

BUCKRHAM, ROBIN NEAL, Ed.D. *Scapegoated, Castaway, and Forgotten: The Dispensable Principals of School Turnaround*. (2016)
Directed by Drs. Ulrich “Rick” Reitzug and Kathleen Casey. 142 pp.

The blaring din of rhetoric surrounding school reform has become so loud that we rarely hear the sound of the school principal actually engrossed in the daily work of improving schools across the country. The purpose of this dissertation is to give voice to those principals in North Carolina schools who have been replaced as a result of this battle over how schools can be improved. Rather than focus on the muddled voices of politicians debating this topic, I have chosen to do as Casey (1993) does and present the untold stories of those on the front lines of this war on school reform in hopes of “. . . recreating the possibility of public debate which has actually been suppressed by national reports” (p. 3). As a result of the No Child Left Behind legislation, the school turnaround reform model, as outlined in the School Improvement Grant (SIG) guidelines, has become the model for improving student achievement across the country (GAO, 2011, p. 3). I focus the spotlight on principals who have been replaced due to federal, state, or local district efforts to improve failing schools.

In Chapter I, I briefly provide the backdrop for the school improvement movement and explain my reasons for conducting this research along with the significance of this study to the body of work on educational leadership in low performing schools. This chapter includes my research questions along with a description of the theoretical framework used for this study. Included in this chapter is the definition of terms that may be unfamiliar to readers. Chapter II is a review of the literature on school turnaround that provides insight into SIG sanctions that led to the

termination of many principals. These sanctions have served as a model for state and district turnaround efforts as well. Included in this same chapter is research on the effectiveness of the turnaround model and the practice of replacing principals for purportedly better ones. Chapter III focuses on the methodology used to conduct the study while Chapter IV includes the stories of the castaway principals and my analysis of the data collected. Chapter V represents my conclusions after analyzing the interview data along with suggestions for further study. I further explore the impact these practices have on the school leadership position, and implications for future policy at the district, state, and federal levels in this area.

SCAPEGOATED, CASTAWAY, AND FORGOTTEN: THE DISPENSABLE
PRINCIPALS OF SCHOOL TURNAROUND

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Greensboro
2016

Approved by

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To my sources of inspiration.

My Husband, Clifton Buckrham Jr.

My Children, Clifton “Trey” Buckrham III, Graham Buckrham, and Morgan Buckrham

My Mother, Mae Gresham

My Father, Eugene Neal

My Grandmother, Pauline Graham

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Robin Neal Buckrham, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank the Lord for giving me the vision and strength to pursue this great undertaking. I have come a long way from the country girl in Southeastern North Carolina who grew up shucking corn and dancing with my Uncle Lenzy to old blues artists in his living room. I am truly blessed and amazed that I was chosen for such a time as this.

I would like to thank the members of my committee Dr. Ulrich (Rick) Reitzug, Dr. Kathleen Casey, Dr. Craig Peck, and Dr. Brian Clarida. I thank you each for the time, support, encouragement and guidance that you have provided. Dr. Reitzug, I thank you for never giving up on me even when this journey became very difficult. You have been my cheerleader and advocate every step of the way. Thank you for being a true “committee chair” and never giving up on me. I want to thank Dr. Casey, my “dissertation muse” for all the days I “sat at her feet” at her home while she enthusiastically read my work, laughed out loud with no regard for my feelings (smile), and offered me more support than I ever expected to have from a college professor. Without you two, I truly don’t know how I would have gotten through this degree. Dr. Peck and Dr. Clarida, I appreciate all the feedback you provided in order to get me to this place. Thank you so much. I hope that my work reflects the excellence in all of you that has been modeled for me over the past several years.

Words cannot describe how blessed I am to have a family who supports me each time I decide to take on yet another adventure. To Cliff, my husband, friend, confidant,

and love of my life—how could this have happened without you? You have been here with me every step of the way encouraging, prodding, and loving me to completion. Thank you for keeping the kids *all the time*. Thank you for cooking, *all the time*. Thank you for going to all the events I couldn't attend *all the time*. I could go on and on and on. But you know what you have been to me throughout this time. I love you and you are “The Man.” To Trey, Graham and Gracie, who said weekly, “I will be glad when this paper is finished!” Well it is finished and you can have Mommy back! You three have sacrificed so much so Mommy could complete her degree and I thank you. You three are my world. Mommy loves you.

To Mama and Daddy, what can I say? I am a reflection of you. So this accomplishment is your accomplishment. You are my rocks and without you I couldn't have done this. Thanks for keeping the kids for me all those times so I could write and encouraging me to become Dr. Buckrham. To Kimberly “Lucy-Lucy” Neal, thank you for keeping the kids whenever I needed you and I hope to see you in this same place in a few more years. You know how we do! To Travis, “Bae Bro” Neal, thank you for pulling me away to have some fun when I was drowning in books and articles. Can't wait to celebrate with you! To Aunt Chelle, my sister-cousin, thank you for praying for me and rescuing me many weekends by keeping the kids so I could steal away to write. You were right on time all the time! To my mother in law, Brenda Buckrham, and my sister in law, Chrystal Buckrham, thank you for being there for me in the good and the bad. Nothing like good in laws! To the GPA Board of Directors, thank you for the time

off and the support you gave me to start and complete this degree. To Jennifer Jacobs and Kelly Dalton, the best play date Moms in Greensboro! You have treated my kids just like your own and your support for me, and help, has been priceless. Thank you! To Jacqueline Drumwright—when I thought the weight of this task would defeat me, you were there. When I thought I was going to jump, you talked me down. When our children were driving us crazy, we left them together and had girls’ night. Thank you for being “on” when I have been off! I’m going to make a better life for us I tell you. Just you wait and see! To my “Big Sis” Regina Williams Davis, there are not enough words to tell you how much I love and have appreciated your presence in my life these past ten years. You have been my biggest inspiration and I want to be just like you when I grow up. To Dr. Robin Harris who talked me into this whole thing. Cuz, thank you for being my outlet and for being there for me in between the weeping and gnashing of teeth while I was writing. You are my cousin-sister-friend for life. You’re next! And finally, to Team Robin, Dr. Ashauna Harris, Dr. Tracey Lewis and Dr. Krishauna Hines-Gaither, my “Doc Sisters.” Where would I be without your support, your coaching, your text messages, your phone calls your presence and your love. If there are three women I know who love me, it is you. Tracey, thank you for the scriptures. Ashauna thank you for your audaciousness. Krishauna thank you for your spirit. Our sisterhood is a true blessing in my life. Thank you so much ladies. I made it! #doclivesmatter

To Grandma Pauline, the most powerful woman I know. You taught us how to look the devil in the eye and make him blink first. You made us women who “don’t take

no mess.” You showed us how to submit and to lead all at the same time. I work like a professional and hustle like a boss because of you. As the matriarch of our family I honor you and dedicate this dissertation to my Phoenix, Big Mama, aka G. G.

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CHAPTER I

THE MAKING OF THE PRINCIPAL

Prior to the creation of the school principal position, teachers worked mainly without supervision in one-room school buildings handling instruction and the management of the entire school with little interference from the local school board.

At the turn of the 19th century, as educational reformers built up the bureaucratic framework of the state and local public school system, they realigned the primary attention of the principal from the classroom to the central administrative structure. This professionalization process involved proscribing lines of authority and accountability, establishing entry requirements and academic training, and improving compensation for the work. (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 5)

Since this time, the role of principal has been represented metaphorically in efforts to describe the over-arching and ever changing responsibilities of a school leader. Beck and Murphy (1993), basing their themes on evidence found in educational literature from each decade since 1920, synthesized their research with the following list of dominant principal metaphors by decade:

- 1920s—Values Broker
- 1930s—Scientific Manager
- 1940s—Democratic Leader
- 1950s—Theory Guided-Administrator
- 1960s—Bureaucratic Executive
- 1970s—Humanistic Facilitator
- 1980s—Instructional Leader. (p. xi)

Other research by Senge (1994) suggests that the 1990s metaphor for a school principal would be that of learning organization catalyst. I would add to this list a 21st century metaphor of the principal as Change Agent or Turnaround Specialist as it relates to the challenges they now face in improving achievement for students in some of the most challenging schools in the nation. At first glance these metaphors seem complex as much as they are contradictory, further emphasizing the myriad of responsibilities and expectations of school principals over time. These and other metaphors continue to evolve, implying that the evolving nature of the principalship sometimes makes the definition of success in the role a moving target.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

I have been an educational leader for 18 years. Seven of those years were spent as a high school English teacher (yes, I consider teachers leaders), three of them as an assistant principal in a Title I elementary school, and I am in year nine as a principal of a K-8, Title I charter school. What I have found in every role is that the responsibility for the success or failure of students and, ultimately the school, rests squarely on the shoulders of the principal. Despite what other factors may be contributing to the work that she or he must perform, there is little to no margin for error. The long hours, the sacrifices, the coaching, and the stress that accompany the job can go unnoticed and unappreciated and at the same time they can bring you recognition and promotion. It is a delicate balancing act that most feel on a daily basis. I will present a backdrop of education policy in the state of North Carolina, and in the nation, to provide a greater understanding of the metamorphosis of school reform over the years. Specifically, it will

present a brief history of school reform in America, examine NCLB sanctions and the Turnaround option and its success, and identify the prevailing attitudes of supporters and opponents of school turnaround as it relates to principal replacement.

Background

Beginning in 1997, North Carolina began providing support to schools having difficulty in meeting academic performance criteria. During this time the dreaded “Assistance Teams” were assigned to schools considered low performing in an effort to revitalize the school by giving support to the teachers and the administration. In 2006, the Turnaround Schools Program placed instructional coaches in turnaround schools. The instructional coaches were there to support teachers and the leadership coaches were there to assist the administrators. This took place in 35 schools across the state. By 2010, the number of schools designated by the state as low-performing and in need of reform was 118. North Carolina continued down the rabbit hole of school improvement by accepting Race to the Top (RttT) grant money in order to provide intense, focused intervention for the state’s bottom 5% of schools. With this increase in funding it appeared that school leaders in the state were finally getting the much-needed resources to improve their failing schools. Coupled with these state reform efforts, No Child Left Behind legislation, along with SIG funding, put the spotlight on principals in ways that could not have been predicted as they now had to work in a limited amount of time to erase years of neglect in school districts all over the country.

Districts across the country have deemed principals ineffective and have replaced them with, purportedly, more effective principals in exchange for millions in School

Improvement Grant (SIG) funds or supplemental state or district funds. Little consideration is given to the hard work of the replaced principal or the relationship they have with the school community. In addition, as demographic shifts challenge the status quo, educators can no longer ignore the demand to create socially just and culturally-responsive learning environments for students. Principals in failing schools, especially, are forced to confront this challenge because the daunting reality in the field of education is that the schools that are low-performing are segregated schools where there is a high minority or high poverty population or both. This is compounded by groups that are typically marginalized such as English Language Learners and students with disabilities. This practice has created a new dynamic that, I believe, has separated principals into two groups. I call the first group the “saviors.” They are the benefactors, survivors, and ultimately the “heroes and sheroes” of turnaround reform. The second group I call the “castaways. These are the principals who are casualties of this process. For the purposes of this study I have decided to focus on the group that has been silenced in the midst of this movement, the “castaways.”

My Truth

When I arrived at my small charter school back in 2006 the school was struggling financially, enrollment was dropping, and test scores were mediocre. I was hired to turn the school around. As an assistant principal, I had served faithfully alongside two female principals. I stepped out of my comfort zone and, being led by my passion for education and children along with a social justice consciousness, I set my mind to change this school. After three years, consistent with much of the research on school improvement,

the school improved significantly outperforming the local LEA and even the state in Math and Science. Enrollment increased, test scores increased, and we exited school improvement status. We eventually came within six points of being recognized as a North Carolina School of Distinction when schools were being recognized in this category. The shame was lifted and we celebrated.

During this time, I lost time with my family, suffered a miscarriage due to the overwhelming amount of stress during a pregnancy, and terminated a host of teachers who were not committed to—or were incapable of—educating poor children or children of color. While I continued working on the work at my school, I heard about principals who were losing their jobs because their schools were failing. I talked daily with friends who were exhausted from the work of school improvement. My “principal-friends” listened to me cry and vent when benchmarks were low, or I had to replace a teacher, or a teacher quit in the middle of the school year unable to deal with the demands of the job. I judged myself, blamed myself when things went wrong, challenged myself, and finally, encouraged myself when no one else would.

I was alone in most respects, having left the security of a large school district for the autonomy and creativity of a charter. However, the reality was that, prior to my arrival, the school was failing. Having heard the horror stories, initially, I lived daily with the reality that I could lose my job. I was fortunate that the school improved and I did not lose my job—but it easily could have turned out otherwise. Now that the Common Core and Essential Standards have replaced the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, my school, like so many others, is yet again challenged with coming out

of the pit of low performance. I am reminded once more that I could find myself unemployed even with all my training, degrees, experience, and past success, if I am unable to facilitate a turnaround in the time set forth by my Board of Directors.

This research is important to me because as a school leader I share the anxiety, the frustrations, and the fear of so many others who give their lives to serving in low performing schools. We are inextricably connected no matter where we are in the nation. As I attend conferences and meet other principals who serve in high needs schools, our stories are the same, our fears are common, and our frustrations are shared. Although we find refuge in this comradery when we can enjoy these short retreats from our buildings, we all know that replacement is always on the table regardless of how hard we try. This reality shakes us all in some way and influences how we lead.

Some of us allow this reality to compromise our moral compass like those administrators in Atlanta, Georgia accused of tampering with standardized tests in order to avoid sanctions. There are others of us who internalize the pressures, like Stephanie, one my participants, and become ill. And there are still others in our position who work and toil day and night to see growth in our schools, only to be replaced anyway with little to no notice. Are these scapegoat principals ineffective and no use to the war on low performance? Are those who have never served in a high-needs, low-performing school more effective, or is it that they are flying under the radar because their students always perform well? What happens to the replaced principals and how does this failure impact the future of their careers? Is the turnaround movement really creating better schools or are these principals being sacrificed in vain?

No leader goes into this profession expecting to fail. They believe they have what it takes to help lead successful schools and they do everything in their ability to make achievement happen. At some point their superiors considered them competent enough to lead. Yet, some of them fail while others replace them, seemingly becoming the new secret weapon that the district was saving to right all the wrong that these former principals caused. In this study, it is my goal to share the lived experiences and life histories of the castaways so that the human side of this profession is heard over the blaring accusations of the media and scapegoating of district officials. Castaways are human, not disposable goods. Their careers are sacred, not headlines for the front page of the local paper. Castaways represent some of the silent victims of the turnaround movement and I believe it is time to shed light on their stories.

Research Questions

This study will examine the experiences and impact of termination on principals who lose their jobs as a result of turnaround policy. For this study, I will focus on the following five research questions:

1. What are the stories and experiences of principals and their colleagues who were placed in high needs school, and subsequently replaced?
 - a. What kind of special training and support do principals in high needs schools receive prior to entering into these environments?
 - b. How does the school district support principals in high needs schools?
 - c. To what extent do principals who are replaced due to federal policies possess a social justice orientation?

- d. How should the experiences of principals removed due to federal or local school reform models inform and impact education policy?

Theoretical Framework

My study will be grounded in social justice theory. Social justice is a concept that has undergone a variety of definitions as scholars seek to make meaning of the ideals of equity and fairness (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002; Marshall & Oliva, 2010; Theoharis, 2007; Tillman, 2002). Tillman (2002) says, “Generally, social justice theorists and activists focus their inquiry on how institutionalized theories, norms, and practices in schools and society lead to social, political, economic and educational inequities” (as cited in Marshall & Oliva, 2010, p. 20). Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) create their version of a social justice definition by connecting social justice to the democratic process. My study is informed by the more recent work of George Theoharis (2007) who defines principals who lead for social justice as those who “make the issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision” (p. 223).

The research on social justice has grown significantly in the past several years, especially in the arena of education where the diversity and complexity of school organization and operation have changed tremendously. Relevant to my study is research of Wilkerson (2014), who found that in 2006, “approximately eighty percent (77%) of the lowest performing schools in the state of North Carolina were headed by African-Americans” (p. 4). This indicates that there are issues of social justice not only operating

at the student level, but at the administrative level as well. It appears that this issue of social justice in educational leadership exists in the charter sector as well. It is not uncommon to be one among a room full of African American administrators at North Carolina charter school conferences whenever sessions are held that addressed the needs of high poverty students

Social justice theoretical framework is used to guide this study because school turnaround is ultimately about disparities and inequities in student achievement within failing schools. As public schools become more racially segregated, there is a trend of high minority schools being deemed low performing while majority white schools enjoy reputations of excellence. Policymakers preoccupied with turning around low performing schools appear to have missed the redistricting tactics that have created “neighborhood schools” and widened the social divide between students of color and their white counterparts in our public schools. As Kozol (1991) posits, “the dual society, at least in public education, seems to be unquestioned” (p. 4). As a result, turnaround has become more an issue of social justice rather than academic improvement. To ignore the social justice element would do this study a disservice. The very nature of high needs schools requires principals to have a social justice orientation. At the same time, school turnaround is a rapid process that is results driven and social justice strategies are often seen as a hindrance to the bottom line—test scores. As I interview principals and gather data about their experiences, the extent to which social justice informed their practice will be key to understanding how, if at all, it contributed to their replacement and whether or not a key ingredient is being ignored in the school improvement process.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The bodies of literature relevant to my study are:

- School reform in public schools
- Business influences in educational reform
- School turnaround reform
- Effective principals for high needs schools

The School Reform Movement

As far back as 1965 President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty," school reform has been at the center of the country's ills. His authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), placed confidence in state educational agencies (SEA's) to dispense federal funds and monitor compliance with the law's requirements in order to eradicate inequality in public schools. Through this act, the Title I program was established. Title I provided funding to schools and school districts with a high percentage of students from low income families (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a). These funds were distributed in addition to state funds granted to schools based on the average daily membership or ADM of students. The rationale offered to justify these additional fiscal resources was that children from poverty are more at risk than their middle class and wealthy counterparts and therefore needed more money to solve the achievement gap.

The condition of public schools in America gained national attention with the 1983 publishing of *A Nation at Risk*, written by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE), which declared war on our schools and claimed our country lived in the shadows of other countries that were advancing academically and technologically. “The collective author of this report was a commission appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Education in August 1981 and chaired by David Gardner, the president of the University of California” (Westbury, 1984, pp. 431–432). “The membership of the committee contained the obligatory Nobel Laureate, three university presidents (including Yale’s), a Harvard professor (the Mallinckrodt Professor of Physics and Professor of the History of Science), the retired chairman of the board of Bell Laboratories, and assorted interest group representatives, state officials, principals and the Teacher of the Year for 1981-1982” (Westbury, 1984, p. 432). Westbury (1984) notes that the varied positions of those who serve on these kinds of boards highly influence the findings as this “professionalized cadre of bureaucratic advocates of this or that seek to mobilize public opinion and so congressional votes, to their particular causes” (p. 434). The report declared, “The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur--others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments” (Gardner, 1983, p. 5). Since this time, the American educational system has gone through a series of strategies to solve this problem of failing schools.

Although there is a caution from the NCEE to avoid the “unproductive tendency of some to search for scapegoats among the victims, such as the ‘beleaguered teachers’” (Gardner, 1983, p. 9), the majority of the recommendations to improve content, time, teaching, standards and expectations deal with the competency of educators in our schools which mirrors the basis for turnaround reform today as principals are being blamed for poor student achievement and replaced as a result. The NCEE (Gardner, 1983) quotes Ronald Regan’s message to a National Academy of Sciences meeting, saying, “This country was built on American respect for education” (p. 13). However, a close look at education in this country will point to the fact that historically, America has not respected education for all. In the 1896 landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision *Plessy v Ferguson*, the federal government upheld racially segregated public facilities under the separate but equal law. It wasn’t until 1954, over half a century later, the same courts declared separate but equal laws in public schools unconstitutional in *Brown v Board of Education*. These years of legislative racism rendered poor and minority students educationally dysfunctional and unable to compete in the global marketplace referenced in the report. As education moved on, these groups remained trapped in a period of inequity and racism. While the NCEE fueled our nation’s effort to reform schools and offered a rebuke to the government for not supporting education financially, they conveniently neglected to take responsibility for the very mediocre, low performing schools they helped nurture in Black and urban communities where much of the decline in achievement they refer to was, and still is prevalent.

According to Westbury (1984), “‘Reform’ is, of course, one of the key categories of American public rhetoric and education has long been one of the foci of ‘reforming’ initiatives, particularly in periods of turbulence and unrest” (p. 434). In the 1990s, states like North Carolina were considered pioneers, being one of the first to establish standards-based accountability standards in schools through the ABC Accountability Model. In response to poor instructional practices among teachers, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 1139 in June 1996. This reform model used the results from standardized tests patterned after the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. “The planned reward and penalty structure of the reform was designed to raise teachers' level of concern about the implementation of the reform. Rewards and penalties were to be awarded to all certified staff in schools based on students' performance on end-of-grade multiple-choice tests” (Sain, 2000, p. 7).

The “ABC’s” as we jokingly used to call them when I was a classroom teacher, were hailed as ground-breaking and North Carolina became a model state for school reform. The problem with this model was that it became an incubator for achievement gaps because there was no attention given to the subgroups within each school. Overall school proficiency was used to determine which schools “made it” and which schools did not. With no consequences for the failure of poor, minority, English language learners, or students with disabilities, North Carolina, like many states, enjoyed a false sense of success that gave no regard to the needs of these marginalized groups. Consequently, neither teachers nor administrators felt especially compelled to advocate for these subgroups of students as monetary rewards were being awarded to those schools that

achieved growth based on this composite calculation. In fact, Jones (2001) points to a negative side effect of this system of rewards that resulted in, “teachers leaving schools that failed to meet test-score standards, while promising new teachers asked about the bonus and were attracted to schools that earned” (pp. 25-26). Even at its height, this reform effort was largely negligent and did not hold states or school districts accountable for leaving certain groups “behind.”

As the federal government continued to troubleshoot school reform strategies and legislation since this dismal prophecy was released, they extended their realm of authority into states by passing the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002. This groundbreaking piece of legislation was the game changer in school improvement because it limited both state and local control of education, which, prior to this time, had remained unchallenged. Established under President George W. Bush, NCLB “remained closely informed by the standards, testing, and accountability reforms advocated by Texas’s business community when he served as Governor of Texas” (Rhodes, 2012, p. 139). It was later discovered is that Texas’s results in student achievement were highly inflated. Furthermore, according to Tirrozi (2013), “there was no viable body of research or any evaluation to support the claims based on which NCLB was “sold” to Congress, educators, and the general public” (p. 173). Therefore, the legislation was seen by some to be hypocritical because it was not founded on the scientifically researched-based practices that school districts must include in their reform strategies.

Even Diane Ravitch (2011), a leading voice in education and former assistant secretary and counselor to the secretary in the U.S. Department of Education under the

Bush administration, became increasingly disillusioned by NCLB legislation and its failure to produce results. She admits,

I had drunk deeply of the elixir that promised a quick fix to intractable problems. I too had jumped aboard a bandwagon, one festooned with banners celebrating the power of accountability, incentives, and markets. I too was captivated by these ideas. They promised to end bureaucracy, to ensure that poor children were not neglected, to empower poor parents, to enable poor children to escape failing schools, and to close the achievement gap between rich and poor, schools, and choice would create opportunities for poor kids to leave for better schools. All of this seemed to make sense, but there was little empirical evidence, just promise and hope. I wanted to share the promise and the hope. I wanted to believe that choice and accountability would produce great results. But over time, I was persuaded by accumulating evidence that the latest reforms were not likely to live up to their promise. The more I saw, the more I lost the faith. (p. 4)

This admission by well-respected educators in the field of how they bought into this high stakes system of accountability points not just to our naiveté regarding the punitive nature of these sanctions, but also shows how desperate we are to find a solution for low performing schools. The ideas being promulgated by politicians sometimes lure the best of us in only to discover that the river was simply a mirage of improvement set in a desert of inequity.

“Since the passage of No Child Left Behind, ‘turnaround’ has become a significant focus of school reform efforts in the United States, especially in urban areas” (Peck & Reitzug, 2013, p. 3). The impact of this legislation has reformed not only the way we improve schools for inner-city students, but also the expectations and skillsets of the principals. “From states and districts paying for principals to be trained as turnaround specialists, to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s call to turn around the country’s 5,000 lowest-performing schools, the concept of rapid, large-scale reform in

individual schools—not just incremental school improvement—has taken hold” (Salmonowicz, 2009, p. 20). These reform efforts are often very aggressive and take their greatest toll on school communities by dismantling staff and replacing principals. As these reform strategies become more commonplace in the public education arena it behooves educators and policy makers to take an inventory of the effects of the reform in order to make prudent decisions about the direction of policy regarding school improvement and more specifically, the trend to replace leadership in schools across the country. This review will examine the body of literature on school turnaround reform and the effects of these policies on school leaders.

Corporate Crossover

As education borrows from the experiences of others, the business world has had the greatest influence on the turnaround movement. This trend to compare schools to businesses and assume that improving a school is the equivalent of turning around a factory has received mixed reviews from both educators and experts in business and organizational management. “A large and growing body of empirical literature is now available that helps us see how churches, hospitals, universities, government entities, for-profit firms, and not-for-profit organizations have successfully and unsuccessfully engaged in recovery efforts” (Murphy, 2008, p. 75). Supporters of cross-sector strategies such as E. A. Hassel and Hassel (2009) contribute to the literature on school turnaround by using Continental Airlines’ turnaround success as a basis for school improvement. According to them, “there is a two-fold consequence for education’s failure to recognize turnaround as a means of school improvement—turnarounds have been tried rarely and

studied even less.” In their analysis, “while education researchers catch up, practitioners can use the turnaround lessons of other sectors” (p. 22).

Senge et al. (1999) have observed starkly, “Failure to sustain significant change recurs again and again despite substantial resources committed to the change effort” and “there is little to suggest that schools, healthcare institutions, governmental, and nonprofit institutions fare any better” (p. 7). Still Hess and Gift (2009) contend that this should “not deter schools from looking to these models for guidance as turnarounds have the potential to be a valuable tool for improving underperforming schools” (p. 2). Senge et al. (1999), caution, however, that “the hope that we can systematically turn around all troubled schools—or even a majority of them—is at odds with much of what we know from similar efforts in the private sector” (as cited in Hess & Gift, 2009, p. 2).

Peck and Reitzug (2012) add to the body of research on how business management concepts are being transferred into leadership fashions in K-12 education. They examined Turnaround management, which emerged as a leading business management concept in the second half of the 20th century. Their research found that Turnaround management gained momentum in the 1990’s in business literature, despite the criticism of leading businessmen like Warren Buffet, and showed early appearances in education literature just before 2000. After the NCLB Act in 2002, Turnaround management was becoming a fixture in the educational sector as some of the popular educational publications like *Principal*, and leading voices in the field such as Duke, Leithwood, Cuban, and Fullan began to weigh in and endorse Turnaround as a viable strategy to saving our lowest performing school.

Mintrop (as cited in Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010) describes the relationship between the business concept of turnaround and school improvement this way:

The corporate world uses profit margins and quality management results as their guide for determining decline while the school systems use similarly narrow criteria—student test scores in math and reading. The move to standards-based tests to determine student and school-wide success continues to be challenged. One of the most important consequences of these changes has been the creation of an underclass of schools labeled and categorized as “in need of assistance,” “low performing,” “underperforming,” “in challenging circumstances,” “failing,” or “in special measures.” (p. 4)

The irony is that educators’ endorsement of a business model of reforming failing schools encouraged the federal government to adopt these measures as the standard for turning around 5,000 of America’s failing schools and thus gave legitimacy to the corporate rhetoric on school improvement. This has, in turn, weakened the influence of school leaders who are actually involved in the challenging work of educating children and has made them expendable.

Unpacking School Turnaround Reform

In order to see the relevancy of NCLB legislation to my study, one must understand the intricate workings of the policy and the sanctions it brings for failing schools. As stated previously, NCLB was “designed to identify schools that are consistently failing to serve poor and minority students and to instigate school-based and systemic remedies so that all students have access to a high quality, standards-based education” (Balfanz, Legters, West, & Weber, 2007, p. 559). The act includes criteria for determining schools’ progress and consequences for insufficient improvement over time.

For example, after five consecutive years of inadequate progress, measured by meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets, (now commonly known as Annual Measurable Objectives or AMO), NCLB requires that schools restructure through conversion to a charter school, replace staff, hire an external contractor to operate the school, invite the state to take over the school, or implement some other significant reform that fundamentally changes the school. (Huberman, Parrish, Hannan, Arellanes, & Shambaugh, 2011, p. 1)

As outlined in the legislation, failing schools, “often characterized as dysfunctional or unstable,” undergo a series of reforms in order to improve student achievement for all students (Housman & Martinez, 2001, p. 2). The problem with this definition is that the AMO targets are different in every state and these targets alone may not be sufficient to determine if a school fits the federal definition. Therefore, a school could be considered low performing in one state but not in another, when, in fact, they very well may be failing subgroups of students. Districts with schools that fall into this category have been lured into adopting these reform models because they are promised funding through SIG funds. This funding is a competitive grant that awards millions of dollars to states so that they can improve conditions at failing schools. The “catch” for school districts is that they have to adopt one of the school reform models in order to be eligible for the money as it is only earmarked for the lowest performing schools in a state. Since 2009, over 4.5 billion dollars has been committed through SIG funds to improve low performing schools throughout the country. These funds are intended to pursue substantial changes using one of four models:

- **Transformation.** The principal is replaced. Staff need not be changed but must be evaluated in part by their students’ outcomes. In addition, the school must make changes in professional development, instruction, curriculum, learning time, and operating flexibility (school-level autonomy over budgetary

and staffing decisions). This model assumes that the core instructional staff members at a failing school are competent but need new leadership, programs, training, and support.

- **Turnaround.** The principal and at least one half of the staff are replaced, and the instructional program is revised. In addition, the school must implement new types of professional development, use data to inform instruction, expand learning time, provide wraparound services, and develop new governance structures. This model also calls for operating flexibility for the school. Turnaround is designed to bring in new, highly qualified staff, as well as new programs, training, and support.
- **Restart.** The school is closed and then reopened under the direction of a charter or education management organization (EMO). Restart assumes that private operators will foster greater innovation and improvement.
- **Closure.** The school is closed, and the students attend other schools in the district. Closure is intended to offer students a better chance for success at another school. (Huberman, Parrish, Hannan, Arellanes, & Shambaugh, 2011, p. 1)

“Since 2010, the SIG program has provided funding to more than 1,500 of the country’s lowest performing schools that have demonstrated the greatest need” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b, p. 2). The concentration of funding for this population of schools could be attributed to the fact that urban schools historically serve a more diverse group of students. For school leaders, this means that they have the added pressure of ensuring that more subgroups of students meet AMO targets than principals in suburban schools that tend to be more homogeneous. Out of those schools receiving grant funds, 169 of them adopted the turnaround reform model (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The common thread in these four models relevant to my research is the replacement of the principal. This implies that the responsibility for the school’s success or failure rests largely on the shoulders of the school leader.

Complexities of Turnaround Reform

“The concept of identifying and turning around underperforming schools has been central to the focus and intent of federal and state accountability provisions over the past decade” (Huberman et al., 2011, p. 1). The problem of mediocre, low performing schools is affecting every aspect of our society and therefore federal and state governments have spent an exhaustive amount of time trying to remedy the situation. “The U.S Department of Education has identified school turnaround, defined as dramatic improvement in student performance at schools with consistent trends of low achievement” (Knudson, Shambaugh, & O’Day, 2011, p. 1). The appeal of school turnaround is that it

offers the opportunity to take familiar educational institutions and improve them through coaching, mentoring, capacity building, best practices, and other existing tools. Unlike most reform efforts, which focus on incremental improvement, this approach seeks to take schools from bad to great within a short period of time. (Hess & Gift, 2009, p. 1)

The speed at which this change occurs is problematic since the common wisdom emerging from past school reform literature is that school improvement takes three to five years to achieve. From the business world, those like Potter (1995) insist “the most general lesson to be learned from the more successful cases (of turnaround) is that the change process goes through a series of phases that, in total, usually require a considerable length of time. Skipping steps creates only the illusion of speed and never produces a satisfying result” (p. 59). Tirozzi (2013) cites the

Breakthrough Schools Initiative, or BTS, sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, for its ability to identify successful schools and

attributes this to several factors, one major factor being the extensive time required for a turnaround. (p. 187)

Despite its success, the program attributes its results to a program called Breaking Ranks. This program, which is endorsed and sold by the organization, ensures significant growth in student achievement, thus offering a one size fits all approach to school improvement that is not realistic when one considers the complex and diverse needs of schools. Additionally, Tirozzi's association with the organization as the former Executive Director of the NASSP calls into question his motives for suggesting this as a viable strategy for reforming the countries lowest performing schools. While the federal government relies heavily on a quick fix approach to school turnaround, the research favors a strategic plan of action that requires time not only in schools but in the corporate sector as well. However, in spite of the opposition, these reform strategies continue to prevail and affect the livelihood of school leaders across the country.

Although these problems with school improvement exist, "at the same time, with the rise of high-stakes accountability and the subsequent increase in the number of schools deemed failing, turnaround efforts and accounts of these endeavors grow" (Murphy & Meyers, 2008, p. 254). What is equally concerning is that "nearly all the turnaround in education leaps from problems (e.g., failure) to solutions (e.g., adoption of whole-school reform models) with remarkable little analysis of the variables and conditions in the school-failure algorithm" (Murphy & Meyers, 2008, p. 4). This means that schools are rarely taking the time to determine what caused the decline that led to failure prior to reacting to save the school. "Most schools are not born low

performers. Understanding how a school's academic achievement begins to slip can thus provide important insights into the adjustments needed to reverse the process" (Duke, 2006, p. 731). Rather than rely on misconceptions about the reason for a school's decline, such as the commonly used excuse "change in demographics," Duke (2006) encourages a more critical look at the causes of decline in low performing schools and how these factors can serve as a springboard for school turnaround reform efforts. The preference of these "knee-jerk" reactions to school improvement over critical analysis and problem solving raises questions about the criteria being used to justify replacing principals in low performing schools. Action research, a rarely used tool in education reform, would reveal problems long before schools get in the turnaround phase of improvement. In efforts to appease the public, however, action research has been sacrificed for immediate results.

The current trend in school turnaround reform puts schools under the spotlight once they are worthy of being mentioned on the evening news. But failure does not begin when a school gains media attention. For example, Oak Hill Elementary School in the Guilford County Schools District in North Carolina showed evidence of academic decline long before the school made headlines. In 2008 the school was the lowest performing elementary school in the state. In 2009 they became the lowest performing elementary school in the nation. In fact, the schools in my study had been in decline for years prior to the districts taking initiatives to improve them by hiring my participants. This failure to act reflects a lack of urgency on the part of district leaders to enact change for students in low-performing schools before they were in a crisis situation and also

speaks volumes about the level of confidence district leaders had in the castaway principal prior to NCLB sanctions taking effect.

According to Reitzug and Hewitt (n.d.), “High test scores are the coin of the realm in current turnaround policy, thus a focus on school improvement is a prerequisite for turnaround principal leadership” (p. 26). Critics of turnaround reform, like Tirozzi (2013), believe this negative impact of No Child Left Behind Legislation thwarts the efforts of educators to endow students with critical thinking skills and dissuades teachers from the profession. He argues that these kinds of “multiple choice assessment models do not account for students’ different learning styles, the context of their learning and the ambiguity of many test questions” (p. 177). There are others in the field who share this concern for using standardized tests alone to determine the success of students, teachers, and leadership. Trujillo and Renee (2012, 2015, as cited in Reitzug & Hewitt, n.d.) “have criticized turnaround policy for being undemocratic and limited to single indicators of effectiveness, (i.e., test scores)” (p. 26). These scores are then published and scrutinized by the public who often do not possess the “educator eye” one needs to accurately interpret the results or make fair comparisons between schools. Test scores used in this way not only create a skewed image of low performing schools compared to high achieving schools, but “such public accountability systems have created significant new pressures for the principal, who is often the only individual whose name is directly linked to a school’s academic performance” (West, Peck, & Reitzug, 2010, p. 251). Nevertheless, this reliance on production over quality appears to have taken root in

education since the inception of standards-based accountability models developed to improve student proficiency.

Effectiveness of School Turnaround

To date, little evidence exists regarding the efficacy of school turnaround efforts. The U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences “practice guide” on school turnaround found “no empirical studies of requisite rigor demonstrating intervention effects or identifying factors that lead to successful school turnaround” (Herman et al., 2008, p. 4). Stuit (2010), in his study of

2,025 low-performing schools (257 charters and 1,768 district schools) across ten states, found that only one in five exited its state’s bottom quartile of proficiency after five years (including closures). Turnarounds were rare: Only twenty-six schools demonstrated enough improvement to meet the study’s turnaround criteria, and the probability of turnarounds across all ten states was approximately 1 percent. (p. 32)

These dismal results point to the fact that much is still unknown about school turnaround and therefore policymakers should use caution when promoting this as a guaranteed method of reform.

The scarcity of successful turnaround schools contributes to the skepticism about this method of reform for some of the nation’s lowest performing schools. For example,

one study of six reconstituted schools finds relatively negative near-term outcomes of school restructuring, including high levels of teacher turnover with experienced teachers often being replaced by first-year and non-certificated teachers, and only marginal adjustments in classroom practice (Malen *et al.*, 2002; Malen and Rice, 2004; Rice and Malen, 2003, 2010). (as cited in Marsh et al., 2013, p. 502)

These negative effects of school turnaround on not just the leader, but the school community, confirms what skeptics like Trujillo (2012) argue about school turnaround, which is that “through application of drastic personnel maneuvers, turnarounds “engender the exact conditions . . . linked with persistent low performance—high turnover, instability, poor climate, inexperienced teachers, and racial and socioeconomic segregation” (p. 1). The limitation of case studies, according to Leithwood et al. (2010) is that

while they are rich in detail and provide some insights, they reveal very little certainty about what works. . . . Furthermore, much of the research about school improvement has focused on schools that required a lift in performance rather than radical intervention; therefore, evidence informing the turnaround process is quite limited. (p. 13)

Although the research is emerging, there is documentation of some success of turnaround reform efforts. Despite criticism, “U.S Education Secretary Arne Duncan announced that the first-year data suggest student achievement is on an upswing at campuses that have received a slice of the SIG pie” (Caroline et al., 2012, p. 1). Three-year data for Cohorts 1 and 2 receiving SIG funding report,

Cohort 1 schools, which have implemented SIG reforms for three years (2010–11 to 2012–13), increased the percentage of students who are proficient in mathematics by 8 and by 6 percentage points in reading. In Cohort 2 schools, the increase was 5 percentage points in mathematics and 4 in reading during the two years of SIG implementation (2011–12 to 2012–13). Cohort 3 schools increased the percentage of students who scored proficient in mathematics by 2 percentage points and by 1 percentage point in reading during their first year of SIG implementation (2012–13). (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b)

Contributing to this positive narrative, information released by the U.S.

Department of Education (2012) reports the following:

- Schools receiving SIG grants are improving. The first year of data show that two thirds of schools showed gains in math. And two thirds of schools showed gains in reading.
- A larger percentage of elementary schools showed gains than did secondary schools, suggesting that it is easier to improve student performance at a young age than to intervene later. Seventy percent of elementary schools showed gains in math, and seventy percent showed gains in reading, a higher percentage of improving schools than was found in middle or high schools.
- Some of the greatest gains have been in small towns and rural communities. (para. 4)

Another more recent study reported that “turnaround reforms supported by the federal School Improvement Grants (SIG) program led to significant improvement in student achievement for students in California’s lowest-performing schools” (Dee, 2012, as cited in Marsh et al., 2013, p. 501). When SIG funds were granted in 2010–2011 from the federal government to improve failing schools, California received the most funding of any state for two categories of schools—the “lowest-achieving” schools and “lack of progress” schools. What they found was that these SIG-funded reforms improved the performance of schools on the lowest achieving boundary but not among SIG-eligible schools that were already making some progress (i.e., those on the ‘lack of progress’ boundary) (Dee, 2012, Abstract). These studies should be referenced with caution as there are caveats to the progress that may not always be evident in sound bites used to justify restructuring of schools and replacing principals in failing schools.

Examples of this conflicting data can also be found in the work of Reitzug and Peck. In their examination of successful school turnaround results they found that

Research analyzing the academic outcomes and results of turnaround has also emerged; findings have been mixed at best. For instance, while one study discovered academic improvement in elementary and middle schools in Chicago (de la Torre, Allensworth, Jagesic, Sebastian, Salmonowicz, Meyers, & Gerdeman, 2013), another study found a very low success rate of turnaround across the public and charter sectors (Stuit, 2012). Further investigation done in this same study also found that even when schools did prove to be successful at meeting the requirements of turnaround, there was always the prevailing issue of whether this improvement would stand the test of time. When researchers discovered cases of schools that demonstrated significant academic improvement, it was seldom sustainable (see, e.g., Aladjem, Birman, Orland, Harr-Robins, Heredia, Parrish, & Ruffini, 2010; Birman, Aladjem, & Orland, 2010; Stuit, 2010). Perhaps more concrete evidence is forthcoming now that this model has widespread acceptance. In the near future, we will receive additional valuable findings from wide-scale studies underway regarding the efficacy of turnaround, such as the U.S. DOE-funded American Institute of Research's 4-year Study of School Turnaround (Le Floch, 2011). In the meantime, skeptics such as Smarick expressed concerns that "given unimpressive initial SIG grant results reported by the US DOE, the billions spent on turnaround were billions wasted. (Reitzug & Peck, 2014, pp. 5–6).

Effective Principal Research

The role of the principal in this era of school turnaround has changed dramatically. School leaders are forced to implement change in a limited amount of time and produce positive results, which defies the conventional training many of us have received. This paradox forces us to search for a new skill set in order to be successful and escape termination.

Two major obstacles to research identifying important skills to help principals in this area are data availability and the complexity of principals' work. Data suitable for doing rigorous empirical work in this area are scarce. The other obstacle to developing a body of useful empirical work on principal effectiveness is the wide range of possible dimensions over which to describe principals and what they do. (Grissom & Loeb, 2011, p. 1092)

The principal's role is not easily defined which is problematic in itself. Regardless of this lack of a clear job description, school leaders are forced to possess skills they may not have when they enter high needs schools. Corcoran (2012) confirms this in her research by saying,

As educators move through this constantly changing landscape and the contextual educational problems that exist in schools today, the instructional leader must possess a vast array of competencies and skills to meet the day-to-day challenges they face. (p. 53)

What we do know from the large body of research on school leadership is that it is key to a school's success. All roads to successful school performance lead to the effectiveness of the school leader. Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) made the claim that "leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors" in terms of student academic achievement (p. 6). With such emphasis placed on the role of the principal, my study serves as a contribution to the literature in that it presents the conditions principals in low performing schools face that often hinder their ability to live up to these expectations.

According to Cai (2011), "it is reasonable to believe that the leadership of school administrators is a major factor of the success of school turnarounds" (p. 151). While this may be true, it is also true that the definition of a "strong leader" is elusive and, no doubt, has changed over time just as the makeup of America's schools has changed. As school leaders grapple with this reality, Reitzug and Hewitt (2015) described this concept of being a strong leader as "both an ambiguous as well as problematic term" (p. 5). This shift not only increases the pressure on school administrators, but it forces them to

constantly adapt to the role they play in ensuring successful student outcomes in low performing schools.

When it comes to the qualities that make them effective leaders, the literature is exhaustive with no one leadership style or skill being favored over another. Hall and Simeral (2008) declare that

The administrator has the ability to inspire, encourage, and activate the potential and output of every single teacher on staff. It is true that accomplishing this task requires a vast repertoire of skills and expertise. First and foremost, he or she must tackle cultivating relationships and building teachers' capacity for success. (p. 105)

We now know, according to Lambert (2003), that “a principal who is collaborative, open, and inclusive can accomplish remarkable improvements in schools and deeply affect student learning” (p. 44). These qualities are not foreign to those of us who are practicing administrators. In fact, many of these practices are standard in most graduate level programs. The question, then, is if we know these strategies lead to success, what is hindering our effectiveness as building level administrators?

In the debate over which leadership style is most consistent with the task of school improvement, Corcoran (2012) posits that instructional leadership and transformational leadership are the two that yield the most benefit in low performing schools. Neumerski (2013) offers a more contemporary view of the principal as instructional leader by warning us against assigning this role solely to the principal. She challenges us to rethink this idea of the instructional leader as an integrated method of leading that involves teacher leaders as well as coaches. She posits that “each day others

work with principals to lead the improvement of instruction; a failure to expand our conceptualization of instructional leadership to account for this shared work seriously constrains our understanding” (p. 314).

I agree that this is a much more realistic and collaborative way to engage in instructional leadership to improve failing schools. However, the changes in the job description continue to challenge the expertise of school administrators and lead them away from these best practices to focus primarily on school improvement in a climate of accountability that is unprecedented (Neumerski, 2013). Operating within these boundaries forces principals into a “leadership box” that limits all the other facets of their personality that should be nurtured rather than restrained.

To Replace or Not to Replace

The question of whether or not to replace principals in low performing schools is just as controversial as the process of school turnaround itself. There may be times when a school that is persistently low performing will continue to remain stagnant without a change in leadership. “A failing school will need a new principal with a skill set suited to rapid and effective turnaround and a spirit of strong leadership and urgency to ignite the school’s effort” (Educational Resource Strategies, 2010, p. 50, as cited in Corcoran, 2012, p. 60). This advice to recruit the principals with the skills necessary to lead change comes at a time when the overwhelming and complex duties associated with the position are not attracting people to the profession. Moreover, the talent pool that is willing to take on these difficult schools, as my research will show, are typically those who have the least experience.

Central to the discussion of principal effectiveness in low-performing schools is the practice of replacing the principal once restructuring methods are implemented. Districts must adhere to this requirement in both the turnaround and transformation models in order to receive the SIG funding. Leithwood, Harris and Strauss (2010) point out “poorly performing schools stand virtually no chance of turning around without good leadership” (p. 14). Hess and Gift (2009) share this same opinion and encourage reformers “not to hesitate to change principals and school leaders to jump-start the turnaround process” (p. 3). What is silent in the literature on school turnaround and school leadership are the experiences of those principals who are cast away to make room for the new principal who is charged with saving the school.

As these school overhauls are implemented, questions can be raised as to whether the responsibility for the failure of the school rests solely on the principal and his/her staff. Even in the face of the previously-cited “experts,” there are skeptics of the practice of replacing the principal. Kowell and Hassle (as cited in Leithwood et al., 2010) claim that “while the evidence is strong that a school’s leader makes a big difference on student learning in all school settings . . . understanding of the characteristics that distinguish high-performing school leaders from the rest is very limited” (p. 19). Others support a model whereby the original principal is given support in order to become an effective turnaround principal rather than being terminated. Tirozzi (2013) posits that “perhaps . . . the low performance [of a school] results from a combination of factors and inadequate leadership at various levels” (p. 186).

Since the turnaround movement is fueled by the business model, advocates of this approach also favor leadership change as a viable and necessary option in order for turnaround to be successful. However, even at the corporate level, the concept of leadership change has mixed reviews. As Grinyer and McKiernan (1990) correctly infer, “we should not assume, however, that a new chief executive is either necessary or sufficient to effect radical change” (p. 141). O’Neill (1986b) shares the same sentiments by stating that “not all turnarounds require a change in top management” (p. 82). Despite opinions from both camps on school turnaround policy, the replacement of the school leader is still supported by some organizational change/recovery research.

The research on replacing principals as part of the turnaround process has, not surprisingly, created conversations about the pool of qualified candidates to lead turnaround schools. While the term “turnaround principal” is new, some educational leaders have been successful in reversing the downward spiral of beleaguered schools for decades. Their numbers, however, are few. Every principal is not necessarily capable of turning a school around (Hess & Gift, 2009). This has prompted a call for training programs to prepare principals for the challenge of turning around a low performing school.

For example, The University of Virginia’s (UVA) Curry School of Education has developed a co-curricular program designed to instruct experts charged with turning around consistently low-performing schools. Operating jointly with UVA’s Darden School of Business, the program takes candidates from inside and outside education and equips “turnaround specialists” to tackle some of the state’s toughest schools. (Hess & Gift, 2009, p. 1)

Other relevant literature on this issue deals with the reality of the shortage of school leaders in the profession. A 1998 survey conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association of Secondary School Principals found that increased responsibilities, long work days, difficult parents, pressure from school boards, and low pay make the principalship less desirable than ever before. Little wonder then that nearly half of the districts surveyed reported difficulty in filling their principal vacancies. With 40% of the nation's 93,200 principals nearing retirement age, finding qualified replacements will be even more difficult in the years to come (Potter, 2001, p. 34). Pressures inherent in state and federal reforms, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, have also made the principalship less desirable. Cusick (2003), concluded that there is a difference between the responsibilities that principals face as a result of "educational reforms" and the immediate task of running the school and addressing the strong desires of parents (as cited in Pijanowski, Hewett, & Brady, 2009, p. 87). The added pressure of being terminated or replaced due to school turnaround reform does not make the job more appealing by any means.

What we know from the literature on school turnaround and principal leadership is that it is a work in progress. The infancy of the turnaround movement has schools, universities, and researchers troubleshooting multiple ways to deal with the chronic problem of failing schools across the country. The rapid pace at which this change must occur has changed the way students learn, teachers instruct, and administrators lead. Our reliance on the business model alone is not consistent with the literature on the success rates of such strategies in private sectors, let alone public institutions. What we also

surmise from the research is that there are parts of the legislation that need reform if schools are in fact going to be turned around.

These efforts have complicated the duties of the principal and forced him/her to become experts in unfamiliar territory, often with no sufficient training. The added pressure of termination or reassignment due to school turnaround has implications for the profession and calls into question how these policies affect principals who are replaced and the principals who secede them. As university programs are frantically trying to manage the need for more competent leaders by creating specialized programs to accommodate the demand for turnaround principals, the literature does not support the fact that they will be successful even after acquiring the expertise.

The turnaround movement has taken the field of education by storm and the literature on this topic struggles to create a clear road map for policymakers and educators to follow. The movement is a perfect example of the “building the plane while its in the air” analogy that is often used to describe programs or policies that are rolled out to the public before they have been vetted or properly understood by those charged with executing them. We can continue to remain expectant that some good will arise from this era of reform. Until then, as these policies continue to borrow from models outside of education that clash with what we know to be best practices for children in low performing schools, we will be left with a mingled version of school improvement that arbitrarily displaces children, teachers and administrators without much justification.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of principals who have been replaced due to the school transformation or turnaround model as outlined in federal No Child Left Behind legislation, or as a result of state or local efforts on behalf of the district. This chapter highlights how the study was designed and provides a description of the population used to conduct the research. The chapter provides information about the setting in which the study took place, data collection, and analysis of that data, along with the limitations of the study and how these limitations affected the outcome of the research. This study examines how training, district support, attitudes surrounding failing schools, and social justice play a role in the experiences of replaced school leaders. The study focuses on the following research questions:

1. What are the stories and experiences of principals and their colleagues who were placed in high needs school, and subsequently replaced?
 - a. What kind of special training and support do principals in high needs schools receive prior to entering into these environments?
 - b. How does the school district support principals in high needs schools?
 - c. To what extent do principals who are fired due to federal policies possess a social justice orientation?

- d. How should the experiences of principals replaced due to federal or local school reform models inform and impact education policy?

Narrative methodology was used in this qualitative study. I chose to draw from the narrative research method of Casey (1995), who advocates dependence on one broad question to gather comprehensive narratives from participants. I employed Casey's (1993) "Tell me the story of your life" approach because it makes the participants more than subjects answering questions. This broad question encompasses much about the participants that would be lost by simply using pre-written interview questions that often lead the responses in a particular direction. I extended this method and used a series of "tell me" questions that evolved as a result of their narratives so as not to steer the study in any one direction. This approach gave my subjects an opportunity to share their truth but also to create a counter-narrative for a marginalized group—replaced principals—who rarely get to share their side of the story when schools undergo radical reform.

I chose this form of qualitative research because it is "based in the literature tradition of collecting narratives and analyzing themes in those narratives, as is done in literary analysis" (McQueen & Zimmerman, 2006, p. 475). Although it has been criticized, this method of research has appeal because as Josselson (1993) writes, "Narrative . . . has intuitive appeal to people who become weary of variables and the quantification of the positivistic approach" (as cited in Casey, 1995, p. 212). At its core, narrative research travels off the beaten path of conventional methodological etiquette and seeks to capture the lived experiences of people as they make sense of their lives and then use their stories to draw insight and construct meaning. My methodology was

largely influenced by the oral history tradition, which, according to Yow (2014), is the “recording of personal testimony delivered in oral form with purposes beyond the recording itself” (p. 4). Narrative research was the most logical method to use because it does not try to arrive at any truth based on facts. The subjects’ stories in this study tell their truth as they saw it. The accounts of their lives as principals and faculty members of high needs schools is told from their perspective, thus producing a constructed account of their experiences and not a factual record of events.

So often as researchers we become the masters of others’ stories rather than the listeners and observers of their truth. Our academic training can sometimes become a hindrance when we reach outside the realm of traditional research methods. It was my desire to have an organic encounter with each of the scapegoat principals that reflected their stories and not a version of their lives that I designed based on predictable questions that would steer the conversations in a particular direction. Like Casey (1995), I was searching for a research method that would “honor the spontaneity, complexity, and ambiguity of human experience” (p. 218). The Popular Memory Group (1982) describes it as “information that comes complete with evaluations, explanations, and theories and with selectivities, silences, and slippage that are intrinsic to its representations of reality” (p. 228).

These questions served only as a guide that allowed participants to be as thorough as possible when describing their experiences (Table 1). I did not ask all of these questions of each participant; however, I asked clarifying questions like these to ensure that they were able to look at their experience from a variety of perspectives.

Table 1

Interview Guide for Principals and Colleagues of Principals

Interview Questions
1. Tell me the story of your life.
2. Tell me what compelled you to work in a high-needs, low-performing school.
3. Tell me how your training prepared you for the position of principal in a high needs school.
4. Tell me what support you receive/received from the district after taking on this job.
5. Tell me what you regret most about the experience.
6. Tell me what you value most about the experience.
7. Tell me how you think the experience affected you.
8. Tell me who you blame, if anyone, for the outcome of your situation.
9. Tell me what you believe is the solution for low-performing schools.
10. Tell me if you would do it all again given another opportunity?
11. Tell me about working with (principal name) during the time when you were working to turn the school around.
12. Tell me what you thought about his/her strategies for improvement.
13. Tell me how you would describe (principal name) professionally and personally.
14. Tell me what you saw him/her go through during the improvement experience.
15. Tell me if you think the replacement was justified?
16. Tell me how you felt going through this experience with (principal name).

Definition of Terms

There are key terms that were used throughout this study that need to be defined in order to provide clear understanding for the reader. These terms are as follows:

High Priority Schools/Low Performing Schools—Schools become designated as low performing or low achieving (terms used interchangeably) as a result of registering a

performance composite (as measured by End-of-Course, End-of-Grade, or some form of standardized testing used by individual states). In North Carolina schools that perform below 50% two of three consecutive years or have a graduation rate of below 60% in one of two previous years are considered failing (Wilkerson, 2014).

Turnaround School/Model—School turnaround efforts are those actions taken at state, district, and school levels to improve student performance in the group of lowest performing schools (Dorman & Clotfelter, 2013, as cited in Wilkerson, 2014). As a result of prior academic performance, a school receives its designation as a school to be turned around. In short, a turnaround school is targeted for intensive support geared to re-culture or restructure a school with persistently low achievement levels as measured by End-of-Course/End-of-Grade tests or graduation rates. The schools receive tiered levels of support ranging from instructional coaching or leadership coaching to central office support (Dorman & Clotfelter, 2013, as cited in Wilkerson, 2014).

Social Justice Theory—

Theory focused on advocating, leading, and keeping at the center of vision and practice issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States. (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223)

Study Setting and Participants

I used several strategies to choose the participants for this study. My first strategy was to review a list of schools in the state of North Carolina that had undergone the grueling process of school restructuring that involved replacement of the principal. Once I identified those schools I used the information to personally locate the former principals

who were terminated. Another method I used was the referral method. Using my network of principals, and other colleagues in education across the country, I contacted them to help me locate those colleagues they knew personally who have been the victim of school turnaround efforts. Lastly, I reached out to those principals I knew personally in order to solicit their stories of being replaced.

All interviews took place in agreed upon locations between the researcher and the subjects, at times convenient for both parties, and where conversations could be held discreetly and confidentially. The interviews were held over a 12-month period. I separately interviewed four replaced principals for a total of 8 hours of interviews with principals. I also interviewed colleagues who worked closely with these principals for at least an hour.

Data Collection and Analysis

After participants were interviewed these interviews were transcribed and coded according to the research questions I used. In line with narrative and oral history methods, I analyzed the data to detect common themes, slippages and silences that occurred across each of the interviews all the while searching for some unifying practices, characteristics, external and internal conflicts that either contributed to the principals' demise or that hindered their ability to be successful at turning around their failing schools. All data gathered was kept confidential. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of those interviewed. The interview questions were used as clarifying questions for principals. The colleagues of the replaced principals were not asked to tell me the story of their lives as the study does not directly focus on their lives,

but rather their professional history working with the principal participants in this research.

Subjectivity and Positionality

As a school leader in a high needs school I recognize the challenges principals in these kinds of situations face and therefore I do not deny the impact this may have on my study. My positionality may cause me to relate to the subjects, however, I was able to successfully lead my school to improvement when it was failing several years ago, which is something the subjects in my study were not able to do according to the turnaround reform guidelines. Therefore, while I remain sympathetic to their situations, I also understand that school turnaround can happen with the right leadership. Currently I am again faced with leading the school to success after state re-norming of standardized tests has taken place. So I am now again in the position where my own job could be at risk and the board could decide to employ school turnaround strategies to improve the school. All of these dynamics could influence my findings and conclusions and I take ownership for this as I believe disconnecting myself from the research would be irresponsible and unrealistic.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This chapter provides an overview of the findings of my study. The purpose of this study was to share and examine the experiences of “scapegoat” principals—principals who were replaced because they were the designated leaders of low-performing schools. This study used narrative methodology to collect the stories of these principals and social justice theory was used as a conceptual framework. Four principals, along with four colleagues who worked with them in their low-performing schools, were interviewed between summer 2015 and spring 2016.

These principals were chosen based on one criterion—they had all served as principals in high needs, low performing schools and were removed from their positions after failing to improve test scores. During my research, I discovered that those principals who have suffered the fate of replacement were not often willing to share their stories. As a result, I included the perspectives of teachers and other staff members as well. These colleagues were recommended to me by the participating principals in order to determine if their perspectives were consistent with those of the principals’, and to offer insight into the effects of principal transition on not just the principal but on the staff as well.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the academic and demographic data of each of the schools under the leadership of the participants. Common conditions that

place schools in the low-performing category include “a correlation between community poverty and stress on the organization of the school” (Corallo & McDonald, 2001, p. 2) Another common characteristic, and undoubtedly the most critical in terms of how states and districts are determining principal effectiveness, is that low performing schools “do not meet the standards established and monitored by the state board of education, or some other authority external to the school” (Corallo & McDonald, 2001, p. 2). The data in the tables are included as evidence that all four schools meet the criteria established to be considered low-performing.

The chapter includes a brief biography of each principal before presenting a thematic analysis of their narratives. The narratives of their colleagues are interwoven throughout the chapter to provide corroboration. The combination of the stories of the principals and their colleagues assist in answering the overarching research question that guides this study, “*What are the stories and experiences of those principals who are replaced due to school turnaround reform methods?*”

Each principal participant in the study was interviewed for one and half to over two hours. Each colleague of the principal was interviewed for a minimum of one hour for a total of approximately fourteen hours of interview time spent with all participants. All the principals are currently still administrators except for one who chose to retire rather than be terminated. Each principal served as a leader in a low-performing, Title I school immediately prior to their scapegoat experience. The ages of the principals at the time of the interviews ranged from the early 40s to mid-60s, with each of the participants having over 20 years of experience in education at the time of these interviews.

Meet the Captains

Courtney is a white woman in her early 40s who began her career as a middle school science teacher before becoming a school principal. When she took her first principalship, she had two years of experience as an assistant principal. Prior to becoming the leader of Old Forest Elementary, named low performing, she was a principal for four years at a non-Title I school within the same district. She spent four years at Old Forest Elementary before being replaced. Her school data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Old Forest Elementary School Data

Year	Reading	Math	Status
2006–2007*	70.7%	50.8%	Priority School
2007–2008**	14.8%	32.4%	Low Performing
2008–2009	24.1%	39.2%	Low Performing
2009–2010***	34.1%	59.5%	Low Performing

Note. AYP Target goals to meet 43% Reading, 77% Math.

* Principal started at the school.

** Tests were changed and scores declined significantly across the state.

*** Student demographics of students tested the final year the principal was at the school.

Demographics: 84% Minority; 37% LEP; 26% EC; 98% Free or reduced lunch.

Melinda is also a white woman in her mid-60s approaching retirement. She began her educational career as an elementary teacher and went on to hold curriculum facilitator positions prior to completing her Masters in School Administration and becoming an assistant principal. After three years as an assistant principal she was appointed principal

at a low-performing elementary school in her district. She served at the school for five years before being replaced. The data for her school is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Tate Street Elementary School Data

Year	Reading	Math	Status
2005–2006*	68.0%	45.4%	Priority School
2006–2007	66.9%	51.4%	Priority School
2007–2008	26.3%	57.8%	Priority School
2008–2009	34.7%	67.1%	Low Performing
2009–2010**	38.8%	62.9%	Priority School

Note. 2009–2010 AYP Target goals to meet 43% Reading, 77% Math.

Priority School: 50%–60% of students performing at grade level.

Low Performing: Less than 50% of students performing at grade level.

* Principal started at the school in 2005.

** Student demographics of students tested the final year the principal was at the school.

Demographics: 90.4% Minority; 35% LEP; 11% EC; 95% Free or reduced lunch.

Stephanie is a black woman in her early 40s. She began her teaching career as a long-term sub until she could successfully pass the teacher’s exam in her area. After passing the required examinations, she entered a school administrator’s program sponsored by her district at a local university and became an assistant principal while in this program. Halfway through her first year in the program she was appointed principal of Cedar Chest High School, a low performing high school in her district. She served as the principal for three years before being replaced. The data for her school are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Cedar Chest High School Data

Year	Proficiency	Graduation Rate	Status
2006–2007*	45.9%	80.5%	Priority
2007–2008	41.4%	75.9%	Low Performing
2008–2009**	47.5%	66.8%	Low Performing

Note. 2008–2009 AYP Target goals to meet 39% Reading, 68% Math.

* Principal started at the school in 2005.

** Student demographics of students tested the final year the principal was at the school.
Demographics: 89% Minority; > 1% LEP; 15% EC; 69% Free or reduced lunch.

Samuel is a black man in in his early- to mid-50s. He is a product of the school system in which he worked. He began as a teacher and went on to hold a variety of district level instructional leadership positions before accepting the principalship at Augusta High School. He experienced success as a turnaround principal at a neighboring high school before going to Augusta High School. He served as the principal of the school for three years before being replaced. The demographic and academic data appears differently from Stephanie’s high school because the two schools are in two different states. These data represent conditions at the school during his tenure (see Table 5).

Chapter IV incorporates the responses of each participant during our interview sessions. An analysis of each of the principal interview transcripts revealed 88 codes with an average of 40 codes for each transcript. After organizing the different codes discovered in these transcripts, five themes emerged from the data, along with some significant findings revealed during the coding process that, although they were not

developed into themes, were complementary pieces of their narratives that aided in creating a more complete picture of each participant. In line with the title of this research, nautical theme titles are used to represent the different stages in which these school leaders matriculated from teachers to principals in challenging schools. The additional findings are included in order to provide more critical insight about the participants that I believe is very important in understanding their experiences.

Table 5

Augusta High School Demographic Data

Year	Math	ELA	Graduation Rate	Status/ Performance Grade
2012–2013	72.2%	49.1%	60.9%	D
2013–2014	78.4%	48.5%	61.2%	D
2014–2015*	n/a	n/a	66.6%	D

Note. New assessments implemented in 2014-2015 indicated overall proficiency rate of students on the English 10 and Algebra I assessments was 45.4%; data from previous year cannot be compared to this year's data.

* Student demographics of students tested the final year the principal was at the school. Demographics: 83.4% Minority; 13.5% LEP; 16.9% EC; 63.1% Free or reduced lunch.

The first theme, “*First Mate: The Path to Leadership*,” primarily deals with participants’ backgrounds and their varied paths to becoming educators and leaders.

The second theme, titled “*Aye, Aye, Captain!: The Call to Administration*,” is where each of the participants shares their story of being chosen by the Superintendent to improve a low-performing school and their willingness to accept such difficult positions and their own thoughts about their ability to be successful. The third theme, “*True North: Getting to School Improvement*,” gives an in-depth look at the grueling work it takes to

implement school change in order to positively impact student achievement. The participants share their efforts to improve school culture, instructional practices and the support, or lack thereof, they received from their district leaders. The fourth theme, *“Going Down with the Ship: Principal Commitment and Replacement”* emerged from the conversations with the scapegoat principals. It is here where the participants shared the organic, personal stories of how the challenge of turning around a failing school affected them emotionally and professionally. This perhaps was the most meaningful part of my research and where the participants were able to be the most transparent during the interviews. The final theme, *“Survivor Island: Life After School Turnaround,”* represents their lives after replacement and how they found peace and purpose after their perceived failure to improve their schools.

First Mate: The Path to Leadership

Participants were asked one broad interview question, “Tell me the story of your life.” All but one of the participants started their life story with their education or career in education. In line with the format designed for the interviews, I was able to ask clarifying “tell me” questions of the participants, which in this case was to tell me about their lives before education and where their desire to work with Title I children comes from. This question elicited very detailed descriptions of their pasts that they attributed to their decisions to go into education and work with marginalized populations. Samuel was the only participant who began his story with his childhood experience and family influence. In his response he said,

Well I was born and raised in this state, in this city . . . we lived in a very inner city urban neighborhood. I know what's right and I know what's wrong, my parents taught me, gave me a wonderful work ethic, as they did all my brothers and sisters, but out of all eight of my brothers and sisters I'm the only one that's a college graduate. I'm a survivor, I grew up in the middle, I grew up in the middle of that neighborhood. I worked hard all my life. I went to an all-white school where they threw bricks at us and spit on us, you know.

He affirms his commitment to equity by saying,

I was that child. My brothers and sisters were that child—were those children, my nieces and nephews are those children, you know, my children could have been those children. They're a fabric of who I am. They are part of me, they're part of my identity. And if I didn't help them, then who's going to?

When asked the same question about her identity before becoming an educator, Courtney seemed to have an epiphany as she detailed the events surrounding her development from childhood through adulthood. It occurred to her as she shared her history that her family had been quite influential in helping to establish her ideas of equity and acceptance even as a young child.

I grew up in a very small town. Both my parents were small business owners, so my life consisted of being at a drug store 24/7, other people taking care of me, the community raising me. We would ride the bus in the afternoons to the high school, switch buses and go to my dad's store over on the other side of town, so in the day time at school I was with all the white kids and then the afternoons in play time I was with the black kids. I knew everybody because that's where we all mixed and so that was a unique quality about me and my family is that we did know, everybody knew, who we were.

She goes on to describe how family encouraged her sense of fairness and tolerance by saying,

But where my dad's store was, was right in the poor section of town so all the kids I ever played with and grew up with, that's who I played with, that's who I associated with, you know. I didn't associate myself with the other country kids and all that, that's who I felt like I belonged with. My parents raised me to accept everyone no matter who they are.

Melinda, from an upper middle class family, attended private schools as a child and as a college student. She shared similar sentiments in her narrative about her desire to teach and work with high needs children:

I grew up in a small town. My mother was a high school English teacher. I went to private schools all my life, and when I had the chance to take up on a minority scholarship from a historically black university, I really looked at that as opening and broadening my perspective in education. My mom taught at one of the low performing schools in the state. My sister's a teacher, too, she teaches at a Title I school, so I think my mom just raised two girls that just wanted to be like her and have a career of being a teacher in schools that have high needs. So that, I'm truly convinced that's where our desire came from, it was modeled for us, so we just followed in that footsteps. I don't know that I could be at a non-Title I school.

Finally, Stephanie's story aligns with the others when it comes to how the influence of home shaped her as an educator and advocate for social justice for at risk students. She shares,

I grew up in a bigger city, so, you know I consider myself a lot more accepting of people and things that were open-minded than I think most people. So when I came here it was, obviously when I came here it was very much a culture shock to me. I guess it's kind of in me. My mom is a retired elementary school teacher, my dad is a retired probation or juvenile probation officer, so I think that dealing with children is in my blood. I think education was always kind of in my blood. I always knew I was going to college, that's always been a part of me. My parents instilled that in me and my brother's a teacher.

Each participant spoke of their past as the major influence in their decisions to become educators, and specifically educators in high needs schools. Samuel shared his story of being from a working poor household and a neighborhood not known for producing scholars. He was able to beat the odds however, and this drives him to try to make this same thing happen for poor children of color. He clearly sees himself in the faces of his students, which adds another layer of responsibility to his already difficult job of improving student achievement in his school.

Courtney was the product of a successful working class family where college was encouraged. Both parents were college educated and her family was considered the local bourgeoisie among both white and minority families. Her upbringing provided her with choices that many of her peers did not have. This luxury of choice helped Courtney realize at a young age that she was privileged although her peer group was not. Even though she could not relate to them and their way of life, the experience provided her with a lens through which she saw poverty and spurred her sense of obligation to do her part to eradicate it when she became an educator.

For Melinda, the distance between her life and the life of the poor around her created a desire to widen her perspective. Having lived a fairly sheltered life, as an adult she took the first opportunity she could to leave the comfort zone of private schools that had been chosen for her by her mother and go to a university that offered a more diverse environment. This craving to be among the “others” she attributes to the strong work ethic instilled in her as a young child and her mother being a teacher in a low performing school. Although her mother worked with the poor, she educated her children in private

schools creating an interesting paradox for Melinda that she overcame by being dedicated to working in low performing schools as a teacher and administrator.

The participant with the most diverse upbringing was Stephanie and because of this, she embraced all kinds of students. She ultimately became an administrator in a high-poverty, low-performing school, which was very different from her life. She came from a middle-class family where different cultures were a regular part of her life because of the area in which she lived. She speaks of the struggle she had with the southern way of living when she arrived in the South and describes it as a culture shock. While her past may have prepared her for working with people from all walks of life, her direct experience in life was not that she came from poverty or even understood poverty. Her connection with children from poverty was not evident in her childhood, so she relied on her connection to education and children, through her parent's modeling, to guide her desire to work with disadvantaged populations.

This portion of their narratives proved to be valuable in answering my research question, "*To what extent do principals who are replaced due to turnaround federal policies possess a social justice orientation?*" Their responses add validity to the work of Marshall and Oliva (2010) who posit that "school leaders with a strong orientation towards social justice and equity issues had this instilled early in their lives by parents/significant adults whose actions regarding these issues were unequivocal, consistent and passionate" (p. 121). This area of the research is critical because it would be extremely difficult for these principals to lead in high needs public school environments without some sense of moral responsibility for their students' success.

Lack of moral responsibility for the outcomes of students in high needs situations could be an obvious reason for derailment of a school principal in a low performing school. However, all four participants possessed not just a surface awareness of their populations, but they each felt compelled to work in these environments because of a sense of duty or calling to be where they were most needed. Their investment in their students' well-being, in and out of school, resonated throughout their narratives. This is explored further when the participants discuss how they put this calling into practice as they worked to transform their schools.

Aye, Aye, Captain! The Call to Administration

In their study of ten turnaround principals in a Turnaround Specialist Program at the University of Virginia, Burbach and Butler (2005) state, "every superintendent knows, the single most important factor in turning around an academically low-achieving school is the selection of the right principal for the job" (p. 24). Contrary to this study, the scapegoats' descriptions of how they answered the call to go into failing schools reveal selection processes that do not align with what is cited as best practice for choosing a principal for a low-performing school.

From the Classroom to the Principal's Office

In this section of the chapter we begin with Stephanie's story because she had the most non-traditional path to becoming a school principal of the four participants. Stephanie entered the education field without the acceptable credentials. Although she was a graduate of an accredited school of education program, she was not a certified

teacher when she began working in her current school district. Despite this, she was able to overcome this obstacle as she describes below:

I started two years at a middle school, and it took me a good couple of times to pass that middle school praxis. I was out and subbing for about a year and a half I believe it was while I studied and retook the praxis. I was like a permanent sub and some teacher left or something like that. I finally got on in the teaching capacity once I passed the praxis.

After successfully obtaining her teaching license while substituting, Stephanie almost immediately entered a Master's program in school administration that was paid for by her district as a "home grown" initiative to produce more principals within the district. Her appointment to an administrative position came fairly quickly as told in her narrative:

So I am four years teaching, maybe a little more than a year into the MSA program becoming an assistant principal. After a year, not even a year and a half at that school, he (her principal) gets a call from the superintendent for me to become the principal at Cedar Chest High School.

The other three participants shared a more familiar, predictable story of their experiences from the classroom to the principal's office. They each plotted their positions very meticulously during our interviews. Samuel, the only male participant, had the most experience and the most decorated resume. He was the only participant who had held a district leadership position prior to becoming a school principal. In his interview, he shared:

I did my student teaching at the school where I was [later] replaced [as the principal]. I taught in the school system for eighteen years before leaving the

classroom. I was a dean of students for four years. I was assistant principal at a middle school. I was assistant principal in charge of student services at a high school. I was the director of middle schools in the district. The then superintendent asked me to become the principal at another low performing school. I worked there for four years. After saving that school the superintendent sent me to Augusta High School.

The white women participants had the most closely related experiences as they both worked their way up the leadership ladder by becoming teacher leaders in their respective buildings. Melinda and Courtney's narratives mirrored each other in the following ways:

Melinda says,

I was really enjoying being a third-grade teacher. I just really enjoyed teaching and he (her principal at the time) said I'm gonna make you a lead teacher and you're gonna do nothing but model lessons and work with the teachers. So I did that for a couple of years and then he was the same principal that said what about an AP? Well you know, been out of the classroom then for three or four years doing pure curriculum and instruction so he's the one that really talked me into it, at the same school that I was in for fifteen years, so I was a teacher, a curriculum facilitator, lead teacher, and an AP, and then that's when I got the call. I was moved to Tate Street Elementary.

Courtney responded in this way,

I did a year-long student teaching. I was a teacher at a middle school in the district, Title I. I also started my master's program at the same time, so she (her principal at the time) was like well, if you want to be a principal I'm going to throw you in, come on. So I—she kept inviting me to observe things before I was even into that internship time, she just made me want to do it even more. Then we go from that, I'm moving to that school, here again, I'm seen as kind of one of the leaders of the school but also she pushed me into SIT team and this team and that team I was only an AP for two years, and then became principal (at her first school). I was there for four years and loved it.

Every scapegoat principal followed the classroom to principal pipeline to leadership. According to Baker, Punswick, and Belt (2010), “Principals leading K-12 public schools today most often ascend to their current position after being employed as a classroom teacher” (p. 526). This gateway to administration through teaching, according to Rand (2004), “has become a somewhat standard prerequisite for building level leadership that is universally understood in the profession” (as cited in Baker et al., 2010, p. 526).

You Don’t Say So

Interestingly enough, Samuel was the only one of the scapegoat principals who seemed to make a seamless transition from teaching into administrative roles without much prompting. The three female principals were encouraged by others to develop their leadership talents while they were teachers, while the male participant seemed to march right into the role as though it was expected. This is consistent with the research of Syvertson (2002), who found that “female principals do not specifically plan their careers and training with the goal of being an administrator; rather, it is an option that presents itself as opposed to pursuing the option from the early stages of a career” (as cited in Baker et al., 2010, p. 527). This could suggest that male principals, like Samuel, have their eye on leadership and pursue these positions and obtain them at a greater rate, therefore contributing to the literature on the gender gap between men and women in school administration positions. What was more intriguing is that none of the participants spoke of administration being their ultimate goal as educators. Although

they willingly entered school administration programs, none of these scapegoat principals spoke of an overwhelming desire to serve in education on this level.

A common language of servitude emerged from the narratives of the female participants that was not present in the experience of the one male participant in the group. All the female principals described a kind of “summoning” to the position rather than being asked if they actually wanted to take on the role. Stephanie describes her appointment this way:

Here I am getting a call from the superintendent, or my principal did, about me becoming a principal at this school, which I knew little about. I don't know how much you knew about the former superintendent's tenure, but everyone knew that you couldn't—you didn't say no, if he called and said for you to go here, there, wherever, you said yes for fear of being blackballed. You told him no, you declined a position, and he wanted to put you up regardless of what it held, you would be blackballed, and that kind of, that was the kind of culture he created in the school system at that time. I can't remember if I talked to him or not. In fact, I honestly can't.

Courtney, a principal in the same district as Stephanie describes her call to the principalship in the following way:

The superintendent at the time, he called me into his office, and he said Courtney, you've done really good at your current school, but we have a school that needs you, and I'm like okay, didn't tell me anything else, just a school that needs you, and you're going to Old Forest. Did not tell me all that it was, you know what I'm saying, so talk about a total shift, but it was where my heart was, you know, I was missing my Title I babies, but I had no idea what a mess that school was in. You do not tell that superintendent no, plain and simple, you do not tell him no. He said you were going to Old Forest, you're going to Old Forest, yes sir, what time, what day, you know what I mean?

Melinda, from a neighboring district describes her placement like this:

I got a call my fifth year as an AP from the superintendent at the time, and he said I'm moving you to Tate Street Elementary as the principal, they're failing. Do I have a choice? He said well think about it, I'll give you 24 hours and you need to call personnel and let them know. I didn't interview for it, had no idea, did not seek it, whatever. I didn't know, I was a young AP, had babies and kids, you know, so I took it. I didn't think I had a choice, yeah, not with him. You just sort of, you just said yes or no and went on your way, you didn't really ask for another placement, it wasn't the environment at the time and the board was supporting that, so you really did not have anywhere to go.

Superintendent leadership style played a critical role in their experiences. As their narratives reveal, there was a shared fear of refusal among these women. All of them mentioned the future of their careers being in jeopardy and the climate of obedience to the superintendent that was present in their districts.

I would like to suggest here that issues of gender played a major role in the female principals' feelings of intimidation and, thus, how they responded to their superiors. The role of the subservient woman dates back to biblical ages and that role, even today, is one that women continue to combat. Historically, men have held the majority of leadership positions in education leaving the teaching to women. As women climb the career ladder and achieve positions as school principals, the likelihood that they will still have a man, usually a white man, as their supervisor, is a common phenomenon. As more women enter the principalship under the supervision of men, the pressure is there to prove themselves worthy of leading and to represent for other professional women. I believe the women in this study felt compelled, as much as they felt coerced, to take these positions to make their "mark" as women administrators within their districts.

Their desire to dispel the myths about a woman's ability to succeed over their male colleagues and somehow be considered equal in the eyes of the superintendent possibly drove their decision to accept the positions as well. Another factor to be considered is the superintendents' ability to manipulate the feminine ethics shared by most female principals. As mothers, wives and partners, we tend to be nurturing individuals. This is confirmed in the work of Kruger (2008), who posits that "in general, research into leadership styles has found that women are a bit stronger in relationship-oriented supportive styles, while men score higher on instructive and controlling styles" (p. 162).

Each of the women said that their superintendents used phrases like "the school needs you" presenting a picture of children in trouble that they undoubtedly knew would appeal to their compassionate and caring nature.

Samuel speaks of his appointment to not one, but two failing high schools, during his career in terms that do not denote fear or feelings of being obligated to bend to the superintendent's will. When he received his school leadership positions he says:

The then superintendent asked me to become the principal another low-performing school in the district which is located on the west side. He sent me to Augusta where I had gone to high school, so I became principal at Augusta High School.

The overriding fear of not being considered for future positions dominated the narratives of the female principals. On the other hand, the male participant did not seem to share the same kinds of fears about his career and progressed from one position of leadership to the next with ease. The culture of the districts these principals served in, according to the

female participants, nurtured this kind of top down management style that compelled them to accept these positions regardless of whether or not they felt prepared.

Too Much Too Soon

Experience prior to becoming a school leader is something that is not only necessary, but expected in some districts. The demands of the profession can be overwhelming for experienced administrators, let alone novice principals. Each of the participants served as assistant principals prior to becoming leaders at failing schools. What is interesting about their stories is the amount of time each served as assistant principal and the kinds of schools in which they served before being “tapped” for the principalship.

Melinda, although an educator for fifteen years, was an assistant principal for just five years in a Title I school before she was moved to Tate Street Elementary. Stephanie was an assistant principal in a non-Title I school for less than two years prior to her appointment. Courtney was an assistant for two years—one year at a non-Title I middle school in a neighboring district, and the other year within the district in a Title I elementary school as a novice assistant principal. She served for only four years in a non-Title I elementary principal before being placed at Old Forest Elementary. Samuel served in administrative positions for five years, including a district level director position before his superintendent sent him to Augusta High School.

Although there is no research that dictates the experience principals need to have prior to taking on the role of school leader, Baker et al. (2010) posit that “schools that struggle to show adequate student achievement share some building leadership

characteristics” (p. 529). One of these characteristics, according to Papa, Lankford, and Wyckoff (2002) state that “schools where students performed poorly on standardized exams are much more likely to have less experienced principals” (p. 2). Not only are student outcomes affected by the experience of the principal, but in a study conducted by Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin (2013), the researchers found that “schools with a high proportion of low-income students are more likely to have first-year principals and less likely to have principals who have been at the school at least six years than those serving a less-disadvantaged population” (p. 67).

In light of this research, we see a serious flaw in the selection process when it comes to appointing leaders in failing schools. Superintendents tend to choose those candidates who have the least amount of experience to lead in the most extreme circumstances. Logic would assume that these appointments would be given to the most highly effective and skilled principals in the district, as well as those who had a track record of success, like Samuel, in improving low performing schools. On the contrary, three out of the four principals interviewed in this study met none of these criteria. So the question then becomes, why are superintendents placing novice principals in such positions?

The answer may be in the results of a study conducted by Davis et al. (2005), commissioned by the Wallace Foundation that states,

the issue has less to do with dwindling supply (of highly qualified principals) than with the inequitable distribution of qualified candidates in suburban and affluent communities. In California, for example, the problem is not a shortage of certified administrators, but a shortage of highly qualified administrators with a commitment to working in underserved communities and schools. (p. 5).

These data suggest that there is a talent pool of school leaders unwilling to tackle the overwhelming work involved in transitioning schools like the ones led by the participants in this study. More troubling, however, is the fact that superintendents are not using the same tactics to coerce them into taking these positions, leading one to assume that the career of the experienced principal is valued more in local school districts than that of the novice principal.

Obvious reasons for this phenomenon are evident as the sanctions placed on these schools and the pressures on the leader make them less attractive. In addition, as Stephanie suggests in her narrative, failure to meet the requirements of school turnaround stipulations can be career ending. Those who have their eyes on promotion to better schools within the district and central office administration avoid these types of placements and typically are not tapped for these positions. In their study on principal effectiveness, Branch et al. (2013) found that

a school that serves largely affluent families may create the illusion that it has a great principal, when family backgrounds are the key cause of high achievement. Alternatively, a school that serves disadvantaged students may appear to be doing poorly but in fact have a great principal who is producing better outcomes than any other principal would. (p. 64)

Therefore, a valid argument can be made for re-visiting the benchmarks used to determine the professional future of principals who enlist in the schools that have the most need versus those who do not. Novice principals who are taking on the responsibility of turning around a low performing school are suffering extreme

consequences for their obedience to the superintendent, while those who are fortunate enough to avoid these “bad” schools within the district continue to advance.

I Wish I Had Known More

Coupled with experience, or the lack thereof for these participants, was the degree to which each of the participants felt they had the capacity to do the job effectively.

Melinda shared this,

I was a young AP (Assistant Principal). So there I am, no experience, I mean I was an AP, as AP I was used to just getting things done—where’s the bus schedule, where’s that math schedule, how-who we were hiring, discipline, how many suspension days, what’s the law say, policy about. I had not worked on per se vision, mission, collaborative vision, relationships per se. I always had that principal doing it and here I was striving (to be that person).

Courtney shared these same feelings of inadequacy in her interview. Below she said,

I was only an AP for two years and then became principal. I do kind of wish I had more AP under me, experience, only because I think there were some things that I wish I would have known more of, but that’s okay. I learned when I got in the job.

Stephanie, the participant with the least amount of experience of all the participants in the study, echoed the same ideas about her promotion:

I knew really very little about Cedar Chest, new to the state, pretty much only like a year, like I said, a year and a half into the Masters of School Administration program, pretty much new to administration.

The women in this study all admitted their lack of self-confidence going into these positions. Although a certain amount of anxiety is to be expected when taking on a new challenge, there was a common idea shared among them of gaining the skills needed to do the job after getting into the position. This on-the-job-training motto is not sufficient when the expectations for the principal in turnaround schools are so high and come with such dire consequences when they fail. On the other side of the spectrum are principals like Samuel. He was the only participant who did not seem to hesitate when asked to lead in failing schools within his district. He describes his call to the role in this way,

Well I think I was asked to go there because I understand, I have a number of strengths. So all of these were my attributes and the superintendent saw this and he knew that I could turn the school around.

Overwhelmingly, Samuel showed the most confidence about being placed into the position and his capacity to deliver results. He never wavered in his opinion about his ability to turn the school around during my interview with him. I found Samuel's poise to be predictable based on the research cited earlier about the ambitions of male administrators and their dominance in the field of education leadership. At the same time, after listening to Samuel tout his many strengths and skills, it seemed probable that his confidence could have been mistaken for arrogance, thus adding legitimacy to his replacement by his superiors. I would submit, however, that those like Samuel who possess this kind of self-awareness could be the candidates needed for the position. It is obvious from my research that many principals are entering failing schools with little

knowledge or skill to be successful. Therefore, when someone like Samuel comes along, perhaps their security in their abilities should be welcomed rather than punished.

You Learn It on the Job

As the principals continued to tackle the challenges of improving student achievement in their underperforming schools, the subject of training and professional development was key in understanding the capacity each had to perform the work needed to effect change. When asked whether they felt their graduate level work prepared them for the position of principal, the scapegoat principals cited their college preparation programs as having some impact on their practice, but agreed that the coursework was not effective in preparing them for what they would face in their new roles as turnaround principals.

Courtney describes her graduate preparation in terms of the course that was most relevant to what she was encountering in her own experience. She reflected on her education by saying:

I would say my doctoral work with one professor because I remember specifically him talking about derailment. I don't know that the research and all that other stuff helped me as much with that particular situation, but it's come in handy with other situations, but definitely that about the superintendency and derailment. I just reflected a lot on that one when I was going through it.

Stephanie speaks of her master's program and its ability to prepare her for the work of turnaround in this way:

Theory, it was more theory versus with what I was doing, it was much more theory than what I was doing. I finished the master's program in two years, in 2004 and I started at Cedar Chest in official capacity in 2005. There was a lot of,

you know, writing papers about leadership, how to lead, but most of my training was on the job training. It wasn't necessarily based on anything that I'd learned, I learned different developments of leadership, I learned different methods of leadership. It was more so it was on the job training for me.

Samuel attributed all his administrative skills to his personal and professional experiences and gave no credit to his educational preparation. He describes his college influence in this way: "No, I think growing up in an urban environment receiving an urban education and teaching in an urban environment prepared me the most." Melinda cites one course, as did Courtney, as having the most effect on her practice, however, like most of the participants, she does not credit her master's program for much beyond this one course,

School law, that's it. That's it. I had to pass his exam, that really is, that really is where I learned, now me, personally, where I learned to be an administrator was by being an AP. But School Law, I still have the book, it was one of the best courses at the university that I took. My internship was fabulous. Once you get in that school that's where you learn it.

This opinion that university school administration preparation programs did not sufficiently prepare the participants for turnaround leadership reflects the research done by Dodson (2014), which states that

Nationwide, school officials have criticized Principal Preparation Programs (PPPs), for not ensuring that graduates are "ready" for principalship. They often claim that students graduating from college and university PPPs lack the skills to step right in as effective leaders; instead, they need too much on-the-job learning. (p. 42)

As an increasing number of principals are faced with the possibility of having to lead high needs schools, this points to a weakness in the university to principal pipeline that could have serious effects on the future of the candidate pool needed to lead our schools successfully.

Delayed Resources

Kelley and Peterson (2000) posit that

preparing individuals to become principals involves much more than just recruitment, preparation, licensure, and placement. Indeed, ongoing evaluation and supervision and coaching and continuous career-long professional development are critical strategies to ensure that schools are led by effective principals. (p. 20)

Despite this, the professional development and training opportunities for each of these scapegoat principals serving in under performing schools was not consistent with the research in this area. The interviews revealed a wide range of professional development experiences for the participants. For example, Melinda spoke in detail about a series of targeted trainings that were eventually made available that addressed her needs as a new principal of a turnaround school. She describes the professional development she received in this way:

By the third year I got the letter that all principals in the lowest performing schools would need to go to a local university. I went for six months and did a six-month series of turnaround elementary school practices. We went through everything that you could possibly go through, master scheduling, hiring, every part of it, and I probably left there more trained than I have ever been before as a principal. The training had speakers from Colorado coming in and PLCs, if you will, DuFour, Pattie, Poppum, was just—they were just hitting the scene, so we were trained by the DuFour's, Richard DuFour and his wife came in and trained us. We had a leadership training in relationship building, we did True Colors, we

did the Myers-Briggs test, we did finding your leadership style, we did self-study analysis, we kept a journal, we had homework, we read research articles.

Courtney recalled her professional development and training as a new principal charged with turning around a failing school in a completely opposite way:

In terms of me as an administrator, I was always, I was being told everything I wasn't doing right and never being told what I needed to do to do better unless I did it exactly the way he (her direct supervisor) wanted and I've already told you, there were things I didn't agree with, so that kind of, I felt like I didn't get support. I want someone, I mean to me support is a two-way street, you give me feedback, I learn from the feedback, I ask questions, you, you know, it's a give and take.

Stephanie had a similar experience, and ironically, contributes her professional development to the dreaded state assistance team assigned to her school. Her description is as follows:

I didn't feel like the school system itself had given me enough support in terms of allowing me enough time to grow, any support in terms of from curriculum and instruction, bringing in people from the different departments to help me, you know, put structures in place, the school was in shambles, and so if you're talking about structuring in a way to reform and bringing me in brand new and wanting me to do, you know, rebrand this building, then give me the tools that I need and the support I need, knowing that I really don't have any experience to do it myself.

A key point that should be highlighted in their narratives about their exposure to professional development is the delayed response, and in some cases no response at all, to the professional needs of these principals and their staff. Melinda spoke of this support coming from the district after her third year. Courtney described a very negative system of support she was offered that did not aid her at all in helping to lead improvement at her

school. Finally, Stephanie had to rely on the state for her professional nurturing because they realized she was not receiving any support at all at the local level.

Each of the women openly admitted in their interviews that they lacked the skills needed at the onset of their appointments. Nevertheless, they did not receive the training and support needed on day one of their entry into the schools. Literature supporting the importance of the professional growth of school leaders is in abundance. Due to the complexities of the job, principals must continuously stay abreast of best practices in education in order to grow and change as the position of the school leader continues to evolve. To deny turnaround principals immediate access to quality professional development, after thrusting them into some of the most neglected schools in the country, sets them up for failure and contributes to the lack of skilled principals willing to work in the schools that need them most.

Samuel made no reference to any professional development opportunities that were provided to him as a turnaround principal. It could be assumed, based on the spirit of his narrative, that due to his background as a central office administrator, perhaps he was the only person who went into his experiences with the knowledge base to handle a turnaround school. Conversely, his replacement raises questions about whether or not even district level administrators are up to the challenge of improving low performing schools. The various professional development experiences of the other three participants also point to inconsistent practices between districts in the same state that may have implications for policy changes that should become a part of the school reform movement.

I Found Myself by Myself

Their first-year experiences, as cited, were void of real tangible support for these principals after they were appointed to the positions. I found this especially troubling considering the enormous responsibility placed upon them to turn their schools around. The assumption could quite easily be made that these principals placed in some of the most at risk schools within their districts, (and some within the state), would have unlimited resources and a level of intervention from the central office that would rival that of other schools simply based on need.

However, as their stories unfolded during the interviews, it was revealing to discover that they all struggled through the process of school improvement in some shape, some never fully receiving any assistance from the district at all. In Samuel's story he even describes the district as a hindrance to the changes he was trying to bring about at Augusta High School. He shared this in his interview:

Our boys' basketball team did something that, and our school's 102 years old, were never able to do in 102 years, they won the state basketball championship. First state basketball championship that the school had ever had in 102 years. First state basketball championship that the city had had in 40 years. They did not allow us to have a rally after we won the game, which is traditional statewide, you always go back to the school and they said that it would be violent.

This failure to support the school did not end here. Samuel describes more incidents like this below:

Every school is allotted the state alternative education budget. Normally we receive \$241,000, and you write your budget how you're going to spend that, okay? They put this white lady in charge and we did not receive our budget. I needed that remediation money so I could set up the afterschool remediation

programs during school and all the alternative programs. They didn't want to give me that money, anything, any resources that I was supposed to get they didn't want to give to me. They wanted to see me fail. They wouldn't give me enough teachers, anything they could do to make me fail they would.

Stephanie spoke very candidly about her feelings of abandonment from the district office. Desperate for help from her district, she turned to her state assistance team for direction, mentoring, and grassroots strategies to turn her school around. She described her relationship with the central office in this way,

I really used them [her state assistance team] to my advantage and really gained relationships with them that helped me in terms of a lot of things that I was able to get because they would—they didn't see the superintendent favorably, they saw how he wasn't giving me the support, so when they wrote their report to him to the state, they also put in the report the support that I didn't receive from the school system, you know, to let people know that I wasn't getting what I needed.

Courtney described similar feelings of being left to fend for herself at her low performing school. She described her entrance into Old Forest Elementary this way,

I didn't have an AP. We also had that autistic continuum starting at age four all the way up, and they were inclusion, so you had autistic children in all that mix, too. We had the regional sites for Behaviorally Educably Handicapped. Yeah, you're like seriously, you put all that and no AP? There was no support, none, I mean I had the superintendent giving me the vocal support and the personal support, but the physical support was not there, you know. Title I can only buy you so much. You can only get but so much out of that, and it's not getting you all you need.

When expressing her feelings towards the direct supervisor assigned to her school to assist her through the turnaround process, the experience was more combative than collaborative and she attributes the setbacks the school experienced, as well as her own

demise, to his lack of support for the work she was doing at the school. When speaking of him she said this,

Now my supervisor he was the downfall for most of those teachers. He came in and he was very judgmental, never had any experience in Title I before he was involved in this school, and didn't understand what it means to be working in a Title I school. He went through every single teacher and he would tell me this one needs to be in on an action plan, this one doesn't, this one—he made me put people on action plans when I didn't agree with it. There was one teacher vividly in my mind that he wanted me put on an action plan just because he didn't like her hair, and I refused, and when I refused to do what he said, that's when I became a scapegoat, that's when I became the negative to everything, because I refused to ruin people's careers just because he didn't like them, had nothing to do with their teaching and I'm like, 'no.'

In her interview, Melinda shared the turmoil surrounding her first year as a new principal at a failing school and how the district itself was left without direction as a newly appointed superintendent came on the scene. Although she was afforded some support her second year, she shared her first-year experience below:

So needless to say, the first year at the school was rough. The superintendent came in and he talked to me one day and he said how much support are you getting? I said well, none that I know of, and he said well here's what we're gonna do, we're gonna go over to square one, you're staying here and you're a good fit here, he said you would not have survived your former school for 15 years and done what you did there. You have something for this place, but you need support. What are you getting? I'm like nothing, I was just placed here, you know.

Careful review of the mission and vision statements from the participants' districts reflects a commitment to high student achievement. Statements claiming to graduate career and college ready students, achieve educational excellence, engage students in a variety of academic and social experiences, and support them in each of

these endeavors so that they are successful in life are reiterated multiple times in the various plans available on their websites. Despite this, there was a consistent theme among the participants of having a lack of support from the district, or a delayed sense of urgency in order to make these goals a reality.

True North: Getting to School Improvement

Each participant entered their new position with a degree of determination that, despite the doubts that some of them had, coupled with their lack of preparation, compelled them all to accept the challenge of school turnaround. What was revealed in the interviews points to a series of common obstacles and accomplishments that without fail, the scapegoat principals and their colleagues all repeated when describing the work involved in school improvement. This section addresses this work and how the scapegoat principals and their staff members reflected upon this very difficult task.

As the responses of the principals are cited, the interview responses of their colleagues regarding their leadership and the turnaround process are included periodically. The areas of focus include school climate and culture, student discipline, teacher quality and staff development, district support, and student achievement. The issue of time and effort is embedded within the student achievement section and addresses the problem with time restraints mandated by turnaround legislation and the idea of principal effectiveness across Title I and non-Title I schools.

Clean Up Year

According to MacNeil, Prater, and Busch (2009),

When the complex patterns of beliefs, values, attitudes, expectations, ideas and behaviours in an organization are inappropriate or incongruent the culture will ensure that things work badly. Successful school principals comprehend the critical role that the organizational culture plays in developing a successful school. (p. 74)

Without fail, each of the scapegoat principals spoke of the first year being a “clean up” year because the climate and culture of the schools was so poor when they arrived.

Rather than focus on instructional improvement, instead they were faced with school culture and climate issues that had to be addressed before learning could take place.

There were varying degrees of the “clean up” phenomenon revealed in their interviews.

The issues they faced ranged from basic facility conditions to overarching micro-political conflicts which all had negative effects on the school environment.

Samuel describes his first year at Augusta High in this way:

I went into that school, the teachers were in survival mode, and when I say survival mode, they were simply trying to make it through the day. With the high turnover rate. The attendance was a major problem in an urban school. Violence is another interesting factor that people don't recognize that plagues our schools. Bullying is one thing, but then you have a whole different scope of violence. The sexual diseases that was spread, you know, we had to open clinics. Because first of all we had law and order, we made the kids do what they were supposed to do. I simply had to clean it up.

Samuel's colleague, Grace, describes similar conditions when Samuel became the principal,

When I first went there I was an instructional coach, five, six years ago, and I hated going there because the alarms were being pulled two or three times a day in one building, okay, so the destruction of the learning was definitely there. It was a gorgeous campus but you know, it wasn't a safe campus. He actually took the learning environment and made it safe and made it structured in terms of kids get to class on time, if you're running around campus, the police would snatch you up or administrators would get you, then you would have some type of consequence. By the time he left it was probably the safest high school in the district—and that was after year one—it was the safest high school.

Stephanie, the other high school principal in this study, describes her entry into the principalship at Cedar Chest High in this way:

So my first year was spent just trying to undo a whole lot of things that had been done at Cedar Chest. The school was out of control, no stability in terms of administration, teachers very disgruntled, just—it was a very chaotic situation, a lot of damage control needed to happen, the school stayed in the news often. I liken it to the movie *Lean on Me*, where the school was just literally out of control. Test scores down in the dumps, white migration where it was—had formerly been a school known for academia. The demographics had totally changed.

Stephanie's colleague, Amanda, describes in her own words the climate and culture of the school and what Stephanie was up against in the early stages of turning the school around in the following response:

She was working with a lot of opposition, and it was just nearly impossible, in my opinion, for her to do what she needed to do with the limited staff she had. She was putting out fires every moment of the day. She was putting out fires with the students because we had high gang issues and oftentimes situations from the neighborhoods spilled over into the school, so we had constant fighting. I can look back now and I can laugh about it, but it came a point towards the end of my career there where I literally buckled my keys on my waist because I never knew when the school might go into lockdown or was going to be a fight, and these kids would fight to the death, it was horrible, the ambulances were always there because somebody stabbed somebody.

Unfortunately, in Stephanie's case, her problems did not just come from the student body but from the teaching staff as well. The fires Amanda refers to also extended to adult issues that Stephanie was forced to correct in her new role as principal. She described these conflicts this way,

I can remember staff getting into arguments right in front of students, we had situations, unfortunately, where a band teacher and a director both were involved with female students, it just to me felt like she was in a sinking boat and nobody was really giving her the help that she needed, so putting out fires just became her way of living.

Melinda describes her first year like this:

So the first year I had to deal with misconceptions, public perceptions, a new superintendent, one leaving, one coming, I had to deal with staff, an AP that was very angry that I was there, a staff that was divided, it was rough, it was rough.

Melinda's colleague, Nancy, spoke of the climate and culture more in terms of the transience of the students and how that hindered their academic progress more than the micro-political issues that Melinda encountered when she arrived. Although the lens through which she saw the school atmosphere was different from Melinda's, the culture of the school Nancy describes is legitimate from a teacher's point of view and relevant to student success. Nancy described the environment this way:

You know, like I said, for Tate Street it's about proficiency, that is where we struggle, we have a lot of students in and out, they may move—they are with us for a little while, they may move, they may come right back. I know that's something that she spoke of a lot as if we could teach our students that we get, you know, the first ten days of school, and keep them, try to, you know, work out ways to keep them there.

Courtney echoed the same kind of first year turmoil as the other principals in her response:

That first year I had to focus not only on getting control because it was out of control with the kids, it was chaos, discipline was out of control, we had drugs, we had fights, we had the cops at the school every week with something, every week with something, gangs, I mean kids were wearing gang colors and beating up each other based on what they wore, that first year it was crazy.

As in Stephanie's case, the adult issues were equally consuming as the student-related matters for Courtney at her elementary school,

Had facilities issues, the custodians were fighting each other, literally I broke up a fight between adults one time that first year, ended up firing everybody in the custodial role, because it was also not clean. I had 25 teachers I had to fire that year, and I'm not talking action plan, I'm talking found them with inappropriate, immediate, walk out of the building, take your keys kind of stuff. Some of them were staff members, doing things that were just inappropriate. I had one person that I walked in the classroom and she was bopping kids on the back of the head and calling them assholes, I'm like, no. So that first year it was just me cleaning up a mess. There was no instructional leadership at all because I had to focus on cleaning up, getting the chaos under control.

Her close colleague, Dana, also described a similar kind of environment and specifically cited instances when Courtney was actually harmed physically her first year at Old Forest,

We had some gang problems and she dealt with that, like she put, I want to say she put SMOD (Standard Mode of Dress) into place where, you know, we didn't have the gang colors anymore. We had to have some restraints because kids would hurt themselves. She got beat up several times. I had a kindergartner that we had to clear my classroom almost daily because he would start throwing things and he stepped on her foot after she'd had surgery and totally undid all the surgery and she never said a word other than he stepped on my foot.

These principals' efforts to transform the culture of their failing schools is evidence of the non-academic factors that these turnaround principals must tackle that are consuming but necessary. According to Kaplan and Ownings (2013),

Unless teachers and administrators act intentionally to re-boot the culture of their school, all innovations, collegiality, shared decision making, high standards, and high-stakes tests will have to fit in and around existing cultural elements. Although any type of change presented to schools often meets resistance, implementing new approaches without considering school culture will remain no more than crepe and tinsel, incapable of making much of a difference. (p. 3)

The condition of these schools when the principals arrived is evidence that they had been in crisis long before these scapegoat principals took control. It is important to understand this because we often adopt deficit assumptions about why schools are failing, often blaming the students and families for the school environment. However, as Marshall and Oliva (2010) point out, "inequitable outcomes often result from systemic organizational practices and policies endemic to schools and administrator practice that have not been analyzed or acted upon with respect to their impact on nonmainstream students" (p. 7). As a result, their instructional leadership was not evident the first year because they were all struggling to just create basic processes and systems that would allow teaching to occur.

Teacher Survival

If leadership is considered one of the most important factors contributing to a school's success or failure, then teacher quality, without doubt, has to be the key factor in determining student achievement within the classroom. The research on teacher quality shows "that the quality of classroom teachers has the greatest impact on the performance

levels of students” (Evers & Izumi, 2002, p. xiii). As these principals operated as change agents in their buildings, a large part of the work involved making sure competent faculty and staff members were in place to reverse the negative or mediocre teaching strategies that had been used until they took the reins of leadership. An unwanted side effect of this duty was the increase in teacher turnover. Through the work of Simon and Johnson (2015), we know that “when students are repeatedly taught by new teachers, they pay a substantial price year after year in the quality of instruction they receive” (p. 5).

While some of the participants did speak of having some control over terminating employees, there was little said about the decision-making power they had to re-hire quality teachers to replace them. To compound the work of transforming the school, these principals had to develop human resource skills in order to recognize good teachers and recommend them for hire. Ultimately, these school leaders became responsible for the professional development of these new and veteran teachers when their skills proved to be insufficient.

In her interview, Stephanie spoke of her efforts to improve teacher quality in the face of a very disgruntled and veteran staff resistant to change. While she did not mention terminating teachers, she did speak at length about how her assistance team was able to help her provide professional development for her teachers:

They [the assistance team] came with teaching and learning support, they helped me with professional development for our teachers, they helped me with pockets—they were able to really get in there and so some observing, helping me and my administrative team with teachers who needed additional support so just anything I needed. Do you want us to bring in some professional development, what do you think about this idea, sitting down and helping me devise, I think—

well you know, I think we need this particular set of teachers or I think we might need this for this set of teachers.

Once again, Stephanie gave credit to the state assistance team, not the central office, for her own understanding of how teacher quality affects student learning. However, there was no mention, specifically, of what trainings or newly adopted strategies, methods, or programs were adopted that addressed these deficiencies in their teaching. Interestingly enough, her colleague Amanda paints a different picture of the quality of the teaching staff as she describes below the obstacles she faced in trying to build capacity in her teaching force to increase student performance:

In order to turn the school around she needed additional help. I think she had a lot of great ideas, I really do, I just don't think she had the tools to do what was necessary with the population that we were serving. I think that she definitely needed more reading coaches, math coaches, she needed a—I would say stronger EC department. The second year she had a high turnover rate with staff, and that caused her to have to bring in young inexperienced teachers. That's not a good thing when you're working with a high needs school.

It is no secret that high needs schools typically have a high percentage of inexperienced teachers. This perception of the improvements in teacher quality from Amanda's point of view could reflect her lack of involvement at the administrative level in the behind scenes collaboration between Stephanie and the assistance team. It could also shine a spotlight on a more troubling internal disconnect between the expectations of the district and what is being required of principals at the building level to improve failing schools. Both Stephanie and Amanda spoke of the small growth the school did

achieve during her tenure as principal, but both agree that more could have been done if the professional development needs of the staff had been more of a priority.

Samuel spoke in detail about the lack of skill of the teachers in his building when he arrived,

I had a social studies teacher that loved to show movies. I had a PE teacher that well, was scared to death of those kids. So they were getting ready to retire, so they had offices on the side of the gym, they'd throw out three basketballs for the black kids and three soccer balls for the Hispanic kids, and go in the office and shut their door. I had another geometry teacher, and all he'd do is sit at the overhead and talk to the kids, I said what, how do you check for understanding? You would not believe what he told me. He said because I could see it in their eyes if they understood or not. And the ones that couldn't handle it left, and the ones that were going to do it my way stayed.

Samuel attributed his own expertise and skill to the improvements in teacher quality that led to his school getting off the state probation list. It would appear that he single-handedly had to improve the teaching conditions in his school when he said in his interview,

I can walk in a classroom and I can tell whether these kids are understanding what it is that the teacher is teaching. I can also tell the level of instruction. I can also tell whether this teacher has prepared. I can also tell whether this teacher is checking for understanding at a high level. I also can do professional development to help these classroom teachers become a better teacher.

In talking with his colleague Grace, she reflected on the strategies employed to improve the quality of instruction and school performance in a slightly different way. She painted a picture of a principal who took a team approach to correcting gross deficiencies in teacher instruction in the classroom. She had this to say,

Well the great thing was he kind of valued staff input, so I got to sit on weekly meetings every Monday with instructional coaches I'm a compliance coordinator, so the compliance coordinators and the instructional coaches got to sit around the table and do a lot of collaboration and planning and brainstorming of what needed to be done and where we were with different parts of the plan. We were a part of the administrative team, but at some point we all kind of had to collaborate more together and then, you know, we had professional learning communities. He was a type of person that when he was in charge of Augusta High School he allowed staff members to kind of, not do their own thing but if you had an idea he would support it if it was logically sound and research based.

These different accounts of how improvement in teacher quality evolved at Augusta were very interesting. While Samuel presented a unilateral, top down approach to providing support for teachers in the classroom, Grace remembered a more collaborative approach that valued teacher input and her own expertise as part of the administrative team. This could be viewed as a slippage in how the professional needs of the staff were addressed, again, based on their positions. It could possibly be indicative of a common theme in Samuel's narrative of being the savior-like figure of the school committed more than anyone else in the school to the success of the students. This sense of personal responsibility could emanate from his own experience as a child from poverty who sees himself in his students.

For Melinda, the professional development of her staff appeared to be supported by the district office, however it was delayed. When speaking of the support she received to improve teacher capacity she said:

We offered an incentive for teachers to work there, gave them an extra week of pay, ended up doing some Kagan training, five days before school started all teachers got five extra days and went through cooperative learning five days, really transformed the school, very transformative. I went for six months and did a six-month series of turnaround elementary school practices with the curriculum

director at CO and with a curriculum facilitator, the three of us went, I think we read 15 research books, we had homework, reports due. We went through everything that you could possibly go through, master scheduling, hiring, every part of it.

Courtney painted a picture of professional support for her staff with less enthusiasm. She described the support her staff needed below:

I couldn't get any help from like instructional services and professional development to help my teachers grow further, it was basically if I didn't have the money in Title I to buy the people I didn't get people, coaches, and so forth because they were assigned to other schools, then that's the year that we made it onto the list and so that next year we got tons of support. But it was like I screamed for a year, I need help! I need help! I need people to help me with basic lesson planning all the way to classroom management, but I was by myself, you know, I wanted help from other people from instructional services and I just couldn't get it because we weren't the people who were assigned to get it at the time

The colleagues of these principals were not able to contribute as much information about the kind of support that was being offered from the district. Only two of them had input on how they viewed the support their principal was receiving. In both cases, the perception of their colleagues was congruent to what the scapegoat principals shared. In Dana's view, while Courtney was providing the professional support her staff needed, this was not being reciprocated towards her from the central office. She had this to say,

We had tons of professional development and it was good. Some of it we paid for, some of it the district paid for, but it was good stuff, and she made sure we had what we needed. Her hands became more tied whereas before she made decisions based on what she knew was best, decisions were made for her towards the end, and they weren't always the best decisions for our staff and our kids. I loved it my first four years and my fifth year 14 teachers were put on a plan. I cried every single day. It was hard. They just, they did not have her back. She would ask for help and they would not give her any, like she would go and say I

need help, I am having a problem in this area, and no one would help her, I mean—and she was just like what am I supposed to do?

When speaking of Stephanie's experience at Cedar Chest, her colleague Amanda personally described her decision to support Stephanie in this way,

I showed up to meet her, she was frantic because a fight had taken place, the office was in chaos, there were a lot of students standing around, teachers standing around. When I came in the secretary told her I had been waiting, she introduced herself and she was very puzzled about me being there, had no clue who I was, she literally said you're hired without having ever met me, seen my resume, nothing, she just said you're hired. I was very concerned, I guess, for her as a young black woman in the role that she held, and I felt a great need to help her coming right in, I didn't know exactly what I was going to do, but I knew I wanted to support her because my initial meeting with her was a very poor meeting, and I could just see the stress on her, and I intended to be a support to her because the staff that were around her on that first meeting I had clearly were not supportive.

We Had Just “Gotten” It

Despite the initial challenges, each participant was able to confidently declare that they made growth in student test scores while attempting to turn their schools around. This was something they all spoke about, some more passionately than others, as they recalled the experience in their interviews. This feeling of success, however short-lived, was a defining moment for many of them that confirmed they were being effective leaders. Courtney described it this way,

We had teachers having student-led parent conferences, the kids were there and showing their parents what they had grown in and what they had learned, you talk about powerful, amazing, so I attribute that to that last year I was there, 19 points in percentage growth. It's unheard of, 19 percentage points, I mean we were just, we were rocking it. They were just, the kids were finally feeling like they were

going to school, they were finally feeling like they belonged somewhere, and I had the right teachers in the right spots.

Although Stephanie's growth was not exponential, she describes the renewed confidence it gave her staff to know that they were able to achieve some success with the students. Stephanie talked, quite unenthusiastically, about her gains by saying,

I want to say it was my either my first or second year, we met expected growth, and that's something that hadn't been done in some years, so we met expected growth. The teachers felt really good after meeting expected growth.

Samuel spoke of his growth defiantly when describing how his student performance and graduation rates increased in spite of the obstacles from within the building as well as from the central office. His recollection of his success in student achievement was described in this way,

The last four years, we had made major improvement, we had seen major growth. The year before they had a 40% English rate and a 40% math rate. The first year I was there, we raised the English rate to 60% and we raised the math rate to 60%, so we were proud of those accomplishments but that still gave us a grade of a D. Then the following year our graduation rate went up. We raised the graduation rate from 60 to 68% which is phenomenal in a urban school. This last year the graduation rate went well over 80%, but we were still released on performance, which was sad because we had really turned the school around and we were beginning to see improvement in all areas, and all of our interventions were working, and we had the data to show that our interventions were working.

When Melinda spoke of her growth, she had this to say,

By the third year I was there we had turned around close to 20 percentage points, we were in the 40s, focused real hard on just instruction, alignment, rigor, and engagement, nothing else, good hiring practices. That next school year I was a finalist in the Piedmont Central Principal of the Year and the final five went to

Raleigh from the work that we had done, and we had put a lot of hours. My final score was 58.6. From 23, and you know, it was a journey, it was a new principal placed there, politics, a lot of hate and doubt, turnaround, new building, staff was excited to be there, lowest turnover ever the summer before I moved out, so we had just gotten it.

Fighting Against the System

Driving the turnaround movement is the public and legislative outcry for rapid improvements in test scores. As the practice of using standardized tests as the only measure to determine student learning increases, it also determines the success or failure of a school principal. The stories of these scapegoat principals indicate that there are moving pieces of this turnaround scenario that have a direct effect on student achievement. Yet, growth in student end of the year assessments and high school graduation rates is still expected, placing the principal in between the proverbial, “rock and a hard place.” To show improvements while trying to overhaul other critical aspects of the school program with little to no support exposes an acute flaw in the turnaround model used to replace principals in these low performing schools.

In some interviews, I found that the participants’ personal recollections of growth did not always agree with the actual numerical data. While advocates of turnaround reform may use this as ammunition to support their movement, I believe this observation presents something more valuable than simple data to justify principal replacement. This difference draws attention to those “intangibles” of turnaround that may be occurring in the schools that is not reflected in numerical indicators. All four participants, notwithstanding, had data to support that student proficiency improved. Their data are evidence that these principals and their staff were poised to continue the upward

trajectory towards attaining even more improvements and meeting federal and state proficiency standards. If the data supports positive outcomes for students in a turnaround school under the leadership of these individuals, the obvious assumption is that the principal was effective in some way. But time, not results, played a role in their derailment.

In addition to the research supporting the fact that it takes three to five years to turn around low performing schools, Tirozzi (2013) says that “the importance of adequate time and the need for continuity of staff and programs apparently have been lost on federal officials, who continue to insist that a principal must be replaced if he or she has been in a failing school for at least two years” (p. 187). All of the participants shared the same sentiments about their student growth and the pressures of meeting the timelines outlined in federal, state and local reform sanctions for their schools.

Mandating research based programs and strategies while at the same time ignoring the research on the time it takes to turnaround a failing school creates a complex duality for the principals in this study. The very model created to promote reforms was undermining the confidence that these principals and their staff had worked so hard to instill in their students. To be evaluated on *how long* it took to effect change rather than *how much* had changed is a deficit model that each of the scapegoat principals felt was a huge barrier to not just student achievement, but their own success as school leaders.

When Melinda spoke of the time constraints in her interview she highlighted this point, “you can’t put 100% poverty in one building and expect it to work in five years.” Stephanie also spoke of the limited time she had to turn around her school:

You see incremental successes and when we would see a success, the district will come in and change something. It was just really hard because you're fighting against the system. I have to work my behind off ten times as much being in this Title I school, I can't get the credit due me, and then when the test scores don't go up as quickly as you need them to, I'm then put, I've been replaced.

Courtney's experience parroted these same frustrations that other participants felt when discussing the time stipulations for raising test scores at her school: "It was already at the bottom when I got there and I helped it get up a little bit, but not in four years you can't solve the world's issues, you can't."

Samuel spoke of his vexation with the amount of time he was given in similar terms as the others,

No Child Left Behind statute said that three years in a row, if a school receives a D or F they can be removed, and so what the school district did was they looked at that, they didn't look at the growth, they didn't look at the data, you know, where we had grown, they simply said that, you know, we were low performing. Change theorists will tell you that when you go into these schools that are just downtrodden and have not been properly run for so many years, it takes five to seven years to turn them around. Well, with the No Child Left Behind waiver that the state received, we, you know, we don't have that opportunity, you know, I had three years, and that wasn't enough time.

Rocks and Pebbles

There was consensus among the group interviewed that these time restraints were not only an unfair measurement of their students' success, but also an unjust evaluation of their effectiveness as school administrators. Although this is not included as a major theme, there was enough mention of this in their interviews that it warrants inclusion in this study. Three out of four of the principals spoke of the standards used to determine leadership effectiveness and/or promotion between those in Title I and non-Title I

schools. In their words, the customary use of test data as the sole indicator of success is unjust. For example, when speaking of this difference, Melinda spoke of some obvious gaps that exist between the two groups,

I'd love to see a non-Title I principal come over to a Title I school and try to make it. They wouldn't, they wouldn't make it, it takes a special person, you know that. You can't do it you know what I'm saying. There's no way the principal I worked with at a school in this district, with 90% Caucasian, 100% two-parent families, college educated families, PTA, I think they had close to \$100,000 in PTA budget, community school, well-established, no teacher has left there in 18 years, 18 years, like no wonder y'all all know each other, like so what do y'all do, they stand and deliver and sit and get.

Samuel offered a striking analogy to compare the two scenarios. Although it is lengthy, I felt that it completely summed up the experiences of principals who are trying to save low performing schools. He explained it in this way,

Well you got big rocks, you got medium-sized rocks, and you got little rocks. You can't see those medium-sized rocks and them little rocks, because you've got to address those big rocks. Once you address those big rocks, which may take you however long it takes, then you address those medium-sized rocks, and then you address the pebbles. Some people go into schools and all they have are pebbles. And they're immediately allotted and acclaimed as being, you know, super educators. Others people go into schools as administrators and they have medium-sized rocks. So their change is within that scope. But then other administrators who are unjustly in my opinion placed, and not give them the time nor the resources, they go into schools that have been undermanaged, they have a huge amount of big rocks, with no support, no resources, no parental involvement, teacher apathy, student apathy, these are the huge rocks, and they are given three years. They ain't got big rocks, they got boulders, you know what I'm saying? And they give you three years and you're done. So all my hard work, now the person that replaced me, they're dealing with the small, medium rocks and the pebbles. Because I've taken care of the boulders and the big rocks.

Stephanie spoke of this glaring discrepancy in like terms:

What I think is unfair about Title I—and I've thought about this often, here I was in this high-risk Title I school and some of these folks had been in these non-Title I schools and they've moved up quickly. Look at the schools where they were. When you think about me over here at a Title I school, high risk, and you're over here at Fluff Fluff school, of course you're going to be able to move up quickly because you're going to see success much faster. Does that mean that the work you're doing or you're capable of doing is better than the work I'm capable of doing, or how are you measuring the success of me versus you? That's where I have a problem.

She continued to share her frustration with this unfair system of defining principal merit in this way:

I'm mad at the fact that you put people in these positions and you don't see the worth of their work, you base it on the wrong thing, and someone comes on the heels of my hard work, they then reap the fruits of my labor, and then they're put on this pedestal like they did the work and they didn't, you have somebody over here who's never stepped foot in Title I school, the school will run if they were never sitting in the principal's office, and because the school would run if they never were in the principal's office, they get promoted and promoted and promoted because they've always been in these cushy schools. So who's really the successful person of who is being deemed as doing the work, the better work?

This also raises questions about the leaders who replace these scapegoat principals. As Samuel suggests, often the hard tasks are already conquered before the new principal comes in. As a result, they capitalize on the momentum that has been established prior to their arrival, which includes receiving credit for improved test scores. Furthermore, these principals often come into these high needs schools with more support, funding and resources because of the pressure the district is under to get these schools off "the list" of failing schools. In each scenario, these new administrators and

their schools flourish temporarily, painting a picture of success for the public that the turnaround model was effective. However, what is not publicized is the tenure of the new principal in these schools after the resources are exhausted. In all but one case in this study, none of the principals who followed the participants are still working in the schools but have since matriculated on to other schools within the district or have left the district altogether.

This confirms research conducted by The Center on Education Policy (McMurrer, 2012) which says, “although a SIG award brings substantial extra funding for school reform, it does not guarantee that districts and schools can find principals and teachers with the necessary expertise who are willing to work in the lowest performing schools” (p. 1). This speaks directly to the issue of the qualifications needed to lead in these environments and if replacing the principals willing to serve in them, despite the challenges, is indeed a practice that should continue in school reform models.

Going Down with the Ship: Principal Commitment in the Face of Replacement

After finally reaching a point where they felt hopeful about the progress they were able to see happening in their schools, each principal was replaced for being a failure. It may seem like a simple process; however, the reality is that there was a cycle of politics and injustice in their replacement that emerged from the interviews. This section of the study is dedicated to exploring their experiences as they were forced to continue leading with the daily imminent reality of replacement.

Faith over Failure

In each of the scapegoat principals' narratives, they all spoke of the hope or faith they maintained throughout their struggle to improve test scores. As they began to see their work eventually evolve into a learning environment where achievement was possible, they became more optimistic about the future of the school. Although they acknowledged at different places in the interviews that they had "some" knowledge of the grave responsibility and consequences attached to the job of the turnaround principal, when they received the news of replacement they all exhibited feelings of disbelief or shock that they would actually be replaced.

This disbelief was grounded in the fact that every participant felt as though the positive outcomes at their schools should have given them some leverage against the mandated sanctions that would be carried out against them. Each of the principals wore their accomplishments like a badge of honor somehow believing that their small successes would lead to a different end. Samuel, who defiantly stood on the growth and graduation rates at Augusta High, insisted that increased performance should have been enough to keep his position since it proved that he had been effective at leading the school.

Our algebra in our freshman center, the kids were passing at 85%. Last year my freshman students were passing at 85%. My graduation rate went from 60 to 68% and this year it will be over 80%. So how would you give me low performance, or poor performance, how would you take my administrative contract away from me and say poor performance? It makes me feel that it's not about your passion, it's not about your expertise, it's not about your level of expertise, it's all political.

Not only did Samuel express his feelings of disappointment at being replaced after showing improvement, but his dissatisfaction over his replacement was further exacerbated by the inequitable distribution of sanctions between black and white administrators in his district.

So this white guy gets a letter, of poor performance because the state said, you know, his middle school had three F's. This black lady, her high school was an A, but her middle school was an F, she gets a letter of poor performance, okay, and all of her administrative team, right? Even though we were going up 1.2, 1.5, 1.85, we get a letter, all of us get letters, because, you know, we had a D. So they called this white man back and gave him a principalship. They call my white assistant principal back to his same position, they didn't call my black assistant principals back, they didn't call me back.

The impact on Stephanie that she would be replaced was much more emotional than most of the other participants. For her, the news came as a surprise because her news came so suddenly. Like Samuel, however, she too felt like she was working hard to make improvements that should be honored with more dignity than what she received.

Devastated. It made me—I was devastated, because I felt like I was working as hard as I could with what I had, I wasn't given a fair shake. I couldn't, I just could not, I couldn't believe it, it took me, it literally, it took the wind out of me, just—it shook me. I couldn't believe it. It literally devastated, it devastated me. It devastated me.

According to Brown (2005), “. . . the majority of African American leaders are employed in large, urban school districts that are underfunded, have scarce resources, significant numbers of uncertified teachers, and student underachievement” (p. 587).

This means that principals like Samuel and Stephanie are more likely to lose their

positions than their white colleagues because of federal, state, or local sanctions that continue to insist upon replacing principals as a part of the solution to improving low performing schools. What Samuel says, however, sheds light on a hidden truth that was revealed in his interview. He gave clear evidence that in some instances, even when placed in low performing schools under the same mandates, white principals and assistant principals are less likely to lose their positions than African American administrators.

This is problematic because “currently, the placement of African American principals implicitly indicates that African Americans can only lead and be effective in schools that are predominately Black, and White administrators are able to lead in schools that are more diverse” (p. 248). Furthermore, these actions on the part of district officials create a perception that the decision to replace or end the careers of principals in turnaround schools rests on other factors such as race and micro-political influences that ultimately create division between African American and White administrators. This internal separation raises concern about whether or not “the placement of African American administrators centers around whether any lingering effects or assumptions with regard to racial segregation 50 years after the Brown decision have any impact on the placement of African American principals” (p. 248). Ultimately, all these practices succeed at is perpetuating existing feelings of racism and discrimination among African Americans in general and sends a message that the careers of White principals are valued over those of African American principals (McCray, Wright, & Beachum, 2007).

Stephanie’s devastation at being moved from her position proves how vested these principals become in the work of school improvement. For her, the blow of losing

her job after giving so much of herself to the students, teachers and families elicited a strong personal and emotional response. In their interviews, she and Samuel both relived this part of their experience with passion and feelings of hurt and anger. For them, the impact of being told they would be replaced was more cutting because of the personal sense of responsibility they felt towards the students being principals of color themselves, and leading in predominantly minority schools.

As an African American principal, I too, understand this sense of obligation to children of color. It is our own experiences of discrimination that often compel us to take up the cross of equality to erase the sin of racism and marginalization for this population of students. However, because African American principals are more likely to lead in schools that are in decline, there must be a shift in the way we navigate these turbulent waters of school reform if we are going to live to lead another day. As much as we want to take on this task, Wilkerson (2014) posits, and I would agree, that

African American principals (especially African American male principals) find themselves in a very precarious position. Many are so dedicated to their mission (fulfilling the idea that “I want to work with a certain population”) of serving those less fortunate that they may fail to see their own peril coming around the corner. (pp. 19–20)

During the time Melinda was undergoing turnaround, she was not only leading growth in student achievement, but her school had received state and national recognition for the improvements made during her tenure. Melinda had also been named Principal of the Year in her region. These credentials normally translate into job security and promotion for school administrators, however, like the others, her professional pedigree was useless

in protecting her from replacement. In her interview, it was clear that she felt as though she was worthy of reward rather than penalty:

All the things that we had gotten right, all the things we had gotten right I felt like were just thrown in the trash, that's how you feel, you know, all that work. In-depth strategic planning over years, and then North Carolina signed Race to the Top and it was all over, it was just quickly over.

Like Stephanie, Melinda shared the same feelings of being blindsided by the news of replacement and spoke passionately about her frustration at being left out of the loop on just how close she was to being replaced.

But no time, at any time did I realize that the axe was getting ready to chop my head off. I had no warning, none. I had no idea. No one told me, no one sat me down and said you are one of the lowest schools in North Carolina, and we know you've come from 20 to 50, if you don't hit 60 this year you're gonna have to be replaced, no one said that to me.

Replacing Melinda's leadership in light of this kind of success completely devalues the work of the turnaround principal and caters to sanctions that make it virtually impossible for principals to be successful. While she was bringing positive publicity to the school district with these accomplishments, she was receiving the negative impacts of being replaced. Her work meant nothing in the face of No Child Left Behind policies and mandates. This no tolerance way of leading school change dismisses the laborious job that principals perform each day to improve student outcomes in low performing schools. Furthermore, it fans the flames of cynicism created by some to create a public impression that schools and educators are failing and need to be replaced.

Courtney, who agreed to sacrifice herself for the much-needed SIG funds, could not conceal her sadness when the requirement that she would be replaced actually manifested.

I was seeing all this hard work that I had done basically being said we don't care how good it looks, you're still the scapegoat. I feel like I—I mean this sounds cocky but I feel like I'm good at what I do and I want to continue doing it, and I don't think I'd be happy doing something else. We are the one sole, responsible person, so yes, it is my responsibility, it was my responsibility, but the end results were positive, the end results of that, of my tenure at that school was positive, but nobody sees that. They see that I was part of that turnaround and I got kicked out.

Interestingly enough, Courtney also admits her change of heart when the action to replace her was set in motion,

If I could go back and change one thing I would have gone to bat for keeping me there, keeping my staff, I would have voted for more of a transformational model, even, I know it still says principal goes but I would have gone to bat for it.

The fact should not be overlooked all of their schools were able to show growth without the SIG funds. This is a key component of the turnaround movement that is overlooked in current policies that call for the removal of the principal and staff at low performing schools. *Without* millions of dollars funneled into the school, and little to no support from their supervisors or superintendents, they were able to show improvements in student test scores, build community, redesign the culture of the school and create a staff that was sold out to the politics of school reform. It was the dedication, not the dollars that changed the conditions of these schools, thus proving that the turnaround model is

flawed at best in its assessment of why schools are failing and the remedies for improvement.

Close Up Shop and Move On

The next piece of this cycle involves the methods used by districts to announce the replacement of these principals and their career options afterwards. These practices ranged from highly publicized and sensationalized attention in the media to quiet removals that went virtually unnoticed by anyone at all. In some instances, such as in Stephanie's case, the removal was positioned as a promotion. As Stephanie describes it,

She (supervisor) came over one day, told me I was being replaced by someone else and I had a choice of becoming an assistant principal again or I could become an SSA downtown, so of course I'm thinking I've done nothing to become an assistant principal again, why would I choose that, I'll become an SSA downtown to serve as an administrator, very awkward position, because then I would become an SSA under her.

Stephanie's replacement was shrouded in political chess moves to ensure there would be no public outcry for moving yet another principal from the school. Unlike the others, she was coached on how to present the move to her staff even though she had clearly been told that she was being replaced because the school was still low performing.

They presented it to the staff as I was given a district level position. The way that meeting happened and then the way they presented it to the staff was totally different. We want you to tell the staff you're being given a district level position, that's how we want you to present it to the staff, because they know that parents and staff members would then have a total fit for you to say to them that you're having me replaced. It would have been a political issue that they didn't want to deal with. Then once they brought him there, [the new principal], then they said oh, we're restructuring the school.

Despite efforts to protect her dignity publicly, Courtney still had to grapple privately with the idea of working for the very person who assisted with her replacement. So although it appeared she was being “promoted” she was actually being set up to work under the same supervisor that was so hostile towards her while she was a principal. This was an interesting move on the part of the district because it would appear that Stephanie was again, as she said in her interview, being set up for failure.

How you gonna bring me behind closed doors and give me the options you gave me, and you sitting right in front of me lying, I mean just looking me dead in my face. And then turn around and have to go to work for the very person who did it to me, in her office because then she became a regional superintendent and I became her SSA, I was like, I was like what, really?

In his interview, Samuel repeatedly professed how unfairly he was treated and the district obstacles placed in his way while trying to improve his school. Believing this replacement was more of a conspiracy orchestrated by the superintendent than mandated sanctions, he seemed to accept his replacement as the natural order of his situation. He was prepared for his replacement but did not intend to leave quietly. Having no offer of a new position, Samuel was bluntly informed that his contract would not be renewed while others in his same situation were receiving offers of principalships, assistant principal placements, and even teaching positions. Understanding that his career options in the district had ended, Samuel took a very different path than the others.

But you gave this white man a job, as a principal, he’s a principal now. And you give my white assistant principal a job at the same school. Oh, they gave her (black principal) a job at half her salary, a teaching job. Now mind you she’s in her 40s and has a family, didn’t bother me because I retired. I was, you know, I was able to retire, full retirement, and plus I, you know, was financially frugal

with my, you know, so and the insurance piece didn't bother me because my wife is an administrator in township and we had free health insurance, so I'm, you know, I'm fine, but you see why I'm bitter to a certain extent, because it wasn't about kids, you see, it was—it's politics.

While there was no public media attention given to the announcement of his replacement, his own hurt and disgruntlement about his replacement caused him to defy the central office actions against him. Believing that his replacement was more of a method to remove him because of a previous Office of Civil Rights claim he made against the district, this is how he reacted to his replacement,

So you know what I did, I filed a retaliation lawsuit against them. They messed with the wrong one. Because see, I have no fear. Because I believe in a just God, and I know that He orders my steps, and I know that as long as I'm doing the right thing, there's nothing anybody can do to me. I've had challenges, I've had struggles all my life as a black man. This just one more. And win, lose, or draw at the end of the day, nothing beats a failure but a try. And I know what my rights are.

Melinda's replacement followed the pattern of notification that was similar to Stephanie's. She, like Stephanie, received little preparation for the announcement and was told of her fate in the middle of testing season, which is a high stress time for principals everywhere.

Our CO really didn't warn us much. Three of them come over one day... and said we need to talk to you, you know North Carolina signed Race to the Top, I said I read that, and they said I don't know if you have the grant or not and I said no, I haven't read it, no, we're busy, it's end of grade testing, they said Melinda you're gonna have to move, I said what have I done, they said well y'all didn't hit 60%. Okay, I just said, I said okay.

Melinda's reaction to her replacement was filled more with frustration at not being informed about the process more than the actual act of losing her job, and this is what she spoke about very passionately in her interview.

But no time, at any time did I realize that the axe was getting ready to chop my head off. I had no warning, none. I had no idea. No one told me, no one sat me down and said you are one of the lowest schools in North Carolina, and we know you've come from 20 to 50, if you don't hit 60 this year you're gonna have to be replaced, no one said that to me. Now they signed it, they came and told me, and then they said you know you can't stay, we're not sure what we're gonna do yet.

Later, after being notified, Melinda recounts the humiliation she suffered when the announcement of her replacement was made in a full principal's meeting without her knowledge.

I'll never forget the principal's meeting that they announced the new principal and I was in the room in front of every principal in the district and every director, like could we not have sent me on an errand or something, could we not have sent me to a workshop, it's just, that just is crazy. They applauded the new principal. She sat down and then they had me stand up and applauded me, and the meeting was over. No principal wants to go through that, nobody wants to do that. Who would ask for that, right, who would ever want to go through that and they didn't, you could tell on their faces that they were like nah, better you than me, I'm staying low.

Melinda's treatment by the district was the outlier in the group of scapegoat principals because her superintendent actually encouraged her efforts and assured her that she was not the problem at the school.

The superintendent called, DPI, state, everybody he could and said look, you know, we got something going here, any way y'all could do a waiver, an extension, you know, send in another principal, have two principals, let her stay and put in another one? Nope, the law says five years and under 60% and then I

told you we were at 58.8, 58.9, whatever, we were like two points away from 60, so he came over one day and he said this is inevitable, this, it's nothing you did, and it's nothing the school did, it's just, I can't change this, it just is what it is. He said so close up shop and let's just move on.

We see here that at least one district official felt the need to salvage some of the momentum that had been in motion at a failing school. His willingness to ask for an exception on behalf of this school and Melinda expresses his own views that seem to contradict what the law surrounding turnaround sanctions should be. He not only asked for the stay, but recognized that there were multiple strategies that could be used, other than principal and staff replacement, that would serve this school better. The courage to question the process shows signs that superintendents, and others in charge of carrying out these radical reform initiatives, also have concerns about disrupting the organization of a failing school that shows signs of revitalization.

Alternatives like these mirror the requests of school districts around the country who are facing challenges replacing principals and staff affected by turnaround policies. For example,

the Michigan Department of Public Instruction requested that the principal of a school that received a SIG grant could remain in place in some situations for example, if the principal had been hired within the last two years but was not brought in specifically for reform purposes or the principal had been hired more than two years ago but there is evidence that student achievement is improving. (McMurrer, 2012, p. 17)

Unfortunately, their request for this waiver was denied by the U.S. Department of Education. At the local level, what is more telling about these kinds of appeals is that in

the face of turnaround policies, superintendents, like principals, are feeling powerless against the sanctions as well.

Melinda was presented with an option for employment after being replaced. However, the option she was given was cloaked in efforts to keep her out of sight until the winds of replacement subsided. She explained it this way,

So he came in (new superintendent) and said I'm not quite sure what to do with you. He said but you can't stay here. So he came up the next day, I'm gonna make you a director. I said okay, I said over at CO? He said yeah, like is that my only choice, because I'm not sure I want to be a director. And he said yeah, that's your choice, he said you've got to hide out for a while like I did when I was dropped out of my old county, you have to hide, well I didn't have a choice, so I was placed over at CO and given the Race to the Top grant to manage. This is not a lie. Director of Federal Programs.

Despite failing to turn her school around, she was seemingly compensated, like Stephanie, with a district level position. These "promotions" that both Melinda and Stephanie received proved to be strategies staged by district officials to avoid public fallout, to have the scapegoat principal "disappear" from the public eye while they appointed new principals in their stead. Executive decisions made by superintendents to place these principals in district level positions after they failed at building level jobs contradicts the argument that they are ineffective.

You're the Scapegoat

For Courtney, this part of the cycle played out in the public eye so frequently that she became the face of failure in the district. Poor media management by the district gave legitimacy to the practice of replacing principals "like her" and she single-handedly became the source of the problems at Old Forest Elementary. As she described it,

The publicity made it a negative as if I was the reason that the school was so bad. The public impression at the time was that I was the cause of why it was such a bad school and why it became a failing school. I have had people literally, for example, I had a disgruntled staff member this year and she wrote a letter to the school board and in the letter it said she's going to do to our school what she did to Old Forest and I'm like you seriously think that me, that one person caused that school to go that deep in one action or in one fell swoop?

Hidden beneath the public announcement of Courtney's replacement was how she was privately being treated by the central office. As she describes it, this was the most difficult part of the process.

The roughest part for me that I had to keep away from my staff was what was happening to me as a principal and how they were basically saying I would never be in elementary school again. Basically being said we don't care how good it looks, you're still the scapegoat, even though that's not the wording they said, having the conversations with the regional superintendent and the superintendent of basically telling me that I'm the figurehead that's gonna be taking the rolls with the punches, you know, that really beat me up.

Future career options for Courtney were not as promising as they were for the other scapegoat principals. Although she was offered a demotion as an assistant principal, after several failed attempts on her part to get the district to confirm the offer in writing, she had no choice but to seek employment elsewhere.

I was offered a position within the district as an assistant principal at a school where they knew the principal was leaving after Christmas because they were retiring, and I'd been told that then I would be the principal after that, but they wouldn't put it in writing, and I said I'm not gonna go to a school and be an AP and then at Christmastime decide to put somebody else as the principal, I want it in writing. They wouldn't put it in writing. Because at that point they said we're not gonna put you in an elementary school because it wouldn't look good in the press, the parents wouldn't accept you.

In her desperation, Courtney tried to use her ties with other administrators and supervisors within the district to appeal for any positions she could get based on her experience.

I'd actually gone to some other people in the county that are regional superintendents and even tried to get them to say, you know, can I be a principal in your zone, in your region, and feeling that black ball of nobody wants you, and I'm like what have I done so bad to everybody besides what the news says and, you know what I mean, it just—I felt like nobody gave me a chance.

After interviewing her colleague, I discovered that Courtney was relying solely on this offer of becoming an assistant principal and would not look elsewhere for positions. Even after admitting poor treatment by her superiors, she was placing her faith in their promise of a job. Her staff was not convinced that the district had honest intentions after witnessing the foul tactics used against her while she was leading the school. Fearing for her career, it was her colleagues who prompted her to pursue other options. One of her close colleagues describes a kind of intervention a group of teachers held with Courtney to force her face her destiny within the district.

She just kept thinking things were gonna be fine, and we kept telling her they're not fine because we could all see it but she wanted it to work so badly and wanted it to succeed that she, she couldn't, and finally one day we said if you don't apply to other places you're not going to have a job. And she sat and she cried, you know. We were just really happy when she got something, because we thought she deserved it.

Finally, after accepting the painful fact that she had indeed been “blackballed” within the district and abandoned by the superintendent and his cabinet, she began to pursue other options outside the district. This search was the point when Courtney began

to realize the far-reaching impact of the fate of principals who are replaced in low performing schools.

I went for an interview in another district and I was told by the superintendent on the phone afterwards that they didn't, that the board just did not want to bring in that type of attention, so it definitely affected me professionally. I knew I had no chance, nobody was gonna give me a chance in that district. Nobody would give me a chance in any of the neighboring districts, and the only reason why I got a second chance in my current district is because I had been a teacher there and I knew people in that district, and I had them going to bat for me.

Samuel was the only participant to demonstrate any protest after being dismissed while the women in the study quietly left their schools without resistance. As he made an argument for why he should have been allowed to stay, the women accepted their replacements and began to look towards their future to secure yet another administrative position.

Survivor Island: Life After Turnaround

Once the process of replacing the scapegoat principals in this study completed its course, they all had to confront their future as educators and leaders. Some, unable to get work in their districts after turnaround and some seemingly had favor and carried on at the district level. But that's not how their stories end. Stephanie's new appointment was short lived, as the effects of being a turnaround principal began to take affect once she was removed.

I did my job at the central office until I got sick. I didn't realize that my body had internalized the stress of that whole episode to the fact to where it made me sick. And I believe that that's the toll it took. That's how sick I had gotten. The point of six months out of work, my parents had to come leave their home and come and take care of me. Never had dealt with any of these ailments, migraines, none

of it, never until that day that I woke up, did not know where I was, who I was. Lost my short-term memory. After all these neurologists, after all these testing, that's what it boiled down to was stress. Stress. My body had internalized it to a point of almost death. Hospitalized three times in two months. Passing out. And to this day, that is what it's kind of boiled down to, and I'm still on medication for the headaches.

Ironically, Stephanie's career came full circle due to her illness and she, once again, serves as an assistant principal within her district. When asked about the possibility of becoming a principal again, she surprisingly said,

At this point in time I would. I feel like I have the tools necessary to do so. I feel like I've paid my dues also. I feel like okay, there's enough of high-needs schools for everybody. If I don't then who will? Everybody isn't made for the high-needs school, everybody doesn't have the heart for the type of child that you're gonna find in a high-needs school.

Of all the turnaround principals, Samuel's replacement was the most recent. His hurt was still very fresh and at the time of our interview he was extremely bitter about how his career ended. Believing that the superintendent and for profit organizations were collaborating to further widen the gap of segregation between schools within the district, rather than appeal the decision or seek a new principalship in another district, he vowed to seek justice through political activism in the community. According to Samuel, those disenfranchised families who are victims of these corrupt strategies are not paying enough attention to what is happening and therefore their voices are not being heard. It was his intent to become the voice of this population, the same population he had served as a turnaround principal.

So you have the most poorest of the poorest kids in the district, so they, the 80 to 90% of the poor kids, they go here. They live here. But now what the community is trying to do is they're trying to remove the kids and remove the families, because they want to bring the rich and the famous back into the inner city, and that's why it's called gentrification. But black folks don't see that, minority folks don't see that, poor folks don't see that.

He pledged his allegiance to the cause of exposing these hidden tactics in this way,

The war is not over. I am going to make sure with every fiber of my being that people understand what's going on. I can do it by being a community activist, I can do it through going on television, radio, I can do it by starting grassroots campaigns, I can do it by participating in focus groups and speaking as not a person that hadn't been in the field, because I've been there and I know that and you're not going to tell me anything. So I'm not done by any means.

Both these African American principals, despite their outcome, displayed an unrelenting dedication to continuing the struggle against failure for poor, minority students. Their unwavering faith that there was still more for them to do as educators was unexpected considering the consequences they suffered at the hand of turnaround policies and district practices. Stephanie spoke specifically to the candidate pool being limited and therefore she almost had no choice but to re-enter the position. Samuel decided that the real battle needed to be fought on a different front to empower principals like Stephanie who feel called to these waning schools. Their devotion to the children remained intact, no matter how their personal stories ended. Rather than accept replacement as their fate, they both used the experience to prepare for round two of the fight against racial discrimination and educational disparities in our public school systems. This reinforces the fact that social justice and the degree to which principals

adopt ideals of equity and inclusiveness are critical to school reform efforts in this country.

Sometimes It Stings

Courtney eventually found a position in the district where she began her teaching career. Her reputation and relationship with those at the central office literally saved her professional career.

Going through that year it definitely made me once again, push through, survive, and learn a lot about what I want to do in life, and it confirmed to me that I want to be in elementary, I want to help kids who are in poverty, I want to be doing those things. I knew that getting a second chance in another county was the right direction and I will never go back to that district because the way I was treated.

Coupled with this feeling of growth, she also shared a very optimistic view of her new district and how principals are treated as opposed to her former district.

I also will never go (back) because the support of all of us in my new district is so amazing. I can go to anybody and get help. It's not, I'm out . . . [there by] myself . . . I feel very supported in everything I do. I don't feel like there's a microscope on top of me either, and I feel like there's people there who want me to be successful, want our kids to be successful and that's nice, it's very nice, so I've been very happy and I've done well since, so I'm like okay, I think I'm doing—still doing the right thing, so yeah.

After talking to Courtney's colleague who followed Courtney to her new school, it is worth noting that her account of Courtney as a leader now is very different from the woman she worked with at Old Forest. Courtney's colleague described Courtney's leadership this way,

She's definitely more reserved, she holds back a little more because they made her be so micromanaged. She is not a micromanager and again, compassionate, like ten people from school could call out and say they were sick and she would not question. So I think she's definitely softened up a little bit and I tell her that all the time. I have said that to her, you need to go back to be the instructional leader you were, not that you're not good, but this school is not where we were [i.e., Old Forest], and that has been hard for both of us.

Her colleague attributed this "new" Courtney to her experience at Old Forest claiming that she could recognize how being replaced has affected her confidence.

I think they made her feel like you don't know what you're doing, and so they tried to just manipulate everything she did, and she did know what she was doing. We have a particular teacher that should be gone by now, but she so much wants them to succeed, you know, she wants to give them every single chance that she can because she knew what it felt like to not be given a chance, you know, almost overcompensated a little bit, and I think sometimes she doesn't realize the depth of necessity that the teachers need, they need a lot, and they won't ask for it, and she's like well how do I know, and this year she's been a little more micromanaging.

We see here the long ranging effects that the turnaround process has on principals like Courtney. She remained confident that her calling was still with elementary students in low-performing schools, however the ways in which the experience has reshaped her leadership style are significant and appear to undermine her effectiveness in her new school, also low performing. Present in her new way of leading is this need to prove herself to others. Courtney spoke about this as well when she says,

Sometimes it stings, you know it will go straight to the heart and make you emotional about it, but what I've learned is to basically, I just said, I just ignored it in some ways and I proved myself with my actions every day and I prove that I'm here for kids and what, my decision making is on the best interest of kids.

Melinda's outlook on leadership seemed unaffected by the turnaround process. Part of this is obviously because she had options after replacement. She was placed in district office position but began to grow restless and long for the building level activity that she was accustomed to living.

I self-selected to go back into a school. And I was under contract so again, I had choices, so I made the choice and left. I interviewed, talked to the school. The superintendent has said it's August, school's started, we've got a principal that left, we need somebody really strong, its back in the same part of the city again. I'm on the 30th year, I'm doing what I love, I got three years left in my contract, I'm being paid at a district level, and I'm a curriculum facilitator, I'm happy, life is good people. My supervisor said you really need to think about it, you know, the superintendent really wants somebody strong, it's gonna be hard to find somebody strong, good school, we got an interim there, take your time.

Melinda's second principalship was markedly more collaborative and less coerced than the position she felt forced to accept at Tate Street Elementary.

So I felt led, I thought about it, went in, I did interview with the staff, the PTA president, an assistant, you know, the whole interview, and so yeah, that's different than being placed, when you're wanted there and then people already knew me from being at Tate Street. I got a warm reception and they were like these are the things we've heard you can do.

The respect and series of options that Melinda was given after replacement rivaled that of the other participants in the study. Her superintendent offered a dignified exit from her former position by promoting her. Later she was able to use her contract as leverage to make certain demands and get a building level position as a curriculum facilitator at district level pay. And finally, she was asked to take a position, given time to respond, and ultimately went into her next school as a shero in the district. Her

professional career was unscathed by the ordeal and she made seamless transitions from one job to the other at will. Nonetheless, she too spoke of the embarrassment of being singled out as a failure and having to contend with the stigma of replacement among her colleagues.

Amazingly, after being removed from her school, she was placed in a school similar to the one she had left. To revisit my earlier analysis, this completely discredits the assumption that these principals are incompetent or they would not continue to be placed throughout the district or given the opportunity to lead in other low performing schools. Moreover, I think that her experience serves as a model for other school districts on how to manage the turnaround fallout and treat replaced principals with human dignity and respect for the work they have given to the students, teachers and the district.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Only the provident principal who can delay gratification in the cause of a future good will be able to carry the day though it often means taking a lot of criticism and pain. (McCall, 1986, p. 64)

When I began my journey to becoming a school administrator I entered that world through the North Carolina Principal Fellows Program in 2001. The first book that we were given to read was titled, *The Provident Principal* by John McCall. The quote above from McCall resonated with me then and still does today. It encompasses the spirit of this research and urges the principal on regardless of the cost.

Over time, principals learn to be the Provident Principal McCall speaks of, leading without emotion; wearing masks of confidence when we are broken inside; and learning that personal, emotional, and physical sacrifices are necessary and expected. The time we commit to the profession goes unnoticed by others and after a time, we convince ourselves that recognition is not necessary—it is our duty. The position is both a blessing and curse. As master's students, we long for our chance to run the show. It is the holy grail of education for many of us who aspire to do something great for children. What we overlook is that we were already doing something great long before we became principals.

Media coverage of self-made education icons like Steve Perry, Michelle Rhee, Ron Clark, and Geoffrey Canada make us believe we are not doing enough if we have not

achieved their level of fame. The American public looks at them, then looks at the average school administrator and asks, “Why can’t you do that?” or, “What is your excuse?” So we hold ourselves to these standards that, if scrutinized more thoroughly, are not transferrable to every situation, including the ones we often find ourselves in as principals in low performing schools. Nevertheless, this pressure causes us to accept positions of leadership for which we know we are not prepared, somehow believing that their stories can become ours.

I began this research in order to answer some very important questions about principals in turnaround schools. I’ve shared those in the previous chapter.

1. What are the stories and experiences of principals and their colleagues who were placed in high needs school, and subsequently replaced?
 - a. What kind of special training and support do principals in high needs schools receive prior to entering into these environments?
 - b. How does the school district support principals in high needs schools?
 - c. To what extent do principals who are fired due to federal policies possess a social justice orientation?
 - d. How should the experiences of principals replaced due to federal or local school reform models inform and impact education policy?

Through their lives, as shared in the previous chapter, I was able to appropriately answer each of these questions. I share below my lessons learned and recommendations springing from those lessons.

Lessons Learned: Recommendations for Principals, Districts, and Preparation Programs

First of all, I discovered that the educational gifts bestowed upon all of us in this profession are not transferrable across all settings, and that training prior to becoming a turnaround principal is key to a principal's success. Samuel had served in administrative positions at the district level prior to his first appointment as a principal charged with turning around a failing school. He was successful at his first school but failed at Augusta High. Melinda and Courtney had served in high needs schools as teachers and/or assistant principals. However, when appointed as principals to low performing schools, their previous skillset did not prove to be applicable. Even Stephanie, who, although she did not have much experience before becoming a principal, did have some leadership experience—that did not seem transferable to helping her in her school.

Does this mean that their past experiences could not help them with the turnaround school principalship? These participants were not, in fact, less effective, but found themselves in environments that were different from their prior ones as much as they were similar. We often make the mistake of assuming that all schools of color where students are impacted by poverty are basically “the same.” However, every school, not just failing schools, is distinctive. This distinctiveness, not their expertise, was the contributing factor in each of their situations. Furthermore, some of them had worked at different grade levels during their educational careers. The needs of elementary, middle and high school children and their communities are vastly different. While Courtney had to deal with gang-related violence at her elementary school, Melinda was battling the issue of transiency that affects the 95% participation requirement that all

schools have to pass during state testing. Stephanie was breaking up fights among adults at her high school, while Samuel was addressing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases among his population. Inexperience coupled with lack of exposure to these kinds of environments is a recipe for failure.

Therefore, when preparing principals to go into these environments, districts should understand their varying professional development needs *prior to* placing them in these failing schools. Part of this strategy should include strategic leadership changes within districts rather than seemingly random movement. For example, prior to placing principals like Stephanie in a high-needs, high profile high school to “keep it out of the news” it would have been wise to allow her some time in that school learning from the current leadership and observing the “lay of the land.” As it stands now, there is very little time for observation, training, or reflection when principals enter these types of schools. School district superintendents have even adopted a common practice of conducting “learning walks” their first 100 days in the office to observe and understand the challenges they may be facing.

Duke, (2006), cites similar methods of preparation that are being used in the state of Virginia. “The Virginia School Turnaround Specialist Program selects 10 experienced administrators who “already have demonstrated their ability to promote school improvement, like Samuel, and who receive a summer of advanced graduate training before they are sent to tackle a struggling school” (p.730). Support and programs like this must be extended to new principals as well to prevent them from becoming the scapegoats of failed school reform initiatives.

Secondly, I learned that support must begin on day one of the principal's entrance into a failing school. Delaying the need for resources to support the principal in a low performing school is counterproductive and borders on sabotage. As stated in earlier chapters this practice seemed to be common among all the principals no matter the district. This places principals in a position where they are always reacting, or as one colleague of a principal put it, "putting out fires all the time." This delay in assistance suspends the instructional leadership that is needed, thus creating a wasted year in terms of student achievement. Knowing that this hinders productivity, rather than discounting that the first year "clean up" exists, reform policy should allow an exemption for test scores the first year that the new principal arrives.

Another policy amendment could include state accountability sanctions against districts that do not provide support every year that the new principal is working to improve student performance. As it stands now, districts are given complete latitude and provide support at their discretion, while principals work feverishly against the clock of sanctions that could end their careers. To make matters worse, superintendents are the ones making these questionable principal appointments and then when the principals fail, they superintendents then do the replacing as well—slinking untouched into the safe confines of their cushy offices. This indicates one-sided accountability strategies between districts and leaders at the building level with no checks and balances for district officials who could be seen as adding to the failure of these schools and principals. Tirozzi (2013) weighs in strongly on this matter of accountability in his criticism of the federal government and their influence in how states educate their children. He posits

that “The absurdity of such an elongated federal reach into the operation of local schools is compounded when it is considered that the ED does not have the staff, resources, or expertise to monitor the mandates it has imposed” (p. 203).

Yet another lesson I learned from these principals was that you cannot even begin to address the needs of students in low performing schools unless you possess a sense of social justice and are willing to fight for equitable conditions for them. In this case, the race of the principals did not impede their ability to do this as all of their pasts had been shaped in ways to promote ideas of equity and fairness for everyone—especially for those who were disadvantaged. Each of them was genuinely concerned about the well-being of not just the students, but also of their families. Much of their first-year experiences were characterized by building relationships with the families of their students to understand them and their needs. In many cases these principals had to build bridges between the school and the world outside the school as the needs of their students transcended the walls of the school building.

In this present climate when political candidates in this country are allowed to use divisive rhetoric that targets those from marginalized communities and incites bigotry and racism, principals like the ones in my study are rare—black, white or Latino. It is reckless for districts to create conditions that discourage socially conscious leaders who want to serve in high needs schools. Theoharis (2007), in his work on social justice leadership, posits that “Marginalized students do not receive the education they deserve unless purposeful steps are taken to change schools on their behalf with both equity and justice consciously in mind” (p. 250). Without leaders like the ones in my study, the

work of school turnaround is pointless. As Marshall and Oliva posit, “policymakers and scholars talk about what can or should be done, but educational leaders are the people who must deliver some version of social justice and equity” (p. 1). Therefore, it is imperative that district leaders begin to invest in these types of leaders, just as they invest millions into the schools they are charged with saving.

As schools become increasingly more diverse, university preparation programs should acknowledge the need for more opportunities for future school leaders to gain experiences in these settings. The ultimate problem is that not even university professors can construct someone’s social justice consciousness. This is a very personal part of someone’s personality that is embedded in their past experiences and has shaped who they are, and, ultimately, how they will lead. From the research and the statements of the principals in this study, not everyone is willing to challenge their social justice consciousness by going to low performing schools.

In the case of these principals, they all had some experience in low performing schools, or they were people of color, as in Stephanie’s case. Superintendents cannot fall into the trap of only calling on those leaders who are already in low performing schools. Implications for these kinds of selection decisions create at least two problems in districts. When the same group is always considered for the hardest jobs it leads to burn out among the talent pool which renders them ineffective. At the same time, this limits their professional development because they never experience anything but difficult, high stakes situations that threaten their career.

Probably one of the most significant consequences of this over-use of principals in high needs schools is how it deters potential school leaders from entering the profession, thus limiting the candidate pool of qualified principals. DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003), as cited in Pijanowski et al. (2009) found that “Principals identified stress (91%) and time required at work (86%) as the top occupational deterrents for people who choose to opt out of school leadership after they meet the credential requirements” (p. 87).

Secondly, by not choosing leaders from status quo schools, districts can appear to reinforce discriminatory practices that protect the careers of principals in high performing schools and possibly these leaders’ lack of social justice consciousness. Equitable distribution of principals throughout districts should be considered by all superintendents as a way to ensure that every principal is given the opportunity to lead in high needs, diverse schools.

These principals taught me that turnaround reform policies do not adequately serve the needs and interests of the subjugated populations who attend these low performing schools and that federal, state and local policy makers already know this. In Spike Lee’s movie, “Jungle Fever,” Flipper, played by Wesley Snipes, decides to have an affair with Angie, an Italian co-worker played by Annabella Sciorra. The two are invited to dinner at Flipper’s parents’ home played by Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. The father tells a very erotic, uncomfortable story at the dinner table of the contentious relationship between the slave master and his male slaves because of the master’s constant raping of his women at will. He describes the covetous desires the slave develops towards the

white woman and how the slave covets the white woman in opposition to the master's extracurricular outings to the slave quarters. Flipper, outraged and Angie, thoroughly embarrassed, leave abruptly in response to the father's history lesson. After they leave, the mother says, "Why did you go and do that for? You knew they were coming!"

Just as Flipper's father had intentionally invited the two so he could tell his story, policymakers know they are intentionally inviting principals all over the nation into situations where they already know the outcome. The problem is that even though they know this, they are still allowing the principals to take all the blame for the school's failure to improve. Policymakers should consider how this dynamic not only lessens the attractiveness of the position of principal, but how it absolutely destroys and defeats good principals who could be successful.

Every one of the school's in this study is still low performing after receiving more funding, new teachers, and new leadership. Kozol (1991) describes this lack of real progress in this way, "In many cities, what is termed 'restructuring' struck me as very little more than moving around the same old furniture within the house of poverty. The perceived objective was a more 'efficient' ghetto school . . ." (p. 4). What would have happened if the scapegoat principals, some being right on the edge of the required proficiency rate, had been allowed to continue? This reality should prompt federal, state and local education officials to reconsider this practice since the sustainability of school turnaround is questionable. Instead of demanding change in an unrealistic amount of time and forcing principals and teachers out of their positions after seeing positive—but not sufficiently positive—results, this growth should become a part of the accountability

equation rather than the current all or nothing method of measuring effectiveness. Until then, this constant disruption and changing of the guard translates into poor children of color being experiments of school reform and paying the ultimate price for circumstances over which they have no control.

All of the participants in my study left with the scars of their experiences mentally, physically, and emotionally. Stephanie spoke of one district official who came to her after her ordeal and apologized for co-signing on the way she was treated. This is not enough. I strongly suggest that districts develop programs to address the effects of turnaround on principals and their staffs as well as help them transition into new positions. And yes, they should be offered new positions. Right now they are left to deal with the embarrassment and shame of failure alone. Shunned by their colleagues and pitied, they have to navigate the aftermath of school reform and its effects on both their physical and mental well-being. Impersonal treatment like this reveals how districts lose good leaders and teachers and has future implications for the recruitment and retention of quality educators.

Recommendations for Further Study

My study represents a small sample of principals placed in persistently low-performing schools who were replaced after they were unsuccessful in raising student test scores in a brief period of time. Notwithstanding, even in this small group, the similarities in their stories were remarkable. Of course, this study could not encompass everything relevant to this topic so I offer future topics of research for those who will come behind me.

The ways in which superintendents select principals for work in turnaround schools is one important issue that should be further explored. Perhaps there are reasons that would seem acceptable and rational to put principals with little to no experience in failing schools. Kowal and Ayscue Hassel (2005) suggest that one criteria for choosing a principal for a low performing school is the principal should have a track record of some kind which would indicate future success. The authors report the caveat in this selection method is that “often, however, a district will be forced to choose among candidates who have not lead whole-school turnaround efforts” (p. 26). Kowal and Ayscue Hassel (2005) offer the following guide for district leaders:

When leaders who have a full-scale, school-turnaround track record are not available, the district should look for potential leaders who can demonstrate:

- A track record of leading significant, speedy change where many barriers to success existed; changes may be more focused than whole-school change but should have involved influencing other people and introducing new practices inconsistent with current “policy”; changes should have been significant (not just incremental improvements to an existing activity).
- A track record of using some or most of the actions common to successful turnarounds . . .
- Both start-up and managerial success competencies, . . . including the very highest level of team leadership needed to implement change, also called communicating a compelling vision.
- A solid understanding of research about effective schools and the ability to describe how it applies to children who have not been successful learners previously. (p. 26)

Another approach to principal selection that could help lessen the negative impact of being replaced would be to offer contracts of no more than three years to principals assigned to turnaround low performing schools. The principals go in to do one job—improve the school. When their time is up, they know they will be replaced. For my

participants, this was the hardest part of the process for them. Having invested so much of their personal lives in this work made replacement a devastating event. Perhaps knowing they were only hired to “do a job” would make the experience more palatable. I believe that this method would make the position a more mechanical, results-driven experience, rather than one where principals build relationships and nurture connections with all stakeholders. A temporary change agent can go into a school and get results, but how does a constant change in leadership shift other dynamics of the school that are not measured in test scores? So while employment contracts could be negotiated in alternative ways, it could also contribute to the lack of sustainable growth that is the Achilles heel of present school turnaround reform.

On the other side of this same coin is the assurance that your career is not derailed by one assignment in a high needs school. I have been a principal for 10 years at the same school, which is unheard of in this age of accountability. In the early years of my tenure I was able to lead the school out of school improvement status. However, the erratic nature of public school policy puts schools at risk of suddenly losing their high achieving status. This ebb and flow in education puts you on top one minute and on the bottom the next. Therefore, I do see value in the idea of being “in and out,” as it is highly likely that principals will end up “going out” on top, thus dodging the bullet of replacement as it is currently practiced.

Another suggestion for further study is an examination of how districts prepare themselves to turn around a school and how the principal and their staff are included in this plan. When districts are placed on “the list” of failing districts in the state, they are

required by the state to create plans of improvement. Once these plans are created, are they implemented at the building level and who makes sure this is happening? From the results of my study none of the principals were included in this plan or benefited from its design.

A very important topic for further research would include the ways in which districts handle replacing principals in districts after they have endured these stressful conditions in low performing schools. Some districts managed media fallout while others allowed negative coverage to run rampant. Some principals were given career options while others were left to fend for themselves in hopes of being accepted into other districts. Sadly, some were offered no choices at all. There is a humane way to conduct sensitive matters like these within school systems. In this area, districts would be served well by following a business model for replacing principals with dignity. Although we are focusing on replacement and not termination of these principals, the work of Lisoski, (1998), is relevant to this study. He posits that “. . . it is critical—no, it’s an obligation—that the supervisor ensure termination be done with a high degree of professionalism, and most importantly, with as high a degree of compassion as possible” (p. 15).

Most of the districts proved to be oblivious in many respects to such humanity.

Although my study was not about the disparities that exist between African-American, White, male and female principals in low performing schools, with further research, I believe that there exists some rich data in my research in regards to how women and men differ in their responses to stressful conditions in high risk schools. I also believe that there are issues of gender and race that played a part in how my

participants were selected and their career trajectories after being replaced. The two white women, Courtney and Melinda, found new positions as principals either outside their districts or within. The two black scapegoat principals did not. I believe more probing could be done that would reveal some significant findings to add to the literature on principal replacement in high needs schools.

Finally, the experiences of those principals who replace scapegoated principals is a subject that is clearly worth investigating. After hearing the stories of these replaced leaders, it would be interesting to compare how districts treat incoming principals after they have set up their predecessors for failure. After Courtney left her school, the new principal was celebrated and remained a fixture in the local media each time something positive happened at the school. Courtney spoke very candidly about how the media vilified her on several occasions and how the negative portrayals affected her staff. Courtney was responsible for the growth that was reported the year after she left, however the new principal was the face of the school by then. This sleight of hand by the district deceived the public, confirmed that Courtney was indeed a failure, and made a hero out of the new principal.

Conclusion

My study was not conducted to defend poor leadership in some of our most needy schools. I am certain there are legitimate reasons for replacing principals who are not performing well. There is poor leadership everywhere and because there is so much at stake, I may even be a supporter of true replacement measures that benefit the children in our public schools. My struggle, however, is when principals like those in my study are

replaced after only being given a short amount of time to do a great deal of work. If all evaluations and performance assessments point to the fact that the principal is not the best fit for the school or simply does not have the capacity to lead in any school, they should absolutely be replaced. However, none of my scapegoat principals' evaluations supported their replacement. Some even won honors for their leadership while some spoke of never having been evaluated at all.

Secondly, if they had strayed from best practices outlined in the research that serve as a guide for all of us, I would also conclude that they deserved being moved out of their positions. Were they without personal flaws—certainly not. I would even say each of the participants possessed some personal flaw that could probably become the topic of a whole new study about the personal dysfunctions of school leaders. What we all know about leaders, however, is that we often develop coping strategies that allow us to continue to perform at high levels in our professions. The participants even spoke of “wearing the mask” at work and staying the course despite what they were experiencing personally and emotionally, in order to keep their staff encouraged and productive. Even flawed, they were able to lead significant growth in student performance at their schools. Therefore, I submit that the personal flaws they may have possessed were not considered career ending because, as I stated earlier in my study, all but one of the participants are still working as school administrators.

But when I review the work of some of the most respected in our field, I saw how each of these principals demonstrated distributive leadership, instructional leadership, and transformative leadership in their daily operation of the school. I heard hints of the

ethic of care. I felt the passion for social justice and a focus on culturally responsive leadership practices in order to make the school setting more inclusive for all students. There was clear evidence that these principals were data driven, collaborative, teachable, ethical and professional. And yet, they were replaced.

I was not trying to persuade the reader in any one direction about this controversial practice in our public schools. Their stories are not presented to discredit or validate their experiences. They are simply presented to offer another voice to the debate. What I did set out to do was to make us all pause and think about this movement. Is it humane? Is it fair? Can we continue to ride this wave of reform at the expense of leaders like the ones in my study and allow them to take the fall for all that is wrong in our public schools? More importantly, can our children afford the fallout from the upheaval that school turnaround brings as it removes their leaders, teachers, and ultimately, the one place where they can depend on stability and structure?

The argument can always be made that our children cannot afford to have ineffective principals for long periods of time when they are already failing. Change must be rapid because this group of students cannot wait any longer. To this I say, allow the principal the same amount of time that the school was allowed to decline prior to their arrival. These principals may only have been able to produce slow, incremental changes. However, as Reitzug and Peck (2015b) emphatically state, “benign or outright neglect of persistently low performing schools is morally unconscionable” (p. 40). So then, who will speak for these principals? It is doubtful that anyone could survive under the

conditions they faced. Nevertheless, there are those outliers, those who prove us all wrong—or do they?

I'm reminded of Principal Joe Clark, the celebrated baseball bat-wielding administrator in the movie "Lean on Me." Based on a true story, Clark is portrayed as single-handedly turning around Eastside High School, a low-performing school in inner city Paterson, New Jersey. His unorthodox methods brought him praise and criticism. His story is used as a model for no-holds-barred leadership that gets results. The truth is that the dramatic final scene of the movie celebrating the school's improved test scores was actually inflated for the purposes of Hollywood entertainment. The same month the movie was released, Clark is quoted in People Magazine saying,

He concluded that his inability to make his students academically competitive was not his problem; it was the system's. "I see a system," he says, "that perpetuates inferiority in the inner cities. With inadequate teachers, inadequate supplies, inadequate leadership. I see black and Hispanic youth being exploited. I see now that I'm helpless in raising the educational standards to a reasonable degree at Eastside or anywhere in an inner city. And that tells me, 'Joe Clark, maybe you don't want to be part of the destructive mechanism.'" (Van Biema & Moses, 1989, para. 12)

When the Goliaths of school leadership fall, the message spreads throughout the troops causing retreat to "safe" schools where they are assured job security, admission of defeat and disillusionment with education, or a shortage of those even willing to enlist in the fight at all. There is clear evidence in the literature that school turnaround is not a reliable, effective reform strategy. So then, what makes us blindly anchor our schools to unreliable reforms knowing shipwreck is imminent, and the captain and the crew will be lost?

Although I gained significant insight and “answers” pertaining to each of my research questions, answers I did not seek to find were also gifted to me by my participant principals—another benefit of using narrative methodology for my study. I was afforded a rare opportunity to hear scapegoated principals’ side of the turnaround story. Although there were some elements I expected to find, the research itself evolved into something much more personal for me and the participants that transcended simple research questions. Each of the principals represented more than statistical data used to justify deficit rhetoric around failing schools and the leaders who try to change them.

As I listened to Samuel’s passionate, angry story of being unjustly replaced, I could hear the voices of the struggle of people of color in this country. Stephanie, who eventually could only respond to her pain by sighing, became another “sistah” just trying to prove herself as a Black woman in this profession. When Courtney began crying in our interview when she talked about her last day at her school, I saw a wounded mother, wife, friend, and finally, leader. In Melinda’s story, I witnessed a white woman, from a privileged past, who recognized her call to the poor, the neglected, and the failing, only to have her superiors replace her for not getting the job done to their satisfaction. Their stories became a counter-narrative to the ideas we have become accustomed to and accepted as truth whenever we read about another fallen principal.

Research is often characterized by hours of tediously compiling data and results that we are forced to weave into something meaningful. My work was far from this mundane definition and I am grateful for the opportunity to interview some of the strongest men and women and I have ever met in the field of education. I came to see

myself as more than a researcher but a guardian of their truth. Since they had suffered so much disrespect at the hands of others, I was mindful that their stories needed to be treated with dignity. Finally, I felt honored that they would trust me with this part of their lives, a part that some of them had never spoken of until now. At the end of my interview with Stephanie she said this,

I just want to thank you. I don't know how it came to be that you're doing your research on the topic, but I just want to say thank you for listening, thank you for giving the voice to us.

This is when I knew that this study was not just an academic work. It was a good work.

To these principals I say,

O Captain! My Captain! our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won;
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring:

O Captain! My Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills;
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding;
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;

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