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High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum: Reconceptualizing Dual Realities

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High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum: Reconceptualizing Dual Realities

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by Brittany M. Miller

June 2018

Advisor: Dr. P. Bruce Uhrmacher

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Title: High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum: Reconceptualizing Dual Realities
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This qualitative research study examines the experiences and identities of school leaders who currently lead or have lead in high performing charter schools. Using educational criticism and connoisseurship, the author focuses on the impact of leaders' experiences and identities, which shape leader intention, school culture, and school development and growth to inform current practice. The author also explores how co-connoisseurship may enhance one's understanding of the nuances of the subject, adding to the literature on the methodology employed.

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Chapter 1: Introduction & Rationale

I am a researcher. I am a practitioner. I am writing this dissertation. I am exploring dual realities. And I am living in dual realities. What do I mean by dual realities? Why do I start with myself at the center of this study? Let me try to explain.

There are multiple perspectives and points of view when examining any complex issue. Education, of course, is no exception. But while multiple perspectives in education may seem like a fairly mundane topic, when examining one particular type of school environment – high-performing charter schools – and the individuals dedicated enough to lead them, the mundane idea of ‘multiple perspectives’ becomes heated, controversial, and yet, completely logical from each point of view.

Let me start with the idea that I am a researcher. That is what I’m supposed to be doing here – right? I am writing a dissertation to demonstrate that I am capable of conducting research. In this identity, I read heady academic pieces which suggest our schools are in peril, and that charter schools – particularly the ‘no excuses’ brand of charters whose origins inform this dual rhetoric – are dangerous for our education system; producing test-takers instead of thinkers, building a school-to-prison pipeline, and militarizing education spaces for our most traditionally underserved students (Lack, 2009; Mora & Christianakis 2013; Ravitch, 2013). I do believe, as a consumer of research, that these criticisms of ‘no excuses’ charter schools have merit. I understand the dangers in just focusing on test scores and how having such a strict discipline code is

at the very least questionable, if not detrimental. All of this makes sense. It is a rational reality.

But then, I return to my identity as a practitioner and operate in what feels like a completely different reality. In this reality, I hear about high-performing charter school leaders who are transforming learning for students, increasing rigor and academic achievement in traditionally underserved neighborhoods, and being praised nationally by popular culture media sources, school districts, some academics, and various politicians for their work (Carter, 2000; Guggenheim & Kimball, 2011; Kopp, 2011; Kraft et. al., 2012). This reality equally makes sense. Why wouldn't we celebrate the accomplishments of schools that are doing something that historically has not happened at a system-wide level? Why wouldn't we want to replicate these results and provide greater educational opportunities for more students in traditionally underserved neighborhoods? All of this makes sense. It is a rational reality.

How is it, then, that I can live in and rationally understand both realities? That school leaders of high-performing charter schools can lead with this dual rhetoric regarding their schools - which are both corrupting our education system yet simultaneously creating unmatched outcomes for students - and never the twain shall meet? This is the crux of the study and why this is not a mundane analysis of multiple perspectives regarding schooling. This study will attempt to unpack these dual realities within which high-performing charter schools operate, examining the polarizing rhetoric in conjunction with the experiences and identities of school leaders who have led or

currently lead high-performing charter schools in order to better understand their intentions to lead and the school culture they intend to develop.

At this point you may be counting the number of times I've used this proper pronoun – 'I' - in my opening remarks. I understand that this unconventional introduction may seem a bit self-indulgent – to begin my study with a series of 'I' statements, delving into my own identity instead of focusing on the topic at hand. While I do intend to make it clear that I am invested in this topic and to reveal my biases in order to address issues of ethics as a researcher, this stylistic choice is not solely due to these more logistically motivated purposes (Creswell, 2012; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). More importantly, this beginning – focused on the researcher as related to the topic – follows the theoretical underpinning of the methodology I use for the study. Educational criticism and connoisseurship calls upon the researcher to be, as its name suggests, a connoisseur of the subject studied. Therefore, the researcher's personal connections to the subject are not bracketed from the research but instead are used to responsibly and carefully inform the study (Eisner, 1998; Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017). In this sense, my position as researcher is not only important, but the greatest tool I have. My understanding of these dual realities and experiences in each space allow me to further explain the complexity of the topic, thereby revealing to others the experiences, identities, and intentions of leaders in these school environments in a more nuanced manner. In the coming chapters I will demonstrate not only the merit of my connoisseurship, but also that of the participants, exploring the notion of co-connoisseurship to enhance the understanding of the progressions of their own experiences, identities and intentions.

On a final note before moving to the formalized explanation of my study, I'd like to be clear that while this study focuses on charter school leaders, this is by no means the only school type I imply is high-performing. In my current professional role, I support district-run schools and their leaders – most of whom are truly engaging in transformational work. Charter schools, however, are the focus of my current research agenda due to my background; their rapid expansion; controversial model; and current impact on the American educational landscape - particularly for our most traditionally underserved students.

Research Questions

The central research questions for this study are as follow:

- **How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead?**
- **How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop?**
- **What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?**
- **What interpretive frameworks enhance our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop?**

Using educational criticism and connoisseurship, I explore these questions in order to better understand leaders' experiences, identities and intentions to add to the literature regarding our collective understanding of the implications for the systematic growth of high-performing charter schools throughout the U.S. I explore these questions

through interviews with direct input from participants – school leaders who have led or currently lead high-performing charter schools. The data from these interviews are triangulated with a review of artifacts from the schools, aligning closely with the commonly used methodological practices for educational criticism and connoisseurship specifically, and qualitative research generally (Creswell, 2012; Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017).

Connoisseurship

Educational criticism and connoisseurship, the methodology employed for this study, calls upon the researcher to be both a connoisseur and a critic of the subject she studies (Eisner, 1991; Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017). Originating with a grounding in arts-based research, this methodology positions the researcher as a connoisseur – a term commonly used in the arts – to be as appreciative, discerning, and valuing of one’s subject as a connoisseur of wine might be during a tasting (Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders). I find the notion of approaching the subject as a connoisseur valuable for this particular study given the complexity of the context within which school leaders of high-performing charter schools find themselves.

As Eisner (1991) explains and Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders (2017) remind us, connoisseurship calls upon the researcher to “...make fine-grained discriminations among complex and subtle qualities” (Eisner, p. 63) from their data. For this study, the complexities and subtle qualities of school leaders’ experiences, identities and intentions are what allow for the ‘dual reality’ within which this brand of schools have operated to be transformed into a chronological development, reconceptualizing this dual rhetoric.

These discriminations thereby appreciate the complexities of the subject along a rapidly changing continuum instead of touting either a hero or villain complex – a concept I will describe later in this introduction.

Criticism

To further the analogy of a connoisseur of wine, I now move to criticism, which calls upon the researcher to make their appreciation, discernment, and valuing of the subject public (Eisner, 1991; Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017). While anyone can inwardly be a connoisseur of wine, a critic makes discoveries of the complex subtleties public, allowing others to learn from their understanding of the subject. Through this process, the critic typically follows four elements for publically sharing her findings: description; interpretation; evaluation; and thematics (Eisner; Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders). While I will delve deeper into each of these processes in my methods section in Chapter 3, it is important to recognize that this methodology relies upon the researcher to operate as both a connoisseur and a critic – in order to learn more about an element of schooling (in this case, school leaders in high-performing charter schools) and use that learning to strive for better schooling environments generally.

The Instructional Arc

As a final note regarding the methodology employed for this study, I will review Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders' (2017) notion of the 'instructional arc', represented below, and why the focus of this study will be primarily on the intended curriculum as it is perceived by the leader:

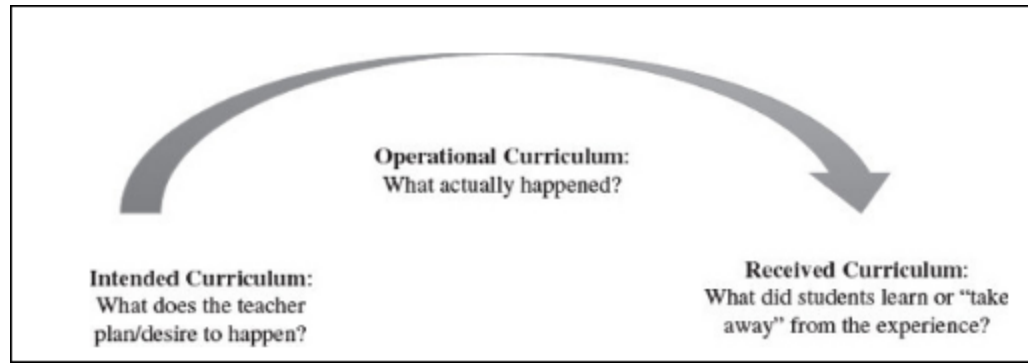


Figure 1: The Instructional Arc

Reprinted from Using Educational Criticism and Connoisseurship for Qualitative Research (p. 25), by P.B. Uhrmacher, C. Moroye, and D. Flinders, 2017, New York, NY: Routledge. Copyright by Taylor & Francis. Reprinted with permission.

In this model, Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders (2017) suggest that while it is important to understand what students receive from their curriculum, we must also strive to understand the intentions and operations of that schooling environment. As Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders remind us, in our current education landscape we are hyper-focused on the received curriculum, or what students take away from a learning experience. While this is the ultimate goal of schooling – to offer some type of learning and set of content to students that they internalize – the use of the instructional arc provides a deeper sense of how we arrive at the received curriculum – through understanding the intentions and operations of the educators.

Before returning to the focus of this study – the intended curriculum as the leader perceives it – I first explain the term received curriculum. It is important to recognize current rhetoric regarding the received curriculum – particularly in relation to high performing charter schools. The contemporary focus on how we make sense of student learning relies heavily on measures of performance on standardized assessments

(Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017). These metrics in high-performing charter schools do suggest that there is a high degree of academic rigor regarding the academic curriculum in these school environments – hence the categorization of the school as ‘high-performing’ (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012).

What may be missing from this understanding of the received curriculum is related to the social and cultural curricula of the school – that which may be concealed in the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1990; Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017). This study will explore these areas of the hidden curriculum in relation to the leaders’ intentions and reflections. Because it is out of the scope of this study to contact students attending high-performing charter schools however, I will not explore the received curriculum as it relates to the social and cultural curricula of the school.

Regarding the operational curriculum and its role in this study, school leaders did share their perceptions regarding the operations in their buildings. I use these descriptions as an illustration of the conditions school leaders provide in order for their school culture to be developed and sustained. The operational curriculum is not the primary focus of this study, though I do describe its relations to the intentions of school leaders along the instructional arc. While these elements of the instructional arc – the operational and received curriculum – are strong areas for future study, I believe that we first must understand the perceived intentions of the school leader to better understand elements of the operational and received curriculum which may be otherwise immeasurable or hidden.

Rationale for the focus on intentions. The reason I believe that studying the intended curriculum of a school leader is of great importance is due to the polarized debate regarding these school environments. This deeper understanding of leaders' intentions provides the following benefits within this dual rhetoric:

- Understanding curricular intentions quickly reveals the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1990) within which students are expected to learn. This provides the leader with a space for reflection upon how their intentions may lead to unintended consequences, further deepening our collective understanding of these school environments.
- Through a clear communication of one's intentions, we are able to create greater congruency amongst educators, reconceptualizing this 'us vs. them' binary. This leads to greater coherence regarding a school's intentions and how we might learn from one another to achieve better learning environments for students.
- When we move through the instructional arc from intentions to operations, and finally to the received curriculum, there is a degree of slippage that will naturally occur. Slippage refers to the differences between the intended and operational curriculum (Uhrmacher, 1991). By more deeply understanding leaders' intentions, we can determine how these intentions move to operations, and finally to the received curriculum – a topic for future research. However, if we don't clearly understand a leader's intentions, then the degree

of slippage to operations and finally the received curriculum will only grow wider, increasing the unintended consequences for students.

Whether one applauds the leaders' strong record of academic achievement (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012)– an element of the received curriculum that has already been highly researched – or critiques their strict behavior systems (Lack, 2009) – an element of the operational curriculum that has also been highly researched – I still do not believe we deeply understand the perceived intentions of leaders in these environments. I further investigate this gap in the literature below when I begin to make the connections between the intended curriculum, the identity of the school leader, and the importance of more deeply understanding these individuals.

School Leaders

Why do I choose to study school leaders? While we know that the actions teachers exhibit are very important in positively impacting student outcomes (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012; Hattie, 2012), teachers do report that what makes them most apt to stay at a school, and therefore continue to impact students, is based on the quality of their colleagues (whom the principal is in charge of hiring and growing) and the quality of the school leadership (Fullan, 2014). Leaders are fundamental in the development of any organization and understanding their experiences, values, beliefs, and actions is critical to understanding its functionality (Clark & McCarthy, 1980; Garrison-Wade, Gonzales & Alexander, 2013; Maxwell, 2011).

This study is an attempt to do that – to more deeply understand these leaders to drive towards a more collective understanding of the ways in which we think about

school reform, student achievement, and educational equity. Before I move into each of the inner-workings of these educational buzzwords, I turn to the thoughts of one of the leaders in educational leadership, Peter Senge. In his introduction to *The Fifth Discipline* (2006), he explains the cautionary tale of leaders who copy components, without a nod to the overall strategy and vision:

Practicing a discipline is different from emulating a model. All too often, new management innovations are described in terms of the ‘best practices’ of so-called leading firms. I believe benchmarking best practices can open people’s eyes to what’s possible, but it can also do more harm than good, leading to piece meal copying and playing catch-up. As one seasoned Toyota manager commented after hosting over a hundred tours for visiting executives, ‘...they always say, ‘Oh yes, you have a Kan-Ban system, we do also. You have quality circles, we do also. Your people fill out standard work descriptions, ours do also.’ They see all the parts and have copied the parts. What they do not see is the way all the parts work together’. I do not believe great organizations have ever been built by trying to emulate another, any more than individual greatness is achieved by trying to copy another ‘great person’. (p. 11)

While I could spend an entire dissertation just debating the idea of borrowing from business models to inform educational practices, I do believe there is value in Senge’s cautions. This study is not meant to list the ‘best practices’ of leaders in high-performing charter schools and transfer those practices to every school throughout the United States. Nor is it meant to criticize school leaders (though an exploration of criticism through Eisner will be essential given the namesake of the methodology employed for this study) who teach in these controversial school environments. Instead, it is meant to better understand these leaders’ perceived experiences, identities and intentions to inform the value they might hold for other members of the education space. This is particularly relevant at a moment in history when now, more than ever, education

is being reformed at rapid rates and whose implications for the next generation of students are yet to be seen.

Targeted School Type

I intend to explore the identities and experiences of school leaders who have led or currently lead high-performing urban schools in charter management organizations (CMOs). In Denver the most well-known CMO networks are the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), Denver School of Science and Technology (DSST), Strive Preparatory Schools (formerly West Denver Prep), GALS (Girls Athletic Leadership School), University Prep, and Rocky Mountain Prep (Cryan, Gibbons, Kurtz & Singer, 2017; Haun, 2015). Nationally there are more high-performing charter networks than it is possible to list here. Some of the most well-known include players such as Uncommon schools, Green Dot schools, IDEA public schools, Noble Street, High Tech High, and Summit Public Schools (Whitmire, 2016). These institutions, which are already highly researched, are known for creating a strong culture of academic achievement that is easily cited based on their performance on standardized assessments (Cryan et al; DSST, 2016; KIPP, 2016; STRIVE Schools, 2014; Whitmire). I will fully explain the merits of the institutions selected for inclusion in this study of high performing charter schools in the methods section – Chapter 3. I present the sample list of institutions now to pull in the schema of any reader familiar with such schools. While some celebrate these schools for their ability to create a high academic standard in traditionally underserved neighborhoods (Carter, 2000; Kopp, 2011), others question their methods, citing

militaristic behavior management systems that accompany this culture of achievement (Lack, 2009; Ravitch, 2013).

Experience and Identity

By examining the experiences and identities of leaders in these environments, I intend to gain greater insight into the perceived intentions of leaders in high performing charter schools (Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017). These two terms – experience and identity – while interconnected in their power to better reveal leaders’ perceived intentions – each represent a current gap in the literature which this study will address.

Experience. The current literature regarding educational practices in high-performing charter schools generally, and school leaders in these environments specifically, follows the dual rhetoric model proposed at the beginning of my introduction. In the current literature most of the research falls into one of two categories – either applauding the results school leaders in high-performing charter schools have achieved through their inspirational leadership – casting the school leader and the teachers they lead as superheroes achieving unmatched results in traditionally underserved schools (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2010; Guggenheim & Kimball, 2011; Mathews, 2009) or as villains, stripping away students’ culture and identity in service of higher test scores (Ravitch, 2013; Lack, 2009).

While the literature (and popular culture reference) cited above provide great insight into these school environments and the individuals that lead such schools, this dual rhetoric never sufficiently gets beyond a surface-level understanding of these people who have dedicated themselves to lead a high-performing charter school. This critique of

previous literature is not meant to say that the publications and films themselves are surface-level – both sides of this debate do have merit, depth, and provide the contextual and theoretical underpinning for this study. Where I see the gap in the literature however, is in more deeply exploring experiences of these leaders; how their experiences impact the way they intend to lead; and how they impact the school culture they intend to develop. I believe the hero/villain dichotomy I propose here illustrates this gap. To further clarify this gap, I now move to the second term identified in my research questions – identity.

Identity, reconceptualization of the dual rhetoric, and responding to the gap in literature. For the purposes of this study, leader identity will be defined using Parker Palmer’s (1998) definition: “...identity is a moving intersection of the inner and outer forces that make me who I am, converging in the irreducible mystery of being human” (p. 13). This definition of identity supports the reconceptualization of the dual rhetoric due to its mention of identity being a “moving intersection of inner and outer forces” (Palmer, p. 13). There are many inner and outer forces that inform leaders’ experiences, identities, and intentions within high performing charter schools. I will address the layers of complexity of these outer forces in the literature review in Chapter 2 through an exploration of the conceptual framework for this study. For the moment, I return to the notion of the inner forces that impact leaders’ identities, the way they intend to lead, and the school culture they intend to develop.

Identity to respond to the gap in literature. Identity – and its inner forces - is where we arrive at a greater depth of understanding experiences of leaders, thereby

informing the way they perceive their intentions to lead, the culture they intend to develop, and their perceptions of how the culture is developed and sustained (Palmer, 1998). The current literature I have found to date that actually explores school leaders' experiences focuses on the heroic efforts of school leaders in high-performing charter schools. This hero rhetoric, for example, in Matthews' (2009) biographical narration of KIPP founders Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin, describes their grassroots efforts to create what today is recognized as one of the largest, most successful charter networks in the U.S. Bambrick-Santoyo (2012) similarly studies successful school leaders – many of whom lead high-performing charter schools across the U.S. He describes their practices in great detail, applauding the strong academic results these leaders have produced within their schools. In both cases, the school leader as 'hero' is characterized through a fairly narrow view of success as measured by the received curriculum that dominates current rhetoric – strong achievement on standardized assessments.

The other side of the dual rhetoric does not offer much in terms of working directly with leaders in these environments but instead relies on theoretical framing, a critique of the neoliberal agenda actualized by the manifestation of these schools (Ravitch, 2013), and perpetuation of general critiques of these environments – citing their militaristic behavior and creation of a school-to-prison pipeline (Lack, 2009). In these cases, we see evidence of evaluation regarding the operational curriculum within these schools, though the scope of this narrative tends to generalize experiences to a particular CMO – typically KIPP, one of the most researched CMOs – as opposed to narrowing the

focus to an individual school or leader, as do Bambrick-Santoyo (2012) and Matthews (2009).

Put simply, the current rhetoric regarding high-performing charter schools seems to suggest that the received curriculum (as measured by achievement on standardized assessments) is demonstrating positive outcomes for students. However, the operational curriculum (regarding a strict code of discipline and privatization of public services) suggests that high-performing charter schools are ruining our education system and the students they educate. At the center of this debate lives the school leader who is largely responsible for the academic outcomes and operationalized behavior systems within these schools. What we don't understand however, are the experiences and identities of these leaders which then inform the way they intend to lead and the school culture they intend to develop.

These dual realities which equally inform my study are valuable. I thank each author, researcher, film producer, and journalist for continuing to help the American public understand this most recent wave of education reform – the exponential growth of high-performing charter schools. Where I see the gap in the literature is in *talking* to these people – who are neither heroes or villains but instead hard-working professionals who I believe have good intentions.

Researcher bias. Here is my bias – made clear for everyone to see. Having lived in my professional identity as a practitioner working alongside leaders who now lead or have led high-performing charter schools, I believe they are, at the end of the day, people. They are hard-working people who don't have all the answers *to disrupt the superhero*

rhetoric, but who also do not intend to create a culture which devalues students' identities, turning them into robotic test-takers *to disrupt the villain rhetoric*.

I am comfortable with my perspective and feel moved to reveal it due to the methodology I use – educational criticism and connoisseurship (Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017). My role as a researcher and connoisseur of this subject is to not bracket out these biases and perspectives I bring to the study, but instead to recognize that my identity informs how I study school leaders' identities and experiences. This enhances what I may be able to offer to the current literature. Furthermore, I intend to use this role as connoisseur and critic to reconceptualize this dual rhetoric. I can also recognize that there are both lessons we can learn from leaders' identities and experiences in high-performing charter schools as well as places to push our collective thinking about this type of school environment. As this school type grows in popularity, enrollment, and replication, we owe it to our students and communities to better understand the intentions of individuals who lead these schools and move away from this binary hero/villain debate (Cryan et al., 2017; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

Identity.

Identity and integrity are not the granite from which fictional heroes are hewn. They are the subtle dimensions of the complex, demanding, and lifelong process of self-discovery (Palmer, 1998, p. 13).

By exploring the identities of leaders in high-performing charter schools we can move away from this hero/villain dichotomy and better understand the intentions of these individuals which inform the way they lead. There are complex, subtle dimensions of

one's leadership style that very much inform the way they intend to lead and the school culture they intend to develop. Understanding these subtleties is the rationale for my first three research questions:

- **How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead?**
- **How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop?**
- **What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?**

Both inner and outer forces inform the complexity of a leader's identity (Palmer, 1998). By better understanding these inner and outer forces we can begin to engage in a rhetoric that recognizes the complexities of a leaders' professional identity. This ultimately impacts the way they intend to lead and the school culture they intend to develop. Here is where I strive to fill the gap in the literature – by diving deeper into the identities and experiences of school leaders in high-performing charter schools – in order to better inform our understanding of these school environments and the intentions of the dedicated individuals which lead them.

Interpretive Frameworks

While the literature review in the following chapter offers a greater in-depth analysis of interpretive frameworks central to the study, I briefly review these frameworks here to address the final research question:

- **What interpretive frameworks enhance our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop?**

These five interpretive frameworks fall into the following three categories, briefly reviewed below:

- Curricular Frameworks
 - Hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1990)
 - Banking model of education (Freire, 1970; 2000)
- Culture and Diversity Frameworks
 - Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995)
 - Diversity, equity and inclusion (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017)
- Leadership Framework
 - The five levels of leadership (Maxwell, 2011)

Curricular: Banking model of education. Although this pedagogical model has been widely discredited since Freire’s (1970) original criticism of ‘depositing’ information from the all-knowing teacher to the empty receptacle – the student – this framework does enhance our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop, particularly as they become more experienced leaders and recognize the deficit thinking such a model of schooling encourages.

Curricular: Hidden curriculum. Jackson’s (1990) notion of the hidden curriculum encourages the educator to reflect upon which elements of the curricula may be concealed, or hidden, despite their powerful implications for students. For example, a teacher who only calls on boys in math class may imply that boys are better than girls at

math – an element hidden from the written curriculum yet very impactful for a students' education. This over-simplified example illustrates a framework of critical importance to this study – how leaders' intentions for their school culture are deeply impactful within the hidden curriculum, and how leaders reflect upon these unintended consequences as they look back and move forward in their leadership of these institutions.

Leadership: 5 Levels of Leadership. I now move from the curricular-based interpretive frameworks that most enhance our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop, to the leadership framework most salient for this study. Maxwell's (2011) 5 Levels of Leadership offer a framework for understanding the leadership trajectory through which each leader develops. While the study will delve further into how various levels manifest in the experiences, identities and intentions of participants, I offer here a brief description of each level:

Level 1: Position. Leaders in this first level have been given the opportunity to lead through acquiring a leadership position. Leaders that stay operating at this level have little impact, as acquiring a position is an opportunity and it does not make one a leader.

Level 2: Permission. Permission-level leaders rely upon their relationships with people to influence. Maxwell (2011) outlines the importance of continuously developing and investing in strong relationships with those one leads. He also cautions that living at the permission level alone will never push toward greatness, as relational leadership does not focus on results and impact but rather on whether people like each other and can

avoid conflict – a widely-recognized necessary element of team-building and leadership (Lencioni, 2006).

Level 3: Production. Production level leaders produce. They achieve results that positively impact the organization. However, production alone does not drive toward organizational greatness. This is because the leader must push beyond the results she produces to the collective efforts of the group. Movement beyond this level of leadership is what makes leadership sustainable – through developing people to also produce with autonomy.

Level 4: People Development. At this level of leadership, the team can move from production to reproduction where one's impact is no longer reliant upon an additive measure, but rather a multiplicative one which grows others to fulfill the organization's mission. This is where leadership becomes more impactful and sustainable; the mission realizable.

Level 5: Pinnacle. In this highest level of leadership, the individual is a leader of Level 4 leaders who develop the others in the organization. At this level of leadership people trust the leader because of their proven reputation and because of who they are. A Level 5 leader is able to develop a Level 5 organization whose results and legacy will transcend their tenure and individual leadership.

I will continue to come back to this framework to enhance our deeper understanding of the leadership continuum upon which leaders in high-performing charters operate as they strive to become Level 5 Organizations.

Culture & Diversity: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. I now move from a theoretical framework for leadership to that of culture. Ladson-Billings' (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) framework identifies three distinct elements for engaging in CRP: creating conditions for academic success; incorporating students' culture into the curriculum; and developing a critical consciousness which allows for students to challenge the status quo. Initially this was the singular theoretical framework I intended to use for the study. However, after heeding the wise advice of my committee, I realized that this singular framework, while still valuable, is not sufficient to fully enhance our depth of understanding leaders' perceived experiences, identities, and intentions. Nor is this framework sufficient to unpack the intentional work around school culture in which so many participants are currently engaging. I therefore also include a note on diversity, equity and inclusion as the final framework to enhance our deeper understanding of leaders' perceived intentions, particularly as related to school culture.

Culture & Diversity: Diversity, equity and inclusion. When I first began interviewing participants, I kept hearing about the 'DEI' work they were doing to rethink school culture. When I finally let go of the notion that I was the only connoisseur in these interviews – a topic I will unpack further in my methods chapter – I asked what 'DEI' stood for. What I came to discover was a study of charter schools and other education non-profits related to the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion to further impact educational outcomes for students (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017). It is important to note here that this study was sponsored by several of the foundations most

well known in the educational reform movement, such as the Walton Family Foundation, Promise54, and the NewSchools Venture fund.

Because multiple participants referenced this body of work and its importance for their leadership around school culture, I include it in the frameworks used in the study along with all other theoretical frameworks listed above generally and Ladson-Billings' (1995) CRP framework specifically to better discern, appreciate and value the subtleties of the various schools of thought regarding curriculum, pedagogy, leadership, and school culture (Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017). I will now move toward an explanation of the outer forces that impact school leaders' experiences and identities – through a review of the literature - which explores the context within which this group of professionals find themselves.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I review the literature on high-performing charter schools and leadership. I primarily explore the literature through the use of a conceptual framework. Before I explain the conceptual framework to set the context for better understanding high-performing charter schools, I begin here with a brief overview of the literature most directly related to this school type. The current literature on high performing charter schools primarily falls into one of two categories: literature that supports high performing charter schools; or literature that criticizes high performing charter schools.

The literature that supports high performing charter schools primarily derives from practitioners, popular culture, and the media. Advocates of high performing charter schools include the following major players, listed in alphabetical order by last name:

- Paul Bambrick-Santoyo (2012), superintendent of Uncommon Schools, a well-known high performing charter school network on the east coast and author of *Leverage Leadership: A Practical Guide to Building Exceptional Schools*
- Samuel Casey Carter, researcher and policy advocate for ‘no excuses’ charter schools. Carter (2000) authored the article *No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools*.

- Davis Guggenheim and Billy Kimball (2011), writers of the movie script *Waiting for 'Superman'*, a documentary that casts teachers and leaders in high performing charter schools as superheroes
- Wendy Kopp (2011), founder of Teach for America and author of *A Chance to Make History: What Works and What Doesn't in Providing an Excellent Education for All*
- Jay Matthews (2009), author of the biographical account of the founders of KIPP entitled *Work Hard, Be Nice: How Two Inspired Teachers Created the Most Promising Schools in America*
- Richard Whitmire (2016), former editorial reporter and author of *The Founders: Inside the Revolution to Invent (and reinvent) America's Best Charter Schools*

I include the information about each of these advocates to provide greater clarity on the origin of the literature that supports high performing charter schools. These authors, policy advocates and practitioners focus on the unmatched outcomes high performing charter schools have achieved for students in traditionally underserved neighborhoods. While this body of literature focuses on the high expectations present in the culture of these schools, there is little criticism for the problematic structures resulting from a strict, 'no excuses' school culture. It is from these sources that I developed the notion of a 'hero' rhetoric within high performing charter schools.

In stark contrast to this celebration of the quantifiable outcomes of high performing charter schools live an equally passionate group of educators and academics

that vehemently disagree with the creation and replication of high performing charter schools. Critics of high performing charter schools include the following major players, listed below in alphabetical order:

- Michael Apple (2014), professor at University of Wisconsin Madison and author of *Can Education Change Society?*
- Julie Gorlewski and Brad Porfolio (2013), editors of *Left Behind in the Race to the Top: Realities of School Reform*
- Brian Lack (2009), author of *No excuses: A critique of the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) within charter schools in the USA*
- Diane Ravitch (2013), professor at New York University and author of *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools*
- Kenneth Saltman and David Gabbard (2010), co-authors of *Education as Enforcement: The Militarization and Corporatization of Schools*

These authors and professors display *equal* passion for their *disdain* of high performing charter schools. I construct the notion of a ‘villain’ rhetoric from this body of literature. Critics of high performing charter schools argue that these institutions have privatized our public institutions, creating a corporeal model for schooling. They also argue that these environments are harmful for students in traditionally underserved communities due to their infamous strict culture of discipline. Authors I place in the ‘villain’ camp either ignore the academic outcomes of students in high performing charter

schools or dismiss them as further evidence of the corporate takeover operationalized by these institutions.

As this study develops, I intend to reconceptualize this dual rhetoric into a continuum that describes the continuous improvement of these institutions over time. In order to fully develop our understanding of these institutions, I created and use a conceptual framework to situate this study within the existing literature on high performing charter schools. I believe that this framework will therefore not only set the context to understand this study but charter schools generally. By the end of this literature review I intend for the reader to understand the research already existing on high performing charter schools and how this particular study fulfills a gap in the literature on this controversial topic.

Conceptual Framework

When I think about the topic for this study, I'm reminded of the children's book *Zoom*. It is the same metaphor Sara Koenig used to describe her understanding of her subject in the second season of *Serial*, a podcast which explores the release of POW Bowe Bergdahl within the greater socio-political context (Banyai, 1995; Koenig, 2015). In each instance we start by looking at something very small and seemingly manageable to understand such as a red indistinguishable shape (in the beginning of *Zoom*); a POW release (in *Serial*); or a school leader's experiences (as in this study). However, as you begin to zoom out from the immediate subject, you begin to see the complexity of the seemingly simple. In the case of *Zoom* a red shape turns into a rooster, then a boy and

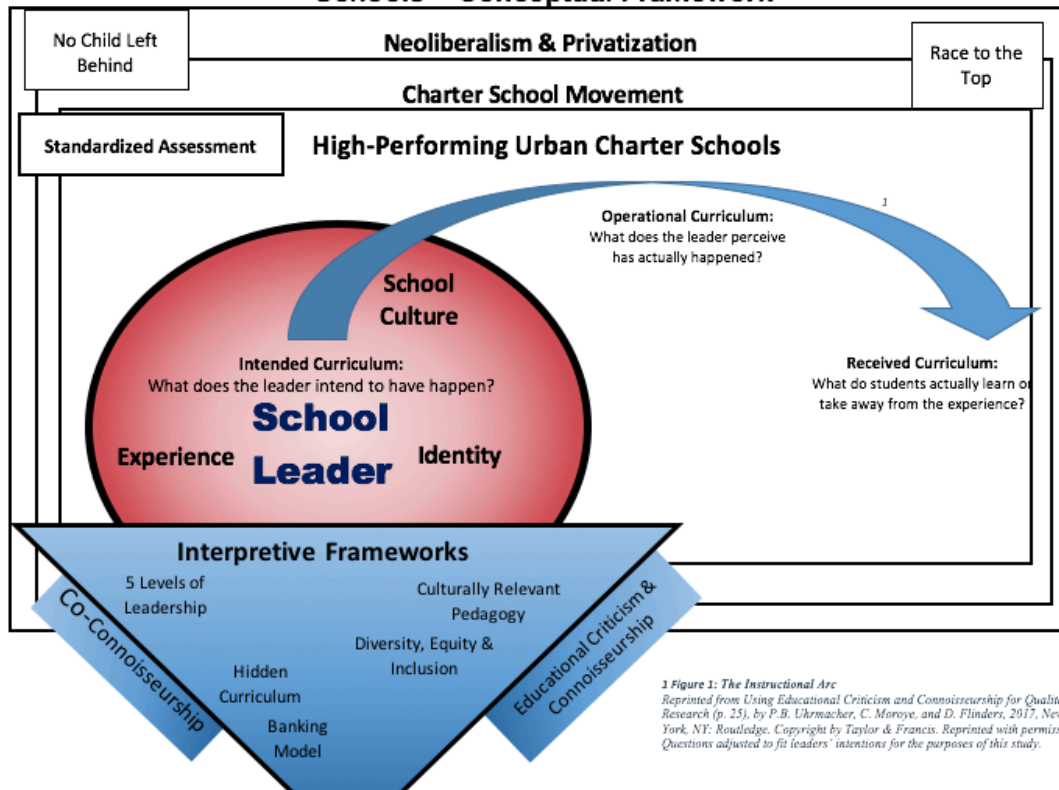
girl looking at the rooster, and so on, until you finally arrive at a globe wherein the red shape from the beginning of the book is only a small part (Banyai).

Similarly, Koenig (2015) explains how when she first began to look into Bowe Bergdahl's release she thought this was what she would report on – the release of the POW. Instead, she discovered that Bowe Bergdahl's release was greatly impacted by foreign policy, national security, and the many other lives intermingled within Bergdahl's capture and release.

This metaphor provides the inspiration for the conceptual framework, displayed below in *Figure 2*, I developed to organize where this study situates itself in the current literature. Both of these cases suggest the importance of perspective, context, and taking the time to see the larger picture. In the case of this study, the perspective and context are equally important as school leaders in high-performing charter schools certainly do not live in isolation of the greater conditions, socio-political context, and shifting policies which promote and impact their school setting, experiences, identities, intentions, and school culture (Dewey, 1931).

In some brevity, this explains the white concentric boxes at the top of *Figure 2: Conceptual Framework*, which encircle the red oval – the focus of this study – thereby demonstrating the 'zoom' effect described above:

Exploring Dual Realities: School Leaders in High-Performing Charter Schools – Conceptual Framework



¹ Figure 1: *The Instructional Arc*
 Reprinted from *Using Educational Criticism and Connoisseurship for Qualitative Research* (p. 23), by P. B. Ugras, C. Moroye, and D. Flinders, 2017, New York, NY: Routledge. Copyright by Taylor & Francis. Reprinted with permission. Questions adjusted to fit leaders' intentions for the purposes of this study.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

This figure demonstrates both the context of the study participants and the lens through which the data will be collected, analyzed, and disseminated.

In the following paragraph I will briefly explain the *zoom* effect which impacts the participants in this study – school leaders who currently lead or have lead at high-performing charter schools – and how their experiences and identities by no means live in isolation but instead are situated within a variety of contexts or outer forces (Palmer, 1998) which impact these identities, experiences, and intentions. In this introduction to the conceptual framework I will begin with my seemingly simple red shape – the experiences and identities of school leaders – and zoom out to each layer of complexity. Following this brief introduction to the conceptual framework, I will move into a more

detailed review of the literature beginning at the global perspective and *zooming* back into the seemingly simple red shape. This will allow me to further explore the complexities within which school leaders in high-performing charter schools operate.

As a reminder, the focus of this study is outlined in the following research questions:

- **How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead?**
- **How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop?**
- **What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?**
- **What interpretive frameworks enhance our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop?**

As my first three research questions suggest, I specifically focus on how the experiences and identities of school leaders impact their intentions to lead; the school culture they intend to develop; and the conditions they develop and sustain this culture over time. These three research questions are best represented within the large red circle in the model above.

The school leader sits at the center of this circle surrounded by their experiences and identities. These elements of *self* inform the leaders' intentions to lead – the first questions Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders (2017) propose in their instructional arc model. For the purposes of this study, I focus on the intentions to lead generally, and to develop

and sustain a certain school culture specifically. This explains the intentional placement of the word ‘school culture’ along the instructional arc. As you will see in the data presentation in Chapter 4, I approach the school culture the leader intends to develop through this instructional arc model, leading into the perceived operations – or how that culture is developed and sustained.

As I begin with these first three research questions it is important to recognize the school setting, which fits within the larger socio-political context, which promotes the growth of charter schools through the charter school movement. In this way the seemingly simple red shape that is central to the research questions are informed by many other factors.

In order to fully understand the experiences, identities and intentions of school leaders I believe it is crucial to understand the context within which they operate – high-performing charter schools. These schools are a part of the charter school movement. This movement has gained tremendous traction over the past several decades (Mora & Christianakis, 2013; Ravitch, 2013).

How, do you ask, did the charter school movement gain so much traction? If we zoom out to a greater context we can see that privatization and the neoliberal ideology have impacted the education space in order to promote such growth. While this ideology broadly explains the traction gained through the charter school movement, there have been specific policies over time to move privatization and neoliberalism from ideologies to actionable policies. Education policies during the past two decades – No Child Left

Behind and Race to the Top – catalyzed the rapid expansion of high-performing charter schools (Goldstein, 2014; Mora & Christianakis, 2013).

There is one more term located to the left of the concentric square diagram in *Figure 2* that further informs the experiences and identities of school leaders in high-performing charters – ‘standardized assessment’. Standardized assessment is the primary metric to determine effectiveness of schools according to current policy and rhetoric, beginning with Bush’s No Child Left Behind legislation (Ravitch, 2013; Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012). When I label a school as a *high-performing* charter school, it is due to their record of academic success as defined by achievement on standardized assessments.

Finally, there are several interpretive frameworks which help us more deeply understand the school culture leaders intend to develop– represented by a blue triangle at the bottom of *Figure 2*. I will further explain these interpretive frameworks at the end of the literature review, as well as use them to inform the data presentation, interpretation, and evaluation to guide the thematics I develop from this study.

I’ve now explained the ‘zoom’ effect on school leaders in high-performing charter schools. While the school leaders’ experiences and identities are central to my study, they rest in a complex, controversial, and timely context which, in many ways, inform the more immediate topic. This also provides the rationale for developing the literature review through this conceptual framework.

In unpacking the context surrounding school leaders in high-performing charter schools I believe we have the ability to more deeply understand their experiences, identities and intentions to lead. I will therefore delve into the literature review in the

opposite order from that which I explained how school leaders in high-performing charters are impacted by the context within which they lead. Put another way, if we return to the *zoom* analogy, we'll start with a view of the globe as a whole and slowly move into the inner-most layer of the subject – the red shape which rests atop the rooster's head. This will create the opportunity to further understand the complex subtleties of the subject as informed by their context (Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017). For this study, then, I will begin with the outer-most layer of the school leaders' context – the socio-political climate surrounding high-performing charter school leaders generally – and neoliberalism specifically – and move inward to the context most closely impacting their experiences and identities – a deeper understanding of these school environments and the dual rhetoric within which they operate.

Through this process I demonstrate how these layers of context and complexity deeply impact school leaders' experiences, identities and intentions. This perspective also provides insight into the trajectory of high-performing charter schools and their leaders over time – a concept I will fully explain in the data presentation, analysis and thematics in the latter chapters of the study.

Socio-Political Climate and Neoliberalism

We've arrived again at the outer-most square as represented in *Figure 2* – the ideologies and policies which permeate every other layer to the context of my participants' experiences and identities – neoliberalism and the privatization movement.

It is important to understand the socio-political context and ideologies that contribute to the narrative around the arguments *for* and *against* high-performing charter

schools and how these conditions inform current realities. Neoliberalism is a phenomenon that has impacted every industry and public space in a different way – the effects of which will undoubtedly be felt for the foreseeable future (Birch & Mykhnenko, 2010). One area that has seen the greatest impact due to these policies and ideological positioning is one of the most important – the school system.

Neoliberalism as an ideology originated out of Paris in the 1930's (Birch & Mykhnenko, 2010). The original idea behind this concept was to introduce the idea that "...governments play an important role as the guardian of 'free markets' by securing the rule of law" (Birch & Mykhnenko, 2010, p. 2). This initial conception focused on the government supporting free market policies in order to create a more productive, better society. While the original ideological framework was born in the 1930's, its agenda didn't really gain traction until the 1970's when neoliberal ideals were thought to be able to increase the efficiency of free markets through a reduction in state intervention (Birch & Mykhnenko).

Although the initial purpose of this push was to reduce state intervention, the actual consequence of this ideology has been the passage of policies that do more. They have created state-supported policies that remove power from the government and put public entities' management and financing into the private sector.

Policy impact on the United States education system. In the United States neoliberalism has had a significant impact on various industries. Education is no exception to this. What's even more interesting about the rise of the neoliberal agenda and the privatization movement in the U.S. education system is that many of the policies

resulting from this ideology are actually bipartisan. Conservatives support charter schools for the minimal government intervention. More liberal policy-makers support charter schools based on their social responsibility to help the less fortunate – an intended result from such policies (Ravitch, 2013). Because of the bipartisan nature of these policies, the privatization of public education has become a central piece of the current education system in the U.S. (Apple, 2014; Ravitch, 2013).

Privatization. Arguably the most salient and influential ramification of the neoliberal ideology in the U.S. education system has been the privatization movement, wherein public-school services are now increasingly managed and governed by the private sector (Apple, 2014; Ravitch, 2013). Critics of this movement cite various examples of how privatization and the neoliberal ideology are eroding the American public education system due to the players involved and the large monetary benefits many in the private sector now enjoy as a result of these reforms (Apple, 2014; Ravitch, 2013). These ideologies, then, have been operationalized through their federally backed, bipartisan support in the United States (Ravitch, 2013).

During the past two presidencies, each executive office has created and successfully passed bipartisan legislation aimed at reforms to the U.S. education system – Bush with his No Child Left Behind legislation and Obama with the Race to the Top campaign (Ravitch, 2013). As Birch & Mykhnenko (2010) explain on a more global level, the neoliberal agenda has not just limited the power of the government in favor of market reform. The reality has been the passage of policies that actually support privatization with government-backed initiatives. Initiatives in No Child Left Behind and

Race to the Top have been no exception to this trend. I'll now move to greater explanation of the policies that operationalize the ideologies of privatization and neoliberalism informing my study's context.

No Child Left Behind: Paving the way for the Race to the Top. No Child Left Behind (NCLB), passed into law in 2002, pushed the accountability movement wherein student achievement would be based almost solely on standardized test scores (Hursh, 2007; Ravitch, 2013). This policy, originally intended to support students with the greatest needs, instead led to the closure of schools consistently labeled as 'failing'. 'Failed' schools were frequently turned over to players in the private sector, such as charter school operators, who were tasked with 'fixing' the failing system. Critics argue that the problem with this policy, in terms of its perpetuation of the neoliberal agenda, is the systematic corrosion of traditional public schools that has occurred as a result (Mora & Christianakis, 2013; Ravitch, 2013). NCLB encouraged the growth of privately managed, publically funded entities to take the place of failing district-run schools in an attempt to better serve students. One of the most prevalent of these models to replace closing district schools are charter schools (Mora & Christianakis, 2013).

Race to the Top. Ironically when President Obama came into office, his policies were also intended to 'fix' the American school system which was once again 'broken'

following the NCLB legislation put in place by Bush. What the Race to the Top¹ legislation actually did, however, was create additional opportunities for funding that furthered the privatization of public education. The two most salient examples that come out of this legislation are the mandates for states to tie test scores to student accountability measures, furthering the marketization of public schools; and the mandate to increase the number of charter schools in states applying for the Race to the Top funding. Both measures further privatize the public education space (Ravitch, 2013).

Race to the Top, the Obama administration's education reform initiative, encouraged states to compete for federal funding through the creation of an education reform plan that was designed to elicit creativity and collaboration. While the initial intent of this initiative was to serve the needs of all students and create better learning environments, the mandates associated with Race to the Top created specific practices across the nation – some positive and some negative – that have a direct impact on students' experiences.

One of the most salient and influential mandates within the initiative was that states competing for this funding had to include space for the creation of additional charter schools within their state (Ravitch, 2013). This piece of the Race to the Top agenda was so influential that \$4.35 billion in funding was allocated to state expansion of

¹ The Obama administration also successfully passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This law replaced NCLB, focusing on providing greater flexibility at the state level to determine education policy (Darling-Hammond, 2017). While this education policy will undoubtedly continue to impact the growth of charter schools as time goes on, the change in administration at the time of this study had created an environment where implementation of ESSA had yet to hit local policy. I therefore make little reference to ESSA beyond notes in the implications and opportunities for future research.

charter schools (Mora & Christianakis, 2013). This statistic speaks to the overwhelming importance of charter reform for the Obama administration and its lasting legacy on the American education system.

At this point I have covered the outer-most square in *Figure 2* – the socio-political context within which leaders in high-performing charter schools operate. Historically this socio-political context has led to the further privatization of America’s public schools through a broader acceptance and preponderance of the neoliberal agenda. In practice, these ideologies manifested politically in two consecutive presidencies that led to federal policies which pushed forward an increase in opportunity for charter schools to grow exponentially - both in number and in public recognition.

It is important to recognize that even at this most global level of context surrounding school leaders in high-performing charters schools, there is a dual reality. Prominent researchers and educational thinkers caution against the impacts of the privatization movement and its impact on the American education landscape (Ravitch, 2013; Mora & Christianakis, 2013). Yet simultaneously, two successive administrations promoted policies which perpetuate the growth of charter schools – furthering the neoliberal agenda – which were backed with bipartisan support and heavily funded through both public tax dollars and generous philanthropic donations (Mora & Christianakis; Saltman, 2010). This is the socio-political context within which school

leaders in high-performing charter schools have operated and continue to operate.² While the thematics section of the study in Chapter 5 will reveal the manner in which I believe this context has impacted the experiences, identities, and intentions of leaders, it is important here to note that this *is* the dual reality within which these professionals live. This context, in part, defines the outer forces that inform high-performing charter school leaders' identities (Palmer, 1998).

In the following section of the literature review I will move to the next two concentric boxes represented in *Figure 2* above – the rise of charter schools through the charter school movement generally and the growing popularity of high-performing charter schools specifically.

The Charter School Movement and the Rise of Charter Schools

The Charter School Movement - situated in national legislation from NCLB and Race to the Top – born of privatization and neoliberal ideologies - is quite far removed from the historical conception that originated these school environments. Initially charter schools were meant to be spaces for teachers to try out innovative teaching practices, free from bureaucratic systems that may limit the creativity of the educator (Fuller & Koon, 2013). With this initial intent, school environments operating as charters would be

² **At the time of this study, Betsy DeVos had recently come into office as President Trump's Secretary of Education. DeVos is an advocate for school choice and voucher programs. However, at the time of this study, DeVos was largely unsuccessful in making any progress to further the Trump administration's education policy plans (Klein, 2017). I therefore make little reference to DeVos, as she was primarily providing feedback on Obama's ESSA policies that slowed the process of its implementation at the state level (Ferguson, 2017). There had been little to no direct impact on state-level charter policy at the time of this study.**

limited to a small number of entities whose ideas would then be shared and as appropriate, replicated in the traditional public-school environments (Ravitch, 2013).

This modest beginning evolved into what is now a major force in the American education system. Charter schools didn't come about until the late 1980's (Fuller & Koon, 2013; Ravitch, 2013). Just thirty years later, charter schools now serve approximately 3.1 million students in the United States annually (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016). The neoliberal agenda, backed by Bush's NCLB legislation and Obama's Race to the Top initiative, has allowed and in many cases, supported, the development of Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) through federally-backed funding initiatives designed to reform America's public schools (Ravitch, 2013; Mora & Christianakis, 2013). Charter Management Organizations essentially operate as their own school district, managing a portfolio of charter schools with a common mission and vision. These initiatives create an environment that fosters the continued growth of the charter school movement. Much of the rhetoric regarding these policies comes from a place of criticism, suggesting that such ideologies, policies, and the growth of charter schools are detrimental to the U.S. education system. This is one of the dual realities in which this study finds itself, revealing how *zooming* out from a charter school into the greater socio-political climate brings to light the importance of contextualizing the settings for this study.

Community control. This history of mainstream charter schools must also include the history of schools specifically targeting the needs of African-American students. While not officially considered a 'charter school' movement, we can see

evidence of rationale for the community control era in today's great charter school debate. Community control is also of particular relevance given that many CMOs serve traditionally underserved communities which include but are certainly not limited to African-American students (Kopp, 2011). This movement, led by activists in the Black Power movement and heavily funded by major philanthropy organizations such as the Ford Foundation and CORE, was a response to the inequities black parents were seeing in school services offered to their children. Advocates in this movement believed inequities were largely due to a centralized, dominant narrative curriculum and the rise in power of teachers' unions (Goldstein, 2014).

This movement was brought about by a demand for greater local control of curriculum (with the introduction of an Afro-centric curriculum) and freedom from bureaucratic controls which stall hiring practices based on tenure and collective bargaining. While the movement to create systematic reforms to the American education system never gained significant traction, we can still see similar debates regarding school governance, curricular flexibility, and opposition to teachers' unions in today's rhetoric concerning the values of school choice (Goldstein, 2014).

Specific consequences of charter schools. These school choice initiatives have had many effects on students given the types of schools that are currently allowed to operate under the 'charter school' heading. It is important to keep in mind that charter schools do not all fall under the same category – some charter schools are fairly conservative with strict discipline codes and policies - while others are more progressive with a focus on experiential learning (Wells, Slayton & Scott, 2002). The targeted

schools for this study are high-performing charter management organizations (CMOs). I will explore the degree to which their discipline codes have remained strict and conservative, further exploring the common association between ‘high-performing’ and ‘no excuses’ charters in Chapters 4 and 5. For now, I continue with their historical context and the current socio-political and academic rhetoric.

The development of high-performing CMOs such as the KIPP charter school network, STRIVE Preparatory Schools, DSST, University Prep, and Rocky Mountain Prep (local to Denver); Geoffrey Canada’s Harlem Children’s Zone, KIPP, Uncommon Schools, and Green Dot Schools (across the nation) have provided strong academic environments for traditionally underserved populations (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012; Carter, 2000; Cryan et al., 2017; Ross et. al., 2007; Tough, 2009). There are other charter school environments that are problematic in the privatization movement, such as for-profit charters (Ravitch, 2013; Scott & DiMartino, 2009). These organizations, which can also be grouped into the ‘profit-making’ players in the current privatization movement (Scott & DiMartino, 2009), are certainly a questionable consequence of the privatization movement specifically as they situate themselves in K-12 public schools. I believe it is important to recognize the various outcomes in charters across the U.S. as this is the broader educational landscape within which the CMOs targeted for this study operate. The sheer number and variety of charter schools add to the complexity of understanding the dual rhetoric surrounding these schools and the leaders of such environments.

High-Performing Charter Schools

Within the socio-political context that currently supports the growth of CMO's, the most recent wave of education reform in the United States has centered on the accountability movement. Student performance on standardized testing shapes policy, funding, and educational practices in K-12 institutions throughout the country (Spring, 2008). Within this high accountability landscape charter school networks have grown exponentially. With the promise of creating higher standards of learning for children in traditionally underserved communities (as determined by standardized test scores), they continue to grow in popularity as a strong alternative to 'failing' district-run public schools (Buckley & Schneider, 2009; Carter, 2000; Mora & Christianakis 2013).

To be clear, there are cautions regarding charter schools – such as the manner in which they are situated within the neoliberal agenda; the privatization movement; and federally-backed policies which many deem as misguided in their free-wheeling allowance for charters to prosper at the expense of district-run schools (Mora & Christianakis 2013; Ravitch, 2013). This is a rhetoric within which school leaders in these environments operate.

Simultaneously, there are some charter school networks that appear to be delivering unmatched results in terms of these accountability metrics, and whose wait lists and growing enrollment do suggest positive outcomes – one narrative regarding the positive received curriculum in these environments. This specific subset of charter schools' academic results suggests some benefits for students from traditionally underserved neighborhoods. Therefore, while not all charter schools yield positive

benefits to students and overall, the data available on the effectiveness of charter schools as opposed to traditional public schools is mixed (Bulkley & Fisler, 2003), the development of these learning institutions has created a space for high-performing charter schools that serve the needs of diverse groups of students to thrive academically (Carter, 2000; Tough, 2009).

These charter networks primarily operate under the assumption that all students *will* attend college. They promote high academic achievement and generally have a highly structured classroom environment and school culture (KIPP, 2014; Ravitch, 2013). While the plurality of the current high-performing CMOs makes it difficult to trace collective history of all schools that fit this category of charters, there is some evidence that the roots of these ‘no excuses’ schools date back to previous reform agendas led by prominent African-American leaders, which intended to create strict discipline codes to demonstrate their love of children and create conditions for academic success to occur (Goldstein, 2014; Matthews, 2009).

These charter schools which initially claimed a ‘no excuses’ model, though this mantra has been largely eliminated in recent years (Whitmire, 2016), boast high standardized test scores as a measure of student achievement, citing their scores as compared to other schools in traditionally underserved neighborhoods as a way to legitimize their relevance in today’s public-school systems (STRIVE, 2012; Whitmire, 2016). It is these records of student achievement on standardized assessments that lead proponents of the charter school movement – in academia, popular culture, and through policy development at the state and federal level – to celebrate these schools’ ability to

create a strong culture around achievement, success, and teacher support (Carter, 2000; Guggenheim & Kimball, 2011; Kopp, 2011; Kraft et. al., 2012). It is here that you see the *dual reality*, wherein high-performing charter schools are being touted as the fix to the U.S. education system, and something we must replicate at rapid rates.

While some celebrate this ‘no excuses’ paradigm that establishes a culture of success, (Carter, 2000; KIPP, 2014), critics question the methods of instruction that lead to this sense of achievement, citing their “militaristic characterization” (Lack, 2009, p. 139) and “boot camp culture” (Ravitch, 2013, p. 34). This highly structured school culture, critics argue, is actually sending “...the message to students that failure in this society will solely be a reflection of not working long and hard enough, or mere complicity with rules set and enforced by authority figures” (Lack, p. 143). This argument suggests that schools that operate under this strict discipline model are actually perpetuating institutional racism, thereby undermining their original purpose – another lens into this dual reality paradigm.

This dichotomous narrative may lead some to believe that the debate over high-performing, *no excuses* charter schools’ place in education is polarizing with each side – or perhaps more dramatically stated – each reality determined to prevail against the other. Although there are clear narratives on both sides of this debate, there may be a space where charter schools can produce measurable results while still developing a culture of support for their teachers and a holistically beneficial learning environment (Kraft et. al., 2000). This study addresses this issue to gain a greater understanding of how high performing, ‘no excuses’ charter schools are being operated by leaders whose intentions

align to more complex priorities than the current binary rhetoric suggests. Furthermore, this study explores how this dual rhetoric may actually be more sequential in nature, with the intentions of leaders changing over time with the maturity of the organization and the leader – a phenomenon common to leadership and organizational development (Collins, 2001; Maxwell, 2011).

Participants from this study have worked and led at ten different Charter Management Organizations that fall into this category. I have made a commitment to not reveal the identities of participants and therefore will not provide the exact names of the schools where participants lead in order to maintain this ethical integrity (Guillemin, & Gillam, 2004). I will further explore their selection in my methods in Chapter 3. Given the prevalence and results of these schools, they are clearly an important sector of our education space both locally in Denver and nationally. For the purposes of this study I will attempt to make public a deeper understanding of these school environments through exploring the experiences, identities, and intentions of school leaders who currently lead or have led high-performing charter schools.

This brings me to the most inner red circle in the conceptual framework. Returning to the *zoom* analogy, we have arrived back to the deceptively simple red shape atop the rooster's head! (Banyai, 1995).

School Leadership

As I stated previously in the 'zoomed' out contextualization of this study, one of the greatest criticisms of high-performing charter schools has been the corporatization and privatization of public schools. I've been struggling with how to move from

exploring these charters and corporeal control into a greater understanding of leadership in these environments and in school leadership in general. While I know there is an inherent link between the two, given that the school leaders participating in my study find themselves in the greater context I've explored, it took quite some time to find the proper transition from the greater context into the experiences of school leaders within these environments. In order to make this link (and to further the co-connoisseurship of the study), I asked participants to share their keystone leadership text titles with me to explore the role of the principal and more deeply understand the way in which each participant leads.

The answers I received included the following texts, ordered alphabetically by author:

- *Leadership and Self-Deception: Getting out of the Box* (Arbinger Institute, 2010)
- *Good to Great* (Collins, 2001)
- *The Tao of Leadership* (Heider, 2014)
- *Leadership on the Line* (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017)
- *Crucial Conversations* (Patterson, Grenny, Mcmillan, & Switzler, 2002)
- *The 5th Discipline* (Senge, 2006)
- *The First 90 Days* (Watkins, 2003)

After much exploration of these texts, I finally came across something that began to bridge these different topics together. This is that these authors' audiences are not just school leaders but are leaders across organizations – primarily those in corporate environments. Why do I tell you this lengthy saga leading into my exploration of

leadership? Because I find it fascinating that it took me this long to see the irony in leaders recommending texts from corporate environments while criticisms of our public schooling system focus on corporate control.

That being said, each text has enhanced my connoisseurship of leadership generally and even school leadership specifically. Senge (2006), for example, offers some interesting points regarding the complexity of leadership – a notion I will continue to revisit, particularly with regards to one’s leadership growth over time. In a discussion of management teams in – yes – a corporate model, Senge explains the importance of situational leadership and the need to be nimble in tackling complex issues:

‘...most management teams break down under pressure’, writes Harvard’s Chris Argyris – a longtime student of learning in management teams. ‘The team may function quite well with routine issues. But when they confront complex issues that may be embarrassing or threatening, the ‘teamness’ seems to go to pot’. Argyris argues that most managers find collective inquiry inherently threatening. School trains us never to admit that we do not know the answer, and most corporations reinforce that lesson by rewarding the people who excel in advocating their views, not inquiring into complex issues. (When was the last time someone was rewarded in your organization for raising difficult questions about the company’s current policies rather than solving urgent problems?) Even if we feel uncertain or ignorant, we learn to protect ourselves from the pain of appearing uncertain or ignorant. That very process blocks out any new understandings which might threaten us. The consequence is what Argyris calls ‘skilled incompetence’ – teams full of people who are incredibly proficient at keeping themselves from learning (p. 25).

This quote explains the importance of thinking critically to tackle complex problems. If there is one type of leadership that is particularly complex, I would argue educational leadership is it. This is particularly true, as the review of literature thus far suggests, in reform-minded environments. At its core this is the historical purpose of

charter schools – to reform the public education system through small-scale efforts to innovate the traditional school model (Fuller & Koon, 2013). The question is how leaders in these environments are able to tackle complex problems with their teams in order to create the ‘best’ learning environments for their students. Because I am also a leader as a researcher, I do not reduce nor formalize my understanding of leaders’ experiences and identities in these spaces (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Instead I continue to focus on the importance of thinking narratively to understand the unique complexities of each professional from whom I had the privilege of learning. I will further explore narrative thinking and how this concept further enhances my research in my methods in Chapter 3.

Several key points regarding leadership continue to bridge these topics together, and further enhance our deeper understanding of school leaders’ experiences, identities, intentions, and leadership trajectories. These key points explored below are as follow:

- Clear goals
- Servant Leadership
- Adaptability
- Technical practices
- Five Levels of Leadership (this final topic is one of the key interpretive frameworks in this study)

Clear goals. One of the themes I will explore in depth in the latter chapters of this study is the notion that a clear mission is the driving force behind everything the leader in a school does. This theme’s prevalence did not just emerge from the data, but

also from every leadership text – and I mean every leadership text – I explored for this study. While the literature on corporate models does not necessarily focus primarily on the mission of the organization, they do all focus on the importance of having clear goals which many argue should come from the driving purpose – or mission - of the organization (Collins, 2001; Heider, 2014; Lencioni, 2006). These goals are typically quantitative and measurable. In the corporate world, these goals are usually revenue goals as that is how success in a business is ultimately measured. In our school systems we also have quantitative goals – typically measuring student proficiency and growth on state assessments. Once again we can see how the corporate world has begun to shape our school systems, with a school’s measures of success being driven by education’s equivalent to gross profit – gross student learning (Ravitch, 2013). However, if we keep in mind Senge’s (2006) cautions regarding the importance of understanding the complexity of leadership, it is clear that such finite measurements are not the only ‘goals’ toward which leaders should strive.

Instead, these numerical goals related to profit or test score proficiency are merely the most visible measure of the success of an organization. To further argue that tracking of and communication around numerical goals are just the representation of much deeper work, Collins (2001) found that in the corporate world, an organization’s success is not dependent upon the financial compensation of employees. Instead, what makes employees and their organizations thrive is a drive towards accomplishing one’s goals because of the collective responsibility, accountable culture, and sense of team which results from clear goals (Lencioni, 2006). This speaks to the importance of the

connection between the mission of the organization – a theme which so many leaders in this study felt was central to their leadership. It is important to have clear goals that *everyone* in the organization has a *collective responsibility* for accomplishing.

I do still believe there is plenty of space for criticism regarding our current system of accountability for school performance. There is clearly a legitimate concern about corporeal control and the neoliberal agenda which laid the foundation for policies, and therefore school environments, whose central focus becomes the finite numerical measurement of student learning on a state assessment (Ravitch, 2013; Saltman, 2010). However, this is the current accountability system and - I believe - the best measure we have of a school's success for the moment. While I do believe there will always be room for improvement regarding the manner in which we measure student learning (Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017; Ravitch), the literature on how clear goals translate to strong culture do offer a frame for situating these numerical measures in a more complex, nuanced, and powerful organizational culture.

In other words, these scores and measurements are more than just scores. They are a numerical representation of what a school is actually *doing*. They don't live in isolation, just like the gross profits of a corporation are not isolated from the driving mission of the organization (Collins, 2001). In the corporate world if all the leader focuses on is making money – void of all other essential elements that drive the mission of the organization – the leader ultimately will not be successful (Heider, 2014). In schools, if all the leader focuses on is improving test scores – void of all other essential elements that drive the mission of the school – the leader ultimately will not be

successful. Instead, it is critical that leaders have clear goals which drive toward the mission of the organization. These goals must be deeply embedded in the purpose of the organization. How one accomplishes these goals must serve to holistically create a better organization. The accomplishments of the 'better' organization are hitting numerical targets along with the accomplishment of more nuanced, qualitative targets that drive deeper toward the mission of the organization.

Servant leadership. The way an organization accomplishes and exceeds their goals consistently and over time is through strong leadership. This strong leadership must come from a drive towards accomplishing the goals of the organization above all else – particularly above the leader's individual needs, ego, and wants (Collins, 2001; Heider, 2014). As Collins (2001) so vividly quotes, “If you have a cancer in your arm, you've got to have the guts to cut off your own arm” (p. 170). This metaphor, so famously stated from Kimberly-Clark's CEO Darwin Smith, speaks to the real meaning behind servant leadership.

The strongest leaders are those who understand that the mission and goals of the organization are their sole purpose for leading. If they see a problem with the organization, even if that problem will directly impact them personally, they have the courage to take the steps necessary to fix the problem regardless of the personal consequences. Perhaps a less gruesome way to state the importance of the collective goals is as follows: “Enlightened leadership is service, not selfishness. The leader grows more and lasts longer by placing the well-being of all above the well-being of self alone” (Heider, 2014, p. 21). This idea of the collective well-being as a goal is important in the

leadership for schools – particularly as related to the growth of leaders in this study over time. While one’s leadership can begin with position, productivity, and perhaps a singular focus on accomplishing a goal which shines light on the leader; the deeper, sustaining, and great leader is able to tackle the complexities of the organization. A great leader always strives toward accomplishing the goals of the organization which drive most deeply toward the organization’s mission. This sits in contrast to a more basic accomplishment of the surface-level goals which yield more short-term praise and feelings of achievement (Heider; Heifetz & Linsky, 2017; Lencioni, 2006; Maxwell, 2011). This is a dangerous act, as the spotlight and surface-level accomplishments feel good. However, the servant leader will ultimately accomplish more and do better if they have the courage to dive into the messiness and nuance of going beyond the accomplishment of these surface-level goals.

Adaptability and courage. This brings me to the next notion of great importance for leadership generally, and those in this study specifically – adaptability and courage. It may seem strange to put these two notions together as if they were one, but when it comes to leadership they are deeply interconnected (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). In our ever-changing global community, every worker, teacher, staff member, and child we lead is deeply impacted by the daily changes that shape their experiences. To be in a leadership role in our current global context requires the leader to be adaptable; and have the courage to tackle the goals, mission, and purpose of the organization with finesse – particularly when the way in which such goals are accomplished will always adapt with an ever-changing context.

With this charge we can see how the goals of the organization are more complex and multi-faceted than a simple quantitative measure of student test scores. I do not believe this means that we disregard the test scores. Like it or not, this is the best, most agreed-upon measure we have to currently understand whether or not a school is meeting the learning needs of their students. However, as one of my participants reminded me, these numerical goals are the floor – not the ceiling – of what it means to create a great school. As you will see in the leadership trajectory developed in the latter chapters of this study, once the numerical goals are clear and begin to emerge and drive toward the mission of the organization, they become an expectation – a ‘business as usual’ model – which is then accompanied by much more nuanced and complex goals – still tied to varying numerical targets - that drive towards more deeply accomplishing the full mission of the organization. This is where the courage and adaptability of the leader become crucial in order to move from initial results to sustained, growth-oriented, and adaptable cultures which continue to create better and better outcomes for the organization and its stakeholders (Collins, 2001; Heider, 2014; Heifitz & Linsky, 2017; Watkins, 2008)

Technical practices. As you will see in the leadership trajectory upon which participants in this study have operated, the technical practices which make a school high-performing according to state accountability measures are an important element of their leadership trajectories. I’d therefore be remiss to not explore the works of Paul Bambrick-Santoyo, one of the most successful leaders in high-performing charter school environments – particularly regarding the technical practices employed to reach

numerical student outcome goals. Bambrick-Santoyo is also the current Chief Schools Officer with Uncommon Schools, a large and expanding high-performing school network in Boston, New York, Camden, and New Jersey (Uncommon Schools, 2016).

One of Bambrick-Santoyo's (2012) most widely read books, particularly in high performing charter environments, is *Leverage Leadership*. In this text, Bambrick-Santoyo urges principals to be the instructional leader in the building, using key levers such as data-driven instruction, observation/feedback cycles, and a strong school culture to build effective learning environments. His 'core ideas' throughout the text suggest that there is a set of practices that will support school leaders in changing results for students – particularly students in traditionally underserved communities. He states, for example, that “What really makes education effective is well-leveraged leadership that ensures great teaching to guarantee great learning” (p. 6). Regarding assessments and data-driven instruction, Bambrick-Santoyo encourages steps such as the following: “Read a school calendar, and you'll know what matters in a school. Put the assessment cycle in first, and learning will take priority” (p. 50). This text clearly targets the importance of strong academic instruction, and the results he cites of leaders who have used these practices to make such strong academic growth provide the technical backing for the instructional leadership practices of many school leaders – particularly those in high-performing charter schools.

Bambrick-Santoyo's (2010; 2012) work is widely read by school leaders across the nation, now permeating both charter and district-run school philosophies. In fact, as a practitioner, I work closely with leaders in district-run schools to leverage the practices

described in this book to improve academic outcomes for students. This brings even greater importance to understanding the environments in high-performing charters, as this rhetoric has begun to shape schools both in and out of the charter sector. That being said, this is not the exclusive manner in which we can view the technical practices of school leadership.

Michael Fullan's (2014) *The Principal: Three Keys to Maximizing Effectiveness* offers us an alternative view on the role of principal which contrasts Bambrick-Santoyo's (2010; 2012) call for principals to serve as instructional leaders in their buildings. While Fullan sees the value of principals being aware of what is going on in classrooms, he does not believe that principals functioning solely as instructional leaders is particularly effective or sustainable. Fullan's call to principals is instead to be "learning leaders", wherein they focus on creating environments that allow teachers to learn from one another, embrace a culture of collaborative learning, and allow others to become leaders themselves.

This call for principals to facilitate other's learning instead of being the sole person in charge of that learning resembles the best practices Maxwell (2011) defines in his book, *The 5 Levels of Leadership*. In this text, Maxwell calls on leaders across disciplines to move into the upper 'levels' of leadership. In these upper levels, the leader supports the leadership of others in addition to growing their own leadership skills. In both of these cases, the leader is called upon to build a culture, grow others, and develop leaders. This allows for greater sustainability in the culture of learning and positive results where the leader, while central to building the culture, is not solely responsible for

the growth of all teachers. This is a collaborative process which ultimately positively impacts students (Fullan, 2014; Maxwell, 2011).

To be clear, this dive into the role of the principal is not meant to suggest that my study will attempt to make judgments regarding the practical skills leaders do or do not possess, nor to suggest one method of leading a school is superior to another. This is not my research question – nor my area of expertise. However, by beginning to explore the ‘best practices’ of those who do spend their lives studying the role of the principal, I believe we are better suited to understand the identities and experiences of these individuals; how they impact the way in which they intend to lead; and the school culture they intend to develop within high-performing charter schools.

Interpretive Frameworks

To briefly re-orient you with where the interpretive frameworks for this study live within my overall conceptual framework, I once again present *Figure 2* below. The top portion of this figure – the white boxes with the ‘zoom’ effect – demonstrate how school leaders in high-performing charter schools are a part of the larger socio-political, controversial climate which shapes the current education landscape. The red dot in the center of the figure represents the primary focus of this study – school leaders who have led or currently lead high-performing charter schools. Research questions for the study focus on their experiences, identities, intentions, and developed school culture – all of which are represented within this red oval. The bottom portion of the diagram represents the interpretive frameworks through which I research, study, and view this work. These

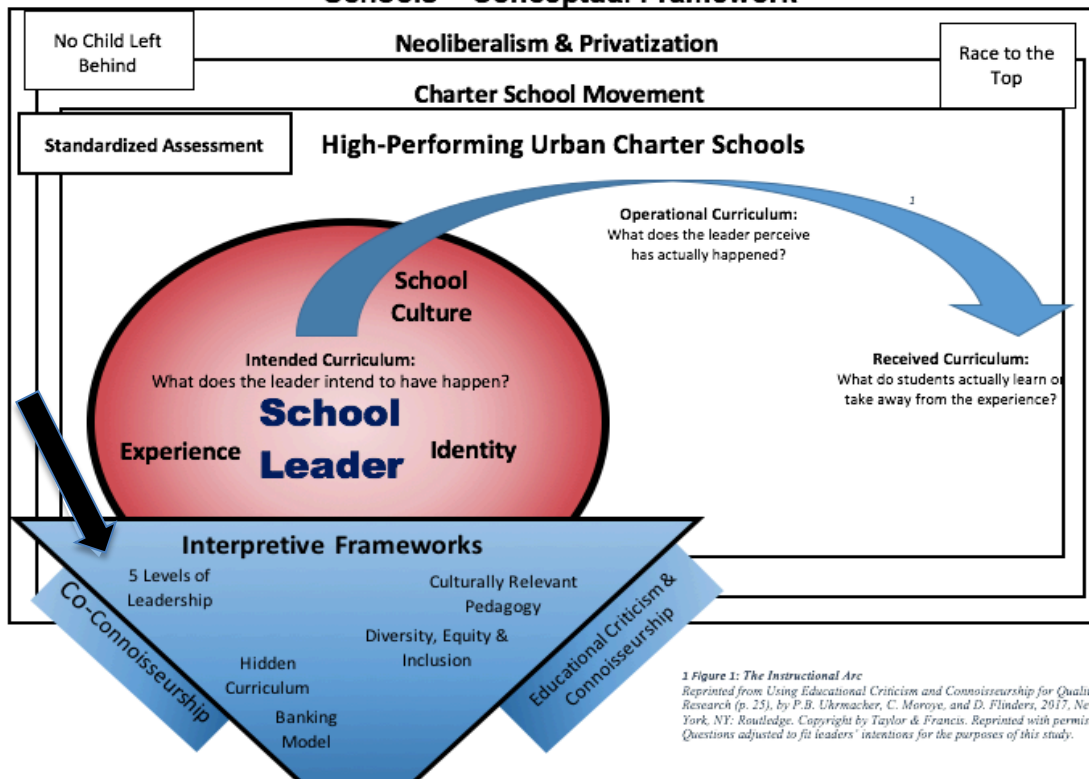
five interpretive frameworks fall into three distinct categories, all of which answer my final research question,

- **“What interpretive frameworks enhance our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop?”**

As evident below, these interpretive frameworks consist of the following:

- Curricular Frameworks
 - Hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1990)
 - Banking model of education (Freire, 2000)
- Culture and Diversity Frameworks
 - Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995)
 - Diversity, equity and inclusion (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017)
- Leadership Framework
 - The five levels of leadership (Maxwell, 2011)

Exploring Dual Realities: School Leaders in High-Performing Charter Schools – Conceptual Framework



1 Figure 1: The Instructional Arc
Reprinted from Using Educational Criticism and Connoisseurship for Qualitative Research (p. 25), by P.B. Uhrmacher, C. Meroye, and D. Flinders, 2017, New York, NY: Routledge. Copyright by Taylor & Francis. Reprinted with permission. Questions adjusted to fit leaders' intentions for the purposes of this study.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

This figure demonstrates both the context of the study participants and the lens through which the data will be collected, analyzed, and disseminated.

I now complete my review of the literature on leadership by moving from the red dot – or the school leader (and all this encompasses) – to the blue triangle – or an interpretive framework for leadership which enhances our deeper understanding of school leaders and the culture they intend to develop.

Interpretive framework for leadership. It is clearly important to have an interpretive framework to enhance our deeper understanding of school leaders related to their primary professional identity – that of a leader. This allows for greater connoisseurship of the leader by more deeply understanding the grounding principals of

leadership and how a leader might develop over time or move through various levels of leadership.

Five levels of leadership. This interpretive framework creates a space to explore the concepts around leadership in the form of a hierarchical trajectory. Maxwell (2011) finds that all leaders operate within this trajectory. Over time and with practice, leaders can move from one level of leadership to the next in order to become more effective and impactful leaders. I choose this trajectory as one of the primary interpretive frameworks for this study in order to more deeply explore the leadership trajectory upon which I have found leaders in high-performing charters to operate. I explore each level below as they are defined by Maxwell, connecting each to the notions of ‘clear goals’, ‘servant leadership’, ‘adaptability & courage’, and ‘technical practices’ described above.

Level 1: Position. Position-level leaders rely on one key factor to lead – their title or position (Maxwell, 2011). While a school leader begins with a position in leadership, I found that participants in this study spent very little, if any time, relying upon their position as the way to lead. I therefore will move quickly on from this level and into the levels of leadership that more directly resonate with data from the study.

Level 2: Permission. While I also found that participants in this study did not spend a significant amount of time leading as a permission-level leader, there are essential elements of permission leadership which continue to permeate as a leader moves up the trajectory to the higher levels of leadership (Maxwell, 2011). Of primary importance is that leaders must establish strong relationships with those they lead. In addition to providing a more pleasant work environment, the relationships established build the

foundation to accomplish the other crucial elements of leadership explored above – clear goals, servant leadership, adaptability and strong technical practices.

Establishing strong relationships allows the team to trust one another to set and work towards accomplishing clear goals (Lencioni, 2006). Additionally, these relationships allow other leaders to serve as servant leaders whose collective responsibility for accomplishing the goals of the organization comes above meeting one's own selfish goals (Collins, 2001). The team cares about one another, and each member is motivated to work with the others to serve the mission of the organization. Finally, when a leader establishes strong relationships among team members, they are able to ask members to adapt to change and have the courage to do the hard work required to fully realize the mission of the organization (Heider, 2014).

Level 3: Production. Production level leaders produce – they work towards accomplishing the immediate goals of the organization within their capacity and sphere of influence. Minimally, all participants in this study reached Level 3 leadership. I can say this with confidence because I recruited participants who had already produced by virtue of leading a *high-performing* charter school. In addition to understanding the need for establishing relationships and their relation to meeting clear goals, leaders at this level also have accomplished the technical practices required to minimally meet their established academic goals (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012; Lencioni, 2006).

With regards to supporting student learning, these technical practices which a leader develops will continue to grow over time, even when the leader continues to move toward Levels 4 and 5 in Maxwell's (2011) framework. However, the shift becomes how

the leader hones these technical skills in order to develop others and how the production becomes more nuanced and adaptive in order to sustain and better the growth of the organization.

Level 4: People development. When a leader successfully develops others, their leadership becomes more impactful and sustainable, making the mission realizable. At this level, the clear goals and objectives of the organization are collectively shared and accomplished by a team instead of just a talented individual (Collins, 2001; Maxwell, 2011). Leaders at this level continue to develop and sustain strong relationships (the critical element in Level 2) and the technical skills that allow them to produce (critical to Level 3 leadership). In addition, they are now developing others to build strong relationships and to also produce.

At this level, the collective efforts of the team drive towards a collective responsibility for the goals of the organization – goals whose driving force are to fully realize the mission of the organization. Here the leadership becomes more adaptive and courageous as the leader relinquishes control and allows a team to determine the best steps forward to accomplish their rigorous goals (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017; Lencioni, 2006). For the purposes of this study, I will focus on how school leaders operating at the higher levels of leadership are able to leverage not only their staff, but also their parents and students to develop the collective ownership of the school's goals and culture.

Level 5: Pinnacle. Pinnacle-level leaders grow other leaders to develop other people. I believe that by virtue of being a principal, we are requesting the leader to be a pinnacle-level leader – who must grow their leadership team to grow others – their

teachers and their students. Maxwell (2011), however, believes that very few leaders will ultimately reach the pinnacle level of leadership. While this very well may be the case, I do believe all leaders strive toward this level of leadership and have moments of arrival as they lead others toward accomplishing the mission of the organization and unpacking the complexities required to fully realize this mission.

I will continue to revisit this framework to better understand the leadership trajectory of leaders in this study. For the moment, however, I will move on to the other interpretive frameworks which enhance our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop – the curricular and culture and diversity frameworks.

Interpretive frameworks for culture and diversity. I include two interpretive frameworks for culture and diversity due to the focus on school culture present in my research questions. Deeply understanding the intended culture of a school requires some depth of understanding regarding what experts determine to be a positive school culture. Because so many define a positive school culture as one that is also diverse, equitable, and inclusive, I cannot separate the notions of culture and diversity from one another (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017; Riehl, 2000; Whitmire, 2016). Furthermore, the lens through which I view school culture generally, and this research specifically, is through the elements of diversity, equity and inclusion that make up the school culture. I offer two interpretive frameworks which further explain this lens and will continuously inform the leadership trajectory and school culture development of participants in this study: culturally relevant pedagogy or CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and diversity, equity and inclusion or DEI (Padmsee & Crowe; Riehl, 2009).

Culturally relevant pedagogy. Because multiple stakeholders define the term culturally relevant pedagogy differently, it is important to operationalize this definition for the purposes of my study (Creswell, 2012). Culturally relevant pedagogy calls on educators to engage in practices that incorporate students' culture into the classroom, thereby allowing them to be more successful and achieve at greater academic levels due to these specific practices (Ladson-Billings, 2009). While there is little empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of culturally relevant pedagogy practices in terms of academic achievement, qualitative research on the topic suggests significant benefits to the use of said practices (Sleeter, 2012). The majority of research on CRP is in the form of case studies (Sleeter). These studies suggest that engagement in culturally relevant pedagogical practices provide students with a greater sense of engagement in curriculum, greater connections to the school, and even a sense of family that develops in the school community (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Sleeter, 2012).

These feelings reported by students and teachers may not be easily quantifiable with a set of test scores, but perhaps that is inherent in the benefits. For students and teachers to feel this sense of engagement and family within the school environment is positive, and its importance cannot be underestimated regardless of its lack of quantifiable metrics. Due to the qualitative nature of this framework and the strong quantitative data we already have regarding the effectiveness of high-performing charter schools as measured by standardized assessments (Carter, 2000; Ross et. al., 2007), I believe this lens – combined with the other interpretive frameworks utilized for the study

– offers a more holistic understanding of high-performing charters and further informs their relevance in the current educational landscape.

Tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy. Many researchers have studied culturally relevant pedagogy and the practices teachers generally demonstrate when engaging in culturally relevant pedagogy (Brown, 2004; Frye, Button, Kelly & Button, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2009). While all researchers seem to include some element regarding the importance of incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into classroom practices, I believe Ladson-Billings' (1995; 2009) explanation of culturally relevant pedagogy is the most inclusive of the critical elements of CRP.

Ladson-Billings (1995) defines these practices in three rich, inclusive categories: creating a culture of academic achievement; developing students' cultural competence; and developing their critical consciousness that challenges the status quo. These three categories encompass many individual examples of culturally relevant pedagogical practices presented by other researchers (Brown, 2004; Frye et. al., 2010). However, the succinct, inclusive model Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests provides a deep understanding of CRP and makes it the most appropriate as the theoretical framework for this study.

Academic achievement. The first tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy Ladson-Billings (1995) outlines is the importance of academic achievement. While this idea may seem a fairly obvious element of any quality schooling program, its importance cannot be underestimated, nor its meaning simplified. Critics of culturally relevant pedagogy, and those that do not fully comprehend each component, may believe that CRP does not

address academic achievement, and instead simply relies on a celebration of students' culture as the primary indicator of CRP practices.

While understanding students' culture is one element of culturally relevant pedagogy, this certainly is not the only practice that creates conditions for CRP. This idea also does not encompass developing a cultural competence, though I'll return to this in the analysis of cultural competencies specifically. Instead, culturally relevant pedagogy requires educators to engage in practices that challenge students academically and – even more importantly – create a culture that promotes this desire to achieve from within the students. As Ladson-Billings (1995) explains, "...culturally relevant teaching requires that teachers attend to students' academic needs, not merely make them 'feel good'. The trick of culturally relevant teaching is to get students to 'choose' academic excellence" (p. 160). I will continue to apply these notions regarding CRP in Chapters 4 and 5, as participants in this study repeatedly referenced the strong culture of academic excellence palpable in their buildings.

Cultural competency. Cultural competency is the tenet of culturally relevant teaching practices that is most often associated with ideas of culturally relevant pedagogy. This makes it very well documented, yet equally misunderstood. At its most basic level, developing a cultural competency can begin with the introduction of diverse perspectives into the classroom. Frequently, however, this is accompanied with a 'heroes and holidays' paradigm that creates a surface-level understanding and incorporation of diverse perspectives into the classroom (Gorski, 2015). While this initial attempt to integrate diverse perspectives is a starting point for CRP, it does fully

encompass what Ladson-Billings (1995; 2009) envisions through the exploration of this tenet.

Instead, developing a cultural competency calls on educators to ensure that students' cultural backgrounds are fully integrated into the curricular content and classroom design, thereby allowing students to see themselves in texts, classroom artifacts, discussions, and throughout the school on a daily basis (Adichie, 2009; Gorski, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Newell, 2006).

If this tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy is not incorporated into the classroom environment, students become marginalized, thereby leading to a subtractive schooling environment that takes away from a students' school experience and sense of self (Valenzuela, 2010). However, when the development of a cultural competency and celebrations of diverse perspectives are embedded in daily instructional practices, they contribute to students' feelings of engagement, inclusion, and family in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2009). When I first began this study, many people I casually spoke with about my research believed deeply that this element of CRP was the *least* present in high-performing charter schools. The infamous notion of a 'no excuses' school culture carries a critique of stripping a students' culture away from their academic experiences (Ravitch, 2013). This has adapted over time, and therefore is an important nuance of these school environments to further unpack in the latter chapters of this study.

Critical consciousness. Ladson-Billings' (1995) final tenet of culturally relevant pedagogy – the development of a critical consciousness that challenges the status quo – can be the most difficult to implement yet can also be the most transformational. In this

space, educators bring to light issues of social justice and equity that are meaningful and relevant to students and invite action to address these injustices. This element of culturally relevant pedagogy is a critical component as it strongly addresses the issues of equity and social justice that CRP proponents envision (Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012).

Diversity, equity and inclusion. Whereas culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on the pedagogical strategies an educator can employ to, put simply, *teach better* (Ladson-Billings, 1995); diversity, equity and inclusion efforts rely upon the structure of the school to capitalize on the benefits of creating diverse schooling environments (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017). Due to the structural nature of this work it is necessary to frame this as the work of school leaders. They are the agents most influential in developing such a school culture (Fergus, 2016; Reihl, 2000). In order to more fully explore the ideas of diversity, equity and inclusion and their importance as an interpretive framework, I will unpack each term below, finally bringing them together to suggest the power of this interpretive framework.

Diversity. As our world becomes more and more globalized, the importance of operating in diverse spaces and providing such opportunities for our students is of critical importance (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017). Whether in a business, social, schooling, or personal context, the value of diversity cannot be underestimated. When we are able to work with individuals whose experiences, backgrounds, cultures, languages, and perspectives differ, we are able to build a greater collective understanding of complex issues, further enhancing each individual's learning along with the experiences of the collective whole. Such experiences are of particular

importance for our children whose ability to understand and appreciate the diversity the world now offers will shape their futures and the futures of our global community. High-performing charter schools, while not always heterogeneous, do collectively serve a diverse group of students. In fact, Padamsee & Crowe's (2017) recent study found that of all education settings included in their sample population – which included 'education products and services', 'funder, donor or investors', 'education support organizations', and 'CMO/Charter Schools' – that the CMOs had the highest level of staff diversity. However, simply having a diverse group of people in the room is not enough. This brings me to the structures that must be established in order to capitalize on this diversity and create better environments for students (Padamsee & Crowe).

Equity. The notion of equity is of great importance in the field of education, particularly when serving a community of learners whose needs are as diverse as their backgrounds. The notion of equity comes from an understanding that in order to provide all students with academically rigorous, high quality learning experiences, their individual needs must be met by the institution – or structure – of which they are a part (Fergus, 2016). Because the United States has a long history of providing inequitable learning experiences for students, it is of even *greater* importance that we remedy the conditions that have led to such diverse needs of students. In other words, the U.S. education system was set up – whether intentionally or unintentionally – to privilege the white dominant culture, marginalizing Hispanic/Latino and African-American students as a consequence of these histories (Fergus). We now live in an educational landscape where students whose backgrounds do not match that of the dominant culture are

typically less prepared for school than their white, middle-class peers. Creating equitable schooling conditions relies upon educational leaders to create structures that do not provide equal supports for all students, but instead equitable supports which provide opportunities for students from traditionally underserved communities to thrive in a school setting (Fergus).

Inclusion. I recently had the opportunity to hear Dr. Sharon Bailey, educational leader, scholar and community activist in Denver, speak about the role of a school leader in establishing a strong school culture. She explained the difference between diversity and inclusion as follows: “Diversity means you’re invited to the party. Inclusion means you’re invited to dance” (Griffen et. al., 2017). The notion of inclusion in schooling environments relates very closely to the second and third tenets Ladson-Billings’ (1995) framework references – developing a cultural competence and developing a critical consciousness which challenges the status quo. Once a school prioritizes diversity in staffing and in recruitment of students, there is a structural need to ensure the individuals whose traditional experience in schooling has been that of marginalization and oppression sit at the center of the conversation (Fergus, 2016).

This interpretive framework – diversity, equity and inclusion – provides a framework for school leaders not only to get the right, diverse people on the bus (Collins, 2001) but also ensure that their needs are met; their voices heard and valued. Because so many leaders participating in this study referenced the work they were doing around diversity and equity, I will return to this interpretive framework in the coming chapters.

Curricular interpretive frameworks. As mentioned in the introduction to this study, there are two curricular frameworks whose notions further enhance our understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop. Both of these curricular frameworks also allow us to reflect upon how one’s intentions may lead to unintended consequences.

Hidden Curriculum. The hidden curriculum contributes greatly to this study given its notion of schools really being made up of two curricula – the “official” curriculum and the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1990). Whereas the official curriculum describes the intended curriculum educators teach – the content, strategies, and methods of acquiring knowledge, the hidden curriculum refers to the social and cultural structures to which students must conform in order to be successful in school.

Jackson’s (1990) notion of these two distinct curricula is particularly pertinent for this study when considering how students must act and engage in order to be successful in school. As I move into the review of data I will explore how these two concepts are impacted by the race, class and socio-economic status of students served in high-performing charter schools; how a leader’s intentions might have a greater degree of slippage (Uhrmacher, 1991) when arriving towards the operations of the school; and how these unintended consequences have led to the adaptation of these school environments over time. I leave you with a quote from Jackson that I believe many educators – both in this study and nationally – continue to grapple with:

It is certainly possible that many of our valedictorians and presidents of our honor societies owe their success as much to institutional conformity [*to the white dominant narrative*] as to intellectual prowess (Jackson, p. 34).

Banking Model of Education. To further enhance our understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop, Freire's (1970; 2000) banking model of education provides a deeper lens into the official and hidden curriculum which make up the intended, or perhaps unintended, educational experiences of students. Freire brings a critical lens to the culture of a school that places attention on the notion of the oppressed – the students which have been historically underserved since the beginning of formal schooling in the U.S. (Spring, 2015). Within this framework, the students are 'empty vessels' that the teacher has the heroic duty of 'filling' (Freire). In this context I would argue that teachers fill both the official and the hidden curricular aims of the institution's school culture (Jackson, 1990). If this is the case, the impact is felt even more as students must comply and meet the academic and cultural demands dominant in the building – traditionally that of the white dominant culture (Fergus, 2016).

While I do not believe this is the intention of any educator – to oppress students into submission until they are able to conform to the official and hidden curricular demands of their oppressor – I do believe these notions provide us with an enhanced and deeper understanding of the unintended consequences that leaders reflect upon.

This chapter has made it clear that this setting is inherently complex – informed by the charter school movement, privatization and neoliberal ideologies; federal legislation and initiatives; and measurements of standardized assessment. Equally complex are these school environments' intended cultures, their curricular intentions, and the notion of leadership. With this backdrop I now explore how my methodology embraces this complexity and offers a suggestion for how to understand the nuances of

school environments whose origins, current growth, and opposing rhetoric suggest a much more ‘hero’ or ‘villain’ paradigm – operating in dual realities – than I believe may accurately represent the experiences, identities, and intentions of school leaders in these environments.

Chapter 3: Methods

Effective educational policy is more likely when we do more than look at test scores and shout, ‘The sky is falling, the sky is falling!’ Educational criticism has something to offer (Eisner, 1998, p. 119).

I’ve selected educational criticism and connoisseurship as the research methodology in part for the rationale explained above by Eisner himself. While other rationales will emerge throughout the methods section below, I believe first and foremost that this research methodology fits the research questions I explore for this study. The target sites – high-performing charter schools – currently rely heavily on the quantitative data in their student populations to speak to their success. I do not intend to discount these data, underestimating their value. What I do intend to explore, however, are the limitations of only seeing the quantitative data as a single representation of these school environments’ successes and short-comings.

By using a qualitative methodology generally, and educational criticism and connoisseurship specifically, I intend to move beyond the test scores – as impressive as they are – that make up the current rhetoric about high-performing charter schools. In this vein, I highlight what Eisner so eloquently states regarding complexity:

...it is better to appreciate the complexity of a complex problem [*providing an exceptional education experience to all students*] than to be seduced by simplistic remedies that cannot work [*using high-stakes testing data as a single data source for the effectiveness or lack thereof of a particular school environment*] (Eisner, 1998, p. 119).

What I find so beautiful about using an arts-based methodology for this study is the inherent rigidity of the current rhetoric surrounding these school environments. Because high-performing charter schools are most frequently cited – for better or for worse – for their high numerical and statistical successes, I believe that using this arts-based methodology reconceptualizes this rhetoric, allowing for a greater understanding of the complexity of schooling, particularly in high-performing charter schools. With a grounding in the rationale for the use of this methodology, I move to the more technical elements of this approach.

Educational Criticism and Connoisseurship

Educational criticism and connoisseurship is a qualitative methodology of inquiry that calls on researchers to do just what the methodology suggests – be critics and connoisseurs of their subject matter (Eisner, 1998). While Eisner (1998) defines connoisseurship as the “art of appreciation” (p. 63), criticism makes this appreciation public, using it to elevate and understand the connoisseurship. It is this relationship between the two elements that makes the methodology an ideal fit for my study – to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences, identities and intentions of leaders working in high-performing charter schools. This approach also supports our understanding of how their experiences inform their identity as leaders. The structure of educational criticism and connoisseurship consists of four distinct dimensions – description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematic (Eisner, 1998), each of which I describe further below.

Description and data collection. The first element, description, is where data collection occurs. In this case I collected data through interviews and artifacts. The

interview data collected ranged from one to three interviews, each lasting between 45 minutes and two hours. During these interviews I used a semi-structured protocol (see *Appendices A-C*) to move towards answering my research questions. Due to the richness of interview data I collected, I was then able to draw further perceptions from these data, following Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders' (2017) suggestion to focus on collection of these data that matter as opposed to a focus on a fixed and arbitrary time frame or data type.

I triangulated these data through the use of co-connoisseurship – a collaborative concept I developed and employed (Miller, 2017) - embedded into the interviews along with artifacts from leaders and publically accessible artifacts in order to give a more holistic picture of the leaders' experiences, identities, and intentions to develop and sustain a particular school culture (Creswell, 2012; Eisner, 1998).

Through the collection and analysis of these data I was able to answer my research questions:

- **How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead?**
- **How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop?**
- **What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?**
- **What interpretive frameworks enhance our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop?**

Data presentation organization. In Chapter 4, I use these initial descriptions – disseminated in the form of storytelling through composite characters (Rooney, Lawlor & Rohan 2016; Sandelowski, Trimble, Woodard & Barroso, 2006) – to inform my findings. Following each short story, I move to a brief interpretation and evaluation of the data to appreciate, discern and value the experiences, identities and intentions of participants. Finally, in Chapter 5, I review the thematics to further inform a discovery of the subtle complexities of the subject while more deeply and thoroughly answering my research questions.

Interpretation. From the description comes the interpretation, wherein the researcher begins to interpret the data presented, providing the reader with a view into what the research suggests from their perspective. The notion of perspective becomes of great importance at this point in the structure of educational criticism. As I explored more thoroughly in Chapter 1, I come to the research with a set of subjectivities which shall not be bracketed out of the research. Instead I use my own experiences and identities to further inform my interpretation of the data (Eisner, 1998; Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017). These interpretations, informed by my connoisseurship – both as a researcher and a practitioner – will be one way of viewing the data and descriptions presented. While this interpretation does have merit, Eisner (1998) names this process as involving a “heuristic conception of theory” (p. 95) which creates space for several theories to explain the description.

In addition to being informed by my own identity as researcher and practitioner – as a critic who both deeply understands and constantly operates within the dual reality

framework described in Chapter 1 – I will also engage in interpretation through the interpretive frameworks explored in the literature review in Chapter 2. These interpretive frameworks are as follow:

- Curricular Frameworks
 - Hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1990)
 - Banking model of education (Freire, 2000)
- Culture and Diversity Frameworks
 - Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995)
 - Diversity, equity and inclusion (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017)
- Leadership Framework
 - The five levels of leadership (Maxwell, 2011)

These interpretive frameworks further inform the manner in which I view this research, interpret my data, and answer the research question, “What interpretive frameworks enhance our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop?” From here, I was able to use these analyses to evaluate my findings.

Evaluation. Evaluation represents the process of understanding the data and ultimately appreciating the idiosyncratic elements of the research. I analyzed these data using an etic point of view – or that of an outsider – as well as through an emic point of view – or learning from insiders. At the intersection of the emic and etic points of view, I also investigated the data with participants as co-connoisseurs in the research whose knowledge and experiences further enhance the interpretation, evaluation and thematic of the study.

Thematics. Finally, thematics provide the space to synthesize the research that pulls upon both criticism and connoisseurship to develop a story or deeper understanding to be shared with the education community at large (Eisner, 1998). Put differently, Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders (2017) suggest the potential for educational criticism and connoisseurship to open up new anticipatory frameworks to further inform our collective understanding of the complexities within the education space:

...thematics...articulate(s) the patterns, big ideas, and anticipatory frameworks for other educational situations. The themes distill the major ideas that run through general educational matters and provide guidance, not a guarantee or prediction, for understanding broader educational contexts (p. 54).

As I explained throughout the previous two chapters, I strongly believe that we must gain a greater understanding of high-performing charter schools to move away from the current dual rhetoric. The rapid expansion, growing popularity, and increasing number of students served by such schools brings to light the importance of this work (Cryan et al., 2017; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Furthermore, their permeation into the more general education landscape through the adoption of similar practices by district-run schools (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012) and use of public tax dollars (Ravitch, 2013) increases the importance of this research.

An anticipatory framework has emerged which informs our understanding of high-performing charter schools specifically, and the broader, every-changing educational landscape generally. For the purposes of this study, I will address these

broader consequences through an exploration of the experiences, identities, and intentions of school leaders in these environments in the coming chapters.

Anticipatory framework. While thematics do provide a more holistic understanding of the subject, these findings are not intended to be generalizable (Uhrmacher, et al., 2017). What they are intended to create, however, are a more detailed backdrop which we may then use to better understand our education space generally and high-performing charter schools specifically. The anticipatory framework I created in this study will move the reader from an understanding of the current dual rhetoric of high performing charter schools and their leaders to a deeper analysis of their chronological and developmental progression over time.

High-performing charter schools and leadership continuum: an anticipatory framework. I created an anticipatory framework for several purposes: to help us better understand the trajectory of high-performing charter schools and their leaders; to appreciate the uniqueness of each leaders' experiences, identities and intentions; and to learn from their reflections, informing our collective work toward educational improvement generally (Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017). I call this anticipatory framework the *High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum*. This continuum consists of four phases:

- Phase 1: Early Stages
- Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions
- Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures
- Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future

I fully describe, interpret and evaluate the details, subtleties, and depths of each phase in the data presentation in Chapter 4. While this anticipatory framework does create an opportunity to appreciate, discern and evaluate the data, these findings are not intended to be generalizable, but rather to support one's understanding of these data and perhaps other schools:

...it is important to note that critics' and educators' future perceptions should not be narrowed by the recognition of such themes, but rather the themes serve as entry points for further deepened seeing and elaboration upon their ideas (Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017).

I developed this anticipatory framework through the description, interpretation and evaluation of data collected. But I did not do this in isolation. Instead, I co-constructed this framework with the support of my participants, all of whom added valuable insight to the themes emerging. I call this process co-connoisseurship³.

Co-Connoisseurship

If I am a connoisseur of my subject, the participants who live and breathe their own work every day may be sommeliers. I therefore want to leverage their deep understanding of their own experiences, identities and intentions not only as participants, but also as co-connoisseurs. In this model, their background, connoisseurship and experiences can augment the researcher's understanding of the subject in educational criticism and connoisseurship. To operationalize this notion, I used member-checking

³ I thank Dr. P. Bruce Uhrmacher for his support, guidance, and encouragement as I experimented with this idea. Also, he came up with the term 'co-connoisseurship' to describe what I was trying to do.

during the interview process as a way of co-constructing knowledge with the participant and leveraging their own connoisseurship their data.

Consensual validation. The idea of a researcher running their ideas by others is by no means novel. In fact, Eisner (1998) calls this ‘consensual validation’, which urges the researcher to collaborate with colleagues to ensure the themes developed share similarities to others’ interpretation and evaluation of the subject. Eisner describes consensual validation as “...agreement upon competent others” (p.112). While Eisner refers to other researchers in this context, I argue that the subject can also serve as a ‘competent other’, particularly in the case of this study. By engaging participants in a reflection of their own data, I believe we can more deeply understand their experiences, identities and intentions, thereby strengthening the rigor of the study (Creswell, 2012).

Member-checking. If consensual validation sets a precedent for finding consensus among ‘competent others’ (Eisner, 1998); member-checking provides a framework for confirming the accuracy of data collected with participants (Birt et al., 2016; Doyle, 2007). While the most basic form of member checking requires the researcher to provide participants with a transcript of their interview (I did take this step as well), many researchers suggest moving beyond this base-level form of member-checking to further enhance the rigor of the study. Birt et al. and Doyle suggest that one way to more thoroughly check one’s conclusions with the participant is through a follow-up interview where the researcher comes back to the participant with their interpretations, asking the participant for input or confirmation of their findings.

Co-connoisseurship as an intersection between emic and etic interpretations.

While I did engage two participants in a follow-up interview to further explore the initial findings, I believe that specific to educational criticism and connoisseurship, researchers have the opportunity to co-construct their findings at the intersection of the emic ('seeing with') and etic ('seeing about') (Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017) approaches to interpretation. Because educational criticism and connoisseurship focuses on appreciating, discerning and valuing the subtle intricacies of an educational setting, both perspectives – emic and etic – strengthen one's ability to do this. I engaged in this process by taking the following steps:

1. Ask the participant more 'typical' research questions in a semi-structured interview protocol. This gives participants the opportunity to share their perceptions of their experiences, identities and intentions.
2. Provide the participant with an initial interpretation of what they share, mapping their perceptions onto an interpretive or anticipatory framework with the invitation to co-construct this interpretation.
3. Ask the participant to critique this interpretation in a back-and-forth dialogue, thereby augmenting, challenging, or reshaping the initial interpretation provided by the researcher.

Structurally this can occur either during an interview when a salient theme begins to emerge, or in a follow-up interview. I experimented with both approaches.

Power dynamics in interviewing and member-checking. Some methodologists rightfully warn the researcher to be cognizant of the power dynamic involved in both the

interview and member-checking processes. Because the researcher may be considered in a more powerful position than the participant, some caution that the participant may unequivocally agree with the researcher's proposed findings regardless (Bradbury-Jones, Irvine & Sambrook, 2010; Creswell, 2012). In this study I do not believe these power dynamics question the validity of participants' interpretations due to how I intentionally phrased these questions. Also, participants in this study were not considered part of an 'at-risk' population (Creswell).

In Chapter 4 I will write myself into the descriptions at key moments of co-connoisseurship to illustrate how I engaged participants in this interpretive methodology, and where I made mistakes as a new researcher. This allowed me to participate in reflexivity to maintain my ethical responsibility and to improve my own practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). In these descriptions I intend to demonstrate how I worded questions as, "let me run something by you and get your thoughts", inviting the participant to investigate an idea that truly was not fully formed at the moment of the interview, instead of "I've got the answer! Do you agree?" Due to this tone and language, I believe I did create space for the participant to share their interpretations. In fact, I have empirical data to confirm that the participants were not blatantly agreeing with me but instead providing authentic feedback on an interpretation. For example, a participant disagreed with the description of a high performing charter schools' culture as 'dehumanizing' in the Early Stages – a word shared by another participant to describe the unintended culture early on. In another case I suggested that the participant's school did meet Ladson-Billings' (1995) criterion for culturally responsive pedagogy related to

academic success based on their state accountability rating of ‘meeting or exceeding expectations’. Once again, the participant disagreed with me, stating that until the school met their own more rigorous goals, which were well above state expectations, the school would not truly exemplify Ladson-Billings’ notion of creating a culture of academic success.

Furthermore, participants were leaders of high performing charter schools. They were not considered part of an at-risk population; they were professionals performing at some of the highest levels in their field. This was a criterion for selection into the study. Due to participant positionality, I do not believe I was in an exaggerated position of power as the researcher. I note this because if the study did involve an at-risk population, I’m not sure this methodological approach would be appropriate (though this idea is outside the scope of this study).

Benefits of co-connoisseurship. In the coming chapters, I demonstrate the richness of data I was able to collect. I will also establish how co-connoisseurship enhanced both the rigor of the study and the deep understanding of the subtle intricacies of school leaders’ experiences, identities and intentions. My empirical data suggest there is also an inherent benefit for participants to participate in co-connoisseurship. In one description, for example, I illustrate how the participant’s ability to unpack the policy of silent hallways in her school provided her the language and space to immediately return to her school building and work with the principal to change a policy that she found oppressive and an expression of implicit biases in staff. While I certainly did not intend for our interview and engagement in co-connoisseurship to lead to this action, the

participant repeatedly expressed gratitude for having the space to reflect upon this policy in order to create a better educational setting for her students – one of the primary purposes of educational criticism and connoisseurship (Eisner, 1998; Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017).

Other moments of co-connoisseurship. While member-checking during the interview process was the primary way I experimented with co-connoisseurship, I also incorporated participants' keystone leadership texts into my literature review to further delve into the intersection between our emic and etic interpretations (Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017). I share this additional detail to demonstrate my belief that co-connoisseurship may have many more opportunities to emerge in one's methodological design, protocols, and analysis. I therefore propose that co-connoisseurship has a place within educational criticism and connoisseurship specifically and educational research for qualitative studies generally. It promotes greater understanding of the study; encourages co-construction of interpretations with participants to increase rigor; and may even provide additional benefits for the participant beyond the scope of the study.

Narrative Thinking

While my primary methodology for this study is educational criticism and connoisseurship, the nature of the research questions I ask also lend themselves to some principles of narrative inquiry. I explored these elements as I moved through the study and define those that resonate most below.

The most important ideas are narrative thinking and joint narrative accrual. Narrative thinking offers researchers more than a methodology, but a way of thinking.

While my methodology is firmly rooted in the technical and theoretical components of educational criticism and connoisseurship, I also lean on principles of narrative inquiry to inform my approach (Barone, 2007; Bruner, 1991; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In particular to narrative thinking, the concepts of reductionist and formalist boundaries are relevant for my study. As defined by Clandinin & Connelly (2000), formalist boundaries in narrative inquiry rely on the formalized steps of research. Reductionist – the reduction of professional experience – provides a set of technical steps. While we all bring elements of this construct to our work, Clandinin & Connelly push the researcher to think narratively, appreciating complex stories and individual truths as a way to inform one’s research purpose and way of thinking.

This concept of narrative thinking is complemented by Bruner’s (1991) concept of ‘narrative accrual’ (pp. 18-20), which suggests that individual stories ultimately create a larger narrative and understanding of one’s experience, culture, or truth. In these cases, Bruner argues, there is certainly bias and perspective which shapes the larger narratives we create, potentially leading to inaccurate narratives that do not represent one’s truth—though educational criticism and connoisseurship trends more toward the benefits of perspective as opposed to concerns of objectivity (Eisner, 1991; Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017). This caution, however, does offer relevance to this study, as Bruner’s guidance to solve for these potential misrepresentations is through the process of ‘joint narrative accrual’ (p. 20). I created opportunities for ‘joint narrative accrual’ through basic member-checking (sending participants their transcripts for review), co-connoisseurship (investigating the intersection of emic and etic interpretations with

participants), and reflexivity in my data analysis and evaluation – all of which led to a greater joint accrual of the narrative I describe (Creswell, 2012; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders)

Furthermore, because popular culture and well-known researchers have given us their versions of the ‘grand narrative’ for high-performing charter schools – in other words, the ‘dual realities’ explored in Chapters 1 and 2 – I use narrative thinking and the joint narrative accrual – accomplished through the use of member-checking and co-connoisseurship – to reconceptualize this dual rhetoric into a continuum (Bruner, 1991; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This distinguishes the data presentation as a means not to reduce nor formalize leaders’ experiences but instead to reconceptualize both grand narratives about these school environments and the assumed culture of high-performing charter schools. I do this through my anticipatory framework, the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum. In order to make the data presentation intelligible and reveal more meaning than the current rhetoric provides, I constructed descriptions of six composite characters and two fictional schools (Barone, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

In this way narrative inquiry allowed for the professional memory of educators to tell a holistic story of their experiences in this role instead of reducing their profession to a step-by-step guide for how to educate the next generation – arguably the current grand narrative, particular to popular culture, in the field (Guggenheim & Kimball, 2011; Kopp, 2011; Matthews, 2009). Through this nuanced exploration of school environments and leaders, I was able to co-construct the anticipatory framework to intentionally

demonstrate the experiences, identities and intentions of school leaders in high performing charter schools in an aesthetically appealing, relatable, and unifying manner (Barone, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Composite Characters in the Anticipatory Framework

As a reminder, the anticipatory framework I developed for this study is the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum. This continuum consists of four phases:

- Phase 1: Early Stages
- Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions
- Phase 3: Questioning Problematic Structures
- Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future

In order to present the data that demonstrates the experiences, identities and intentions of leaders in each phase, I created six composite characters (Sandelowski et al., 2006) from the nine participants in the study. These six composite characters led schools in two different fictional charter school networks, the details of which I describe below. No single participant represents any single character; each character is instead a representation of multiple participants' experiences, identities and intentions. There is also significant overlap. For example, a participant represented in Phase 1: Early Stages will also be represented in Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future.

These representative composite characters allow the identities of participants to remain hidden while making their experiences come alive. Sandelowski et al. (2006) set precedent for this method of data presentation by turning their study of HIV-positive

patients' feelings and experiences into a movie script to provide a wider audience with access to their findings. The researchers emphasized the importance of striking a delicate balance between sharing the themes from the research with connecting the audience with composite characters in a relatable, artistic fashion – a balance I also strived to develop:

Although it was essential that the viewer be intrigued by the composite characters, empathize with their situations, and connect with the narrator, equally important was the need to communicate the research themes (Sandelowski et al., p. 1357).

To be clear, every experience I describe in the vignettes in Chapter 4 did happen, with the exception of the CEO of the network bringing together all of his school leaders, though the priorities the principals share did come from participants. I explicitly state this fiction within the interpretation and evaluation for that vignette in Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions.

Each description is therefore an accurate representation of information shared by participants and collected artifacts. The details of the experiences may be fictionalized to either enhance the meaning of the vignette based on my analysis and co-connoisseurship with participants or to further conceal participants' identities.

Rationale for the composite character approach. I recognize that this approach to the data presentation comes with some criticism. There is a concern that the qualitative researcher provides an accurate representation of the data collected from participants and in some qualitative approaches there is a call to bracket one's own biases out from the research (Creswell, 2011). With regard to bracketing out biases, this is not a concern within this particular methodology as the researcher's experiences and

connoisseurship of the subject enhance the manner in which she presents the data and findings (Eisner, 1998; Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017).

I also understand the necessity to ‘accurately’ portray the experiences, identities and intentions of participants. Perhaps the notions of accuracy, science and fiction are merely a means to reveal or conceal certain interpretations as diametrically opposing truths (Barone, 2007; Bruner, 1991; Eisner). Regardless, I recognize the inherent risks. I believe, however, that the benefits of this approach outweigh the potential risks, and that I have taken the necessary steps to create composite characters whose stories represent the findings from the data. I did the following to create a ‘joint narrative accrual’ (Bruner, 1991): I went through five rounds of data analysis (described below in the methodological logistics); I used co-connoisseurship to increase the rigor; I engaged in basic member-checking; and I practiced reflexivity (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

These compositions thereby create an aesthetic whole that unifies the experiences, identities and intentions of participants into something intelligible and relatable (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This fictional school and its composite characters are not meant to share objective findings from participants. Eisner (1998) did not develop educational criticism and connoisseurship to be an objective research methodology. Rather, I offer these data presentations to artfully describe the anticipatory framework I co-constructed with participants, providing the reader an opportunity to appreciate, discern and value my interpretation and presentation. In short, I share a different way to understand the subject (Barone, 2007).

The reader may have wholly different interpretations of these data. I encourage this reinterpretation (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), and invite the reader to use the *High-Performing Charter School and Leadership Continuum* as guidance in other education settings. As Barone (2007) reminds us:

...unlike traditional research texts, storied texts often appear to be written for (or at least accessible to) school people residing within the research setting whose educational beliefs, values, and practices are portrayed, or toward school people in analogous settings who might gain sustenance from the sounds of voices similar to their own (pp. 460-461).

I use principles of narrative accrual and story-telling to do just this – to provide a wider audience with access to a relatable, comprehensible story of a charter school network. With these ‘similar voices’, I believe we have the opportunity to better understand school leaders in high performing charter schools. This allows the reader to access the data in a manner that reconceptualizes the notion of a ‘hero’ or ‘villain’ characterization as I propose is the current dual rhetoric. I invite the reader to come with on this journey through the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum. May this provide you with sustenance as you grapple with your own understanding, analysis and beliefs about school. And may these stories provide a different way of seeing.

I now move to a more thorough explanation of the SUCCEED⁴ Charter Network and Community Preparatory Academy. It’s important to note that this second school, Community Preparatory Academy, comes at the very end of Phase 4: Advancement for a

⁴ This is the fictional name for the composite charter school network in this study. This school name has no relation to the Success Academy Charter Schools network in New York City (Success Academy Charter Schools, 2018).

Brighter Future. I include this information to explain in greater detail the intentional decisions I made in constructing this data presentation.

The Fiction: SUCCEED Charter Schools

...a ‘true’ description is more than simply a collection of detailed facts. Rather, the term meaning ‘to press out’ (see Dewey, 1934: 64). We view description as a form of pressing out of meaning. Its aim is not simply to depict, but to evoke images and to give the reader a visceral sense of places, people, and situations (Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017, p. 39).

In the descriptions in Chapter 4, we will follow six fictional leaders through their journey at two fictional high-performing charter networks – the SUCCEED Network and, in the final phase, Community Preparatory Academy. Their stories are organized into the four phases along the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum. I choose the names ‘SUCCEED’ and ‘Community Preparatory Academy’ for the networks because, to the best of my knowledge and research, there is not a high-performing charter network that goes by either of these names, yet the names speak to the schools and leaders selected for this study. Participants all were successful in minimally meeting the academic outcomes as defined by each state’s school rating system and intentionally developed community in their buildings to prepare students for college. Regarding the notion of ‘success’, in the eyes of the states where participants have led, their schools have been successful as defined by academic performance metrics and school accountability systems, the details of which I explain in the methodological logistics below.

To be clear, I have not created these composite networks with composite characters to tell the stories of the real leaders in real high-performing charter networks as

a way of essentializing the experiences of leaders in high-performing CMOs. Their unique experiences, identities, intentions and perceptions of their schools are diverse, nuanced, and individual. I do this rather for several pragmatic and methodological purposes. Also, there is some precedent for this approach (Barone, 2007; Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Rooney et al., 2016).

From a pragmatic perspective, I have had the privilege of speaking with dynamic, successful, and well-known leaders in the field. I have made a promise to keep their identities private for the purposes of this study. In order to fulfill this promise to the best of my ability, I believe I have an ethical responsibility to create composite characters to illustrate the narratives shared by participants. The events described in the descriptions in Chapter 4 are, as a reminder, primarily from the events shared by participants. I do not fictionalize any event a participant shared in order to change the meaning of the event or its significance. Rather, I add in details, colorations, and dialogue in order to pragmatically fill gaps in the information I do have, and to conceal the identity of participants when necessary. These details also create a composition that, "...arrange[s] different elements into a coherent order [to] make the work intelligible" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This is the methodological rationale for this approach.

For example, the first description in Phase 1: Early Stages, which represents the very beginning of the high-performing CMO movement, I tell the story of a leader who became the principal of a 6-12 middle and high school at the age of 25. Two of the participants in this study *did* take on their first role as principal when they were 25 or younger. This account, then, does represent an accurate piece of data from the study. It

is also true that one of these participants was actually called over the summer to take the position as principal after having accepted an assistant principal role prior to the school year ending – an event that I do craft in the first description.

The fictional components are the exact moment he received the phone call and the reason the former principal was leaving the school. The participant from the study was not actually driving with a friend across country for a two-week road trip, nor was the principal he replaced actually moving to a central office position. These added fictional elements are meant to fulfill the primary rationale for the creation of these composite characters in a composite charter network – to “press out” (Dewey, 1934; Uhrmacher et al, 2017) the meaning of the data I collected from actual leaders of high-performing CMOs in order to create an intelligible composition (Barone, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The full architecture for the development of the composite characters and their stories can be found in *Appendix G: Architecture of the Data Presentation*.

By adding in these rich descriptions that tell a story, I am able to discern meaning from the collected data, further capturing the attention of the reader while simultaneously fulfilling my role as a connoisseur and critic in this methodological approach. I intentionally add in these fictional details to capture the nuances emerging from the data in a manner consumable to the reader (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Rooney et al., 2016).

During the opening story in Phase 1: Early Stages, for example, I share that the composite character, Ben, was on a two-week road trip with a friend to capture this notion of a 25-year old principal who has to straddle his transition from recent, hard-

working college graduate and teacher/coach to principal of a large, high-performing and high-pressure high school in a very short time frame. This is meant to extract the immense responsibility young leaders choose to take on in contrast with the reality of their age and social circle. This is a key element of the identity of leaders as they begin this path in educational leadership, particularly at the infancy of high-performing CMOs, wherein numerous participants shared that the majority of staff in the building initially fit this demographic of young, energetic, white, privileged enough to take the summer off for a road trip, and passionate about their work.

I also create the fictional account of Ben's predecessor, Tanya, entering into a central office role within the network as this was the leadership path taken by another participant in the study. This therefore provides a lens into the various leadership journeys, or experiences, of participants in the study. Ben's response to Tanya's transition, where he recognizes the importance of recruiting strong teachers for the growing networks, is once again fictional in terms of its sequence of events in this story. However, the notion of strong teacher recruitment is a priority named by several participants, thereby representing an element of the identity of other study participants. Additionally, Ben's understanding of the importance of teacher recruitment represents another strong theme throughout the study – the results of the network and how they achieve those results is a collective responsibility (Collins, 2001; Lencioni, 2006).

The SUCCEED mission statement. In addition to constructing composite characters, I also constructed two composite schools. SUCCEED, the primary school in the study, has its own composite mission statement. I do this to highlight a key finding –

the very intentional focus on the mission of the organization which drives the intentions of school leaders in high performing charter schools. After pulling mission statements off of ten different high-performing CMO websites, both from this study and other well-known CMOs nationally, I was able to find the most common words and phrases in order to develop a mission statement as a composition of the most important element of high-performing CMOs' missions.

In these mission statements, the goal was clear: to provide students with a public education that results in graduating from high school with the skills necessary to achieve at high levels in college. This is the central mission of high performing CMOs with college admission being a key component of these experiences. Through this process and an analysis of other data collected in interviews and artifacts, I created a mission statement for the composite school, SUCCEED, at the center of this study: ***The Mission of SUCCEED is to prepare all students for college through character development, leadership, and 21st century learning.***

Logistics of Methodological Approach

With the theoretical backing and rationale for approaches to co-connoisseurship to interpret data, and the use of composite characters to present my data and findings in place, I now move to the logistics of the study – the participants, the pilot study, the interview structure and protocols, and finally, the data analysis. By the end of this section, I will have set the stage to move into the data presentation of the study following the composite character approach described above.

Participants. I selected nine participants for this study. Each participant had served in at least one leadership position at a high-performing charter school. Their leadership roles varied, inclusive of the following positions: principal, assistant principal, director of academics, founder of a school, founder of a network, CEO of a network, principal manager, and central office leadership. After much consideration, I have decided not to share the exact list of schools that have participated in this study, as I believe I would be exposing participants to greater chance of personal identification, thereby compromising my ethical responsibility to participants expecting anonymity (Creswell, 2012; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

In order to find and choose these participants, I used snowball sampling (Creswell, 2012). My personal contacts served as the entrée into this demographic and helped me make connections to additional participants (Creswell). Because I intended to target a diverse participant demographic, I continuously asked for diversity in experience and background as I engaged in the snowball sampling process. Put more simply, I asked individuals with whom I currently have connections for names of diverse leaders who have led or currently lead high-performing charter schools.

Criteria for selection. I define high-performing charter schools as any school governed by a charter board as opposed to a school district governance structure that met or exceeded expectations according to the school rating system in their state or school district. I also selected schools that served a primarily traditionally underserved student population. Every school included in the study served schools with greater than 50% of

students eligible for free and reduced lunch rates; most participants reported above 90% of their students fit this category.

With regards to the school rating system, there is variance across states. In Denver Public Schools, all schools receive an annual color-coded rating based on students' academic outcomes on state assessments including CMAS (Colorado Measures of Academic Success), the READ Act (the state's assessment for early literacy development), and ACCESS (the state's assessment for English Language Learners' language development), along with a very few number of points awarded based on attendance and student and parent satisfaction (Denver Public Schools, 2018).

Nationally, frameworks for rating schools' performance vary in terms of individual assessments and measures. Each state has, however, been legally required to have a system for rating their schools that historically was based almost solely on academic outcomes from standardized assessments. These rating systems will be revised in the coming years with the new legislation requirements under ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) (Education Commission of the States, 2018).

All participants' rating systems are not equivalent. However, in order to be included in the study, the school they led had to be 'high performing' based on the determined criteria for their state's accountability system. In other words, in the eyes of the state, participants in this study led their schools to achieve strong academic outcomes for their students as demonstrated by high performance on standardized assessments. In order to gain a more holistic understanding of the experiences, identities and intentions of leaders in high performing charter schools and to conceal the identity of participants, I

recruited nationally. This allowed me to attract a more diverse group of school leaders than had I only included participants from Denver.

Diversity in participants. This intention to attract diverse participants allowed me to better understand the experiences and identities of school leaders serving in high performing charter schools, as opposed to the experiences of school leaders who fit a particular demographic. While my intent was to target a diverse demographic, I do not mean to suggest this group is representative of the general population, nor that the results are generalizable given the methodology employed (Eisner, 1998). *Table 1* below summarizes participants in this study. Please recognize that many of the exact details of participants have been intentionally removed so as to maintain anonymity and fulfill my ethical duty to participants. Furthermore, I emphasize again that the composite characters I established to tell the stories of these participants are a composition of all participants in the study (see *Appendix G: Architecture of the Data Presentation*). There is not a 1:1 correlation between a particular participant and character though I certainly drew from the experiences, identities and intentions of participants in *Table 1* to inform the characters I developed.

| Participant | Role | Gender | Approx. Years of Experience | Approx. Time Frame in Charter | Race/Ethnicity | Interview Structure |
|-----------------------|---|---------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Participant #1 | Principal | male | 2 | 2010-2012 | white | Three-Interview |
| Participant #2 | Assistant Principal, Coach, Central Leadership | female | 4 | 2013-Present | identifies as woman of color | Three-Interview |
| Participant #3 | CEO & Founder | male | 12 | 2005-Present | white | Single Interview |
| Participant #4 | CEO, Founding Principal | female | 22 | 2006-Present | white | Single Interview |
| Participant #5 | Founding Principal, Central Leadership, School Leadership | male | 8 | 2008-Present | white | Single Interview |
| Participant #6 | CEO, COO | female | 4 | 2014-Present | white | Single Interview |
| Participant #7 | Principal, CEO & Founder | male | 13 | 2003-2017 | white | Single Interview |
| Participant #8 | Principal | female | 2 | 2016-Present | African-American | Single Interview |
| Participant #9 | Founding Principal, Principal Manager | female | 9 | 2009-Present | white | Single Interview |

Table 1: Summary of Participants

Due to available time, location, and study purposes, I interviewed each participant between one and three times. These interviews were extremely valuable and enriched the ability to answer my targeted research questions. I further explain the value of these semi-structured protocols below, and how I adjusted each protocol to focus on answering the research questions despite the variability in the number of interviews I was able to conduct with each participant.

Pilot study to inform methodological approach. Prior to beginning the full-blown study, I was able to conduct an initial pilot study. In this pilot, I interviewed one participant who had been in a leadership role within one of the charter networks targeted for this study. I interviewed the participant twice for the pilot study in order to further clarify my research questions, interview structure and protocols, practice the art of interviewing, and develop a transcription key (Anfara, Brown & Mangione, 2002). Through this process, I was also able to begin exploring Eisner's (1998) call for description, which calls upon the researcher to move beyond telling the reader what happened and into showing this to the reader (see *Appendix F*). I also transcribed parts of each interview which further informed my understanding of the research process and the important role transcribing can play in data analysis. This process also allowed me to begin the development of a transcription key (Bird, 2005), which I was able to refine and use for the transcriptions in my full study (see *Appendix E*).

The three-interview approach. Through the pilot study, I was able to identify the content of each interview and how the interview questions would help answer my research questions. Within each semi-structured protocol there was space to return to content from previous interviews, which intended to ultimately strive towards greater understanding of any research question at any time throughout the study. In the full study I was able to use these open portions of the protocol to begin the exploration of co-connoisseurship. I embedded time during the interview to investigate the interpretive frameworks with participants. I also used time during the interview to explore my initial anticipatory framework that would eventually become the High-Performing Charter

Schools and Leadership Continuum. *Table 2* below outlines this structure. Full interview protocols for the three-interview approach are available in *Appendices A-C*.

| Interview | Interview 1 | Interview 2 | Interview 3 |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Topic | Experience | Identity & Intention | Co-Connoisseurship |
| Targeted Research Question(s) | <p>-How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead?</p> <p>-How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop?</p> <p>-What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?</p> | | <p>-What interpretive frameworks enhance our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop?</p> |
| Purpose | Build a relationship with the interviewee and understand experiences | Go deeper into the identity of the interviewee and understand intentions | More pointed questions related to interpretive and anticipatory frameworks |
| Chronological Development | Introductory interview | Circle back to lingering questions from Interview 1, deeper into identity and intentions | Circle back to interpretations explored and developed during first two interviews |
| Sample Question | <i>What was it like to be a leader at [school name]?</i> | <i>What are your greatest priorities? What do you find most challenging?</i> | <i>I've been trying to develop this idea. Let me run it by you...</i> |

Table 2: Three-Interview Structure

Single interview approach. Following the first two participants, I moved to a single interview approach. I made this choice because many leaders were only available for a single interview. I also found that a in single interview and by using co-connoisseurship, I was able to collect rich data that did allow me to arrive at the point of saturation (Creswell, 2012). The above architecture in *Table 2* informed my creation of a single interview protocol to ensure I addressed all of my research questions. See *Appendix D* for the single-interview protocol.

Data analysis. During and following each interview I engaged in five rounds of data analysis, each of which provided greater opportunity to more deeply understand the experiences, identities and intentions of school leaders in high performing charter schools.

Data analysis round 1: Co-connoisseurship. I argue that the first round of data analysis occurred during the interview with participants. These moments of co-construction of the interpretations acted as analysis in their own right, allowing both the participant and researcher to more deeply understand the information shared. I share these raw analyses at the end of each phase within the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum to further illustrate the interpretations developed with participants in this first round of data analysis.

Data analysis round 2: Transcription and analytic memos. I consider the second round of data analysis the transcription and creation of analytic memos. Because I transcribed all interviews myself, I was able to use this process to more fully discern, appreciate and value the data collected (Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017). During

the transcription process, I also took moments to write analytic memos (Creswell, 2012) as a reminder of an initial thought or interpretation. I either constructed these memos mid-interview or following the completion of a full transcription.

Data analysis round 3: Coding in NVivo. By the time I had about half of my interviews transcribed and artifacts collected, I started to become paralyzed by the sheer volume of data. I therefore chose to use the marvels of technology to begin organizing all this information into something more manageable. NVivo provided the technological platform to do this. While I will be the first to admit that I did not use NVivo to its full potential, I did find it useful to organize my data and begin assigning initial codes. In this third round of data analysis, I coded interviews and artifacts based on key terms, phrases and ideas that related most generally to the research questions. These codes were by no means perfect, but minimally provided the space to reread every transcription and begin to make sense of the data.

Data analysis round 4: Translating codes to the anticipatory framework. When I finished assigning all data from my interview transcripts and artifacts to their loose codes, I moved toward making even greater sense of my findings through the use of my anticipatory framework, the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum. This continuum reconstructs the notion of a dual reality, casting the leader as either a hero or villain and moves toward a focus on how leaders' intentions adapt and change over time based on their experiences, identities and reflections. This continuum consists of four phases:

- Phase 1: Early Stages

- Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions
- Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures
- Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future

During this process I also mapped out which participants' data and personal interpretations informed each story within each phase. See *Appendix G* for the full architecture I used to construct the anticipatory framework and vignettes described in Chapter 4.

Data analysis round 5: Aligning interpretive frameworks to the anticipatory framework. Finally, I had constructed an anticipatory framework aligned to the codes...which aligned to the research questions ...which reconceptualized the dual realities of school leaders in high performing charter schools... which met the purpose of the study. I was *almost* ready to move from analysis to description, followed by interpretation, evaluation and thematics. However, I still had these interpretive frameworks that I'd used during the co-connoisseurship process with participants. While these frameworks had emerged to varying degrees through the previous four rounds of data analysis, I recognized that I still hadn't *fully* determined how and where each interpretive framework supported our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intended to develop.

In order to more thoroughly address this research question, I took one final pass through the data as I had organized it up through this point. This allowed me to better utilize these interpretive frameworks in order to enhance our understandings. Finally, I was ready to write! Now it's your turn to read what I came up with. Before we leave the

methods section, however, I leave you with my personal connections to the research and limitations of the study to further fulfill my ethical responsibility as researcher (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), particularly given the manner in which I choose to present the data in Chapter 4.

Personal Connections

... the sentences we construct, the images we paint with our words, the characters we depict, and the scenes we bring to life are the products of our own experiences as well as the products of the relationships we foster and share with our participants (Kiesinger, 1998, p. 89).

The methodology for this study, educational criticism and connoisseurship, calls on the researcher to begin with a rich description of the scenes, words, and experiences shared. This quote speaks to the manner in which another researcher engaged in this work and how her own identity informed her process for telling her participant's story. This is a privilege and responsibility with the power to push ones' thinking, offer up another way of seeing, or simply to share an appreciation for the experiences, identities and intentions of another.

In Chapter 1, I launched my introduction with a description of my identity as a researcher because educational criticism and connoisseurship urges the researcher to act as a connoisseur of the subject of their study. Therefore, the researcher's personal connection to the subject is not bracketed from the research but instead is used responsibly and carefully to inform the study (Eisner, 1998). Due to the importance of my role as researcher and connoisseur, I believe it only responsible to inform the reader

of my inherent connections to the research subject in order to provide both transparency and legitimacy to my role.

As previously stated, the charter school movement is frequently touted as being inherently linked to the neoliberal agenda and the privatization of public schools (Ravitch, 2013). Beyond charter schools some of the most major players in this school reform era are non-profits that provide alternative paths to licensure, such as Teach for America. In fact, charter schools, particularly high-performing charter schools, are so inherently linked with Teach for America that many of their founders are former corps members (Matthews, 2009). I believe it is therefore important for me to name my position as a former corps member with Teach for America, and as someone that has taught in several charter schools (though none of the schools where I taught fall into the subset for this study). In addition to sharing this with you here, I also shared this information with all participants I did not know personally in order to build rapport and reveal my identity and personal biases as a researcher.

Limitations. This study focuses on school leaders' experiences, identities and intentions in high performing charter schools, not that of teachers or students in these environments. It is also important to note that the targeted schools are high performing charter schools. The study does not speak to the experiences of leaders in all charter schools, nor of all public schools. Both the stakeholder groups and other school environments are possible areas for future research.

Results. Because this study is designed to deeply understand the experiences of leaders in high performing charter schools, I did not enter the study with an impression of

what I expected to find. Ultimately, I anticipated the findings would shed light on the multi-faceted experiences of leaders in these environments and caution against the hero – villain paradigm that seems to be the focal point for the debate around the relevance of high-performing charter schools. I believe the following chapters will provide the reader with the reconceptualization of this dual rhetoric; instead focusing on the continuum of the high performing charter school movement generally and of the experiences, identities and intentions of school leaders specifically from this study.

I believe this reshapes the conversation to truly appreciate the subtle nuances of such notions, thereby allowing us to better understand these controversial school environments and how they have become an engrained part of our educational landscape. With that, I invite you to join me at SUCCEED, the composite charter network that tells the stories of participants. This artistic expression of the data presentation will allow a greater audience to appreciate, discern, and value the topic at hand. My great hope is that this audience is then able to apply these findings to their own schema and understanding of such school environments, further enhancing our collective understanding of the current educational landscape, and the role that high-performing charters *can, do, and will* play in this space.

Chapter 4: Data Presentation and Analysis

I now provide an overview of the four phases and composite characters that represent the experiences, identities, intentions, and perceptions of participants. I will then share brief vignettes from their tenure in leadership within a composite high-performing CMO, followed by the interpretation and evaluation (Eisner 1998, Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017) of the description in order to finally arrive at the thematics of the study – the focus of Chapter 5.

Table 3 below summarizes where each composite character led; the chronology of their school within the network; and where they show up within the four phases along the continuum. Below this chart is a brief summary of each phase and composite character.

| Name | Age | Gender | Race | Leader Role | School | Chronology of School | Phase |
|--------|-----|--------|------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Edward | 40 | male | white | Founder & CEO | SUCCEED network at-large | N/A – Led the whole network | Phases 1-3 |
| Ben | 25 | male | white | Principal | SUCCEED-South | 3 rd School in network | Phase 1: Early Stages |
| Toby | 30 | male | white | Principal | SUCCEED-Central | 4 th School in network | Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions |
| Anne | 35 | female | mixed race | Assistant Principal | SUCCEED-River | 5 th School in network | Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures |
| Rachel | 42 | female | white | CEO | SUCCEED network at-large | N/A – Led the whole network | Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future |
| Emery | 32 | female | African-American | Principal | Community Preparatory Academy | 1 st & 2 nd Schools in network | Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future |

Table 3: Summary of Composite Characters

Four Phases and Six Composite Characters

Across phases: Edward. Edward’s composite character provides a line of sight into the experiences, identities and intentions of leaders of entire networks. This perspective also illustrates how the policies set at the network level impact the experiences of individual school leaders and the culture of the CMO (charter management organization) at-large. As with all the characters, Edward represents the experiences, identities and intentions of multiple participants – both those who were

CEOs of entire networks, and the ways that individual site leaders intended to impact the direction of their network as a whole.

Edward is a 40-year old white male. The demographics of Edward's character do not hold a 1:1 correlation with any single participant. Rather, I developed these demographical details because several of the participants who were CEOs and founders of high-performing charter schools fit elements of this description. Edward will show up in all four phases in the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum, though his stories will be reflective of the key elements of that individual phase.

Phase 1: Early Stages – Ben. The first phase in the evolution of high-performing charter schools is what I name *Early Stages*⁵. This phase of the high-performing charter school movement represents the origins of many schools still in existence today and a number of beliefs and practices that have shaped the trajectory of these schools over time. During this time, it was not only the school that was in the Early Stages of development – leaders during this phase from the study also tended to be very early in their own leadership journey. As I unpack the descriptions in the Early Stages, I will illustrate how the Early Stages of charter schools led to the greatest unintended consequences upon which participants in this study reflect as they look back at this time in their leadership.

Ben represents the very Early Stages of leaders and schools in the high-performing CMO movement. He is a young, energetic 25-year old principal whose

⁵ After I had developed this label, I discovered that Padamsee & Crowe (2017) use the same terminology to describe organizations at the early stages of development of DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) practices. Our uses of the term do not hold the exact same meaning, though they are related.

academic outcomes are phenomenally strong and time commitment to the role exhausting. He represents the use of technical strategies without sufficient nod to the adaptive, nuanced and intentional building of a school culture that will come in the latter years of the SUCCEED network (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). His character primarily derives from participants' reflections upon their beginnings in school leadership and/or network development.

Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions – Toby. I focus in this phase on the development and systematization of technically efficient and effective strategies to increase academic performance for students. In this phase of the development of high-performing charter schools, participants focused on how to develop, maintain, and perfect systems and structures that had begun to be rapidly replicated at multiple school sites. Leaders' experiences in this phase of development are highly prescriptive. In this phase I focus further on the sustainability of this highly structured, routinized culture for both students and staff. Furthermore, I focus on unpacking the polarizing dichotomy regarding a rules-based or values-based culture represented in current literature, pop culture, and participants' perspectives (Carter, 2000; Lack, 2009; Guggenheim & Kimball, 2011; Kopp, 2011; Kraft et. al., 2012; Mora & Christianakis 2013; Ravitch, 2013). This phase is very important in the development of high-performing charter schools as many of the academic practices developed during this phase continue to permeate all schools across governance structures to this day (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012).

Toby represents this next phase of leadership in the development of high-performing CMOs. Toby still works more hours than are sustainable for any leader, a

theme that will continue throughout all four phases and as described by most of the participants in the study. He is slightly older than Ben – both in age and experience. Like Ben, he is white and comes from a fairly privileged background. This represents the demographics of several participants leading during this phase. It also represents how participants described the demographics of the majority of their staff and leadership teams during this phase. He has quickly accomplished the creation of structures and systems which produce strong academic outcomes for kids. His staff, however, are still primarily very young, monochromatic, and inexperienced.

While he values the strong, structured culture of the school, some of the practices employed at his school continue to create unintended consequences for kids. There is a paternalistic and at times oppressive culture underlying Toby's school that he constantly wrestles with as his school continues to perform academically. Toby continues to work to operationalize the values of the network which drive towards a more inclusive school culture for students. While he engages in this internal struggle, he does not often vocalize these concerns as his focus remains on growing a young, promising school within the SUCCEED network to its full size and capacity. Toby's story also represents an age of rapid expansion in the high-performing CMO movement.

Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures – Anne. Phase 3 in the evolution of high-performing charters represents leaders who have begun to more publically unpack the problematic structures in their context. In this phase, leaders begin to discern within their own identities and experiences the unintended consequences of some of the early beliefs established in Phase 1 and technical practices codified in Phase 2. The

reflective, transparent, and vulnerable identities of so many leaders in this study led them to arrive at Phase 3 fairly rapidly once the technical components of the schools were quickly well-established. Many participants now had the time to reflect upon the unintended consequences of some of these practices.

Anne's story in Phase 3 represents a time when the academic outcomes for students have been so codified and well established that she almost takes for granted the strong academic success of the school. She sees beyond the numbers to the more nuanced and adaptive elements of school leadership that continue to impact students at her fully-developed, well-established school site. Anne is a woman of color. She has more leadership experience than either Ben or Toby did when they became principal of their schools, though not all of her experience comes from the charter sector.

I do not illustrate Anne as a woman of color to say that white leaders are incapable of moving into these later phases of leadership in the high performing charter school movement. Rather I do this because leaders in Phase 3 have begun to see a greater diversity in the staff and leadership in their buildings – an intentional effort in their networks (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017). Anne's story demonstrates the move from individual reflections on the unintended consequences of a behaviorally strict, regulated learning environment for students of color to a collective movement in high performing charter networks to address these unintended consequences and inequities.

Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future – Rachel and Emery. Phase 4 in the evolution of high-performing charter schools is characterized by dynamic, experienced leaders whose work centers around the notion that the codified and

replicated practices which led to strong academic outcomes for all students in Phase 2 are just the floor of what a school can and should do for students. Leaders operating in Phase 4 of the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum internalize the inequities and problematic structures recognized and made public in Phase 3 and have begun to make moves to adjust the practices of the organization in service of more diverse, equitable and inclusive school cultures (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017). It is important to note that in Phase 4 there are two composite characters to represent experiences of leaders in this phase. This is because I found that the experiences, identities and intentions of leaders who lead high performing charter schools developed from the early stages, where the ‘no excuses’ paradigm was widely held and accepted, have a very different task and context in Phase 4 than do leaders whose schools never held the ‘no excuses’ mantra as a part of their school’s fiber.

Phase 4 – Rachel. Rachel’s story represents the data collected from participants whose schools historically touted the ‘no excuses’ mantra. Rachel is a white woman with several decades of leadership experience at high performing CMOs, as the participants in the study most representative of this phase fit this demographic. At this phase, the ‘no excuses’ ideology is not accepted given its unintended consequences for students in poverty – a notion I will explore when the mantra is dropped in Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures (Lack, 2009). Rachel’s story focuses on participants’ work around how to take all the best practices and adaptive, messy, important work of a school to scale. Rachel’s story represents the current state for fewer leaders. However, if you review *Appendix G: Architecture of the Data Presentation*, you will see that eight of the

nine participants' data inform this phase. Even participants who led in the Early Stages had moments of leadership representative of Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future. Furthermore, Phase 4 is the intended state for most leaders with whom I had the pleasure of speaking. Rachel is a vision for the future in the high-performing charter school movement, and the manner in which the leaders from the study intend to lead as they move forward.

Phase 4 – Emery. Emery's story represents even fewer participants in the study. Emery represents leaders whose schools began at a time when the 'no excuses' mantra was beginning to be removed from the hallways and jargon of the original group of high performing charter schools. She is an African-American woman in her mid-thirties. She grew up near the community where she now leads, though she did not attend the high performing CMO she leads as it was just recently founded. These details are an accurate representation of one participant from the study, and a characterization of some staff members currently serving in high performing charters as reported by participants. Her school is not a part of the SUCCEED network, though she has previously worked for a high performing CMO that touted the 'no excuses' model, as did both participants leading at high performing CMOs founded more recently. Some of her experiences and intentions differ enough from those of other leaders in the study that they are represented by a fully different school to account for the distinction in the origin of high performing charters and how high performing charters started today differ from those started in the late 1990's and early 2000's.

With this brief look into my intentions as a researcher, I will now launch into the meat of the study through description of these composite characters' experiences along the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum.

Phase 1: Early Stages – Ben

Description. How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead?

He was 25, had taught for three years, and now was the principal of a high-performing charter school. You wouldn't believe it if you saw him walking down the hallways of his school – his pale complexion, smattering of freckles, bright smile, and spry jaunt were more reminiscent of a high school student himself than of the individuals he would lead. That was, of course, until you saw him at work. After completing a brief stint at a neighboring comprehensive high school, Ben had been invited to take on a role as a teacher-coach at a growing charter school in the SUCCEED Network, a Charter Management Organization (CMO) with two other campuses across the city. The SUCCEED CMO had started several years earlier to open schools in underserved communities. The high-performing charter school network touted a promise - SUCCEED ensures all students who enter the doors go to college regardless of background, cognitive load that they have when they arrive, or ability. The staff and leadership promised students will get the support that they need to get there. The student demographics at SUCCEED-South were 99.6% Latino, between 40-60% English Language Learners depending on the year and grade level, and 85% qualified for free and reduced lunch. After teaching 11th Grade at SUCCEED for a year, Ben's students had

experienced academic gains. Combined with his natural strong leadership and deep commitment to SUCCEED, his work quickly superseded his unassuming appearance.

Ben was therefore slotted for his second year with the network to take on the role as Assistant Principal. Ready to tackle an ever-expanding leadership role in this world where Ben had become so entrenched, he went on summer break with some friends from Teach for America (TFA). Their plan was to spend their two weeks off driving from city to city crashing on couches of friends they'd met during their first few years of teaching. As he'd just begun his short road trip, Ben got a call from the founder of SUCCEED.

“Ben, Tanya won't be coming back to the SUCCEED – South campus as principal. She's been offered a role as Director of Recruitment for the network at-large and will begin when we all return from break”. Ben, just now turning down the radio in his '89 Chevy Cruiser, had to reframe his thinking to even respond to Edward's quick-natured delivery of this information. Edward was the CEO and Founder of the SUCCEED Network. His direct, no-nonsense style was something to which Ben had grown very accustomed during his first year in the network.

“Well, what a great opportunity for Tanya and the rest of the network”. Ben stumbled the words out, knowing the importance of recruiting strong teachers for the growing network. “So, who's going to replace Tanya?” This next question came out with less grace than he'd anticipated. Edward believed in the spry young leader, but Ben knew he'd be held to the same expectations as all leaders at other SUCCEED campuses.

“Well Ben, after talking it over with the board and other leaders in the network, we think the best option would be for you to take over as the interim principal for the

coming year. I need to know if you're willing to do this. We unfortunately don't have time for you to think the decision over." As Edward finished dropping this information right in the middle of Ben's summer vacation, he cleared his throat, startling Ben back into the reality that now was facing him.

"I-I'd be honored to take this on, Edward. Thank you for this opportunity". As Ben and his friend Rodney continued to drive through the winding highways towards their first stop on their road trip, Ben and Edward began working out the details of his new contract, benefits, and compensation scale. When he finally got off the phone, Rodney had a pretty solid idea of what was going on.

"So, you're going to be the principal next year? We all thought Becky'd be the first. Congrats, man!" Becky was another friend from TFA that worked in the SUCCEED network. She has also quickly moved into a leadership role, and many thought she would be offered a principalship within the next few years.

"Yeah, thanks!" Ben attempted to raise the enthusiasm in his voice the same way he did with his sleepy sixth period 11th graders during AP Chem. He wasn't quite sure Rodney bought the enthusiasm in his voice, but at least he had the next 13 days to convince himself before he took on this massive responsibility.

When Ben returned to SUCCEED - South at the beginning of July, he had already developed a solid idea of how he'd approach this next year as the interim principal at SUCCEED. He knew he had a really solid team of teachers. The mission of the network was understood and internalized by staff and students. Ben repeated the mission statement as he reentered the building as the principal- *The Mission of SUCCEED is to*

prepare all students for college through character development, leadership, and 21st century learning. Ben knew and believed that all the 12th graders walking into his building in six weeks would go to college next year. It was the promise they'd made to the students, each other, and to the community surrounding the SUCCEED – South campus.

Interpretation and evaluation: Diversity, equity and inclusion; mission-driven. At this point, let's take a short break from our story. You'll see that following each vignette, I'll stop to explain how the description characterizes the experiences, identities, and intentions of school leaders I had the honor of interviewing for my study. Eventually, my character will be written into the story as well, as the researcher is not bracketed out but a critical tool within the research in this methodology. For the time being, though, I'll live as a separated narrator from the story. With that, I will offer an interpretation and evaluation of this description. At the end of Phase 1: Early Stages, we will arrive at a final interpretation directly from a participant to further illustrate the findings developed through co-connoisseurship.

The reason that I begin with this story from Ben's semi-fictional life is that it offers a story that is common to many – both in terms of his individual leadership story as well as to the makeup of the early Charter Management Organizations (CMOs). At the beginning of their inception, many high-performing charter networks had this same type of individual teaching and leading their schools. They are young, motivated, white, and passionate individuals who work hard to fulfill the mission of the schools – a central

component of the experiences of all leaders I interviewed for this study (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017).

For many participants their first leadership position within these schools was as an Assistant Principal or a Principal. Some participants had many more years of experience than Ben, but this extreme example does illustrate the initial model of many CMOs – to grow their talent from within the organization and rely on raw talent and perseverance more than years of experience. As I mentioned in the introduction to this story, one of my participants did, actually, describe a similar call from the founder of his network, describing being “terrified” as he approached this first year in a principalship – a role far outside his realm of experience or skillset. This is also representative of the lack of diversity which initially made up the staff of many high performing CMOs. This is problematic. Despite their good intentions, the lack of diversity leads to a lack of a lens on decision-making centered around creating equitable and inclusive school cultures (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017).

The other factor that this description addresses is the relentless commitment to the school’s mission. This is very characteristic of the experiences and identities of the leaders with whom I spoke. Every leader I interviewed shared that the drive towards the school’s mission, vision or values was central to the culture they intended to develop. This mission focus continues to propel the schools forward despite the problematic structures both leaders within and critics outside the organization recognize. Clear goals and focus are the driving force behind these schools and what make their leaders so successful (Collins, 2001; Lencioni, 2006).

As we move forward with stories from the SUCCEED charter network beyond its young, energetic, and primarily inexperienced start, we will see how the path toward SUCCEED for these schools may change, but the mission of preparing students for college will remain central to the operations and intentions of leaders and their schools throughout. It is this unwavering commitment to fulfilling the school’s mission that I believe is the most defining factor for leaders of high-performing urban charter schools. For the moment, however, we return to Ben’s story, and the conditions he provides in order to develop his intended school culture.

Description. What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?

Ben had been the interim principal for the past two months at SUCCEED – South. He had been able to win over the trust of most of the teachers – though this trust was already fairly well-established during the previous year when he coached many of his colleagues. His students were continuing to make the academic gains expected of the network. There was, however, still a lot of work to be done at the school in order to meet the SUCCEED mission that donned the hallways as students entered the building: *“The Mission of SUCCEED is to prepare all students for college through character development, leadership, and 21st century learning.”* Next to this mission was a mantra commonly used by all members of the staff – “No Excuses!” Ben deeply believed in the mission and knew that all students would leave his school admitted to a four-year university, just as all SUCCEED schools promised – and delivered - to their communities.

In order to avoid any ‘excuses’, detention provided time for students who were not meeting the school’s high behavior expectations to be held accountable for their actions. While Ben appreciated the use of detention as part of their behavior intervention model, he thought detention at SUCCEED-South lacked a clear purpose. He therefore decided to take over the structure to make sure these extra minutes of contact with students stayed intently focused on academics. Detention would be used as a homework center as well, especially since so many students who attended detention were going for not turning in their homework that day or had a track record of difficulty with this clear expectation.

Ben therefore spent his evenings running after school detention. While the after-school detention structure was only supposed to last until 4:45pm, students were held to the expectation that they would not talk during detention. If they did, an additional five minutes was added onto their time in detention. Ben held true to this high expectation, and therefore frequently did not wrap up detention until several five-minute increments after the official detention time ended.

One night, Ben was still working with one of his most challenging students who continued to push against this structure. She had spent the regular detention time repeatedly speaking out while her classmates worked during the regular detention time, adding many more five-minute increments to her detention time with Ben. All of these extra five-minute consequences had piled up as her classmates trickled out, leaving Ben with the student well into the evening. By 8:30pm her mother arrived at the school to figure out why her daughter was still there. She rang the bell to enter the school, and Ben

came confidently to the door. His spry step from the previous year had been replaced by a more meticulous march – every move he took was under the scrutiny of the parents, executive directors, and teachers he served each day.

“Hi, Mrs. Mejilla. How can I help you?”

“Mr. Ungar, why is my daughter still in detention?” Her voice was respectful but a bit impatient – it was, after all, 8:30pm on a weeknight.

Ben sighed as he responded to the frustrated parent, stating the expectation he had repeated over and over again to her daughter that day. “As you know, Mrs. Mejilla, we have a policy at SUCCEED that if a student talks out during detention, their consequence is to have five minutes added onto their time. Marisa continued to speak out and therefore must accept this consequence”. Ben aptly waited for a reply from the frustrated woman standing before him.

“But it’s 8:30, Mr. Ungar”

“Mrs. Mejilla, look, here at SUCCEED, we have a 96% pass rate on most of our state exams. We currently have a 56% pass rate on AP exams. If you believe in that kind of culture to ensure Marisa will be ready for the next step, then let me do this. Otherwise, she can go, and we can talk about her future here.”

“Do what you have to do,” Mrs. Mejilla replied. She left the school - and her trust - in the hands of the young, strong-willed principal.

At 11:59pm, Ben drove Marisa home. As he dropped her off he reminded her of the same thing he’d told her over and over again during their power struggle throughout the afternoon and long evening. “Marisa, I believe in you. You are capable of getting

into the college of your choice. To do that, we need to work together to get you there. I'm proud of the work you accomplished today, and look forward to seeing you again tomorrow morning”

Mrs. Mejilla was waiting at the screened-in porch, opening it and allowing her tired daughter to pass through with her backpack full of completed homework for the next day's classes. As Ben drove home he was too tired to reflect upon the long night of detention that was now behind him. What he did know, however, was that Marisa had completed her homework. She would be ready for her classes and assignments tomorrow, and was one step closer to realizing the mission of SUCCEED.

Interpretation and evaluation: The hidden curriculum of ‘high expectations’.

In this description, I illustrate the intended culture and unintended consequences resulting from the leader's experiences. Ben's intentions in this vignette were to ensure students were held to high behavioral expectations, thereby allowing them to be successful academically. At the end of the night, this intended outcome was realized – Marisa returned home with her homework complete. Academically she would be prepared for the next day's assignments. The question becomes, what were the unintended consequences, or hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1990), exemplified in this description?

As I unpacked this incident and others with participants leading during the Early Stages of high performing charters, they consistently referred back to a culture of ‘high expectations’ for students. No matter what they had to do, leaders would ensure that students met the high expectations for behavior and academics – *no excuses* (Lack, 2009; Matthews, 2009). While this notion allows for students such as Marisa to meet the

academic expectations required by her teachers, there is a hidden curriculum at play whose unintended consequences arguably outweigh the accomplishment of completing her daily assignments. This hidden curriculum is a lack of trust in students' ability to make their own decisions and take ownership over their identity as learners.

Because in this instance Ben led with such a focus on the consequences of not completing an assignment, he developed a school culture which did not allow Marisa to take any ownership over her own behavior. Furthermore, because so much time and energy were devoted to realizing the consequence and keeping the 'five-minute rule' for detention in place, neither the leader nor the student had the mental capacity or wherewithal to reflect upon their actions and the consequences of those actions. Several participants in the study shared similar reflections regarding the lack of ownership for students coupled with the highly regimented behavior systems of high performing charter schools in the Early Stages of development. In terms of naming the school culture that was unintentionally developed through such a regimented set of rules and consequences, the adjectives participants shared included the following: *dehumanizing*⁶, *predictable*, *racist*, *oppressive*, *paternalistic* and *unacceptable*. This is the unintended culture described - to varying degrees of severity - in the Early Stages of the high-performing charter school movement.

⁶ While one participant characterized the problematic structures in his school as *dehumanizing*, another participant pushed back against the use of this word, focusing on the caring culture he intended to develop at his school. These differences in opinion represent the value of co-connoisseurship in helping the researcher more thoroughly represent participant voice.

When I asked the participant, who shared the story which inspired the above description, if the demographics of his student body – primarily Latino/Hispanic and 99% free and reduced-price lunch – impacted the way he intended to lead, he unequivocally said, “Yes, absolutely”. Reflecting upon this story with the participant many years later, he was able to recognize how problematic this was. While we will continue to unpack the hidden curriculum as we move through the phases of the development of high-performing CMOs, it is important to note my appreciation for the participant’s willingness to share such an honest, raw reflection with me – one that characterizes a dedicated leader in an unpleasant light – despite his well-meaning yet singular intention at the time, to get all of his students into college. These elements of reflection, transparency and vulnerability were salient in the identities of most participants throughout the study.

This singular focus is representative of younger leaders in the early stages of their careers. They have clear goals and an intentional focus, yet they lack the experience to understand the subtle nuances that make their goals achievable within the larger context of the organization (Heider, 2014; Lencioni, 2006). In this way, part of the reality for leaders in Phase 1: Early Stages is that they themselves are in the early stages of their own leadership, having perhaps mastered Maxwell’s (2011) Level 2 Leadership: Relationships, and Level 3 Leadership: Production, but not yet understanding the impact some of their actions may unintentionally have on the culture of their schools.

Description. How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop?

Ben had made it to the spring of his first year as principal at SUCCEED-South. Detentions were now ending at a more reasonable hour, and the weather had begun to thaw enough that the students' lunch break could include a short outside game of basketball. As Ben dribbled the ball past one of his tenth graders and made a shot, he reveled in the cheer from the students on his team. "Hey Damarius, I guess I'll have to let your mom know what kind of game you have at dinner on Friday!" Ben jokingly passed the ball back to Damarius, who quickly proved his 'game' as he dribbled down the court and re-tied the game.

Just at that moment, the bell rang – exactly twenty minutes after lunch had begun. Everyone quickly formed straight, silent lines in order to make sure they made it back to fourth period before the three-minute passing period had elapsed. Just as Ben was about to go back down the hallway to ensure all students were completing their 'do now' the moment they entered their classrooms, Damarius ran up to him. "Mr. Ungar! You almost forgot your stuff again!" He handed the principal his keys, phone and wallet that Ben had left on the picnic table outside when he joined the tenth graders for the quick pickup game. "Thanks, Damarius", Ben said as he slid his wallet back into his navy-blue dress pants, straightening his graduation cap tie – a gift from his parents when he completed his undergraduate work at Cornell - as he prepared to reenter the school for the next academic block. "You've got precalculus next, right? Mrs. Harrison has an awesome lesson planned for you guys today!" Damarius gave a slight chuckle as he ran to the back of the line to enter the school silently with the rest of the students in tenth grade precalc.

Interpretation and evaluation: Intended culture of family, care and urgency.

This description sits in fairly sharp contrast to the previous one – intentionally recognizing the nuanced and varied experiences of leaders in high-performing charter schools. In this description, Ben represents the all-in, relationship-building qualities characteristic of leaders’ intentions in Phase 1: Early Stages. During his lunch duty time, Ben makes an effort to not only keep students at his school safe, but to actively use even this brief break from the rigorous academics as a time to build relationships with kids. This is the type of school culture many participants described as most characteristic of their intentions.

One participant did share an anecdote about students being so bought into the school culture that he never had to worry about his phone or wallet getting stolen or hidden by his students – they would always take the care to bring anyone’s belongings back to the owner if they were left out. This culture of safety and community were further exemplified by practices such as those of another participant who held Friday night dinners. As a young single man, he had the freedom and commitment to his school such that he would go to a different student’s home every Friday night to have dinner with their family. This anecdote further represents the culture leaders intend to develop in Phase 1: Early Stages – a culture of family and care. They believed deeply in the mission of the school, and as a part of accomplishing the mission, they knew they must establish relationships with families and the community.

The third element of the intended culture, illustrated by the above vignette about recess time, is the sense of urgency school leaders repeatedly shared. They created

minute-by minute routines and systems for every element of the day, including lunch, transitions back to class, and even the consistent structure of the first minutes of every class, so that not a single minute of instructional time was wasted (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012). It may be difficult for anyone who has worked at – or gone to – a traditional comprehensive high school to imagine a group of tenth grade students forming perfect silent lines to walk to their next class in such a regimented fashion. This is, however, how several participants described transitions all the way up through twelfth grade. This culture of urgency was coupled with the notions of family and care, as many leaders in the early stages reflected upon the interconnectedness of these elements for their intended school culture.

It is here that we begin to see the dichotomy of the intended school culture – one of family and care - mismatched with the unintended culture - dehumanization, oppression, and racism exemplified, recognized, and reflected upon by the same leaders. Many leaders reflecting back on this rigid, controlled school structure had begun to question whether or not this culture was truly beneficial in helping realize the mission of the organization, particularly with regards to preparing students for college. As we move to the next vignette, I, the researcher, unpack this dichotomy – or dual reality – with Ben to further reveal the nuance of the intended outcome of students getting *into* college, and the unintended consequences regarding whether students were prepared to get *through* college - in the early stages of high performing CMOs.

Description. How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop?

It had been nearly a decade since Ben had led at SUCCEED-South. He still kept in touch with several of his students from his formative years in school leadership; two of them were even now teachers at SUCCEED, having successfully graduated college and returning to the network as young professionals. A mutual friend had introduced Ben and I – she knew that I was studying the experiences and identities of school leaders in high performing charters and thought Ben would offer an interesting lens on the work, given the time frame in which he led and his age when he was a principal with SUCCEED. We sat down for our interview at a local coffee shop half-way between our houses. It was still warm enough outside, even in the early evening, that we grabbed a table on the outside porch. The metal table shook a bit as we sat down, nearly spilling Ben’s drip coffee over the interview protocol I’d handed him moments earlier.

As we dove into the meat of the interview, I started to learn more about Ben’s varied, incongruent experiences and identities as a leader at SUCCEED. It struck me how dichotomous his experiences at SUCCEED had been – he worked late into the evening, arrived early in the morning, and even spent all weekend at the school to ensure students’ academic needs were met. He strived to develop a culture where students were challenged academically, teachers had what they needed to get the work done, and parents believed that their children would be admitted to a four-year institution – a promise that was largely kept by all SUCCEED campuses. Yet simultaneously, he was talking about this notion of dehumanization, control over children’s bodies, and the very regimented culture which shaped students’ daily experiences in the building. How could these dual realities for everyone at SUCCEED sit in such sharp contrast to one another?

As Ben wrapped up his explanation of what the typical structure of what a day at SUCCEED looked like, I paused for a moment, and offered a value proposition that I'd heard several leaders across schools and over time pose: "Given what you've shared so far, I'm curious - would you send your own child to your SUCCEED school?" Ben paused. "No. I wouldn't".

When I asked Ben why, he paused for another moment, resting his cleanly shaven chin on his hand as he pondered the question – and his definite response. "So, I don't know my child's own disposition yet, but the question reminds me of one of my students, Emilio. At least 12 days out of every month, I would drive my car over to his house; I would open the door; I would walk into his bedroom; I would make him throw on clothes; I would throw him in my car; and I would drive him to school." Ben paused briefly, signaling to me the significance of this anecdote. Then came Ben's interpretation and evaluation of this event.

"He had no agency in his own failure or success when it even came to showing up," Ben continued. I wasn't sure where Ben was going with this – was this comment about the students' agency a reflection on how he felt about the innate abilities of the students he served? My fluttering thought was immediately negated as he continued – he clearly believed the lack of agency was due to the school culture he'd developed, not because Emilio was from an impoverished Latino-Hispanic family.

"We didn't give kids the opportunity to fail, reflect on failure, and think about how they wanted to change that narrative. Every kid had to have, and did have, honestly, like, the same narrative." Ben began to count off the tasks students at SUCCEED had to

complete on a daily basis, using each count to further emphasize this notion of a single narrative. “We show up to school every day, we take these exams, we do these things, ‘cause everything's being asked of us to do this, and I have no opportunity to opt out, ever. And I have no opportunity to reflect on how me opting out changes the way I can do school or the way I go about school. And I think that would have like, *crushed* my *soul* as a child.” As Ben reflects on the experiences he crafted for students at SUCCEED to his own experiences growing up, he gestures toward his own heart, demonstrating the empathy he feels; the impact this culture may have had on his students.

“I learned a lot from my failures in middle school and high school and things like that. We just - we made it so easy not to fail. And that's the biggest feedback I get from my students who just made it *to* college and who didn't make it *through*. The hardest thing for them was navigating college, going to classes every day, or making sure THEY kept track of when their term paper was due. Professors weren't on their backs, calling them at night, telling them like, ‘Hey your assignment’s due tomorrow don't forget!’ It wasn't part of that culture in college. That’s a huge shock for kids.” Ben paused again, having made it clear that the culture he intended to develop may have fallen short of the ultimate mission of SUCCEED. Students may have enrolled in school, but he was clearly unsure if they were truly prepared for the multi-faceted challenges completing a four-year degree entailed.

“That is my answer,” Ben continued, “that's why I wouldn't send my own child there. Because that child has no opportunity to fail and reflect, and think about - how *do*

you own your own schedule? How *do* you own your own time, your own body, your own thinking?”

I pause for a moment, taking in Ben’s very vulnerable, reflective, and transparent explanation of why he wouldn’t send his own child to SUCCEED. “I’m going to try and make a connection between some of the things you’ve said previously.” Ben is ready to dig deeper into this dialogue – “Yeah, go for it” – he leans in – I continue.

“What it’s got me thinking, is like, you -- were so intensely focused on the steps from point - wherever you started - to point college. Right?” I point to two spots on the metal table separating us that are very far apart – illustrating the immense amount of work many high performing charter leaders had described regarding the steps it takes to ensure *every* child gets into college – an outcome Ben had achieved when he was principal at SUCCEED-South.

Ben quickly agrees, “Yep.”

“And that was so much a sole focus that what you perhaps lost in that - process - was like, you knew exactly *what* the academic steps were and monitored them like *crazy*.”

“Like *crazy*,” Ben agrees, ready to further develop this notion.

“But you did not necessarily know what the social-emotional steps were in order become a person that can function without someone telling students how to operate in school.” I pause to determine Ben’s reaction to my conjecture.

“Yeah - I would say that’s like - rubber stamp it - like go ahead. That’s exactly it. And that’s why I would not send my own child there. Did we meet the promise that we

were giving parents – to ensure their child went to college? I would argue yes. But are we meeting the promise of getting them *through* college? I would argue *no*.” Ben stamps that final word, recognizing the weight of ‘no’ as he leaves the word sitting on the hard metal table, raw and vulnerable for the world to see.

Interpretation and evaluation: Co-connoisseurship and the nuance of a dual reality. In this description, I intend to explore two important notions:

- Exploration of the dual reality I propose at the outset of this study
- The use of co-connoisseurship as a method of member-checking to build our collective understanding of the subject

Regarding the exploration of the dual reality in the above vignette, I focus on a potentially problematic notion I heard from several leaders in the Early Stages – they would not send their own child to the school they were leading. This sits in stark contrast to another sentiment I heard from the same leaders. They were very invested in and proud of the academic outcomes of their students. The rationale for not wanting to send their own children to their high performing charter school primarily focused on one of two factors: either students did not have the ownership over their own learning that leaders would want for their own child, or the school culture was so solely focused on academics that it didn’t have room for the social-emotional curriculum to be leveraged by teachers and students. In each of these cases, leaders recognized the problematic nature of this response. This is, however, the reality in the early stages of high-performing CMOs. There is a hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1990) that does not trust students to own their learning, mistakes, and identities. The school culture is shaped by a strict behavior

code, living in stark contrast to the intentions – and occasional operations – of a culture of family, care, urgency, and high academic expectations.

The other idea I illustrate in the above description is the use of co-connoisseurship as a method of member checking to further build our collective understanding of the subject. With all participants in this study, I engaged in moments like the one described above. I would break from the semi-structured interview protocol when the opening presented itself to more deeply explore an idea I was hearing emerge from the participant. During this moment of co-construction (Eisner, 1998), I tried to further clarify and unpack what the participant was sharing. In this instance, I was hearing a connection from Ben between the notion that he would not send his own child to SUCCEED, and a reflection he had shared earlier. The reflection he had previously shared was that he was confident the school culture he intended to develop was fulfilling the mission of academically preparing students for college. However, what was missing from that intended culture was the social-emotional preparation needed to equip students with the tools to navigate difficult situations, take ownership over their actions, and learn from and reflect on mistakes they made along the way. Once again, his singular focus on one goal – albeit a clear and meaningful goal – detracted from his ability to reach the high levels of leadership which require a deep understanding of the unintended consequences of certain actions in service of hitting a numerical target (Lencioni, 20016; Maxwell, 2011).

From Ben’s response, you see that the connection I made resonated with Ben very much – he ‘rubber stamped’ it. The connection brought greater clarity to this nuance

within high-performing charter schools: the intention to prepare students academically for school – and the eventual recognition that academic preparation was not enough. This increases the rigor of the study, as it provides a more thorough method of member-checking, and an additional layer of data to inform the researcher’s findings (Birt et al., 2016; Creswell, 2012; Doyle, 2007). At this intersection of the emic and etic interpretations (Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017), I was able to more precisely work with Ben to discover the reason he would not send his own child to the school, and the implications for schools in the early stages of development based on this honest reflection. In each of the four phases, I will continue to write myself into the narrative to further illustrate the methodological use of co-connoisseurship and to more deeply understand the experiences, identities, and intentions of school leaders in high performing charter schools.

For the moment, however, I move into the final description in Phase 1: Early Stages. I now bring us back to Ben’s experiences immediately following his departure from SUCCEED. In this final description, I focus on the identity and courageous leadership Ben exhibits, and how these elements shape the culture he continues to intentionally foster, even after having departed from SUCCEED.

Description. How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop? What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?

After two years with the network, Ben left SUCCEED to attend graduate school out of state. During his time in graduate school, many of his former students kept in touch, sharing their successes and struggles as they moved through the rest of high school and their first few years in college. In fact, many of them asked Ben to write them letters of recommendation for their college applications. Ben happily wrote individual recommendations for every student who asked. He knew every child in his school well enough to do so without much trouble – after all, SUCCEED had been his whole life at the time.

As graduate school began to come to an end, Ben felt drawn to return to the education sector. After much thought, Ben reapplied for a principalship with the SUCCEED-North campus. During his phone screener for the position, the recruiter for the position brought up something that completely reversed Ben’s desire to return to his former charter network. The recruiter crisply asked, “Please explain your rationale for not encouraging Natalie to go to college.”

“Excuse me? Can you please repeat the question?” Ben replied, remembering the immense challenges Natalie and her family had faced during his time working with her.

“Natalie Flores. She was the only student in the entire network that did not go to college two years ago. We called her and asked her why, and she confirmed that she *appreciated* your empathy with her struggles.” The recruiter over-emphasized the word *appreciated* as if to suggest the heavy irony of appreciating a leader not pushing the student to go to college. Ben couldn’t respond. His fury with the recruiter had completely derailed him as he returned back to the phone call he had made shortly after

enrolling in graduate school and leaving SUCCEED for the next chapter in his leadership journey.

The network had asked him to call Natalie, his former student, as she was the only student who had not enrolled in college following her acceptance the previous spring. As he dialed the number, he thought back to her witty personality and strong spirit. That was, of course, until her mother's cancer diagnosis. The final semester of her senior year had led to a number of difficult challenges. Ben was happy to call and check in on Natalie and even inquire about her enrollment in college. As she answered, Ben could hear the exhaustion in her voice.

"Natalie – it's Mr. Ungar – how are you?" Natalie and Ben spoke for several minutes, talking about Natalie's mom, her new job, and some of the other challenges the family was experiencing. "Mr. Ungar, I didn't enroll. I just can't right now with all this stuff going on with my family."

Ben talked to Natalie for several more minutes about some of the options she may have not considered – going to school part-time, enrolling in an online program for the required prerequisites, or even attending the local community college that was less expensive and closer to home. None of the options were going to work for Natalie – she had too much going on with her family right then. Ben knew it was time to stop pushing. As they finished up the call, Ben ended by saying, "I totally understand if you don't go. Don't feel guilty. Do you need anything from me?" Natalie thanked him for the call, and Ben moved forward with his own enrollment in graduate school.

“How do you explain the *high expectations* you hold for *all* students when you did not seem to hold these same expectations for Ms. Flores just two years ago?” The recruiter’s question brought Ben back to the phone interview, pushing the empathy for Natalie aside to once again make room for the fury he felt towards the recruiter’s line of questioning.

Ben stumbled through the question to the best of his ability, citing the multiple alternative options he had provided to Natalie, and the importance of recognizing her personal needs. As Ben hung up the phone, he knew he couldn’t continue in the interview process. How could he work for an organization that questioned his commitment to high expectations? The outcomes of his students spoke for themselves. Natalie and every other student at SUCCEED HAD gotten into college. He DID have high expectations. He also had a relationship with ‘Ms. Flores’, and enough sense to know he couldn’t pick her up and put her in his car every day to get her to school, like he had regularly done with Emilio as a high school freshman several years earlier.

Interpretation and evaluation: The courage to lead. This description illustrates the difficult task one takes on when they commit to lead, and the courage and adaptability required for this work (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). It also represents the courage of so many leaders who were generous enough to participate in this study.

Ben knew that the network wanted him to get Natalie to enroll in that first day of classes. Be it for the purpose of realizing the mission or being able to put that absolute 100% statistic on the network’s boldly-colored marketing materials – or maybe for both reasons – the goals and mission of the network were clear. This is what had made the

network successful; the schools replicable up until this moment (Lencioni, 2006).

However, Ben could not push Natalie any further. He recognized that Natalie's needs at that moment were not aligned with enrollment in a four-year institution – she did not have to realize the singular narrative of all students in the network. In this moment, we see that Ben's intentions *were* to prepare Natalie for college. However, nowhere in the mission statement did it say that every child had to follow the same path once they left the secondary school. This was, instead, the assumed mission of the organization – one with which Ben did not agree. This moment also offers foreshadowing into the later stages of high-performing charter schools and their leaders when the notion of every child crafting their own narrative becomes more prominent.

In Phase 1: Early Stages, we can once again see clear evidence of a dual reality – the intentions of leaders are coupled with unforeseen and unintended consequences. Their care and commitment to students sits in stark contrast to their lack of attention to empathy and individualization of their student body. Because they are ruthlessly committed to fulfilling the mission of the organization, there is an unintended consequence that does not recognize the unique experiences, identities and needs of the students they serve nor the leaders in the network. Ben felt as dehumanized as did his students and realized that the SUCCEED network at this point in time did not provide an adaptive culture that would allow him to make courageous decisions that would best serve his students (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017).

These were the very early years of high performing CMOs, along with the very early years of leadership for the principals at these institutions. As we move into the

following phases of the high performing charter school movement and the leaders dedicated enough to lead them, I intend to illustrate how this characterization of the early stages is not a fixed place, nor does it represent the current experiences and identities of any participants in this study. Put more simply, as we move across the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum, the mission of SUCCEED remains the same, but the experiences, identities, intentions, and reflections of leaders continuously operationalize in new ways to provide the space to take a different path toward the realization of the school's mission. It is here that I begin to reconceptualize the dual realities of leaders in high-performing charters into a continuum, where the degree of slippage (Uhrmacher, 1991) becomes smaller and smaller as leaders' intentions and operations begin to achieve greater coherence, thereby eliminating some of the most problematic structures and unintended consequences present in the early stages of these institutions.

To end Ben's story, however, I would like to share a quotation from one of the participants in the study. I will let this quotation sit in isolation, as I believe at this point, I have provided my description, interpretation, and evaluation of high-performing charter schools in Phase 1: Early Stages. In the spirit of co-connoisseurship, I now allow my participants' voice and own analysis of the early stages to emerge untouched.

Participant analysis of Phase 1: Early Stages.

*“I don't think - I don't think charters are blood-sucking institutions. I'm just being very raw with, you know, what it was like at times. So - I really still do believe and I want to keep harping on this - there are things we can learn from them. We just choose to throw that whole goddamn bathwater out because we want to **demonize** the **entire** institution. And I think that's just false. I think it's absolutely false.”*

Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions – Toby

Description. How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture their intentions to lead?

As he peered out at his staff, Toby was excited to begin the year with this group of devoted, motivated, and hard-working teachers. It was the staff morning meeting – a well-known tradition across the SUCCEED network – on the final day before students arrived. Toby had worked at another SUCCEED campus for several years as an 11th grade AP U.S. History teacher. In this position, he had taken on a number of minor and informal leadership roles while his students continued to outperform the state on AP test pass rates. After completing a year as a principal intern at the SUCCEED-North campus, Toby had been selected to start the fourth SUCCEED campus in the network, SUCCEED-Central. While he didn't have the same formal administrative license required of principals in the district public schools, he felt the internal principal preparation program had well-prepared him to take on this role.

His middle school campus would begin with a sixth-grade cohort and eventually fully build out to a sixth through eighth grade middle school. They were projected to have a more diverse enrollment than some of the other SUCCEED campuses currently in operation – about 50% of the students enrolled for the first year were Latino/Hispanic, 20% were African-American, 20% were white, and another 10% identified as either Asian/Pacific Islander or mixed race. This campus also served a slightly lower free and reduced lunch-price-eligible student demographic – about 85% of the first cohort of sixth graders qualified for this service. The school would be co-located with a traditional district-run school. The two schools would be on the same campus, but students at SUCCEED would wear their own neatly tucked-in collared shirts, black or brown belts, and khaki or navy-blue dress bottoms that had become the signature uniform for the network. Students at SUCCEED would have their own bell schedule, and generally have little interaction with students in the traditional public school throughout the course of the school day.

The young school leader's bright red cheeks and SUCCEED t-shirt he'd worn during the team's marathon relay race earlier that summer both glistened with sweat in the light as he stood at the front of the auditorium. They had just been able to enter the SUCCEED campus the previous day, as the school had been under construction to install new windows in the upper wings of the school all summer. While the auditorium was piled high with the remnants of the move from the staff summer training he'd had to host at the neighboring campus, his staff had worked tirelessly all day to make sure the

classrooms were at least organized enough to get students off to the right start on the first day of school.

Every room had the school's mission statement and core values brightly bordering the top foot of wall space, printed and mounted large enough to clearly display the common messaging for all students, but far enough up on the wall to allow plenty of space for the instructional charts and classroom systems that would soon fill the rest of the clean white walls of each room. The auditorium was no exception for this consistent messaging. A large banner hung behind Toby as he stood on stage, displaying the eagle mascot the staff had chosen earlier that Spring for the SUCCEED-Central campus. Next to the banner was another large, durable sign displaying the mission statement: ***“The Mission of SUCCEED is to prepare all students for college through character development, leadership, and 21st century learning.”*** While the network still touted the ‘No Excuses!’ mantra, Toby had opted to not order any of the wall adhesives that reminded everyone of the dismissive statement.

Toby was about to start his well-rehearsed welcoming speech when he decided to let the silence hang in the well-lit auditorium. He took the brief moment to think back on the 12 weeks that had led him and his staff to this day. They had made it through an intense summer training targeted at preparing the primarily inexperienced, albeit committed, staff to begin the first day of school strong. The SUCCEED network made it clear that academic content began on day one with students. He was so impressed that the staff had sat through those long hours of reviewing the minute-by-minute routines, expectations for lesson planning, format for weekly collaborative planning meetings, and

interim assessment schedules in the heat of the borrowed classroom at the neighboring school. They had even backwards-planned the first unit of instruction during the hottest two days in August the previous week. Even with the sweat dripping down their semi-casual attire, his staff had stuck through it, deeply unpacking the standards and carefully crafting scripted questions to drive towards each essential learning target.

Even more impressive was the resolve of the families who had patiently waited to determine whether or not their child's school would be open in time. The families had largely remained enrolled despite the uncertainty leading up to the final confirmation that the school would in fact open on time. While Toby knew every family had their own reasons for wanting to stick with their choice to enroll in SUCCEED-Central, he couldn't help but imagine that the previous track record of the other SUCCEED campuses impacted their willingness to stick with him through the uncertainty. Toby refocused his attention on the eager teaching staff before him, once again in awe of their commitment. They believed in the mission of the school. They believed in the students they would serve. They believed in each other. Toby broke the silence with the well-rehearsed opener to their meeting – he was ready to replicate yet another high performing SUCCEED charter school.

Interpretation and evaluation: Rapid expansion through codified technical strategies. This story of Toby's first year as principal illustrates the school culture described by many participants; the leadership journey of some participants; and the logistical situation of several high performing charter school leaders interviewed for the study. I will begin with the latter and finish with the former. The culture that leaders

intended to create in Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions is powerful and instrumental to the rapid expansion of high performing charter schools. Logistically speaking, several participants did describe a situation where they were co-located with another school campus, typically a traditional public-school campus. Participants also described the logistics of setting up the school for its academic success through these consistent rituals, routines, and lesson planning practices (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012). These academic practices are still well-used today by many leaders in both high-performing charter schools and in traditional district-run schools, as they have been found to have a positive impact on student outcomes (Hattie, 2012).

While these practices were clearly not developed only by high-performing charter schools, their ability to codify these technical practices and rapidly replicate them were instrumental in the success of these schools according to state accountability measures for academic performance. This is part of the reason for their ability to expand so quickly – according to the quantifiable measures, high-performing charter schools were achieving unmatched results for students in traditionally underserved neighborhoods (Kopp, 2011).

Regarding Toby's journey to school leadership, participants did frequently describe a similar path: they began as a teacher at the school, had the opportunity to take on leadership roles while still in the classroom, and after a few years, were given the opportunity to move swiftly into school leadership. Because participants did not face the barrier of having to get a traditional administrators' license as is required in traditional public schools, they decided in part to continue with the charter network to avoid this hurdle that was difficult to navigate. These details represent the logistical reasons which

allow for charter networks to replicate more rapidly – they have a prescriptive, tightly structured set of practices, a track record of success on standardized assessments, a pathway to leadership which enculturates their future principals in this work, and the nimbleness to co-locate in any building the school district is willing or able to provide for the growing network (Kopp, 2011; Matthews, 2009).

I now move to arguably the most powerful quality of the work in this description – the fostering of a strong school culture wherein staff will do whatever it takes to fulfill the school’s mission. The participant who shared the story of his teachers working tirelessly in a building without air conditioning before the start of the school year was still impressed by their relentless drive as he shared this story with me many years later. He described an almost intangible quality to the culture at the time – no matter what obstacle the staff faced, they were committed to the school and the culture they were building. Furthermore, the families set to send their students to the school stayed enrolled on a bit of a leap of faith, despite the uncertainty surrounding the school’s opening. While he did not boast about SUCCEED as the only factor which kept them engaged despite the physical discomfort they experienced in those formative months of the school’s development, the school culture he and other participants described in Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions, can be illustrated through this devotion, commitment, hard work, and belief in the mission described above (Kopp, 2011; Matthews, 2009).

This culture leaders intend to develop in high-performing charter schools very much reflects their own identity and belief in the mission of their organization. They deeply believe that students in underserved communities deserve better, are capable of

outcomes which match their more affluent peers, and that through hard work and commitment, they can help students realize the mission of college acceptance (Kopp, 2011; Matthews, 2009). I believe this intentional culture is one of the primary reasons for why high-performing charter schools were able to, during Phase 2, replicate at such rapid rates. In addition to producing unprecedented outcomes for students in traditionally underserved neighborhoods, leaders' intentions to build a strong, mission-focused, predictable school culture appealed to the families they recruited and to the young, idealistic, primarily white⁷, and hard-working teaching staff they developed. Their reflective, transparent and vulnerable nature also created space for them to continuously improve.

In the following description, I will describe the conditions school leaders provided in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained – and the unintended consequences leaders reflected on as they looked back at the adaptive approach that is truly needed to develop a strong, equitable, inclusive, and diverse school culture (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017).

Description. What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?

⁷ Participants in Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions had begun to recognize that their staff were primarily white and reflected upon the problematic nature of having such a monochromatic staff (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017). Because they were so hyper-focused on achieving the mission of the organization, however, leaders in Phase 2 did not publically tackle these issues. This public recognition of this problematic structure and action to reverse these hiring trends come in Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures and Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future.

Toby's school had grown to include a seventh-grade cohort of students. It was September of his second year as principal at the new SUCCEED-Central campus. While the mess in the auditorium from the previous summer had been stored away to make room for the school-wide Friday morning meetings and other numerous celebrations of academic success which deeply characterized Toby's leadership style, the school was still far from perfect. Toby had just finished his morning walk-through with his assistant principal of culture, Nadia. As they returned to their shared office space, he briskly opened his computer as he sat down, determined to come up with an actionable plan to address the unruly behaviors he and Nadia had just observed in three of the eight homeroom classes.

“So...” Nadia began.

“So...” Toby repeated. They quickly dove into their debrief protocol, citing the positives in each classroom as they crafted the feedback e-mails to each teacher. After they'd ended the bite-sized action steps for each staff member, they began to discuss the upcoming PD scheduled for the following Monday. “I believe we need to revisit our rituals and routines,” Toby began. “Particularly around expectations for active listening to the speaker”. Nadia agreed, and they set forth to complete their professional development plan.

As they began to plan, Toby reflected upon what they'd just seen in the sixth-grade classes. As they added four new homeroom classes to the school, Toby had intentionally moved two of the former sixth-grade teachers up to seventh grade, so he would not have an entirely new teaching staff in sixth grade. He wanted to make sure

that as the school grew, the rituals and routines he and his staff had worked so hard to instill the previous year were maintained as the students moved up to seventh grade. Furthermore, he knew the great importance of students experiencing a predictable, organized, and equitable set of behavior systems representative of their clear high expectations for student behaviors.

While the clearly-outlined behavior ladder and paycheck system – students would receive a fake dollar when a teacher caught them doing something that exemplified the shared core values and expectations of all scholars at SUCCEED-Central which they could spend at the school store every Friday – was largely effective for most students and staff, the rapid doubling of his school staff and ability to hire qualified candidates had led to inconsistencies in the way staff were using the highly structured behavior systems outlined in summer professional development. Toby knew, however, if Nadia and he were able to clearly name the expectations for students and follow up this professional development with tight coaching cycles, they would be able to get the staff and students back on track.

Interpretation and evaluation: The banking model of education in a culture of ‘high expectations’. During Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions, the notion of ‘high expectations’ for student behavior remains largely focused on student compliance and adhesion to clearly defined rules. Many participants described a similar behavior system where students were rewarded for good behavior with a fake monetary incentive and punished through a set of arbitrary consequences for not adhering to these high expectations. To be clear, there are still plenty of schools across governance types that

use such a system to incentivize student behavior – I did so when I was a teacher as well. However, what is key about this description and my interpretation of participants’ stories and reflections is the intended culture described by participants, and the unintended consequences such a tightly regimented and unforgiving behavior system can have on the school culture (Lack, 2009).

This literal banking model of behavior regulation is a clear illustration of the banking model Freire (1970; 2000) proposes in his keystone text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire proposes that in this traditional education model, teachers have all the information and are depositing this information into students – the empty receptacles that receive the deposits. This one-way relationship between students and teachers does not allow for critical thought, engagement, or problem-solving skills to be fostered in the students as their only role in this model is to receive the information teachers have. This may seem like a fairly harsh criticism of behavior systems that are common in many schools to this day. To be clear, this is not meant to suggest any behavior system that uses a fake monetary system, or a behavior ladder, is broken. In fact, leaders in this study explained that such a system was actually intended to create more equitable and predictive expectations for all students as they are able to clearly see what the expectations of the students are.

Rather this criticism relates to the rigid structure of such a system, which does not allow for students to reflect on their behaviors and work to adjust their actions through restorative practices (Howard, 2009). This rigidity also does not allow for teachers to

show empathy for a student struggling because of other conditions of which the teacher may not be aware.

Toby's decision to revisit the behavior systems and expected behaviors of students is not in itself problematic – this intentional move is actually a commonly-cited best practice in school leadership. A leader uses the data collected from classroom observations to provide teachers with actionable feedback and plan upcoming professional development opportunities to continuously improve teaching practice and student outcomes (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2010; 2012). However, what is missing from this decision, or the hidden curriculum at play (Jackson, 1990), is that students' ability to reflect on their mistakes, work to correct them, and have greater ownership over their own learning style is not honored nor recognized. Once again, I arrive at these conclusions through my interpretations coupled with co-connoisseurship. I appreciate the reflective, transparent, and vulnerable leaders generous enough to share such reflections with me as they engaged in this difficult, complex, and nuanced work in schools. In the next description I will illustrate how these efficiencies by leaders also intend to highly support the teachers they lead, thereby leading to the codified academic supports, systems, and structures derived from charter schools in Phases 1 and 2. Many leaders still intentionally use these academic supports, systems and structures today due to their ability to support strong academic outcomes for students.

Description. How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop?

Toby walked into the SUCCEED network's central office building 15 minutes early for the network-wide leadership meeting. With coffee in one hand and his revised school culture plan in the other, he backed into the door, opening it for Edward to join him in the brightly-lit reception area.

“Good morning, Edward,” Toby greeted the network's founder and CEO as he held the large glass door open with his foot.

“Morning, Toby,” Edward retorted, returning the favor at the second set of heavy glass doors, boldly etched with the SUCCEED network logo and mission statement. As the two men passed by the empty reception desk, they continued with their pleasantries, making an intentional effort to build a culture of mutual care for one another's fairly limited personal lives before diving into the professional dialogue that would consume the next several hours of their Wednesday mornings.

Edward launched the meeting right at 8:00 am, ensuring he kept to the tightly-structured agenda with his five principals, each of whom ran their own SUCCEED campus within the network. Since Toby had come on as the fourth school site, Edward had lobbied with the city's district officials to open a fifth SUCCEED campus in the Fall. The fifth leader, Priscilla, was now in her year-zero planning phase for opening the next SUCCEED campus, SUCCEED-River, so named for its location in the small River neighborhood just West of the SUCCEED-South campus.

After participating in a brief ice breaker activity in which each leader shared a short story of a teacher best exemplifying the SUCCEED mission, Edward launched into the first portion of the meeting – reviewing each school leader's current top priority and

rationale for this focus area. Edward typically planned his meetings with an intentional focus on one of the practices most paramount to students' academic success in the network, such as reviewing a recording of a principal providing feedback to a teacher following a classroom observation and leveraging the expertise of the other principals in the room to provide the hosting principal with feedback on their feedback to the individual. While these practices were always impactful, Edward wanted to spend today's time reiterating the key priorities of each school prior to engaging in their more typical learning focus for the day – a critical review of each school's culture plan.

Edward had made this decision due to several factors, but primarily because of the growing size of the network. Next fall, the network would have five school campuses running with approximately 2,000 students being served collectively. As the network grew, Edward knew he needed to ensure his leaders continued to prioritize strong instruction in every classroom in order to keep the fidelity to a culture of high expectations alive and well across the network. This review of leaders' priorities would allow him to better determine the current state of each campus and the alignment to this culture. This would also allow the principals to explore how other schools' priorities could help inform their ongoing work and continue to actively cultivate a culture of high expectations in their own buildings.

“We'll spend the next 30 minutes diving into each school's priorities and providing feedback on these articulated priorities to your peers.” Edward continued in his tight meeting facilitation. “Please take notes using the note catcher on the back of the

agenda. We will then follow up at your upcoming 1:1 visits regarding the feedback from your peers and action steps resulting from today's session."

Priscilla began. The eager young leader had spent the last four months building out the SUCCEED-River plan aligned to the network priorities and had a clearly-defined priority to share with the group today. "Currently, my highest priority is teacher recruitment. The current applicant pool lacks sufficient prospective teachers with a clear alignment to the mission fit of the organization. I need to find a strong teaching staff with the deep belief that every student is capable of getting into college. I'll continue to work with Edward and the recruitment team to determine next steps to meet this outstanding need for SUCCEED-River." As Priscilla finished her share-out, the other leaders in the network continued to take notes on the back of their crisp agendas, preparing to move into the feedback round to follow. Toby followed suit. He wasn't quite sure how to articulate it, but he felt a bit uncomfortable with this idea of 'mission fit'. Was this another way of saying whether or not the candidate would fit in with the dominant narrative? Instead, he wrote "Define criteria for 'mission fit'" on his note catcher.

Dominic followed Priscilla. Dominic was the current principal of the SUCCEED-South campus. After Ben left the network, Dominic had been recruited from another charter network to take over the school's campus. He had more leadership experience than any other principal in the network – a need in the network for which Edward had intentionally recruited Dominic to fulfill. "My highest priority is ensuring my teachers have the resources to be the very best teachers they can be for our students." Dominic's

economy of language always impressed Edward – he had a clear vision for his school that he was able to distinctly articulate without mincing words.

“The highest priority in our school this semester is a more intentional focus on student outcome data,” Miranda, the leader of SUCCEED-North shared. “Our growth results met state expectations last year, but we did not meet our school’s goals to exceed on the growth measures. I believe that fostering this focus on student outcomes and data tracking will augment the culture of high achievement so paramount to our success.”

“My highest priority at the moment is similar to Miranda’s over at the North campus,” Aaron shared. Aaron was the principal at SUCCEED-West, the network’s very first campus. “We also have been very intentionally focused on the use of student data to drive instructional decisions. The way I think about this focus, though, is through the need to build a strong sense of urgency amongst our staff and students. This laser-like focus on student achievement is the only way we’ll truly achieve the mission of SUCCEED.”

The other leaders in the room nodded in agreement as they continued to take notes on the articulated priorities of each of their colleagues, simultaneously scribbling potential questions to ask one another in the upcoming feedback section of the meeting.

It was Toby’s turn to share. While he agreed on the importance of a strong culture of data-driven instruction; fostering a sense of urgency among staff and students; providing teachers with any resource needed to better do their job; and the need to recruit the right people with a clear mission fit, his highest priority varied slightly from those of

his peers. “My highest priority is instruction.” As he shared this simple notion, everyone in the room smiled, recording their notes in the second to last section of the note catcher.

Toby went on, appreciating the shared sense of ownership over this priority he felt from his peers. “I agree with all the priorities everyone else has shared thus far. The way that I think about how to operationalize those priorities to drive towards our mission at SUCCEED-Central, however, is through strong instructional practices. These allow us to do the other work required to meet our school’s rigorous academic goals and ultimately ensure every student’s academic outcomes open the doors to college admission.” As Toby finished sharing, he began thinking further about how his stated priority could be further enhanced by the priorities shared by his peers. Before he had the chance to internally articulate this reflection fully, Edward moved to his share-out.

“My current priority is a focus on advocacy,” Edward began. “I know we can continue to expand our impact through the expansion of our current school sites and through the intentional work you all do every day.” Edward paused to allow his leaders to refocus their attention on the progression of the network as a whole. “In addition to this, we will continue to expand our school sites,” Edward continued, happy that he was able to share this announcement within the content of the meeting. “After Priscilla’s school in River opens this fall, I’m advocating for two more campuses in the next two years.” Edward used this opportunity to transition into the feedback round, where he was eager to receive feedback on his stated priority alongside each of his direct reports.

Interpretation and evaluation: Articulation of the codified technical solutions. The above description is projected to clearly articulate the stated priorities of

many participants, demonstrate the intended culture leaders develop to create conditions for academic success, and explore how the perceived experiences of school leaders in high performing charter schools lead to the culture they intend to develop. This structure for the sharing of schools' priorities was a fictionalization intended to embed these data within the narrative structure selected for the data presentation (Barone, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This meeting structure also illustrates the intended culture of high performing charter schools during Phase 2.

Participants in the study expressed repeatedly the need for a crystal-clear focus on strong academic outcomes for students. School leaders leading an individual school site articulated this through the need for clear systems and structures to support teachers in supporting students. These supports often included elements such as the time and resources to plan for and deliver high-quality, rigorous instruction to their students; recruitment of a strong, mission-driven staff⁸ to collectively meet the school's high goals; and a clear focus on the student data to drive towards strong academic outcomes as measured by standardized assessments.

For executive directors of networks these priorities equally focused on providing the resources and systems which schools need to support teachers in being the very best they can be for their students. Leaders of entire networks also articulated the need for a

⁸ While participants shared the importance of having a staff fully in support of the mission of the organization, in Phases 3 and 4 participants expressed findings that recruiting on the basis of being 'mission-driven' had led to unintended consequences. Because the rhetoric around the mission of the organization was privileging the dominant narrative, leaders began to broaden the ways they would find mission-driven teachers and leaders to increase staff diversity (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017). I share Toby's internal reflections on the idea of 'mission fit' to illustrate how in Phase 2, unpacking such structures that may be problematic had not yet become a part of the collective dialogue, but instead were brief reflections and flittering thoughts of leaders in this phase.

clear, shared vision among their school leaders that continued to drive toward maintaining high expectations for all students – particularly as their networks grew and adapted over time. Simultaneously they articulated the need to continuously advocate for their network in the broader education community.

As I explained in the literature review regarding the socio-political context surrounding high-performing charter schools, there has been substantial legislation over the years which creates the conditions for high-performing charter schools to rapidly expand in size and impact (Apple, 2014; Mora & Christianakis, 2013; Ravitch, 2013). As charters operate in a dual reality, however, critics of these school environments have conversely been very vocal about the detriments such environments may produce for the education space as a whole. As I interviewed executive directors of high-performing charter networks across the country, I repeatedly heard that advocacy work for their schools was an important part of their roles. It is important to note that this intentional advocacy for their networks' abilities to flourish and grow in the current socio-political climate and rhetoric drove from a deep belief in the mission of their organizations. This intentional advocacy also came from the impact they had and wanted to expand on regarding academic outcomes they were getting for students in traditionally underserved communities.

This description comes in Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions to explain the historical roots of the strong practices which continue to drive the academic outcomes of high performing charter schools. These clear, reliable, efficient and intentional priorities of school leaders largely remain the focus to this day (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012). These

priority areas – providing teachers with the resources and training they need to be their best for students; strategically focusing on instructional support and delivery; recruiting staff members with a deep belief in the mission of the organization; and using student outcome data to drive instructional decisions – are paramount to providing opportunities for strong academic outcomes to be sustained in high-performing charter schools.

While these priorities continued to drive towards a very intentional culture of high expectations for all students, in Phases 3 and 4 I will explore the unintended consequences of the operationalization of some of these priorities. I will also describe how leaders continuously improve their practice through their reflective, vulnerable and transparent identities to intentionally maintain a culture of high expectations and academic success for all students while negating the unintended consequences resulting from some of the initial grounding principles pervasive in the original ‘no excuses’ charter school environments. This allows them to more quickly move along the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership continuum – they largely do not stagnate in one phase. For the moment, however, we will continue with Toby’s journey at SUCCEED with a focus on the sustainability of leadership in Phase 2.

Description. How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop? What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?

Toby drove home from another long day at SUCCEED-Central. The familiar feelings of exhaustion, fulfillment, and inspiration settled into his shoulders with the

same weight as the rain pattering on his front windshield in the twilight. He had just finished a powerful community meeting with a group of families in seventh grade – the teachers had planned the meeting to celebrate the academic success of the grade level on their most recent science unit. Toby called his wife, Sheila, on his nearly-dead cell phone as he merged onto the highway towards the small duplex the two had bought shortly after Toby had begun his second year as an AP U.S. History teacher at SUCCEED several years earlier.

“Hi Honey,” Toby began the familiar conversation with his supportive partner. “I’m almost there. Is the baby still up?” Toby felt the guilt spill over him, washing the previous feelings of fulfillment and inspiration away as he tended to his personal responsibilities. Hopeful he would be able to briefly interact with his three-month old son before gobbling down a quick meal and heading to bed for tomorrow’s early morning staff meeting, Toby continued to steal a few minutes of conversation with his patient wife as he clicked up the speed on the windshield wipers, careful to use the phone’s speaker feature so he could make it home safely in the encroaching darkness and swelling rainfall.

This routine had become a part of Toby’s daily life during his second year as principal at SUCCEED-Central. In addition to his duties as school principal, Toby had recently taken on his own fifth period mathematics class. The math teacher had gone on medical leave a few weeks earlier, and Toby had not yet found a quality candidate to fulfill the important teaching role mid-year. He therefore committed to teaching the class

in the interim, ensuring that the students enrolled continued to receive high quality instruction regardless of the unexpected absence of their regular math teacher.

Toby was also getting ready to welcome a new group of sixth-graders in the fall as his original group of 100 seventh-graders – 75 of whom would still be at the school the following year – would move up to the final grade of the full build-out of the middle school. He was therefore working tirelessly to interview candidates from the pre-selected ‘hot list’ the SUCCEED network’s recruitment staff had sent over last week while simultaneously working to secure the four additional classrooms he would require in the shared campus space. These additional responsibilities, coupled with his weekly commitment to lead the four-hour Saturday school for struggling students, left little time for him to be present for his own growing family. He no longer had a limited personal life to idly discuss with his colleagues – he was now a husband and a father – two jobs for which SUCCEED’s principal training program had not prepared him.

Toby had proven that he could sustain strong academic outcomes for his students over multiple years – their interim assessment scores were among the highest in the network. The question now was, however, could he sustain himself?

Interpretation and evaluation: Navigating the levels of leadership; building a culture of high academic success. Toby’s experience driving home late from work is one common to many professionals in and outside education – trying to balance the demands of a fulfilling, meaningful career with one’s personal life and commitments. In this context, however, I intend to balance the sustainability of the role of principal in Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions with the high need to do whatever it takes to

ensure students' strong academic outcomes reflect a supportive school culture and drive towards the opportunity of college acceptance for every student.

As participants in the study shared their typical work day, duties ranged from those typical of a principal – such as observing teachers and providing feedback, leading staff meetings, and interacting with parents – to those duties that may fall outside the traditional scope of the work of a school leader. Several principals of high-performing charters shared that in addition to their administrative duties, they also continued to teach their own class in the school. The rationale for this action varied from participant to participant, but typically resulted from a need to fulfill a teaching duty for which they were currently hiring. By teaching the class themselves, they could ensure students continued to receive strong instruction as they solved for the gap in human resources. Leaders in all phases across the continuum also described their typical days as being very long and, in some cases, including a weekly Saturday school – a practice that was once fairly common in high-performing charter schools.

Additionally, leaders in this phase created intentional opportunities to involve parents in their students' learning. They held community-wide parent meetings, after-school demonstrations of academic learning, and required all parents to attend annual parent-teacher conferences. These intentional opportunities to involve parents are, once again, not unique to high-performing charter schools. However, leaders referenced the importance of these opportunities to intentionally build a culture of academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In the later phases of the continuum, we will see how there were unintended consequences with the way in which these connections with parents

were initially approached, and how leaders adapted practices of parent involvement over time to develop more diverse, equitable and inclusive cultures that leveraged parents as leaders in the school culture (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017).

The purpose for taking on these additional duties was clear – to continue driving towards the school’s academic goals. This laser-like focus on academic success and the production of such results is a clear testament to the culture leaders intend to develop – a culture which achieves the mission of their school or network, not leaving any students’ academic outcomes to chance. I applaud the efforts of leaders that are willing to take any and all steps necessary to fulfill their organization. This is a true demonstration of servant leadership (Heider, 2014).

These experiences and intentions are also reminiscent, however, of Maxwell’s (2011) Level 3 Leadership explored in the literature review. Level 3: Production-Level Leaders focus on the production of results. While this level of leadership does lead to the ability for leaders to ensure the production of desired results and show their teams the manner in which they do so, Level 3: Production does not lead to the sustainable growth of the organization as a whole. This critique of Level 3 leadership matches the notion of needing the ability to create sustainable conditions for schools to thrive. Many leaders in Phase 2 explained how very unsustainable their work was as they led their young schools in developing codified technical solutions to produce strong academic results for students. To be clear, I am not suggesting that teaching your own class as a school leader is inherently problematic, but rather that participants spoke to the sustainability of their

work given the many additional responsibilities they took on despite their already-full workloads.

In addition to the inability to sustain this leadership level for the leaders themselves, leaders in this phase also expressed how such strong academic results are produced in a structured, rules-based culture which may not foster the academic ownership of individual students – an important theme to allow leaders to move into Levels 4 and 5 of Maxwell’s (2011) leadership framework. In these higher levels of leadership, leaders are focused on growing others to produce and lead instead of being more focused on producing themselves. This is where both the results and day to day operations of a school become sustainable. Leading others to produce and lead also frees the mental capacity for leaders to focus on the unintended consequences of some of the early practices of high-performing charter schools. Simultaneously, the leader can now leverage the individuals she has empowered to help develop and sustain the school culture of which they are a part. In Phase 4, I will describe how leaders do this through Emery’s work with the principal council she forms with her middle school students.

Finally, I’ll draw attention to the shrinking size of the founding student class at SUCCEED-Central. Toby began with 100 students in sixth grade. However, the sixth grade founding class would begin in eighth grade with 75 students two years later. Twenty-five students had either left or been asked to leave SUCCEED-Central, and their seats were not replaced. While not the case with all participants in the study, this detail is representative of an important structural policy with some high performing charter schools in Phases 1 and 2. Participants explained that in these earlier phases policies

were intentionally put in place to not enroll students in the later years of the school's development. Two participants also reported that earlier in the development of their schools, they asked students whose behaviors were not representative of the 'high expectations' they held for their scholars to leave.

This initial intention was later found to be problematic, and both participants who shared this practice also explained how their networks had changed these original policies to better match the mission and values of their organizations. I will further explore this pivot in the structures and policies of high performing CMOs, representative of their pivoting intentions, in Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures.

To end Toby's story, I share a quotation from a participant about Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions. I will let this quotation sit in isolation, as I believe at this point, I have provided my description, interpretation, and evaluation of high-performing charter schools in Phase 2. In the spirit of co-connoisseurship, I now allow my participants' voice and own analysis of schools' codified technical solutions to emerge untouched.

Participant analysis of Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions.

“I kind of feel like critics of charter schools often see charter schools - like successful high-performing charters walking around, thumping their chest, like, ‘Look at us, look at us,’ and yeah maybe they do some of that. And they're advertising and recruiting to families. But I think that comes from what we want - as many kids as we can to come experience this and go to our schools because we're doing great work here. And we believe in it. And so, I think that comes from a good place. I think what's lost a lot of the time in the criticism is just like, the humility of a leader. We're not perfect and we make mistakes all the time. We want to continue to learn and grow. And every time I've sat in a kickoff meeting with all the staff at the school, it's a celebration of people, and then it's a celebration of results, and then it's a like, but here's where we've gotta get better. What do we do next?”

Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures - Anne

Description. How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead?

Last year had not ended well for Anne. She had spent the last two months of the school year standing outside the upper grade bathrooms monitoring students' quiet use of the toilets. When I say upper grades, I mean eighth graders. The sixth graders seemed to not have any trouble with bathroom behaviors according to SUCCEED's well-developed

criteria for restroom use, but the eighth graders had been caught on more than one occasion throwing paper towel balls soaked in water at each other while separate from the watchful eyes of their classroom teacher. After it had finally gotten physical during one of these typically innocuous episodes, it was clear to both she and her principal that she would need to step in to ensure that students were able to go to the bathroom quickly and safely so as not to distract from instructional time.

She totally understood this – if kids weren't given the best educational experience every day, then the leadership team and staff would do whatever it took to ensure they were. It's just that in the first half of the year, this had meant Anne had been intensely focused on coaching their two new teachers until their daily instruction produced the necessary results on exit tickets and interims to merit observations dropping back to weekly instead of daily. Now, while all but one classroom was on track to having 65% of students pass state exams in the Spring, the hallway behavior of eighth graders ready to move campuses to the SUCCEED - West High School clearly did not demonstrate the *SUCCEED Way* – the common motto that replaced the network's previous *no excuses* mantra. The *SUCCEED Way* described the clear behavior expectations that had been established since the moment students walked in the SUCCEED – First Steps campus door as Kindergarteners.

After two months of bathroom duty, the eighth graders had completed their courses with the expected results. Sixty-five percent of students passed state exams and were well prepared to take on the academic challenges of SUCCEED in high school. They were ready to take the next step toward the ultimate measure of success within the

network – being admitted to, enrolling in, and graduating from the four-year university of their choice.

But that didn't change Anne's disdain for the last two months of bathroom duty. To be clear, the bathroom duty job itself was only mildly insulting for a brilliant, double-masters school leader who had on her own accord exceeded the 65% goal on state assessments in her Honors Algebra class at the SUCCEED-Central campus. It was more what it represented. Why did a school leader have to stand outside the bathroom at a school where students inside classrooms were mastering the great works of Maya Angelou and Pam Muñoz Ryan with such poise and rigor that the mayor had already nominated their campus as a "School to Watch" for the year? Particularly given that 85% of Anne's students were either Latino-Hispanic or African-American, and that 96% of students qualified for free and reduced lunch rates, it just didn't quite sit right with Anne. She believed so deeply in the mission of SUCCEED and was constantly blown away by the amazing teachers and students she had the privilege of working with each day. Yet eighth graders couldn't be trusted to go to the bathroom without getting a demerit? Was this because of their racial and ethnic backgrounds? She couldn't put her finger on it, but something didn't add up.

Interpretation and evaluation: Exploring dual realities: The clash between academic success and behavior expectations. This description to open Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures, intends to illustrate the presence of these dual realities which encapsulate many of the experiences of leaders in high-performing charter schools. Anne's reflections represent the irony of the events shared by a participant who did have

to fulfill this role during a particularly low point in the school's culture at the time. Here I use the experience of the leader along with their personal reflections to demonstrate how dichotomous the school culture of high-performing charters is for a leader, school or network transitioning from Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions, to Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures.

The intentions of the school administration in the above vignette are to ensure students are held to high expectations across all parts of the day, including when they use the shared bathroom space. However, how this operationalizes is in direct contrast with the meaningful work going on inside classrooms. The question, then, becomes how a school can justify the use of an administrator to monitor something as trivial as bathroom behavior in the same building where students are academically challenged to degrees far exceeding those of their peers across the state? In this case, while students' academic intellect is being challenged and developed, their behaviors are not. This is one of the problematic structures I will continue to unpack in Phase 3 based on my interpretation and evaluation, and in collaboration with participants through the use of co-connoisseurship. There is a recognizable, problematic discrepancy between the nuanced, meaningful academic expectations leaders have for students and the strict, oppressive behavior expectations these same individuals unintentionally message to their children (Lack, 2009; Ravitch, 2013).

The good news is, because leaders in high-performing charter schools are highly reflective, transparent and vulnerable in the way they lead, they do not live in this dual reality for long. Once the issue is recognized they reshape the narrative, attempting to

move along the continuum and take action to reverse systems of oppression present in their buildings. I now move into Anne's courageous leadership intended to address another potentially problematic structure – silent hallways in her middle school.

Description. How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop?

As Anne finished her instructional rounds with the sixth-grade teacher leader, she began to mentally prepare herself for the upcoming meeting with her principal. She had been pushing Priscilla to begin implementing some of the ideas she was leading for the network as a whole at the SUCCEED-River campus. Anne was the assistant principal of instruction for the seventh-grade team, though all of the assistant principals worked together closely. This was most recently demonstrated by Anne's bathroom duty to support eighth grader's behaviors the previous spring. In her third year with the network, Anne had taken on several additional responsibilities to grow her leadership and influence in the network.

She was in the leadership fellowship intended to prepare her to take on a principalship herself in the next one to two years, and she had volunteered to lead the network-wide initiative focused on diversity, equity and inclusion. As one of the few school leaders who were women of color, Anne believed that her voice, perspective, passion and leadership were important as the network continued their refinement of

systems and structures which supported a diverse, equitable and inclusive community⁹. These efforts were one of the primary reasons Anne agreed to stay with the network and expand her leadership in this environment. After ten years of experience with both district-run and charter schools, Anne had a pretty clear sense of what she was looking for in a school environment. The last high-performing charter network where she'd taught had not made the same efforts to grow her leadership, nor had they been open to the frank dialogue now commonplace in the SUCCEED diversity committee meetings Anne led monthly.

While these same conversations were not quite as prevalent with Anne's seventh grade school-based leadership team, she had developed a strong rapport with her principal who appreciated her critical perspective regarding the school culture at SUCCEED-River. Anne entered Priscilla's warmly decorated office just as she was finishing up a call with a prospective student's family. Despite the consistent waitlist to enroll at the SUCCEED-River campus, Priscilla understood consistently recruiting families to join the SUCCEED community was of primary importance. She deeply believed every student in the city deserved a quality education and the promise of college admission and graduation.

⁹ I debated whether or not to include this rationale for Anne's leadership on the diversity committee. Ultimately, I decided to include it because a participant did use this rationale for wanting to be further involved in the work. She believed that she had a level of empathy with students based on her race and background that provided a necessary perspective for the work. That being said, I recognize that prototyping the leader of color as the champion of equity may unintentionally lack a shared ownership of this priority, further marginalizing this important body of work (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017).

“What’s up?” Priscilla motioned Anne into the room as she hung up the phone, her engagement ring that adorned her thin, pale hand sparkling brightly in the sunlight peering through the large glass office windows. Anne shut the principal’s office door behind her and sat down in the modern, straight-backed chair with black leather cushions across her principal’s desk.

“I wanted to revisit the notion of silent hallways with you,” Anne began the conversation quickly, knowing she and Priscilla both had limited time before their next meeting began.

“Alright, tell me more,” Priscilla invited her mentee to continue sharing as she closed her laptop screen, leaning forward with her arms gently folded over the top of the standing desk one of the school’s donors had generously provided for the campus, along with a number of other structural pieces, when SUCCEED-River first opened.

“I just don’t think we need silent hallways,” Anne began. Her thoughts had been clearly organized based on her ongoing conversations on the subject. “I think it really comes down to our belief systems,” Anne could feel the heat building around her pensive expression as she petitioned for the change to a decade-old school policy. She pushed her round, charcoal glasses back up off the flat bridge of her nose as she lobbied. “In order for students to be engaged and respectful, do they really *have* to be silent?” As Anne proposed the rhetorical question to her principal, she scooted forward on the tightly-packed leather chair cushion.

“As I think about this policy, I wonder if this is in place because we need to have silent hallways to show we value learning time, or if this policy is outdated. The way that

I think about it is if I am enacting my implicit bias onto students. The value of learning time matters. But when the rule – silent hallways – results in students being screamed at in the hallway, it actually negates the purpose for the rule. Then the teacher’s screaming is interrupting the students’ learning time, along with the learning time of the class next to the place in the hallway where she’s screaming at her students.” Anne knew this last image may have been hyperbolic for some teachers, but there certainly had been incidents during the year where the power struggle to get kids to be silent had gone so far that Anne had to step in to get kids back to class in a timely manner.

Priscilla listened carefully to Anne’s concerns, wondering if such a change in policy would be beneficial to the school community, or result in even more unclear expectations for students and teachers. After taking a moment to gather her thoughts, Priscilla asked Anne to run the idea by her seventh-grade team. After she’d gathered more data from the grade level, Priscilla and Anne would meet again to determine whether or not to move forward with the change in policy. As Anne left Priscilla’s office, she began thinking through when she could bring this up to the grade level team. She was thrilled to be getting so much traction with this work. She knew the students at the school were capable of handling this release of control – just look at what they were doing in class!

Interpretation and evaluation: Exploring dual realities: Values-based or rules-based? This description focuses on one of the primary dual realities participants expressed as we explored their intentions to develop a particular school culture – one of high expectations and a strong focus on student learning. In these conversations, leaders

shared how important the values of the school and/or network were to their success. The values of each network of course vary, but one shared value – whether articulated in the school’s marketing materials or not – was a strong focus on the importance of instructional time. This value is, of course, a focus of most schools. In high-performing charter schools, however, I found an even more intense and articulated focus on this value. In one interview, a school leader went so far as to recite the instructional days, hours and minutes he had available to support students in meeting their rigorous academic goals.

The dual reality, then, becomes the degree of slippage between the intended value and how it is operationalized through the school’s culture (Uhrmacher, 1991). The rules and strict culture developed and sustained in the first two phases of high-performing charter schools were rationalized due to their desire to demonstrate this important value – student learning and instructional time. By having efficient systems and structures which frequently manifested as a very strict, ‘no excuses’ culture, schools were able to maximize instructional time, leaving little room for behavioral concerns to pop up. What this unintentionally did, however, was limit students’ social-emotional growth, something Ben explained in his reflections about why he wouldn’t send his own child to his SUCCEED school in Phase 1: Early Stages (Matthews, 2009).

Simultaneously, leaders in Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures begin to question the strict academic culture. They have largely abandoned the notion of ‘no excuses’ to make room for a more nuanced, messy world where the culture of the school and its reflection of the values of the organization can authentically manifest. In this

phase, participants wrestle with how one's intentions can emerge from the values of the school instead of being based solely in the arbitrary rules devised to make the technical space for instructional time, despite the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1990) and banking model (Freire, 2000) such rules may create.

At this point I move into how the I, the researcher, explored this theme with a participant in the study. You will see the messiness of this work come across, not only in how the school must adjust to the less-than-perfect external appearance of the culture when a rule such as silent hallways is removed, but also my own reflections on the messiness of using co-connoisseurship to explore the experiences of these leaders. I will illustrate my inability to bracket out my bias in this study, particularly when using co-connoisseurship as a methodological approach. I then interpret and evaluate both the findings related to the study, as well as my reflexivity as a qualitative researcher pioneering the notion of co-connoisseurship (Guillemin & Gillam 2004).

Description. How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead?

Anne arrived at the coffee shop just as I opened up my book bag, pulling out the familiar interview protocol and recording device. "Hi Anne!" I motioned her over to the small wooden table in the back corner of the quaint coffee house. As we prepared for our second interview at the familiar location, we quickly settled into our seats, chatting briefly as I finished setting up the small microphone to record her meaningful reflections in her current role as a school leader at the SUCCEED-River campus.

I was getting ready to ask the first question when Anne interjected – “I wanted to let you know that after our last conversation, I pushed for us not to have silent hallways. We don't have silent hallways anymore.”

“That’s awesome, Anne!” I replied. I thought back to our previous interview just as I realized how much I was blurring the lines between researcher and co-creator of the reflections Anne had shared in our last interaction. Anne had been working with a committee of leaders across the network to lead the efforts around the network’s designated priority for the year – a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion. Anne had also been working to think through the structures in her own building, and whether or not these structures were necessary to drive towards the mission of the organization. When silent hallways came up, Anne had experienced some disequilibrium around the issue. She had shared with me that she didn’t think silent hallways were necessary, but that the school was still enforcing this rule with students. Anne had seen this practice as detrimental to students and their learning. Were silent hallways really necessary in order to protect learning time – the rationale articulated by the school – or was this method of control really leading to unintended consequences for students – primarily students of color – who were being treated as though they weren’t responsible enough to talk as they passed between classes? Anne continued to share her progress since our last conversation.

“I was like, this really makes me mad,” Anne quietly tittered as she spoke, “I’m actually going to - I’m gonna - not do this anymore.”

“Oh, I love that! Thanks for telling me that!” I responded. My biases as a researcher and practitioner were spilling out into the small coffee shop’s safe ambience before I had a chance to stop myself.

“Yeah.” Anne responded, leaning back in the plastic folding chair which matched the overall eclectic décor of the interview location.

I began to regain my composure as a researcher, intending to dig into the recent insight with less bias than my initial reaction had demonstrated. “Was it like a - was it a pretty easy transition? Or was it...” before I could get the full question out, Anne finished my thought.

“...it was - easier than I thought it would be to convince my principal. And then easier than I thought it would be to convince the seventh-grade team to do it. Um – “

“Is it just seventh grade or is it all grade levels? How are the kids handling it?” Now *I* was the one cutting off the participant. *Keep it together, Brittany!* I thought to myself.

“It's all grades but, um, well they're not being - they're not whispering like we said that we wanted but it's also - it's been mostly fine.” Anne laughed at herself, continuing with her transparent explanation of her current progress with this messy work. “Yeah. I would say just as much time is spent on learning as it was before minus the like, dynamic of power - you would just see people screaming at children. You have to be silent for no reason. So, we’ve had less negativity. So, it's been good.” As Anne finished sharing this revelation resulting from our last interview, I couldn’t help but beam. I knew I certainly wasn’t the only reason the school had made the change to this policy – they had been

doing a lot of work to break down these power structures and their impact on students. However, I was elated that I had perhaps been able to have even a small positive impact on my participant by allowing her the time and space to reflect upon these behavior systems so embedded in her network's makeup; even if I had completely lost my more neutral stance in the interview momentarily.

Interpretation and evaluation: Leader identity in exploring dual realities:

The clash between academic success and behavior expectations. I share this incident for three distinct purposes: (1) to demonstrate the swift action of leaders in high-performing charter schools when they discover a practice that they do not believe is in the best interest of their students; (2) to share the reflective, transparent, and vulnerable identity of participants leading at high-performing charter schools, and (3) to demonstrate reflexivity as I navigated the successes and difficulties I experienced using co-connoisseurship as a methodological approach in this study (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

I believe this vignette to be particularly illustrative of the action-oriented identity of leaders in high-performing charter schools, an identity informed by both the inner and outer forces of their experiences (Palmer, 1998). In this instance Anne had taken the action to change a policy deeply embedded in her school's culture, an action based on her reflections during the previous interview with me, the researcher. Anne had reflected upon the implicit biases that were manifesting through implementation of the silent hallway policy in her building and had worked with her principal to quickly reverse the policy. She was truly a leader that was always learning and creating spaces for her staff

to do the same, thereby demonstrating strong adaptability in her practice (Fullan, 2014; Heifetz & Linsky, 2017).

As soon as Anne realized that she did not believe silent hallways were actually serving the intended purpose – to provide more instructional learning time – she worked to rapidly make a change that she believed would have a more positive impact on her students. While Anne’s internal competencies allowed her to take this meaningful step, thereby demonstrating her adaptable leadership identity (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017), Anne also knew her principal would support her in this work. This outer force (Palmer) is representative of the culture leaders in high-performing charter schools intend to develop. As the participant quoted at the end of Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions shared, *“...it's a celebration of results, and then it's a like, but here's where we've gotta get better. What do we do next?”*

This vignette also demonstrates three elements of identity I found to be pervasive amongst the majority of participants for this study – the reflective, transparent, and vulnerable nature of leaders in high-performing charter schools. In this instance, Anne had clearly reflected upon the policy and worked with her principal to take action. She demonstrated her transparent purpose for requesting this change by referring to her own implicit bias and her transparent reflections regarding the actual purpose of such a policy as she spoke with her principal. Finally, when Anne shared the progress made thus far with me, she didn’t mind the vulnerability that came with being honest about the impact on hallway behavior as the school made this transition. She expressed the lack of quiet hallway behavior the school intended when they rolled out the new policy. These

elements of leader identity are what allow leaders to not only arrive at Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures, but also allow them to propel into Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future.

Finally, this description allows me the space to explore my own biases and interview practices as a researcher (Creswell, 2012; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). When the participant who inspired the above description shared with me how our last interview had allowed her to further reflect upon whether or not she agreed with the silent hallway policy and ultimately take action to change the policy with the support of her principal, I was grateful to be a part – albeit a small part – of this change. To be clear, I didn't honestly have any real stake in whether or not hallways at the participant's school were silent. I had never visited the participant's school. Nor had I spoken with any students regarding how they felt about the silent hallway policy. However, I had been able to explore the potentially problematic hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1990) such a policy conveyed with the participant, and knew based on our last discussion that the policy was incongruent with the school culture she intended to develop and sustain.

When I listened to the interview recording and transcribed the exchange, however, I was shocked by my clear agreement with the change to the policy and inability to let the participant share what had happened without interruption. This demonstrates the growing pains I experienced as a researcher during this study. This exchange allowed me to reflect upon the benefits of the use of co-connoisseurship to enhance our deeper understanding of the subject. Conversely, I recognize the risks I take as I work with participants to co-construct our deeper understanding of high-performing

charter schools, particularly when I unintentionally push forward my notions of what a leader should or should not do instead of maintaining a role as researcher whose purpose is to primarily learn from the participant in order to more fully appreciate, discern, and value the experiences and reflections leaders share with me (Uhrmacher et. al, 2017). While I will return to these notions during the thematics discussion in Chapter 5, for the moment I will continue with another important concept shared by leaders in Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures – the enrollment structure of high-performing charter schools and its impact on the culture leaders intend to develop.

Description. What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?

Edward sat in front of his governing board, a mix of frustration, elation and passion swirling through his head, heart, and body as he thought through the best way to respond to the important questions being raised. The network’s founder and CEO had just shared with the powerful group of community members that made up the SUCCEED governing board the most recent state accreditation rating and assessment scores of all twelve schools in the network. While all but one of their schools was either meeting or exceeding state expectations, the network’s results were not meeting the rigorous goals Edward, his board and his principals had set a year earlier. One of the newer board members wanted to know why Edward believed the network was not meeting the goals outlined. When the network was much newer, the schools had been able to maintain the highest two accreditation ratings in the state and largely had kept the promise to ensure all students were accepted to the four-year university of their choice.

Edward knew that the answer to this important question was much more complicated than he would be able to divulge in this hour-long interaction, but the glaring change from the formative years of the network's enrollment structure to current day was certainly relevant. Edward recognized the importance of reminding the board of their intentional decision to make a structural decision which continued to impact the network's results. "The years you are referring to, Justina," Edward tried to convey his respect for the board member as he revisited this important decision made prior to her joining the board, "represent the performance of our network prior to the shift in our enrollment policies - before we were serving a student population representative of the broader community." As the CEO and founder of the SUCCEED network determined the most coherent way to share this history, he thought back to the interaction that had ultimately led to the decision.

Edward was preparing to open the SUCCEED-Central campus at the time – the fourth school the network would operate. He had gained many accolades for the work at the other three campuses; their academic results on state exams were significantly outperforming those of other schools serving demographically-similar students at the time. What was even more impressive about these initial successes were that students had to choose to go to a SUCCEED school; they were not automatically enrolled like in traditional neighborhood schools. Edward's network of schools each had a wait list to get in, and he felt the pressure from various stakeholders to rapidly expand in order to provide additional seats for interested families. The superintendent of the school district asked Edward to join him for a meeting regarding the future of the network. Edward was

never sure how these meetings would go – while the superintendent largely supported the work of the charter network, Edward knew how mixed the reviews of SUCCEED were in the public eye – particularly when the rhetoric regularly focused on his intentions to continue with an aggressive expansion model.

“Hi Edward, nice to see you – please – come in,” William and Edward sternly shook hands as the superintendent shut the door to his spacious office behind him, returning to his black leather office chair at the oval-shaped glass table situated in the middle of the grey carpeted room. Edward pushed his forest green tie into his white dress shirt as he sat down, sitting back in the matching swivel chair across from where the superintendent now sat. After exchanging brief pleasantries, the superintendent cleared his throat, clarifying the purpose of discussing the network’s future expansion he’d alluded to when setting up the meeting with Edward.

“As you know, we have an application open to any operator that would like to take over the Richwood Middle School campus when it closes at the end of this year.” The district had worked with the state over the past six months to determine a closure timeline for the struggling school site. William had recently announced a process to determine a turnaround strategy for the school site. “I’d like to invite you to apply to be the turnaround school operator at Richwood,” William continued, laying out his intended plan to Edward. “Here’s how I’d invite you to proceed. Should your application be chosen, you can have all the charter autonomies you have now. You can hire your own people, you can set your own budget, you’re your own non-profit, you can choose your own curriculum – all of these autonomies will remain intact. However, you have to take

a boundary enrollment. By taking on the Richwood campus, you would commit to being the boundary school for the neighborhood.” William paused for a moment to gauge Edward’s reaction. Edward’s silence invited him to continue, wanting to gather all the information from the superintendent before he responded.

“Families would therefore be automatically enrolled at SUCCEED. They would have to choose to opt *out* of SUCCEED, rather than automatically being enrolled elsewhere as is the case at your current campuses. If you commit to this you also have to take kids who come mid-year, and you have to take kids at all grade levels. You can have *every* other autonomy you have now, except for enrollment. This would need to be different.” William now sat back in the flexible seat, waiting patiently for Edward’s response.

Edward’s vivid memory was replaced with the eager expressions in front of him, his current group of advisors awaiting his explanation of the network’s current academic results. He briefly rehashed the conversation with the board, moving into a reminder of the choice he and the members of the board had made at the time of the offer.

“If you’ll remember, we had a really tough decision to make,” Edward brought his board members back to the conversation they’d engaged in all those years earlier. “When we really got down to it, we all agreed.” Edward paused, capturing the attention of the diverse, business-clad audience sitting before him.

“We say we serve all kids, and we say we’re serious about community. So, we either needed to accept this invitation to apply for the turnaround campus, or we needed to stop saying we served all kids. We chose to take on the turnaround school, and as a

result, we also agreed to accept neighborhood enrollment. Due to this, we *do* have campuses in our network that serve a more representative group of students.” The CEO slid his hands through his buzz cut, grabbing his reusable SUCCEED water bottle and taking a swig before reminding his board of the impact and importance of this collective decision.

“This move to turn around the Richwood campus illuminated the *very* significant ways in which those operating conditions - even with *exactly* the same autonomies - were different from the prior operating positions.” Edward wanted to remind his board of the reality of their current context and its impact on the school’s results, yet he still believed deeply in the decision they had made.

“And this is a - and I’m not trying solve my trouble here and I’m not trying to shift your question because you laid out a very clear question that I’m - only sort of answering - but this issue is very fundamental to how many charters operate. If you’ll remember, it drew enormous criticism when we did this from other charter operators who felt like we were caving on a very critical operating autonomy by doing this. That would have a big impact on results. And that’s *right*” Edward’s passion for the decision spit out as he emphasized “right”, the double entendre clear to those who knew it was the *right* decision.

“It does have a big impact on results. And it’s a very significant difference in how some of our charter schools operate. This is the most challenging part of our work now, particularly when we think about how we continue to meet our rigorous goals. But I, as a leader, am not willing to budge on this point. I believe we can be truly of the community

and serve all students and still be a college prep program with continued phenomenal results. But I believe we all recognize that this presents both a lot of operational and resource challenges. I know this is a reality too.” Edward took another sip of water from the SUCCEED bottle he gripped with the same fervor as his commitment to his network’s model. The SUCCEED logo still remained fully intact on the water bottle he’d used every day for the past several years, a metaphorical testament to his resolve to keep the network’s mission intact despite the challenges he faced every day. As Edward recited the mission to himself, he re-emphasized ALL students, knowing the meaningful inclusion of the word “all” as he worked to realize the SUCCEED mission every day: *The Mission of SUCCEED is to prepare ALL students for college through character development, leadership, and 21st century learning.*

Interpretation and evaluation: Diversity, equity and inclusion – negating the hidden curriculum. This vignette was inspired by a story one participant told me when I asked him the question, “Tell me a story that best represents your experiences at your school network?” The above description intends to reveal the importance of this moment in the leader’s experiences at his school network along with the experiences of several other CEOs and founders of various CMOs. When the participant made the decision, in conjunction with his board, to accept a pattern of enrollment more typical of district-run schools, he did so with the intention of negating the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1990) that had become so prevalent in the school’s former enrollment patterns.

The hidden messaging behind the enrollment pattern characteristic of Toby’s school – which had lost 25 students in two years – 25 students whose spots were then

eliminated – sends is that in order to achieve in this environment, ‘scholars’ must fit neatly into the white dominant narrative (Apple, 2014; Ravitch, 2013). If a student does not fit neatly into this model, masked as ‘high expectations’, they are no longer included in the community established – whether by expulsion, suspension, or just getting there too late (before sixth grade begins).

The leader whose story inspired the above description realized this problematic structure within his network (though, to be clear, he did not give this exact interpretation – this is my language) and therefore led his network to change their enrollment policies. Once again, this demonstrates the reflective, transparent and vulnerable identity of many leaders in high performing charter school environments. When he was faced with the decision and forced to determine the deepest values of the network, he reflected on the current model; transparently approached the conversation with his board; and took a very vulnerable step forward. This intentional move demonstrated the values he and his network had developed: once the network started accepting and keeping all students, their value of all students having the opportunity to attend college was possible, thereby negating this particular element of the hidden curriculum.

As another participant whose network made a similar pivot explained, “Once you choose us, we commit – we won’t un-choose you.” All leaders whose networks made this change to enrollment policies recognized the importance of their actions to negate this element of the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1990). This, then, begins to further drive forward the notions of creating more diverse, equitable, and inclusive schools (Padmsee & Crowe, 2017; Riehl, 2009). All leaders that made this move also expressed the

difficulty of truly serving all students; yet simultaneously continue to believe deeply in their mission and therefore this notion. While no leader specifically articulated this, I do believe that this programmatic change in enrollment was in part the catalyst that allowed schools to pivot on a number of other key issues, primarily the rules and policies indicative of a ‘no excuses’ mantra.

The very adaptive challenge schools face, then, is how to release the problematic strict codes of discipline so inherent to their initial model while simultaneously maintaining the rigorous academic environment and outcomes that grew their enrollment, expansion and notoriety in Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions. I explore these notions with Anne in the following description, using co-connoisseurship to further my own understanding of these dual realities and reconceptualizing them through the development of the four phases of high performing charter schools I outline in the study.

Description. How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop? What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?

Anne arrived at our final interview in the same routine fashion we’d both become accustomed to. She sat down across from me, clearly having rushed in from her long day’s work at SUCCEED-River. She placed her heavy workbag on the floor, carefully leaning it against the large wooden table. With her hair pulled back in a loose bun, Anne’s poised posture demonstrated a familiar expression of humble confidence. We quickly got started with the interview. The weather had turned the previous week, and I

wanted to make sure we were both able to get home before the wet roads turned to ice as the night wore on.

After reviewing the opening preamble and follow-up questions from the previous interview, I pushed forward, eager to get into a more formalized protocol for the co-connoisseurship model I'd been exploring with Anne and several other participants. After alluding to the unconventional structure as I set the tone for the interview, I launched into a more formal description of my methodological approach.

“So, in this next section I'd like to explore with you the idea of co-connoisseurship.” As I shared the label my advisor had helped me come up with to describe this *thing* I was trying out, I could hear the raise in my intonation, indicative of the unfamiliarity I was still experiencing with its now-formalized appellation. “So, the methodology that I'm using for my study is called educational criticism and connoisseurship. It's an arts-based research method that essentially relies upon the researcher to be both a connoisseur, or somebody who appreciates, discerns and evaluates the content, and a critic - not in the way that you might think to criticize, but a critic in terms of how an art critic makes their appreciation, discernment and evaluation public.” I paused for a moment, taking a sip of my lukewarm tea as I found my place in the script in front of me.

“Does that make sense?” Anne nodded, a quiet “yeah” coming out as she generously allowed me to try this new idea out with her.

“And so, within that, I'd like you to consider yourself a connoisseur, or an expert, on high-performing charters, for obvious reasons.” We both let out a comfortable chuckle, filling the brief awkwardness with a joint symbol of permission to proceed.

“You obviously, I believe, fit into this category because you've led a high-performing charter, and you've worked at one, and the majority of your career has been spent in that environment. And so, using this fairly non-traditional interview method, I'm going to run some themes by you that I've been exploring and see how they fit with your perceptions of your experiences at high-performing charter schools. Instead of it being like a more traditional interview where I ask a question and you answer it, I'll try kind of like testing some things out on you to see if this is actually what's emerging from our conversations and from what you know, or is it - not?” I waited for another symbol of permission to proceed.

Anne created the invitation, “Sounds good,” she offered, shifting position in her plastic folding chair as I gathered my next thought.

“OK, cool.” I continued, “So I'd like to explore the ideas of culturally relevant pedagogy with you, and how they map onto your own experiences at SUCCEED.”

“Alright,” Anne invited.

“When people hear of culturally relevant pedagogy, they often think it's kind of like a soft pedagogy if you will - where it's like, oh, like heroes and holidays or you know, just incorporating ‘culture’ and that's the beginning and ending of it. But what Ladson-Billings actually proposes is that it's like, actually a very rigorous and important body of work that we need to incorporate into our schools.”

“It's just good teaching!” Anne exclaimed, taking the article's title straight from my literature review and Ladson-Billings' (1994) framework to further enhance the point I'm stumbling to make, confirming her deep understanding of the pedagogical approach and its practical implications for her work.

“Yeah exactly,” I continued, “...and the importance of creating conditions for academic success. So, we can't have a culturally responsive classroom if not every child has access to conditions that allow them to be successful academically.”

“Um-hm” Anne agreed, sliding her hands under her seat as she sat up further.

“The second element is developing a cultural competency where students' culture is represented in the environment - not just in the physical environment, but also in the curriculum, and then the third one being the development of a critical consciousness, which challenges the status quo. So, with each of those tenets you know, obviously they bleed into each other, but if you were to say, like, which elements are successful at SUCCEED and why and which are least successful - if there are any most successful or least successful - how would you parse those out?” I finished my lengthy explanation; slightly out of breath both from the elucidation and from the risk I just took with my participant in going down this path.

“I would say that we are - I don't think we're perfect in any of those three categories. I feel like we're equally striving for growth in all three.” Anne removed her hands from under her seat, resting them on the table as she engaged with the framework.

“So, for the like, creating conditions for academic success,” she continued, “I think at my school in particular, and at SUCCEED in general too - we're still working really hard to actually see rigor in every single classroom.”

I continued to be impressed by her high expectations for staff and students. The school's state performance results did suggest a culture of rigorous academics, yet she brushed this aside every time I ask about it – she continued to strive for academic excellence regardless of the state framework until the mission of the organization is fully realized.

“In terms of developing a cultural competency and challenging the status quo, we have been working through that with a professional development series. In our last session it was actually really, really great. We talked about systems of power and how they play out in our schools. And we actually, as a whole staff, talked about systems at our school that enact those systems of oppression on our kids. So we - the leadership team - have set aside time now in the next three of our Monday PDs to actually have our teachers work in teams to, you know, talk about what the systems in our school are doing that they shouldn't be doing, what the actual goals of the system are to then rethink them. So again, I'm like really excited about this, and I think that our staff has continued to grow in this area.” It was now Anne's turn to take a deep breath, both because of the amount of information she'd just shared and because of the equal risk she took with both her staff and me.

My follow-up question, while not intended to elicit the same degree of co-connoisseurship, did exactly this. “How would you, then, describe the current school

culture at SUCCEED? I'm particularly interested in it as it relates to it being a high-performing charter school."

"Hmm," Anne pondered the question for a moment, launching into a much more critical perspective than I had prepared for.

"The vocabulary in your premise is interesting. Do high-performing charters, by nature, designate a certain type of culture, or is 'high-performing' a statement of results, and then could encompass a variety of cultures? I think this is an interesting question. We do not claim the 'no excuses' sort of mantra anymore." Anne air quoted this notion of 'no excuses', symbolizing the disregard for this phrase which at one time did hold a synonymous association with the notion of 'high-performing'.

"We did at the beginning when we were very young," she continued, returning to a more formal tone in her response. "We don't any longer because we feel like that's not the culture that we're trying to emulate. To be clear, we do still have a culture with a fair amount of structure, particularly at the middle school level. But I've heard that our high school culture is very different than that. I'd say the key characteristics of the culture are that there is a high degree of structure. There is a high degree of accountability. There's also intended to be a really high degree of joy. And so - I think that answer is emblematic of the change management we are going through. I think a lot of us feel like we have some vestiges of the old culture that need to be moved out and some bright spots of the new culture that we're celebrating. But we are not all the way to one or the other side of that change process."

As we closed out this portion of the conversation, beginning to discuss the types of systems of power she and her staff would continue to explore at the upcoming PD, I continued to be fascinated by these high academic outcomes and deep care for students coupled with a strict discipline code.

Indeed, we *can* create conditions in our schools that provide one without the other. Perhaps the tenets of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2009) and work around Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (Padamsee & Crose, 2017) are the path forward? By the time I was done with the interview and back to my car, I realized the significance of her work. Anne's PD with her staff was intentionally built to reconsider the policies and practices of high performing charters – or I should say of SUCCEED – to create truly diverse, equitable, inclusive, culturally relevant; and therefore academically successful school environments. It wasn't perfect, and there would always be more work to do, but it certainly was a strategic, intentional start.

Interpretation and evaluation: Culturally responsive pedagogy to enact a diverse, equitable and inclusive organizational culture.

The data suggests that creating a diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment is less about which set of technical activities an organization chooses and the sequence in which they are pursued, and more about whether the leaders of an organization are fundamentally willing to acknowledge, question, and eventually share and/or relinquish power. One more dimension connected to power shifting relates to communication practices. This relies on organizational leaders' willingness and ability to create an environment where it is safe for multiple stakeholders to give input regardless of role authority. It is also critical that leaders encourage staff to interrupt moments of racism, name power dynamics explicitly, and call sacred organizational practices into question (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017, p. 9).

In this particular description and preceding quotation, I believe the data embedded into the description mostly reveal the interpretation and evaluation. I will therefore make this brief. As leaders and their schools move into Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures, and even Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future, they rely heavily on the notions of diversity, equity and inclusion to undergo this change management. They recognize the need to explicitly name power dynamics, question practices deeply embedded in their fiber, and have the courage to lead towards a more adaptive, risky, yet ultimately better culture in their schools and organizations at large (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). This is their moral imperative, and I do believe the majority of participants with whom I spoke exemplify at least some elements of this recognition and practical movement. They do this work because they care. They do this work because every student deserves for them to do it. They do this work to truly fulfill their mission for *ALL* students.

To end Anne's story, I again share a quotation from a participant about Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures. I let this quotation sit in isolation, as I believe at this point, I have provided my description, interpretation, and evaluation of high-performing charter schools in Phase 3. In the spirit of co-connoisseurship, I now allow my participants' voice and own analysis of Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures to emerge untouched.

Participant analysis of Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures.

“There's just a lot more awareness of how we were thinking about schooling and how we were thinking about - how we are truly preparing students for the 21st century - but also, there's a lot more questions about those practices and how oppressive they are and how they're really impacting students' ability. SUCCEED themselves figured out we're holding kids' hands for so long that they're getting to college and they're not successful at all. We were doing a great job getting them high scores on ACTs and SATs, but they had no skills to go into college because we were still making them walk in straight lines with perfectly tucked in shirts and have no opportunity to do anything as seniors in high school. So, you can't expect them to go on a college campus with all this freedom. One thing I love about working for SUCCEED is we're a learning organization and we're not afraid to share our failures and talk about how we're going to make those failures better, and so, both nationally and then locally, how are we more creative in you know, what the day to day classroom instruction looks like, being creative with scheduling, and thinking about how are we truly giving students voice. Our students are the leaders of the future. Families need to have a voice in their community where for many of them, they often haven't because of the circumstances in their neighborhoods. And I would say that we still have a few school leaders now who are so dug in to the old ways that it is kind of getting to the make or break point. It's like I get that your sixth graders are successful, and I get that what you're doing is working. But it's not who we are as an organization and who we are with me as the leader. It's not as easy to change because it really goes down deep to what people as leaders value and where they choose to spend their time and efforts. So, when you start talking about oppressive practices, or racist actions, or lack of diversity - if people aren't comfortable with that, it causes a lot more resistance to change. If I'm telling you that the practices you use at your school are racist, that's a lot harder to hear.”

Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future – Rachel

Description. How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead?

Rachel got the call from her old friend just as she was locking up her office after another long day at the downtown CLIMB office. The principal manager began scrambling through the tattered North Face backpack she'd had since she took her first principalship. She finally found her personal phone buried beneath her laptop, rain jacket, and many other random items she took with her on her daily commute into the office, just before the call went to voicemail.

“This is Rachel?” She began, not recognizing the number on the caller ID. Though CLIMB gave her a work phone, she had decided to keep her personal phone number as well, a symbol of her intentions to maintain some assemblance of a personal life. Despite her best efforts, however, she'd gotten into the habit of just giving out her work number. After all, most of her close friends knew her through work first. She quickly recognized the voice on the other end of the phone.

“Rachel, it's Tanya.” Her old friend from college had been with SUCCEED since the day she'd graduated alongside Rachel 18 years earlier. Rachel was thrilled to hear from her yet couldn't help but wonder why she was calling on this random Tuesday evening.

“Tanya!” she exclaimed, “It's so good to hear from you, how are you?”

As the two continued catching up on their current work and personal lives, Rachel slung the blue backpack back over her shoulders, checking her office door was locked

once more as she made her way out of the CLIMB office, glancing at her clear, fair makeup-free face in the elevator mirror to finally arrive at her bicycle parked in the building's garage. Just as she was ready to tell Tanya she'd have to call her back once she finished her five-mile bike ride home, Tanya made clear the real purpose for her unexpected call.

"Listen," Tanya began, sensing Rachel's attempt to try and close out their conversation. "I was actually calling because SUCCEED is looking for a new CEO. Edward will be moving into a regional director role, and we need someone to fulfill his duties here in town." As Tanya finished sharing this information, Rachel unclicked the bike lock from its spot, casually balancing the phone between her shoulder and ear.

"Oh, OK," Rachel began. The information had caught her off-guard. Not because of Edward's move – she knew he'd been working to expand regionally – but because it seemed that Tanya was considering her for the position. While the role and scope of work certainly appealed to Rachel, she did not have any intention of leaving her current charter school network, CLIMB, to move to SUCCEED. She had been in some of the SUCCEED schools years ago and was not comfortable with the strict discipline practices common to the network. As she tried to kindly decline the offer from her long-time friend, she could tell that Tanya would keep pushing until she agreed to at least come tour a couple of campuses. After making it clear that she was happy to meet her old friend at one of the SUCCEED campuses but that she would *not* be filling out a formal application, Rachel ended the call, mounting her mountain bike and quickly forgetting about her upcoming visit to SUCCEED.

Rachel's visit to SUCCEED was nothing like she'd expected. By the time she left the final visit for the day, Rachel was blown away by how different the schools – *felt* than she thought they would. The culture was so warm, everyone was so nice, and kids were doing amazing things in their classrooms. This was the exact opposite of the punitive culture she'd experienced all those years earlier. While she hadn't spent much time preparing, Rachel did complete the interview, finding herself much more invested in the prospect of being the next CEO of the SUCCEED network than she'd expected. By the time she got home that evening, Rachel was convinced – this was the job she was going to have for the rest of her life. She couldn't quite name it yet, but there was just something about the culture. There was a *presence* she felt just being in the schools. She knew she'd take the job.

Interpretation and evaluation: Unexpected joy. In this description, Rachel's story of getting recruited to be the CEO at SUCCEED matches a concept very reminiscent of Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future. As schools and their leaders move through the four phases outlined in this study, there continues to be impressions from their pasts – whether founded or not – about what the school culture in a high-performing charter school is like in present day. Even Rachel, a leader who was very familiar with the SUCCEED model, had misconceptions of the current state of culture in the network prior to joining SUCCEED. There was an element of joy that permeated the school – a feeling so strong that she was willing to leave a job where she was quite happy – and come to lead the SUCCEED network, going so far as to say she believed she'd be with the network indefinitely.

I believe this unexpected element of the culture of some high performing charter schools is important to call out, as this is an intended component of the schools that many participants shared with me. As Anne shared in her final vignette, “I’d say the key characteristic of the culture is that there is a high degree of structure. There is a high degree of accountability. There’s also intended to be a really high degree of joy.” In the later phases of high performing charter schools, leaders expressed their perceptions of a more systematic presence of joy. A high performing school can and should be joyous. This is the vision for a brighter future. Now, we get to see this joyous culture start to move from intentions to operations as perceived by participants.

Description. What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?

Rachel had been with SUCCEED for the last two years. She was thrilled with the progress she’d made but knew there was much more work to be done. When she first took over the CEO role at SUCCEED, she quickly found an area of high need. Yes, the school culture at SUCCEED felt much more joyous. Yes, there was conversation about how to systematically change behavioral practices that the network recognized to be problematic. However, community engagement needed to now match the growing needs of the network, particularly as Rachel led SUCCEED through the changes of 21st century learning and community connection.

As an experienced leader she knew the importance of spending time up front to get to really know the community she was leading prior to taking much action. Early on, she was able to get these perspectives from her teachers, leaders, and students without

much trouble. The staff almost inherently trusted her. Years ago, before joining her previous charter network, she'd been the president of her local teachers' union. This, combined with her many years leading a school and then a group of schools with CLIMB, allowed her to quickly develop rapport with staff and students who appreciated her calm, certain demeanor and inviting smile. While these interactions were meaningful and informative, Rachel still struggled with one key stakeholder group in the community – the parents at SUCCEED.

Rachel therefore quickly resolved to hold a parent forum for the western part of SUCCEED network, inviting all parents whose students went to the five schools in the area to attend. While attendance at the meeting was fairly strong, the conversations she was able to have with parents were not. She assumed that when she called the meeting her support staff would provide interpretation services, particularly since so many of the families on the west side of town spoke Spanish as their first language. She quickly learned, however, that this was not the norm in the network. She stumbled through that first meeting, happy to finally get in front of the parents in the community, yet quite shocked by the fact that providing interpretation services was not an expectation at SUCCEED.

This parent forum created the catalyst Rachel needed. As she continued to host her regular parent forums, which now always included translation services, Rachel learned that while parents felt like SUCCEED cared about their kids a lot, they didn't feel like parents were really engaged in their learning process. Yes – they would sign the annual parent compact, promising to help their children with their homework and get

them to bed at a reasonable hour. Yes – they would attend parent-teacher conferences. And yes – some teachers did hold regular family nights for their class. But these efforts fell short of what Rachel and her parent advisors knew was necessary to truly build a community of parent leaders who could advocate for their students and their schools. Rachel swiftly built relationships with a group of parent informers to support her in making changes in the processes at SUCCEED.

After leading the network for two years, she felt a sense of pride for the community she'd helped to foster with parents. Rachel now committed to holding eight town hall meetings a year – four on the west side of town and four in the southeast – allowing parents in both parts of town (where the majority of SUCCEED schools were located) to participate. She created a family council with representatives from all 12 of the SUCCEED schools to meet once a month. She ensured parent/teacher organizations were the norm at every campus. Furthermore, she grew the SUCCEED advocacy and community engagement team from one to five staff members housed centrally to support these efforts.

These changes allowed Rachel to lead the SUCCEED network to also build strong community partnerships based on family needs. Rachel knew she still had a ton of work to do, but she was so much happier with where she'd taken the network around parent engagement. This was the type of parent engagement Rachel needed for SUCCEED to truly realize the mission of the organization: ***The Mission of SUCCEED is to prepare all students for college through character development, leadership, and 21st century***

learning. It was a far cry from the previous parent engagement model represented by that initial lack-luster parent forum she'd first hosted several years earlier.

Interpretation and evaluation: Negating the hidden curriculum through higher levels of leadership. The above description lives in stark contrast to Ben's story in Phase 1: Early Stages, of keeping a student in detention until 11:59 pm. When the mother came to Ben at 8:30 pm and asked him why her daughter was still in detention, Ben's reaction was to explain to the parent the importance of taking these steps to ensure her child got into college. He closed the door on the parent, keeping her daughter even later in the school building. He assumed that he knew the best way to get her to college absent the involvement of her mother. Conversely, Rachel invited parents into these decisions regarding students' academic futures; holding them in high regard as critical leaders to drive forward the advocacy and operations of the network. By taking these steps, Rachel negated the hidden curriculum in the SUCCEED network around parent participation. She demonstrated the value she saw in parents' deep participation in the school community, thereby negating any former practices which might have suggested otherwise. Rachel's move to quickly intensify and enrich parent leadership in the network also exemplifies a diverse, equitable and inclusive school culture: Rachel did not just invite the parents to the school. She asked them to *dance* (Griffen et al., 2017).

While this juxtaposition between Rachel and Ben's actions may seem like a simple difference in how each leader values parents, their intentions are actually much more closely related. In both cases the leader is intently focused on achieving the mission of the network – to create opportunities for all students to be prepared for

college. The conditions they created to get to this intended outcome, however, varied greatly. In Phase 1: Early Stages, there was a much higher degree of slippage (Uhrmacher, 1991) between the intentions and operations of the leader. It is here that the context within which each leader was operating becomes important to further unpack this dual reality regarding parent engagement. In this way the dual reality is actually just a product of leaders and schools at different stages along the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum, where one's intentions more closely map the operations as the leader moves along this continuum.

Ben was leading during the early stages of high performing charter schools. Both he and the network were trying to prove their concept – they did not have many places to point to in order to merit the actions they were taking to try and fulfill the network's mission. Furthermore, while Ben's intentions were to lead a school that did not let students fail academically, the unintended consequence of his leadership as a 25-year old white male from a completely different world led to families being essentially pushed out of the decisions he was making for the school. To be clear, participants in this phase did have ways in which they tried to engage parents and the community. However, due to the intense, singular focus on academic outcomes and lack of experience of both the leaders and their schools, these attempts were overshadowed by the structured, tunnel-vision priority of academic success as defined by state assessments (Ravitch, 2013).

Rachel on the other hand led during Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future. As a much more experienced leader, she was able to see the unintended consequences of seemingly innocuous actions, such as not having translation services at community

forums. While Rachel's intentions remained focused on creating a community where students were able to thrive academically, her intentions also represented a move towards a shift in the power dynamic in high performing charter schools. Rachel and her staff were not the sole operators and decision makers at SUCCEED – parents were also deeply embedded in this process. When this power dynamic shifted, Rachel had to give up some control, relying on her parents as allies to truly change the oppressive history of our collective education system (Friere, 2000; Spring, 2008).

I believe part of this contrast is due to the growth and maturity of high performing charter schools and their leaders over time. I also believe a part of this change is due to the socio-political context within which each leader was operating. As conversations around oppression, racism, and implicit biases have become a more normalized part of the dialogue regarding school reform, leaders have been able to use this conversation to take actions that begin to disrupt these power dynamics (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017). Finally, I believe this contrast is due to the level of leadership evident across each phase. In Phases 1 and 2, participants' stories primarily focused on what they were doing to directly support students and teachers. They typically operated at Level 3: Production Level leadership (Maxwell, 2011). They were so intently focused on proving that students in traditionally underserved communities were able to achieve academically that they were unable to move beyond the urgent production needed to meet this clear goal (Heider, 2014; Lencioni, 2006).

By Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future, Rachel demonstrated intentions to lead in Levels 4 and 5 of Maxwell's framework, focusing on growing the leadership of

others, and their capacity to develop leadership in stakeholders. Rachel's intentions to develop a school culture where parents acted as leaders are evidence of these higher levels of leadership. Rachel was therefore able to create more sustainable conditions for all stakeholders, relying on parents to help build the future of the network. While there is much more work for leaders and charter schools operating in Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future to accomplish, this intentionality and depth of experience does create conditions to authentically advance this school model into a brighter future.

I now move to another leader in Phase 4, Emery. I intentionally add another leader and charter school network to this phase because of an important shift in high performing charter schools founded more recently. As Anne posed in Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures, a charter school does not have to be a 'no excuses' model in order to be high performing. While the SUCCEED network continued to unpack the structures in their schools, policies and systems that are problematic and reminiscent of their 'no excuses' origins, Emery's school, Community Preparatory Academy, had the advantage of starting more recently without any history of a 'no excuses' mantra. It is here that we see the paths forward for leaders in Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future begin to diverge based on the origins of the network.

Before we move on to Emery, I once again leave Rachel's story with a quote from a participant that I let stand in isolation. In the spirit of co-connoisseurship, I believe this quote reveals even greater interpretation of the experiences, identities, and intentions of school leaders in Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future whose schools that began during the 'no excuses' era.

Participant analysis of Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future.

“I think what I would probably add to [the continuum you propose] is that there are a lot of different points on that spectrum, and a lot of gradations of reasons to make some of those pivots. I think there are people who still very much still run ‘no excuses’ schools. I think there’s another group of people who pivoted for sort of pragmatic reasons. I think that the ‘no excuses’ brand is a lot less effective instructionally in the era of common core because the expectations of critical thinking and student performance on standardized assessments are much higher. So I think there’s the camp that’s still there. I think there’s a camp that’s pivoted for sort of ideological reasons that have to do with human development and how we treat children, and I think there’s a camp that’s probably pivoted for ideological reasons that have to do with DEI [diversity, equity and inclusion] work and really race and power dynamics. And then there’s probably a bunch of others. And then there’s another really interesting group of folks who never were there but get lumped in with them because their results are good. Which I think is really interesting. And I think there’s a lot more space and gradation here than I think people appreciate from the outside, for what that’s worth.”

Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future – Emery

Description. How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop?

Emery welcomed the bubbling, chatty seventh and eighth graders into the school's conference room for their weekly Principal's Council meeting. The group of eager students had been selected by their peers at the beginning of the year to give input on the design of the high school. Emery, in her second year as principal at Community Preparatory Academy, greatly enjoyed this powerful part of her week. As part of her focus on building student autonomy and incorporating student buy-in to their experiences at school, Emery had decided to pilot the Council to create a co-ownership and accountability as she thought forward to the build out of the Community Prep High School campus.

The students all happily greeted Ms. Hensworth, pulling out their personal laptops adorned with stickers of the 'CP' logo as they settled into their seats around the large white plastic table in the modern conference room. The 31-year old principal quickly checked her Google calendar, pulling up the invite and attached agenda the students had created during their last meeting. She briefly reviewed the notes, reminded that the group's task this week was to solidify the uniform design and purchasing company for the high school they would all soon attend. Before she'd even finished a brief introduction and set the topic for the day, the students were busy at work. Betsy, one of the eighth graders on the council, got to work pulling up the Google survey results on the uniform design. Julius, the designated note-taker, started capturing the council's findings as they reviewed the results. And Frederick, the designated manager of the uniform project, prepared to share the budget they had available for the initial uniform order along with the list of vendors Emery had helped him prepare.

Emery slowly stepped back from the conference table, taking her usual seat at the back of the room while the student leaders harmoniously buzzed forward in designing uniforms for their future high school. As she pulled up her e-mail and began her now-regular routine of multi-tasking while the kids took the reins, Emery took a moment to appreciate the work happening in the room. She had agreed to take the principalship at Community Prep after graduating with a master's degree from Harvard University in school administration and working as a principal intern at SUCCEED. While the reason she agreed to take on this role stemmed from her close connections to the neighborhood – her parents had gone to high school about five minutes from the campus that was now Community Prep and her grandparents were one of the first African-American homeowners in the neighborhood – what kept her at the school were moments like these.

This is what can happen if you believe kids can really be the authors of their experience, she thought to herself. Of course, she did explicitly teach the group some skills to help them navigate the experience and how to deal with people that have more power than they do. She taught them how to work with each other in a really thoughtful manner. But then she was able to roll off some of her responsibilities as a principal and just to spend time with them as they worked.

She knew this was where her school shined. Emery also recognized that right now those moments happened somewhat infrequently. But when they did happen, she appreciated that her school was a really special and magical place. She began typing a feedback e-mail from a recent classroom observation to one of her teachers, feeling the

joy that surrounded her as the Principal's Council began assigning out tasks to get the uniforms prepared and ordered for *their* future high school.

Interpretation and evaluation: Level 5 leadership. This description from Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future was inspired by a participant whose school began long after many networks had realized that the notion of creating a school culture predicated on 'no excuses' was not as effective as some once thought. In this case, the leader was able to move forward with creating conditions that allow for high performance academically and the maintenance of a structured environment to ensure this happens. What was different, however, was the manner in which students in this environment were included in the development of their school culture. They were treated as leaders in their school, and the principal intentionally provided opportunities for students to be 'authors of their own experience'.

In this way, I believe leaders in this phase do, by design, lead at Levels 4 and 5 in Maxwell's (2011) framework. Leaders create conditions where they are able to avoid the unintended consequences reminiscent of the initial phases in this study due to their intentional inclusion of students and parents in their design. Note that Emery is not much older than Ben was when he became principal at SUCCEED-South. Emery's school, however, was founded without the inclusion of a 'no excuses' mantra. Emery also had historical roots in the community and was very intentional about the autonomies she created for students. Her level of slippage (Uhrmacher, 1991) from intentions to operations and, arguably, the received curriculum is minimized due to the design of the

school. This is a representation of the *magic* that can happen as high performing charter schools Advance toward a Brighter Future.

Here I believe it is important to remember that each of the characters in this study are semi-fictional, and their experiences are truly representative of multiple participants. In fact, while the base story for this vignette was actually inspired by an African-American female participant whose family did have roots in the community where she now leads, there were many other participants whose stories, reflections and experiences contributed to this description. In fact, the participant whose persona largely inspired Ben's character in Phase 1: Early Stages shared stories of the ways in which he worked to create student leadership to fundraise for the class trip to a college campus when he was leading in a 'no excuses' environment many years earlier. This is important to elevate to make clear the point one participant shared in his analysis of Phase 4. As the participant quoted above reminded us, "I think there's a lot more space and gradation here than I think people appreciate from the outside, for what that's worth." I believe it's worth a lot. All leaders intend to create a brighter future for their students regardless of the school they lead. It is my intention to create a story that draws the reader in, allowing the art form of storytelling to describe these gradations and nuances across time, schools, and leaders (Barone, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Description. What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained? How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead?

“Louis Callum, University of Virginia. Willimae Cai, University of Kentucky.” Emery’s voiced boomed through the loudspeaker on the school’s football field – parents clapping and shouting madly as their children walked proudly across the stage – shaking hands and hugging the many staff members and administrators that helped them arrive at this moment – as they eventually made their way to Emery to receive their high school diplomas.

“Merrill Deweese, William and Mary College,” Emery continued, attempting to leave enough space between calling the next name to allow for sufficient celebration of each and every student that walked across the phase in the bright, warm sunlight. While Emery was thrilled to congratulate this graduating class of seniors on all their accomplishments, she knew this was really just the beginning. That was the incredible thing about this work. The education she had co-facilitated for these amazing leaders alongside their teachers, parents, support staff, and other students had been intentionally designed to prepare them to not only get *into* college, should they choose to take that path, but also to graduate *from* college.

“Clement Hibbert, University of Virginia.” As Clement made his way across the phase, the audience continued to erupt in applause. Emery was excited to see what the next steps would look like for Clement. He had continued to take on more and more leadership roles as he’d moved through his high school experience as Community Prep High and had already joined the freshman debate team at UVA. Clement, just like every other graduating senior, would be assigned a college counselor through Community Prep to help them make the transition from high school to college. Emery had implemented

this model after seeing how helpful this addition of counseling services had been for students in the SUCCEED network. Despite the deep social-emotional learning she and her leadership team had embedded into students' daily routines and curricula, she knew this additional support would help ensure Clement and his classmates would be able to graduate from college – the ultimate mission of Community Preparatory Academy.

“Elanor McLoughlin, University of Florida,” Emery continued, making sure to keep the enthusiasm for each student intact as she read down the list of graduates. This individual student identity was one of the most foundational elements of Emery’s intentions as a leader at Community Prep. She continuously reminded her staff, students, parents, and funders of the unique and individual talents each student brought to the school community. She recited the familiar message to herself as she waited for Elanor to make her way to Emery, hugging her as she proudly accepted her diploma.

I want my kids to leave my building knowing that being black is not a monolithic identity. You can be black and be lots of different things. Even the model that I present to you of being an African-American female whose family is from this neighborhood does not have to be what you achieve. My job is to help you have enough experiences, so you can leave this building and this schooling with a strong sense of self and identity to know who you are and where you want to go.

As Elanor left the stage, Emery called up the next student. “Lashon Mulvey, undecided.” As Lashon proudly made his way across the stage, Emery recognized the way in which her vision for the school was manifesting. She continued her internal dialogue.

To back that up, you have the soft skills and hard skills - the social-emotional stuff and the academic stuff to do that. I know we're still not there yet, but that's really where I want us to go.

Lashon did have the social-emotional ‘stuff’ and the academic ‘stuff’ to open up many opportunities for the future. He had decided, however, that despite his college acceptance to multiple universities, he wanted to take a year off to work and save up some money while he decided on an undergraduate major. Emery had supported Lashon through this decision, knowing that each student had his or her own path. They had the skillset to make these decisions. Lashon was the author of his own experience. He proudly took the diploma from Emery and exited the stage, his family shouting “Go Lashon!” as he made his way back to his seat.

Interpretation and evaluation: Advancement for a Brighter Future. While I share this vignette to close out the data presentation for the study generally and Emery’s story specifically, I want to make it clear that I believe this description represents the direction and manifestation of the mission, vision, and intentions of most school leaders, and certainly most participants in this study. While there are some nuances to the above description which do set Emery’s story apart from the other characters, I can’t emphasize enough how many participants shared stories of their own school’s graduation ceremonies as a manifestation of the values and missions of the institutions where they led.

When I first began this study, I was honestly confused as to why so many schools’ mission statements were focused solely on college enrollment and graduation. Perhaps

this came from my practical experiences being seeped in elementary education where the focus is so much broader than this singular goal. I also now recognize that part of this initial confusion was due to my own identity as a white, privileged woman for whom college was not a goal but rather a norm – it’s just what I did when high school was over.

As I continued to collect data, however, this focus became more and more clear to me. These schools and their leaders value students being prepared for and accepted to college for more reasons than just because of the financial and career opportunities that such a prospect presents – although this is a fairly obvious advantage of attaining this goal. More than that, by focusing on college preparation, high performing charter school leaders are able to take this value of being ready to tackle the ins and outs of both the academic and social-emotional learning required to prosper in such an environment and develop their culture to demonstrate this value. The ultimate goal for many high performing charter schools has shifted from college *preparation* and *admission* toward college *graduation*. As a result, the rates of college graduation have risen over time (Whitmire, 2016). This is where the social-emotional learning becomes very important. If students are not given ownership over their behaviors, time, and even as one participant put it, *bodies*, they can attain perfect scores on any college admission exam and still fail out. This crucial refinement of the direction of high performing charter schools and the intentions of their leaders is the primary uniting force I found in this study. It is the intention of leaders to develop this to truly fulfill their missions. It is the direction in which so many leaders continue to move further toward in service of Advancement for a Brighter Future.

What sets Emery's story apart, then, is that her school was founded in absence of the 'no excuses' paradigm. Due to this difference and her own identity, she was able to more swiftly take actions to change the unintended consequences of any practice she saw in her school in order to move forward.

To end Emery's story, I again share a quotation from a participant. I let this quotation sit in isolation as I believe at this point, I have provided my description, interpretation, and evaluation of high-performing charter schools in Phase 4. In the spirit of co-connoisseurship, I now allow my participants' voice and own analysis of Advancement for a Brighter Future to emerge untouched.

Participant analysis of Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future.

“I think the other portion about the focus on academic achievement and learning time is what is our real - as 'ed reformers' or whatever word you want to give us - what is the real end game? And I think - so one of our core values or things we say is like, 'be collegiate, change the world'. If we really view education as a disruptive activity, as an inherently political activity, what are we doing in our rooms in our building? What skills are we building into kids to be able to do that? I think that's another example of - most educators - I think would say 'yeah, education is the key to freedom'. It unlocks doors; it gives you access to different things. OK. But if we only teach kids to be compliant in our classrooms, are we actually unlocking things for them or are we reinforcing systems and structures - you know we talked about patriarchy, etc. that we already have? I think what that results in is that it makes school messier. So we are encouraging, or at least here I personally encourage my kids to push back on me. And that makes a lot of adults and parents feel really uncomfortable because it's like you're giving up a measure of your control. But the idea is like, I want you to make a mistake, so I can teach or coach you through the right way to do that.”

Chapter 5: Thematics, Conclusions, and Discussion

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to more deeply understand the experiences, identities and intentions of school leaders in high performing charter schools. This study fills a gap in the literature by taking a school type that remains highly polarized and reconceptualizes the current dual rhetoric into the High Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum. I describe how high-performing charter schools and their leaders have developed over time through an analysis of their experiences, identities, and intentions.

Answers to the Research Questions

The specific research questions I proposed for this study were as follow:

- **How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead?**
- **How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop?**
- **What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?**
- **What interpretive frameworks enhance our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop?**

Within the High Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum, I fully answer these questions in each phase below. I answer the research questions in this way due to the findings from the study. The answer to each question shifts depending on the phase and context of the school leader and their charter school. This is the key takeaway in answering these questions – charter schools and their leaders are not stagnant, flat places and people that can be described in a single experience, singular identity, or singular intention. They are just as complex and nuanced as any other school environment or leader.

In answering these research questions, I therefore suggest that, instead of high performing charter school leaders either creating heroic environments we should rapidly replicate, or villainous environments that are dismantling our current education system, they are simply leading another school type that continues to strive to get better for kids. It is this notion that allows me to reconceptualize the dual rhetoric. This reconceptualization is the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum.

Leader Identity

While the answers to each research question shift over each phase of the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum, the internal identities of leaders remain more consistent. The three common characteristics of leaders' identities I found were as follow:

- Reflective
- Transparent
- Vulnerable

In Chapter 1, I define identity as, "...a moving intersection of the inner and outer forces that make me who I am, converging in the irreducible mystery of being human" (Palmer, 1998, p. 13). This definition of identity supports the reconceptualization of the dual rhetoric I propose due to its mention of identity being a "moving intersection of inner and outer forces" (Palmer, p. 13). When we are able to understand one's identity, we are able to better discern, value and appreciate (Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017) their intentions.

In Chapter 2, I review the literature to explain the outer forces that encompass high-performing charter schools. These outer forces contextualize the subject for this study and provide insight into the outer forces that inform leaders' identities. Here, I share my findings regarding the inner forces that inform the identities of participants. As I explain each common element of identity I found in participants, I offer an explanation of how these characteristics propel school leaders along the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum.

Reflective. Participants in this study consistently demonstrated deep reflections about their experiences and intentions in high-performing charter schools. Their reflective identities led to the constant change of systems and structures that were not working for their students. This propelled leaders into the later phases of the Continuum as they worked to collectively reflect on the unintended consequences of problematic structures, such as a school culture of *no excuses*.

Transparent. The transparency of leaders' identities is best represented through the very raw, sometimes unflattering descriptions I share in Chapter 4. Leaders were not

only reflective in their conversations with me; they also were transparent about these reflections, and how some of the conditions they created were problematic. While these transparent reflections certainly benefitted the rich data that I had the privilege of collecting, this is not the most beneficial consequence of leaders' transparent identities. Leaders were also transparent with their staff and communities.

This is what led to Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures as we saw through Anne's composite character. In order for a leader to move to Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future, they must first be willing to transparently dialogue with their community about what is inherently problematic in their school model. This element of identity is beneficial for any leader. Despite one's best efforts, there will always be a degree of slippage (Uhrmacher, 1991) from intentions to operations. Often times, this slippage is problematic in fulfilling the mission of the organization. By being transparent and reflective, however, leaders can minimize this slippage, thereby leading to more aligned conditions for the intended culture to be developed and sustained.

Vulnerable. The final common element of leaders' identities was their vulnerability. When a leader openly discusses structures that are problematic, racist, oppressive, or even dehumanizing, there is a great degree of vulnerability involved. While this level of vulnerability may be uncomfortable and risky, it creates conditions where the culture of an organization can continuously improve. Leaders' vulnerability, combined with their reflective and transparent identities, are what allow them to move forward on the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum. This development leads to a lesser degree of slippage in each phase, allowing the mission and

goals of the leader and organization to be more authentically realized over time. I now move into further explanation of this continuum to answer the other elements of my research questions.

High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum

I use this continuum to demonstrate the various phases of development along which both the schools and their leaders move. These four phases are:

- Phase 1: Early Stages
- Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions
- Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures
- Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future

As leaders and their schools move along the continuum, the dual realities between their intentions and operations lessen. This is because the leaders and schools become more experienced and advanced, thereby leading to a smaller degree of slippage between their intentions and operations. Slippage refers to the difference between the intentional and operational curriculum (Uhrmacher, 1991). For example, as we saw in Phase 1: Early Stages, there is a high degree of slippage between intentions and operations due to the newness of the organization and leader. The leader's intentions are to provide an academically rigorous environment that ensures all students are admitted to a four-year college. These numerical targets are largely accomplished – an impressive feat for any school let alone a school serving a historically underserved community that has not had wide access to such options. The slippage from these intentions to the operations of the school relate to the created culture which unintentionally marginalizes the same students

the leader works so hard to serve. This slippage also results in an environment that prepares students for college *academically* yet stifles their ability to learn independent of the highly structured environment that led them to get into college.

As school leaders realized these elements of slippage between their intentions and operations, they worked to mitigate this slippage to create *truly* high-performing schools – a notion I will further unpack in the latter part of this chapter.

This continuum reconceptualizes the ‘hero’ or ‘villain’ dual rhetoric into developmental shifts over time. School leaders in high-performing charter schools are reflective, adaptive and vulnerable. When they have the reputation, resources, and experience to understand structures that are problematic, particularly given the demographics of their students, they work to adapt their practices to more wholly fulfill their mission; more authentically meet their rigorous goals (Heider, 2014; Heifetz & Linsky, 2017).

Context Developed in the Conceptual Framework

I began the review of literature by using the metaphor from the book *Zoom* (Banyai, 1995). In this metaphor we begin with a seemingly simple object and zoom out to discover that what began as a small red shape is actually part of a much greater context. In the case of high performing charter schools and their leaders, the context that surrounded their rapid growth and expansion over the past several decades resulted from a set of ideologies and political policies. These policies promoted the privatization of public services such as public schooling and created conditions that lay the foundation for charter schools to expand rapidly (Gorlewski & Porfilio, 2013; Ravitch, 2013). During

this time of rapid expansion, my findings suggest that there were both external factors – such as those listed above – along with internal factors that allowed for their rapid expansion. These internal factors included their students’ strong results on standardized assessments, high performance on school accountability measures, codified technical solutions that allowed for these results to be rapidly replicated, and the nimbleness of these new organizations. As the socio-political context shifted and there were greater opportunities for discussion of the potentially racist and oppressive practices in their buildings, the leaders themselves shifted as well, moving along the continuum to intentionally develop more diverse, equitable and inclusive school cultures (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017).

Methodological Approaches

In order to reach these conclusions, I used educational criticism and connoisseurship as the methodology for the study (Eisner, 1998; Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017). I practiced the four traditional components of this approach: description, interpretation, evaluation and thematics. Given the positionality of participants in the study and their own connoisseurship of high performing charter schools, I developed an approach to interpret the data in the moment with participants. I call this co-connoisseurship. In this methodological approach, I propose that there is a unique space at the intersection of emic (‘seeing with’) and etic (‘seeing about’) perspectives where the researcher and participant can co-construct interpretations, evaluations and, to a certain degree, thematics of the study (Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017).

In addition to relying heavily on this methodology and its theoretical underpinnings, I also leaned on notions of narrative thinking and portraiture to further inform the study design and data presentation (Barone, 2007; Bruner, 1991; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I focused on thinking narratively to ensure the stories I told did not essentialize the experiences of a group of unique individuals but instead allowed me to appreciate the delicate intricacies of their experiences, identities and intentions. I displayed the data using composite characters (Sandelowski et al., 2006) and two composite charter school networks to appreciate, discern and value their descriptions. This created a data presentation and analysis consumable for a broader audience (Barone, 2007); an intelligible interpretation of the findings (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997); and maintained greater anonymity for participants (Creswell, 2012).

Conclusions

With this brief overview of the study, I now move to more directly answer my research questions through my anticipatory framework, the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum. I hope this framework will provide guidance for others as they work to better understand diverse schooling environments, the experiences and identities of the individuals who lead them, and their intentions to develop a particular school culture. Below I share a visual representation of this continuum in *Figure 3* aligned to my research questions. Following this visual and an explanation of the language of ‘continuum’ and ‘phases’, I will provide an explicit response to each of the research questions.

High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum

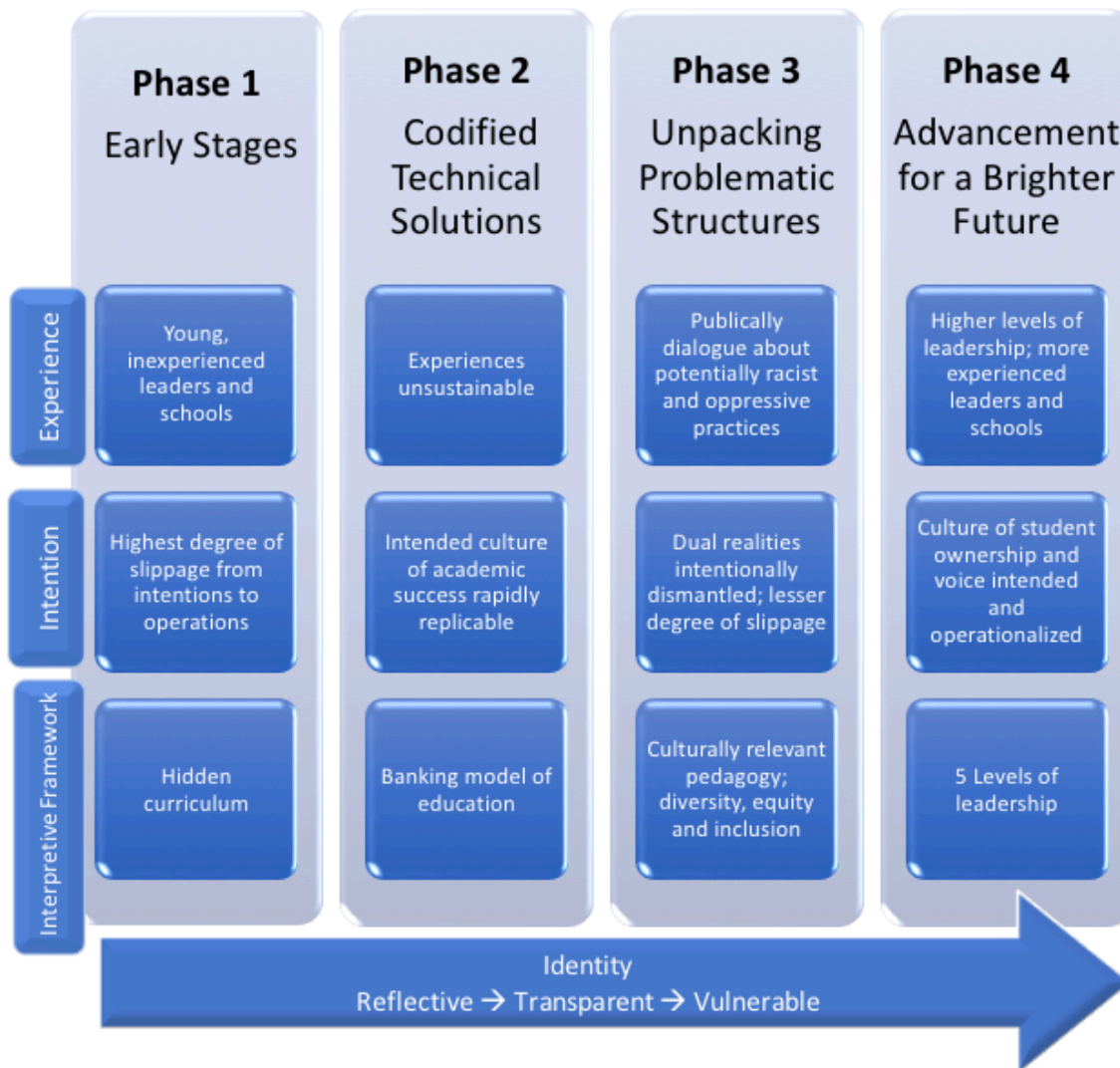


Figure 3: High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum

Language of continuum and phases. I call this anticipatory framework a ‘continuum’ due to the manner in which the data presented itself. Merriam-Webster (2018) defines a continuum as *a coherent whole characterized as a collection, sequence, or progression of values or elements varying by minute degrees*. While the data for this study primarily fell along a chronological progression – those leading more recently

typically had experiences, identities and intentions represented in the later phases whereas individuals leading high-performing charter schools many years ago typified the earlier phases in the continuum – there were also representations of leaders across the phases of the continuum regardless of timeline (see *Appendix G*). Because leadership in education is such a complex task, it is logical to assume an individual would oscillate between varying phases depending on the context, experience, identity and intentions of the leader in the moment. This further explains why I created composite characters. For example, while I modeled Toby’s character after a few participants whose experiences, identities and intentions most closely represented elements of Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions, these participants’ data also fit in other phases along the continuum. Simultaneously, almost every participant had at least one experience, element of identity or intention representative of Phase 2.

Therefore, while the data for this study primarily follow the chronology of high-performing charter schools and their leaders across this continuum, I do not believe these phases are necessarily chronological. Every leader has moments of regression and progression despite or because of their experience, identity and intention. What remains constant is the opportunity to reflect upon one’s actions, be transparent about their intentions, and have the courage to vulnerably adapt to create more culturally relevant, diverse, equitable and inclusive school environments (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Padamsee & Crowe, 2017). These are the elements of identity I did find to be more universal across participants, and why I believe they have been able to continuously improve and grow over time. I hope others find this continuum useful guidance for informing their work

across contexts. This will allow us to collectively improve schooling environments through deeper understanding – a primary goal of this methodology (Eisner, 1998; Uhrmacher, Moroye & Flinders, 2017). I now move into a description of each phase and the experiences, identities and intentions of leaders along the continuum to further answer my research questions and provide greater insight into this highly polarized school type, reconceptualizing the current dual rhetoric.

Answers to the Research Questions in Phase 1: Early Stages

In the early stages of high-performing charter schools both the leaders and their schools were fairly young and inexperienced. As we saw with Ben in Phase 1, leaders were highly motivated, hardworking, and devoted to the school's mission – to achieve high levels of academic success and prepare students for college. These experiences – or lack thereof – led to the highest degree of slippage from the intentions of the leader to their operations (Uhrmacher, 1991).

Their limited experience best answers the research question, *“How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences as impacting their intentions to lead?”* Because they had more limited experiences in the early stages, school leaders in Phase 1 relied on a more singular intention – to get students from traditionally underserved communities into college. This singular intention to meet the clear, rigorous goals of the network was achieved through a strict, structured leadership style that left no room for error as they worked to prove their ability to achieve this goal. Ben's composite character demonstrated this structured leadership style when he kept Marisa in detention until 11:59 pm because she kept talking out during the regular detention time. While the

numeric targets in Phase 1 were largely met and even exceeded, the unintended consequences of this culture where no one – not students, parents, teachers, or leaders have the room to reflect upon their actions, *no excuses* – arguably outweighed the benefits of the numerical academic achievement. Ben reflected on this when he met with me almost a decade after he worked at SUCCEED as a participant in this study. He was able to see the problematic practices from his early days in leadership, saying he would not send his own child to his school due to the lack of ownership he fostered in his students.

As leaders became more experienced and distanced from these experiences, their reflections answered the research questions, *“What kind of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?”* and *“How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop?”* When I spoke with leaders whose experiences represented this phase, they reflected back on the unintended consequences of the conditions they provided. Their reflections focused on students’ inability to learn from their mistakes given the rigidity of their days and the lack of ownership the school culture created for students in traditionally underserved neighborhoods. It is here that we see the greatest degree of slippage (Uhrmacher, 1991) from the intentions to the operations of school leaders in high-performing charter schools, thereby leading to the problematic structures and unintended consequences for the students they worked so hard to educate. However, leaders did not operate in Phase 1 for long. Their reflective,

transparent, and vulnerable identities allowed them to quickly move into the latter phases along the continuum.

The final unanswered research question in Phase 1 is, “*What interpretive frameworks enhance our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop?*” While many interpretive frameworks were presented during Ben’s story to interpret and evaluate the descriptions, I will only reference the frameworks most relevant to each phase in order to further develop key themes. In Phase 1: Early Stages, the two interpretive frameworks of greatest importance are the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1990) and the five levels of leadership (Maxwell, 2011). The slippage (Uhrmacher, 1991) from the intentions to the operations of leaders in this phase created great opportunity for various hidden curricula to prevail. The unintentional message sent to students and parents in a structured, strict, no excuses culture was a lack of trust in students’ ability to take ownership over their own learning. This was partially born from leaders operating in Levels 1-3 of leadership – they did not yet recognize the power of engaging their students and families as leaders in the school.

As we move to Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions, I am reminded of the interpretations shared by one participant at the end of Phase 1. I let this interpretation again sit in isolation in the spirit of co-connoisseurship as a reminder of the nuances of this work and the honest reflections from participants.

Participant analysis of Phase 1: Early Stages.

*“I really still do believe, and I want to keep harping on this - there are things we can learn from them. We just choose to throw that whole goddamn bathwater out because we want to **demonize the entire** institution. And I think that's just false. I think it's absolutely false.”*

Answers to the Research Questions in Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions

In this phase, leaders created conditions for rapid replication of their model. This phase was also characterized by a reputation for academic success that allowed leaders to point to examples of successful models. The mission of the organization remained central to the organization. The numeric academic goals had been achieved enough times that staff and families were willing to stick with the school despite any logistical bumps these quickly growing school environments encountered. We saw this when Toby was able to maintain student enrollment and a dedicated teaching staff even when his school building was under construction for longer than anticipated. It is here that we see the structured practices of high performing charter schools become codified technical solutions. This information directly answers the research question, “*What kinds of*

conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?”

I now answer the research questions, *“How do leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead?”* and *“How do leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities and impacting the school culture they intend to develop?”* Leaders in this phase perceived their past and present experiences as being focused on working very hard to meet the mission of the school. They were willing to go to extreme measures to ensure they met their rigorous academic goals that were high above state expectations, such as when Toby began teaching his own class when a teacher left mid-year. The school culture they intended to develop was one where teachers had the resources and supports they needed to meet the needs of their students. In order to fulfill these intentions, leaders in Phase 2 perceived their work as unsustainable. Toby demonstrated the unsustainability of this work when he was talking with his wife as he drove home late at night, reflecting on his ability fulfill his home responsibilities while taking on so many additional duties at his school.

This brings me to the research question, *“What interpretive frameworks enhance our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop?”* In Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions, the most relevant interpretive frameworks are the five levels of leadership (Maxwell, 2011) and the banking model of education (Freire, 2000). Leaders in this phase were primarily operating at production level leadership. While they were able to continue to largely meet their high academic goals, they did so by mostly relying on their own hard work and production. Leaders’ experiences and identities

representative of Phase 2 intend to develop a structured, supportive school culture. But they typically did this without leveraging their communities.

The banking model of education (Freire, 2000) best supports this interpretation of leaders' experiences and identities. By not leveraging their communities, leaders in Phase 2 unintentionally developed a banking model of education, particularly in the behavior structures they maintain. These behavior structures relied on a prototype of what 'high expectations' should look like. Toby and his dean of culture, Nadia, demonstrated this when they were disappointed with students' behavior following a walk-through of classrooms across the SUCCEED-Central campus. In my interpretation of this vignette, I focused on the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1990) that was at play when a leader determined a prototype for what 'high expectations' meant in isolation. We see that as leaders move to the later phases of the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum, they were able to leverage their communities, making the work more sustainable and the culture of the school more inclusive. In part, they were able to do this due to their reflective, vulnerable and transparent identities.

Before we move to Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures, I believe it is important to recognize that movement along the continuum does not mean we 'throw out the goddamn bathwater'. I therefore share here the counter narrative to this raw metaphor articulated by one participant at the end of Phase 2, reminding us of the continuous improvement that is so central to the identity of any effective leader (Collins, 2001; Maxwell, 2011). I let this interpretation again sit in isolation in the spirit of co-

connoisseurship as a reminder of the nuances of this work and the honest reflections from participants.

Participant analysis of Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions.

“I think what’s lost a lot of the time in the criticism is just like, the humility of a leader. We’re not perfect and we make mistakes all the time. We want to continue to learn and grow. And every time I’ve sat in a kickoff meeting with all the staff at the school, it’s a celebration of people, and then it’s a celebration of results, and then it’s a like, but here’s where we’ve gotta get better. What do we do next?”

Answers to the Research Questions in Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures

In Phase 3, we begin to see leaders publically dialogue about the potentially racist and oppressive practices created by a strict *no excuses* school culture. Through this dialogue and their reflective, transparent identities, they intentionally begin to negate the unintended consequences of such structures, dismantling the dual realities of their school cultures. Leaders in Phase 3 maintain the strong focus on fulfilling the mission of the school – preparing all students for college – through the intentional use of the tightly structured codified technical solutions developed in Phase 2. Because these practices have become such a normalized part of their school cultures however, they consider these academic practices a ‘business as usual’ model. Rigorous academic instruction continues

to be a focus, of course. But because there is a strong base built for these practices, leaders in Phase 3 are now able to more strategically review the problematic structures developed to rapidly replicate and sustain a high performing charter school model, and rethink systems that unintentionally marginalize students in traditionally underserved communities. We saw evidence of this through the professional development Anne led out with her school team to further this conversation at the school level. Anne also advocated for her leadership team to remove the ‘silent hallways’ rule, as she questioned the implicit biases that may be the impetus for this arbitrary rule.

This information answers the research questions, “*How do leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead?*” and “*How do leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities and impacting the school culture they intend to develop?*” Because leaders in Phase 3 came with more experience than was typical of leaders in Phases 1 and 2, their intentions to lead and the school culture developed drove from the same clear academic targets for students. But they were able to couple this with a more intentional connection between these numerical goals and their impact on the larger organizational structure (Heider, 2014). In other words, there is a lesser degree of slippage between the intentions and operations of leaders in Phase 3 (Uhrmacher, 1991).

I will now answer the next two research questions together due to their interconnectedness in Phase 3. These are, “*What interpretive frameworks enhance our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop?*” and “*What kind of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to*

be developed and sustained?” The interpretive frameworks most relevant in Phase 3 are the culture and diversity frameworks – culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2009) and diversity, equity and inclusion (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017; Reihl, 2000). Leaders in Phase 3 operated with an intentional focus on creating conditions that develop and sustain a diverse, equitable and inclusive school culture. Edward demonstrated further evidence of his intentions to create a more diverse, equitable and inclusive school culture when he and his board changed their enrollment policies. By changing their policies so that students could be enrolled after the beginning of sixth grade and removing procedures that led to students with more volatile behaviors being expelled, Edward demonstrated this intentional school culture. Leaders in this phase asked all stakeholders in the school to unpack problematic structures, such as silent hallways or exclusive enrollment policies, in service of creating a more culturally relevant space for learning.

Before we move to Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future, I want to emphasize that this change management is not easy. It takes dedicated, reflective, transparent and vulnerable leaders that are willing to adapt their own thoughts and belief systems as they lead this transformation and ask others to do the same (Fergus, 2017; Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). I include an interpretation shared by one participant at the end of Phase 3. I let this interpretation sit in isolation in the spirit of co-connoisseurship as a reminder of the nuances of this work and the honest reflections from participants.

Participant analysis of Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures.

“Our students are the leaders of the future. Families need to have a voice in their community where for many of them, they often haven't because of the circumstances in their neighborhoods. And I would say that we still have a few school leaders now who are so dug in to the old ways that it is kind of getting to the make or break point... So, when you start talking about oppressive practices, or racist actions, or lack of diversity - if people aren't comfortable with that, it causes a lot more resistance to change. If I'm telling you that the practices you use at your school are racist, that's a lot harder to hear.”

Answers to the Research Questions in Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future

In Phase 4, I focus on the most inspirational moments participants shared; the moments where they saw the *magic* of what their schools could be come alive. I do not make this stylistic choice through rose-colored glasses. There is always room for improvement and moments of unfortunate slippage from one's best intentions to the imperfect operations (Uhrmacher, 1991). Even schools with Level 5 leaders (Collins, 2001; Maxwell, 2011) and intentional foci on culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and diversity, equity and inclusion (Padamsee & Crowe, 2017) are by no means perfect. I would argue, in fact, that

learning and schooling and teaching and leading are inherently imperfect processes. They require us to navigate layers of complexity and context that zoom in and out of our daily operations in such ways that the idea of perfection is unattainable and generally undesirable. It is this messiness that makes our work so important; so powerful; so fun!

The vignettes in Phase 4 are instead meant to highlight moments of leaders' visions for a brighter future. In Phase 4 we see the times when school leaders continued to create conditions for strong academic performance on accountability measures. Rachel demonstrated this by developing opportunities for parents to become leaders in the school community that helped the school take action to continuously improve academic outcomes for students. Simultaneously, they had moved so far away from a *no excuses* culture that the notion of this mantra being synonymous with high performing charter schools was no more than a distant memory from the past. In fact, some schools, such as Emery's Community Preparatory Academy, were not even founded with a *no excuses* philosophy. This answers the research questions, "*What interpretive frameworks enhance our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop?*" and "*What kind of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?*"

I now move to the research questions, "*How do leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead?*" and "*How do leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as*

impacting the school culture they intend to develop?” Because leaders in Phase 4 had the experiences – whether personally or tangentially – of leading in some of the earlier phases, they were able to use these experiences to be more intentional about developing a school culture focused on student voice and community leadership. For example, both Rachel and Emery had worked at other high performing charter schools prior to taking on their leadership roles at SUCCEED and Community Preparatory Academy.

Their intentions were to advance toward a brighter future where the power dynamic shifted to create diverse, equitable, inclusive, and culturally relevant cultures in their buildings (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Padamsee & Crowe, 2017). Rachel did this through her intentional work in creating different opportunities for parents to take on leadership roles at SUCCEED. She considered her parents her closest advisors, helping her shape the future direction for the school network. Emery also worked to shift power dynamics at her school. We see this when she created a principal’s council to help determine the logistics of the high school students will attend when they leave her middle school. In the vignette, students created their own uniform designs, going so far as to work directly with the vendor to order the uniforms they would wear when they moved to the high school campus. In both cases, these intentions were impacted by the reflective, transparent and vulnerable identities of the leaders. It is through this work that we saw the moments when the mission of the organization was truly fulfilled –

students are prepared for college should they choose to take that path. Their opportunities are open. They are the ‘authors of their own experience’.

Participant analysis of Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future.

“I think the other portion about the focus on academic achievement and learning time is what is our real - as “ed reformers’ or whatever word you want to give us - what is the real end game? And I think - so one of our core values or things we say is like, ‘be collegiate, change the world’. If we really view education as a disruptive activity, as an inherently political activity, what are we doing in our rooms in our building? What skills are we building into kids to be able to do that?”

Thematics

Throughout this study several themes have emerged. It is important to note that these thematics all involve change and continuous improvement. High-performing charter schools, just like all schools, evolve and change over time. Their rate of change has perhaps happened more rapidly, especially when we consider that many of these organizations have been around for no more than a decade or two. The thematics I present here are as follow:

- **Mission-driven:** School leaders in high-performing charter schools remain intently focused on the missions of their organizations.

- **High expectations:** School leaders intend to create a school culture of high expectations for all students, though the definition of *high expectations* changes along each phase in the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum.
- **To college or through college:** While the initial missions of high-performing charter schools were focused on college admission, these institutions have become more dedicated to college matriculation in the later phases along the Continuum.
- **No excuses:** While many high-performing charter schools began with a *no excuses* mantra, many CMOs have abandoned this notion, recognizing that it devalues and undermines students' unique experiences, identities and future aspirations.
- **Diversity, equity and inclusion:** This interpretive framework creates the language and value structure to allow for a lesser degree of slippage (Uhrmacher, 1991) between leaders' intentions and operations.
- **Levels of leadership:** School leaders have the unique opportunity to develop other leaders from multiple stakeholder groups – their staff, parents, and students all have the potential to be leaders in the school community, leading to *truly* high-performing school environments.

Mission-driven. One of the most uniting themes from all participants was their intentional drive toward the missions of their organizations. In the early phases these mission statements were such a singular focus of their organizations that they did not have time to reflect upon how they were fulfilling the mission. When high performing charter schools began, there were clear goals that had yet to be achieved at scale:

- Create learning environments where students from traditionally underserved communities academically achieve at high levels
- Prepare and enroll more students from traditionally underserved communities into college

Despite the problematic structures that accompanied these goals, they were largely successful in achieving this.

As high performing charter schools and their leaders grew, achieving this goal became replicable at more rapid rates. These institutions and their leaders had developed codified technical solutions to meet the goals of the organization. Note that I state ‘goals’ instead of ‘mission’ here. This is because in these earlier stages, the missions of the organizations had yet to be achieved. Let’s take the composite mission statement I developed for the SUCCEED network: *The Mission of SUCCEED is to prepare all students for college through character development, leadership, and 21st century learning.* While leaders in the earlier phases of high-performing charter schools academically prepared students for college, their reflections in this study indicated that they had not prepared students

in other aspects of learning, such as the social-emotional learning required to be successful in a four-year institution.

As high performing charter schools and their leaders moved into the latter phases, they began to recognize this need to prepare students for college beyond the academic outcomes that had become so codified in Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions. Put simply, the mission of the organization did not change. What did change was the way in which they worked to achieve this mission, and what values were behind the notion of college preparation.

High expectations. Participants in the study frequently referenced the culture of *high expectations* they intended to develop and sustain. While part of this culture was related to ensuring all adults hold students to high expectations academically, there was also a behavioral component to the culture of high expectations.

In regard to developing a culture of high expectations for student behavior, the way leaders defined high expectations changed depending on which phase they were operating in. During the Early Stages, high expectations for student behavior were for students to be silent in the hallways through 12th grade, sit in a pre-determined position in their seats in class, and generally conform to the leader's prototype of what an ideal student should look and act like. We saw this operationalization of high expectations in Phase 1 when Ben had his students form silent lines to re-enter the school after recess, and when he enforced the five-minute rule during after school detention with Marisa.

In the latter phases when these practices began to be called into question, high expectations for student behavior adapted to a more inclusive and developmentally appropriate framework. Students were expected to be respectful in the hallways, but not silent. They were expected to listen to classmates, but not required to all sit in the same position dictated by the teacher. Anne reflected on these changes in Phase 3, demonstrating how leaders work to unpack problematic structures related to the way one defines *high expectations*. These changes to the definition of high expectations reflect the movement along the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum, and the changing intentions of school leaders in these environments.

To college or through college. Participants in the later phases of the High Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum frequently spoke to the difference between preparing students to get *into* college and to get *through* college. Early on in the development of high performing charter schools, college preparation was focused solely on college admission through high levels of academic achievement. However, as these schools and their leaders grew, they began to collect empirical data on students' rates of matriculation from college. These data revealed that while these institutions were enrolling students from traditionally underserved communities in college, their graduation rates were much lower than expected (Whitmire, 2016).

High performing charter schools and their leaders reflected on these data and worked to change course. Some of these adaptations still fell into Codified

Technical Solutions, such as the creation of counselors that would regularly check in with students even after they graduated from high school and were enrolled in a four-year university. While these initial steps to increase college graduation rates did help, participants reflected on how there were also problematic structures within their schools that were not setting students up for success in a higher education setting.

Because high performing charter schools in the earlier phases of development were so highly regimented, students did not have the opportunity to fail and learn from their mistakes. As we saw with Ben, this led to a school culture that prepared students academically for college but lacked the culture that would prepare them get through college. These structures that do not support student independence and ownership remain a focus of the social-emotional curriculum in Phases 3 and 4 along the Continuum.

No excuses. As leaders began unpacking the problematic structures in their institutions more publically, they recognized the inherent issues with the original *no excuses* mantra so many of these schools initially touted. Participants in this study reflected on how this notion of *no excuses* marginalized students' experiences, recognizing the problematic structures developed through this bootstrap mentality (Lack, 2009). As schools moved into Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures, they dropped this mantra and the values associated with it. This allowed for greater flexibility in the development of their school cultures to support this value proposition of preparing students for college. They were

able to begin rethinking systems that had led to the oppression of students from traditionally underserved communities and develop more diverse, equitable and inclusive school cultures.

It is important to note here that not every charter school advocate has dropped the ‘no excuses’ mantra. However, participants in this study spoke to these shifts in their organizations and the importance of this intentional shift. I believe it’s almost impossible to operate under a ‘no excuses’ framework if one is to embrace the next salient theme from this study – school leaders’ intentional work around diversity, equity and inclusion.

Diversity, equity and inclusion. As a former Teach for America corps member, charter school teacher, and active member of the ‘reform’ movement, I can tell you personally that equity is at the center of the intentions of this movement. Reform-minded educators have a deep passion for serving students in traditionally underserved communities in accessing a high-quality education. While this value is at the center of our intentions, I do not believe it always operationalizes into a diverse, equitable and inclusive school culture. This slippage (Uhrmacher, 1991) was evident through participants’ reflections as well.

As we saw in Phase 1: Early Stages, and Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions, high performing charter schools were initially staffed by primarily young, white educators. While these individuals showed a great deal of passion and commitment to the work, the homogeneous makeup of these institutions did not create diverse and inclusive school cultures. In the later phases of the High

Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum, we saw that the diversity of staff began to shift. This, along with the intentional work around diversity, equity and inclusion, created conditions to intentionally shift schools' culture so that the power dynamics in the building shifted and students began to become the 'authors of their own experiences'. This was most evident in Phase 4:

Advancement Toward a Brighter Future, when Emery had her middle school students design their own uniforms for the high school they would eventually attend. These intentional decisions of school leaders in the later phases demonstrate their higher levels of leadership – the final theme I explore.

Levels of leadership. Maxwell's (2011) 5 Levels of Leadership provide a clear framework for comprehending the ways in which leaders grow and develop over time. I believe this concept helps us more deeply understand the experiences, identities and intentions of school leaders in high performing charter schools – especially along the High Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum.

While school leaders obviously develop their staff to become producers in Level 3 and leaders in Level 4, there is an opportunity in schools to also develop the leadership skills of another set of stakeholders – students and their families. In Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future, we saw how Rachel leveraged the families in her community to become advocates and leaders in their schools. We also saw how Emery took this work to students, asking them to lead the design of their own high school uniforms. The participants who shared these moments of

high level leadership expressed that these opportunities were still too infrequent. I believe, however, that these higher levels of leadership are the moments when the mission of the organization can be fully realized – students are prepared for higher education when they are given the opportunity to not only excel academically. This is the floor of a high performing school. What really makes an institution high performing extends far beyond a numerical value on a standardized assessment. How do we continue to push our leaders, our students, our researchers, and our communities to continuously improve – to truly become *high performing*?

Implications

The most recent statistic I found for the number of students nationally attending charter schools was 3.1 million. This represents over 6% of students in the United States being enrolled in a charter school (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016). This number has grown exponentially since their original conception just thirty years ago. Since 2007 the number of students attending charter schools in the U.S. has almost tripled from 1.2 million students to 3.1 million. These data demonstrate the fact that this school type is not going anywhere. It is more important now than ever to deeply understand charter schools.

Charter schools generally, and high performing charter schools, specifically are a central part of a highly polarized debate. I propose the dual rhetoric of a ‘hero’ vs. ‘villain’ characterization to bring to light how stereotypical

this polarization can be. I do not believe this is the only time a school gets caught in the crosshairs of two divergent philosophical perspectives on schools. This is why I believe we must reconceptualize these notions. Schools are complex, diverse, and ever-changing places. The individuals that lead and teach are committed professionals working hard to respond to each new demand, pedagogical model, and latest research in service of providing successful learning environments for their students. It is here that I believe a framework focused on a continuum is necessary. It helps us break down these generalized stereotypes and dual rhetoric to something comprehensible, digestible and assessable. We must engage in this work because every day in front of every student matters. We must strive for excellence in our research, practice, reflections, and replications.

I now move to the notion of a successful or ‘high-performing’ school, as this was the designated school type for this study. Here I intentionally place quotation marks around the words ‘high-performing’. This is because through this study, I have realized how numerous are our definitions of a high-performing school. I argue in Chapters 1-3 that my definition of high performing charter schools to be selected for this study is based on their state accountability rating tied to student performance on standardized assessments. Under No Child Left Behind, this was the most common definition of what made a school ‘high performing’ (Ravitch, 2013; Spring, 2008).

While I still believe these academic metrics are an important measure to judge whether or not a school is ‘high-performing’, participants from this study

made it clear that this was not their only way of measuring the success of their schools. Are there other definitions of what makes a school ‘high-performing’ that we should consider? How do we use our collective understanding of what makes a school ‘successful’ to inform this work? How do we create authentic opportunities for our students and families to co-create these visions with us? Is this already happening enough? Is it systematic? Does it matter across school types? All of these questions are areas for future research.

Future Research

I leave this study with more questions than answers. I believe the High Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum offers a framework to better understand the phases school leaders go through as they work to create ‘high-performing’ schools for their students. However, our definition of what makes a school ‘high-performing’ continues to shift and adapt to an ever-changing local and global context. This is an area for future research, particularly as states work to implement ESSA, which requires all states to define a clear, comprehensive system for school accountability (Ferguson, 2017).

Another area for future research could be the use of the *High Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum* to inform one’s understanding of school leadership in other educational settings. Do leaders and their schools go through similar phases of growth and development in other educational settings? What might we learn from high performing charter schools to help us better

understand traditional public schools? Private schools? Informal education settings?

Another area for future research could be the received curriculum in these school environments. This was outside the scope of this study and a promising area for future research. Do students receive the intended outcomes in each phase of the continuum? Does the continuum even apply when we look from a student perspective? How might our families and communities better inform our understanding of high-performing charter schools? These questions and area of focus are of particular importance given criticisms regarding the exploitation of traditionally underserved communities through market exploitation (Buras, 2011).

In addition to future areas of research regarding the content of this study, I believe there is also opportunity for future research on the use of the methodological practices involved in this study, namely co-connoisseurship and the use of composite characters. Regarding co-connoisseurship, are there opportunities to use this methodological approach in other educational settings? Other research settings generally? Beyond the use of co-connoisseurship as a form of member-checking during the interview, is there opportunity to use principles of co-connoisseurship in other moments of the research process? What value do these approaches bring to the research?

Regarding the use of composite characters as a form of data presentation, I also encourage other researchers to try this approach. I believe it helped me gain much greater clarity around my findings and led to the development of my

anticipatory framework, the High-Performing Charter Schools and Leadership Continuum. I also recognize the inherent risks involved in such an approach and appreciated the opportunities to use reflexivity to determine the best path forward. I encourage others to take risks in their data presentation. It's amazing what you'll uncover through this process.

Closing Comments

Leading successful schools – however you might define success – is a challenging, rewarding, and influential job. I believe it is also one of the most important jobs out there. The experiences, identities and intentions of these individuals must be understood in order to more deeply understand our schools where our students spend most of their days. I open this dialogue with the request that we work to enter into our own interpretations of education settings with a sense of humility and respect. By humility, I mean that we recognize that practitioners and researchers alike are all doing hard work and that we must open up to one another to better understand. By respect, I ask that we continue to push and question one another's practices, reflections, and interpretations to get better for our students. I invite others to join this dialogue in the ways that best fit their research interests and questions. Continue to appreciate. Continue to discern. Continue to value. We owe it to our students, communities and each other.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol #1¹⁰ - Three-Interview Approach

SCHOOL LEADER: PROTOCOL AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS – INTERVIEW #1

Targeted Research Questions:

1. How do the experiences [and identities] of school leaders impact the way they intend to lead?
2. How do the experiences [and identities] of school leaders impact the school culture they intend to develop?

Opening Protocol

1. Give the participant unsigned version of the Consent Form to keep.
2. Read Preamble.
3. Ask leader to sign the Consent Form

Preamble

This is Brittany Miller. Today is [fill in date] and we are at [fill in location] talking with [fill in name]. Thanks so much for agreeing to this interview! The reason why I asked you to participate in this interview is to hear about your experiences as a leader in a high-performing urban charter school, [state school network].

I am going to spend the next hour asking you some questions about your experiences leading at [state school name]. The permission form that you signed means that we can record our discussion so that we can listen to it later and use it to write a report. No one but my advisor and I will hear the tape or read the transcript of this interview. I will use the data collected in this interview to inform my study on high-performing charter school leaders. I will make every effort to maintain anonymity so as not to expose anything about your identity to anyone that I speak with about this project.

Any questions? Great! Let's get on with the interview.

Interview Questions (research question(s) are in parentheses)

First... I'd like to hear about how you ended up working at [school name].

¹⁰ The interview protocols in Appendix A and Appendix B were inspired by Dr. Nicholas Cutforth, Department Chair and Professor of Research Methods and Information Science and Research Methods and Statistics at the University of Denver

1. If you were to describe [school name] to someone who didn't know anything about it, what would you tell them?

Listen for:

- experience working at the school
- curriculum used
- other leadership
- student demographics
- school culture

2. Why did you decide to work at [school name]?

Listen for:

- Understanding of the school model
- Understanding of school culture
- Academic success track record
- Professionalism

3. How did you learn about [school name]? Were you specifically interested in working at [school name]?

Listen for:

- Previous education experience
- Community/professional connections
- Recruitment strategies
- School culture

4. Did you start out in a leadership role, or did you take on your leadership role later on?

Listen for:

- Journey to this position
- Experiences that led to this point

Now I'd like to hear about your experiences as a leader at [school name].

5. What was it like to be a leader at [school name]?

Listen for:

- Experiences as a leader
- Daily schedule
- Typical work during the day
- Primary job functions

6. How are/were you supported in your role?

Listen for:

- Experiences as a leader
- Supports from leaders in building
- Supports from external sources
- Impact on ability to lead

7. What were/are your highest priorities in your role as a leader at [school name]?

Listen for:

- Experiences as a leader
- Intentions for school culture
- Intentions for staff culture

8. What did you find most exciting about working at [school name]?

Listen for:

- Experiences as a leader
- Achievements in work
- Impacts on students
- Drive toward academics

9. What did you find most challenging about working at [school name]?

Listen for:

- Experiences as a leader
- Impact on students
- Disagreement between actions and beliefs

Now I'd like to hear a bit about the academic successes students experienced.

10. How do you define academic success? How did students know if they were successful academically?

Listen for:

- Quantitative measures of success
- Qualitative measures of success
- Students' participation & ownership

11. How did your actions contribute to students' academic success?

Listen for:

- Experiences as a leader
- Actions as a leader

12. How would you characterize the attitude in your school toward academic success?

Listen for:

- School buy-in
- School culture

13. How did the school community react to the academic expectations?

Listen for:

- School culture
- Successes
- Difficulties

In the final set of questions, I'd like to hear about the school culture at [school name] more generally speaking.

14. How would you describe the school culture at [school name]?

Listen for:

- Experiences as a leader
- School culture
- Successes
- Difficulties

15. What types of behavior expectations were placed upon students? How did this impact the school culture?

Listen for:

- Systems to monitor behavior
- Student feelings about these systems
- Leader feelings about these systems

16. How did your role impact the school culture?

Listen for:

- Experiences as a leader
- Leader feelings about these experiences

17. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

As we've talked today, several things have stood out to me and I've paid attention to them:

1.

2.

3.

4.

When I listen to this interview, what would you like me to pay attention to?

Thank you. I really appreciate your help with my research!

Appendix B: Interview Protocol #2 – Three-Interview Approach

SCHOOL LEADER: PROTOCOL AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS – INTERVIEW #2

Targeted Research Questions:

1. How do the [experiences] and identities of school leaders impact the way they intend to lead?
2. How do the [experiences] and identities of school leaders impact the school culture they intend to develop?

Opening Protocol

1. Give the participant unsigned version of the Consent Form to keep.
2. Read Preamble.
3. Ask leader to sign the Consent Form

Preamble

This is Brittany Miller. Today is [fill in date] and we are at [fill in location] talking with [fill in name]. Thanks so much for agreeing to this interview! The reason why we asked you to participate in this interview is to hear about your experiences as a leader in a high-performing charter school, [state school network].

I am going to spend the next hour asking you some questions about your experiences leading at [state school name]. The permission form that you signed means that we can record our discussion so that we can listen to it later and use it to write a report. No one but my advisor and I will hear the tape or read the transcript of this interview. I will use the data collected in this interview to inform my study on high-performing charter school leaders. I will make every effort to maintain anonymity so as not to expose anything about your identity to anyone that I speak with about this project.

Any questions? Great! Let's get on with the interview.

| Interview Questions (research question(s) are in parentheses) |
|--|
| First... <i>I'd like to hear a bit more about your leadership story</i> |
| 1. Last time, you described more of the logistics of how you ended up at [school name] – <i>give examples...</i> etc. Today, I'd like to hear more about your journey into a leadership role at [school name] on a personal level. |

Listen for:

- Identity as a leader
- Internal growth
- Growth as a leader

2. Why did you decide to leave [school name]? OR why have you decided to stay in leadership at [school name]?

Listen for:

- Identity as a leader
- Intentions as a leader
- Values

3. How did you decide where to go after [school name]? What impact did your experiences at [school name] have on this decision? ***Skip if still in leadership at a high-performing charter school*

Listen for:

- Identity as a leader
- Leap from one role to the next
- Intentions as leader

Sample question – pull from previous interview to go deeper where needed

4. In the last interview, you alluded briefly to how your “leap” to the director of math at [school name] had an impact on your current work. Can you expand on what you meant by this?

Listen for:

- Identity as a leader
- Impact of [school name]
- Current intentions in way leads

Now, I'd like to hear more about your identity as a leader.

18. Please complete this analogy – When leading at my best, I am like a.... Why did you choose that analogy?¹¹

Listen for:

- Identity as a leader
- How identity impacts intentions
- Integrity as leader
- Hidden parts of identity revealed through metaphor

¹¹ This activity was modeled after Parker Palmer's (1998, pp. 147-150) description of an activity in using metaphor he has used to more deeply understand a one's identity and integrity as a teacher. The language has been adjusted to target leader identity.

19. Would this analogy be the same at [school name] and in your current role? Why or why not? ***Adjust if leader has moved to various leadership roles. Eliminate if leader has remained in same leadership role***

Listen for:

- Identity as a leader
- How identity impacts intentions

20. What do you value professionally? Why?

Listen for:

- Identity as a leader
- How leader intends to operate
- Values as leader
- Connection to students

21. If I asked you to tell a story from your time at [school name] that represents your experiences there, what story would you tell? Why?

Listen for:

- Experiences as a leader
- Identity as a leader
- Intentions as leader
- Intentions for school culture

Now, I'd like to hear more about this idea of cultural responsiveness
Note: placeholder for addressing questions that arise from previous interviews

22. You mentioned during the last interview a couple of people in the network that worked with staff on issues of cultural responsiveness. Can you tell me about any trainings/interactions you remember specifically? Why do you remember that interaction?

Listen for:

- Stories about training
- Experiences as a leader
- Priorities of the leader
- Intentions to build School Culture

23. How did these trainings impact the way you did your job at [school name]?

Listen for:

- Experiences as a leader

- Actions as a leader
- Impact on intentions of leader
- Intentions to build School Culture

24. Did you ever talk about the behavior expectations for students during the cultural responsiveness work? If so, please explain how. If not, why do you think this wasn't mentioned?

Listen for:

- Intentions to build school culture
- Connections to CRP

25. Do you think, in terms of being "culturally responsive," you served students at [school name] well? Why or why not?

Listen for:

- Intentions to build school culture
- Perceived successes
- Perceived difficulties

In the final set of questions, I'd like to hear about student's experiences at [school name].

26. Please describe a typical day for a student at [school name].

Listen for:

- Intentions to build school culture
- Experiences as a leader

27. Why did you and your leadership team choose to structure the day in that way?

- Intentions to build school culture
- Identity as leader (integrity)
- Experiences as leader

28. How do you think students were impacted by the strict behavior policies at [school name]? Was this something staff talked about?

*****Note: eliminate this question if school leader does not perceive behavior policies as strict*****

Listen for:

- Intentions to build school culture
- Identity as a leader
- Intentions as leader

29. Last time, you described the school demographics as being primarily [insert demographics]. Do you think the demographics impacted the way you intended to lead? If so, why? If not, why not?

Listen for:

- Intentions of school culture
- Experiences as a leader
- Identity as a leader

30. You mentioned in our last interview that you tried really hard to connect with students. Can you tell a story about a time you felt like you were able to really connect with a student? *Note: adjust question based on how leader has described relationships with stakeholders at school*****

Listen for:

- Systems to monitor behavior
- Student feelings about these systems
- Leader feelings about these systems
- Identity as leader
- Experiences as leader

31. Were you able to connect with students in this way on a regular basis? Why or why not? *Note: adjust question based on how leader has described relationships with stakeholders at school*****

Listen for:

- Experiences as a leader
- Leader feelings about these experiences
- Identity as leader
- Intentions to lead

32. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

****LEAVE 15 MINUTES AT END****

As we've talked today, several things have stood out to me and I've paid attention to them:

- 1.
- 2.

3.

When I listen to this interview, what would you like me to pay attention to?

Thank you. I really appreciate your help with my research!

Appendix C: Interview Protocol #3 – Three-Interview Approach

PROTOCOL AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS – INTERVIEW #3

Targeted Research Questions:

1. How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead?
2. How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop?
3. What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?
4. What interpretive frameworks enhance our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop?

Opening Protocol

4. Give the participant unsigned version of the Consent Form to keep.
5. Read Preamble.
6. Ask leader to sign the Consent Form

Preamble

This is Brittany Miller. Today is [fill in date] and we are at [fill in location] talking with [fill in name]. Thanks so much for agreeing to this interview! The reason why I asked you to participate in this interview is to hear about your experiences as a leader in a high-performing urban charter school, [state school network].

I am going to spend the next hour asking you some questions about your experiences leading at [state school name]. The permission form that you signed means that we can record our discussion so that we can listen to it later and use it to write a report. No one but my advisor and I will hear the tape or read the transcript of this interview. I will use the data collected in this interview to inform my study on high-performing charter school leaders. I will make every effort to maintain anonymity so as not to expose anything about your identity to anyone that I speak with about this project.

Any questions? Great! Let's get on with the interview.

Interview Questions

In this first section, I have a few follow-up questions from the last interview. *Note: These questions changed based on the data from the first two interviews. You will see that the manner in which these sample questions are asked delve*

more deeply into the notion of co-connoisseurship and ask leaders to be transparent and reflective in what they share with the researcher.

1. Last time, you described the struggles you have with the fact that students were never allowed to fail at [charter school name]. How you would go so far as to go to the student's house in the morning and personally drive them to school. Do you believe it's a school's job to allow students to make these kinds of life mistakes, or is that the job of the parents? Were parents seen as allies or co-contributors to the school's culture?

Listen for:

- Community engage in school
- Intentions to engage community
- Intentions to build culture

2. In the last interview, you said that you believe the demographics of the students were absolutely the reason the school was ran the way it was. In reflecting upon this, do you believe there are any bias-based beliefs that underlie the decisions you or other leaders made at (charter school name), or at high-performing charter schools in general? Schools in general?

Listen for:

- Identity as a leader
- Perceptions of culture

In this next section, I'd like to explore with you the idea of co-connoisseurship. In this process, I'd like you to consider yourself a connoisseur, or expert, on high-performing charters. I believe you fit this category having led a high-performing charter school.

In this fairly non-traditional interview method, I'm going to present to you a dichotomy I've seen arise as a theme throughout our conversations together, and through my conversations with other participants. As I present this dichotomy, I'd like for you to answer the following four questions:

- 1. Do you agree that this dichotomy existed in your experience leading [charter school name]?**
- 2. Within this dichotomy, what do you believe were your intentions as a leader?**
- 3. What do you perceive to have actually happened, or operationalized?**

4. What additional reflections might you have as you sit here with me today?

A. Real-World Preparation --- Academic Success

- Do you agree that this dichotomy existed in your experience leading [charter school name]?
- Within this dichotomy, what do you believe were your intentions as a leader?
- What do you perceive to have actually happened, or operationalized?
- What additional reflections might you have as you sit here with me today?

B. Academic Ownership --- Behavior Regulation

- Do you agree that this dichotomy existed in your experience leading [charter school name]?
- Within this dichotomy, what do you believe were your intentions as a leader?
- What do you perceive to have actually happened, or operationalized?
- What additional reflections might you have as you sit here with me today?

C. Values-Based --- Rules-Based

- Do you agree that this dichotomy existed in your experience leading [charter school name]?
- Within this dichotomy, what do you believe were your intentions as a leader?
- What do you perceive to have actually happened, or operationalized?
- What additional reflections might you have as you sit here with me today?

D. Adaptive Strategies --- Technical Solutions

- **Do you agree that this dichotomy existed in your experience leading [charter school name]?**
- **Within this dichotomy, what do you believe were your intentions as a leader?**
- **What do you perceive to have actually happened, or operationalized?**
- **What additional reflections might you have as you sit here with me today?**

E. Family & Care --- Dehumanization

- **Do you agree that this dichotomy existed in your experience leading [charter school name]?**
- **Within this dichotomy, what do you believe were your intentions as a leader?**
- **What do you perceive to have actually happened, or operationalized?**
- **What additional reflections might you have as you sit here with me today?**

Are there any other dichotomies you believe existed in your work at [charter school name]?

Is there anything else you'd like me to know?

Do you have any other leaders of high-performing charters that you think would be interested in participating in this study?

Can you please send me some artifacts that speak to how you led when you were at [charter school name]? ie, staff newsletters, PD plans, strategic plans, meeting agendas, etc.?

****LEAVE 15 MINUTES AT END****

As we've talked today, several things have stood out to me and I've paid attention to them:

1.

2.

3.

When I listen to this interview, what would you like me to pay attention to?

Thank you. I really appreciate your help with my research!

Appendix D: Interview Protocol – Single-Interview Approach

CHARTER LEADER: PROTOCOL AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS – SINGLE INTERVIEW

Targeted Research Questions:

1. How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead?
2. How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop?
3. What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained?
4. What interpretive frameworks enhance our deeper understanding of the school culture leaders intend to develop?

Opening Protocol

1. **Give the participant unsigned version of the consent form, principal consent form, and time requirement form to keep.**
2. **Read preamble.**
3. **Ask participant to sign the consent form and principal consent form.**

Preamble

This is Brittany Miller. Today is [fill in date] and we are at [fill in location] talking with [fill in name]. Thanks so much for agreeing to this interview! The reason why I asked you to participate in this interview is to hear about your experiences as a leader in a high-performing urban charter school, [state school network].

I am going to spend the next hour asking you some questions about your experiences leading at [state school name]. The permission form that you signed means that we can record our discussion so that we can listen to it later and use it to write a report. No one but my advisor and I will hear the tape or read the transcript of this interview. I will use the data collected in this interview to inform my study on high-performing charter school leaders. I will make every effort to maintain anonymity so as not to expose anything about your identity to anyone that I speak with about this project.

Any questions? Great! Let's get on with the interview.

Interview Questions

First... *I'd like to hear about how you ended up working at [school name]*

1. If you were to describe *[school name]* to someone who didn't know anything about it, what would you tell them?

Listen for:

- Experience working at the school
- Other leadership opportunities for students
- Student demographics
- School culture

2. Why did you decide to start *[school name]*? OR what made you decide to lead *[school name]*?

Listen for:

- Intentions of the school model
- Intentions of school culture
- Academic success track record
- Professionalism

Now I'd like to hear about your experiences and identity as a leader at *[school name]*.

1. What were/are your highest priorities in your role as a leader at *[school name]*?

Listen for:

- Experiences as a leader
- Intentions for school culture
- Intentions for staff culture

2. What did/do you find most exciting about working at *[school name]*?

Listen for:

- Experiences as a leader
- Achievements in work
- Identity as leader
- Impacts on students

3. What did/do you find most challenging about working at *[school name]*?

Listen for:

- Experiences as a leader
- Impact on students
- Identity as leader

4. Please complete this analogy – When leading at my best, I am like a....
Why did you choose that analogy?¹²

Listen for:

- Identity as a leader
- How identity impacts intentions
- Integrity as leader
- Hidden parts of identity revealed through metaphor

5. If I asked you to tell a story from your time at *[school name]* that best represents your experiences there, what story would you tell? Why?

Listen for:

- Experiences as a leader
- Identity as a leader
- Intentions as leader
- Intentions for school culture

Now I'd like to hear about the school culture you intend to develop at *[school name]*.

6. How would you describe the school culture at *[school name]*?

Listen for:

- Academic expectations
- Behavior expectations
- Equity and Inclusion

7. What types of behavior expectations are placed upon students? How does this impact the school culture?

Listen for:

- Systems to monitor behavior
- Student perceptions about these systems
- Leader perceptions about these systems

8. How do you define academic success? How do students know if they are successful academically?

Listen for:

¹² This activity was modeled after Parker Palmer's (1998, pp. 147-150) description of an activity in using metaphor he has used to more deeply understand a one's identity and integrity as a teacher. The language has been adjusted to target leader identity.

- Quantitative measures of success
- Qualitative measures of success
- Students' participation & ownership

Finally, I'd like to explore the themes I've been exploring from the data for this study through the notion of co-connoisseurship. (Note – this does not need to occur sequentially – input this question and co-connoisseurship at an authentic moment in the conversation)

I'd like to explore with you the idea of co-connoisseurship. In this process, I'd like you to consider yourself a connoisseur, or expert, on high-performing charters. I believe you fit this category having led a high-performing charter school.

I'm trying to establish a trajectory, or continuum of how high performing charter schools started and how they've grown and adapted over time. I would then like you to give me feedback on what I've found, and push my thinking further regarding this continuum. Does that make sense?

I'm going to share with you the way that I've framed it in four phases. I'm do not present these phases to simplify something so complex, but in order to make it comprehensible to someone that doesn't necessarily deeply know high-performing charter schools. I think these phases help us instead dig deeper into these complexities. These phases are as follow:

1. Early Stages
2. Codified Academic Practices
3. Questioning of Problematic Structures
4. Advancement Toward a Brighter Future

Describe each phase based on current data collected and analyzed from prior interviews.

So that's what I've heard from folks, and would love for you to - you know, since you have been a part of Yes for so long to just kind of like, respond to that, and please like, this is my favorite part of these interviews so like, if you don't agree with something, like poke holes in it, or you know, kind of tell me what's on your mind about that to kind of help me think more deeply about this.

As we've talked today, several things have stood out to me and I've paid attention to them:

1.

2.

3.

4.

When I listen to this interview, what would you like me to pay attention to?

Thank you. I really appreciate your help with my research!

Appendix E: Transcription Key

| Symbol | Meaning | Additional Notes |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|---|
| B | Brittany | |
| Random Single Letter | Interviewee | |
| ... | Skip Over | For text that I don't transcribe – ie, interruption to the interview |
| - | Brief pause | |
| * | Hard stop | Pause for effect |
| LL | Light laugh | |
| ^ | Emphasized word | |

Appendix F: Description from Pilot Study

As Nina sits across the table from me, sipping her coffee as she speaks, I can see how relaxed she is talking about her experiences at SUCCEED. As someone in a leadership role, the questions I ask don't seem to faze her – she is happy to describe what it was like to work there, her qualifications (and shortcomings) as she stepped into leadership, and how her experiences have helped her become the leader she is today. Her confidence is not boastful or assuming – rather firmly present.

When I ask her to describe professional learning opportunities in which she participated at SUCCEED, her even tone and calm demeanor remain intact. As she speaks about these experiences, she describes the standard professional development opportunities afforded to most leaders in education – calibrating on the use of the teacher evaluation rubric, attendance at national conferences, some autonomy in the types of opportunities in which she participated. Sitting back in her chair, legs crossed, she then casually recalls another more 'personal' development the network offered, which focused on cultural responsiveness. As she arrives at this final phrase, the words teeter briefly on her tongue, the 'ness' finally rolling out onto the table as she recalls these trainings.

When I ask her what she means by “cultural responsiveness trainings”, her body language begins to shift. She sits forward in her chair, eyes fixed on me in a more intentional manner, and begins to describe more clearly this particular set of trainings:

“So there's a couple people within the district that... were almost like culture coaches, but they would really just work to make sure that the way that we were talking

about equity, or not even talking about equity, but being equitable, is accurate. And so there would be after school meetings... with these people and a group of teachers where you talk about like - institutional racism. And have open dialogues about that.”

As she arrives at this loaded phrase – ‘institutional racism’, she stamps the word into our shared space, pausing, looking me in the eye, and then finishing her sentence. Nina continues to describe this training with greater conviction and purpose, focusing on how SUCCEED did this in a more meaningful way than how the school district where she currently works engages in these conversations. As she continues to talk, both her words and body language convey how deeply internalized these ideas and values are for her. She moves to describing why the staff at SUCCEED was able to engage in these ‘cultural responsive-ness’ trainings in meaningful ways, and how the individuals that work in the network are bought into these ideas:

“This is why people at SUCCEED are willing to work longer hours. Like we all do school visits, it's not like we get a comp day for going to recruit students across the whole city, it's like you just do that, and I think it's because you want to serve everyone in the neighborhoods as best you can. It's more than a job, because people are just really bought into equity. It's not how we worked, it's who we are.”

At this point, Nina’s posture has moved from a relaxed, poised, calm individual into a passionate, engaged, assertive leader. She is sitting forward in her seat, now spidering her fingers out, pounding them into the table as she arrives at this final phrase:

“It’s more than a job... It’s who we are”.

Appendix G: Architecture of the Data Presentation

| | Description | Composite Character | Aligned Participants | Targeted Research Questions |
|------------------------------|--|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Phase 1: Early Stages | Principal at 25 | Ben, Edward | P1, P3, P7 | How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead? |
| | Detention until midnight | Ben | P1, P7 | What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained? |
| | Basketball at lunch | Ben | P1, P5, P7 | How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop? |
| | Co-connoisseurship: Would you send your child there? | Ben | P1 | How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop? |
| | Ben reapplies to SUCCEED | Ben | P1, P5, P7 | How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop? What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained? |

Key: P = participant

| Phase 2: Codified Technical Solutions | Description | Composite Character | Aligned Participants | Targeted Research Questions |
|--|---|----------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| | Opening the 4 th SUCCEED campus | Toby | P1, P2, P4, P5, P7 | How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead? |
| | Developing a culture of 'high expectations' | Toby | P1, P2, P5, P7, P9 | What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained? |
| | Network-wide leadership meeting | Edward, Toby | P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9 | How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop? |
| | Late night drive home | Toby | P2, P5, P8, P9 | How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop? What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained? |

Key: P = participant

| Phase 3: Unpacking Problematic Structures | Description | Composite Character | Aligned Participants | Targeted Research Questions |
|--|---|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| | Bathroom duty | Anne | P2 | How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead? |
| | Silent hallway rule | Anne | P1, P2, P5, P8 | How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop? |
| | Co-connoisseurship and silent hallways | Anne | P1, P2, P5 | How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead? |
| | Changing network enrollment policies | Edward | P3, P7, P9 | What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained? |
| | Co-connoisseurship and culturally relevant pedagogy | Anne | P2, P3, P4, P8 | How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop? What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained? |

Key: P = participant

| Phase 4: Advancement for a Brighter Future | Description | Composite Character | Aligned Participants | Targeted Research Questions |
|---|--|----------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| | Moving to SUCCEED – unexpected joy | Rachel | P4, P6, P8 | How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead? |
| | Parent leadership | Rachel | P1, P4 | What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained? |
| | Principal’s council designing uniforms | Emery | P1, P3, P6, P8 | How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting the school culture they intend to develop? |
| | Graduation day | Emery | P1, P2, P5, P6, P8, P9 | What kinds of conditions do school leaders provide in order for their intentions and school culture to be developed and sustained? How do school leaders perceive their past and present experiences and identities as impacting their intentions to lead? |

Key: P = participant

Appendix H: Timeline

February 2017 – Defend Proposal

March-July 2017 – Complete IRB process for University of Denver and RRB process for Denver Public Schools

July 2017 – Through snowball sampling, begin to identify participants (not all participants need to be identified in order to begin data collection)

August 2017 – Begin data collection (interviews and artifact collection)

January 2018 – Complete data collection

November 2017- March 2018 – Complete written portion of dissertation for review

March 2018 – Submit completed draft to dissertation chair for review

April 2018 – Correct changes needed based on submitted draft

May 2018 – Defend dissertation