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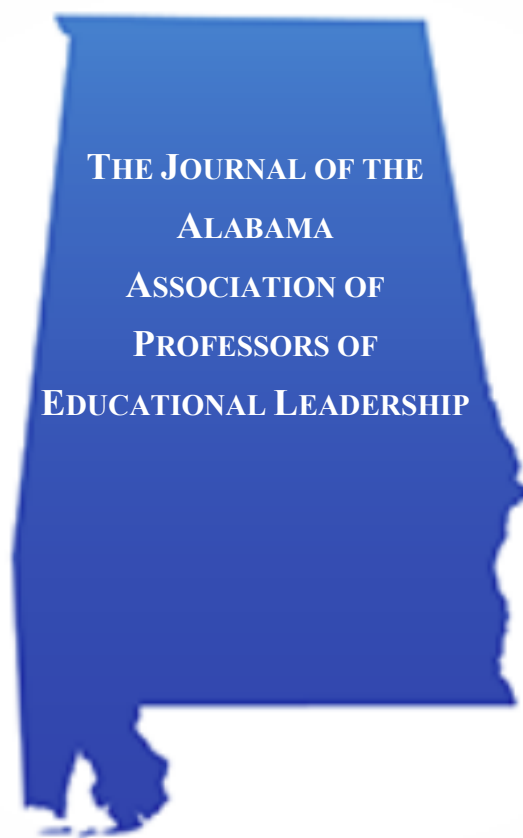

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TORCHBEARER LEADERSHIP:

A CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR LEADING CHALLENGING SCHOOLS

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Abstract

School leaders find it extremely hard to lead effectively without a model designed specifically to provide effective leadership in the best interest of students. This study examines the unanswered question as to how to lead successful turnaround efforts in challenging schools today. A critical analysis of studies found the absence of an effective leadership model for urban and rural school leaders. We sought to develop a new model to answer the guiding question of how to effectively lead urban and rural school leaders presented with a unique challenge.. The Torchbearer leadership model, developed from this study, could be a conceptual process as an option for urban and rural principals who are struggling to lead challenging schools.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that effective leadership is very challenging in terms of leading an educational organization through difficult times or change, especially when there is so much that is not fully understood about effective leadership (Leithwood, 2003). Educational leadership embodies the totality of vision, implementation, and successful outcomes. Essentially, leaders create the vision, execute the strategies that make the vision a reality, and follow through to ensure that things are done the right way (Hoerr, 2005). When implementing these strategies, urban and rural principals ought to have the audacity to lead and be deliberate changing the academic performance of economically disadvantaged students (Tajalli & Opheim, 2005) and failing schools. Urban and rural principals should take ownership of the current affairs which reside in urban and rural schools. These affairs include but are not limited to the academically unprepared student (Barnes, 2010). In addition, these affairs include the academic achievement gap between African American students and Hispanic students in relationship to their Caucasian peers (Barnes, 2010), the lack of parental support (Topper et al., 2010) and the threats of sanctions from local and state policymakers on low performing schools (Chiang, 2009). Yet, Bridwell (2012) found that the use of "high-stakes testing, and accountability mandates are experienced disproportionately in high poverty urban schools" are detrimental (p. 53).

Despite all the societal roadblocks and obstacles, students face in and out of the home, there is an opportunity for principals who lead struggling schools to turn their schools around. The opportunity to turn their schools around is through leadership in the best interest of students. Leithwood and Strauss (2010) surmised that the affairs in urban and rural schools present a unique mission and character in leading effective turnaround efforts. Nevertheless, the possibility is present and reasonable if principals in charge of difficult schools would take ownership of their challenges and lead with the intent to overcome them. By doing so, these principals can use their knowledge regarding the plight of their schools and what effective practices yielding positive change to begin building the bridge towards success.

Statement of the Problem

Manufacturing sustainable change in urban and rural schools is very daunting for principals. Hewitt and Reitzug (2015) found that "out of every 1,000 turnaround-designates schools, less than 25% were able to improve their achievement in one year significantly, and only 1% was able to sustain significant improvement over two years" (p. 20). However, the research gap appears to study effective leadership models for urban and rural school leaders to lead successful turnaround campaigns without an axiomatic leadership model to answer the bell for failing schools.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to examine principals' lived experiences and describe their characteristics that led to successful turnaround efforts. Also, this study attempted to conceptualize these characteristics into an effective leadership model for principals to implement that would yield turnaround results in challenging schools.

Review of the Literature

This phenomenological study aimed to examine the commonalities among successful Torchbearer principals in Alabama. Moreover, the discovery of potential and effective leadership model for leaders in challenging urban and rural schools were cultivated by the literature review that did not accurately provide sufficient evidence to support the notion that current leadership models are effective in challenging urban and rural schools.

Furthermore, current literature illustrates how educational leadership experts have discussed effective leadership without truly answering the general question of how urban and rural school leaders can lead effective turnaround campaigns without the appropriate leadership model to do so? Therefore, this review will show that available literature surrounding school leadership does not accurately address the need for a leadership model that is required to aid schools in turnarounds efforts in urban and rural areas. In addition, literature regarding leadership models was very limited. According to Hewitt and Reitzug (2015), the empirical research available on turnaround was "scant" (p. 21), and Herman et al.'s (2008) analysis of empirical research on turnaround described it as "sparse" (p. 4). As a result, the discussion of an effective leadership model for urban and rural leaders remains vague, if not absent. Lastly, this review of literature was developed from a systemic review of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, electronic sources, presentations, and published and unpublished dissertations. The literature presented is relevant to the purpose of this study.

Leithwood (2003) revealed what the educational leadership community knew about successful school leadership. Leithwood referenced that school leaders must navigate their schools through the maze of complex infrastructure entities posed by school districts, such as curriculum standards, benchmarks, and any other policy directed or given by the district. Also, Leithwood (2003) mentioned the disparities in incomes, cultural backgrounds, and diversity which adversely impacted school leaders' ability to lead effectively. Leithwood stated that "principals must respond to increasing diversity in student characteristics, including cultural background and immigration status, income disparities, physical and mental disabilities, and variation in learning capacities" (p. 1). Nevertheless, these disparities, among other things, negatively impact school leadership and prevent urban and rural principals from leading successful turnaround campaigns. Principals cannot lead urban or rural schools without an innovative and creative model to overcome obstacles that were identified 15 years ago. However, he contended that there is no acceptable answer that will address the prevalent issue of leading successful turnaround efforts in historically failing schools to date.

Leithwood and Strauss (2010) presented the evidence that successful turnaround efforts began in stages but only to a fault. However, several underlying variables must be considered before congregating all failing schools into a category where Leithwood and Strauss' proverbial four stages would apply. For example, educational leadership theorists often refer to schools in mainstream society, which typically do not include urban schools because these schools are predominantly Latino or African American, where effective leadership is most needed.

Hitt et al. (2018) proclaimed that, "leadership may be even more important in chronically low-performing schools" (p. 57). Schools the mainstream are predominantly white, and administrators in these schools see an increase in diversity as negatively impacting the success of their schools.

According to Leithwood (2003), many school leaders work with student populations that are increasingly diverse and that may not be experiencing success in school. This includes children who are from low-income families or whose cultural background or characteristics fall outside of the mainstream (for example, native people or recent immigrants, children with physical handicaps, and Latinos or African Americans). Many principals leading schools that are predominantly Latino and/or African America believe the schools they lead do not fit into the mainstream, therefore, evoking the need for a leadership model ideally for urban and rural schools.

Leithwood and Strauss (2010) introduced leadership lessons in which they ascertained successful turnaround efforts happen in "stages." They identified *direction-setting* as stage one, in terms of goal setting, which emerged from district mandates in Ontario Schools. Districts set goals that are marginal at best. Moreover, Salina et al. (2017) espoused the idea that in establishing his leadership team's guiding principles, they must begin with expectations in composing a three-prong framework that abetted their effort toward school improvement. In Salina et al.'s (2017) framework, "academic press, social support, and relational trust" were at the epicenter of their journey towards school improvement and change (p. 68). In interpreting Salina et al. guiding principles, first, it must be understood that the precepts in academic press, social support, and relational trust are simply setting expectations, helping people, and building on the expertise of others. Even though the framework is successful, urban and rural school leaders need more. Given the immense complexities of their educational organization, in terms of an effective leadership model, urban and rural school leaders need more in their quest to turn around failing schools.

In 2010, Leithwood and Strauss also claimed that "efforts to better understand the nature of successful school turnaround processes would do well to begin with a focus on successful school turnaround leadership" (p. 2). Years earlier, Leithwood (2003) purported those principals use a combination of leadership styles to find success. According to Leithwood, "principals exert leadership through constellations of actions that coalesce around different 'models' of leadership, including transformational, instructional, moral, or participative leadership" (p. 3). However, none of the models fit the unique challenges of failing urban and rural schools. Leithwood went on to conclude that leadership can take "different forms in different context" (p. 7). There is a myriad of examples that can be haggled, but the mere inclusion of all urban and rural schools in the same context of Turnaround Leadership is inconclusive.

Unlike Leithwood and Strauss, Green-Gibson and Collett (2014) proposed a call for change in urban schools by saying the "ability to address effectively the cultural and educational needs of African-American students must require leadership stakeholders, teacher educators, teachers, and counselors to work collaboratively to reform and develop appropriate educational approaches" (p. 1)

In addition, Irby (2014) acknowledges that, "Leadership practices that occur within these schools (urban) reflect school leadership" (p. 1). Irby (2014) proclaimed that education research neglects to examine the leadership challenges that are associated with urban schools and the leadership practices needed to improve urban schools. According to Irby (2014), "education researchers examine anything and everything" (p. 2) but leadership "related to the education of children who live in poverty regardless of where they live or the education of children who live within city limits" (p. 2). Likewise, Green-Gibson and Collett (2014) concluded that "African-American students who attend mainstream (European-centered) public schools… are failing at a higher rate" (p. 1). Thereby, a different and more appropriate leadership model is needed to provide

leaders of urban and rural schools, in terms of different contexts apart from mainstream schools, a model to lead turnaround efforts effectively and successfully.

There are educational leadership proponents who tend to congregate all failing schools into one category with their rendition of a solution. For example, Murphy (2010) summed up that "all failing schools are not worth saving" (p. 93). To restate a previous assertion, he issued a caveat stating "let me be clear that, when I talk about a school failing, I am not talking about the students and their families. It is the school that has failed" (p. 93). Murphy (2010) suggests that the leadership, teachers, and staff have failed.

In Murphy's defense, he pointed out that leadership "is seen as a central variable in the equation of organizational success" (2010, p. 94). Yet, he did not attempt to provide any coefficients that would lead to success in turning around failing schools. Identifying a problem without providing a solution does not provide an opportunity to address the problem. To clarify Murphy's perspective on failing schools, he surmised there are approximately nine elements educational leaders must consider to successfully turn around failing schools. Murphy's elements included "focusing on leadership, acting quickly, diagnosing before selecting a remedy, emphasizing efficiency, centralizing operations, recognizing limitations, focusing on core lines of work, and creating hope through vision" (p. 94). Consequently, these findings do not address the specific needs of urban and rural leadership. Murphy and Leithwood (2010) suggest findings from their studies are consistent with the educational leadership literature and would direct practitioners to the broader literature on organizational leadership to answer the failing school question. Furthermore, they are convinced that their efforts should be "a source of confidence for school leaders aiming to inform their practice with the best available evidence" (p. 29). In contrast, with respect to their efforts, Murphy and Leithwood's findings should not be applied as a source because Urban and Rural schools' leaders were not included in the conversation regarding turnaround leadership and what practices, if any, work best. Murphy (2010) believed failing schools should be closed, but closing those schools, it will have an enormous and negative impact on the communities those schools serve while creating new issues for neighboring districts and communities.

Contrastingly, Stein (2012) compared school leaders and teachers to doctors and nurses. Stein clarified that schools need to be saved just the same as patients need to be saved in hospitals. Moreover, he exemplified the need to find "the right school leaders" who will have "a sense of urgency" to save schools that have been labeled as failing (p. 53). Stein provided evidence that concurs with expectations being at the forefront of strategies needed to turn around failing schools. According to Stein (2012), "When I was challenged with turning around a failing school, my first act was to take charge and let everyone know my expectations" (p. 53). Furthermore, Stein championed his belief in distributing leadership roles and responsibilities at an acceptable point during the turnaround process when those opportunities present themselves. He believed, "collaborative leadership comes later, when you have the luxury of time" (p. 53). Stein responded to previous literature with a deliberate approach to changing the academic performance of failing schools. Stein surmised that there are other principals experiencing turnaround success and shared that the school leader is the focal point in beginning the turnaround process.

For instance, successful turnaround principals as illustrated by Kafele (2018), acknowledge that there are successful principals who accept the challenge to improve the academic and cultural performances of failing schools. Kafele proclaimed, "these leaders exist, but I put them in the category of special, visionary, and driven people…" who have committed themselves to

developing their school leadership skills (p. 23). Similarly, Leithwood and Strauss (2010) declared that to improve our comprehension surrounding the complex dynamics of turnaround leadership, we must direct our attention to successful turnaround leadership examples. In contrast, Kafele (2018) recognized that the existence of successful turnaround principals' accomplishments is exceptional and deserving of categorization. This category of exceptional turnaround principals, which would include Torchbearer leaders, would potentially provide a concept to unlock a potential leadership model for struggling urban and rural school leaders. It is this type of leadership model that would aid besieged urban and rural leaders that Kafele described as any "well-intentioned leader who is doing all that he or she can do to stay afloat" (2018, p. 23).

Methods

The participants in this study were three principals and nine teachers from three different urban schools across the state of Alabama that have been designated as Torchbearer schools. Torchbearer Schools are high-poverty public schools that have overcome the odds to become high-performing school according to the Alabama Department of Education (Eleven Alabama Schools Named Torchbearer Schools, n.d.). The participants were chosen by employing a purposive sampling method that is best used with a low number of participants in a group of individuals which is sufficient for understanding human perceptions, problems, needs, behaviors, and contexts, to whom are the central rationalization for qualitative research (Bailey, 1994). Moreover, this sampling method was adopted to recruit the principals, as it "seeks to capitalize on the variations of experiences and descriptions using participants from contrasting "milieus and backgrounds" (Hallberg 2006, p. 143).

The data were collected by a constructed interview method using the "repertory grid" technique. This technique can best be characterized as a semi-structured interview (face-to-face, computerized, or phone interview) where participants are addressed with a series of questions in which they were asked to specify some important ways in which the leadership characteristics are alike and, thereby, different from previous leadership experiences (Bailey, 1994; Kerkhof, 2006).

We used qualitative semi-structured interviews which allowed for questions to be asked that provided a space for open responses from the participants regarding their experiences with principals of Torchbearer schools. According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn, (2019), semi-structure interviews can be used in an academic setting. These semi-structured interviews open the space for both inductive and deductive reasoning in evaluation. Using semi-structured interviews is purposeful in gathering information from participants in the study who have personal experiences, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs regarding the phenomenon that is Torchbearer leadership (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). In addition, the structure of the questions permitted the conceptual framework of Torchbearer leadership to develop, while the open-ended nature of the questions created the space for explanations as to why the phenomenon of successful leadership might have occurred in Torchbearer schools (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

The data were collected by using the following steps. In step one, an e-mail was sent to the principals and teachers to inform them about the purpose of the study. The principals and teachers were asked if they could participate in this research voluntarily. Consent to participate in this study was reached when those who were invited to participate in the research was assured of the confidentiality of the data collected from them and its safe keeping of the data. Those who were invited to participate in this study were informed that their identities would be anonymous, and

their names would not be revealed in any part of the study or shared. Step two, interviews were scheduled and mutually agreed upon with those who accepted the invitation. The participants were visited on the dates previously scheduled. The semi-structured interviews were recorded by audiotape and written notes were taken with the participants' permission. Each semi-structured interview took approximately 50-60 minutes to conduct.

A phenomenological design was appropriately used to recognize the need for an effective leadership model based on the findings presented in this study. Torchbearer principals are school leaders, typically in urban and rural areas in the state of Alabama, who have led successful turnaround efforts in their schools. Data derived from observations of Torchbearer school leaders were transcribed and analyzed to identify common themes among the participating principals. This study sought to determine the essential leadership characteristics that originated from the experiences of successful principals in urban and rural school settings. The collection and labeling of characteristics of Torchbearer principals in this study would potentially lead to the discovery of a new leadership model for struggling principals in similar urban and rural areas.

Principals who led schools that were designated as Torchbearer Schools served more than two years as principal, and were located in or near Birmingham, Montgomery, or Mobile areas were selected. Teachers who served under the leadership of sampled principals were veteran educators who have served more than 10 years as a teacher. The description of the participants resulted in purposive sampling. Additionally, the researcher wanted to discover, understand, and gain insight from the Torchbearer principals' lived experiences. Specifically, the researcher wanted to capture the essence of the "lived" (Hatch, 2002, p. 30) leadership experience of principals who led turnaround efforts at struggling schools. Moreover, the purpose of the design for this study is to "convince the educational leadership community, of "a general phenomenon" (Yin, 1994, p.9) that is Torchbearer Leadership. The rigor of this study was maximized using triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, and an audit trail. Repeated analyses of transcripts and observations were used to allow for common themes to emerge (Creswell, 2007).

Results

Several themes emerged from this study that were common to all Torchbearer principals. The following analysis used the tenets of transformational and instructional leadership to illuminate the characteristics, behaviors, and practices of Torchbearer principals in high-poverty, high performing schools. This study provides a discussion of how these findings can become practice through a conceptual model for urban and rural school leaders. The identified themes in this study were *Expectations, Provider, Empowerment, Collaboration, Openness, and Data Driven.*

Expectations

This first theme emerged as a characteristic that was seen in all three Torchbearer principals. Each of them expected students to succeed and teachers to provide quality instruction. All three principals, each of them expressed the importance of clear expectations. One principal stated,

> I think that I inspect what I expect. I do not think I am a 'snoopervisor' (*term used by participating principal. This term refers to not snooping on teachers while supervising*

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their work), but if it is a priority for me, it will be a priority for them. One of the first things I learned when I become a principal was that you could not assume anything.

The commonality among the principals was communicating expectations effectively. Communicating expectations was part of the turnaround process. Expectations would not be effective for teachers without the supervision component. Moreover, expectations were monitored to ensure goals were met and teachers knew the importance of maintaining high levels of standards. On the other hand, 'expectations' emerged as number one in the quest to turn around failing schools. Those expectations became more of a personal testament by the participating principals in their belief in students and teachers to overcome the challenges each school faced.

Provider

Providing resources to teachers during the turnaround process was instrumental to their success as Torchbearer principals. Both principals and teachers knew that to improve the instructional program they needed resources. Teachers viewed their principals who provided resources as a provider which to them was a sign of strength as a leader. One teacher recalled,

> She finds the financial resources if there is something that we need to get it into our hands. Generosity would be another characteristic as there are times when she will pay for things out of her own pocket if it is not within the budget. If a child does not have something, she goes out and gets out and gets it whether it's tennis shoes or educational materials.

The principals in this study communicated in their own language that they recognized areas of opportunity and provided support and resources in various forms to teachers and students.

Empowerment

A third theme emerged during this study which described the participants advocating for teachers to take ownership of the turnaround process. The promotion of taking ownership extended to teachers, students, and parents. Torchbearer principals knew that empowering teachers would encourage, if not evoke, a willingness to go above and beyond what was expected of them to improve the academic performances of students. One principal responded,

> This is not a job that is done in isolation. You must trust people and be able to delegate. If you try to do it all by yourself, you are going to die. I trust all the people in this building, but I depend on the building experts heavily. Hopefully, we empower each other. By empowering the lead teachers, they take the lead in helping me make sure that everything is being implemented. If there is a problem, we work together in solving the problem. They are immediate support to teachers, but I hope that most of our teachers feel empowered.

The principals all indicated that empowerment allowed them to promote leadership, build relationships, increase trust, and ensure ownership in student achievement.

Collaboration

The theme of Collaboration harnessed the Torchbearer principals' ability to network and employ attractive people skills which catapulted these principals to lead high-poverty, high-performing schools effortlessly. Teachers from all three school sites shared similar perceptions and experiences about their principals. As a result, one teacher responded,

> She brings in her teachers' opinions. There has never been a school year where… …we have not gotten together as a team. She has consulted with the experts in the building; she does not make decisions on her own. Subscribes to the philosophy that school is part of the community and not separate from that community.

All the principals in this study shared the view and/or perspective on the importance of achieving student success despite the societal challenges present at each school through collaboration with parents and the community.

Openness

In this study, openness was defined as being honest and open about the dire conditions and situations their schools were in. These Torchbearer principals were honest about how the crime rate, poverty, and lack of environmental resources negatively impacted their schools. More importantly, they were honest about their academic achievement levels as well. However, teachers expressed how their principals took the time to listen to them and community stakeholders. Thus, making them open to going against the grain to achieve student success. For example, one teacher stated,

> The fact that she is open to change [determines instructional effectiveness]. I feel that when the administrator is open to change, the faculty feels like they have a placement in what is going on. They feel like they are involved, and their ideas are being taken into consideration.

Data Driven

Data meetings, analyzing student data, and adjusting curriculum based on indicators from student data were all common among the Torchbearer principal observed in this study. All the Torchbearer principals studied wholeheartedly believed that data drives instruction. One can witness their belief by simply walking the halls and seeing student data displayed on the walls, hallways, the principal's office, and data meeting rooms. One principal stated,

> Everything in the building is transparent data. Anyone can walk into the building and see that our data [are] visible. We look at data on Tuesdays and Thursdays when we have our specified data review meetings to make decisions to help those students achieve.

> Data drives our instruction, and we have weekly data meetings.

> We are a big data-driven school. Everything is all about data.

The principals in this study all expressed in their own words how they are data-driven and use data to make informed data-driven decisions to positively impact student performances.

Discussion

The findings of this study present Torchbearer principals and their leadership characteristics as a different, yet unique framework that would benefit all school leaders in urban and rural areas in terms of a conceptualized leadership model. Myran and Sutherland (2019) surmised that what is "needed in the field of educational administration and leadership is an unpacking of the constraining foundation" of leadership for schools' leaders and start "reframing

the narrative" around the possibilities the Torchbearer leadership model can provide as an effective model to serve failing schools (p. 661).

Moreover, the findings suggest that the conditions in high poverty and low-performing schools provide an ideal opportunity for a differentiated leadership, such as Torchbearer Leadership, to embark on a mission to address the need to turnaround low-performing schools (Duke, et. al., 2007). The commonality among the characteristics that were identified in the study has some resemblance to traditional leadership models such as Transformational and Instructional leadership but does not encapsulate the essence of the models themselves. Furthermore, the commonalities of the characteristics do provide a platform to usher in a potentially new model to lead turnaround efforts based on the characteristics of the studied Torchbearer principals. By the same token, this study demonstrates that effective leadership, such as Torchbearer Leadership, can overcome the challenges of turning around low-performing schools with a specific set of skills that are above and beyond what typical school leaders possess (Duke, et. al, 2007).

As a result, this study of Torchbearer principals has conceptualized Torchbearer leadership which embodies tenets of the effective communicator of expectations, empowerment, provider, collaborator, openness advocate, and a driver of data to enhance the instructional programs of the schools they lead. Burns (1978) argued that organizational leaders employing these tenets would exert an influence and motivation that produce benefits for continued positive behavior. Burns (1978) further suggested that leaders who have trust and confidence in their subordinates inspire them to reach goals of a shared vision. In other words, Torchbearer Leaders possess the ability to motivate teachers through mutually beneficial expectations which inspire them to set and meet a shared vision of excellence when turning around low-performing schools.

After analysis of the commonalities among the Torchbearer principals, the researcher found that when these behavioral descriptions were amalgamated, the result was a desirable approach to leading turnaround efforts in schools experiencing consistent underperformance, particularly in urban and rural areas. Teachers in Torchbearer schools shared common experiences when being led by a Torchbearer principal. These descriptive experiences were grouped into four categories: (1) the torchbearer principal as a provider, (2) the torchbearer principal who empowers, (4) the torchbearer principal as a collaborator, and (4) the torchbearer principal who is open. Once employed, teachers experienced significant incremental growth in student achievement which is identified by the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) as Torchbearer School.

As a provider, the Torchbearer principal marshal their personal resources, building resources, district resources, and community resources to provide support to teachers and staff. These resources are used to address student needs and provide instructional and professional development opportunities for teachers to increase the quality of instruction to all students. By doing so, the Torchbearer principal can achieve the vision and goal of the school. Principals as resource providers is documented in the literature. For example, Jenkins (2009) wrote that "effective instructional leaders need to be resource providers" (p. 36). An earlier study conducted by Smith and Andrews (1989) found that successful principals are good at acquiring needed materials. Later, Leithwood, et. al. (2012) surmised that in the preparation of educational leaders an interactive approach is optimal because it enables them to confront the conflicting pressures they face. Furthermore, Leithwood, et. al (2012) espoused that this development of school leaders equips them to "respond to the needs and pressures for change and development" (p. 13). The Torchbearer principal role in the development of the teachers and staff permits the schools to provide resources necessary to meet the needs for an effective culture and climate in a learning

environment. Thus, confirming the provider attribute is consistent with effective leadership in schools.

When the Torchbearer principal empowered their teachers, these teachers felt included in the environment, the decision-making process, and the overall success of the school. The teachers began to develop deep compassion for the work being done to help students. During the observation, it was apparent there was a level of trust between the faculty and staff. In addition, based on the behaviors of the principal and the teachers, there existed shared compassion for their students. of the schools. Trust is an important element in empowerment. Torchbearer principals view trust as a cornerstone in the culture and climate of a school. Especially, when building these relationships among teacher leaders in a school designated as a Torchbearer school. Moye et al., (2005), found that "teachers who perceived that they were empowered in their work environments had higher levels of interpersonal trust in their principals" (p. 260.). From the outside looking in, Torchbearer principals can be seen building capacity through coaching. Torchbearer principals coach their teachers to be teacher leaders in the building. The literature provides another perspective regarding empowerment that coincides with the notion of building teacher leaders through empowerment. For example, Maxfield and Flumerfelt (2009) wrote "it is possible for principals to contribute to teacher leader development within the context of the daily activities and interactions of a school environment and improve the culture of the school simultaneously" (p. 46).

Torchbearer principal as a collaborator is seen as most effective in terms of moving the school towards its desired goals. By working with the faculty, the Torchbearer principal share in the decision-making process. Torchbearer principals tend to rely on the expertise of the teachers when making instructional decisions for the school, assessments, problem-solving and peer-to-peer professional development. Collaboration is an effective tool during the process of a school reaching its desired goals. The Wallace Foundation (2013) found that "leaders also looked for ways to encourage collaboration, paying special attention to how school time is allocated" (p. 10). Collaboration between the principals and teachers has worked in concert through shared leadership to reach a vision and goal decided upon through the shared decision-making process. The Wallace Foundation concluded that "when principals and teachers share leadership, teachers' working relationships with one another are stronger and student achievement is higher" (p. 10). As a result of this collaboration, Torchbearer schools increased student achievement has been obtained and sustained over a period of three years according to the ALSDE which gives that distinction.

The Torchbearer principals are open due to their willingness to be transparent. Torchbearer principals are not afraid to share with their teachers the conditions and obstacles that Torchbearer principals face on a day-to-day basis. Also, Torchbearer principals are willing to be honest about how difficult the situation might get before the situation improves. However, Torchbearer principals have managed to convey the importance of connectedness and working together to overcome challenges. The literature points out the pitfalls of transparency but provides a glimmer of hope that transparency can bring. LaFee (2019) stated that school leaders "fear practices that promote openness might undermine their power and position" (p. 1). On the other hand, Torchbearer principals do not share the same sentiments of fear because they believe openness promotes trust in their teachers and community. Michael Fullan (2003) points out that leaders must actively develop sharing of information, tell the truth, admit mistakes, give, and receive constructive feedback, maintain confidentiality, and speak with the good purpose.

Expectations and data-driven decision-making are normal outliers of the Torchbearer leadership model because they are behaviors that instructional leadership-focused principals share. Both characteristics are observed in principals utilizing the instructional and transformational leadership models. However, the exhibiting of these behaviors does not constitute a rehashing of traditional leadership models from the 1980s but merely an acknowledgment that they exist in Torchbearer principals. Smith and Andrews (1989) mentioned that "the effective principal is actively involved in all aspects of the instructional program, sets expectations for continuous improvement…" (p. 21). Expectations and using data to make informed instructional decisions are not new developments in educational leadership. However, expectations and data-driven decisions are the foundations on which the conceptual Torchbearer leadership model is constructed on. The effective Torchbearer principal seems to be able to blend and balance the elements of traditional models along with characteristics that developed out of this study and coalesced them into four elements that are essential to Torchbearer Principals' leadership: (1) provider of resources, (2) collaborator, (3) empowers others and (4) openness.

Implications of Study

This study on Torchbearer leadership will benefit urban and rural schools where leading these schools is the most challenging. Urban and rural school leaders cannot lead effective turnaround efforts in failing schools because the educational leadership community has given band-aids and not a remedy to combat the systemic and cultural epidemic in urban and rural educational leadership. Myrna and Sutherland (2019) found that the educational leadership community has supported the notion that leadership is only second to teaching which was an identified improvement from earlier assertions that suggested leadership accounted for 3% to 5% of the variation in student learning. Furthermore, to improve the quality of leadership in urban and rural schools, educational leaders must provide an alternative professional leadership practice for those leaders. To do so, it is imperative that educational leaders (1) understand the meaning of Torchbearer leadership as a viable option, (2) develop professional development opportunities on Torchbearer leadership for districts who have schools in need of a turnaround, (3) development cohorts designed to select and educate principals who can perform as Torchbearer Leaders, and (4) implement supervision, evaluation, and Torchbearer development models that will allow school districts to make decisions regarding the achievement of their current group of principals.

Torchbearer leadership has answered the call to focus on 'successful' turnaround leadership and improve student performances. In fact, Torchbearer leadership is derived out of the study of successful principals in urban and rural areas in the state of Alabama known as Torchbearer principals. The urban and rural south present a unique set of challenges that are, what most would consider, normal. Overcoming culturally embedded behaviors that impact the overall performance of the school is a daunting task for even the most skilled and experienced principal. However, Torchbearer leadership will be seen by principals and superintendents as a viable option to lead failing schools. Professional development opportunities are likely to be created as a result of exposure to this study which will bring to the educational leadership community a new and innovative leadership model, Torchbearer Leadership. Moreover, the literature is definite in its proclamation that school leadership is essential in recognizing success in failing schools. Yet, no evidence within the literature suggests a definite model for failing schools in urban and rural Alabama and other states alike. On the other hand, this study will add to the scarce and limited

body of available research surrounding leadership models for leaders leading turnaround campaigns.

Conclusions

Urban and rural school leaders are poised to lead turnaround campaigns within and around communities that desperately need academic and cultural change. However, to equip well-intentioned, struggling, and overwhelmed leaders for the task at hand, these leaders must furnish a leadership model that will fill the void of appropriateness regarding school leadership in urban and rural schools. Efforts to address the lack of an appropriate leadership model for urban and rural schools are beginning to take shape. This study is one of a few that are seeking to address the scant and sparse leadership models for urban and rural school leaders. According to Hitt et. al. (2018) "growing attention has been given to what principals in such schools need to be able to lead a turnaround, although the articulation of those expectations seldom differs much from already established bodies of school leadership literature" (p.57).

Failing schools are on the rise and becoming more protuberant in districts where schools are racially homogenous over the years. The number of free and reduced students is increasing which incorporates 90-99% of the student population. These factors have been consistent when identifying failing schools. According to Fowler and Wahlberg (1991), they surmised that "districts socioeconomic status and the percentage of students from low-income families were the most influential and consistent factors related to schooling outcomes" (p. 191). However, there is hope. Recent studies have demonstrated that consistent collaboration with leadership and teachers can evoke substantial change in failing schools. For example, Jarl, Anderson, and Blossing (2021) concluded that "failing schools have unique characteristics" such as an absence of collaboration which signals that working together "is difficult or does not work" (p. 464). In contrast, "at successful schools, teachers and principals have high expectations of students and signal what is expected of them" (p. 465). The hope is the characteristic of collaboration as expressed in this study provides a glimmer of what is possible in a new leadership model. Also, the level of expectation from both teachers and students signifies working collaborative is not difficult but encouraged in moving failing schools towards success. Furthermore, Jarl et. al, (2021) espoused that "successful schools have created stability and continuity in students' learning environments that enable learning to prosper" (p. 466).

This study makes a significant contribution to educational leadership. It shows a persistent culture change in leadership and increased teacher collaboration at successful Torchbearer schools. Moreover, this study argues that it is most likely that change is needed in the leadership and the way principals evoke change, and that such a culture of success is missing in failing schools. Principals are important agents of change through the way they act as leaders (Leithwood & Louis, 2011).

Therefore, Torchbearer Leadership is leadership in the best interest of students where educational leaders and policymakers cannot ignore this growing epidemic that is on the horizon in education. A proficient school leadership model, such as Torchbearer Leadership, would allow leaders of failing schools to have the audacity to lead and be deliberate in turning around failing schools. Districts will be more inclined to hire principals with Torchbearer training to respond to the turnaround challenge. Hitt et. al (2018) espoused the notion that "urban schools are increasingly ascertaining principal candidates' leadership competencies and then using these

competency scores to make hiring decisions about which candidates are best suited to turn around their low-performing schools" (p. 57).

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