students or meet set metrics, external student and familial factors have been the blame for these inconsistencies. These factors may include blame about a student's social or socioeconomic backgrounds or circumstances (Dryfoos, 1994; Jones, 2013). Paradigm shifts on the nature of the educational system and the responsibilities of school personnel versus those of family members have evolved over time. Jones (2013) explained the paradigm shift from separation to remediation to today's focus on collaboration. With separation, policymakers in the 1960s made no requirement that schools were to engage with families, particularly parents. By 1965, as part of the ESEA, educators were to provide compensatory services where the school was expected to mitigate the any negative home experiences or backgrounds of the students they served. With this remedial thinking, educators were empowered and expected to be all-knowing, providing the best experiences for students. On the other hand, parents served as passive participants and were less involved in the school. Acceptable involvement practices for families involved attending conferences, responding to teacher requests, and communicating back and forth with school through notes and report cards. By the 1990s, authors and researchers like Dryfoos (1994) and Epstein et al. (2011) shared the benefits of a collaborative nature of schools, families, and community through multiple spheres of influence. Today's educators rely heavily on school-community partnerships to serve the various needs, challenges, and complexities of a family unit that reach beyond academic needs. Current

literature (Dryfoos, 1994; Epstein et al., 2011; Hogue, 2012; Jones, 2013; Nichols et al., 2015; O'Connor & Daniello, 2019; Sanders, 2014;) on school-community partnerships now boasts various successes, best practices, and policies on student achievement and growth and school initiatives.

Key Policies Fostering Effective School-Community Partnerships

By the 1990s, further calls in support of the efforts by Dryfoos (1994) and Epstein et al. (2011) gained prominence in support of school-community partnerships. Indeed, the literature highlights multiple case studies testimonials, and success stories of communities that had partnered with their local schools and districts to address student and family needs. A policy document created by Davies and the Center on Families, Communities Schools & Children's Learning (Davies & CFCSCL, 1996) highlights unique efforts within that context. The document, targeted at increasing this partnership between schools and communities, calls for school board members and school administrators to adopt policies around this practice. More specifically, it was noted, "We invite every American school board, superintendent, and principal to act now to plan and implement a comprehensive program of family and community partnerships aimed at improving the academic achievement and social success of their students" (Davies & CFCSCL, 1996, p. 1). However, even in these types of efforts that gained traction, much of the work around policy has been on the involvement and engagement of families, mainly parents, rather than community agencies. The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), a revision of the ESEA of 1965, reflected educational policies aimed at improving student success metrics that included requirements for school districts to support familial involvement. Epstein et al. (2011) explained that the NCLB required all

public school districts who received federal monies to create policies to assist all schools in developing programs to involve families in ways that support student success. Similarly, the NCLB also required schools receiving Title I funding to monitor the use of funds for compliance that further supported school-family involvement. This included mandatory parent involvement policies, annual meetings, and the provision of reporting student scores to parents.

In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was adopted as a revision of the NLCB and subsequently the ESEA. Federal policies under ESSA included policy and funding through Titles I, II, and IV. Each Title provided school districts and schools the guidance around funding to develop evidence-based strategies (including a robust school-community partnership), whole child supports, 21st Century Learning Centers, respectively. Today there are a range of policy mechanisms at the federal, state, and local levels to support community schools. Generally, these fall into two important categories necessary for successful school-community partnerships. These categories are (1) financial or resource support through grants or (2) implementation and technical supports. Despite the push and creation of policies to require school-family partnerships, there is a lack of formal policy to mandate partnerships and relationships between schools and community agencies. Similarly, there has been little to address real societal change by leveraging partnerships between schools and agencies, even through federal or state policy. Students and families in marginalized communities are still served through deficit models (cite an author that mentions deficit models). At least at the very basic and foundational level, local school districts recognize the importance and significance of school-family and school-community partnerships. Thus, local school agencies have

developed in-house policies and departments around these partnerships to support this ongoing work (Partnership for the Future of Learning, n.d.).

Definition of Societal Change

Many scholars have highlighted the need for schools to serve as educational sites that function as social institutions (Education Diplomats as Leaders of Social Change, 2020; McShane et al., 2012; Nichols et al., 2015). Amidst the variations in educational ideologies, Schiro (2013) addressed perspectives indicating that education is designed to develop the learner and subsequently impact the learner's life through individual knowledge gains, workforce skills and development, or social contributions. As a result, there are multiple perspectives on how schools should be led, what and how curriculum or content should be taught, and to what extent this learning impacts the individual or his or her community. The concept of social change, development, and justice are not new concepts in education. Schools have long been deemed as a means by which to remedy existing societal inequities (Schiro, 2013). For example, in the social reconstruction ideology, it is assumed that the survival of society is threatened by many problems. These may include racism, sexism, poverty, pollution, political corruption, and other social pressures and concerns. Social reconstructionists believe that education can help people better understand and analyze social problems. Thus, schools can lead to social transformation. Pandey (2020) argues that, without education, there can be no social change; education opens the learners' minds to newfound thought and ideas to support critical thinking and social development and reform. Similarly, Roper (2020) mentioned that educators are able to influence students' persona and social responsibility, civic engagement, commitments to community in and out of the classroom, and involvement

with social change in a positive way. The Education Diplomats as Leaders of Social Change (2020) best defines societal change by stating, “Society is web of human interactions and social relationships, and social change offices through these interactions and relationships. When people’s needs are not being met by society, they call for change” (p. 72). Jones (2013) defined social justice work as a belief that all individuals and groups have the right to fairness and respect and are entitled to the same resources as others. Other authors use the term, *societal change*, when work emphasizes the need to associate and address inequities within marginalized communities, identifying and addressing institutional problems, and injustices (Nichols et al., 2015; O’Connor & Daniello, 2019; Roper, 2020). For the purposes of this study, the definition of *societal change* adheres to the same elements as these authors and researchers when discussing the assumed responsibilities of agents related to education and community leaders. More specifically, societal change is viewed through a progressive and liberal stance, in support of marginalized people and communities.

Culture Wars in Public Schools

Where progressive liberals lean into a critical desire for change for improving marginalized outcomes, conservatives value concepts such as religion, tradition, freedom (but not equality), authority, and so on (Kerlinger, 2022). In response to recent and current public education attacks by polarized individuals and groups, this review would be remiss without recognizing current conservative culture wars impacting education. Professor and sociologist James Davidson Hunter first discussed the concept of culture wars in the early 1990s (Zimmerman, 2022). Specifically, he mentioned that Americans were extremely divided by competing systems of understanding. Not a new concept but

increasingly forward-facing and public, these culture wars were seen in radicalized government stances that separated traditionalists (conservatives) from secular-progressives (liberals). On one side, traditionalists saw the United States as well-founded and doing good for the country. Progressives, on the other hand, recognized the need for radical and social change in the country and world. Hunter cautioned of these incompatible belief systems, particularly in public schools (Zimmerman, 2022). In 1996, Christian conservative Ralph Reed made a statement that supported pushing on what would be taught and valued in public schools. His statements denounced the validity and integrity of school boards and members. As a result, theories supported conservatives who won school board elections on the basis that that by controlling public school boards, they would be able to win battled over progressive instruction, sex education, and school prayer (Zimmerman & May, 2021).

More current conservative politicians, as supported by statements in 2021 from former President Donald Trump's advisor, Steve Bannon, mirror values of Reed's statement. Bannon predicted, "The path to save the nation is very simple—its' going to go through the school boards" (Zimmerman & May, 2021, p.1). His statements pointed to his identified issues that included critical race theory amongst other concepts seen as a threat to schools. As a result, some outspoken and radical conservative public members now frequent school board, city council, and county commissioner meetings across the country to protest against perceived progressive ideologies in schools and the community (Zimmerman & May, 2021). Though *societal change* could arguably support efforts on either political side of changing public education, this study is concerned only with progressive, liberal advancements and delimitations.

Promise Neighborhoods

For the purpose of this study, one particular effort, Promise Neighborhoods, is noted as a model that scholars have addressed with regard to existing school-community partnerships that emphasize societal change. With its national scope, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Innovation and Improvement launched its Promise Neighborhoods program in 2010. Horsford and Sampson (2014) described this program as the first federal grant initiative with efforts to address poverty in urban and rural areas. The Promise Neighborhoods was the first actualization based on an initiative in New York called the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ). The HCZ was formally established in 1997, created to address and minimize the various social, educational, and financial needs of students and families in the neighborhood. The community-based approach expanded educational opportunities and improved student success. These achievements served as the foundation and basis to create 20 Promise Neighborhoods in the U.S. in areas with high levels of poverty, crime, and low levels of academic achievement (Horsford & Sampson, 2014).

According to Horsford and Sampson (2014), only nonprofit organizations, higher education institutions, or Native American tribes within an economically distressed target area could apply to lead a Promise Neighborhood. Those selected are required to partner with at least one public school within the area. Together, the community-based collaborative is expected to yield gains in educational and developmental outcomes for youth. The Promise Neighborhood expectations, as outlined, include the following:

> "(1) Increasing the capacity of eligible entities focused on achieving results for children and youth throughout an entire neighborhood;

> (2) Building a complete continuum of cradle-to-career solutions of both educational program and family and community supports, with great schools at the center;
>
> (3) Integrating programs and breaking down agency 'silos' so that solutions are implemented effectively and efficiently across agencies'
>
> (4) Developing the local infrastructure of systems and resources needed to sustain and scale up proven, effective solutions across the broader region beyond the initial neighborhood; and
>
> (5) Learning about the overall impact of the Promise neighborhoods program and about the relationship between particular strategies in Promise Neighborhoods and student outcomes, including through a rigorous evaluation pf the program" (Horsford & Sampson, 2014, p. 958).

The foundational concept that supports societal change through the Promise Neighborhoods is two-fold. Arguably, one of the benefits and successes of the initiative has been to increase access and attention to marginalized groups of people and students. The intentional focus with accountability from the Promise Neighborhood expectations has yielded more opportunities for the areas in which they serve. Secondly, Warren and Mapp (2011) claim that concepts like building community capacity allows community members to create institutional and policy change on their own behalf. This includes increasing opportunities for marginalized groups to gain or increase power through strategic sessions, conversation, and work on various issues. In these cases, as related to the Promise Neighborhoods, this gain in power was often used to improve student access to more equitable schooling and empowering communities to advocate for social change.

Notably missing or inconclusive are the long-standing impacts of place-based reform efforts such as the Promise Neighborhoods. One study shows that increases in student achievement with supports through the Promise Neighborhoods may alter

community-level changes (Mueller, 2023). Another study reinforces that more research needs to be done to fully understand impacts of Promise Neighborhoods due to broader social and political contexts (Lash & Sanchez, 2019). Though there is a considerable amount of policy change needed to continue successful changes using programs like the Promise Neighborhoods, the federal government has demonstrated some commitment to supporting community capacity building for these neighborhoods (Horsford & Sampson, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

This study is viewed through the lens of a dominant theoretical framework. The critical Change Theory, based on the work of Marx (1818-1883) and supported by Lewin (1940s), helps guide endeavors that incorporate social justice work. Critical Change Theory is notable in advancing societal change, and this framework has often been used in studies centered on enacting substantial systemic change (Kincheloe et al., 2018; Lochmiller & Lester, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldana & Omasta, 2022). As such, it is important to gain an understanding of Critical Change Theory as a fitting endeavor to the work of school-community partnerships toward social change.

Critical Change Theory

Critical Change Theory is often used interchangeably with Critical Theory, and regardless of their use, it is often used as the framework in studies that encompass school leadership, school-community partnerships, and agencies that have undertaken efforts to enact social change. Due to the social nature of schools and improvement efforts on school systems or societal aspects of individuals, groups, or communities, Critical Theory is frequently referenced as a lens to show how elements *can* and *should* be improved.

Critical Theory raises questions about power bases and inequities that exist across sociological structures, such as race, gender, social class, ethnicity, ability, and language, to name a few. This framework, therefore, can be used to question the power differentials and subsequent inequities. In this similar effort, the purpose of critical research is to question the status quo and generally address inequities through action or continued analyses (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). According to Saldana and Omasta (2022), critical inquiry manifests the perspectives and meanings of experiences and the actions, reactions, and interactions that result in power imbalances. Frequently, critical writing incorporates the researcher's values or perspectives as a means of recommending action and further review of studies. "The writer makes no apologies for her values-laden perspective and the goal of righting the wrongs," (Saldana & Omasta, 2022, p. 264). Critical research has been used as a means of supporting teaching and learning ideologies, such as the social reconstruction ideology. For example, social reconstructivists believe that education is intrinsically social and as a result, is implicated in relations of power and social practices to be identified and addressed. Students are presented with topics and issues relevant to societal pressures and encouraged to learn, make meaning of, and confront as appropriate (Schiro, 2013). Critical research has a long history that encompasses various approaches. Early influencers include Marx, Haberman, and Freire. Each of these philosophers, researchers, and authors developed a form of cultural criticism that reveals power dynamics within social contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Critical theory is broad and is often used as a lens by which to analyze different groups within society. For example, critical theory informs feminist theory focused on

gender and sex relations, critical race theory reviewing race structures and differentials, and queer theory on sexual orientation dynamics. At the center of critical studies lies the foundational concept of power and dynamics of power. Whether through a historical or cultural lens, critical studies identify hierarchies amongst those in society. Additionally, critical research asks questions to address inequities at a larger scale rather than focusing on a single and isolated story or incident. Typically, critical research questions how systems are organized, who has access to the systems and resources, who has power to make decisions, and how outcomes impact different groups within a system or context. Thus, critical research questions how interests of one group oppress others, and about the nature of truth and development of knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Critical Theory in School-Community Partnerships

Existing scholarships on school-community and school-family partnerships have used critical frameworks. This is, in part, due to the inherent nature of critical studies and the purpose of school partnerships designed to support improvement efforts, critical viewpoints have been deemed appropriate. For example, Teemant et al. (2021) stated that critical theory teaches us that engaging stakeholders in decision making, problem posing, discussion, and other methods of school impact is an explicitly political process. Epstein et al. (2011) supported this thought through the idea of "overlapping spheres of influence" where various settings provide a context for education. Additionally, O'Connor and Daniello (2019) identified different levels and purposes of school-community partnerships. The first level represents school-community partnerships centered on schooling and learning needs. The second level focuses on the needs of the community-based organizations. The final level represents and encourages civil and

political factors that influence societal impact. Thus, schools, home, and communities are deemed as key contributors to the overall collaborative efforts in order to benefit learning and development of students. Studies and work on effective partnerships with schools have helped shape strategies and areas to develop in-school initiatives to help academic and social performance as well as provide families with agency support outside of schools.

Summary

Given the ongoing calls for school improvement efforts, the literature points to the use of school-community partnerships to enhance social change. As such, the roles and responsibilities of school leaders at site and district levels, engaged school-community partnerships, and demands impact societal change are essential factors to better understanding the demands of such work. Moreover, Critical Change Theory has often been used as the lens by which to examine the unique dynamics that contribute to desired educational outcomes among all of those involved. The rich history and key areas shed light on the need to explore the perceptions and experiences of school leaders, school district leaders, and community-service agency leaders on the roles and responsibilities of schools as societal change agencies.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this qualitative study is to examine perceptions among district-level administrators, site-level principals, and community partners regarding the school's responsibility in enacting societal change. Generalized commonalities and differences in perceptions will be explored and discussed. Specific questions and responses will be gathered to gain insight on how schools work alongside community-service agencies to impact societal change. Addition to this information will be the perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of school districts and school leaders to serve explicitly as change agents within the community. This chapter addresses the organization of the study by identifying the research questions and including a description of the context and design, data sources and collection, data analysis, and researcher positionality.

Research Questions

There are three research questions and two sub-questions that serve as a guide for the purpose of this research study. These questions help explore existing perceptions and experiences, while providing an opportunity to examine unique efforts by roles across various settings (i.e., schools, school districts, and community agencies). Additionally, the questions provide an opportunity to examine similarities and differences across shared perceptions and experiences, while identifying potential ways in which efforts are enhanced or hindered.

- Question 1: What are the perceptions and experiences of agency leaders who partner with public school systems on the responsibility of school and school district leaders as societal change agencies?

    - Question 1a: What do community agency leaders do to sustain practice and reduce disparities?
- Question 2: What are the perceptions and experiences of school and school district leaders of their responsibilities as societal change agents?
    - Question 2a: What do school and school district leaders do to sustain practice and reduce disparities?
- Question 3: How do agency leaders, school leaders, and district leaders drive social change efforts through partnerships?

Context & Background of the Study

The study follows a case study with notable organizations situated in and serving Washoe County, Nevada. The following section gives generalized information on the setting and background of the Washoe County School District. This school district was identified due to convenience by the researcher. Organizations identified and used for the study are not identified specifically due to anonymity constraints. These agencies and their respective leaders were selected by participating principal respondents who partner directly with the organizations.

The Washoe County School District

The Washoe County School District (WCSD) is a public school district in Washoe County, Nevada. Due to its relatively large land size of over 6,500 square miles, the WCSD serves schools in urban and rural areas. The most notable cities the WCSD serves include Reno and Sparks (US Census Bureau, 2012). The WCSD is the second largest school district in Nevada, second to the Clark County School District serving the greater Las Vegas area. As of 2021, the WCSD serves approximately 62,000 students

within its 103 schools. Demographic information show that 50% of students are identified under free-and-reduced lunch, an indicator for living under the poverty line; 15% qualify for special education services; and 14% are learning English as a secondary language. The WCSD boasts roughly an 85% graduation rate; 51% proficiency in English language arts state assessments; and 34% proficiency in mathematics (WCSD, 2021). The Our WCSD Promise, formerly the vision and mission statements of the organization, claims,

> "We will know every student by name, strength and need so they graduate prepared for the future they choose and we will deliver this promise in partnership with our families and community" (WCSD, 2024).

Existing Partnerships within the WCSD

There are current existing partnership efforts within the WCSD. These efforts include the WCSD Family-School Partnerships Department, work alongside career and technical programs within the WCSD Signature Academies and Career & Technical Education (SACTE) Department, and work alongside the Education Alliance of Washoe County. The purposes of these departments vary, but it is understood that there is more work to be done to address partnerships to support the needs between schools and families.

The WCSD Family-School Partnership Department's focus is to bridge the gap between home and schools. More specifically, the vision of the department states, "The WCSD Department of Family-School Partnerships supports families and school staff to work together on behalf of every child" (WCSD, 2024). Staff members work through a

central office location but work with schools to bring programming and workshops to schools and support initiatives like home visits.

The WCSD SACTE Department focus efforts on college and career readiness. The department's statements claim,

> "WCSD Signature Academy and Career & Technical Education (CTE) programs add value to the high school experience and prepare students for success! These programs provide a rigorous, stimulating curriculum that engages and motivates students; provide opportunities for students to acquire and practice 21st century skills; and prepare students for success in college, high-skill careers, and life. Signature Academies and CTE are education for the future!" (WCSD, 2024).

This department's personnel work closely with high schools who offer career and technical education courses as well as magnet programs called "Signature Academies." Staff work within a central office location on site of the WCSD's only technical/vocational school and help prepare for post-secondary readiness.

The Education Alliance of Washoe County (2024) is a nonprofit organization created to bring business and organizations to schools. The mission of The Education Alliance states,

> "Our Mission is to unite our community to illuminate and clear pathways for every Washoe County students' brightest future. Education Alliance works with many diverse state, city, community, civic, industry, and business groups in support of education… These efforts are directed at initiatives which bring education and businesses/community organizations together" (2024).

Efforts within The Education Alliance have remained stagnant. As a result, new staffing changes, including newly appointed executive staffing and board members, have started to revive efforts.

Research Design

This qualitative research study aims to gain insights from various leaders within the local school, school district, and community agencies that partner with its local schools and district. Within qualitative research, a comparative case study design is used. Defined, case studies serve as a practical study about a particular phenomenon. Case studies study the individual parts, relationships between the parts, and how they function as a whole (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Comparative case studies then serve to collect information and compare multiple cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As such, case studies or comparative case studies are widely used in educational settings. For this study, this comparative case study was bounded to one local school district, three central office administrators, three schools, and three community agencies that work alongside the schools and school district. The inclusion of multiple cases, as in this study, supports enhancing the validity of the findings and shared or diverse perspectives of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, the qualitative study was designed using a critical theory framework. This framework is appropriate for the design through the direct purposes of critical and transformative research (Mertens, 2017). The study is a comparative case study with ethnographic perspectives. An ethnographic perspective focuses on the culture and social regularities of everyday life (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Subsequently, the study is viewed through the perspectives and experiences of multiple participants with a single focus on the impacts of their local school system. Research purposes include opportunities to learn about experiences and perceptions from a variety of stakeholders, learn of limitations and power structures surrounding nationwide implementation efforts, and implications and suggestions for current and future school

leadership. The results and findings provide a narrative on schools as change agencies and encourage action and change at the local level or support policy change.

Data Sources and Collection

Participant Selection

This study values the perceptions and experiences of those most directly involved in working in or alongside school districts enacting change. As a result, participants represent a sample of personnel from schools, the central office of a school district, and community leaders. School and school district personnel were identified through convenience and purposive sampling due to their direct work alongside community agencies or knowledge and experience in understanding partnership efforts. Community organization leader participants were selected through snowball sampling due to principal participants identifying them because of their roles alongside the schools. Additionally, these organizations represent personnel with varying levels of contributions or experiences with partnerships with schools, policy change, and successes with societal change. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to adhere to anonymity and ethics in qualitative research.

- Three central office administrator participants, at the Chief level or higher; Washoe County School District (Reno/Sparks, Nevada)
    - Michael Johnson (District Leader 1): 26 years experience in school district leadership
    - Regina Phelps (District Leader 2): 8 years experience in school district leadership

    - Barbara Atkinson (District Leader 3): 20 years experience in school district leadership
- Three school principal participants; Washoe County School District (Reno/Sparks, Nevada)
    - Michelle O'Lara (Principal 1): 29 years experience in education; 22 years as a school administrator
    - Kylee M. Branda (Principal 2/Principal Supervisor): 20 years experience in education; eight years as a school administrator or principal supervisor
    - Rachel Thorn (Principal 3): 25 years experience in education; 15 years as a school administrator
- Three community agency leaders
    - Rudy Smith (Agency Leader 1): 29 years experience in the organization
    - Charmaine B. Halsorn (Agency Leader 2): 12 years experience in the organization
    - Frances Paul (Agency Leader 3): 11 years experience in the organization

Data and Evidence

A semi-structured interview protocol serves as the main source of data and information. Questions include the background of the participants and their respective organizations, experiences with their local school systems or schools, and suggestions from their experiences. Responses from a variety of stakeholders, with different experiences, outcomes, and suggestions will be compared to determine themes and implications for continued research or change. Triangulation to form a complete analysis of the research questions and narratives include a review of literature and artifacts

pertaining to vision and mission statements where available and appropriate. Review of literature focuses on definitions of societal change, the history and evolution of school-community partnerships, information around public school policy, and evidence of school and community leaders enacting change. Finally, artifacts include a review of vision and mission statements and other pieces of evidence that support building background information on community agencies, schools, or the school district.

Data Collection and Analysis

Saldaña and Omasta (2022) discuss the importance of collecting data and information. Through preliminary considerations on carrying out this research through qualitative methods, it is important that the researcher considers multiple points of data in consideration for the topic. First, the researcher must develop a background understanding of the concept of the roles and responsibilities of school and school district leaders. Although there is a gap in existing literature, the idea of the roles and responsibilities of school leadership as societal change agents is certainly not new. Research is limited as it is related specifically to changes made by school or district leaders outside the day-to-day scope and goals of individual school improvement efforts relating to concepts like student assessment achievement and growth. The second method for collecting data is through interviews. In this process, the researcher created the questions to ask during the interview (Appendix A) and links them directly to the purpose of the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña & Omasta, 2022). It is important that the research is intentional and mindful to not use questions that lead to particular responses or consider power structures that prevent participants from responding authentically. Prior to the interviews, the researcher ensured that participants

were willing to participate, comfortable with recording the process, and that responses may lead to other, follow up questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña & Omasta, 2022). Interviews were conducted individually, in person or via Zoom/Teams, and recorded using the Otter.ai program for accuracy. As identified in the interview protocol, anonymity was an important factor to consider protecting the identity of individual participants and respective schools and organizations. Pseudonyms have been assigned to all participants. Interviews were conducted and immediately transcribed in a table and organized in a codebook to analyze and review for themes. Program transcribed responses were considered for relevancy before coding and determining themes. Coding was utilized using In Vivo Coding and Process Coding with elements of Values and Emotion Coding. Coding processes include identifying the words spoken directly by the participants and later processed to find meaning in these statements. Themes are determined by batching subthemes according to the totality of all participant responses. These interviews, triangulated with a review of relevant literature and relevant artifacts, created a narrative on personal experience and how participants perceive the roles and responsibilities of school and school district leaders.

Researcher Experience and Stance

Statement of Researcher Positionality

Despite his current role as a public school principal, the researcher's role is one of an inside-outsider. In this position, the researcher works professionally within the context and setting, having access and information known to those in the field, but remains as an outside non-participant. In order to limit assumptions and bias, the researcher did not join as a contributing participant in the study. However, it is important to mention that the

researcher's liberal perspective and bias in favor of progressive social efforts reflects the definition of societal change accordingly. He believes strongly in the need to critically assess and challenge current, existing educational practices and systems as a microcosm that continue to perpetuate and mirror macro sociological issues. Due to the unique position as school leader and researcher, it is imperative to consider and mention personal assumptions or perceptions on the effects of leadership in order to effectively collect data, design thoughtful questions, and determine themes and findings around responses that reflect the true nature of the participants.

Statement of Trustworthiness, Reflexivity, and Ethics

Trustworthiness, reflexivity, and ethics are important elements to consider when conducting and reporting research. These elements allow transparency but appropriate use of humans and their experiences as information to study and learn from (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Trustworthiness in this study accounts for the triangulation of information. By providing multiple points of data, information becomes more valid, and experiences are best supported. Triangulation is this study, as mentioned previously, included pieces of evidence and data. When and where appropriate, these pieces include a comprehensive literature review on information, interview responses, and artifacts. As previously and explicitly stated, reflexivity by accounting on the positionality of the researcher is also accounted for and considered. Finally, ethical considerations are implemented as well as reported as reviewed and mandated by an internal review board. Ethics in this study account for participants' willing participation, anonymity, trust between the participants and researcher, and honesty and respect of reporting of participant responses. Not only are ethical considerations lawful in research, but also

create accurate portrayals and determination of findings and themes (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). As a result of considerable attention to trustworthiness, reflexivity, and ethics, the project's findings can support action beyond the scope of its single study.

Summary

Historically speaking, schools have served as a community resource and institution for learning. As advancements in society have altered the purpose and work around schools, so should the moral and ethical purpose of the responsibilities of school district and school leaders. However, due to various local and government constraints, the roles and responsibilities of school personnel have become focused more on the effectiveness of site systems for the sole purpose of student assessment achievement and growth. More evidence and research in support of the role of schools to contribute to systemwide, societal change is necessary. Continued research and additional data sources on this topic can increase awareness and lead to a critical review of the roles and responsibilities of schools and school districts as societal change agents.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions among district-level administrators, site-level principals, and community partners regarding the school's responsibility in enacting societal change. The following research questions guided the work.

- Question 1: What are the perceptions and experiences of agency leaders who partner with public school systems on the responsibility of school and school district leaders as societal change agencies?
    - Question 1a: What do community agency leaders do to sustain practice and reduce disparities?
- Question 2: What are the perceptions and experiences of school and school district leaders of their responsibilities as societal change agents?
    - Question 2a: What do school and school district leaders do to sustain practice and reduce disparities?
- Question 3: How do agency leaders, school leaders, and district leaders drive social change efforts through partnerships?

Chapter Four is comprised of multiple sections pertaining to the findings of the study. The first portion identifies the participants in each of the cases. Following the participant description are the presentation of topics and themes from each research question. These findings are divided into cases to show similarities and differences. Findings are based on common responses that emerged from interviews. Interview statements are supported by the participants' discussions on the organizational mission

and vision statements. The last section of Chapter Four shares the identified similarities and differences between the cases.

Description of Participants in Each Case

The comparative study examined two cases: one from the perceptions and experiences of community agency leaders and the other from the perceptions and experiences of school and school district leaders. Thus, this section identifies the participants in each case and how they were selected for the study (Appendix B).

There were three community agency leader participants in the first case. These leaders were selected specifically by the three principal participants through snowball sampling. Each site principal selected the agency and leader due to their direct work with the principal or school. Each agency leader serves in an executive position within the respective agency and currently works alongside the principal who selected the agency to be examined. The participants' identified partnership benefits included a variety of academic, social, physical health, and behavioral/mental health efforts to help the schools, students, and families. Artifacts that include each agency's vision and mission statements triangulate the understanding of the organization and their main societal focuses. It is inferred that these specific experiences and agency focuses relate specifically to the respondents' experienced with different marginalized groups of people. The years of employment for the agency leaders in their current roles ranged from 11 to 29 years. Prior to their roles, the agency leader participants have held many other professional roles within current or other communities. Some of these roles include teacher, athletic coach, school principal, and other subordinate roles within their current agencies. One participant identifies as male while two participants identify as female.

Throughout Chapters Four and Five, these participants are identified through pseudonyms to honor anonymity.

The second case included both school and school district leaders with a total of six participants. There were three participants in each category, with one participant in the principal category also serving as a principal supervisor. These leaders were selected using purposive and convenience sampling. However, each leader was considered by the researcher due to the participants' varying levels of longevity and professional experience in working alongside community agencies. Each of the principals and principal supervisor have led various schools, both in high and low-performing schools, confirming that each participant could speak to a diverse experiences. The two principals currently work in higher academically performing elementary schools. Each principal and supervisor have led and spoke to experiences in both low and high performing elementary, middle, and high schools. Central office leaders were selected due to their position at the chief level or higher and job responsibilities tied to directly engaging with community agencies, support programming for partnerships, or being able to speak to shared work between schools and community agencies. Collectively, the participants in this case range from 8 to 29 years of experience in their current roles, with most having worked for at least 20 years. Prior to their current roles, these participants held various other similar roles that included positions as teachers. Central office leaders have previous experience within their field in other communities including the WCSD. Of the three central office leaders, one identifies as male, while the other two identify as female. All three of the principal or principal supervisor participants identify as female. Of all nine participants, one identifies as a person of color while the other eight identify as

white. Two participants identify as gay/lesbian while the other seven identify as heterosexual. Throughout Chapters Four and Five these participants will be identified through pseudonyms.

The following section identifies the themes of research questions (RQ) 1 and 1a specific to community agency leaders. Following these reported themes are the findings of RQ2 and 2a specific to school and school district leaders. Finally, RQ3 shares emergent themes between all nine participants.

RQ1: Perceptions and Experiences of Agency Leaders

Epstein's (2011) concept of overlapping spheres of influence is a concept that is realized by the purpose and backgrounds of community agencies when discussing organizations like schools. Both community agencies and schools have a shared interest and responsibility to serve the same set of clients—the community. Thus, statements and experiences from community agency leaders who partner with school systems provided illustrative comments around this notion of shared responsibility. Common themes that emerged from this case centered on beliefs about the responsibilities and roles of schools and school leaders, the importance of partnerships, and the issues or limitations to school district capacity in serving as societal change agencies.

The Inherent Good

As expressed by the participants, community agency leaders seemed to share specific views with regard to roles and responsibilities of school and district leaders. First, Halsorn emphasized the importance of ensuring student safety and wellbeing, saying, "The number one responsibility of the school system if to create safety." Smith also discussed safety but added the importance of serving as a "protector [of students and

the system].” A common responsibility expressed by the agency leaders was in building trust and public transparency as public school leaders (Halsorn, Paul, and Smith). This theme carried into discussions on limitations and issues with educational systems in general. Paul specifically mentioned the importance of building trust and transparency with the community.

For example, Paul shared, “We have to start by trusting our people and being transparent about what we are doing.” Smith highlighted the importance of “trustworthy leaders” for school district success. Relationship-building served as another main responsibility of school and school district leaders. Paul described the importance of focusing on “the human side of leadership, fostering connections, empathy, passion in students, and staff.” Finally, all three agency leaders acknowledged that school and school district leaders have a responsibility to drive social change through inclusive and equitable practices to close disparities. Each agency leader spoke to these disparities in terms of the specific services they provide, whether academic, social, or related to health initiatives. Knowing families’ and students’ needs and expanding services was a common mention. Paul comment with regard to this responsibly was reflective across the participants when noting, “the purpose of public schools it to help students learn to navigate the real world, which involves building relationships and fostering their passions.”

The Hope for Change

While the focus on partnerships was inherent to the purpose of the interviews, the way in which participants regarded its importance was particularly noteworthy. All three community agency leaders (Halsorn, Paul, and Smith) all indicated that schools and

school districts have an innate responsibility to partner with community agencies to drive critical social change. Paul's response was simply stated in that "it *is* [the school district's] responsibility" [to partner along community agencies]. Generally, participants acknowledged limitations in developing effective collaborations. All three participants (Halsorn, Paul, and Smith) shared a common belief on the importance of partnerships between schools, district, and organizations to provide additional support and opportunities for students and families. Smith and Paul mentioned this as a main responsibility of school and school district leaders. Paul stated, "When we are talking about partnerships, and about 64,000 children…yeah, [partnerships are] important." Finally, all three agency leaders (Halsorn, Paul, and Smith) argue that school and school districts would benefit dually from partnerships in order to focus on reducing disparities, building trust between the two cases, and driving positive societal change. Smith specifically mentioned, "We offer summer programming. We have learning centers, so these are things that directly are going to benefit [the students of WCSD]."

Issues Preventing Change

The most evident theme of the reports from agency leaders was that on the recognized or experienced issues and limitations facing school systems. The first explicitly mentioned issue was focused on the limitations around partnerships. Generally, the participants recognized challenges in developing collaborations due to bureaucracy, lack of trust and misaligned priorities. Halsorn and Smith discussed frustration with the WCSD's approach to partnerships, stating that they see the partnership as one-sided. Smith shared an example of shared spacing and limitations set by the local school district to secure and pay for spacing when requested.

"The [WCSD] understands what a partnership is, but it's about what they want from us and not what they can do for us. Like, a simple thing. Anytime [a specific school] needs something, our doors are open, right? Come to our gym… [But] when we got into a bind…and lost one of our gyms, [the WCSD] was going to [charge us] $37 an hour and we had to pay for this and that" (Smith).

He believes that unnecessary and outdated processes existing in the WCSD prevent effective collaboration and shared interests. All three agency leaders (Halsorn, Paul, and Smith) agreed that partnerships have not necessarily been reciprocated. Rather, partnerships have been beneficially one-sided, and in support of the schools' and school district's interests. The participants highlighted concerns with leadership and culture in the school system limiting these interactions. These concerns included a lack of transparency, fear-based environments, resistance to change, and toxic leadership hindering progress. Paul stated that she believed "WCSD, along with many other districts, is still a culture of fear and non-transparency." She also mentions that in her experience, resistant school systems and leaders driving these systems are "ancient, toxic, immovable leaders" (Paul). Despite these expressed experiences, the participants also provided experiences of inspiring leaders who have advocated for change. A second common limitation about partnerships was specific to funding. All three participants (Halsorn, Paul, and Smith) recognized that a lack of sufficient funding greatly impacted the progress of schools. Smith, however, also countered on the issue of funding as a relative issue. He shared his insight that school systems will receive federal and state monies while nonprofit organizations like his and others are not so fortunate. These

organizations are sustained by writing grants to sustain personnel and expand critical services to families (Smith).

"When [the WCSD] states that they have no funding and cut programming or services for families and then ask us to take it on, well, we don't have funding either. We have to write grants and ask for every dollar that we have" (Smith).

Finally, some of the most notably mentioned concerns were around state and federal policies that limit progress in public schools. Participants discussed ways in which they believe these policies have negative impacts on marginalized students. Reports from Halsorn and Paul discussed personal experiences with outspoken conservative groups against schools and their liberal, progressive agencies. Zimmerman (2022) explains this as divisive culture wars. Halsorn stated, "For those of us working in nonprofits and education, we are pushing for the same [progress]. If we are going to progress our country, we have to vote and we have to vote smart." Paul mentioned that conservatives against public education are not new. She stated, "Political roots within communities resistant to change are centuries long, centuries deep." However, the participants also saw policy as a tool for positive change with proper leadership. As an example, Paul spoke to her experience in working alongside school systems from her agency's direction to sidestep policy limitations on school progress.

RQ1a: Agency Leaders Sustaining Practice and Reducing Disparities

Beyond the participants' identified imitations, agency leaders shared how they work to sustain practice and reduce disparities in their work. Smith discussed that reflective practices serves as a main avenue in sustaining efforts. He stated that the operating board and personnel starts by "looking inward when issues arise, rather than

blaming others" (Smith). Smith summarized that the organization aims to drive social change by teaching empathy, keeping an open mind, and challenging old ways of thinking. He shared an experience on how political stances from the community members and funders have positively and negatively impacted his work and funding. He shared the importance of staying politically neutral in order to sustain but challenge practices for "what is right for the kids" (Smith). It was mentioned that this is supported by the operating board who asks thoughtful questions to expand the organization's perspectives. Halsorn supports critical change efforts and believes that education and advocacy are key to advancing the rights of marginalized groups. One mention was on how she sustains her practice and provides services, but recognizes that momentum can be advanced through partnerships. Halsorn expressed her efforts as successful due to effort sharing initiatives and practices in which she partners with other nonprofits. This creates a shared effort in providing access, care, resources, and services to underserved populations. Finally, Paul also emphasized partnerships as a key element on sustaining and challenging existing practices while addressing disparities. She mentioned the importance of working alongside schools and enhancing community engagement. Because of the direct vision and focus on the organization, she is committed to reducing social and academic disparities by bringing issues to the forefront when working with school districts.

RQ2: Perceptions and Experiences of School and School District Leaders

As discussed previously, the roles and responsibilities of school and district leaders are ever-changing and demanding. More current calls and research show that school and district leaders can make substantial changes in terms of societal change (Mayger & Provinzano, 2022; Rawls & Hammons, 2015; Roper, 2020; Teemant et al.,

2021). Thus, responses from participants serving in roles as school principals and central office leaders share common reports on these responsibilities. Common themes from conversations from these six participants surround those on the roles and responsibilities of school and school district leaders, experiences with partnerships between schools and community agencies, and issues limiting progressive critical educational efforts.

Demands of the All-encompassing Role

One main and understood theme of this study from the perspective of school and school district leaders was on the roles and responsibilities of school and school district leaders. Collective perspectives on the roles of the principal were specific to supporting the school site and surrounding community. Shared viewpoints include supporting school personnel, teachers, and students. This includes the need to remove barriers, ensure learning is happening, and supporting a focus on the community. Specifically, Thorn and Branda discussed a priority for school principals to build relationships with families and community partners. There was agreement on the importance of leadership that is reflective, transparent, advocated for marginalized students, and aims to build the capacity of schools and communities. All school and school district leaders shared their perspectives on the innate focus on instruction and instructional leadership. Five respondents specifically mentioned the importance of principals supporting and developing teachers so that they could effectively teach students (Atkinson, Branda, Johnson, Phelps, and Thorn). All three principal participants mentioned the responsibility of principals to create a positive, welcoming, and supportive environment focused on students' wellbeing (Branda, O'Lara, and Thorn). Additionally, some also shared the importance of "meeting individual student needs" (Atkinson, O'Lara, and Thorn).

Leadership approaches emphasized collaboration, reflection, boldness, values-based decisions, and community connections. Branda directed that school principals should "be reflective, self-aware, and think critically about biases." The importance of standout leaders mentoring new leaders was also highlighted and mentioned (Branda, Johnson, and Thorn).

School leaders and school district leaders expressed similar roles and responsibilities for central office leadership, however participants saw this role as more large-scale and visionary for the entire school district. First, all participants expressed it was imperative that school districts partner with community agencies. Atkinson, Johnson, Phelps, and Thorn specifically expanded the importance of this partnership for the sake of supporting students. Transparency with community members for the sake of engagement was also mentioned by Atkinson and Thorn. Secondly, another main responsibility of school district leaders as identified by school and district leaders were to support principals and schools, remove barriers, and provide resources (Atkinson, Branda, Johnson, O'Lara, and Phelps). Finally, participants also recognized the need for addressing policy changes as a main responsibility of school district leaders. This was explicitly stated and supported by comments from Johnson, O'Lara, and Phelps.

Validating Partnerships

All school and district leaders supported the importance of schools and school districts partnering with community agencies. The participants indicated that these partnerships were beneficial because they provide additional services and supports for families. However, some noted challenges in developing partnerships due to bureaucracy, differing priorities, and communication issues. O'Lara emphasized the importance of

partnership and collaboration to drive social change efforts in education. For example, Thorn expressed a similar focus on this with the need to advocate for more community involvement in schools, including social work and childcare services, to better support families. Branda shared an example of leveraging community partnerships by "partnering with a few key organizations over two to three years to drive social change efforts." All three district leaders highlighted agencies that have shared interests to drive change and provide services, such as health agencies, volunteer groups, and youth programming. Johnson made the statement that "partnerships are key to advancing public schools by connecting students with opportunities outside of school." Atkinson resounded this statement by claiming, "[School systems] cannot do it alone. School systems must partner with agencies to provide essential services." She also recognized that partnerships can "drive change faster than [school districts]." Phelps knows the importance of partnerships but recognized that the WCSD sometimes struggles with collaborating with community agencies, leading to inefficiencies in serving students. She said, "[The WCSD is] working to improve partnerships" (Phelps).

Unintended Consequences

School and district leaders did not shy away from addressing and recognizing limitations and issues within the general school system and local issues. These issues were almost always mentioned after questions on the positive and negative impacts of school systems. District leaders discussed the "unintended" consequences of school systems like WCSD, particularly with minority subgroups of students (Atkinson and Johnson).

"I think there are slippery slopes and unintended consequences associated with accountability systems, for example," said Johnson, discussing inequities identified in data reviews.

These negative contributions and issues were primarily due to policies, transportation issues and limitations, and mirrored discrepancies seen in the greater community. Issues that school and district leaders noted as hindering school district progress included outdated methods, politics and political pressures, funding, overworked staff, and unsuccessful partnering (Atkinson, Branda, and Thorn). Atkinson spoke to her experiences with the culture wars (Zimmerman, 2022). She stated, "Politics is getting in the way. Politics are preventing us from advancing, I think. We have a pretty segregated school system still. I think of our friends in Florida. They don't know what to say and all this kind of stuff." Finally, policy impacts were also discussed and supported limiting claims such as funding, mandates, and state and federal oversights. Like the unintended consequences of local practices, participants believe that state and federal policies can help or hinder change efforts depending on leadership and implementation (Atkinson, Johnson, O'Lara, and Thorn).

RQ2a: School and District Leaders Sustaining Practice and Reducing Disparities

The following statements support the research question on how school and school district leaders sustain practice while reducing disparities. Multiple school and district participants supported building strong relationships and trust with students, families, teachers, and the community. These statements included perceived responsibilities of school and district leader personnel that include open communication, empathy, and active listening (Atkinson, Branda, and O'Lara). Along with these practices, creating a

welcoming, inclusive environment for all students was mentioned by Atkinson, Branda, and O'Lara. Atkinson made a particular comment on the importance of "prioritizing transparency and bold action to address systemic inequities, even it means disrupting the status quo," an issue identified as a limitation in schools. Other school and district leaders discussed pushing against existing practices and advocating for policy change to enhance educational experiences for all students (Branda, O'Lara, and Johnson). Other ways that principals and district leaders mentioned sustaining practice and addressing disparities was through student learning efforts. Atkinson and Branda stated the importance of focusing on individualized, student-centered learning and providing the necessary supports to help each student thrive. Atkinson, Branda, and Johnson supported this by equipping students to be critical thinkers, change agents, and contributors to society. In summary, these school and district leaders emphasize building trust, transparency, partnerships, policy advocacy, reflection, access to appropriate curriculum, and bold action to challenge practices and reduce disparities for students.

RQ3: Driving Societal Change Efforts through Partnerships

Aligning to many objectives and expectations of The Promise Neighborhoods (Horsford & Sampson, 2014), participants in this study identified consistent themes on driving societal change efforts through partnerships. As seen throughout the responses of the entire study, participants have agreed that enhancing and leveraging partnerships, emphasizing the roles of school and district leaders, and advocating for policy changes are the best efforts to drive societal change. These comments also support critical change theory viewpoints (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). The following section summarizes shared findings amongst participants on these emergent themes.

Enhancing and Leveraging Partnerships

Participants from the study discussed how partnerships between schools and community agencies are just one way to drive social change efforts. Respondents believe that partnering between community organizations and schools maximizes supports and opportunities, especially those from marginalized groups. Several conversations by nearly all participants highlighted the importance of schools collaborating with nonprofits, social service agencies, juvenile justice organizations, and others to help address disparities and meet the diverse needs of students. Specific responses from agency leaders in particular shared resources and opportunities offered through their organizations. These partnerships can provide mental health services, internships, after-school programs, and other resources that schools may be limited in providing on their own.

Emphasizing Roles of School and District Leaders

Respondents, especially school and district leaders, seemed to feel strongly that many actions are already in place or can be enhanced to make changes in their roles now. This was evident in discussions where school and district leaders indicated they could leverage their own leadership and decision-making authority to drive societal change. Nearly all participants (i.e., Branda, Halsorn, Johnson, O'Lara, Paul, Phelps, and Thorn) highlighted the responsibilities of education leaders to be reflective, take bold action, and leverage their positions to create more inclusive school cultures and advocate for marginalized groups. Participants reported that partnerships can support leaders in these efforts due to shared interest in their efforts.

Advocacy for Policy Changes

Partnerships with community agency leaders and policymakers were identified as a need to drive policy efforts to make changes. Participants expressed a belief in partnerships being able to drive social change efforts by advocating for policy changes at the local, state, and federal levels to better support public education and advance equity. Some participants argued that policy changes are needed to reduce disparities, provide adequate funding for schools, support innovation in education, and create accountability for equitable practices (Atkinson, Paul, Phelps, and Smith).

Similarities and Distinctions Between Cases

Themes between the two cases (agency leaders as one case and school and district leaders as a separate case) were similar (Appendix C). Emergent themes, as previously identified, included perceived roles and responsibilities of school and district leaders; importance of creating, sustaining, and leveraging partnerships; and discussions on issues limiting educational efforts to close disparities. Though the themes were overarchingly similar, each case's perspectives varied slightly due to the subjective nature and personal experiences of the respondents.

Agency leaders believe that responsibilities of school and district leaders include student safety, building trust and transparency with the general public, relationship-building, and a concerted effort to drive social change. School and district leaders, on the other hand, discussed the following as main roles and responsibilities of school and district leaders: supporting the school site and surrounding community; removing barriers for personnel; creating a welcoming and supportive environment for students to meet individual needs; ensuring that learning is happening; leading with reflexivity and

transparency; eliminating barriers and providing resources; mentoring new leaders; and serving as societal change agents through partnerships and policy change efforts.

There is agreement between the two cases and all nine participants on the need and desire to partner between schools, school district, and community agencies. Common statements between both cases showed support for these partnerships for the benefit of the families and students they serve; express interests in reducing disparities as a result of partnerships; and making more services available to families and students. Both cases recognized limitations due to policy and bureaucratic issues in effective partnerships or moves toward societal changes. One respondent summarized these efforts in stating that "[School systems] cannot do it alone. School systems must partner with agencies to provide essential services" and that partnerships can "drive change faster than [school districts]" (Atkinson).

Finally, both cases recognize issues within the existing educational system that limit progress with closing disparity gaps and advancing schools as societal change agents. Most respondents agree on similar issues, though agency leaders saw communication and resistance more than school and school district leaders. Agency leaders mentioned the limitations around partnerships between schools and community agencies; miscommunication and misaligned priorities between the two sectors; outdated processes and resistance to change preventing partnerships; funding constraints; and conservative politics and policies that hinder change efforts. School and district leaders, then, see the following as issues impacting the educational system: unintended negative consequences from initiatives and processes that continue to perpetuate disparities;

outdated methods, politics and political pressures; funding; overworked staff; unsuccessful partnering efforts; and state and federal mandates and oversights.

Summary

There were several themes that emerged based on the statements from participants in the study. These themes and responses from participants give evidence to support the answering of each research question. Agency leaders shared a variety of responses about their perceptions and experiences in partnership with the public school systems for the sake of societal change. Additionally, these respondents discussed ways that they are sustaining or challenging their practices and closing disparities in their work. Secondly, school and school district leaders shared their perspectives on their responsibilities to serve as societal change agents. The participants also discussed individual and shared initiatives to challenge their existing practices and address needs. Finally, all participants responded to questions on how they are leveraging partnerships between agencies to drive social change. Chapter Five will interpret the results and report summaries in relation to each research question. Also included will be implications for practitioners as well as suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions among district-level administrators, site-level principals, and community partners regarding the school's responsibility in enacting societal change. As a reminder, the following research questions guided the work.

- Question 1: What are the perceptions and experiences of agency leaders who partner with public school systems on the responsibility of school and school district leaders as societal change agencies?
    - Question 1a: What do community agency leaders do to sustain practice and reduce disparities?
- Question 2: What are the perceptions and experiences of school and school district leaders of their responsibilities as societal change agents?
    - Question 2a: What do school and school district leaders do to sustain practice and reduce disparities?
- Question 3: How do agency leaders, school leaders, and district leaders drive social change efforts through partnerships?

Two sets of participants were interviewed in order to respond directly to these questions. Interviews were coded and themes determined to address these questions for each case. Each participant spoke to their understanding of the roles and responsibilities of school and school district leaders, partnerships, and issues within educational systems. Chapter Five discusses the summary of the results, comparing the experiences of the participants with existing literature. The chapter also includes implications for practice, recommendations for further research, and conclusions.

Responsibilities of School and School District Leaders

The nine school, school district, and community agency leader participants added their personal experiences and interpretations of the roles and responsibilities of school and district leaders. It is clear from the leaders' perspectives in their generalized belief that schools can impact critical change as viewed through a critical theory lens. Cruz-Gonzalez et al. (2019) discuss how authority figures within school systems, such as school principals, can and should enact larger scale change. School district leaders, specifically, supported the idea that their roles can make an impact. Additionally, schools can close disparities within social groups through equity-focused educational efforts (Mayger & Provinzano, 2022; Rawls & Hammons, 2015; Roper, 2020; Teemant et al., 2021). Despite claims s by participants that school and district leaders can and should serve as societal change agents, the largest discrepancy between the two cases were in the perceived roles and responsibilities of school and district leaders. A main factor to this could be the ever-changing roles and responsibilities of school leaders. Ryan (2016) and Fabionar (2020) argue that school leaders have a social responsibility to take critical action to address mounting inequities. Critical theory supports this notion by reviewing and addressing power imbalances (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Today's leaders, as agreed upon by participants, should serve through "bold action" (Atkinson) and address inequities as social justice leaders (Fabionar, 2020; Ryan, 2016).

Partnerships

Participants shared a resounding shared support for school-community based partnerships. Statements in support of partnerships included benefits and services for families and students served and as well as reducing disparities of some populations of

people. Partnerships allow community organizations to collaborate and align their missions, leveraging each other's strengths and resources. Additionally, these partnerships share in resources and services. They can create pipelines and pathways connecting schools, community organizations, and local industries. This expands opportunities for students and fosters a skilled workforce (Oliveri et al., 2017).

An underestimated but supported benefit of partnerships is in the capacity building of underrepresented and marginalized groups of people. Authors like Mapp (2011) report that building community capacity allows citizens to make institutionalized and policy changes on their own behalf. Increasing opportunities for marginalized groups of people to gain or increase power or collective voice can move to eliminating limiting conditions that are otherwise imposed on these groups. Participants who mentioned this benefit understand that existing limitations may need to be addressed for this reform (Atkinson and Johnson). These issues include a better review of data on disproportioned statistics existing in schools, programs, and opportunities to engage these groups, and partnerships to support in sharing the workload and offer resources outside of the school system. Atkinson supports and summarizes this need by stating, "Partnerships can drive change faster than [school districts]."

Issues Impacting Educational Systems

Three main issues as identified by respondents were on funding, policies, and current culture wars (Zimmerman & May, 2021). School funding initiatives, especially those dedicated to Title I funded schools through ESSA, are still primarily funded for specific academic efforts. Even in the case of partnerships, funding is designated specifically for family-school partnerships (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). Participants

affirmed that funding can support growing programming, adding resources, and ultimately diminish obstacles, specifically for underprivileged populations of students. Additionally, participants agreed that funding can enhance partnership efforts by sharing resources for the sake of their shared interest of students, families, and community.

Policy stagnation and issues were reported by participants as a limitation with progressing schools. Studies by Bolden and Tymms (2020) and reviews of existing policies such as NCLB and ESSA show stagnation in school policies in the United States and across the globe. Participants in this study reported frustrations with stagnant and unwavering policies at the school and district levels. These included regulations, forms and processes, and standards and concepts of teaching that limit creative, social growth. Additionally, these archaic practices have continued to yield similar academic reports (Bolden & Tymms, 2020) in a time where additional supports around mental health are necessary other concepts beyond tested subjects must be considered. Participants agree that generalized local, state, and federal reforms are necessary.

Finally, many respondents mentioned the impacts of culture wars that are hindering progressive educational and societal change. Agency, school, and district leaders all recognized small and vocal groups of citizens that have been outspoken about continuing to maintain practices or return to traditional educational methods. This is in alignment with reports of existing culture wars throughout the country as reported by Zimmerman and May (2021).

Implications for Practice

There were three initiatives and suggestions for practice that emerged from this study. In line with participant responses and review of current literature, practitioners

looking to support students and families to close disparities can consider the following: enhancing school-community partnerships; increasing funding and resources; and reforming existing systems in education that include changing policy.

Innate to this study and responses, this research supports enhancing partnerships. Agency leaders specifically mentioned how the WCSD has not reciprocated partnerships fully due to archaic regulations and limitations (Paul and Smith). Despite this, participants also believe that school district leaders have authority and power to make substantial changes (Atkinson, Branda, Johnson, O'Lara, Paul, Smith, and Thorn). This power dynamic is indicative of how critical theory can be used to challenge these existing limitations to improve practices and drive change. Improving practices can be accomplished through intentionally developing and stewarding reciprocated partnerships between schools, government agencies, nonprofits, and local organizations to provide holistic support services for students and families. This can be initiated by schools, school district, and/or agencies who share common interests.

Responses and suggestions from this study's participants encourage the increase of funding and resources to schools and organizations providing services to community members like children or families. Some researchers agree that funding for K-12 schools should be reevaluated and revamped (Lueken & Shuls, 2019; Ogletree & Robinson, 2016). Increasing monies for schools can provide more resources for schools, especially in those serving low-income communities. Additionally, increased funding can support special education services and mental health supports in schools, as mentioned by respondents who work closely in these sectors. Additional funding could also support increasing teacher pay. This effort would help improve teacher retention, especially in

high-needs schools. Finally, additional funding and efforts to expand early childhood education programs and full-day kindergarten could lead to long-term and future impacts. This could help provide an equitable start for students from all backgrounds and reduce disparities in early literacy and learning.

As mentioned previously, there is a belief and understanding among the study's participants and supported by literature (Mayger & Provinzano, 2022; Rawls & Hammons, 2015; Roper, 2020; Teemant et al., 2021) that schools and school systems can make an impact. Thus, it is important to consider an implication that would suggest reforming existing systems in and for education. The first suggestion would be to provide professional development for school leaders on addressing systemic inequities and learning equity initiatives. Along these lines are providing more resources and training for educators on culturally responsive teaching practices. This can help engage diverse learning and reduce disparities in achievement and opportunity. Secondly, there should be considerations to reform punitive disciplinary practices that disproportionately impact students of color or other marginalized subcategories. Instead, schools should consider restorative practice and justice programming and initiatives. Finally, as previously mentioned as a benefit to make progressive moves in education are considerations to push for policy change. Critical efforts are suggested to address inequities. Educators and lobbyists should support the development of policies at the federal and state level with input from education leaders and practitioners to ensure they support critical change efforts. Hess (2010) argues that calls for uniformity does not support diverse and quality changes. He suggests creating a variety of schools to meet the diverse needs and demands of learners, leading to a more demanding and complex society.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the totality of this research, there are some ideas for further research that emerged. These recommendations include expanding the participant insights, particularly for additional agency leader perspectives; considering a quantifiable component; and comparing cases beyond one setting.

A recommendation would be to expand information from participants. The first consideration would be to solicit more participants. Though evident themes came from the small sample size of nine participants, the size of each case was not equal. As a result, the first case of agency leaders yielded half of the responses from the second case of school and district leaders. Secondly, including more characteristics on the participants could enhance a varied lens of understanding. These elements would include more specifics on personal backgrounds that infer responses, protocol questions on respondents' stance on societal change, and questions in the protocol about which marginalized groups are affected by the work. By abiding by anonymity in a relatively small setting, limiting characteristics for the sake of anonymity prevented access to more information on the backgrounds and characteristics of the participants. Expending the case to include additional community agency leaders could bring a more extensive review of this problem of practice. Finally, the study may benefit from additional groups of respondents. This could include responses from other stakeholders such as families/parents, students, and teachers. Surely these responses would expand, support, or show how the daily and experiences of these groups contribute to societal changes.

Secondly, this study could consider a measurable focus following a program evaluation model. Certainly, the role of the principal and responsibility to address

academics is a priority for schools. Thus, academic considerations, such as questions around how school-community partnerships can impact student academic achievement and growth can be reviewed. This study could be modified to follow a quantitative process, such as a factor analysis considering different variables, including partnerships, which may show significant variance amongst one another.

Finally, another consideration would be to explore cases between separate settings. Even within the one setting, like many urban areas, there were considerable geographical considerations within the area that may have impacted the study. These considerations include high or low poverty or concentrations of groups of people of color or predominant white residential areas, as some examples. As with all qualitative research studies, results are difficult and inappropriate to report as justifiable. However, in recreating a similar study with separate settings, results and findings could determine similar themes to support improvement initiatives between or amongst different cities or states.

Conclusions

Schools, as societal public institutions, play a significant role in the social development of a community. This is prevalent in the historic responsibilities and goals of schools to enhance the development as youth as contributing members to their community to more advanced theories of learners as societal change agents. However, due to various local and government constraints, the roles and responsibilities have become focused more on the effectiveness of site systems for the sole purpose of student assessment achievement and growth. Hess (2010) states clearly that traditional systems are ill-suited for the goals and purposes of today's educational efforts. Critical and radical

change is essential. More evidence and research in support of the role of schools to contribute to systemwide, societal change is necessary. This study has provided some insight on how community partners perceive these limitations and can break through barriers despite limiting structures. The benefits to the suggestions and findings of this study could contribute greatly to how schools implement initiatives and partner with community agencies. Continued research and additional data sources on this topic can increase awareness and lead to a critical review on the roles and responsibilities of schools and school districts as societal change agents.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me to discuss the topic of the responsibilities of school systems in their communities. This research topic and the following questions are part of a course on qualitative research, but the topic of school system roles, accountability, and responsibilities is important to supporting ongoing changes in schools. Your responses will help to create a story on how partnerships with schools are contributing to these societal changes, if at all. The goal would be to use these kinds of responses from various partners and school personnel to contribute to a true research study and action plan.

With your permission, I would like to request to audio record our interview. This will allow me to return to the audio in order to ensure that I capture your comments and reflections accurately. I will maintain anonymity by assigning a pseudonym to you and your organization, if you prefer, so that you can be open and honest with your responses. Of course, if you do not feel comfortable in responding to any question, you may state so, and I will move on to the next question.

I will start by asking some general background questions relating to your position and work within your organization, about the organization, and relationship with school systems. From there I will ask more direct questions relating to your experiences and perceptions on the responsibilities of school systems. In some instances, I may follow up questions that ask you to expand on or explain your responses. The interview should take approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Part 1: Personal Background Questions

1. Please state your initials, role in the organization, and organization name. This is for organizational information, but as a reminder, your name, titles (where applicable), and organization will have pseudonyms.
2. How many years have you been with the organization?
3. Have you held any additional roles in the organization?
4. Have you held any similar roles in other organizations that speak to your experience in working alongside public school systems?

Part 2: Organizational Background Questions

1. What are the vision and mission statements of your organization?
2. How does your organization impact your community?
3. How does your organization build the capacity of the marginalized individuals, groups, or communities you serve?
4. What is your organization's relationship with public education locally, nationally, and/or globally?
5. How long has your organization worked alongside public education?

Part 3: Perceptions and Experiences of the Responsibilities of Schools and School Systems

1. What do you see as the overall purpose or purposes of public schools?
2. What do you believe should be the overarching responsibilities of individual school leaders, like principals?
3. What do you believe should be the overarching responsibilities of school district leaders, such as department directors or superintendents?

4. In what ways have you seen school systems negatively contribute and positively contribute to the communities or society they are in, if at all?
5. What factors, if any, keep school districts from advancing appropriately?
6. Do you believe that your local public school system is operating appropriately?
    a. If yes, what is going well?
    b. If not, what are the areas of concern that you have seen or experienced?
7. What is a school system's responsibility to partner with community agencies, if at all?
8. How has partnering with schools or school districts been reciprocated in terms of benefits for your organization and for the school system, if at all?
9. Do you believe that state or federal policy would help or hinder critical change efforts? How?
10. What changes and/or additional support is needed to better advance public schools locally or nationally, if any?
11. What do you believe are the responsibilities of school and school district leaders as societal change agents?
12. What do you do to sustain practice and reduce disparities?
13. How do you drive social change efforts through partnerships?
14. Do you have any additional comments about the responsibilities of school systems that you believe may add value to this conversation or research?

Appendix B

Participant Information

Participant Information

Participant	Case Number	Industry	Years of Experience	Gender
Smith	Case 1	Community Agency Leader; Academic and Social	29 years in the organization	Male
Halsorn	Case 1	Community Agency Leader; Medical and Behavioral Health	12 years in the organization	Female
Paul	Case 1	Community Agency Leader; Academic	11 years in the organization	Female
Johnson	Case 2	School District Leader	26 years in school district leadership	Male
Phelps	Case 2	School District Leader	8 years in school district leadership	Female
Atkinson	Case 2	School District Leader	20 years in school district leadership	Female
O'Lara	Case 2	School Principal	29 years in education; 22 years as a school administrator	Female
Branda	Case 2	School Principal	20 years in education; 8 years as a school administrator or principal supervisor	Female
Thorn	Case 2	School Principal	25 years in education; 15 years as a school administrator	Female

Appendix C

Similarities and Distinctions Between Cases

Similarities and Distinctions Between Cases

Case 1 Community Agency Leaders	Common Topics	Case 2 School and School District Leaders
The Inherent Good • student safety • building trust and transparency with the public • relationship-building • concerted efforts to drive social change	Responsibilities of School and School District Leaders	Demands of the All-encompassing Role • supporting the school site and surrounding community • removing barriers for personnel • creating a welcoming and supportive environment for students to meet individual needs • ensuring that learning is happening • leading with reflexivity and transparency • eliminating barriers and providing resources • mentoring new leaders • serving as societal change agents through partnerships and policy change efforts

The Hope for Change • partnerships for the benefit of the families and students they serve • interests in reducing disparities as a result of partnerships • making more services available to families and students • recognized limitations due to policy and bureaucratic issues in effective partnerships or moves toward societal changes	Partnerships [a]	Validating Partnerships • partnerships for the benefit of the families and students they serve • interests in reducing disparities as a result of partnerships • making more services available to families and students • recognized limitations due to policy and bureaucratic issues in effective partnerships or moves toward societal changes
Issues Preventing Change • limitations around partnerships between schools and community agencies • miscommunication and misaligned priorities between the two sectors • outdated processes and resistance to change preventing partnerships • funding constraints • conservative politics and policies that hinder change efforts	Issues Impacting Educational Systems	Unintended Consequences • unintended negative consequences from initiatives and processes that continue to perpetuate disparities • outdated methods, politics, and political pressures • funding • overworked staff • unsuccessful partnering efforts • state and federal mandates and oversights

[a] The responses for Case 1 and Case 2 were similar.