

UNDERSTANDING AND DEVELOPING THE KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND  
DISPOSITIONS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN A TEXAS CHARTER  
SCHOOL NETWORK

A Record of Study

by

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## ABSTRACT

The Black-White achievement gap that prevails nationally is also a problem for Texas Charter Academy. Factors contributing to this problem may include inadequate principal development including knowledge, skills, and beliefs about the achievement gap. A review of literature substantiates that high-performing schools generally have effective leaders and that improving Black-student achievement requires social justice school leadership. Principals must be adequately prepared for this type of leadership. The goal of this qualitative case study was to develop a recommendation for an in-service principal professional development framework to be utilized in Texas Charter Academy to ensure that principals are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for social justice school leadership.

Many of the Texas Charter Academy principals who participated in this study articulated strong knowledge of social justice issues in education. A moderate number shared that they consistently utilize the practices and skills of effective social justice school leadership. Few, however, gave narrative responses reflecting the three critical dispositions for effective social justice school leadership. Texas Charter Academy could benefit from implementing a principal professional development program for current and incoming principals focused on learning the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to execute effective social justice school leadership, which may accelerate Texas Charter's Academy goal of closing the Black-White achievement gap. Given the apparent discrepancy between knowledge and utilization of this knowledge to implement effective skills and practices, a key initial focus should be on developing the dispositions of social justice school leaders. Ensuring that Texas Charter Academy principals are committed to social justice, have positive belief about the cultural community they serve, and are passionate could affect their behaviors as school leaders.

## DEDICATION

This record of study is dedicated to my family. To my children, Madison, Evan, and Macy Williams. To my parents, Drs. James and Dinah Horton. To my brother, Jonathan Horton, and my nieces, Kennedy, Skylar, and Codi Horton. Finally, this record of study is dedicated to the memory of my amazing, inspiring, and trailblazing sister-cousin, Dr. Mona K. Whitley.

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## NOMENCLATURE

AP	Advanced Placement
ESEA	Elementary and Secondary Education Act
ESSA	Every Student Succeeds Act
IB	International Baccalaureate
IRB	Institutional Review Board
K	kindergarten
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
NCES	National Center for Education Statistics
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
preK	prekindergarten
SQ	subquestion
STAAR	State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness
TAPR	Texas Academic Performance Report
TEA	Texas Education Agency

## CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

### **Contributors**

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: LEADERSHIP CONTEXT AND PURPOSE OF THE ACTION

#### **National Context**

The United States education system was created to benefit White students; it was not designed to educate Black students. Despite countless attempts to reform this inequitable national education system and to ensure an appropriate education for all students, Black students still do not benefit from today's education system at the rate that White students do. Data abound to substantiate the persistence of the Black-White achievement gap (Hung et al., 2020). Further, scholars have agreed that this gap is rooted in inequitable opportunity, as Black students have historically been denied access to the same quality of educational experiences that White students been afforded (Guttek, 2013; Perry et al, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2013; Patterson, 1989; Rosenfeld & Hilton, 1971).

Today, the United States public education system exists to provide a free and appropriate education for all students from kindergarten to 12th grade (K–12). Black students, though, remain the least likely to receive a high-quality K–12 education and have consistently had academic outcomes below those of their White peers (Bradley & Bradley, 1977; Coleman et al., 1966; Hung et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Osborne, 1960; Rosenfeld & Hilton, 1971; Williams, 2011). This disparity in performance is most commonly referred to as the achievement gap, and it has persisted for decades and exists across races, economic backgrounds, and genders (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Today, the Black-White achievement gap remains a significant concern among educators and educational researchers (Haycock, 2001; Hung et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Early suppositions and hypotheses included cultural deficit theories that posited inherent inferiority and family structures as causes for the achievement gap (Coleman et al., 1966; Osborne, 1960). Contemporary scholars have conversely concluded that Black students are not any less able to achieve than other demographic groups and have rejected genetic and social factors as a cause (Williams, 2011). Rather, they have maintained that Black students are routinely afforded less educational opportunity compared to their White peers (Perry et al., 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Further, they have asserted that this opportunity gap ultimately manifests in Black students experiencing lower placement in honors and advanced academic courses, higher dropout rates, lower college admissions, and even effects on matriculation in graduate and professional programs and adult employment (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Lamboy & Lu, 2017; Rowley & Wright, 2011; Williams, 2011). The achievement gap is actually an opportunity gap, and its implications are far reaching (Gutek, 2013; Perry et al., 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Patterson, 1989; Rosenfeld & Hilton, 1971).

For decades, researchers, educators, and legislators alike have attempted to close the Black-White achievement gap. In 1964, legislators passed the Civil Rights Act following the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that desegregated schools. At the time, legislators believed integration to be the answer to Black-student achievement (Orfield, 1969). In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson enacted the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as part of the War on Poverty to provide support and funding to high-minority and low-socioeconomic-status communities (Templeton, 2011). In 1990, though, years after these three historic judiciary and legislative actions, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) testing results showed an average 26-point difference between Black and White students in reading and a 20-point difference in math (National Association of Education Statistics, 2020).

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 was then enacted to do what the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was unable to do—eliminate the disparity in education and increase opportunity for historically underperforming and underserved students.

The 2020 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) annual report showed a decline in the achievement gap as measured by NAEP results but revealed conclusively that the Black-White achievement gap still exists and is significant (NCES, 2020). The Black-White performance gap in fourth-grade reading achievement scores decreased from 32 to 26 points between 1992 and 2019, and the Black-White performance gap in eighth-grade reading decreased from 29 to 27 points from 1992 to 2019, which reflected little change over the 27-year period. Similarly, in fourth-grade math, the Black-White performance gap decreased from 31 to 25 points from 1990 to 2019, and the Black-White performance gap in eighth-grade math decreased from 33 to 32 points from 1990 to 2019. For more than 50 years, legislative efforts at closing the achievement gap have yielded little result, and despite more than 15 years of federal legislation, a double-digit gap in test scores and performance between Black and White students have persisted and remain significant (Hung et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Templeton, 2011).

Scholars have argued that closing the achievement gap requires an equal emphasis on excellence and equity and have stated that Black students must routinely be afforded the same opportunities as White students if their outcomes are going to change (Brown et al., 2011; Ferguson, 2007). This has been attempted through legislation. Closing the achievement gap, though, is not solely a matter of legislation. Williams (2011) maintained that closing the achievement gap is matter of shifting beliefs and practices and, ultimately, changing school structures. To that end, Taliaferro (2011) argued for expanding opportunity and demanding

equity for Black students. While much has been done at the macro level to address the Black-White achievement gap, less has been done at the micro level, which would include ensuring that today's schools are led by effective leaders.

Scholars have noted that effective principal leadership is a critical element in student achievement, second only to teacher quality (Leithwood et al., 2008; Louis et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2008; Waters et al., 2003; White-Smith, 2012). Further, Branch et al. (2013) found that the impact of a highly effective principal can equate to adding 7 instructional months to students' learning. Templeton (2011) explained the significance of the principal's role as instructional leader of the school and, therefore, underscored the role of the principal in closing the Black-White achievement gap.

Given the historical and current national achievement gap statistics, there is much to be gained by ensuring effective principal leadership in schools serving Black students—specifically ensuring that principals are sufficiently prepared for social justice school leadership. According to Furman (2012), social justice is a significant concern for educational practitioners. She argued that effective social justice school leadership requires intentional training and development. Sun and Ni (2016) found, though, that nationally, principal preparation programs have historically focused on managerial leadership and has failed to emphasize the leadership capacities necessary for strong student outcomes. Jackson and Kelley (2002) determined that the most effective principal preparation programs are those that not only include the knowledge base for effective school leadership, but those that also develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions. As schools become increasingly diverse and as the achievement gap persists, social justice scholars have concluded that principal preparation programs must specifically address the knowledge, skills,

and dispositions for effective social justice school leadership (Furman, 2012; McKenzie et al., 2008; Stafford & Hill-Jackson, 2016).

In 1993, the education landscape changed with the creation of the first charter schools in Minnesota (Cohodes, 2018). Charter schools were initially established in response to the education reform movement as a vehicle to closing the achievement gap between Black and White and between poor and non-poor students (Lambooy & Lu, 2017). Many charter schools' missions are centered on achieving educational equity and increasing educational opportunity for their students (Cohodes, 2018; Lambooy & Lu, 2017). They are, therefore, organizational agents of social justice. The new charter school option resonated well with parents, particularly minority parents, who wanted more choices for their students' education (Almond, 2012; Cohodes, 2018). Thus, from 1993 to 2000, nearly 2,000 charter schools served over 500,000 students across the United States (Dressler, 2001). Nationally, charter schools enroll more minority students and more Black students than White students as compared to traditional public schools (Almond, 2012; Monarrez, 2019). Therefore, the issue of effective social justice school leadership and closing the Black-White achievement gap is particularly salient for today's charter schools.

In comparison to traditional public schools, charter school principals are not always required to hold administrative licensure, meaning that they may have had even less intentional preparation for effective school leadership than their public school counterparts (Luekens, 2004). In Colorado, for example, Dressler (2001) found that 10 out of 17 charter school leaders had training or education in school leadership before becoming principals. Furthermore, according to Sun and Ni (2016), charter schools tend to have higher rates of turnover for principals. Béteille et al. (2012) found high rates of principal turnover to be detrimental to student achievement, as this turnover results in higher teacher turnover, which can then lead to lower student performance.

Higher principal turnover and less principal preparation are, therefore, areas of significant concern for charter schools.

Luekens (2004) determined that the effectiveness of charter schools in accomplishing their social justice missions may be more directly linked to the presence of a strong principal as compared to traditional public schools. As evidenced by the literature, there is much to be gained by ensuring highly effective principals in schools serving Black students. Moreover, for charter schools, developing principals for social justice school leadership is a matter of critical importance in closing the Black-White achievement gap and accomplishing their social justice missions.

### **Situational Context**

Texas Charter Academy is a regional K–12 charter school network with 40 schools serving more than 18,000 students across North Texas. Like many schools across the nation, Texas Charter Academy is experiencing disparate academic performance between Black and White students across grade levels and subject areas. In 2019, however, only 38% of Texas Charter Academy’s Black students performed on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) at the “meets grade level” standard on all subjects compared to 67% of Texas Charter Academy’s White students, 89% of Asian students, and 42% of Hispanic students. “Meets grade level” is the indicator that students are adequately prepared for success in the next grade (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2017). As such, Black students in Texas Charter Academy are the lowest-performing of all racial groups across the network. According to the TEA Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) for the 2018–2019 school year, there were 3,685 Black students enrolled in Texas Charter Academy schools. This represents the second-

highest student population in the network and reflects the urgency concerning the achievement gap across the network.

Texas Charter Academy's stated organizational goal is to close the achievement gap, and the vision is college for all students. Closing this Black-White achievement gap is a necessary and possible charge. Currently, there is no network-wide principal professional development framework to address the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for effective social justice school leadership. This is significant for two reasons: Texas Charter Academy has a higher-than-state average of Black students at 19.7% compared to 12.9% and, consistent with national charter school trends, Texas Charter Academy experiences high turnover among principals (TEA, 2019). For the 2019–2020 school year, Texas Charter Academy had seven new principals among its 40 schools. In 2018–2019, there were six new principals, and in 2017–2018, there were nine.

Texas Charter Academy principals are not required to have completed a formal principal preparation program, to hold state administrative licensure, or to have an advanced degree in education. Therefore, principals enter and navigate the principalship with varying levels of knowledge, skills, and dispositions about their role as school leader and struggle to successfully manage the complexity of their role and to effectively enact social justice leadership on their campuses, as evidenced by high principal turnover and the persistent Black-White achievement gap across the network.

### **The Problem**

Nationally, Black students are underperforming White students on standardized tests. Texas Charter Academy served over 3,600 Black students in the 2018–2019 school year, and these students, following national trends, underperformed White students in Texas Charter Academy by double-digit figures. It has been widely documented that the two most critical



factors in student achievement are teacher quality and principal quality. Accordingly, schools serving Black students need highly effective principals. Further, as the achievement gap is a social justice issue, closing the achievement gap means that schools serving Black students specifically need principals who possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of social justice school leaders.

Across the Texas Charter Academy network of schools, there is no explicit focus on social justice school leadership. The absence of an overarching network vision and direction for social justice school leadership means that principal experiences, priorities, and results vary widely from school to school. Given Texas Charter Academy's significant Black-student population and the network's goal of closing the Black-White achievement gap, Texas Charter Academy needs a focused, actionable professional development framework aimed at developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for effective social justice school leadership.

### **Relevant History of the Problem**

Texas Charter Academy is a network of 40 college-preparatory schools across North Texas that was established in 1996. The Texas Charter Academy network has grown from 1 to 40 schools over a 23-year period, and like many charter schools across the nation, has seen steadily increasing Black student enrollment. In 2005, Texas Charter Academy opened its first urban campus in East Dallas and has had a growing Black-student population since then. In 2019, Texas Charter Academy's Black-student population was 3,691 students, which represented 19.7% of total enrollment, represented the second-largest racial student group, and was significantly higher than the state average of 12.9%. Historically, Black students at Texas Charter Academy schools have performed below grade-level expectations and below their White peers. In 2017, only 34% of Black students achieved the "meets grade level" performance

standard on STAAR compared to 61% of White students. In 2018, only 35% of Black students achieved “meets grade level” performance on STAAR compared to 62% of White students. And in 2019, only 38% of Black students across all grades achieved “meets grade level” performance on STAAR compared to 67% of White students (TEA, 2019).

The responsibility of closing this Black-White–student achievement gap lands on leaders at all levels within the organization. At the network level, leaders identified the International Baccalaureate (IB) program as an opportunity to provide all students with access to rigorous academic programming and a viable vehicle for advancing college readiness for all Texas Charter Academy students. At the campus level, it is the responsibility of the campus principal to ensure IB programming with fidelity and to create and sustain a highly academic, college-preparatory learning environment that promotes high academic achievement for students.

Following national charter school trends, Texas Charter Academy experiences higher-than-average principal turnover. Further, Texas Charter Academy has expanded significantly and rapidly, growing from 1 to 37 schools in 20 years. As such, principals are regularly hired to lead new Texas Charter Academy schools and replace outgoing principals. Unlike the traditional independent school district model, however, Texas Charter Academy principals are not required to have completed a principal preparation program or hold state administrative licensure. In 2019, only 42% of Texas Charter Academy’s 40 principals were credentialed by the State of Texas and had completed a principal preparation program.

Principal leadership is a critical element in accelerating student growth and closing the achievement gap. In Texas, principal preparations programs exist through local universities and education service centers. These programs, though, do not always emphasize the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for social justice work such as closing the Black-White achievement gap.

In order to accelerate Black-student achievement, principals must be sufficiently prepared for their work as social justice school leaders. This preparation should explicitly name what effective social justice school leaders, know, do, and believe and should develop principals in these areas.

As completion of a principal preparation program is not currently part of Texas Charter Academy's hiring process, the network should include a focus on social justice school leadership in its current principal professional development framework in order to improve outcomes for Black students. My research study involved learning the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of current Texas Charter Academy principals at various stages in their principalships. I identified schools (a) with at least a 10% Black-student enrollment and (b) where Black-student performance is equal to or greater than White students in the network and across the state or where the Black-White gap had significantly narrowed over the past 3 years. I also identified novice principals in Texas Charter Academy with a Black-student population of at least 10%. I queried the principals of these schools to determine their knowledge, leadership practices, and beliefs about the achievement gap and used these data to inform the development of recommendations for a principal professional development framework focused on social justice school leadership for Texas Charter Academy.

### **Research Questions**

Through this research study, I aimed to respond to the following research question and subquestions: What are the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of Texas Charter Academy principals?

SQ1. What do Texas Charter Academy principals know about the Black-White achievement gap?

SQ2. What do Texas Charter Academy principals do to close the Black-White achievement gap?

SQ3. What do Texas Charter Academy principals believe about the Black-White achievement gap?

### **Personal Context**

I attended all-Black schools throughout my K–12 years of schooling. My K–8 Catholic school was 100% Black and was located in one of the city’s most economically depressed and dangerous neighborhoods. During the 9 years I attended the school, I had six Black teachers and every classmate was Black. We excelled academically and consistently received city-wide accolades for our performance on Stanford Achievement Tests. In high school, I attended a magnet school for high-performing students that was housed inside a low-performing, high-poverty, all-Black high school, also in one of the city’s most notoriously dangerous neighborhoods. By contrast, less than 15% of the magnet school students were Black. No teachers were black. And, for the first time, I found myself an underperforming student. What changed? Did I change? Was I no longer capable? Was it the change in my environment? I don’t know, but I do know that throughout high school I struggled to find relevance and meaning in classes. I struggled to connect with my teachers and other students and ultimately failed to thrive.

Upon entering the workforce after completing my undergraduate studies, I became a case manager for low-income pregnant and parenting women receiving Medicaid. All of my clients were Black and Hispanic women, most without high school diplomas. In my role as case manager, I assisted them with job searches and helped them secure child care. This work allowed me to see firsthand the quality of early childhood, elementary, and after-school care that poor

Black children were receiving, and it varied greatly from the high-quality early childhood programs I had worked in as a college student and recent college graduate.

After serving as a case manager, I was compelled to become an early childhood educator. I opened a small early childhood center in an economically depressed area where I could serve Black and Hispanic families and provide them with high-quality child care and early childhood education. My school focused on experiential learning in a literacy-rich, culturally affirming environment. Initially serving only infants through preschool, there was ultimately demand to offer elementary school, and we eventually expanded to serve students in prekindergarten through eighth grade.

Inspired by the academic performance, emotional health and wellness, and cultural pride of our students, I decided to continue in education after our school closed in 2011. I entered a teacher certification program and secured a position as a middle school history teacher in a local independent school district. I found, though, that Black students in this school were failing to thrive. Our school's data revealed disparate performance in all content areas and across grade levels. The district data revealed the same. State data revealed the same. As I dug into various types of data, I began to see trends that were concerning.

In 2011, the middle school was 40% Black, 30% Hispanic, and 30% White. More than half of all school suspensions were Black male students. More than 70% of students being retained or required to attend summer school were Black. Less than 10% of all students in pre-Advanced Placement (AP) and honors classes were Black. It felt like there was little to no expectation—or opportunity—for Black students to succeed. Worse, it felt like there was no strategy to ensure that they did. This led me to a deep concern for and commitment to equity in education, and I began to work toward ensuring strong academic outcomes for Black students.

## **Researcher's Roles and Personal Histories**

In the initial few years of my new career as a public school teacher, there was no discussion about or training on the achievement gap either during my teacher preparation program or during my tenure as a teacher. When I earned my master's degree and principal certification, there were no required classes addressing the problem of inequity in schools. After seeing this inequity routinely and systematically cripple and rob Black students of a high-quality education, I purposed to be a change agent. I committed my work as a teacher, assistant principal, and now principal to eliminating inequity in schools serving Black students and ensuring equal opportunity to quality schooling. As I have engaged with teachers and school and district leaders over several years, I have recognized and challenged the absence of disaggregated student achievement data, culturally relevant pedagogy in the classrooms, and equity plans to ensure achievement for all. In order to advance the work of closing the achievement gap, I decided to conduct my doctoral research in the area of the achievement gap.

I currently serve as a middle school principal in a large, urban charter network of 40 schools. In this role, I observe and provide feedback on teachers' instruction, analyze student achievement data, and engage in professional development and networking with other principals in the network. We routinely discuss instructional strategies and have professional development around those strategies, but we rarely address the specific challenges and academic needs of Black students in our schools. My school serves nearly 600 scholars, 40% of whom are Black. As such, being sufficiently knowledgeable of and equipped with effective leadership strategies to ensure their academic success is of chief importance to me. In my 5th year as a public school leader, though, there has been no intentional, systematic training or social justice leadership preparation to ensure that my work positively impacts Black students. This was not a focus at my

previous district, nor has it not been a focus during my tenure at Texas Charter Academy. As such, I have struggled to lead for impact, and the performance of my Black scholars has largely remained at the bottom of all student groups across grade levels and content areas.

### **Journey to the Problem**

In 2001, NCLB was enacted to ensure that students of color and historically underperforming student groups have equal access to resources that support their academic achievement. For the first time in United States educational history, there was a federal demand on schools to disaggregate student data by student groups, calling attention to decades of educational inequity. The data were not enough, though; there was no clear path or direction to change the outcomes of these vulnerable populations of learner. States were ill-equipped to respond meaningfully to the demands of NCLB. And nearly 20 years later and after a new federal legislative act—the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015—Black children are still being left behind in schools across the nation.

Racial equity advocates have postulated that the United States has turned a blind eye to the needs of Black students, and I agree. When I first became a public school teacher in 2011, this was painfully obvious to me. I watched White students overwhelmingly placed in advanced academic classrooms with small rosters and highly effective, veteran teachers, while general education and special education classrooms were overcrowded and primarily composed of Black students with inexperienced teachers. White students were routinely afforded opportunities like field trips, participation in organizations like student council and National Junior Honor Society disproportionately more than Black students, while Black students were assigned detention and in-school suspension at much higher rates than their White peers. The opportunity gap is not a phenomenon of the past, nor is it a false narrative or loose conception; historically, the

achievement gap has remained steady, and scholars have agreed that it remains rooted in inequitable educational opportunity (Gutek, 2013; Perry et al., 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2013; Patterson, 1989; Rosenfeld & Hilton, 1971).

As a Black educator, I was concerned at what I observed. I was even more concerned that the needs of the Black students and the opportunities being withheld from them seemed to go unnoticed by most other teachers and administrators on our campus. Even more concerning—this was not unique to my local school. It was a clear reflection of the state of education in the United States. This apathy regarding Black-student achievement and opportunity has been naturally reflected in student outcomes. My students, with a 1st-year alternatively certified teacher in overpopulated mixed-ability classes, routinely underperformed the class next to mine where the teacher had taught for 6 years and taught exclusively advanced academic classes. My classes were 90% Black; hers were 90% White and Asian. She was a much more proficient and more experienced educator with deep knowledge of the content. The odds were stacked against my students from day one.

As a result of my observations and the perceived inequities affecting my Black students, I wanted to affect positive change in the area of Black-student achievement. I waited for training on culturally relevant teaching practices or deeper training in my content area. The reality, though, is that none of these was the answer. What was really needed was for educational leaders to change their practices and disrupt the existing oppressive structures in schools—like strategically placing the highest-needs and most marginalized students in the classrooms of the most effective, most skilled, most experienced teachers, giving them equal access to meaningful programming, and increasing opportunities for advanced academic and more rigorous courses. They needed to speak out about the inequitable experiences and reinvent inequitable systems



harming Black students. It was up to campus principals to take notice of and take subsequent action against the Black-White achievement gap in their schools and to ensure equal Black-student access to high-quality instruction and educational programming. This remains the charge of principals serving Black students today. To close the Black-White achievement gap and promote equity in education, principals must adopt a social justice school leadership lens, and principal development must explicitly focus on developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of social justice school leaders.

### **Significant Stakeholders**

Two major stakeholder groups in this research study include principals in Texas Charter Academy who are responsible for student outcomes and members of Texas Charter Academy central administration who are also responsible for student outcomes. Like principals in other schools, principals in Texas Charter Academy are responsible for leading schools that produce strong student outcomes. Historic and current federal legislation (NCLB and ESSA) expand this accountability beyond general outcomes to disaggregated outcomes for all major student groups. Principals are responsible for the academic success of all students in their schools; however, when the achievement gap is not an area of intentional focus for principals, the unique needs of Black students can be ignored, resulting in stagnant or even regressive outcomes. For an organization committed to closing the Black-White achievement gap, it is important that principals have a clear focus on this task and have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to engage in effective leadership that leads to excellent outcomes for all students, including Black students. Further, it is incumbent upon the network's senior leadership to provide access to the development of these critical principal competencies.

A third stakeholder group is the Black students whose educational outcomes are at stake. Black students are among recipients of the instructional programming that takes place in Texas Charter Academy schools. Because the network is a college-preparatory school network seeking to prepare 100% of students to get to and through college in 6 years, it is critical that this college-preparatory opportunity is afforded to Black students as well. By consistently performing below White students by double-digit percentage points, Black students are at continued risk of being denied the educational opportunity that is outlined as the network's goal and that is consistently afforded to other students.

### **Important Terms**

The following definitions are used throughout this record of study according to the purposes of the study:

- Achievement gap—the gap in academic performance between student groups, especially between Black or Hispanic students and White or Asian students
- Disposition—the beliefs and attitudes held regarding an issue
- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)—federal legislation enacted in 2015 aimed at improving outcomes for historically underperforming student groups
- No Child Left Behind (NCLB)—federal legislation enacted in 2001 aimed at improving outcomes for poor and minority students
- Principal preparation—the formal education and training to equip a preservice principal for his or her school leadership role
- Professional development – the training to equip an in-service principal
- Social justice—justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society

- Students of color—students of ethnic backgrounds including Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Indigenous
- Underperforming/underserved student groups—economically disadvantaged, Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, and special education students

### **Closing Thoughts on Chapter I**

My personal experiences as a Black student, a Black teacher, a Black parent, and a Black principal provided the passion to direct this research. Through my work with Black students and families, I have seen firsthand the impact of effective, equity-focused leadership, as well as the negative impact on Black students when effective, equity-focused leadership is not present. I have come to the realization as a new principal in a district and school with a high percentage of underperforming Black students that we cannot leave their education to chance; principals need to know what works in improving Black-student outcomes and be afforded the opportunity to gain the skills and develop the dispositions required to lead the work of closing the achievement gap.

Through this study, I aimed to identify the specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions of effective social justice school leaders and subsequently create recommendations for a principal professional development framework for Texas Charter Academy principals that sufficiently equips them to do the work that Texas Charter Academy has set out to do, which is to close the Black-White achievement gap. This research is salient as the population of Black students in Texas Charter Academy has steadily increased over the past 20 years and is currently more than 3,600 students. Further, while the average tenure of a principal in United States schools is just over 4 years, the tenure of Texas Charter Academy principals is even shorter at only 2.75 years. With both continued expansion and principal attrition, there will always be new leaders at the

helm of Texas Charter Academy schools. Given the network's current hiring practices and requirements for leadership, it is important that the network ensures that each principal has the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for effective social justice school leadership to advance the work of closing the Black-White–student achievement gap.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF SUPPORTING SCHOLARSHIP

#### **Introduction**

Texas Charter Academy is experiencing disparate academic performance between Black and White students across grade levels and subject areas. In 2019, 38% of Texas Charter Academy's Black students performed at the "meets grade level" designation on STAAR compared to 67% of the network's White students. This Black-White achievement gap is not a new phenomenon, nor is it one that is unique to Texas Charter Academy. Similar performance differences have been observed in multiple educational contexts since the 1800s, and the achievement gap continues to be of concern today. Contemporary scholars have agreed that effective principal leadership is a critical element in student achievement, second only to teacher quality (Leithwood et al., 2008; Louis et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2008; Waters et al., 2003; White-Smith, 2012). Additionally, Branch et al. (2013) found that the impact of a highly effective principal can equate to adding 7 instructional months to students' learning. Educational equity researchers have also noted the significance of the principal's role as instructional leader of the school and, therefore, have underscored the role of the principal in closing the Black-White achievement gap (Brown, 2004; McKenzie et al., 2008; Templeton, 2011). This is particularly important for charter schools given their mission-driven nature and given their significant Black student enrollment. Charter school principals must be intentionally focused on achieving educational excellence and equity and, therefore, must have sufficient opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for effective social justice school leadership.

I propose to answer the following research question and subquestions: What are the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of Texas Charter Academy principals?

SQ1. What do Texas Charter Academy principals know about the Black-White achievement gap?

SQ2. What do Texas Charter Academy principals do to close the Black-White achievement gap?

SQ3. What do Texas Charter Academy principals believe about the Black-White achievement gap?

To answer these research questions, I thoroughly examined extant literature to understand school leadership factors contributing to the achievement gap and to determine the critical knowledge, skills, and dispositions employed by social justice school leaders who have successfully closed or narrowed the achievement gap in their schools. This review began with investigating the historical context of the Black-White achievement gap, including how scholars and researchers originally came to acknowledge the gap and how it has historically been addressed. I then moved to the current context of the achievement gap and examined current achievement data and responses to the data by scholars, lawmakers, and educators. From there, I examined historical and existing research on effective school leadership practices and the promise in effective principal preparation and professional development to advance the work of closing the Black-White achievement gap. I also examined the literature around charter schools as organizational agents of social justice and the effects of and subsequently examined the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of effective social justice school leadership and the promise in equipping charter school principals to be social justice school leaders.

Dissertation abstracts, peer-reviewed scholarly articles, educational journals, and national education statistics were utilized to thoroughly examine the context of and response to the problem. More than 50 sources on the achievement gap, social justice in school leadership, and

principal preparation were extensively reviewed, resulting in a deep understanding of the achievement gap and critical knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for effective social justice school leadership. Through this literature review, I ultimately sought to gain the understanding necessary to inform the development of recommendations for an effective principal professional development framework that equips principals at Texas Charter Academy for their roles as social justice school leaders.

Historically, much attention has been given to the Black-White achievement gap, and there have been many attempts to close this gap through national legislation. In 1964, legislators passed the Civil Rights Act following the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that desegregated schools. Legislators believed integration to be the answer to Black-student achievement (Orfield, 1969). In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson enacted the ESEA as part of the War on Poverty to provide support and funding to high-minority and low-socioeconomic-status communities. In 1990, though, years after these three historic legislative acts, NAEP testing results clearly reflected that the achievement gap had persisted despite legislative interventions. There was a 26-point difference between Black and White students in reading and a 20-point difference in math (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). NCLB was then enacted in 2001 to do what the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was unable to do—eliminate the disparity in education and increase opportunity for historically underperforming and underserved students.

In 2019, the NCES annual report showed a decline in the achievement gap as measured by NAEP results, but again revealed a significant Black-White achievement gap. The Black-White performance gap in fourth-grade reading achievement scores decreased from 32 to 26 points between 1992 and 2019, and the Black-White performance gap in eighth-grade reading

decreased from 29 to 27 points between 1992 and 2019, which reflected little change over the 27-year period. Similarly, in fourth-grade math, the Black-White performance gap in math decreased from 31 to 25 points from 1990 to 2019, and the Black-White performance gap in eighth-grade math decreased from 33 to 32 points from 1990 to 2019 (NCES, 2019). For more than 50 years, legislative efforts at closing the achievement gap have yielded little result, and despite more than 15 years of federal legislation, a double-digit gap in test scores and performance between Black and White students have persisted and remain significant (Hung et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Scholars and practitioners have posited varying ideas about the factors that contribute to and mitigate the Black-White achievement gap. Evidence abounds that the school principal is the second-most critical factor in student achievement and school success (Leithwood et al., 2008; Louis et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2008; Stafford & Hill-Jackson, 2016; Waters et al., 2003; White-Smith, 2012). The achievement gap, though, is not just a school leadership issue; it is a social justice issue. Furman (2012) found that principals who lead through a social justice lens are most effective at improving outcomes for Black students. As such, it is prudent that principals of schools serving Black students possess the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions of social justice school leaders. This balance of social justice leadership competencies may hold critical significance in closing the Black-White achievement gap and ensuring high levels of performance for Black students in today's schools.

The problems of the achievement gap and potential solutions are particularly salient for charter schools, as charter schools are overwhelmingly mission-oriented organizations aimed at improving outcomes for historically underperforming student groups, including Black students (Almond, 2012). Charter school principals, then, must be intentionally focused on and prepared



for effective leadership and must strategically work at achieving educational excellence and educational equity.

### **Relevant Historical Background**

The fight for equal access in education began in the 1800s, even before the abolition of slavery, as Black students and White students were historically educated in separate and unequal schools. In *Brown v. Boston* (1849), Benjamin Roberts sued the City of Boston, unsuccessfully, to allow his daughter, Sarah, access to the neighborhood White school. The Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) meant that the federal government could legally allow separation of the races as long as the separate facilities were "equal." This ruling held firm until the Supreme Court's 1954 landmark decision concerning public education, *Brown v. Board of Education*. The Supreme Court ruled segregated schools to be illegal and unconstitutional, marking the decline of *Plessy v. Ferguson* and shifting the power in education law from states to the federal government (Kauper, 1954).

In the 1960s, attention to the gap between Black- and White-student achievement began to grow, and researchers gave varied explanations for the reason for the gap. Researchers found that average scores achieved by Black groups on intelligence tests and standardized content tests were consistently significantly lower than their White peers (Osborne, 1960). In seeking to explain the gap, many emphasized cultural deficit theories as the reason (Ladson-Billings, 2006). These deficit models hypothesized genetic differences between the races, lack of motivation among Black students, cognitive deficiency compared to White students (Osborne, 1960), and even family composition as explanations (Bradley & Bradley, 1977; Della-Dora, 1962; Taylor et al., 1994). Without empirical evidence to the contrary, Black students were at times concluded to be incapable of high levels of academic achievement.

Conversely, nondeficit explanations for the achievement gap were also posited. Osborne (1960) concluded that the lower IQs and student performance prevalent among Black children were not because of inherent inability, but because of inferior learning opportunities compared to those of Whites. Educational researchers agreed that differences in educational opportunity, insufficient learning environments, and a treacherous, racially charged social climate negatively affected Black-student achievement (Guttek, 2013; Perry et al., 2003; Patterson, 1989; Rosenfeld & Hilton, 1971). Historically, White students were more often enrolled in academic courses in high school compared to their Black peers, who were more often enrolled in nonacademic and vocational courses; White students were also consistently afforded wider access to smaller classes, high-quality books and libraries, well-equipped science laboratories, high-quality teachers, and enriching extracurricular activities as compared to their Black peers (Guttek, 2013; Hilliard, 2003; Osborne, 1960; Patterson, 1989; Rosenfeld & Hilton, 1971). Finally, gaps in Black-student performance were conclusively attributed to gaps in opportunity and inequality in learning environments, expectations, and experiences rather than gaps in motivation or cognitive and intellectual ability, as had been earlier hypothesized.

Despite new understanding about the Black-White achievement gap, meaningful efforts to address and mitigate the gap were few, and conclusions and recommendations varied widely. One of the earliest responses to the Black-White–student performance problem was the *Coleman Report*, which concluded that desegregation would benefit Black students and positively impact their achievement by giving them access to White students, White teachers, and White education (Coleman et al., 1966). Bradley and Bradley (1977) argued, on the contrary, that available learning opportunities did not sufficiently lend themselves to Black students’ inspiration and personal motivation and suggested that the learning environment should be more closely situated

within their cultural reality. Rosenfeld and Hilton (1971) recommended equalizing access to the high-quality academic subjects accessed by White students. Recommendations by researchers in these years varied as much as their explanations for the achievement gap itself.

Efforts to close the achievement gap during the 1970s and 1980s failed to yield long-term positive results for Black students. Jones (1984) explained the declining differences between Black- and White-student performance in the 1970s. While the gap began to narrow in the 1970s by as much as 50%, this trend actually reversed in the 1980s (Haycock, 2001). During the 1980s, national educational reforms were enacted, but they failed to adequately address the constant underperformance of Black students across the country compared to White students. For example, one component of 1980s education reform was to increase math offerings for high school graduation. Patterson (1989) found, though, that Black and “at-risk” students were still routinely being denied access to advanced curriculum and academic opportunities equal to Whites and were being placed in remedial, lower-level, and nonacademic classes, which negatively affected their ability to meet the new, higher standards for graduation. Overall, 1980s education reform failed to sufficiently address equal opportunity for Black students.

The 1990s and 2000s brought renewed attention to explaining the achievement gap. Taylor et al. (1994) further substantiated the existence and persistence of the achievement gap and debunked newly resurged ideas of Black students’ lower performance being the result of lack of motivation. Perceptions of racism and discrimination by Black students and historical societal discrimination were again posited as reasons for the gap between Black- and White-student academic performance (Caldas & Bankston, 1997; Taylor et al., 1994). Additionally, Perry et al. (2003) maintained that the low academic bar set by NCLB legislation was damaging to the achievement of Black students.

While researchers sought reasons for the achievement gap, they failed to develop adequate responses. Therefore, despite decades of federal legislation aimed at reducing educational discrimination and improving the performance of Black students, inequities and subsequent gaps in academic performance persisted. Efforts to explain and close the gap between Black- and White-student academic performance yielded little result (Hilliard, 1999; Perry et al., 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

The enduring failure to successfully close, or even significantly minimize, the Black-White achievement gap has been described as continued systematic oppression, which supports the call not only to improve the quality of schools, as had been the earlier focus, but to ensure equal access to educational opportunity and effective schools for all students (Ladson-Billings, 2006). According to Hilliard (1999), shifting the belief system surrounding education as an institution, and particularly Black-student achievement, was more important than solely shifting educational structures as was recommended by legislators and scholars. In line with the beliefs of Hilliard (1999) and Ladson-Billings (2006), Brown et al. (2011) reiterated that closing the Black-White achievement gap required viewing education with excellence as the goal and through a social justice lens. They recommended adopting an emphasis on educational excellence and educational equity. This call for excellence and equity in education came as public schools continued to become increasingly more diverse than they had historically been. As the Black-White achievement gap persisted in the nation's schools, educational researchers concluded that schools serving Black students must be led by social justice leaders who advocate for this equity and work diligently toward improving outcomes for historically marginalized students (Furman, 2012; Perry et al., 2003; Khalifa et al., 2016; Sun, 2019; Theoharis, 2008).

United States education reform efforts prompted the establishment of the first charter schools in 1993 (Cohodes, 2018). Not regulated or operated by state boards of education, charter schools typically operate with less governmental oversight and more autonomy than traditional public schools and usually have a clear mission focused on accomplishing social justice in education (Dressler, 2001; Lamboy & Lu, 2017). Accordingly, charter schools were largely as a vehicle to closing the achievement gap between Black and White and poor and non-poor students (Lamboy & Lu, 2017). This new option was well-received by parents, and from 1993 to 2000, nearly 2,000 charter schools served approximately 500,000 students across the United States (Dressler, 2001). This number continues to rise, with increasingly more minority students and more Black students than White students enrolling in charter schools as compared to traditional public schools (Almond, 2012; Bloomberg & Nathan, 2008; Monarrez, 2019). Therefore, the issue of effective social justice school leadership and closing the Black-White achievement gap is of significance for charter schools. As many charter schools' missions are centered on achieving educational equity and increasing educational opportunity for their students, they are organizational agents of social justice (Cohodes, 2018; Lamboy & Lu, 2017).

A focus on effective social justice school leadership is of chief importance to charter schools. As mission-driven organizations, charter schools undertake the social justice-oriented work of achieving educational equity for their students (Almond, 2012). Despite this focus on closing the achievement gap and achieving educational equity, charter schools often have less experienced staff, including principals, than traditional public schools (Dressler, 2001; Lamboy & Lu, 2017; Leukens, 2004). Charter school principals are not required by law to have previously taught school, to hold principal licensure, or to have completed a principal preparation program as are traditional public school principals, which are factors that Sun and Ni

(2016) asserted may negatively affect student achievement. Of further significance, the authors found that charter schools also tend to have significantly higher principal turnover, with all charter school principals averaging the comparatively reduced tenure of high-minority, low-performing traditional public schools.

Scholars have maintained that, overall, student achievement in charter schools is not better or worse than traditional public schools (Almond, 2012; Cohodes, 2018; Lamboy & Lu, 2017). Scholars also have not agreed on whether Black students, in particular, perform better overall in charter schools than in traditional public schools (Almond, 2012; Cohodes, 2018). However, Bifulco and Ladd (2007) asserted that Black charter school students who do perform better academically and achieve stronger outcomes do so in charter schools with effective principals where the leader maintains a clear focus on academic performance. Lamboy and Lu (2017) dubbed these “no excuses schools.” This assertion supports Dressler’s (2001) conclusions that effective principal leadership is essential for charter schools and that principal preparation for effective school leadership is a necessary factor in achieving high academic performance for students served by charter schools.

### **Alignment with Action Research Traditions**

Stringer (2004) defined action research as a systematic inquiry process that seeks to improve social situations that affect individuals. More specifically, Tomlinson (1995) summarized action research in education as a method of systematically investigating educational practices with the purpose of improving the quality of action and outcomes in schools. The goal of this research study was to improve principal professional development at Texas Charter Academy and equip principals for social justice school leadership. As such, this study was conducted in the action research tradition as defined by Anderson et al. (2007) and was wholly

conducted by a researcher-practitioner with the goal of improving practice within a single school district. Accordingly, the results of this research will only be utilized to address a local problem, specifically the issue of principal professional development and preparation for social justice school leadership as a means of closing the Black-White achievement gap at Texas Charter Academy. The results of this study will not be generalized to other contexts.

Black students are performing significantly behind their White peers across the Texas Charter Academy network. The Black-White achievement gap is a complex issue with many factors and implications on Black students. The Texas Charter Academy Black-student population is higher than the state average, and Black students are the second-largest student group in the network. As such, this research study bears strong implications for the network. My goal was to synthesize the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of effective social justice school leadership and provide Texas Charter Academy with a clear focus for principal professional development that can strategically align future professional development efforts with the network's goal of closing the Black-White achievement gap. The artifact produced (shown in the Appendix) includes recommendations for the development of a principal professional development framework that explicitly addresses the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of effective social justice school leaders.

The recommendations I propose for a social justice school leadership principal professional development framework for Texas Charter Academy are based on historic and current literature about the Black-White achievement gap and social justice school leadership. Specifically, the recommendations for principal professional development focus on development of specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions of effective social justice school leadership in diverse schools. The recommendations were also developed based on the data collected from a

sample of current Texas Charter Academy principals that revealed their knowledge, skills, dispositions about social justice school leadership and the Black-White achievement gap. Findings from this study will be presented to Texas Charter Academy's network executives and principals.

Qualitative data analysis was used to determine the perspectives of current Texas Charter Academy principals and to understand their knowledge, skills, and dispositions about the achievement gap and social justice school leadership. Through this exploratory qualitative case study, I aimed to respond to the following research question and subquestions: What are the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of Texas Charter Academy principals?

SQ1. What do Texas Charter Academy principals know about the Black-White achievement gap?

SQ2. What do Texas Charter Academy principals do to close the Black-White achievement gap?

SQ3. What do Texas Charter Academy principals believe about the Black-White achievement gap?

From the literature, I determined essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions of effective social justice school leaders. I used this information to develop an open-ended survey that queried principals about their knowledge of leadership for social justice, the leadership practices and skills they most utilize, and their beliefs about the achievement gap and social justice in educational contexts. These data were used to determine what current Texas Charter Academy principals know, believe, and do to close the achievement gap and, further, to inform the development of recommendations for a future social justice-oriented principal professional development framework in Texas Charter Academy.



## **Conceptual Framework**

Texas Charter Academy is experiencing inconsistent academic performance between Black students and their White peers across grade levels and across content areas. Factors contributing to this problem may include misaligned beliefs about the achievement gap and inadequate or ineffective principal preparation. A review of literature substantiates that effective, high-performing schools generally have effective leaders and that improving Black-student achievement requires social justice school leadership. Principals must be adequately prepared for this type of leadership. The goal of this solutions-based study was to develop recommendations for a principal professional development framework to be utilized in Texas Charter Academy to equip principals with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for social justice school leadership.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This research study was grounded in critical race theory. Building upon the work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, critical race theory argues for an accelerated pace for racial reform in the United States (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Specifically, critical race theory in education examines the intersection of race and education and the implications had on students of color by this intersection and notions of race.

Tate (1997) argued for a new inquiry into critical race theory that asks how the historical underpinnings and artifacts of United States patriotism serve as vehicles to maintain oppression and limit educational opportunities for students of color. My research questions directly align with this theory, exploring professional development for effective social justice school leadership as a vehicle for accelerating Black-student achievement and closing the Black-White achievement gap in Texas Charter Academy schools. Citing critical race theory, I aimed to

understand what principals in Texas Charter Academy know, believe, and do to close the Black-White–student achievement gap with the intention of developing recommendations for a future principal professional development framework that explicitly focuses on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for effective social justice school leadership that dismantles oppression and advances equity.

### **Most Significant Research and Practice Studies**

For many years, different explanations have been given for the achievement gap, and both historically and currently, some have posited that the achievement gap is a symptom of poverty. Most salient concerning this theory is the discovery that differences in performance have been found to be directly related to race—not income—as some had posited (Williams, 2011).

According to Pitre (2014), if we are going to successfully close the achievement gap, race must be highlighted as the primary factor in its existence. She asserted that efforts to address the racial achievement gap have been derailed by discussions on poverty, which is not the central issue in Black-student performance. Moreover, Clark et al. (2016) contented that the discussion of race and culture must be elevated in schools in order for educators to confront and correct their own biases, which they found to be a factor in Black-student achievement. Singleton (2014) also argued that race must be isolated as a factor in educational performance and that teachers and administrators must be taught the skills required to have meaningful, focused discourse about race and equity in education. Unconscious biases and the unwillingness or inability to confront race mitigates efforts to close the Black-White achievement gap (Mayfield & Garrison-Wade, 2015).

The achievement gap is a systemic issue resulting from years of inequitable access to high-quality educational experiences for Black students. It has long been established that the Black-White achievement gap is not one of performance; it is one of opportunity, as Black students have routinely been denied access to the same quality of teachers, resources, and classroom learning environments as White students (Guttek, 2013; Patterson, 1989; Rosenfeld & Hilton, 1971). Ladson-Billings (2013) concluded that implementing culturally relevant pedagogy and instructional strategy bridges the gap between teachers and students of different cultures and mitigates the effects of the cultural mismatch between educators and students in schools (Skiba et al., 2014). This concept of integrating students' cultures in the learning environment to impact learning has received national attention since the 1990s.

While teachers are a key lever in improving student outcomes, closing the achievement gap is not solely the work of classroom teachers. School principals hold primary responsibility for school resources, affect policy, and create the conditions in which Black students in their schools are educated (Furman, 2012; Sun, 2019; Theoharis, 2008). Therefore, as executive leaders of their schools, principals serving Black students should keep race central to their work (Singleton, 2014). Closing the Black-White achievement gap means that principals must focus on consistently disrupting marginalization of Black students and must relentlessly and deliberately work toward improving equity and increasing opportunity (Brown et al., 2011; Ferguson, 2007; Taliaferro, 2011).

Researchers have widely established the impact of effective principal leadership and have noted it as the second-most critical element in student achievement following teacher quality (Haberman & Dill, 1999; Leithwood et al., 2008; Louis et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2008; Waters et al., 2003; White-Smith, 2012). Branch et al. (2013) found that the impact of a highly

effective principal can equate to adding 7 instructional months to students' learning. As such, there is much to be gained by ensuring that highly effective principals are leading today's schools.

What, though, is an effective principal? Nationally, there is no widely accepted understanding of or consensus on principal quality. There are, however, notable attributes shared by highly effective principals who have successfully transformed schools (Stafford & Hill-Jackson, 2016). Further, scholars have agreed that effective principals have specific knowledge, employ critical skills, and hold positive dispositions about students that lead to strong student outcomes. For example, some scholars have noted that effective principals build a clear vision for their school, understand and develop their school teams, and maintain a strong focus on instructional leadership (Leigh Sanzo et al., 2011; Leithwood et al., 2008; Williams, 2011). Additionally, effective principals employ instructional leadership styles that prioritize instructional coaching and developing teachers (Grissom et al., 2013). Finally, effective school leaders demonstrate high levels of efficacy about their leadership (Goddard et al., 2017; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

The school principalship is a complex role, and the ability to successfully navigate its complexities ultimately impacts student achievement. Waters et al. (2003) asserted that effective leaders don't just know what needs to be done; they also know why it matters and when and how to act. This sensitivity to context affects the degree to which leaders are successful (Leithwood et al., 2008). For example, effective principals recognize the need for various leadership styles, and they understand how to engage and empower staff in their schools for maximum student impact (Leigh Sanzo et al., 2011).

While hypotheses about principal effectiveness are a matter of context, scholars have noted that school leaders serving Black students must be prepared to center their work in social justice (Furman, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016; McKenzie et al., 2008). As earlier established, closing the Black-White achievement gap is a social justice matter that requires a principal to have and employ specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Principals leading schools serving Black students must believe, understand, and function differently than other principals if they are to positively and significantly impact Black-student achievement (Haberman & Dill, 1999; Perry et al., 2003; Khalifa et al., 2016; Stafford & Hill-Jackson, 2016; Theoharis, 2008).

### **Knowledge of Social Justice School Leaders**

This study focuses on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of social justice school leaders. In the context of closing the Black-White achievement gap, effective social justice leaders are knowledgeable about social justice issues, including the achievement gap itself, and they are knowledgeable about leadership styles proven most effective in improving Black-student achievement, including instructional and transformational leadership.

First, social justice school leaders are knowledgeable about issues of social justice, including the achievement gap. Furman (2012) explained that a key lever in social justice school leadership is understanding the historic context of race in the United States. Further, Ladson-Billings (1995a) contended that overcoming oppression and marginalization in the United States education system requires fully understanding the achievement gap and the opportunity gap that have plagued the nation for decades. She called for a growing emphasis among educators to understand one's own culture and the cultures of the students in our schools. Khalifa (2018) expanded on this call for culturally relevant teaching and explained the critical nature of culturally relevant school leadership to ensure that school policies, processes, and instruction

consider and encompass the school's cultural representation. Finally, McKenzie et al. (2008) claimed that social justice school leadership must be rooted in a deep knowledge of the historical and current contexts of the Black-White achievement gap, its causes, and evidence-based knowledge and practices to close it.

Additionally, social justice school leaders know and employ specific leadership styles that positively affect Black-student performance. To positively impact Black-student achievement, the leadership style employed by the principal must be situated in a cultural context and viewed through a social justice lens. When it comes to Black-student achievement, certain leadership models and practices are more beneficial to student achievement than others. Of all leadership styles, scholars have agreed that transformational and instructional leadership styles are the most effective for Black-student achievement and closing the achievement gap (Cole-Henderson, 2000; Colgren & Sappington, 2015; Johnson, 2007; Khalifa et al., 2016; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000).

Transformational leadership focuses on the importance of commitment and highlights the organization's mission above all (Rahman & Hadi, 2018). Transformational leadership empowers and energizes teachers and staff and has been found to be a common leadership style among all high-performing principals of National Blue Ribbon Schools (McKinney et al., 2015). Some have hypothesized that transformational leadership is the leadership style most effective for today's 21st-century schools, as the purpose of schools has fundamentally shifted from preparing students for the workforce to preparing students for college, career, and citizenship (Anderson, 2017; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000).

Colgren and Sappington (2015) called for transformational leadership models to support Black-student achievement and argued that students of color can achieve optimal success under

traditional school models when transformational leadership is employed. They also proposed a shift from the traditional exclusive focus on rigor to a focus on inclusivity and cultural responsiveness in instruction and school leadership. Further, Cooper (2009) argued for transformational leadership that focuses on cultural inclusiveness and social justice, explaining that such work is critical when leading diverse schools. In addition, Cole-Henderson (2000) and Johnson (2007) explained that transformational leadership that addresses community advocacy and instructional equity is necessary for advancing Black-student outcomes. Transformational leadership also shifts the focus toward equitable organizational structures and ensures that segregation, which further perpetuates and promotes gaps in achievement within schools, does not occur (McKenzie et al., 2008).

Pepper (2010) also found transformational leadership to be important for 21st-century–student success. She, however, also encompassed transactional leadership as an effective style for today’s schools and presented an integration of the two styles as the most effective approach in developing a strong school learning environment. Transactional leadership, opposite of transformational leadership, is more managerial in nature and focuses on rules, procedures, and expectations to accomplish the organization’s goals (Friedman, 2004; Sergiovanni, 2007). Kotter (1996) explained that transactional leadership results in structure and predictability, which result in an environment that supports and promotes student learning. Haberman and Dill (1999) argued, though, against utilizing a solely managerially focused transactional leadership style as a social justice school leader, calling for principals to adopt strong, more transformational practices in their leadership approaches.

Leigh Sanzo et al. (2011) are among a growing group of scholars who have found instructional leadership to be the most effective leadership style among effective school

principals. Unlike transformational leadership rooted in the organizational mission and transactional leadership rooted in structure and order, instructional leadership is rooted in the work of teaching and learning. This includes establishing an academically focused mission, monitoring teaching and learning, coaching teachers, and emphasizing professional development (Robinson & Gray, 2019; Terosky, 2014).

In addition to transformational leadership, instructional leadership has been identified as a critical leadership style in improving Black-student performance. Directly contrasting previously held school leadership models that focused principal leadership almost exclusively on operational management and supervision is the instructional leadership model, which situates the instructional program at the center of the school experience. Jackson et al. (1983) were among the first to argue for this shift to instructional leadership for school leaders serving Black students and found that a focus on instruction, efficacy, and staff development are critical factors in a school's ability to be successful with Black students. Templeton (2011) also underscored an instructional leadership style as essential for closing the Black-White achievement gap.

Brown et al. (2011) also contended that principals who employ instructional leadership practices such as developing teachers, providing feedback, and facilitating reflection on instructional practices are highly effective in closing the Black-White achievement gap. Johnson et al. (2011) found that effective principals of schools serving Black students hold a relentless focus on instructional leadership, but their focus is not solely on the curriculum or instructional supervision. Rather, they added that, as social justice school leaders, instructional leaders also must focus on the levels of engagement of students and the positivity of the classroom climate, which positively contribute to student learning.



Many theories exist regarding the most effective leadership styles to advance student achievement. Pepper (2010) argued for an integration of transformational and transactional styles. Marks and Printy (2003) also argued for an integration of styles but proposed that transformational leadership is adequate but not sufficient for optimal student achievement; counter to Pepper (2010), they suggested a balance of transformational and instructional leadership styles. For social justice school leadership, however, Khalifa et al. (2016) specifically argued for an integration of transformational and instructional leadership styles to most effectively serve Black students and close the Black-White achievement gap.

When it comes to charter schools, which tend to enroll higher numbers of Black than White students, the knowledge and utilization of effective leadership practices are critically important. Many charter schools' missions are centered on achieving educational equity for their students and closing the Black-White achievement gap (Lambooy & Lu, 2017). Sun and Ni (2016) deduced principal leadership practices to be a significant factor in charter school principal turnover and principal turnover to be a significant factor in student achievement. Luekens (2004) determined that the effectiveness of charter schools may be more directly linked to the presence of a strong principal as compared to traditional public schools. According to Almond (2012), Black students in charter schools tend to perform better when the school has a clear, academically focused mission statement and instructional program. Therefore, as social justice school leaders, charter school principals may also benefit from adopting the integration of transformational and instructional leadership styles proposed by Khalifa et al. (2016).

### **Skills of Social Justice School Leaders**

Beyond employing appropriate leadership styles, effective social justice school leaders engage in specific practices that impact Black-student achievement. These skills and practices

are critical in creating the right conditions for Black students to thrive in school. From this study, I concluded that social justice school leaders engage in multiple layers of reflection, model beliefs and behaviors within their schools, build strong, trusting relationships at all levels within the school community, and regularly engage in evidence-based instructional leadership practices.

First, given their strong commitment to their students and their relentless focus on strong outcomes, effective social justice leaders engage in critical reflection. Dantley (2010) found that principals who effectively serve Black students regularly engage in spiritual, though not necessarily religious, reflection. He stated that this spirituality influences principals' morality and commitment to effectiveness in their work. Social justice school leaders are reflective and critical of themselves and the system in which they work (Furman, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016; Theoharis, 2008). Further, Sun (2019) explained that when social justice school leaders engage in reflection, they are able to identify and overcome their own prejudices and biases. By constantly reflecting on their practices and the impact of their work on the students whom they serve, effective social justice leaders constantly challenge the oppressive structures that have historically ill-served their Black students and that have led to the achievement gap they are challenged to close.

Social justice school leaders also intentionally model the behaviors and beliefs that advance their vision of educational equity. Sun (2019) found intentional modeling to be a common practice among social justice school leaders, as this practice reinforces the values of the school community. This was underscored by Kowalchuk (2019), who explained that explicitly demonstrating beliefs in and commitment to social justice is important to advancing the work of improving outcomes for racialized students. Further, Khalifa (2018) asserted that modeling

beliefs is a critical practice of social justice school leaders because it serves as a way of authentically developing teachers' cultural awareness and responsiveness.

As earlier posited, the work of closing the achievement gap and achieving educational equity for Black students is transformative work. Establishing and maintaining relationships between the powerless and the powerful is essential to social justice school leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016; Kowalchuk, 2019). Transformation happens through relationship building, and effective social justice school leaders intentionally build trust and establish strong relationships at all levels—between students, fellow administrators, teachers, and parents—to build a strong culture of and commitment to the school's mission (Khalifa et al., 2016; McKenzie et al., 2008; Sun, 2019).

### **Dispositions of Social Justice School Leaders**

Dispositions can be defined as attitudes and beliefs (Theoharis, 2008). Haberman and Dill (1999) underscored the importance of a value-laden belief system, or ideology, for effective principals serving historically marginalized populations. In addition to knowledge and skills for social justice school leadership, the disposition of school leadership is important in advancing Black-student achievement and closing the Black-White achievement gap. Stafford and Hill-Jackson (2016) explained, though, that little attention is given to the dispositions of principals even though it is a principal's disposition that actually drives their practice. School leaders are what they believe. Theoharis (2008) argued that a social justice principal's work cannot be separated from their beliefs; social justice is simply woven into their being. The three dispositions paramount to this study were a commitment to social justice, positive beliefs about the larger community served, and a deep passion.

First, effective leadership for social justice requires a relentless commitment to social justice and a belief in the value of social justice work and its impact on students. Consistent with the concept of transformational leadership, an effective principal's work must be centered in the mission of social justice; it cannot be a mere second thought (Haberman & Dill, 1999; Theoharis, 2008). Scholars have agreed that the most effective school leaders are those centered in social justice with a commitment to activism, as well as deep connections to, knowledge of, respect for, and belief in the schools and communities they serve (Johnson, 2007; Taliaferro, 2011; Towns et al., 2001). Haberman and Dill (1999) explained that to effectively serve historically marginalized students, today's principals can no longer see themselves as executive managers; rather, they must adapt and evolve to working within and for the larger cultural communities they serve.

Cultural competence and cultural commitment are critical in social justice school leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016). Believing in and valuing the communities they serve means that social justice school leaders employ culturally relevant practices that reflect these beliefs, such as considering students' cultures and backgrounds in developing school-wide policies and engaging parents in school activities and school culture toward the end of bettering their schools and communities. Serving Black students effectively and closing the achievement gap further means changing the way that educators see and speak of them. Cole-Henderson (2000) found that schools with strong success among Black students have principals who maintain high expectations for their students, hold positive and optimistic views about their schools' families and their students' potential, and vehemently reject the idea that insurmountable barriers existed to their students' success. Pitre (2014) proposed that a shift from deficit thinking to positive thinking is necessary when referring to Black students and their cultures. Khalifa et al. (2016) further maintained that culturally responsive school leadership refuses deficit perspectives of

children of color and, likewise, argued for a positive mindset and language about them, their families, and their cultures. For example, the difference in language between *achievement gap*, which focuses on the student, and *opportunity gap*, which focuses on the system, is a critical language shift that rejects the early-held, persisting deficit-thinking that Black students may somehow be to blame for their own lack of academic achievement (Pitre, 2014).

Finally, social justice school leaders display a deep passion for and in the work they do for their students and the communities in which they serve (Stafford & Hill-Jackson, 2016; Theoharis, 2008; White-Smith, 2012). They are relentless about accomplishing their goal of improving student outcomes and achieving equity (Theoharis, 2008). This was underscored by Towns et al. (2001), who found passion and infectious energy to be common characteristics among effective principals of Black students.

### **Charter School Principal Development for Social Justice Leadership**

According to scholars (Dressler, 2001; Gawlik, 2018; Luekens, 2004) charter schools' success may depend more heavily on having a strong instructional leader as principal than traditional public schools. For charter schools, then, developing principals for social justice school leadership is a matter of critical importance in closing the Black-White achievement gap and accomplishing their social justice missions. In comparison to traditional public schools, charter school principals are not always required to hold administrative licensure, meaning that they may have had even less intentional preparation for effective school leadership than their public school counterparts (Gawlik, 2018; Luekens, 2004). In Colorado, for example, Dressler (2001) found that 10 out of 17 charter school leaders had training or education in school leadership before becoming principals. Furthermore, according to Sun and Ni (2016), charter schools tend to have higher rates of turnover for principals. Béteille et al. (2012) found high rates

of principal turnover to be detrimental to student achievement, as this turnover results in higher teacher turnover, which can then lead to lower student performance. Further, charter school principals report a significantly more complex workload than traditional public school principals (Gawlik, 2018). Higher principal turnover, less principal preparation, and more taxing workloads are, therefore, areas of significant concern for charter schools that demand a response.

Despite the clear evidence that effective leadership is critical to student success, few schools or districts have robust principal professional development programs designed to ensure that their principals are sufficiently equipped for the demands of their roles as school leaders (Manaseri & Manaseri, 2017). Elsberry and Bishop (1993) noted the problem of absent or poorly planned, unfocused principal preparation programs, citing it as a key factor in principal ineffectiveness. Additionally, Wright et al. (2009), explained that increasing complexity of the principalship necessitates strong preparation and professional development programs for principals that prepare them to do all parts of their jobs well. This includes developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for social justice school leadership, as it is indeed the right combination of knowledge, skills, *and* dispositions that makes a school leader effective and promotes strong outcomes for historically marginalized students (Haberman & Dill, 1999; Jackson & Kelley, 2002; Manaseri & Manaseri, 2017; Theoharis, 2008).

According to Haberman and Dill (1999), there is an inherent connection between what principals do and what they believe. The authors contended that effective principals can be trained, but only after their belief system, or ideology, is firmly established. While some programs do focus on knowledge and skills, Allen et al. (2017) specifically argued for including a social justice–oriented curriculum in principal preparation programs and found that a focused social justice curriculum can positively affect the development of social justice dispositions, or

ideologies. Skiba et al. (2014) and Pitre (2014) determined that negative perceptions of Black students is one of the most damaging factors to their achievement. The shift from deficit thinking requires first uncovering and confronting unconscious bias. Mayfield and Garrison-Wade (2015) found that overcoming biases is most often only accomplished through intentional antibias work. Santamaría (2014) recommended that principals carefully and intentionally reflect on their own multicultural experiences to inspire transformation and success for all students and overcome bias. Additionally, Horsford et al. (2011) recommended allowing and encouraging an awareness of the sociopolitical nature of schools as part of the antibias work that is essential for effective social justice school leadership. These are all examples of the types of social justice curriculum necessary for developing dispositions of effective social justice principals.

A cursory look at current school leadership and principal development programs across the State of Texas shows that little attention is given to developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to effectively lead diverse schools and close the achievement gap. A change in student outcomes cannot occur without the intentional development of high-quality preparation programs and a shift in the focus of these programs (Jackson & Kelley, 2002; McKenzie et al., 2008). While some school leaders are naturally oriented toward social justice and enter the principalship with the passion and commitment required for effective social justice school leadership, principals' capacity as social justice leaders must be intentionally developed in order for them to be effective in their work (Sun, 2019).

Charter schools do not always require principals to have completed formal school leadership preparation. Gawlik (2018) argues that the success of charter schools depends on the effectiveness of the principals and states that principal training must be a priority. Further, Bloomberg and Nathan (2008), posit that charter principal professional development and training

are critical due to the complexity of the role and the multiple leadership skills required for effective school management and student achievement. For charter schools, in-house professional development and training models can be developed and can be fashioned after existing effective principal preparation programs (Jackson & Kelley, 2002). Scholars agree that the most effective principal preparation programs to be those that address knowledge, skills, and dispositions of effective school leaders; have a clear, focused vision with programming aligned to the vision of the organization; have a mentoring component; have significant experiential components; and are cohort-based. Further, they found the most effective programs to have an emphasis on instructional leadership as well as moral and ethical leadership, which are the bedrocks of social justice (Bloomberg & Nathan, 2008; Gawlik, 2018; Haberman & Dill, 1999; Jackson & Kelley, 2002; McKenzie et al., 2008).

### **Closing Thoughts on Chapter II**

Closing the Black-White–student achievement gap is social justice work. Effective social justice school leaders possess certain knowledge, skills, and dispositions that make them effective leaders and agents of transformation. This knowledge, these skills, and these dispositions are essential in closing the achievement gap. As executive leaders of their schools, principals should not only engage in these practices themselves, but should also lead their staff toward this same commitment to social justice and equal opportunity. This type of leadership, though, does not necessarily come naturally. While some principals have an inherent orientation toward social justice or may naturally engage in effective leadership practices, it is incumbent on principal preparation programs and school districts to ensure that the principals leading schools that serve Black students possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for social justice school leadership. This is particularly important for charter schools, which serve as organizational



agents of social justice and tend to enroll higher numbers of Black than White students. Further, because charter schools do not always have the same requirements for principal leadership that traditional public schools do, it is important that they develop an appropriate and adequate response to the call for effective social justice school leadership.

## CHAPTER III

### SOLUTION AND METHOD

The Black-White achievement gap that prevails nationally is also a problem for Texas Charter Academy. Factors contributing to this problem may include inadequate principal preparation and beliefs about the achievement gap. A review of literature substantiates that high-performing schools generally have effective leaders and that improving Black-student achievement requires social justice school leadership. Principals must be adequately prepared for this type of leadership. The goal of this solutions-based study was to develop recommendations for a principal professional development framework to be utilized in Texas Charter Academy to equip principals with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for social justice school leadership. Through this exploratory qualitative case research study, I aimed to respond to the following research question and subquestions: What are the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of Texas Charter Academy principals?

SQ1. What do Texas Charter Academy principals know about the Black-White achievement gap?

SQ2. What do Texas Charter Academy principals do to close the Black-White achievement gap?

SQ3. What do Texas Charter Academy principals believe about the Black-White achievement gap?

#### **Outline of the Proposed Solution**

Texas Charter Academy is a charter school network of 40 schools in North Texas. On average, the network hires seven new principals each year, and the average principal tenure in the network is 2.75 years. The principalship is a very complex role and navigating it successfully

requires a specific skill set and knowledge base. The complexity of this role can be particularly challenging for principals who have never served in the capacity before. According to Wright et al. (2009), newly appointed principals want and need strong preparation programs that prepare them to do all parts of their job well. For principals at Texas Charter Academy, this includes intentional development for their role as social justice school leader to prepare them for their role in closing the Black-White achievement gap.

An organizational focus on closing the achievement gap in all Texas Charter Academy schools makes Texas Charter Academy principals, like many charter school principals, social justice school leaders. Sun and Ni (2016) argued that the capacity of social justice leaders must be intentionally developed in order for them to be effective in their equity work, but that principal preparation has historically focused on managerial leadership rather than student achievement or instructional leadership and that few principal preparation programs programmatically address the social justice lens required to positively impact Black-student achievement. Luekens (2004) found that many charter school organizations fail to provide any principal preparation at all. The proposed solution is a principal professional development framework that focuses on developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to positively and significantly impact the academic outcomes of Black students at all Texas Charter Academy schools and to close the Black-White achievement gap.

As a new principal of a Texas Charter Academy middle school, I frequently felt overwhelmed and underprepared for the work of leading my campus, specifically for closing the achievement gap. In my interaction with other principals, I heard other principals echo a similar sentiment. My informal conversations and observations on principal training and principal practices led to the understanding that most new principals have been learning on the job or from

each other and have not all received the benefit of a focused, strategic, network-designed program to prepare them for the complex managerial, instructional, and social justice responsibilities that are part of the daily work of a Texas Charter Academy principal.

I learned through my initial research on the achievement gap that closing the Black-White achievement gap is not just a matter of effective school leadership; it is a matter of social justice, and effective social justice school leadership is a critical factor in Black-student achievement. Additionally, I learned that principal preparation programs rarely address the development of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of social justice school leaders. Finally, I learned that charter school principals often have less formal education and teaching experience and are less likely to have completed a principal preparation program than traditional public school principals. As such, charter school principals tend to be less prepared for the principalship than their traditional public school counterparts. Across Texas Charter Academy, only 42% of principals have completed a formal principal preparation program, compared to 100% of traditional public school principals in Texas.

To address the problem of the Black-White achievement gap in Texas Charter Academy, I sought to understand the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of principals in Texas Charter Academy and compare this information to the prevailing literature on social justice school leadership. This understanding then informed the development of recommendations for a network-wide principal professional development framework to ensure that Texas Charter Academy principals have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to become social justice who leaders who are able to effectively lead their schools in the work of closing the Black-White achievement gap. The proposed principal professional development framework is

intended to supplement, not supplant, any other professional development activities provided by principal supervisors and the network's executive leaders.

### **Justification of Proposed Solution**

Texas Charter Academy has a stated organizational goal of closing the achievement gap, but this has yet to be achieved across the network of 40 schools. According to the TAPR, from 2017 to 2019, Black students across the network performed more than 20 percentage points below White students across grade levels and content areas (TEA, 2019). As such, I wanted to address the problem of the Black-White-student achievement gap in Texas Charter Academy through the lens of principal preparation. While principal preparation is largely a function of universities and regional education service centers, Texas Charter Academy could benefit from developing and implementing an in-network principal professional development framework that focuses on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of social justice school leaders.

Leading a diverse school and closing the achievement gap is social justice work. Spillane & Lowenhaupt (2019) explained that many principals arrive at this work from having a sense of social or moral obligation. These principals generally inherently possess the dispositions of social justice school leaders. This reality was also underscored by Theoharis (2008). Dispositions matter, as dispositions generally drive behaviors; however, scholars have agreed that the combination of knowledge, skills, and dispositions positively and significantly impacts Black-student achievement. While the inherent presence of social justice dispositions is not uncommon, according to Furman (2012), effective social justice school leaders are not just born; they are developed through intentional action and explicit preparation. Allen et al. (2017) explained that a principal preparation program focused on social justice can positively influence the dispositions and also improve the skills of school leaders and aspiring leaders.

In Texas, traditional public schools require that principals hold an administrative credential, which is earned only after successful completion of an accredited principal preparation program. Charter schools, including Texas Charter Academy, do not have to require principals to have completed a formal principal preparation program or to hold an administrative credential. This is a charter school trend in Texas and across the nation (Dressler, 2001; Luekens, 2004). Sun and Ni (2016) explained that this gap in principal preparation may contribute to higher rates of turnover among charter school principals. Béteille et al. (2012) found that a lack of adequate principal preparation negatively affects student outcomes.

Twenty percent of Texas Charter Academy's students are Black, and Black-student achievement trails White student achievement by as much as 31 points (TEA, 2019). Inadequate principal preparation for social justice leadership, higher-than-average principal turnover, rapid expansion, and current principal hiring practices in the network all detract from the network accomplishing its goal of closing the Black-White achievement gap. Presently, there is no comprehensive, network-wide program or approach to prepare principals for the principalship at Texas Charter Academy. Specifically, there is no framework for preparing principals for their role as social justice school leader or for their role in closing the Black-White achievement gap.

Ensuring that all principals are prepared to successfully navigate the role of social justice school leader is critical in accomplishing improved academic outcomes for Black students (Furman, 2012; Haberman & Dill, 1999; Theoharis, 2008). It is, therefore, essential that all principals in Texas Charter Academy's network both understand their role in closing the Black-White achievement gap and that each has the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to promote high achievement among Black students and close the Black-White achievement gap. Given the fact that Texas Charter Academy has a significant Black-student population, is

experiencing disparate performance between Black and White students, and does not require principals to hold principal certification or administrative licensure, there is a clear opportunity for the network to develop an in-network principal professional development framework that addresses social justice school leadership.

The principalship is a complex role; social justice school leadership is even more complex, as this type of leadership adds layers to the traditional role. Effective preparation is paramount to success as a school leader. Jackson and Kelley (2002) noted that the most effective principal preparation programs have a clear, focused curriculum. Manaseri and Manaseri (2017) added that principal preparation programs with an explicit social justice curriculum are most effective in developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for social justice school leadership.

The purpose of this study was to understand the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of Texas Charter Academy principals. The feedback collected from principals informed the development of recommendations for a principal professional development framework to be utilized within Texas Charter Academy that prepares principals for social justice school leadership. As a Texas Charter Academy principal, I held the role of participant-researcher with a thorough understanding of the local problem. As such, validity in more general contexts is limited, and findings from this study are not intended to be generalized to other contexts.

### **Study Context and Participants**

The purpose of this record of study was to understand what Texas Charter Academy principals know, do, and believe about social justice school leadership and the Black-White achievement gap. Through this research study, I aimed to identify the specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions of principals in Texas Charter Academy and to determine the gaps in

knowledge, skills, and dispositions. This information was then used to inform the development of recommendations for a framework for preparing new principals for social justice school leadership in Texas Charter Academy.

This exploratory qualitative case study was situated in North Texas. The Texas Charter Academy network encompasses two large urban counties and six cities in the second-largest region in Texas. According to the TEA (2019), during the 2019–2020 school year, Texas Charter Academy served 17,500 students, including 3,691 Black students, across 40 elementary (preK–5), middle (6–8), and high (9–12) schools. The participants in this study consisted of 14 principals at Texas Charter Academy. At the time of the study, four principals had served for less than 1 year, one principal had completed 1 full year, two principals had completed 2 years, and seven veteran principals had completed at least 3 years on their current campuses. The veteran principals comprised a purposeful sample of 7 out of 30 Texas Charter Academy principals with demonstrated outcomes with Black students. These veteran principals had either successfully closed or significantly narrowed the Black-White achievement gap in their schools or had increased Black-student performance on STAAR (all grades, all subjects) by at least 10% at their respective schools between 2017 and 2019.

Each of the 14 principals was sent the same survey asking them to respond to questions about their knowledge of the achievement gap, their utilization of effective leadership skills and practices to close the achievement gap, and their dispositions regarding the achievement gap. The data from the survey were compared against extant literature on social justice school leadership and closing the achievement gap and were then used to inform development of recommendations for a principal professional development framework focused on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of effective social justice school leadership.



Prior to initiating the study, I explained the purpose of the study to all prospective participants, explained that participation was voluntary, explained how the study results would be shared and were intended to be utilized, and explained that all identifying information and responses would be kept confidential. I sent each of the principals in the sample an invitation via email to complete the survey and requested that survey responses be returned within 7 days. As a fellow 1st-year principal in the network, I was able to make contact and share the survey with most of these principals easily, they were eager to assist me with my data collection. This accessibility and convenience were additional considerations in the sample selection (Creswell, 2014). Of the 14 principals invited to participate, all 14 returned a completed survey. Details of the participants and their demographic and experiential characteristics are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1***Texas Charter Academy Principals*

Participant	Completed principal experience	Campus level	Gender	Race	Principal preparation program completion
1	1 year	Elementary	Female	Black	No
2	> 1 year	Middle	Female	Black	Yes
3	> 1 year	Middle	Female	White	Yes
4	> 1 year	Middle	Male	White	Yes
5	> 1 year	Middle	Female	Black	Yes
6	2 years	High	Female	Black	Yes
7	3 years	Elementary	Female	Black	No
8	4 years	Elementary	Female	Black	No
9	2 years	Middle	Female	Black	Yes
10	5+ years	Middle	Female	Black	No
11	5+ years	Elementary	Female	White	Yes
12	5+ years	High	Female	Black	No
13	5+ years	Middle	Female	Black	Yes
14	5+ years	High	Male	White	No

**Proposed Research Paradigm**

The selection of a research paradigm for a research study is critical, as the philosophical framework drives the design and the implementation of the study (Creswell, 2014). This qualitative case study focused on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of principals in Texas Charter Academy to inform the development of a social justice principal professional

development framework. The study involved collecting data, assigning meaning to participant responses, and developing an intervention to promote change; therefore, the worldview utilized for this study was the transformative worldview. As a passionate, committed social justice school leader who struggled to effectively navigate the complexity of the principalship in a high-minority, high-poverty, low-performing school, I felt ill-equipped to address the achievement gap on my campus and was compelled to collaborate with other principals, learn their experiences, and find a solution to the problem. The justice orientation of the transformative approach aligns with my research goal of affecting change and initiating reform.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Through qualitative case studies, researchers can gain in-depth understanding of individuals and programs (Creswell, 2014). This qualitative study was first approved by the Texas Charter Academy network chief executive officer and then was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in October 2019 to obtain approval for collecting data. The research was determined to be not-human-subject research, and IRB approval was granted within 3 days. Data collection began in February 2020. All data were collected from principals leading Texas Charter Academy schools at the time of the study.

A qualitative design was selected for this study for the primary purpose of understanding Texas Charter Academy principals' knowledge, skills, and dispositions regarding the achievement gap. By exploring what current principals know, do, and believe and comparing how their current knowledge, practices, and beliefs align with existing research on effective social justice school leadership, I aimed to develop recommendations for a principal professional development focused on intentionally developing the essential knowledge, skills, and

dispositions of effective social justice school leadership to close the Black-White achievement gap in Texas Charter Academy.

Prior to data collection, I identified experienced, successful, veteran Texas Charter Academy principals who had served as principal of their campus for at least 3 years. To identify and qualify these principals, I reviewed STAAR data from 2016 to 2019 and selected seven principals whose Black-student population was at least 10% and whose school-wide academic achievement data reflected strong academic outcomes with Black students. These veteran principals had either successfully closed or significantly narrowed the Black-White achievement gap in their school or had increased Black-student performance on STAAR (all grades, all subjects) by at least 10% at their respective schools between 2016 and 2019.

### **Principal Survey**

Next, I developed the survey used to collect data. Data were needed to understand what Texas Charter Academy principals know about the achievement gap, what they do to close the achievement gap, and what they believe about the achievement gap. Using the extant literature, I developed a 20-question survey that queried principals regarding their knowledge, skills, and dispositions about the achievement gap. The questions were carefully aligned to existing research on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of effective social justice school leaders, and participants were asked to fully explain their responses to each of the 13 questions, except the initial 6 questions, which were included for demographic purposes only.

The survey was developed using an online survey tool, Google Forms, which allows for survey development with anonymous response collection and allows for the data to be collected in an easy-to-manipulate spreadsheet for detailed analysis. The electronic link to the survey was distributed via email to the 14 principals on February 1, 2020 with a requested response time of

14 days or fewer. The approximate time required to complete the survey was also shared in each email so that participants could effectively plan a time to complete and return the survey. I sent a reminder email with a link to the survey every 2 days until the deadline of February 15, 2020. Each communication with the principals reiterated that the survey was confidential and voluntary and that responses would ultimately be used to inform the development of a principal professional development framework focused on developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of effective social justice school leaders.

All the data yielded from the survey were used to understand the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of principals within the Texas Charter Academy network. Further, this understanding informed the development of recommendations for a future principal professional development framework for Texas Charter Academy to prepare principals for social justice school leadership.

### ***Demographic Survey Questions***

The first six questions on the survey were strictly information-gathering. These questions asked the participants about personal and school demographic information. They allowed principals to become familiar with the survey tool and gave me additional insight into the characteristics of the participants.

1. How long have you been a school principal?
2. How long have you served in your current role?
3. What is your gender identity?
4. What is your racial identity?
5. What is your age?
6. Explain the context of your school leadership experience.

### *Achievement Gap Survey Questions*

The next 12 questions asked about the principals' knowledge on the achievement gap, their knowledge on skills and practices for closing the achievement gap, and their dispositions and beliefs about the achievement gap. Principals were able to expand on Questions 7 to 18 by providing context and explaining their responses to each question. The following sections present the study's research subquestions and their corresponding survey questions on the achievement gap.

**Survey Questions Corresponding to Research Subquestion 1.** How can Texas Charter Academy prepare principals to be social justice school leaders who possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to close the Black-White achievement gap in their schools? SQ1. What do Texas Charter Academy principals know about the Black-White achievement gap?

7. How do you define the achievement gap?
8. Describe the achievement gap on your campus.
9. Which leadership style(s) are most effective in closing the achievement gap and promoting high achievement for Black students: managerial leadership, instructional leadership, transformational leadership, distributive leadership, a combination of styles (specifically which styles), etc.? Explain your answer.
10. Which instructional factors are most effective in closing the achievement gap and promoting high achievement for Black students: student engagement, formative assessment, positive classroom climate, effective direct instruction, targeted interventions for Black students, extended learning time, data-driven instruction, student data tracking and reflection, teacher reflection on instructional practices? Explain your answer.

11. Which of the following leadership practices are most effective in closing the achievement gap and promoting high achievement for Black students: data-driven decision making, instructional coaching, observation and feedback, collaborative decision making, professional development, other? Explain your answer.

**Survey Questions Corresponding to Research Subquestion 2.** How can Texas Charter Academy prepare principals to be social justice school leaders who possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to close the Black-White achievement gap in their schools? SQ2. What do Texas Charter Academy principals do to close the Black-White achievement gap?

12. Which of the following factors are most present in your personal leadership: passion, commitment to social justice, compassion, reflection, spirituality, self-efficacy, community engagement, cultural competence? Explain your answer.
13. Which leadership style(s) do you most often utilize on your campus? Explain why and how.
14. What leadership practices do you regularly employ to close the achievement gap? Explain why.

**Survey Questions Corresponding to Research Subquestion 3.** How can Texas Charter Academy prepare principals to be social justice school leaders who possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to close the Black-White achievement gap in their schools? SQ3. What do Texas Charter Academy principals believe about the Black-White achievement gap?

15. What is your role in closing the achievement gap on your campus? Explain why.
16. How equipped do you feel to close the achievement gap on your campus? Explain your answer.

17. What do you believe is needed to close the achievement gap in schools? Explain your answer.
18. What personal leadership factors/dispositions contribute to closing the achievement gap: passion, commitment to social justice, compassion, reflection, spirituality, self-efficacy, community engagement?

### ***Principal Professional Development Survey Questions***

The final two survey questions were designed for me to gain an understanding about the principals' perspectives regarding their principal professional development experiences at Texas Charter Academy. I also wanted to know what principals believe they need to learn in order to be sufficiently prepared to be social justice leaders and lead the work of closing the achievement gap on their campuses.

19. Describe the information, training, and development you have received from Texas Charter Academy to prepare you to be an effective social justice school leader and lead the work of closing the achievement gap on your campus.
20. What training, information, and development do you need to prepare you to be an effective social justice school leader and lead the work of closing the achievement gap on your campus?

### **Justification of Use of Instruments in Context**

Qualitative methodology is appropriate for understanding and making meaning of phenomena in a specific context or environment (Creswell, 2014). A qualitative design was selected for this study for the primary purpose of understanding Texas Charter Academy principals' knowledge, skills, and dispositions regarding the Black-White achievement gap. By exploring what current principals know, do, and believe and comparing how current knowledge,



beliefs, and practices within the network that align with existing research on effective social justice school leadership, I aimed to develop recommendations for a principal professional development framework focused on intentionally developing the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for effective social justice school leadership to close the Black-White achievement gap in Texas Charter Academy.

In my attempt to understand and explain the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of current Texas Charter Academy principals, I developed and administered a survey for each of the participants to complete. The survey questions were carefully aligned to extant literature on the achievement gap and social justice school leadership. I opted to utilize a survey for data collection as it allowed me to ask the participants consistent, specific questions regarding their knowledge, skills, and dispositions about social justice school leadership while also affording them the opportunity to expand on their answers to their individual satisfaction. Further, the use of a survey, which was sent to each participant electronically, allowed for ease of data collection and resulted in all 14 participants completing and returning the survey by the requested deadline and according to my research study timeline.

### **Data Analysis Strategy**

Coding is a data analysis procedure that allows the researcher to identify themes and trends across the responses. Patton (2014) explains that the process of coding includes assigning codes to meaningful segments of data by marking the data with symbols, words, or titles to words and phrases in the responses to capture the meaning in each response and, therefore, the overall survey. Stemler (2000) explained qualitative content analysis as a systematic data analysis technique where dense text is compressed into smaller content categories based on specific rules of coding. In emergent coding, themes emerge as the data are analyzed.

Conversely, in a priori coding, themes are identified prior to data analysis and are. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2020) explain that in priori coding, prior to data collection, a set of initial codes is developed from the literature review, conceptual framework, and research questions that drive the study. The use of an emergent coding scheme, though, should not limit the qualitative researcher to the predetermined codes (Cresswell, 2014; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2020). As such, I engaged in two cycles of coding for this study. First, the survey data were analyzed using content analysis with a priori coding. Then, a second round of coding was conducted using emergent coding.

For the first cycle, I opted to utilize a priori coding to interpret responses and survey data in relation to the existing literature on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of social justice school leadership. I examined the existing literature and extracted recurrent key words, phrases, and concepts that aligned with the work of prevailing scholars in the field of social justice, including Haberman, Furman, Theoharis, Khalifa, and Dowalchuk through which I set up a coding scheme. Knowledge, skills, and dispositions were the three recording units for the first round of data analysis. For each research subquestion, specific words and phrases were identified based on extant literature. Upon compiling the data question by question, I evaluated each response and noted the occurrence of the keywords and phrases from each research subquestion. According to Saldaña (2015), recoding occurs in the second cycle, where the data are further analyzed and additional salient features of the qualitative data are recorded to generate additional themes or concepts and to make meaning of the data. For the second coding cycle in this study, I analyzed the data with no predetermined codes to see if other themes or patterns emerged that had not been previously identified as meaningful to the study.

## **Timeline**

After obtaining approval from the network's chief executive officer and the IRB, data collection began on February 1, 2020 and was completed on February 15, 2020. The survey was sent to principals on February 1, 2020 in order to allow sufficient time to obtain enough responses, complete data analysis, and develop the artifact (shown in the Appendix). February was an optimal time of the school year because by this time, principals had largely overcome any issues with the transition from fall to spring and had settled into routines for the new semester. As the spring semester is historically a very busy time for principals due to state testing and early preparation for the next school year, I wanted to ensure that I allowed ample time to complete the research, study the problem, and develop the response to the problem. Further, as the survey was open-ended and required significant thought and reflection, I wanted to ensure that principals in the sample had sufficient time to complete the survey without feeling rushed. After the initial email was sent, reminder emails were sent every 2 days until the response deadline of February 15. Analysis of the survey data occurred from March 1 to 31. A complete timeline for the study is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Record of Study Timeline*

Date	Activity	Collection/Analysis
November 2020	IRB approval	
December 2020	District approval for data collection	
January 2020	Proposal defense and request for approval from record-of-study committee	
February 2020, Week 1	Data collection	Qualitative data analysis
March 2020	Data analysis	Analysis of quantitative data collection to determine study results and development of recommendations

**Reliability and Validity**

The intent of this qualitative case study was to inform action within Texas Charter Academy to ensure that new principals are sufficiently prepared for their role in the work of closing the Black-White achievement gap. Ultimately, the goal was to develop a framework for new-principal professional development that specifically addresses the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of effective social justice school leaders. The methods of this study were developed to be well aligned with sound research practices for qualitative research. The outcome validity was of critical importance. Bailey (2010) explained validity as the extent to which research methods actually accomplish the intended purpose, examine exactly what they were purposed to examine, and, therefore, produce findings that are credible.

The administration of a single survey to all participants helped to ensure treatment efficacy. Further, data were collected electronically and participants entered their own responses, eliminating the need for multiple additional measures to address potential transcription errors. Additionally, clarifying the researcher's bias is an important strategy to validate findings, particularly for participant-researchers (Creswell, 2014). Researcher bias was included as part of the findings, as I am a participant-researcher who serves in the same role in the same organization as the participants.

Regarding democratic validity, data were collected from principals in Texas Charter Academy with the support and assistance of executive staff, and the research outcomes are applicable to all principals in Texas Charter Academy. As a fellow principal within the network, I was concerned with the possibility that principals may not feel comfortable sharing their honest experiences and thoughts. To address this, I was intentional about framing the study around improving the education of our students because, having experienced an incredibly passionate and caring group of Texas Charter Academy principals, I believed them to be committed to improving practice and growing for the benefit of their students. Further, to ensure that there was no pressure to respond in a certain way, I reiterated in multiple communications to the principals that their responses were voluntary and anonymous, as well as expressed the commitment and support of network executive staff for this study. The collaboration of multiple stakeholders—principals and network executive staff—contribute to democratic validity (Newton & Burgess, 2016). Additionally, ensuring catalytic validity was also important to me as this is a social justice research study aimed at affecting change. Catalytic validity is used by researchers to evaluate whether qualitative research accomplishes its goal of social change (Bailey, 2010). In this research study, catalytic validity was accomplished through the action research process itself and

gathering as much data as possible from the sample to inform the development of a principal professional development framework for new Texas Charter Academy principals that supports the network's goal of closing the Black-White achievement gap.

### **Closing Thoughts on Chapter III**

The methods utilized in this study were selected to inform action. In my discussions with principals on preparation, onboarding, and other principalship experiences, I heard many perspectives varying widely based on multiple factors. Further, levels of knowledge, skills, and dispositions were found to vary widely based on multiple factors, such as age, type of principal preparation program, and previous school leadership experience. Some reported and demonstrated high levels of knowledge about the achievement gap, and some reported and demonstrated only moderate levels of knowledge. All reported positive dispositions about their role in closing the achievement gap. However, fewer than half reported consistent use of effective skills and practices for closing the achievement gap.

My experiences and observations as a novice principal in Texas Charter Academy led me to believe that there is a gap in principal preparation for social justice school leadership and that there are no consistent practices for preparing principals for the work of closing the Black-White achievement gap. I believe that a more aligned and effective approach toward principal professional development would be meaningful for principals in the network.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

#### **Introducing the Analysis**

The purpose of this research study was to answer the following research question and subquestions: What are the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of Texas Charter Academy principals?

SQ1. What do Texas Charter Academy principals know about the Black-White achievement gap?

SQ2. What do Texas Charter Academy principals do to close the Black-White achievement gap?

SQ3. What do Texas Charter Academy principals believe about the Black-White achievement gap?

To understand the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of principals in Texas Charter Academy, a survey was sent to 14 principals in the network. The survey was aligned to extant research on the Black-White achievement gap and social justice school leadership. The data gathered from the survey and the findings from current literature were then utilized to inform the development of recommendations for a principal professional development framework to ensure that all Texas Charter Academy principals have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of social justice school leaders. The recommendations are not intended to be comprehensive, but rather were created for the network to use as a starting point for developing a comprehensive, robust principal professional development program within Texas Charter Academy.

This research study was inspired by informal conversations with a small group of my peers, 1st-year principals in Texas Charter Academy. As we spoke casually throughout the

school year in various contexts, I learned about their perspectives on the achievement gap, their levels of preparation, and their senses of efficacy to improve Black-student performance on their campuses; I found their perspectives both intriguing and concerning. I considered the feelings, experiences, and challenges of these principals and pondered an effective, meaningful response that would meet the needs of principals and also positively impact student achievement. As a result of a series of informal discussions and conversations with various Texas Charter Academy principals, I arrived at my research questions.

Using the extant literature on the achievement gap, principal preparation, and social justice school leadership, I developed a survey to send to a sample of Texas Charter Academy principals representing a cross-section of schools, grade levels, and principal characteristics (tenure, race, gender, age, and previous school leadership experience). The survey asked these principals to respond to 20 questions. Six of the questions were purely demographic in nature, 12 of the questions queried principals about the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for social justice school leadership, and 2 of the questions asked principals to share their thoughts on their principal preparation experiences and recommendations for future principal professional development within the network. As this was a qualitative research study, the survey asked principals to give thorough, narrative responses to gather deep insight into their perspectives.

Once all survey responses had been received, I used a priori coding to analyze the data. I first compiled the data by question type, putting together all knowledge questions, skill questions, and disposition questions. Then, I reviewed each response for each question and looked for themes. For the questions on knowledge, I looked for key terms that would reflect a clear understanding of the concept. For example, one question asked principals to define the achievement gap, and I looked for terms like *race*, *White*, *disparity*, *performance*, and



*opportunity*. As a key element of social justice leadership is nondeficit thinking, I also looked for words like *subpopulation*, *low socioeconomic status*, *poverty*, *crime*, or *single parents*. For the questions on skills, I looked for key terms reflecting the practices of effective social justice school leaders. These terms included *coaching*, *professional development*, *reflection*, *modeling*, *relationships*, and *community engagement*. Finally, for the questions on dispositions, I looked for key terms reflecting the beliefs of effective social justice school leaders. Some of these included *nondeficit*, *deficit*, *subpopulation*, *low socioeconomic status*, *poverty*, *passion*, *expectation*, and *commitment*. After analyzing the data using a priori coding, I completed a second round of emergent coding to see if additional themes emerged from the data. I continued this process of a priori then emergent for each of the questions to gain a clear understanding of principals' knowledge, skills, and dispositions to inform the development of recommendations for a principal professional development framework to be used in Texas Charter Academy. Initial codes used in the study and examples of corresponding survey responses are detailed and outlined further in Table 3.

**Table 3***Codes Used for Data Analysis*

Code	Description	Example from Surveys
<i>Category: Knowledge</i>		
Social justice (n = 0)	Justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society (Theoharis, 2008).	N/A; none of the principals explicitly referred to or named social justice as the central issue in the achievement gap in any of their narrative responses for this category.
Achievement gap (n = 14)	The gap in performance between demographic groups (Hung et al., 2020).	“The achievement gap refers to the disparity in performance between groups of students, especially among racial, socioeconomic, and gender lines.”
Opportunity gap (n = 6)	The inequitable resource allocation and structures that ultimately cause a gap in academic performance (Ladson-Billings, 2013).	“The achievement gap is a gap in opportunity. It is the unequal or inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities which lead to a gap in student learning and academic outputs.”
Race (Black/White) (n = 6)	A social and genetic construct that distinguishes between groups of people; Black, White.	“The achievement gap is a bar defined by how White privileged students perform and an attempt to denigrate other students, specifically Black students, who do not have the same resources. I think a more accurate term is ‘opportunity gap.’”
Transformational leadership (n = 9)	Focusing on the importance of commitment and highlighting the organization’s mission above all (Rahman & Hadi, 2018).	“Transformational leadership and instructional leadership are key components of closing the achievement gap because they focus on and result in change and improvement.”
Instructional leadership (n = 6)	Situating the instructional program at the center of the school experience and focusing on effective instruction and staff development (Jackson et al., 1983).	“Honestly, I think you need a balance of all four leadership styles, but the principal has to primarily be an instructional leader who sets the vision for learning and achievement . . . ”

**Table 3** *Continued*

Code	Description	Example from Surveys
<i>Category: Skills</i>		
Coaching, improving instruction, professional development (n = 12)	Coaching and professional development for teachers on specific areas of need to improve instruction and student performance.	“We focus so much on data, but I honestly think we need to focus less on data overall and focus on improving our teachers. We need to do more professional development. I need to do more professional development with my teachers and help them get better as a whole.”
Reflection (n = 5)	Thinking deeply about one’s personal leadership, as well as the system in which one works (Khalifa et al., 2016; Theoharis, 2008).	“Principals have to make time to be reflective. We have to be. Reflection forces me to see where I need to make changes in my leadership.”
Modeling (n = 0)	Explicitly demonstrating and reinforcing one’s beliefs, values, and commitment to social justice in everyday work (Kowalchuk, 2019).	N/A; none of the narrative responses referenced modeling.
Relationships, building relationships (n = 11)	Establishing and maintaining relationships between all members of the school community, including students, fellow administrators, teachers, and parents (Kowalchuk, 2019; Khalifa et al., 2016).	“The ability to build relationships and get people to believe they can do the impossible is so important.”
Community engagement, community commitment, cultural commitment (n = 4)	Ongoing engagement and connection with the larger cultural community served by the school (Khalifa et al., 2016).	“Compassion should be coupled with family empowerment. The community has to be involved in the school. My job as a principal is to figure out how to make it comfortable for them.”

**Table 3 Continued**

Code	Description	Example from Surveys
<i>Category: Dispositions</i>		
Passion (n = 14)	The degree to which one is relentless about accomplishing the goal of improving student outcomes and achieving equity (Theoharis, 2008).	“When I say that I am passionate, I mean that this keeps me up at night. I am responsible for these students and their futures.”
Commitment (n = 4)	Commitment to student learning as well as social justice issues, like the achievement gap (Haberman & Dill, 1999; Theoharis, 2008).	“This is hard work. There’s so much to keep up top. Principals need to have a certain level of grit that keeps them committed to the task as hard even when it gets really hard.”
Belief, positive belief, nondeficit thinking, high expectations (n = 4)	Positive, nondeficit mindsets and subsequent language when referring to students and their families (Pitre, 2014).	“I believe a deep-seeded commitment to social justice is needed. This starts with believing that our kids are worthy and capable. Typically, adults are the issue holding students back from success and adults that are not committed, especially the ones who don’t have positive mindsets about our students.”

## Presentation of Data

### Research Subquestion 1

What are the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of Texas Charter Academy principals?

SQ1. What do Texas Charter Academy principals know about the Black-White achievement gap?

The overarching research question provides the basis for the creation of a principal professional development framework to develop Texas Charter Academy’s principals’ knowledge, skills, and dispositions for effective social justice school leadership. The first subquestion was selected to determine current knowledge of principals in Texas Charter

Academy. To answer this first subquestion, six questions were included on the survey addressing principals' knowledge about the achievement gap and its causes, the most effective leadership styles for closing the achievement gap, the most effective instructional practices for closing the achievement gap, and the most effective leadership practices for closing the achievement gap. All 14 principals answered each of these questions.

The first question on knowledge asked principals to define the achievement gap. Of the 14 principals who participated in this study, all 14 were able to clearly and accurately explain the achievement gap. For example, one principal stated, "The achievement gap is an educational term to describe the gap in performance between different populations of students. There are multiple factors that contribute to this including race, economic status, etc." Social justice leadership requires a strong, positive belief in the community served, starting with using nondeficit terms to describe the community or explain cultural phenomena, as well as clear cultural language that explicitly names the cultural aspects being addressed. Five of the 14 principals used deficit or nondescript terms such as *students of color*, *subgroup*, or *low socioeconomic status* as part of their narratives on the achievement gap rather than specifically naming race and using the terms *Black* or *White*, which were the populations of students being discussed. Largely, however, Texas Charter Academy respondents accurately referenced gaps in opportunity, explained inequitable resource allocation, and explicitly named race in their narratives to explain what the achievement gap is and what causes it.

The second question on knowledge asked principals to describe or explain the Black-White achievement gap on their campuses. Principals with the lowest percentage of Black students articulated the achievement gap not being a major concern. All but one principal referred to their two largest student groups, Hispanic and Black, to explain the achievement gap.

Principals with higher percentages of Black students articulated the greatest sense of urgency about the Black-White achievement gap. Of the 14 principals, only 3 compared Black-student performance to that of White students outside the network. One principal noted,

I have grave concerns about my African-American students. They aren't my largest student group, but they are my lowest performing. On my campus, they perform on par with my Hispanic students, but when I compare them to other students in the state, the performance is unsatisfactory. It keeps me up at night.

The third question on knowledge queried principals about the most effective classroom instructional practices for closing the achievement gap. A school principal's knowledge of effective instructional pedagogies for Black students is critical in social justice school leadership and is a key lever in impacting student achievement. Answers to this question were significantly varied among the principals. Overall, Texas Charter Academy principals shared moderate understanding of these practices as being essential to closing the achievement gap. Most principals expressed believing student engagement to be a critical factor in Black-student achievement; however, their explanations varied widely on what student engagement is. The overwhelming majority of the 14 principals explained the value of student engagement and shared appropriate examples:

Student engagement is the most important factor. If students are not thinking deeply about the work and doing the mental work and thinking critically, then they aren't learning. Some people think engagement means working, but it's more than that. It's how the students are working.

Seven of the 14 principals indicated a positive classroom climate as being a critical factor in Black-student achievement. These principals all sufficiently explained the value of a positive

classroom climate and gave examples. For example, one principal explained that there are certain teachers whose classrooms “feel right and her kids know that they are safe there, so they work hard for her.” Only 6 of the 14 principals expressed believing data-driven instruction to be a critical factor, and 4 of the 14 expressed believing high-quality, standards-aligned instruction to be a critical factor. One principal explained knowing that all of these factors are important for learning, but not believing that some factors have a greater impact on Black-student achievement. Importantly, one principal said, “I do not know” when asked to explain critical instructional practices for Black-student achievement, stating that none of these practices related to the achievement gap had ever been discussed in principal training and development.

The fourth question on knowledge sought to identify the principals’ knowledge about the most effective leadership styles for closing the achievement gap. Khalifa et al. (2016) specifically argued for an integration of transformational and instructional leadership styles to most effectively serve Black students and close the Black-White achievement gap. The 14 principals who participated in this study overwhelmingly demonstrated an understanding that these two leadership styles are effective for social justice school leadership. Of the 14 principals, 5 accurately named an integration or combination of instructional and transformational leadership styles as the most effective for closing the achievement gap and accelerating Black-student achievement. Ten of the principals demonstrated an understanding that transformational leadership is essential for social justice school leadership, either independently or integrated with instructional leadership. Eight of these 10, though, incorrectly explained that transformational leadership is about turning schools around. One principal said, for example, “The principal needs to be an instructional leader who sets the vision and then coaches through transformational leadership. This is important when you arrive at a turnaround school because transformation is

the goal.” Another principal stated, “A leader has to be strong instructionally but it transformational leadership is required if you’re really looking to accomplish change.”

All 14 principals correctly explained instructional leadership as leadership that highlights a strong instructional program with instructional coaching at its core:

The achievement gap is about performance, and you can’t improve performance without improving instruction. Being an effective principal and improving student outcomes takes incessant instructional leadership. I have to focus on a lot of things as a principal, but the most important is making sure that our instruction is on point. That takes a lot of instructional oversight and a lot of coaching.

When further explaining instructional leadership, though, only 3 of the 14 principals included alignment of instruction-focused professional development as part of the instructional leadership framework.

Overall, Texas Charter Academy principals demonstrated a moderate understanding of effective instructional factors as being essential to closing the achievement gap. Twelve of the 14 principals who responded to this question about effective instructional practices for closing the achievement gap largely showed an understanding that student engagement is a critical instructional factor; however, the narratives reflected varied understanding about what student engagement actually is. Twelve of the 14 principals explained the value of student engagement. Nine of the 14 principals explained student engagement as students actively participating in classes, but failed to further explain critical elements of student engagement such as critical thinking, curiosity, cognitive engagement, and student interest in what they are learning. Additionally, 8 of the 14 principals explained that a positive classroom climate is essential in promoting Black-student achievement. In the narrative responses, principals recorded the value



of positive teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships. Three of the principals additionally explained that these relationships are critically important when there is a cultural mismatch between the teachers and students and that a positive climate must be intentionally developed and nurtured. Finally, eight of the principals explained that intentional teacher reflection on the achievement gap is a critical factor in closing the achievement gap. In the narrative responses, one principal explained knowing that all of these factors are important for learning, but not believing that certain instructional factors have a greater impact on Black-student achievement; she expressed an interest in learning more about effective instructional practices for closing the achievement gap: “I knew that all of these factors were important for learning, but I did not believe that certain instructional factors had a greater impact on Black student achievement. I definitely think I need to learn more about this.”

The final question on knowledge asked principals to identify and explain the most effective leadership practices for closing the achievement gap. Effective social justice school leadership is centered in the correct knowledge, skills, and dispositions. The survey data show that even with high levels of knowledge, Texas Charter Academy principals do not always utilize evidence-based practices in their leadership. Most participants reported at least moderate knowledge about social justice and the achievement gap, consistent use of effective leadership styles and effective instructional practices, and engagement in practices aligned to this knowledge. The chief exception to this was community engagement, which is a critical factor in social justice school leadership. Of the factors, community engagement seems to be the factor least committed to by Texas Charter Academy principals. Only 4 of the 14 principals said that they engage with the larger cultural community in which their school is located. One reason given for this was the principal not wanting to pin the school’s success or failure on the

community. Another reason given was having not found a meaningful entry point into the community. Finally, another principal cited a significant language barrier hindering her ability to engage with the community.

## **Research Subquestion 2**

What are the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of Texas Charter Academy principals?  
SQ2. What do Texas Charter Academy principals do to close the Black-White achievement gap?

The second subquestion specifically addressed the social justice leadership skills and practices utilized by Texas Charter Academy's principals. Theoretically, principals' knowledge and skills should be closely aligned; however, an apparent gap was shown between the knowledge reported and demonstrated by the 14 principals and the subsequent utilization of effective practices for closing the achievement gap.

The first question on skills queried principals regarding their utilization of the practices they identified as most effective leadership practices for closing the achievement gap. This question asked principals to select among eight leadership practices and explain how present these practices are in their principalships and why. The selection options were personal spirituality, critical reflection, community engagement, and cultural competence. Additionally, principals were asked to identify and expand on their utilization of effective instructional practices including instructional coaching, data-driven decision making, and targeted school-wide professional development on effective instructional strategies and practices for closing the achievement gap. As shown in Table 4, the survey data show that even with high levels of knowledge, Texas Charter Academy principals do not always utilize evidence-based practices in their leadership.

**Table 4**

*Utilization of Effective Leadership Skills and Practices for Social Justice School Leadership*

Leadership practice	Frequency
Personal spirituality	8
Critical reflection on leadership	11
Engagement with larger cultural community	4
Cultural responsiveness in decision making and school leadership	8
Instructional coaching	11
Data disaggregation and decision making	11
Targeted professional development	5
Leader-led learning walks	9

The factor least practiced by Texas Charter Academy principals is community engagement. Only 4 of the 14 principals said that they engage with the larger cultural community in which their school is located. One principal stated,

I don't think I ever found the best entry way for engaging more with the community as it's not a part of my Theory of Change. I care about education happening to high fidelity in the school before turning to the community. In my experience, leaders start to blame the community and I didn't want that narrative. Now that my school is academically performing, maybe the succeeding principal will work more in this area.

Another principal explained there being a significant language barrier hindering her ability to engage with the community. She said, "I have several Black students, but my school is mostly Hispanic. As a White, English-speaking principal, it has been hard for me to authentically connect with my students' families and the community at large because of the language."

Regarding professional development, one principal stated,

I would love to spend more time with my teachers on ways to close the achievement gap, but the network is hyper-focused on close reading and visual modeling and analysis right now. I know these are important for overall student growth, but if we are talking about the achievement gap, we have to actually talk about the achievement gap with the people who are on the front lines, in the classrooms with our students every day.

Another principal stated,

We have this time built in our calendar for professional development, but honestly, outside of a couple of days during summer professional development, I feel like I have very little control over this time. There's grade-level meetings, virtual round tables, team-building, content team meetings. I'm sure that there's a way to incorporate closing the achievement gap in there, but I honestly don't know how or what that should even look like for my teachers.

The second question on skills asked principals to share the leadership style that they most utilize. In the questions on knowledge, Texas Charter Academy principals reported strong knowledge about effective leadership styles for closing the achievement gap. Most stated instructional and transformational or a combination of the two as being most effective. In this question on skills, though, more than half of the responding principals said that they utilize transactional leadership most. One principal noted,

I realize that instructional leadership is most effective for closing the achievement gap, but the staffing issues that I deal with on a daily basis keep me from this. I have competing priorities almost every day and have to deal with staff compliance issues that keep me from being in classrooms and coaching teachers . . . I have to focus on staff climate 90% of the time.

Finally, the principals largely reported moderate knowledge about social justice and the achievement gap, consistent use of effective leadership styles and effective instructional practices, and engagement in practices aligned to this knowledge. The chief exception to this was community engagement, which is a critical factor in social justice school leadership. The data reflect that Texas Charter Academy principals are least committed to community engagement. Only 4 of the 14 principals stated engaging with the larger cultural community in which their school is located. One reason given for this was not wanting to look to the community for the school's success or to blame them for any failure. Another reason given was having not found a meaningful entry point into the community. Finally, another principal reported a significant language barrier hindering her ability to engage with the community, which is largely Hispanic.

### **Research Subquestion 3**

What are the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of Texas Charter Academy principals?  
SQ3. What do Texas Charter Academy principals believe about the Black-White achievement gap?

In this study, the widest variation in responses was around dispositions. Effective social justice school leaders must have a strong commitment to social justice, a belief in the community they serve, high expectations for students, and a tenacious passion for their work. Overwhelmingly, Texas Charter Academy principals articulated a strong commitment to social justice and a high sense of efficacy about their ability to close the achievement gap. When asked, though, about what is needed to close the achievement gap, all but two principals gave a response including external factors (factors out of their locus of control), gave a response around their ultimate responsibility as campus executive leader, or gave a response indicating a deficit mentality. Such responses included the needs for student sense of efficacy, more professional

development for teachers, data to target at-risk factors, access to mental health resources, more competitive salaries, parenting classes, and intervention groups for Black students. For example, one principal stated, “To close the achievement gap, we need more experienced teachers, relevant training for teachers, training around ACE factors and their impact on schools.” Another stated,

We have to attract top talent with competitive salaries and multiple levels of support.

Hire people that are looking to do this long-term and not as a stepping stone to the next career (unless you are in a turn-around situation, then the short-term stop gaps are needed). Keep good administrators in place instead of moving them to the next school that needs help.

Responses more aligned to the high sense of efficacy and the principal’s responsibility for closing the achievement gap included fostering a culture of learning, improving instruction, and leading identity and antibias work with staff. One principal shared,

Radical anti-racism - professional development, identity work, continuous learning and unlearning of problematic beliefs that perpetuate inequity in our schools are all necessary to close the achievement gap. This is what we have to be working on with our teachers and staff.

Another said,

I think it is important for the principal to ensure we are giving kids access to rigorous curriculum with high expectations and quality teachers. Principals have to make sure they are hiring the right people with the right mindset and skills. It is easy for teachers to dismiss poor academics outside the locus of their control, principals can help identify

what the school can and should address and ensure teachers are holding to high expectations.

Contrary to the conclusions and recommendations of contemporary scholars, while most Texas Charter Academy principals do have strong, positive dispositions about the achievement gap and understand the knowledge and skills for closing the achievement gap, they do not utilize specific practices with the explicit goal of closing the achievement gaps on their campuses.

### **Results of Research**

The information learned from this research study allowed me to see trends among the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of novice principals compared to those of successful veteran principals at Texas Charter Academy. Further, it allowed me to learn and understand the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of social justice principals in charter schools who are closing the Black-White achievement gap and accelerating learning for Black students. Given the high turnover of principals in and expansion of the Texas Charter Academy network, this research study provided an opportunity to develop recommendations for a framework for principal professional development that ensures that all principals in the network enter their principalship equipped for their role as social justice school leader. These recommendations are intended to be a starting point for Texas Charter Academy's leadership development and should be refined as necessary to ensure alignment with the network's strategic priorities.

Texas Charter Academy principals accurately referenced gaps in opportunity, explained inequitable resource allocation, and explicitly named race in their narratives to explain what the achievement gap is and what causes it. Overwhelmingly, they understand that the achievement gap is actually an opportunity gap and recognize it as a social justice issue. Further, the 14 principals who participated in this study overwhelmingly understand that instructional and

transformation leadership styles are the most effective styles of social justice school leadership. Additionally, many of the principals named an integration or combination of instructional and transformational leadership styles as the most effective for closing the achievement gap and accelerating Black-student achievement. While most of the principals understand that transformational leadership is essential for social justice school leadership, either independently or integrated with instructional leadership, the majority of them incorrectly explained that transformational leadership is about turning schools around. While transformational leadership can facilitate academic turnaround in schools, it is actually defined as leadership that elevates the organization's mission above all else and centers all of the organization's work in the mission (Rahman & Hadi, 2018). None of the principals referenced Texas Charter Academy's mission or vision in any of their narratives. This omission represents an opportunity for Texas Charter Academy to clarify and center its mission and vision in its work with principals. Finally, while all 14 principals correctly explained instructional leadership as leadership that highlights a strong instructional program with instructional coaching at its core, only 3 of the 14 included alignment of instruction-focused and equity-centered professional development as part of the instructional leadership framework. Again, this represents an opportunity for Texas Charter Academy. Effective principal professional development within the network should highlight the need for and include a clear framework for professional development for teachers that includes culturally responsive pedagogy and best instructional practices for advancing Black-student achievement.

The survey also queried principals about the most effective classroom instructional practices for closing the achievement gap. A school principal's knowledge of effective instructional pedagogies for Black students is critical in social justice school leadership and is a key lever in impacting student achievement. Scholars have concluded that intentional teacher



reflection on instructional practices and focus on disaggregated student performance must be part of instructional monitoring systems and that consistent utilization of evidence-based instructional practices, high levels of student engagement, and a positive classroom climate are essential for closing the Black-White achievement gap (Brown et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2011). All of these instructional practices, which have been noted as effective instructional strategies for all students, exemplify the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy as developed by Ladson-Billings (1995b).

Texas Charter Academy principals demonstrated a moderate understanding of effective instructional factors that are essential to closing the achievement gap. Nearly all 14 of the principals largely understand that student engagement is a critical instructional factor; however, the narratives reflected misaligned and incomplete understanding about what student engagement actually is. Most explained student engagement as students actively participating in classes, but failed to further explain critical elements of student engagement such as critical thinking, curiosity, cognitive engagement, and student interest in what they are learning. The omission of the components of student engagement represents another opportunity to bolster Texas Charter Academy principals' knowledge about the achievement gap and social justice school leadership.

Additionally, 8 of the 14 principals explained that a positive classroom climate is essential in promoting Black-student achievement and recorded the value of positive teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships. Further, three of the principals stressed the importance of fostering a positive classroom climate when there is a cultural mismatch between the teachers and students, saying that this positive climate must be intentionally developed and nurtured. Eight of the principals also explained that intentional teacher reflection on Black-student achievement is a critical factor in closing the achievement gap and summarized

that this reflection should result in utilization of more effective instructional practices and focus on developing a more positive classroom climate.

In the narrative responses regarding knowledge of social justice and the Black-White achievement gap, one principal explained knowing that all of the identified instructional practices and factors are important for student learning, but not believing that certain instructional factors have a greater impact on Black-student achievement. She indicated this being a gap in her principal preparation experience and, along with nine other principals, expressed an interest in learning more about effective instructional practices for closing the achievement gap.

Finally, principals were asked to articulate and explain the most effective leadership skills and practices for closing the Black-White achievement gap. Nearly all the principals accurately identified effective leadership skills and practices, including reflection and effective social justice school leadership being centered in the correct knowledge, skills, and dispositions. The survey data show that even with high levels of knowledge, Texas Charter Academy principals do not always utilize evidence-based practices in their leadership. Most articulated at least moderate knowledge about social justice and the achievement gap, consistent use of effective leadership styles and effective instructional practices, and engagement in practices aligned to this knowledge. The chief exception to this was community engagement, which is a critical factor in social justice school leadership. Of the factors, community engagement seems to be the factor least committed to by Texas Charter Academy principals. Only 4 of the 14 principals said that they engage with the larger cultural community in which their school is located. One reason given for this was not wanting to pin the school's success or failure on the community. Another reason given was having not found a meaningful entry point into the

community. Finally, another principal stressed a significant language barrier as hindering her ability to engage with the community.

There is an apparent knowing-doing gap among Texas Charter Academy principals. Most of the principals who participated in my research expressed incredible knowledge about the achievement gap, even without having participated in a formal principal preparation program or having received any formal education or training on leadership for social justice. However, despite significant levels of knowledge, most reported not regularly implementing identified best practices for closing the achievement gap. Analysis of the narrative responses from this study revealed that this knowing-doing gap is not necessarily rooted in apathy or lack of commitment. Sometimes the absence of effective leadership practices or dispositions is caused by not having sufficient knowledge, and sometimes it is rooted in the presence of systemic barriers or conflicting organizational priorities. Principals are charged with the daily oversight and management of their schools, yet they do not always have the liberty of choosing what they know to do. Sometimes they have to do what they are told to do, and sometimes they just have to do what needs to be done to effectively manage the incredibly complex institutions they lead.

Further, there is an apparent knowing-believing gap among Texas Charter Academy principals. Despite reporting strong knowledge about the achievement gap and effective leadership for closing the achievement gap, principals had varying dispositions that were not always aligned to the dispositions for effective social justice school leadership. This represents a clear opportunity for Texas Charter Academy. By building on the existing knowledge held by Texas Charter Academy principals, the network can intentionally support principals in aligning their beliefs with their knowledge about social justice school leadership and, subsequently, shift behaviors.

## **Interaction Between the Research and the Context**

Texas Charter Academy is a growing network of 40 charter schools in North Texas. As the network expands to add new schools and experiences high rates of principal attrition, principal professional development is an area of concern for the network. An average of seven new principals are hired each year, but there is no network-wide approach to or framework for principal professional development. As the network serves nearly 90% students of color, including more than 3,600 Black students, there is a significant need for social justice school leadership development. This need is further justified by the reality that Black students in Texas Charter Academy have historically performed significantly below their White peers on state assessments.

When I first introduced this study and the research questions to Texas Charter Academy principals, I was met with overwhelming positivity. One principal expressed that she was eager to read the results and hoped that the network would take advantage of the results. Another principal shared sometimes feeling like he was “on a ship without a sail” and that this study could result in much-needed direction for principal development. One principal, however, expressed the hope for the study to not be a waste of my time, saying that in her 5 years in the network, she had not seen any evidence that Texas Charter Academy would ever take social justice school leadership seriously, despite 90% of the network’s students being Black or Hispanic.

While some expressed uncertainty about the future utilization of the results, I experienced no resistance to participation in the study. Principals shared openly and willingly about their experiences and were very transparent about their gaps in knowledge and skills. After administration of the survey, I received calls, emails, and text messages from seven principals

thanking me for taking on this research and expressing the impact had on them by completing the survey. One principal stated,

Wow. Thank you for forcing me to think about my students of color and how I am serving them. I tend to think of my campus as a whole, but as I went through this process, I realized that there are some things I could do differently to help the students who need me the most.

This type of reflection is exactly what social justice scholars have argued is necessary to close the Black-White achievement gap.

The results have not yet been shared with Texas Charter Academy, but will be shared prior to the network's summer leadership conference. I am hopeful that this record of study will be viewed by network administrators as useful to advancing their goal of closing the achievement gap and will be fully utilized to develop and implement a solutions-focused response to the problem of principal preparation and the Black-White achievement gap in Texas Charter Academy.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

#### **Summary of Findings**

Before initiating this study, I had a limited understanding of social justice leadership and an even more limited understanding of what it means and what it takes to be a social justice school leader. My perception was that simply being passionate about one's work as a school leader, caring about the larger cultural community one serves, and advocating for one's students makes one an effective social justice school leader. I previously failed to fully consider the depth and breadth of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of effective social justice school leaders. Further, I believed other Texas Charter Academy principals, also charged with closing the achievement gap, to be similarly knowledgeable of and engaging in effective, evidence-based practices and to all hold similar beliefs about the achievement gap.

The survey data reveal that most Texas Charter Academy principals have strong knowledge about the achievement gap, but hold widely varying beliefs about the achievement gap and inconsistently implement practices that they acknowledge to be effective practices for closing the achievement gap. Principals overwhelmingly reported only feeling moderately equipped to close the achievement gaps on their campuses, citing a lack of training and competing priorities as the primary issues of concern. Further, several principals reported desiring targeted professional development and ongoing support to become more effective social justice school leaders. As a charter school, Texas Charter Academy principals are not required to hold principal licensure or to have completed an accredited principal preparation program; none in this study reported having participated in any network preparation programs specifically targeted to their role in closing the achievement gap.

## **Discussion of Results in Relation to the Literature**

While literature on the achievement gap and social justice school leadership abound, the current literature on charter school leadership and principal preparation for social justice school leadership is comparatively scant. Few of the recent studies I examined fully encompass the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of social justice school leaders, and only three actually make recommendations for developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of social justice school leaders. Further, though there is a large body of research around the achievement gap, limited research is available to comprehensively synthesize the principal's role in closing the achievement gap and how to effectively prepare principals for this work. There is abundant literature focusing on leadership practices or skills of effective principals, but less research exists on the combination of knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to significantly improve outcomes for Black students.

According to Theoharis (2008), a deep understanding of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of effective social justice leaders can benefit marginalized students, as these leaders are a model for what is possible. Stafford and Hill-Jackson (2016) explained that the era of standardized testing has resulted in a narrow focus on leadership practices, but it is the right combination of knowledge, skills, *and* dispositions that makes a school leader effective in achieving strong outcomes for students (Haberman & Dill, 1999; Jackson & Kelley, 2002; Theoharis, 2008). Haberman & Dill (1999) explained that it is, indeed, dispositions that drive behaviors.

Given that charter schools enroll higher numbers of Black students than White students, they often function as social justice agents and should be led by social justice school leaders who have and employ the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of effective social justice leaders. The

survey data of principals across Texas Charter Academy reflect a wide range of knowledge, skills, and varying dispositions about the achievement gap and social justice.

First, social justice school leaders are knowledgeable about issues of social justice, namely the achievement gap, and display a high level of cultural competence. Pitre (2014) contended that successfully closing the achievement gap requires that race must be highlighted as the primary factor. She is among a group of scholars who believe that meaningful discussions on the racial achievement gap have been derailed by discussions on poverty, which is not the central issue in Black-student performance, and who contend that the discussion of race and culture must be elevated in schools in order for educators to confront and correct their own biases (Clark et al., 2016; Singleton, 2014). All 14 principals who participated in this study were able to clearly and accurately explain the achievement gap. Some used deficit or nondescript terms such as *students of color*, *subgroup*, or *low socioeconomic status* as part of their narratives on the achievement gap. Largely, however, Texas Charter Academy respondents referenced gaps in opportunity, explained inequitable resource allocation, and explicitly named race in their narratives.

Further, social justice school leaders must be knowledgeable about effective leadership styles for impacting Black-student achievement. According to scholars, instructional leadership and transformational leadership are the most effective leadership styles when leading for social justice. Khalifa et al. (2016) specifically argued for an integration of transactional and instructional leadership styles to most effectively serve Black students and close the Black-White achievement gap. Principals who participated in this study overwhelmingly articulated the understanding that these two leadership styles are effective for social justice school leadership. Of the 14 principals, 5 presented narratives accurately naming an integration or combination of



instructional and transformational leadership styles as most effective for social justice school leadership. Many, though, articulated an incorrect understanding of what transformational leadership is. While most narratives highlighted it as an effective leadership style, there existed in the surveys a prevailing thought that transformational leadership is about turning schools around. While this is partially true, scholars have defined transformational leadership as leadership that highlights the organization's mission above all and focuses on the importance of commitment to that mission (Rahman & Hadi, 2018).

Finally, as instructional leadership is a key lever in closing the achievement gap, a school principal's knowledge of effective instructional pedagogies for Black students is critical in social justice school leadership. Ladson-Billings (2014) concluded that implementing culturally relevant pedagogy, which is integrating students' cultures, beliefs, values, and identities into the learning environment to impact learning, is an effective strategy to bridge the gap between teachers and students of different cultures. Johnson et al. (2011) further explained that critical instructional factors for closing the achievement gap include consistent utilization of evidence-based instructional practices, high levels of student engagement, and a positive classroom climate. Brown et al. (2011) also argued for intentional teacher reflection on instructional practices and a focus on disaggregated student performance as part of instructional monitoring systems.

Overall, Texas Charter Academy principals moderately understand these factors as being essential to closing the achievement gap. The overwhelming majority of the 14 principals explained the value of student engagement and shared appropriate examples. Seven of the 14 principals indicated a positive classroom climate as being a critical factor in Black-student achievement. Only 6 of the 14 principals believe data-driven instruction to be a critical factor,

and only 4 of the 14 believe high-quality, standards-aligned instruction to be a critical factor. One principal explained knowing that all of these factors are important for learning, but not believing that some factors have a greater impact on Black-student achievement.

Effective social justice school leadership is centered in the correct knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Most study participants reported at least moderate knowledge about social justice and the achievement gap, consistent use of effective leadership styles and effective instructional practices, and engagement in practices aligned to this knowledge. The survey data show that even with high levels of knowledge, though, Texas Charter Academy principals do not always utilize evidence-based practices in their leadership. The chief exception to this was community engagement, which is a critical factor in social justice school leadership. Of the factors, community engagement is the factor least committed to by Texas Charter Academy principals. Only 4 of the 14 principals said that they engage with the larger cultural community in which their school is located. One reason given was not wanting to assign the school's success or failure to the community. Another reason given was having not found a meaningful entry point into the community. Finally, another principal explained a significant language barrier as hindering her ability to engage with the community

Among Texas Charter Academy principals, the most significant variation in participant responses was around dispositions. According to research, effective social justice school leaders must have a strong commitment to social justice, a belief in the community they serve, high expectations for students, and a tenacious passion for their work. The participants largely expressed a strong commitment to social justice, but only a moderate sense of efficacy about their ability to close the Black-White achievement gap. This gap between commitment and sense of efficacy represents an opportunity for Texas Charter Academy to intentionally focus on

increasing this sense of efficacy, which may be best accomplished through a strategic principal preparation program that addresses the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of social justice school leaders.

The literature substantiates that few principal preparation programs focus on preparation for social justice school leadership, and even when they do, knowledge and skills are more likely to be a focus for principal preparation programs than dispositions for social justice school leadership. It is a leader's dispositions, though, that actually drive behaviors and actions. When asked what is needed to close the achievement gap, all but two principals gave a response including external factors (factors out of their locus of control), gave a response around their ultimate responsibility as campus executive leader, or gave a response indicating a deficit mentality. Principals noted reasons related to student efficacy, student motivation, professional development for their teachers, at-risk factors, lack of access to mental health resources, salaries, parenting, and programs and intervention groups for Black students. These responses demonstrate that while most Texas Charter Academy principals have strong, positive dispositions about the achievement gap and understand the knowledge and skills for social justice school leadership, they have not fully internalized their role in closing the achievement gap. All but one principal shared that the principal is responsible for closing the achievement gap, but their narrative responses contradicted this belief.

### **Discussion of Personal Lessons Learned**

Conducting action research during the process of completing this record of study allowed me significant opportunities for learning and discovery about myself, the content of my research, and the research process itself. Most importantly, I learned that I am deeply thoughtful and reflective and that while I can think and reflect without preparation or organization, I cannot

write without feeling that I am sufficiently prepared to articulate my thoughts in writing. As I struggled to meet personal deadlines with my research, I saw a clear distinction in my writing when I felt prepared and fully invested in what I needed to produce versus when I felt the pressure of meeting a deadline. During this process, I frequently found myself thinking about specific students whom I had taught or worked with as a principal, which sometimes prompted me to write when I was not feeling particularly compelled. This may be because I was engaging in transformative work or because I found my record-of-study work to be very personal.

I also learned that there are reasons that we, as people, do not always do what we know to do. This knowing-doing gap is not necessarily rooted in apathy or lack of commitment. It is sometimes rooted in the presence of systemic barriers or conflicting organizational priorities, and as principals, we do not always have the liberty of choosing what we know to do in our schools over what we are told we have to do. Many of the principals who participated in my research expressed incredible knowledge about the achievement gap, despite not having participated in a formal principal preparation program or having received any formal education or training on leadership for social justice; however, despite significant levels of knowledge, most reported not regularly implementing identified best practices for closing the achievement gap.

After an extensive review of the extant literature, discussions with my peers, analysis of the survey data, and reflection on my own school leadership experiences, I learned that the principalship is one of the most complex roles in education and that adding social justice school leadership to this already complex role is necessary for closing Black-White achievement gap. Further, I learned that without systemic supports in place to support social justice school leadership, principals feel limited in their ability to have a far-reaching impact. The principals who participated in this study are overwhelmingly committed to being effective leaders, but

largely feel powerless to impact the system and overturn systemic inequity. As I reflected on their perspectives and an experience I recently had in Berlin, Germany, exploring perspectives on the Holocaust, I realized that it is, indeed, the work we do every day that will dismantle these oppressive and inequitable systems that have persisted for decades and have denied Black students equal opportunity and access to an excellent education. The work we do each day in our communities, on our campuses, and with our students is the work that will impact their lives. These are our acts of resistance. This is our impact.

Finally, regarding the research process itself, I learned the importance of knowing what one wants to know. I refined my research questions countless times through this process. As I read, reflected, wrote, revised, and read more, I had more questions than I had at the beginning of the research process. A former mentor once suggested to me that I select a research topic that is important to me, but not one that I am passionate about. I was initially stumped by this recommendation, but the deeper I dove into the research, the more I found myself asking more questions, identifying more problems, and wanting to learn more about the topic. This research is very personal to me, and I had to learn to separate myself from the research at times so that I could actually get it done.

### **Recommendations**

The literature recommends explicit preparation for social justice school leadership so that principals begin their work having developed the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for effective social justice school leadership. Although some principals enter the principalship with a strong commitment to social justice, they may lack the skills to actualize social justice school leadership. Or while some principals enter the principalship with strong knowledge about social justice school leadership, they hold misaligned beliefs that may prevent them from actually

implementing the evidence-based leadership practices that will improve Black-student achievement. Texas Charter Academy serves more than 3,600 Black students across the network of schools. In all schools, Black-student performance is far below that of White students in the network and across the State of Texas. Theoharis (2008) argued that a deep understanding of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of effective social justice leaders can benefit marginalized students, as these leaders are a model for what is possible. Further, Allen et al. (2017) found that a focused social justice curriculum can positively affect the development of social justice dispositions and specifically argued for including a social justice-oriented curriculum in principal preparation programs.

Many of the Texas Charter Academy principals articulated strong knowledge of social justice issues in education. A moderate number shared that they consistently utilize the practices and skills of effective social justice school leadership. Few, however, gave narrative responses reflecting all three dispositions for effective social justice school leadership. Texas Charter Academy does not require principals to have completed a formal principal preparation program. Based on the research in this study, principals in Texas Charter Academy could benefit from implementing a principal professional development program for principals focused on developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to execute effective social justice school leadership, which may accelerate Texas Charter's Academy goal of closing the Black-White achievement gap. Given the apparent discrepancy between knowledge and utilization of this knowledge to implement effective skills and practices, a key initial focus should be on developing the dispositions of social justice school leaders. Ensuring that Texas Charter Academy principals are committed to social justice, have positive belief about the cultural community they serve, and are passionate could affect their behaviors as school leaders. Specific

recommendations for areas of focus are outlined in Table 5 and are also supplied in further detail in the Appendix.

**Table 5**

*Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions for Effective Social Justice School Leadership*

Knowledge	Skills	Dispositions
Instructional and transformational leadership styles	Instructional coaching and developing of teachers	Commitment to social justice Passion
The achievement gap / social justice in education	Community engagement/ connection	High expectations and positive beliefs about larger community/cultural commitment
Effective instructional practices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student engagement</li> <li>• Positive classroom climate</li> <li>• Teacher reflection on Black-student performance</li> <li>• Culturally responsive pedagogy</li> <li>• Evidence-based instructional strategies</li> </ul>	Critical reflection on leadership practices Modeling beliefs and desired behaviors Building strong relationships and school culture	

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## APPENDIX A

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEXAS CHARTER ACADEMY

Texas Charter Academy should develop and implement a principal preparation program focused on social justice school leadership (McKenzie et al., 2008):

- Structured as a year-long, cohort style based on entry point into the principalship (Barnett et al., 2000; Jackson & Kelley, 2002)
- Including a combination of mentoring, classroom learning, and experiential learning (Haberman & Dill, 1999; Jackson & Kelley, 2002)
  - Experienced, successful social justice mentor principals to support new Texas Charter Academy principals
  - Social justice school leadership curriculum as part of monthly director learning labs
  - Social justice projects and initiatives as part of each campus's strategic priority planning
- Developed around and following an explicit social justice curriculum (Furman, 2012; Jackson & Kelley, 2002; Manaseri & Manaseri, 2017)
  - Focus on knowledge, skills, and dispositions of effective social justice school leaders (Furman, 2012; Haberman, 1999; Stafford & Hill-Jackson, 2016)
    - Knowledge for social justice school leadership
      - > Instructional and transformational leadership styles
      - > Social justice in education / the achievement gap

- Skills for social justice school leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016; Kowalchuk, 2019)
  - > Instructional coaching and developing of teachers
  - > Community engagement
  - > Critical reflection
  - > Modeling beliefs
  - > Building strong and trusting relationships
- Dispositions for social justice school leadership (Allen, Harper, & Koschorek, 2017; Haberman & Dill, 1999; Theoharis, 2008)
  - > Strong commitment to student learning and social justice
  - > Passion
  - > High expectations for and belief in the larger cultural community

APPENDIX B  
SURVEY

1. How long have you been a school principal?
2. How long have you served in your current role?
3. What is your gender identity?
4. What is your racial identity?
5. What is your age?
6. Explain the context of your school leadership experience.
7. How do you define the achievement gap?
8. Describe the achievement gap on your campus.
9. Which leadership style(s) are most effective in closing the achievement gap and promoting high achievement for Black students: managerial leadership, instructional leadership, transformational leadership, distributive leadership, a combination of styles (specifically which styles), etc.? Explain your answer.
10. Which instructional factors are most effective in closing the achievement gap and promoting high achievement for Black students: student engagement, formative assessment, positive classroom climate, effective direct instruction, targeted interventions for Black students, extended learning time, data-driven instruction, student data tracking and reflection, teacher reflection on instructional practices? Explain your answer.
11. Which of the following leadership practices are most effective in closing the achievement gap and promoting high achievement for Black students: data-driven decision making,



instructional coaching, observation and feedback, collaborative decision making, professional development, other? Explain your answer.

12. Which of the following factors are most present in your personal leadership: passion, commitment to social justice, compassion, reflection, spirituality, self-efficacy, community engagement, cultural competence? Explain your answer.
13. Which leadership style(s) do you most often utilize on your campus? Explain why and how.
14. What leadership practices do you regularly employ to close the achievement gap? Explain why.
15. What is your role in closing the achievement gap on your campus? Explain why.
16. How equipped do you feel to close the achievement gap on your campus? Explain your answer.
17. What do you believe is needed to close the achievement gap in schools? Explain your answer.
18. What personal leadership factors/dispositions contribute to closing the achievement gap: passion, commitment to social justice, compassion, reflection, spirituality, self-efficacy, community engagement?
19. Describe the information, training, and development you have received from Texas Charter Academy to prepare you to be an effective social justice school leader and lead the work of closing the achievement gap on your campus.
20. What training, information, and development do you need to prepare you to be an effective social justice school leader and lead the work of closing the achievement gap on your campus?