**A Phenomenological Study of Alternative Education School Leader Servant Leadership**

**Characteristics in Texas**

David Randall Pratt

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David Randall Pratt

Approved by:

Dissertation Chair:     Carolyn Price, PhD

Committee Member:   Susan Reutter, EdD

**Abstract**

Alternative education schools provide marginalized students a different method of achieving success in school. The problem facing alternative education schools of choice (AESOC) in Texas was the lack of defined servant leadership characteristics and how those characteristics further the mission of AESOC. Studies have linked servant leadership characteristics with effective alternative school practices in general. The purpose of the phenomenological study was to explore what servant leadership characteristics are revealed in the lived experiences of exemplary leaders of AESOC in Texas and how those characteristics advance the mission of AESOC. Research identifying characteristics of effective AESOC leaders was lacking. Servant leadership and social learning theory provide the theoretical framework. Research Question 1 explored What servant leader characteristics are exhibited by AESOC leaders' lived experiences in Texas. The second research question looked at how servant leadership characteristics exhibited by AESOC leaders' lived experiences advance the mission of AESOC. Social learning factors improve student success in schools of choice. Semi-structured interviews, conducted through teleconferencing, explored the lived experiences of 20 exemplary alternative education leaders in Texas. Relationships were the overarching theme influencing themes of mission and vision, leadership styles, accountability, and respect. Exemplary AESOC leaders exhibit characteristics comparable to servant leadership. These characteristics further the mission of the AESOC. Further research is needed to determine if leaders other than AESOC leaders exhibit servant leader characteristics.

*Keywords:* alternative education, school of choice, phenomenological, servant leader, social learning theory, educational leadership

**Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Arrenia T. Pratt, who has stood my me and encouraged me throughout my professional career. Reni encouraged me during my first round of doctoral graduate school, through my various educational careers, and encouraged and supported this final step in completing my doctorate.

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my father, Dr. David Pratt, and my father-in-law, Dr. Ide Trotter, Jr. Both provided excellent examples of high ethical standards for professionals in academic settings and as positive role models in my personal life.

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I would like to thank Dr. Margie Martinez and Laurie Rath for their display of true servant leadership in alternative school settings. Their example of helping staff and students achieve excellence through servant leadership helped guide my research questions. Dr. Martinez reviewed interview questions and Ms. Rath led the selection committee that chose exemplary alternative education leaders. Thank you for your leadership, encouragement, and help.

I would like to thank the faculty at American College of Education for providing the structure and means to complete my doctorate. Faculty in subject courses and chapter writing provided specific and useful feedback that helped me grow as a professional, researcher, and as a writer. I would like to especially thank Dr. Carolyn Price, committee chair, for the numerous hours spent reviewing the chapters. The resultant dissertation is the result of the reviews provided. I would like to thank Dr. Susan Reutter, committee member, for the feedback given that helped improve the paper.

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**Chapter 1: Introduction**

Alternative education provides marginalized students with different methods to achieve success in school (Cajic-Seigneur & Hodgson, 2016; Jordan et al., 2017; McGee & Lin, 2017). The varying needs of marginalized students suggest alternative education leaders are different from regular education leaders, necessitating unique investigations (Hodgman, 2016; Maillet, 2017). Alternative education schools of choice (AESOC) provide fresh starts to students who have not been successful in regular education settings. Type I alternative programs, which include AESOC, are voluntarily chosen by the student reflecting organization, administration, and programs different from traditional schools (Raywid, 1994). Students voluntarily attend AESOC to achieve academic and life success (Wilcox et al., 2018). Knowing what servant leadership characteristics AESOC leaders exhibit and how the characteristics further the mission of the schools can help prepare leaders to meet the needs of marginalized students to become successful. Research studies on alternative education leaders are sparse (Kloss, 2018; Maillet, 2017).

Studies on alternative school practices suggest servant leader attributes and social learning factors play a role in successful alternative programs (Henderson et al., 2018; Kloss, 2018; Maillet, 2017; McGee & Lin, 2017; Rolfsman, 2020; van Aalderen-Smeets & Walma van der Molen, 2018). Investigating what servant leadership characteristics are revealed in the lived experiences of exemplary AESOC leaders in Texas and how those characteristics further the mission of the AESOC will be accomplished with a phenomenological qualitative design to elicit the experiences of exemplary AESOC leaders in Texas, United States.

**Background of the Problem**

Providing a meaningful education to marginalized and disadvantaged students who have not been successful in regular education settings is a challenge for society (Peterson, 2016). Centralized school reforms of the late 20th and early 21st centuries have failed to meet the needs of unsuccessful students (Peterson, 2016). Alternative education schools of choice meet the challenge by providing interventions focused on the individuality and needs of learners (Hodgman, 2016; Jordan et al., 2017; Maillet, 2017). Alternative education roots in American education began early in the 20th century (Baker, 2017). The seminal 8-year study on the effectiveness of alternative schools between 1933-1941 linked decentralized, democratic, individual-focused programs as more effective than the mass-produced centralized system of regular education (Aikin, 1942/2015).

Students attending AESOC often have academic, behavioral, social, and emotional problems (Bettini et al., 2020; Hodgman M., 2016). Successful interventions rely on positive psychological practices and establishing meaningful relationships (Dutta & Khatri, 2017; Kloss, 2018). Relationships and positive psychological practices link to servant leadership and social learning theory. Characteristics exhibited by AESOC leaders, and how characteristics further the mission of AESOC deserve investigating.

## Statement of the Problem

The problem facing alternative schools of choice (AESOC) in Texas is the lack of defined servant leadership characteristics and how those characteristics further the mission of AESOC. Research on alternative education has focused on students and the whole school (Maillet, 2017). Alternative school leader investigations have examined general qualifications and certifications (Bettini et al., 2020). An exhaustive search of the literature failed to find studies investigating specific characteristics of exemplary alternative education leaders.

Solving the problem of students failing to complete high school continues to perplex the educational system (Peterson, 2016). Longitudinal studies indicate former students who have completed alternative schools achieve a high rate of success in life after graduating (Harnischfeger, 2018). Students attending AESOC are different from regular education students (Jordan et al., 2017). Different students need different methods to achieve success. Links between practices found in successful alternative education programs and characteristics of servant leadership suggest servant leader characteristics are important to the effectiveness of AESOC (Maillet, 2017). Determining what servant leadership characteristics AESOC leaders exhibit and how the characteristics further the mission of the AESOC will add to the body of knowledge concerning educating marginalized and disadvantaged students who have not succeeded in regular education programs.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the phenomenological study was to explore what servant leadership characteristics are revealed in the lived experiences of exemplary leaders of AESOC in Texas and how those characteristics advance the mission of AESOC. Qualitative research methodologies interpret meaning from participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Phenomenological approaches analyze complex lived experiences of participants (Valentine et al., 2018). Semi-structured interviews explored experiences of exemplary AESOC in Texas.

Analysis of AESOC leader responses helped discover, describe, and understand the interaction of servant leader characteristics and how characteristics further the mission of AESOC. Exemplary AESOC leaders provide experiences from successful programs over time. Telecommunication interviews support selection of participants statewide avoiding restrictions imposed by traveling distances.

**Significance of the Study**

The mission of AESOC includes individual support for students who fail to succeed, thereby, encompassing the whole student: (a) academic, (b) behavioral, (c) environmental, (d) emotional, and (e) social (McGee & Lin, 2017). Servant leadership and social learning theory address the needs of AESOC (Perzigian, 2018). The leadership needs of AESOC vary from regular education settings (Jordan et al., 2017). Determining what servant leader characteristics AESOC leaders exhibit and how the characteristics advance the mission of the AESOC can help provide effective alternative education for students who have not succeeded in regular education settings.

The primary beneficiaries of learning the servant leader characteristics of AESOC leaders are AESOC students. Providing an individualized relationship-based instructional program enhances the ability of marginalized and disadvantaged students to succeed. School systems will benefit from knowing what characteristics exemplary AESOC leaders exhibit. Placement of appropriate leaders, based on characteristics of exemplary AESOC leaders, will help AESOC programs focus on the individuality of the student, increasing the effectiveness of the programs (Kloss, 2018). Identifying characteristics of AESOC leaders will provide a basis for differentiating leader selection criteria in school districts. Knowing how servant leader characteristics further the mission of the AESOC will provide criteria for differentiated professional standards and practices for AESOC.

Improvement in student lives after AESOC graduation indicates a long-term impact (Unterman & Haider, 2019; Wilcox et al., 2018). Likelihood of students participating in productive activities after leaving school increases with graduation from AESOC. Productive activities include employment, post-secondary schooling, or both. Many AESOC model the

success sequence of graduation, job, marriage, children. Expanded knowledge of AESOC leader characteristics can help guide communities in improving school quality, fit, and engagement with the community.

## Research Questions

Qualitative research questions seek answers to what and how of the phenomenon leading to open and emerging design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The questions focus the study on a single concept or phenomenon to explore. Phenomenology designs use research questions describing the essence of the lived experience.

Research Question 1: What servant leader characteristics are exhibited by AESOC leaders' lived experiences in Texas?

Research Question 2: How do servant leadership characteristics exhibited by AESOC leaders' lived experiences advance the mission of AESOC?

Phenomenological qualitative research questions permit the research to evolve based on participant responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Open-ended semi-structured individual interviews allow participants to describe experiences as AESOC leaders. Phenomenological approaches recognize the complex interactions of participant experiences (Valentine et al., 2018). Hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes the value of interviewer's experience in seeking complete descriptions of participant lived experiences. The population in Texas restricts purposeful sampling of AESOC leaders.

## Theoretical Framework

Servant leadership and social learning theory informed the study. Servant leadership considers the primary function of a leader is to serve others (Greenleaf, 1970/2008). Social learning theory extends classical and operant conditioning in an interaction of behavioral,

personal, and environmental factors experienced by the individual (Bandura, 1977). Links between servant leadership and effective alternative education practices found in several studies suggest further investigation of the relationship (Jordan et al., 2017; Kloss, 2018; Maillet, 2017; McGee & Lin, 2017). Social learning theory factors are associated with school performance (Khudzari et al., 2019; Lyons & Bandura, 2019). Studies on alternative education and educational choice indicated evidence of both servant leadership and social learning theory concepts in the practices of successful programs (Dutta & Khatri, 2017; Palta, 2019; Sheikh et al., 2019).

**Servant Leadership**

Servant leadership characteristics described in the literature vary depending on research methodologies employed (Coetzer et al., 2017; Gandolfi & Stone, 2018; Sisan, 2017). Greenleaf (1970/2008) developed the first set of servant leader characteristics, holding that leadership was an ethical endeavor to serve others with a clear mission and goals (Coetzer et al., 2017). Recent literature descriptions of specific characteristics include those from qualitative research and factor analysis studies (Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2018). Characteristics common to all reports include ethical leadership, service, listening, empowering others, building others. Other descriptions complement and augment the common themes (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018; Sendjaya et al., 2019; Sisan, 2017).

Servant leadership is associated with positive principal integrity and performance (Malingkas et al., 2018). Organizational commitment by teachers is correlated with servant leadership, resulting in higher job satisfaction and lower turnover rates (Palta, 2019; Shaw & Newton, 2014; Zeng & Xu, 2020). Teachers expect school leaders of alternative education programs to exhibit servant leader characteristics (Insley et al., 2016).

**Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theory provides a model of learning expanding classical and operant conditioning principles to include three factors: (a) behavioral, (b) personal, and (c) environmental (Bandura, 1977, 2018). Behavioral, personal, and environmental factors interact and influence each other. Modeling and observational learning result from the interaction of the three factors (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Social cognitive theory, a subset of social learning theory, addresses concepts of performance, self-efficacy, and self-regulation (Bandura, 1988; Lyons & Bandura, 2019).

Social learning theory factors influence behaviors of servant leader followers. Servant leaders model ethical behavior, trustworthiness, and participatory behaviors (De Cremer et al., 2018; Mayer et al., 2009). Social learning theory addresses the whole student, coinciding with the goals and mission of AESOC. Alternative education, focused on relationships, utilized servant leader characteristics, and social learning theory factors to influence students to achieve.

## Definitions of Terms

*Agape love.* Love based on truth, protection, trust, hope, and perseverance (Robinson, 2015). It is "doing the right thing, at the right time, for the right reasons" (Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015, p. 121).

*Agency.* Power to shape environment and life courses (Bandura, 2018).

*Alternative education*. Schools that are different from mainstream regular education schools and serve primarily marginalized and disadvantaged students. Three types of alternative education schools exist focusing on different criteria. Type I schools are innovative schools of choice structured and organized differently than traditional schools. Type II schools are last chance options before expulsion for disciplinary issues. Type III schools are mandatory remedial

programs to address academic and social-emotional needs (Raywid, 1994). Type II & II schools are mandatory placement enrollment programs. Type I schools, voluntary enrollment, are the focus of this study.

 ***Alternative education schools of choice (AESOC).*** A term used to distinguish Type I alternative schools from disciplinary alternative education programs (Walker, 2009).

 ***Disadvantaged***. Students who lack sufficient resources, personally, behaviorally, and/or environmentally to succeed in the traditional school setting (Jordan et al., 2017).

 ***Ethical leader behavior***. Foreseeing events and taking the right actions when the freedom to initiate action is still available (Greenleaf, 1970/2008).

 ***Marginalized students***: Students who have not integrated into the traditional school culture. Personal, behavioral, and environmental factors that hinder achieving success in a traditional setting affect marginalized students (Jordan et al., 2017).

 ***Phenomenological research***. An inquiry designed to describe the lived experiences of participants of a specific phenomenon, culminating in a description of the essential parts experienced by several individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)

 ***Resiliency.*** A trait that helps individuals cope with and overcome impacts of adversity (Cheung et al., 2020)

 ***School of Choice***: Enrollment is open regardless of set geographical locations (West, 2016). Students have choices in which school to attend. This study restricts school choice to public education systems.

 ***Self-efficacy***. The belief an individual can bring change to a specific situation and affect the outcome (Bandura, 2018).

*Self-motivation.* Intrinsic factor in obtaining a personal goal. A necessary component of self-regulation and depends on self-efficacy (Bradley et al., 2017).

*Self-regulation*. Controlling impulses and instincts. Self-regulation is important to decision-making (Bandura, 2018).

*Servant*. One who serves others. Servanthood places others' needs ahead of self. Not to be confused with subservience (Greenleaf, 1970/2008).

## Assumptions

Assumptions presuppose relationships between phenomena and causal processes that are not always clear (Storozhuk, 2018). Phenomenological qualitative research seeks to describe the personal experiences of participants' involvement with the phenomena investigated (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative research assumptions follow the four cornerstones of qualitative research: (a) research findings, theory, and methodology principles; (b) researcher expertise; (c) research informants' preferences, wants, cultures, values, and important personal considerations; and (d) the persons of researchers (Gilgun, 2006). Assumptions made address the four cornerstones of qualitative research.

Research findings, theory, and methods assume phenomenological qualitative methods are appropriate to investigate and describe how and what of the phenomena from the lived experience of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants can describe the experiences of the phenomena (Gilgun, 2006). Separation and identification of participant expertise, values, biases, and assumptions are possible. Servant leadership and social learning theory provide sound theoretical constructs to alternative education programs, relative to the research. Alternative education programs serve populations that differ from traditional settings

and require different methods and leadership. Quality and type of leadership affect the organizational structure and culture.

Researcher expertise matches the theories, findings, and methodologies of the study (Gilgun, 2006). The expertise of the researcher helps organize and interpret findings. Participants share expertise with the researcher. Sharing expertise from different perspectives provides a form of validation for both research and practice.

The participant cultures, interests, wants, and values impact qualitative research (Gilgun, 2006). Participants freely choose to participate; no adverse consequences occur based on participation. Values held by participants include the mission and goals of alternative education.

The person of the researcher recognizes personal experiences without imposing those experiences on the participants (Gilgun, 2006). Ethical conduct of the researcher occurs throughout the research project. Accurate interpretation of participant descriptions of phenomena overrides researcher personal views and assumptions (Gilgun, 2006).

## Scope and Delimitations

The scope of the research defines parameters the study covers (Simon & Goes, 2013). Lived experiences of alternative school of choice leaders in Texas are the domain of the study. Leader characteristics, specifically servant leader characteristics, and how the characteristics further the mission of the school denote the range of the study. Descriptions of participant experiences as AESOC leaders were sought in the study.

Delimitations are exclusionary and inclusionary decisions in the research design (Simon & Goes, 2013). Delimitations are choices made to limit the scope of the research. The study encompassed only voluntary admission AESOC, where other types of alternative programs are mandatory and not directly relevant. Alternative education schools of choice are separate from

traditional education settings to avoid the problem of separating individual perspectives when responsibilities are mixed. The study was restricted to recognized exemplary AESOC leaders. Experiences of effective leaders further the knowledge of how to educate students in alternative education (Jordan et al., 2017). The population was restricted to Texas-based participants due to past interactions with education leaders active in alternative education settings and alternative education professional organizations, who made the selections of exemplary leaders.

## Limitations

Limitations are constraints beyond the control of the researcher (Simon & Goes, 2013). The study relied on voluntary participation by leaders active in alternative education settings and professional organizations to identify and introduce prospective participants. In addition, the study relied on the voluntary participation of school leaders who were unknown to the researcher. Communication skills of both researcher and participants limited the collection and interpretation of experiences (Tuffour, 2017). The openness of participants to share their lived experiences as honestly as possible limited the study. Teleconferencing, due to distance and social restrictions, limits the preferred personal interaction of phenomenological studies. Description of what and how, rather than why the phenomena occur, limited the interpretation.

## Chapter Summary

Students in alternative education schools of choice have diverse needs compared to regular education students, suggesting alternative education leaders are different from regular education leaders (Hodgman, 2016; Maillet, 2017). Servant leadership and social learning theory meet the needs of students in alternative schools. What characteristics and how those characteristics further the mission of the AESOC require investigation. Exploring lived experiences of exemplary AESOC leaders provided a rich description of the interactions of

leader characteristics and the mission of the school. Gaining insight into the practices of exemplar AESOC leaders can help education leaders meet the needs of marginalized and disadvantaged students who failed to succeed in traditional settings. The following literature review explains in detail the underlying theoretical foundation and significance of the problem as it relates to educating today's youth.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The problem facing alternative schools of choice (AESOC) in Texas is the lack of defined servant leadership characteristics and how those characteristics further the mission of AESOC. Alternative education schools of choice refer to public schools designed to meet the needs of students who have not been successful in traditional school settings in a voluntary admission setting (Hodgman, 2016; McGee & Lin, 2017). The purpose of the phenomenological study was to explore what servant leadership characteristics are revealed in the lived experiences of exemplary leaders of AESOC in Texas and how those characteristics advance the mission of AESOC.

The following literature review includes three topics: (a) theory foundations, (b) alternative education, and (c) educational choice. Servant leadership and social learning theory provided the theoretical framework used in the study. Studies indicated links between alternative education and educational choice to servant leadership and social learning theory (Crippen & Willows, 2019). While relationships between successful school practices and servant leaders were identified, servant leader characteristics of alternative education leaders are lacking (Heyler & Martin, 2018; McGee & Lin, 2017). The identified gap in the literature addressed in the current study is in identifying servant leader characteristics of alternative education leaders and the impact those characteristics have on the mission of the school. A summary of the literature review findings and the need for the study closes the literature review chapter.

**Literature Search Strategy**

The primary search tool utilized was EBSCO Discovery databases through the American College of Education (ACE) library. The databases available for searches through the ACE library system include Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, Educational

Administration Abstracts, Education Source, ERIC, Open Dissertations, ProQuest Dissertations, and Theses Global ProQuest Education Database, and ABI/Inform collection. Google Scholar and Microsoft Academic provided additional resources unavailable through the ACE library. Amazon, and its affiliate Kindle Books, were a source for hard copies of works unavailable through online resources.

Major search terms included *servant leadership, social learning theory, alternative education, school choice, and qualitative research*. Each major search term used individual terms and combined terms. *Servant leader* and *servant leadership* searches added *Greenleaf, social learning theory, alternative education, school choice*, ethics, ethical leadership, and *educational leadership*. *Social Learning theory* searches added Bandura's *self-efficacy, education, school* or *educational choice*, and *alternative education.* Searches using related terms for *social learning theory* used social learning theory modifiers. Terms related to social learning theory included *social cognitive theory, observational learning*, and *modeling*. Using *educational choice* and *school choice* expanded the search. Research related literature search terms used *qualitative, phenomenological, phenomenology*, and *hermeneutics*. Therefore, servant leadership and social learning theory comprise the theoretical framework of the study.

**Theoretical Framework**

Two theories informed the current study, servant leadership and social learning theory. Servant leadership, as proposed by Robert Greenleaf (1970/2008), viewed the purpose of leadership as serving others. Social learning theory, proposed by Albert Bandura (1977) extended classical and operant conditioning principles by adding observational and modeling concepts to methods of learning. The focus on leadership involves knowing (a) what servant leadership characteristics are exhibited by leaders of alternative education schools of choice

(AESOC) in Texas and (b) how those characteristics further the mission of the AESOC. Servant leadership theory provides the theoretical framework for investigating what servant leadership characteristics AESOC leaders in Texas exhibit. Focusing on serving the needs of followers is the primary duty of a servant leader (Greenleaf, 1970/2008). Servant leadership meets the attributes of effective leadership, education leadership, and vocational leadership (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018; Sisan, 2017). Positive psychology, psychological capital, positive organizational behavior, and resilience link psychological constructs to servant leadership and AESOC needs (Eliot, 2020; Gonçalves de Lima et al., 2020; Insley et al., 2016; Malingkas et al., 2018).

Social learning theory provides the theoretical framework for investigating how servant leadership characteristics of AESOC leaders help advance the mission of the AESOC. Three factors serve as the basis for social learning theory: (a) personal, (b) behavioral, and (c) environmental (Bandura, 1977, 1988, 2018). Personal factors of servant leaders are the characteristics of a servant leader, including ethical leadership, trustworthiness, and participatory behaviors (De Cremer et al., 2018; Mayer et al., 2009; Otaye-Ebede et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2018; Zimmerman et al., 1992). Behavioral factors of self-efficacy and self-regulation correlate with academic performance (Lyons & Bandura, 2019).

Self-efficacy is a person's belief about an individual's ability to accomplish a task (Bandura, 1977). Thinking, action, and feelings influence a person's self-efficacy. Experiences influence the self-efficacy of the individual (Haverback, & Bojczyk, 2019). Mastering a task increases self-efficacy by providing objective, personal evidence (Bandura, 1977). Observations of others' performance and meaningful feedback of performance influences self-efficacy. Self-efficacy influences the self-regulation of emotions (Caprara, et al., 2020). Belief in the ability to manage negative emotions is a good predictor of general well-being. The belief in the ability to

manage sadness and fears has a pronounced effect on life satisfaction and overcoming negative outcomes.

Self-regulation involves cognitive and behavioral functions associated with achieving personal goals (Bradley et al., 2017). Self-efficacy and self-regulation are positively correlated. Extended life efforts, such as education requires self-regulation (Peck et al., 2018). Retention and performance in academic programs are significantly correlated with self-efficacy and self-regulation (Lyons & Bandura, 2019; Peck et al., 2018).

Social learning theory is a recommended theoretical model to influence environments when attempting to improve schools and education (Desravines et al., 2016; Henderson et al., 2018). Building a school culture of academic, behavioral, and social success is essential to improving schools and educational opportunities. Social learning theory provides a model for eliciting change through modeling and observation. A focus on self-efficacy, agency, self-motivation, and resiliency promotes increased success for staff and students (Henderson et al., 2018). Figure 1 illustrates the integration of social learning theory, servant leadership, and alternative education. Behavioral, personal, and environmental factors associated with social learning theory influence individual learning. Learning, a relative permanent acquisition of knowledge, skills, or responses based on experiences is both implicit and explicit (Schacter et al., 2020). Alternative education schools of choice leaders influence staff and students through modeling servant leader characteristics.

**Figure 1.**

*Social learning theory integrated with servant leadership and AESOC characteristics*

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┌─────────────────────────────┐          ┌─────────────────────────────┐
│   Behavior Factors of        │          │  Environment Factors of      │
│   AESOC Members:             │          │  AESOC Members:              │
│   •Self-efficacy             │ ◄──────► │  •Alternate education        │
│   •Self-motivation           │          │  •Schools of choice          │
│   •Listening                 │          │  •Empowered followers        │
│   •Service                   │          │  •Vision and goals           │
│                              │          │  •Community                  │
└─────────────────────────────┘          └─────────────────────────────┘
          ┌──────────────────────────────────────┐
          │        Personal Factors of            │
          │        AESOC Members:                 │
          │        •Compassion/love               │
          │        •Humility                      │
          │        •Trust/integrity               │
          │        •Moral and spiritual character │
          │        •Altruism                      │
          └──────────────────────────────────────┘
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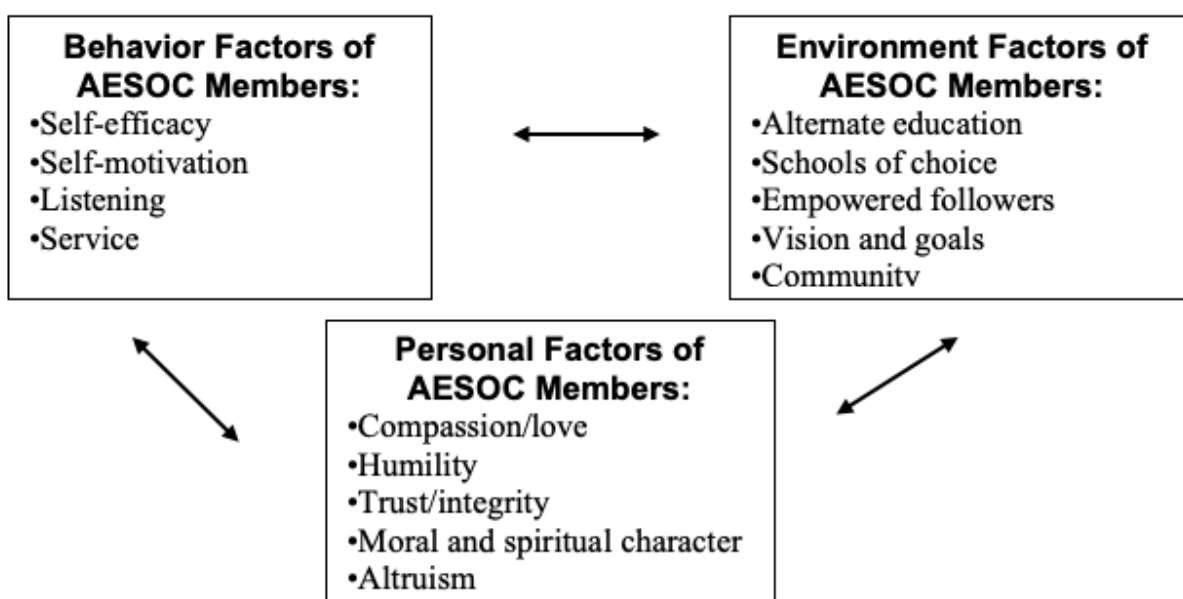
*Note:* Servant leader characteristics associated with social learning theory factors interactions

**Servant Leadership**

Servant leadership is a concept with roots in antiquity (Gandolfi et al., 2017). Teachings and practices in diverse cultures reflect servant leadership constructs. Ancient monarchs viewed leadership as a service to others. Historically, Gandolfi et al. (2017) connected the foundational concept of serving others to Confucius's teachings, the Zhou dynasty, and Bedouin cultures. Gandolfi et al. (2017) further asserted the teachings of Jesus Christ are best known for proposing servanthood as a way of life for all.

Robert Greenleaf's original work in 1970 on the concept of servant leadership served as a treatise on society (Greenleaf, 1970/2008). Greenleaf described servant leadership as "begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first" (Greenleaf, 1970, as cited in Greenleaf, 2008, p. 135). Whether the leader is a servant depends upon the personal growth of

those served. The positive effects of a servant leader on the least privileged in society best serve society.

Greenleaf (1970/2008) stated two major concerns leading to servant leadership. First, Greenleaf saw individuals attempting to deal with societal problems solely in terms of systems, ideologies, and movements. Societal institutions are not basic to solving societal problems. The individual is basic to solving problems.

Greenleaf's (1970/2008) second concern viewed the failure to lead by serving people as a blockage to wholeness and creative fulfillment. Hope for the future rests in the hands of true servants among those society deems least unsophisticated and deprived. Optimism is based on people learning to differentiate between true servants and those who posture as servants. The multi-dimensional aspect of servant leadership encompasses all aspects of leadership and all levels, individual, organizational, and societal (Coetzer et al., 2017). Utilizing a multi-dimensional approach, servant leaders, freed from the constraints of organizations and society, utilize the creative powers of the individual.

Frustration with the lack of instant reform led many to attempt to destroy societal institutions without thought to what would replace them (Greenleaf, 1970/2008). Reliance on educational systems that diminish the individual and assume intellectual preparation provides optimal growth overarches these concerns. Education's focus on analytical and abstract concepts leads to a failure of solving problems and identifying individual efforts in solving problems. Education focused on criticism, not solving problems. Schools produce alienation and purposelessness.

Criticism of educational systems has continued into the twenty-first century (Letizia, 2014; Peterson, 2016). School choice advocates in the school reform movement attempt to

address alienation and purposelessness through an increase in self-efficacy and self-motivation (van Aalderen-Smeets & Walma van der Molen, 2018). Flexible thinking, linked to education choice, increases problem-solving abilities and engages students in seeking long-term alternatives to life choices (Rolfsman, 2020; Tsatsaroni & Sarakinioti, 2018).

Nationwide reform movements of the late 20th and early 21st centuries focused on institutional and regulatory control as a means of reforming schools, culminating in the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) and The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015; Peterson, 2016). Institutional-focused reform efforts have failed to eliminate the educational gaps between cultures and failed to improve the country's academic standards compared to other countries.

Good and evil originate with individual thoughts, actions, and attitudes, resulting in individuals determining the quality of society (Greenleaf, 1970/2008). The system-focus of educational reform ignored individual contributions and needs. The centralized control exhibited by reform efforts is an antithesis to democratic principles and actions. Greenleaf's (1970/2008) educational concerns seem to increase under reform efforts, decreasing democratic potential. Servant leadership takes the viewpoint that one person, through persuasion, can effect change in society. Servant leadership promotes democratic ideals and actions.

Student lack of success, alienation, and purposeless schools are related (Greenleaf, 1970/2008; Hodgman, 2016; Jordan et al., 2017; Kloss, 2018). Alternative education schools attempt to provide meaningful, relational settings and experiences that increase the value of the individual. The characteristics of effective alternative schools match the characteristics of servant leadership. Alternative education seeks to address many of the identified problems within the

educational system. Improving the quality of AESOC requires the improvement of AESOC leaders (Bettini et al., 2020).

Leadership is an ethical endeavor (Greenleaf, 1970/2008). Failure to foresee and act constructively when given the opportunity is unethical. Unethical behavior linked to preventable actions is the result of actions by many, not just the current individual blamed. Ethical leadership, according to Greenleaf (1970/2008), searches for wholeness and healing. When leaders exert coercive power, both overt and covert, the result is followers experience minimal power and diminished autonomy, plus strengthening resistance (Gandolfi et al., 2017; Spears, 2004). In contrast, servant leaders use persuasive powers to create opportunities and alternatives, plus increase the autonomy of the individual.

Rooted in ancient cultures, servant leadership takes a moral perspective (Gandolfi et al., 2017). Servant leadership's moral and ethical foundations require leaders to use critical thinking to solve problems and persuade followers based on the merit of arguments rather than authority (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). Bibliometric analysis suggests a strong link between servant leadership and ethical leadership (Mustamil & Najam, 2020).

Servant leadership views unethical organizational behaviors, involving human behaviors and human nature, as a crisis of leadership (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). Through increased engagement with members of the organization, servant leaders promote ethical organizational behaviors through ethical leadership. Servant leadership characteristics fit within Collin's highest level of leadership, level 5. Ethical climates, including educational settings, are positively correlated with servant leadership, creating ethical organizations (Dodd et al., 2018). A view of servant leadership is it provides the best defense against moral and ethical failures in organizations and society (Gandolfi et al., 2017).

*Characteristics of a Servant Leader*

Descriptions of characteristics of servant leaders vary across the literature depending on research methodologies (Coetzer et al., 2017; Gandolfi & Stone, 2018; Sisan, 2017). Original characteristics include eight areas. Recent qualitative research descriptions vary between 6 and 12 characteristics. Factor analysis revealed as many as nine characteristics shared by servant leaders. Research conducted on servant leadership since Greenleaf's (1970/2008) original publication in 1970 has attempted to modify and clarify the original characteristics while retaining the essence of servant leadership.

**Original Characteristics.** The original characteristics of a servant leader included eight areas: (a) agape love, (b) humility, (c) altruism, (d) vision and goals, (e) trust, (f) empowerment, (g) service, and (h) listening (Greenleaf, 1970/2008; Shaw & Newton, 2014). According to Shaw and Newton (2014), agape love, associated with strong moral character, is the type of love referred to in servant leadership. Agape love is the demonstration of faithfulness, commitment, and goodwill toward others. Descriptions of servant leaders fall within the strong moral character associated with agape love. Table 1 shows the characteristics of agape love and strong moral character found in the original characteristics of servant leaders.

**Characteristics from recent research.** Research on servant leadership combined some of the characteristics and renamed others (Boone & Makhani, 2012; Gandolfi & Stone, 2018; Sendjaya et al., 2019; Sisan, 2017; Wong & Davey, 2007; Wong & Page, 2003). Descriptions of the factors, whether five, six, or seven, include the eight characteristics proposed by Greenleaf (1970/2008). Characteristics identified since Greenleaf include trust, authenticity, humility, compassion, accountability, courage, altruism, integrity, and listening. (Coetzer et al., 2017; Focht & Ponton, 2015). Competencies displayed by servant leaders include empowerment,

stewardship, service, love, building relationships, valuing people, and having a compelling vision. Table 2 shows the characteristics and competencies found in recent research on servant leadership.

**Table 1**

*Original Servant Leader Characteristics*

| Agape love characteristics | Strong moral character characteristics | |
|---|---|---|
| Faithfulness | Agape love | Humility |
| Commitment | Altruism | Vision & goals |
| Goodwill | Trust | Empowerment |
| | Service | Listening |

*Note.* Original servant leader characteristics organized by agape love and strong moral character

**Table 2**

*Servant Leader Characteristics from Recent Research*

| Characteristics | | Competencies | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Trust | Courage | Empowerment | Stewardship |
| Authenticity | Altruism | Service | Love |
| Humility | Integrity | Building Relationships | Valuing People |
| Compassion | Listening | Compelling vision | |
| Accountability | | | |

*Note.* Characteristics and competencies identified in recent research.

**Characteristics revealed through factor analysis.** Factor analysis results suggested a multi-dimensional concept adding unique augmentation to transformational leadership (Liden et al., 2008). Factor analyses revealed a spiritual and moral component of servant leadership, as well as an empowerment component (Otaye-Ebede et al., 2020; Sendjaya et al., 2019; Sisan, 2017). Malingkas et al.'s (2018) analyses revealed participatory styles and courage as factors of servant leadership. The unifying aspect of the research is leaders focus on the needs of the followers as the primary duty of the leader. Table 3 shows the components of servant leadership found through factor analysis.

**Table 3**

*Servant Leader Components from Factor Analysis*

| Factor Analysis Components | | |
|---|---|---|
| Spiritual | Moral | Empowerment |
| Participatory | Courage | Focus on needs of follower |

*Note:* Components of Servant Leadership revealed through factor analysis.

### *Description of Servant Leader Characteristics*

Agape love, based on strong moral character, is the basis of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970/2008; Shaw & Newton, 2014). Shaw and Newton (2014) asserted humility acknowledges personal shortfalls, does not exaggerate self-strengths and includes acceptance and empathy for others. Genuine humility derives from personal strength and self-acceptance, tolerating imperfect people, not tolerance of behavior. Altruism is helping others because they need help, not for personal gain. Shaw and Newton (2014) asserted altruism forms the basis of actions serving others.

Service to others, the root of a servant, involves giving time, effort, and resources based on the needs of others (Coetzer et al., 2017; Greenleaf, 1970/2008). Establishing visions and goals provides clear direction for individuals. Clear visions and goals allow evaluations of current resources and future needs. Servant leaders can see and direct potential in people, often when others do not see the potential. Greenleaf (1970/2008) contended that recognizing the potential in others allows servant leaders to effectively utilize current personal resources and develop future resources in followers. Empowering others allows them to take ownership. Helping others to gain power is a function of servant leaders.

Trust is the foundation of positive relationships, built through active listening (Coetzer et al., 2017; Greenleaf, 1970/2008). Relationships built on trust allow for growth and learning. Listening allows a leader to determine the strengths, needs, and desires of others to help build the strengths of others (Coetzer et al., 2017). Expanding personal boundaries can occur when trust is evident in the relationship. Growth based on trusted relationships increases organizational resources and increases positive relationships. Altruistically loving and serving others requires an intimate knowledge of the individual gained through the act of listening.

Common themes encompassing competencies and characteristics of servant leadership in recent literature include ethical leadership, listening, empowering, service to others, and building others (Boone & Makhani, 2012; Gandolfi & Stone, 2018; Sendjaya et al., 2019; Sisan, 2017; Wong & Davey, 2007; Wong & Page, 2003). Ethical leadership, based on serving others is the focus of servant leaders. Servant leaders accomplish ethical service through listening and empowering and building others, creating a positive relationship.

Themes commonly found in all three descriptive versions indicate shared concepts in servant leadership. While specific terms are elusive, the important aspect remains that

characteristics of a servant leader meet the criteria for effective leadership (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018; Otaye-Ebede et al., 2020). Specific terminology describing factors, competencies, and characteristics fall within the common themes of servant leadership. Figure 2 compares shared, and unique descriptions of original characteristics, qualitative characteristics, and characteristics identified in factor analyses.

**Figure 2**

*Characteristics of Servant Leaders*
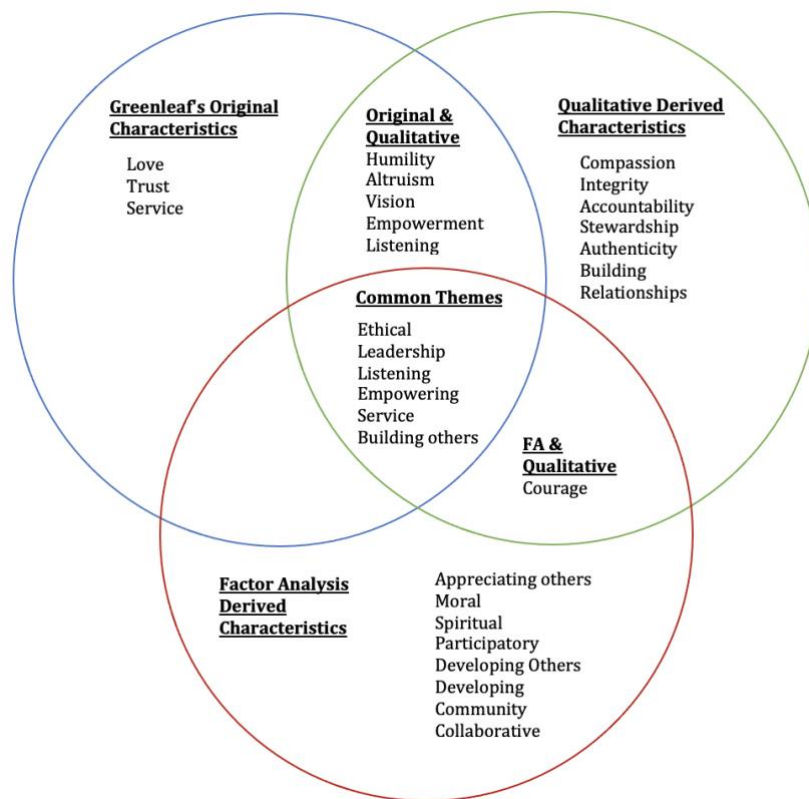


*Note:* Venn Diagram showing common and unique characteristics derived from three types of analysis.

***Organizational Benefits of Servant Leadership***

Servant leadership correlates with job satisfaction and lower turnover rates (Akdol & Arikboga, 2017; Dutta & Khatri, 2017; Shaw & Newton, 2014). High mobility in the workplace results from a lack of relationships and organizational commitment. Servant leadership correlates with positive organizational behavior (Dutta & Khatri, 2017; Eliot, 2020; Kiker et al., 2019). Positive organizational behavior, a subfield of positive psychology, focuses on the positive aspects of an individual. Servant leaders establish psychologically healthy climates encouraging followers to improve their strengths. Relationships, empowerment, development, and other servant leadership aspects serve to increase ownership for the follower and reduce turnover.

Conflict management strategies favor servant leadership traits of persuasive, humane, and participatory leadership (Jit et al., 2016). Servant leadership positively correlates with follower performance, trust, commitment, and organizational behavior (Kiker et al., 2019; Lapointe & Vandenberghe, 2018; Lu et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2017). Positive organizational behaviors, positive psychology, and psychological capital are associated with servant leadership (Dutta & Khatri, 2017; Eliot, 2020; Gonçalves de Lima et al., 2020; Wong & Davey, 2007). Servant leader behaviors, while restricted by personality, are teachable (Insley et al., 2016).

Teachers expect their school leaders to exhibit servant leadership (Insley et al., 2016). Schools whose teachers identified principals as servant leaders exhibited higher job satisfaction and lower turnover rates (Shaw & Newton, 2014). Organizational commitment by teachers and innovative behavior correlates with servant leadership (Palta, 2019; Zeng & Xu, 2020). Servant leadership has a positive effect on principal performance and integrity (Malingkas et al., 2018). Alternative education teachers express higher levels of organizational commitment when the teachers perceive the leaders as exhibiting servant leader characteristics (Crippen & Willows, 2019; Insley et al., 2016; Palta, 2019). Alternative schoolteachers expect servant leader behaviors

from the leaders. Leaders in schools exhibiting servant leader characteristics are in both the administrative and teacher levels of the organization.

**Social Learning Theory**

Albert Bandura provided a model of learning, social learning theory, characterizing classical, and operant conditioning as necessary, but insufficient (Bandura, 1977, 2018). Bandura identified three factors influencing learning: (a) behavioral, (b) personal, and (c) environmental. Factors influencing learning are based on forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflection. Learning through modeling and observational learning is a part of social learning theory (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Behavioral, personal, and environmental factors interact and influence each other. The interactions of these factors influence the interpretation of observations and modeling. Observational learning explains how servant leadership characteristics of leaders' impact and promote positive organizational behavior and culture.

Social cognitive theory is a subset of social learning theory, isolating cognition as one aspect of personal factors by addressing performance, self-efficacy, and self-regulation (Bandura, 1988; Lyons & Bandura, 2019). Emphasizing modeling, social cognitive theory seeks to strengthen one's self-efficacy, ability to control one's own behaviors, emotions, and motivations. The application of social cognitive theory explains how an individual increases self-motivation through goal systems. Increasing self-motivation promotes the vision and goals established, a key concept of servant leadership. Social learning theory is the theoretical foundation under which the subsets of social cognitive theory, observational learning, and modeling fall. Social learning theory can explain how servant leadership promotes empowerment and the development of others.

*Servant Leadership, Education, and Social Learning Theory*

Servant leadership characteristics draw on social learning theory factors to influence follower behaviors. Followers observe and replicate leader trustworthiness and participatory behaviors (De Cremer et al., 2018). Ethical leadership, a component of servant leadership increases the ethical behaviors of followers through social learning theory (Mayer et al., 2009). Openness to sharing knowledge and empowerment correlates to ethical leadership (Men et al., 2020). Social learning theory explains the strong positive relationships between workplace spirituality and perception of ethical climate, moral judgment, and prosocial motivations (Otaye-Ebede et al., 2020). A general ethical climate in an organization significantly relates to sub-divisions helping behavior and service performance. Environmental factors are one of three interactive factors in social learning theory.

Social learning theory is a need in the educational planning process to address behavioral, personal, and environmental factors and the interactions of these factors on staff and students to impart meaning to educational experiences (Streule & Craig, 2016). Meanings attach value and cognitive links to educational experiences. School improvement initiatives utilize characteristics of servant leadership and social learning theory including missions, values, relationships, talent management, and personal leadership (Desravines et al., 2016). Positive school culture is essential for establishing effective schools. Human relationships permeate schools. Managing those relationships and complex interactions effectively results in positive school climates.

Prosociality, the concept of individuals engaging in actions to benefit others, is a prevalent desire in education (Yada & Jäppinen, 2019). Sharing many of the constructs of servant leadership, prosociality concepts of motivation, behavior, and impact place the welfare of others. Utilizing social learning concepts of interactive factors affecting actions, self-motivation, capacity for change, and observational learning, prosociality seeks to instill behaviors focused on

the needs of others. Prosociality in educational settings promotes servant leadership through social learning theory methods.

Social learning theory addresses the whole student through behavioral, personal, and environmental factors. Institutions of learning increasingly attempt to shield students from unwanted or uncomfortable thoughts and words (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). In the hope of protecting the sensibilities of young adults, educational institutions, with the backing of government bureaucracies, have criminalized speech that offends someone. Forbidding alternate ideas and thoughts decreases the ability to critically analyze situations and develop creative solutions. The emphasis on protecting students from unwanted thoughts results in less self-reliance and higher levels of anxiety and depression. Social learning theory's emphasis on agency, self-efficacy, and future orientation correlates with an increase in the resiliency of alternative education students (Henderson et al., 2018).

Embodied within social learning theory, alternative education helps students become able to freely act with the ability to change and achieve goals (Henderson et al., 2018). Increased student performance corresponds to staff being present and involved, aligned values, continuity, exposure to positive role models, and observational learning (Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018). Self-efficacy is related to academic performance, goals, self-motivation, and resilience (Henderson et al., 2018; Lyons & Bandura, 2019; Zimmerman et al., 1992). Negative student behavior and personal factors concur with student failure (Khudzari et al., 2019)

**Research Literature Review**

Alternative education schools of choice (AESOC) are attempts to change the education system to meet the needs of students (Walker, 2009). AESOC contains characteristics and purpose of both the alternative education movement and educational choice movement.

Alternative education and educational choice implement themes found in servant leadership and social learning theory. The problem facing AESOC in Texas is the lack of defined servant leadership characteristics and how those characteristics further the mission of AESOC. The purpose of the phenomenological study was to explore what servant leadership characteristics are revealed in the lived experiences of exemplary leaders of AESOC in Texas and how those characteristics advance the mission of AESOC.

## Alternative Education

Alternative education programs serve students at risk for failing in school, often due to academic, behavioral, and safety issues (Bettini et al., 2020; Hodgman, 2016). Alternative education has its roots in the early 1900s (Baker, 2017). Relationships at all levels are key to successful alternative programs (Kloss, 2018). Alternative education programs employ positive psychological practices linked to servant leadership and social learning theory (Dutta & Khatri, 2017). The failure of school reform efforts of the late 20th and early 21st centuries show the need for alternatives to the regulated education of regular education (Peterson, 2016). Centralized planning failed to meet the promise of improving educational outcomes for students. Decentralized systems in alternative education allow flexibility in providing for the individual needs of students.

### *History of Alternative Education in America*

Alternative education has its roots in the early 20th century with the open education movement that opposed mainstream educational systems (Baker, 2017). The movement advocated for self-directed learning, transparency, and a focus on the learner. The learner needed the ability and freedom to act in their best interest, a component of social learning theories agency concept. Alternative schools, also known as progressive schools, based learning on the

interests of students and placed community building ahead of competitiveness (Kloss, 2018).

Examining early progressive school methods and results provides evidence for the need for

AESOC in today's regulated school systems.

An early seminal work chronicling the effectiveness of alternative education programs is

known as the 8-year study (Aikin, 1942/2015). The study compared 30 alternative schools to

regular educational programs from 1933 to 1941. Schools varied in size, geographical locations,

and emphasis of the program. Results suggested that alternative schools improved education for

students. The study revealed several factors separating alternative schools from regular schools.

Alternative school administration used more democratic leadership, the home and schools

worked together, teachers' participation increased their dignity and worth, and students met the

challenges of responsibility (Aikin, 1942/2015). Democratic leadership, participatory leadership,

and community building are themes found in servant leadership. Students meeting

responsibilities connect to social learning theory. Aikin believed that "The chief function of the

schools in a democracy is to conserve and improve the democratic way of life" (Aikin,

1942/2015, p. 54), which could occur in alternative schools but not in regulated regular

education programs.

From the beginning of the alternative education movement, experiential learning focus

has sought to integrate learning experiences and productive activities, while regulated mass

schools sought to isolate learning from productive activities (Seaman et al., 2017). Experiential

learning in alternative schools began including human relations training in the 1940s and aligned

with humanistic psychology by the 1950s. Fostering positive relationships in educational settings

through servant leadership and social learning theory promotes prosocial behavior (Yada &

Jäppinen, 2019).

*Purpose of Alternative Education*

Alternative education serves students who have not been successful in traditional education settings (Jordan et al., 2017). Reasons for lack of success include academic, behavioral, and environmental factors. Alternative schools are a means for school systems to improve graduation rates and lower dropout rates.

Alternative education programs consist of three types (Raywid, 1994; Walker, 2009). Type 1, the most successful, changes the educational system in meeting the needs of students and is a voluntary placement. Prior to the Safe School's Movement of the late 1980s, traditional alternative education programs were typically Type 1 schools.

The most common type of alternative school in Texas is involuntary Type 2, Discipline Alternative Education Placement Programs (DAEP) (Walker, 2009). Placement of students is for a specific time as a result of behaviors exhibited at the regular schools. Type 3 schools are involuntary placements to remedial programs focusing on academic and behavioral concerns. Type 1 programs are the only programs that have shown student improvement. In the current study, AESOC schools are Type 1 programs. The terms alternative education and AESOC refers to Type 1 schools.

Alternative schools provide a fresh start for students, providing support, and valued teachers (Cajic-Seigneur & Hodgson, 2016; Jordan et al., 2017; McGee & Lin, 2017). Teachers and staff care, provide hope, and empower students. Students view the relationships built in alternative schools as significant factors in student success (Cajic-Seigneur & Hodgson, 2016; (Kloss, 2018). Alternative schools apply a broad view of success, expanding past academic success to include life success (Plows et al., 2017; Zolkoski et al., 2016).

Advantages of alternative schools include community, small settings, freedom, and individuality (Kloss, 2018; Maillet, 2017). Integrating service-learning opportunities and utilizing volunteers build community. Small settings allow active and creative instruction while building relationships. Freedom to meet the needs of the student, both remedial and accelerated, distinguishes alternative schools. Each student, as an individual, has alternative plans each day.

Servant leadership themes center on community building and relationship-focused schools (Kloss, 2018; Maillet, 2017). Evidence of social learning theory is evident in the individuality of the student, individual programming, and addressing the academic, behavioral, and environmental needs of each student. A Texas-based study determined alternative programs are cost-effective based on a statistically significant relationship between student retention and the cost of alternative programs (Gronberg et al., 2017).

### Students of Alternative Education

Alternative education programs primarily serve those students who are at risk of not graduating high school (Bettini et al., 2020; Henderson, et al., 2019). Students with emotional and learning disabilities enrollment in AESOC is at a higher rate than enrollment in traditional schools. AESOC students engage in more substance abuse and risky sexual behavior (Henderson, et al., 2019). Students exhibit fewer social competencies than students successful in traditional schools (Perzigian, 2018). The structure of alternative schools helps build social competencies based on social learning theory principles. Perzigian (2018) contended educational success utilizes all aspects of the student; intellectual, academic, emotional, behavioral, social, and historical. Alternative education recognizes the interaction of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors identified in social learning theory to address all needs of students (McGee & Lin, 2017).

Biological and environmental factors contribute to students' decision to attend alternative programs (Zolkoski et al., 2016). Summarizing research on neonatal and early infancy, Zolkoski et al. (2016) identify parental drug use, premature births, and low birth weights as contributing factors contributing to students' lack of success in schools. Parental drug use, both pre- and post-birth, affects learning capabilities. Low birth weights and premature births affect social, emotional, and cognitive attributes (Zolkoski et al., 2016).

Environmental factors impacting education include community and familial conditions. Zolkoski et al.'s (2016) analysis revealed drug environments, poor schools, and pregnancies were environmental factors negatively impacting education. Drug environments, with and without personal abuse, negatively affect students. Poor schools and inconsistent schooling hinder academic success. Pregnancy and lack of support from family and community add risk factors of being unsuccessful in school and life (Zolkoski et al., 2016). A 5-year longitudinal study showed students highly rate alternative education schools and indicate a need for caring in education (Harnischfeger, 2018). Programs focused on individual needs, whether personal, academic, or behavioral produce positive, valued results. Harnischfeger (2018) found positive results extend into the lives of students long after graduation.

### *Leadership*

Leadership within alternative education schools includes administration and teachers (Bettini et al., 2020). Principals of alternative education schools have fewer formal qualifications than traditional school principals. National data indicate alternative education school principals have less teaching experience, hold fewer degrees, and possess fewer administrative licenses than traditional schools (Bettini et al., 2020). Alternative education school principals have fewer mentoring and collaborative experiences but do have more control over teachers' professional

development. Relationships, based on trust, are the key to successful alternative schools (Kloss, 2018).

Alternative schools are different than traditional schools, focusing on the whole student: (a) academic, (b) behavioral, (c) personal, and (d) emotional (McGee & Lin, 2017). Few corresponding studies on alternative leaders as distinct from traditional schools are accessible in current research (Jordan et al., 2017). Differences in types of schools suggest that the leadership needs of alternative and traditional schools differ. Trust and relationships are foundational characteristics of servant leadership (Jordan et al., 2017; McGee & Lin, 2017). Differences in alternative schools and traditional schools suggest not only different leadership needs but also different criteria for establishing effectiveness of the programs.

Effective alternative programs are autonomous and supportive (Ellerbe, 2017; Jordan et al., 2017; Kloss, 2018). A positive class climate and positive behavioral management contribute to the success of the students. Relationships, based on trust, include administration, teachers, and students. The relationships built in alternative education schools help students succeed despite the obstacles faced. Relationships help increase student self-efficacy, agency, and self-motivation. A positive relationship between self-efficacy and psychological well-being argues for alternative schools to help students increase self-efficacy (Cansoy et al., 2020). Self-efficacy and agency help students overcome obstacles hindering success. Obstacles faced by educators and students include state policies that undermine successful alternative education school practices (Waite & Goodenough, 2018).

Resources and support for teachers and students are critical to student success (Henderson et al., 2018). Resources include emotional, psychological, social, behavioral, and academic resources. Henderson et al. (2018) argued staff and students in alternative education

schools exert agency, project self-efficacy, and hold a future orientation, all aspects of social learning theory. Agency, the power to make choices, requires a variety of resources within the individual. Supportive staff encourages the development of an individual's resources leading to an increase in agency and self-motivation. Research by Henderson et al. (2018) indicated alternative education school students show an increase in resiliency as a result of increased agency and self-motivation.

Servant leadership and organizational commitment contribute to the supportive environment of alternative schools (Palta, 2019). The prosocial behaviors of educational leaders are strongly associated with servant leadership characteristics (Yada & Jäppinen, 2019). Mentoring through prosocial motivation utilizes social learning theory constructs to encourage prosocial behaviors and positive organizational climates.

### *Psychological Components*

Alternative education schools utilize positive psychology and positive organizational behavior (Dutta & Khatri, 2017). Positive psychology is the field focusing on identifying and strengthening positive traits in individuals. A subfield of positive psychology, positive organizational behavior addresses the concepts of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological competencies. Reduced turnover rates in alternative schools are associated with positive psychology and positive organizational behavior. Positive psychological and organizational behavior attributes were linked to resilience, social learning theory and servant leadership in AESOC (Eliot, 2020).

Servant leadership and social learning theory self-efficacy relate to positive psychology and positive organizational behavior (Dutta & Khatri, 2017). Teachers' psychological well-being and self-efficacy indicate a significant relationship, with over half of the variance in

psychological well-being attributed to self-efficacy (Cansoy et al., 2020). The interactions of servant leadership, social learning theory, positive psychology, and positive organizational behavior in alternative schools contribute to improved psychological well-being (Eliot, 2020). Improved psychological well-being of staff contributes to strengthened resiliency, self-efficacy, agency, and motivation of students (Eliot, 2020; Gonçalves de Lima, et al., 2020).

Students at risk for failing, the target population of alternative schools, exhibit lower emotional development than students expected to complete school successfully in traditional settings (Fish, 2017). Fish (2017) argued alternative school students need a focus on improving emotional capital, not on the deficits, which is a feature of positive psychology. Increasing emotional capital through social-emotional learning is a benefit of alternative programs and tied to social learning theory (Freedman, 2018). Freedman (2018) contended learning to forgive is one aspect of social-emotional learning. Forgiveness relates to an increase in hope and a decrease in depression and anxiety. Hope is associated with self-efficacy and agency.

Education is changing people (Freedman, 2018). Freedman (2018) explained the linkage between social learning theory, socio-emotional skills, education, and alternative schools. Believing one can change, self-efficacy, then possessing the ability to change, agency, occurs before personal change takes place. Successful individuals learn social-emotional skills through social learning theory processes either implicitly or explicitly. Alternative schools help students explicitly increase social emotional theory to increase overall educational success.

Alternative education school structures prioritize helping students build social competencies (McGee & Lin, 2017; Perzigian, 2018). Social competencies mastered are relevant to both educational settings and the general community (Perzigian, 2018). Methods of increasing social competencies include direct social skills training, formal mentoring programs, and positive

behavior management, all based on social learning theory (McGee & Lin, 2017). Increasing

social competencies increases resiliency in students, increasing agency, and self-efficacy

(Henderson et al., 2018; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Involving parents in the student's education and

community members as mentors are hallmarks of servant leadership traits.

**Educational Choice**

States and the federal government have instituted policies with the goal for all students

graduating from high school (Peterson, 2016). Education policies set standardized goals without

recognizing the variations in students. Employment in a meaningful occupation often requires

secondary education graduation as a minimum (Rolfsman, 2020). Higher skills and advanced

training extend education to work transition with new and varied patterns. Transitioning to work

has become a complicated endeavor for some students. Educational choice provides

opportunities for students to match individual needs with programs designed to meet those needs.

Schools of choice are at the heart of educational reform (West, 2016). Examinations of

schools in New York City found a large academic increase in schools of choice. Educational

improvement on multiple levels is associated with schools of choice (Campbell et al., 2017;

Linkow, 2011). Flexibility with goals, increasing global knowledge, and focusing on the needs of

students are aspects associated with schools of choice (Tsatsaroni & Sarakinioti, 2018). Schools

of choice improved students' lives beyond graduation, having a long-term influence on the

student and the community (Wilcox et al., 2018).

Graduates of schools of choice are more likely to enroll in post-secondary education than

students in traditional programs are (Unterman & Haider, 2019). Post-secondary education

includes vocational training and community colleges. The emergence of increased educational

requirements and an increase in student variations requires educational systems to address the

delivery of education. Higher standards and greater diversity in resources students bring to school require schools to meet the needs of students. Schools of choice are an attempt to address the uniqueness of individual students.

Relationships are at the center of schools of choice (Catt & Cheng, 2019; Price & Corrin, 2020; Sneyers et al., 2018; Strier & Katz, 2016). Parent trust in schools of choice, built on relationships is higher than in traditional schools, increasing parent involvement (Strier & Katz, 2016). Schools of choice allow parents "to move from margins to the centers of their child's educational experience" (Wilcox et al., 2018, p. 2).

Student-teacher relationships foster meeting student needs (Catt & Cheng, 2019; Price & Corrin, 2020; Sneyers et al., 2018). Students feel wanted, appreciated, and valued. Teachers can provide personal recommendations for students based on a relationship built over time. Relationships, based on trust, allow educators to discover the needs and the strengths of students to develop individual goals and objectives.

Building relationships with parents and community members add additional resources to impacting student lives long after graduation (Campbell et al., 2017; Wilcox et al., 2018). Resource needs and strengths in schools of choice include all three social learning theory factors; behavior, personal, and environmental. Relationships allow the evaluation of individual resources, helping students learn to utilize existing strengths and gain new resources.

Social learning factors improve student success in schools of choice (Henderson et al., 2018; Rolfsman, 2020; van Aalderen-Smeets & Walma van der Molen, 2018). Success begins with the belief in the ability to change or achieve the goal of self-efficacy. Until one internalizes the belief that an individual can change, the change will not happen. Schools help individuals obtain the power to shape one's life choices, or agency, through increasing knowledge and skills.

Modeling implicit beliefs, based on relationships, leads to increased agency and self-motivation in students.

Based on a meta-analysis of schools of choice studies, self-control and self-regulation are associated with schools of choice (Mills, 2013). Delayed gratification and self-discipline resulted in improved attendance rates and reduced disciplinary behaviors, leading to improved academic outcomes. Improved academic outcomes, leading to improved lives, are the result of the complex interactions within the individual. According to Mills (2013), schools of choice address the complex interactions identified in social learning theory.

**Counter Argument**

Opponents claim alternative education and educational choice provide an inequitable education for students (Fedders, 2018; Sen, 2019). Sen (2019), in a law review article, equated school choice with segregation based on race and disabilities. Acknowledging parental rights to direct the education of students confirmed by the Supreme Court, Sen confused state-mandated placements with parental and student choices. Arguments against alternative programs only compared type 2 schools, characterized as discipline placement schools (DAEP). Comparisons were based on systems, not individuals or individual schools.

School choice opponents indicate no differences exist in academic scores between school choice and traditional education (Cowen & Creed, 2017). Opponents to alternative education neglected to compare individual performances in DAEP and regular education placements. The study mischaracterized open enrollment schools as schools of choice. Open enrollment schools allow students to attend any regular education school within a district, within specified guidelines. School structures remained unchanged from the traditional model, resulting in an incorrect comparison of schools of choice.

In contrast to educational choice, some propose to change the existing structure to meet current needs (Eley & Berryman, 2019; Fadzil et al., 2019; Hameed & Manzoor, 2019). The argument proposes reworking the current system to reflect work expectancy, pedagogy beliefs, and school culture will lead to school reform. Advocates propose to change the system by changing the culture of schools, increasing cooperation, and increasing teamwork. Micropolitical processes in schools and school districts affect the changing cultures of educational systems (Browne-Ferrigno & Björk, 2018). The size and complexity of the organization affect the extent real change will occur.

Calls for transforming the system focus on group and group identity as the basis for the change rationale (Ndaruhutse et al., 2019). A system-based focus

on changing groups does not address individual needs as do schools of choice. Generalized calls for better policies, more inclusion, and improved teacher education can serve as an argument for whole system change, ignoring differences individuals bring to educational settings (Browne-Ferrigno & Björk, 2018). Educational reformers identify reforming the educational system as the method to achieve improved educational outcomes. System-based reform, even if needed, assumes all students will respond similarly to a singular method.

**Gap in Literature**

Meaningful scholarly research on servant leadership has only occurred since the beginning of the 21st century (Gandolfi et al., 2017). Research identifying characteristics of servant leaders and how they interact with business organizations indicates servant leadership has the potential to foster improvement in individual, group, and organizational performance (Heyler & Martin, 2018). The need for research in the application of servant leadership in varying organizational settings helps determine if, and under what conditions, the potential

benefits of servant leadership exist is an identified gap area. One area identified as lacking is research determining characteristics of effective AESOC leaders.

Research indicates links between servant leadership characteristics and successful alternative school practices (Kloss, 2018; Maillet, 2017; McGee & Lin, 2017). Investigations of servant leader characteristics in AESOC leaders are not evidenced in current literature. Investigating how servant leadership characteristics further the mission of the AESOC is also not addressed in the literature. The study addresses the gap in the literature linking servant leader characteristics of AESOC and how servant leadership characteristics support of the mission of the AESOC.

**Chapter Summary**

The theoretical foundation of the study of AESOC characteristics is based on servant leadership and social learning theory. Servant leadership focuses on the needs of those served (Greenleaf, 2008, reprinted from original, Greenleaf, 1970). Common themes include ethical leadership, active listening, empowering others, building others, and service to others. Effective alternative and vocational education leaders are associated with servant leadership characteristics (Insley et al., 2016; Malingkas et al., 2018; Sisan, 2017).

Social learning theory stipulates personal, behavioral, and environmental factors influence learning (Bandura, 1977). Agency, self-efficacy, and self-motivation are attributes of social learning theory (Bandura, 2018; Henderson et al., 2018). Social learning theory matches the practices of AESOC (Horsburgh & Ippolito, 2018).

Alternative education seeks to provide an environment for those who are at educational risks (Bettini et al., 2020; Jordan et al., 2017). Students attending alternative programs (a) exhibit higher levels of risky behaviors; (b) have poor environmental backgrounds; and (c) are at risk for

low academic achievement (Bettini et al., 2020; Henderson, et al., 2019; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Relationships are the key to successful alternative schools (Kloss, 2018). Students unsuccessful in traditional settings exhibit lower socio-emotional development and need more support (Freedman, 2018; Mills, 2013). Alternative schools utilize positive psychological and positive organizational behavior practices, linked to servant leadership and social learning theory, to build social competencies (Dutta & Khatri, 2017; McGee & Lin, 2017).

Alternative education requires heightened ethical leadership modeling ethical behavior (Dodd et al., 2018). Ethical work climates, associated with servant leadership and social learning theory motivate staff and students to follow credible moral leaders. Servant leaders have a direct positive effect on the ethical climate of the organization (Eliot, 2020).

Educational choice improves education for students (Campbell et al., 2017). Education improvement extends post-graduation, having a long-term impact (Wilcox et al., 2018). The focus of schools of choice is on relationships of parents, students, and staff (Catt & Cheng, 2019; Price & Corrin, 2020; Sneyers, et al., 2018; Strier, & Katz, 2016). Schools of choice use social learning theory factors of agency, self-motivation, self-efficacy, and modeling (Rolfsman, 2020; van Aalderen-Smeets & Walma van der Molen, 2018). Academic improvement demonstrates a positive relationship with schools of choice (Mills, 2013).

Servant leadership characteristics studies, conducted in AESOC, are missing from the literature. The study sought to answer the research questions: 1) What servant leader characteristics are exhibited by AESOC leaders' lived experiences in Texas? 2) How do servant leadership characteristics exhibited by AESOC leaders' lived experiences advance the mission of AESOC? The following chapter, Methodology, states the rationale and design of the research project.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

Educating disadvantaged and marginalized students is a serious problem (Peterson, 2016). Students who are unsuccessful in regular educational settings are at risk of failing to develop socially, emotionally, and/or academically (Fish, 2017). Alternative education schools of choice (AESOC) provide interventions for marginalized students (Jordan et al., 2017). Interventions in AESOC focus on the needs of individual diverse learners (Hodgman, 2016; Maillet, 2017).

The mission of AESOC includes individual support for students at risk for failing to succeed, as well as increasing affective and contributive social justice in the educational setting (McGee & Lin, 2017; Mills, et al., 2016). McGee and Lin argue leadership needs of AESOC are different than the needs of regular education leaders. Servant leadership places service to others first, empowers others, and seeks to build healthy relationships (Coetzer et al., 2017). Studies have found a relationship between servant leadership and positive organizational behavior, confidence, and self-efficacy (Dutta & Khatri, 2017).

The problem facing AESOC in Texas is the lack of defined servant leadership characteristics and how those characteristics further the mission of AESOC (Gronberg et al., 2017; Hemmer et al., 2013). The purpose of the phenomenological study was to explore what servant leadership characteristics are revealed in the lived experiences of exemplary leaders of AESOC in Texas and how those characteristics advance the mission of AESOC. Research questions guiding the study include:

Research Question 1: What servant leader characteristics are exhibited by AESOC leaders' lived experiences in Texas?

Research Question 2: How do servant leadership characteristics exhibited by AESOC leaders' lived experiences advance the mission of AESOC?

Research questions seek in-depth personal experiences of exceptional AESOC leaders to understand characteristics possessed by leaders and how characteristics further the mission of AESOC (Peterson, 2019). Research seeking answers to what and how questions align with qualitative research methods. Qualitative methods allow an in-depth study to explore the phenomena.

## Research Design and Rationale

Phenomenological qualitative research methodology is the appropriate design to investigate complex interactions of the living world and participants (Valentine et al., 2018). The qualitative research method is appropriate to answer research questions. Phenomenological qualitative studies use participant experiences to describe both how and what experienced phenomenon to obtain a better understanding of the phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019). Researchers' experience and knowledge are viewed as a valuable tool to develop research in phenomenological qualitative studies (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018).

The two research questions ask what servant leadership characteristics AESOC leaders exhibit and how those characteristics further the mission of the AESOC. The research problem and research questions support the objective to understand the lived experience of AESOC leaders. The phenomenological approach recognizes complex interactions of participants' lived experiences (Valentine et al., 2018).

## Role of the Researcher

Phenomenological research explores why and how phenomena manifest in the world based on experience and knowledge of the subject (Neubauer et al., 2019; Valentine et al., 2018).

Experience and knowledge provide a level of flexibility and freedom to explore the context in relation to participant lived experiences. Counselor education, health professions education, and psychological studies use hermeneutic phenomenological research. The phenomenological approach allowed twenty years' experience as an educator in alternative education to help develop the research.

A professional background in alternative education led to my interest in lived experiences of AESOC leaders and provided knowledge and experience in developing research questions. My professional background involves 40 years' experience working with youth in educational and community organization settings. I was involved in alternative education schools for the last 20 years. These settings included both schools of choice and disciplinary settings. My experience teaching college courses concurrently while working in an alternative setting provided a holistic view of students' educational needs.

No ethical issues involving work environments, dual roles, or incentives are known. The use of video conferencing protects the alternative education environment from outside observations. Twenty of the 40 years were in alternative education settings serving multiple simultaneous duties including teaching, discipline management, counseling, and administration.

**Research Procedures**

Research procedures employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to research design (Valentine et al., 2018). Purposeful sampling, common in phenomenological research, supports the selection of participants based on identified criteria (Ryan et al., 2007). Data collection instruments used a semi-structured interview format asking each participant the same questions, with follow-up questions and elaborations (Johnston, 2010; Ryan et al., 2007). Semi-

structured interviews are an appropriate data collection method to determine lived experiences of participants (Ngulube, 2015).

**Population and Sample Selection**

The study population consists of leaders of AESOC in Texas with at least 3 years of experience as an AESOC leader. Texas has 357 public schools recognized as alternative education campuses, excluding juvenile justice centers and hospitals (TEA, 2019). At each alternative education campus, at least 75% of the student body is identified as students at-risk, with at least 50% of the student body in grades 6-12 (TEA, 2019). Purposeful sampling was employed to obtain the preferred sample size of 20 participants, which is within the acceptable range of 5-25 participants in a phenomenological qualitative research project (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018; Roberts, 2013; Ryan et al., 2007). All AESOC leaders with 3 or more years' experience were eligible for consideration.

A selection committee of educational leaders, active in alternative education settings and alternative education professional organizations, identified prospective exemplary AESOC leaders. The ranking of potential participants was based on committee member experience in alternative education settings, working with exemplary leaders. Selection committee leaders were asked to contact chosen participants and provide a letter of introduction (see Appendix A). Contact information came from data publicly available through the state education agency database of public schools. Following the letter of introduction, selected participants were contacted by the researcher and asked to participate in the study based on committee-ranked order (see Appendix B). Primary methods for extending an invitation to participate were by professional email, followed by telephone calls, if warranted. Professional email addresses and telephone numbers of public schools are public information available from both state and local

education agencies.

The selection committee was requested to provide researcher rank-ordered names of exemplary alternative education school of choice leaders receiving letters of introduction, with telephone and email contact information. Prospective participants were contacted by the researcher through email to obtain participation in rank-order. Contact information used was provided by the selection committee.

The selection committee identifying and introducing research acted independently from any state professional organization, either public or private. No organization was involved in the selection or recruitment of participants. The selection committee used contact information gained from publicly available sources. The selection committee may have used professional contact information obtained from prior professional correspondence with prospective participants.

An invitation to participate described the purpose of the study, specifically invited AESOC leaders to participate in the study, provided an informed consent form, and explained the informed consent process, including confidentiality (Walton, 2016). The informed consent form included the voluntary nature of participation, the right to privacy and confidentiality, the right to anonymity, and the right to cease participation at any point in the study (see Appendix C). The informed consent process includes protection of recorded data and the participant's ability to ask questions to clarify any concerns. Interview scheduling began after each participant signed an informed consent form. Copies of return email and consent forms were collected and stored using password protected, encrypted digital storage.

**Instrumentation**

Semi-structured interviews using a one-to-one interview technique are the preferred method to obtain data in a phenomenological study (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018; Roberts, 2013).

Semi-structured interviews are adaptable to different personalities and are useful in gaining insight into lived experiences of participants (Adamson et al., 2004; Aleandri & Russo, 2015). Open-ended questions, based on servant leadership questionnaires are the basis for semi-structured interviews (Kori et al., 2018; Sendjaya et al., 2019; Wong & Page, 2003).

Examining interview questions during the development stage aids in detecting any weaknesses or flaws within interview design (Daniel, 2019). Engaging subject matter experts (SME) to review questions increases validity and replicability of study by adding rigor, consistency, and assuring questions align with methodology (Shrotryia & Dhanda, 2019). The richness of data depends on question structure (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Open-ended questions elicit richer data. The richer the data, the fewer participants needed to gain an understanding of the phenomena. Interview questions developed for the study are based on servant leadership characteristic surveys (Sendjaya et al., 2019; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011; Wong & Page, 2003). Questions reflect unique situations of AESOC (see Appendix D).

Five subject matter experts received interview questions by email for feedback on the appropriateness of interview questions. Subject matter experts, not related to the American College of Education (ACE), can provide professional analysis of the research instrument (see Appendix E) (Manea, 2020). Status of SME external to ACE reduces social sources of inaccuracy. Subject matter experts are a source of objective data in phenomenological research designs (Whitaker, 2007). Used as a field-testing method, SME increases efficiency and keeps participant experiences in the foreground.

**Data Collection and Preparation**

The hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative research project used semi-structured interviews, a creditable form of data collection (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). Interviews conducted

over a secure video teleconference connection, such as Zoom, are as reliable and valid as in-person interviews (Drabble et al., 2016). The primary advantage of using teleconferencing is helping to eliminate distances involved in conducting in-person interviews. Teleconferencing prevents exclusion of eligible prospective participants due to distance.

The population includes all AESOC leaders in Texas. Distances to individual sites make in-person interviews prohibitive. Difficulties associated with COVID-19 restricting in-person contact also support video conferencing and allowed the research project to continue. Scheduling of interviews is at participants' convenience, and video conferencing allows flexibility on part of AESOC leaders.

Other advantages of teleconferencing include (a) convenience in scheduling, (b) privacy, and (c) unobtrusive recording (Drabble et al., 2016). Each teleconference was password protected and utilized waiting room features to enhance privacy and security. Recording of interviews is a requirement for data analysis purposes with expressed permission from each individual participant. Participants received a summary of the results.

As the state alternative professional association, Texas Association of Alternative Education, TAAE, will be offered the opportunity for a presentation of a summary of research and findings at the annual convention. Password-protected, encrypted digital storage of recorded interviews used in research project assures security and confidentiality. After a minimum of 3 years of storage on secured encrypted drives, the destruction of digitally recorded transcripts will take place.

Research design focused on lived experiences of exemplary AESOC leaders to answer research questions. Past and current leaders of the Texas Association of Alternative Education, themselves AESOC leaders, identified exemplary AESOC leaders and facilitated introductions.

Leaders selecting possible participants were required to maintain the confidentiality of AESOC

leaders chosen as possible participants. Identities of actual participants were not revealed to

selectors. Lived experiences of elected leaders of the recognized professional organization were

instrumental in identifying exemplary AESOC leaders.

*Resources*

Resources employed to collect data include video-capable computers and a secure video

conference program capable of recording conversations. Semi-structured interview format

included researcher-developed interview questions. Validated servant leadership survey

instruments serve as the basis for interview questions by identifying topics associated with

servant leadership (Sendjaya et al., 2019; Wong & Page, 2003). Questions reflect unique

characteristics of the AESOC environment. Published servant leader survey instruments are

generic in format and target leaders of adult organizations.

Subject matter experts (SME) reviewed semi-structured interview questions in lieu of

pilot testing. The timeframe for receiving feedback from experts is an unknown variable. The

computer-assisted qualitative research program, NVivo, assisted in the analysis of interviews by

coding and identifying emerging themes. The advantage of using natural language computer

programing is an increase in interrater reliability in the coding of themes (Crowston et al., 2012).

*The Integrity of the Process*

Recording of data used a secure video conference network. The use of computer-assisted

technology to code and analyze data helped maintain interrater reliability and increase the

validity of the study (Crowston et al., 2012). Use of reflexivity and constant self-reflection

promoted rigor, reliability, trustworthiness, and validity (Darawsheh, 2014; Roberts, 2013).

Following completion of the interview, participants reviewed the interview transcript to member check for accuracy and clarify statements, if warranted. Member checking is a form of transactional validity in seeking an agreement in a description of lived experience (Caretta & Perez, 2019). Member checking involves deepening, repeating, and adjusting data gathering process. Participants had the opportunity to share thoughts, photographs, and videos to better illustrate lived experiences (Valentine et al., 2018).

A debriefing session followed a review of transcripts. Debriefing is a structured process to gather key concepts from in-depth interviews to obtain the essence of participant experiences (Simoni et al., 2019; Valentine et al., 2018). Debrief mirrored the interview in both content and sequence. Participants can receive a digital copy of the final report.

## Data Analysis

Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) NVIVO, v.12 (QSR International, n.d.) assisted in analyzing themes from recorded interviews. The use of CAQDAS reduces the time spent on coding and analyzing data (Cope, 2014; Guetterman et al., 2018; Yakut & Saritaş, 2017). Computer software is a fast, efficient, easy-to-use, and effective method in coding and determining themes of data collected in interviews (Freitas et al., 2017). Zoom videoconferencing software translated recorded interviews into text format for member-checking purposes, transparency, and trustworthiness. NVivo software provided visual data representations and reports for the interpretation of findings. While computer software aids analysis and engagement, humans maintain control, direction, and interpretation (Woods et al., 2016; Zamawe, 2015).

The purpose of a phenomenological study is to explore and interpret participants' lived experiences tool selection results in an understanding of participant experiences (Alase, 2017).

Developing themes from a participant perspective becomes the focus of analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Usher & Jackson, 2014). Clusters of meanings emerge from participant statements and, ultimately, are recognized in the analysis as themes. From an analytical, phenomenological viewpoint, a thematic approach emphasizes the lived experiences of participants.

## Reliability and Validity

Qualitative research validity is reflective of the robustness of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Soundness, justifiability, and honesty of the research process insure and support the validity of the study (Nigar, 2020; Sundler et al., 2019). Terms indicating levels of validity include trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility. The use of multiple validity strategies in the research approach increases ability to assess the accuracy of findings.

Qualitative validity strategies used in research include member checking: using rich, thick descriptions; reflexivity; and presenting differences in experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Member checking allows participants to review reports for accuracy. Rich, thick descriptions provide details of experiences. Reflexivity clarifies biases inherent in a study. Presenting discrepancies among experiences studied, and reporting contradictions establishes a realistic and valid account of participant experiences.

Validity in phenomenological studies refers to scientific rigor in the conduct of credible, transferable, and trustworthy research (Sundler et al., 2019). Credibility, associated with methodological assumptions, refers to the meaningfulness of findings. Transparency in the process is critical to credibility. Credibility is dependent upon methodology, analysis, interpretation, and presentation of results.

Transferability is a measure of the soundness of research and applicability of new knowledge to the field, indicating usefulness and relevance of findings (Sundler et al., 2019).

Trustworthiness is the qualitative counterpart to quantitative research validity, rigor, dependability, confirmability, and credibility (Flynn et al., 2019; Peterson, 2019; Rodham et al., 2015). Judgment drives direction and interpretation of data, resulting in trustworthiness of results dependent on the moral character of the interpreter (Woods et al., 2016). Acknowledging biases and providing links to studies of phenomena utilizing reflexivity increases the trustworthiness of study (Sundler et al., 2019).

Qualitative reliability refers to the stability and consistency of approach to study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Methods to increase reliability center around the interview, themes, and codes. Reviewing transcripts for accuracy removes obvious mistakes. Eliminating code definition drifts maintains consistency. Cross-checking codes increases interrater reliability.

To increase the reliability and validity of findings, the study used CAQDAS to analyze data for codes and themes (Crowston et al., 2012). Use of known leaders in the field of AESOC to choose participants increased representation of exemplary leaders. Member checking enabled participants to review and clarify statements. Reflexivity, reflecting on purpose and specific research questions through interviews, increases validity by reducing biases.

## Ethical Procedures

Ethical consideration in human subject research involves the quality of research, protection of participants, and value of the research (Tangen, 2014). Ethical issues of quality of research are related to moral judgments which affect the reliability and validity of results. The value of research is in meeting the needs of marginalized and disadvantaged students.

The Belmont Report recognized protection of participants is a concern in human subject research (The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Three basic ethical principles of the Belmont Report include respect

for persons, beneficence, and justice. Applications of ethical principles involve informed

consent, assessment of risks and benefits, and selection of participants. Informed consent forms

(see Appendix C) provide participants information on the nature of the study, methodology used,

and information concerning the researcher. An explanation of procedures and duration, plus

benefits and risks of participation located in the informed consent form helped participants

comprehend information.

All participants, as school administrators, have advanced academic degrees. Participation

was voluntary with participants having no known prior connections to the research projects,

eliminating undue coercion or pressure to participate. Responses of participants remain

confidential. All archived records contain anonymous information.

Data confidentiality is password protected for a minimum of three years, as required by

federal regulations (Protection of Human Subjects, 2009), on an encrypted secured computer.

Anonymized transcripts of interviews are available for use in future research and for verifying

the results of the study. Removal of identifying characteristics before sharing data protects the

confidentiality of participants. The informed consent process includes voluntary permission for

sharing anonymized data. The decision to share data did not affect the eligibility of AESOC

leaders to participate in the study. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the American

College of Education approved the study before data collection (see Appendix F).

**Chapter Summary**

Alternative education schools of choice (AESOC) provide unique education settings to

address the serious problem of educating marginalized and disadvantaged students. Individual

learners and needs are the focus of AESOC. Servant leadership empowers others, builds

relationships, and places others' needs first. The problem facing AESOC in Texas is the lack of

defined servant leadership characteristics and how those characteristics further the mission of AESOC.

The purpose of the phenomenological study was to explore what servant leadership characteristics are revealed in the lived experiences of exemplary leaders of AESOC in Texas and how those characteristics advance the mission of AESOC. Research questions ask what characteristics and how characteristics further the mission. Questions use a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to examine participants' lived experiences as AESOC leaders to better understand the phenomenon. The researcher's experience and knowledge allow an active role in hermeneutic phenomenological research to guide interviews and interpretation of data.

A selection committee of educational leaders, active in alternative education settings and alternative education professional organizations, identified prospective exemplary AESOC leaders. Participation was voluntary after receiving full information concerning the study. No known prior relationships exist, avoiding conflicts of interest and power problems. A minimum of 20 participants, using a semi-structured interview format, formed the study. Interviews used teleconference technology with recordings.

NVivo, a CAQDAS package, helped analyze recorded interviews. Software, with guidance, helped code and identify common themes. The software package produced graphical representations of data to help explain the findings presented in Chapter Four. Dissemination of information and archiving of interviews utilized anonymous data.

**Chapter 4: Research Findings and Data Analysis Results**

Educating marginalized and disadvantaged students in a meaningful manner has been a challenge for regular education systems (Peterson, 2016). Alternative education schools of choice provide individualized and focused interventions to meet the needs of students (Hodgman, 2016; Maillet, 2017). Studies involving characteristics of alternative education leaders are lacking (Jordan et al., 2017). Studies on alternative education programs point to servant leadership as an important component of successful alternative education schools (Henderson et al., 2018; Kloss, 2018; Maillet, 2017; McGee & Lin, 2017).

The problem facing alternative education schools of choice (AESOC) in Texas is the lack of defined servant leadership characteristics and how those characteristics further the mission of the AESOC (Maillet, 2017). Alternative school leader investigations have examined general qualifications and certifications (Bettini et al., 2020). The purpose of the phenomenological study was to explore what servant leadership characteristics are revealed in the lived experiences of exemplary leaders of AESOC in Texas and how those characteristics advance the mission of AESOC.

The study is significant as alternative education contrasts with regular education (Jordan et al., 2017). Primary beneficiaries of the study are scholastically unsuccessful marginalized and disadvantaged students. Knowing the characteristics of exemplary alternative education leaders provides a basis for the placement of appropriate leaders by differentiating leader selection criteria (Kloss, 2018). Placing appropriate leaders in alternative programs should help further the mission of the AESOC. Evidence of long-term improvement of student lives after AESOC graduation demonstrates the importance

of providing meaningful alternative education programs to marginalized and disadvantaged students (Unterman & Haider, 2019; Wilcox et al., 2018).

Phenomenological qualitative designs are descriptions of participants' lived experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019; Valentine et al., 2018). Hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes the complex interactions of the participant's experiences and the value of the interviewer's experiences while seeking descriptions of lived experiences of participants (Valentine et al., 2018).

Open-ended semi-structured individual interviews elicited the lived experiences of the participants to help answer the research questions (Valentine et al., 2018). Lived experiences of exemplary AESOC leaders provided input to help answer the following research questions.

Research Question 1: What servant leader characteristics are exhibited by AESOC leaders' lived experiences in Texas?

Research Question 2: What servant leader characteristics are exhibited by AESOC leaders' lived experiences in Texas?

Servant leadership and social learning theory provided the theoretical framework for the study. Social learning theory modes expand classical and operant conditioning learning theories to include interactions of an individual's behavioral, personal, and environmental experiences (Bandura, 1977, 2018). Servant leaders model ethical behavior, trustworthiness, and participatory behaviors (De Cremer et al., 2018; Mayer et al., 2009). Social learning theory addresses the whole student, coinciding with the mission of AESOC (Henderson et al., 2018).

Purposeful sampling supported the selection of participants (Ryan et al., 2007). A selection committee of educational leaders, active in alternative education settings and alternative education professional organizations, identified exemplary leaders as possible

participants. Semi-structured individual interviews, the preferred method of phenomenological studies, conducted via secure teleconference connections, resulted in data collection as reliable and valid as in-person interviews (Drabble et al., 2016; Flynn & Korcuska, 2018; Roberts, 2013).

## Data Collection

The focus of the study restricted the population to exemplary alternative education school of choice leaders in Texas. Purposeful sampling targeted leaders of AESOC with three or more years of experience in AESOCs. The data collection process included identifying the exemplary leaders, contacting the leaders, obtaining informed consent, scheduling interviews, conducting interviews, then an opportunity for member-checking and clarification. Data collection began with obtaining fully informed consent from participants.

### Informed Consent

Two experienced alternative education leaders, active in state alternative education professional organizations, were recruited to form a selection committee to identify exemplary AESOC leaders. One committee member served as the contact person between the researcher and the committee. Minimum interaction between committee and researcher reduced the possibility of demand characteristics influencing selection decisions, increasing the validity of the study. The tasks of the committee included identifying exemplary AESOC leaders in Texas with 3 or more years of experience, rank-ordering the prospective leaders, and sending the prospective leaders an introductory letter. An example of the letter was provided to the committee (see Appendix A).

*Collection Process*

Following approval of the study proposal by the American College of Education IRB, the two lead committee members were asked to form a selection committee to identify exemplary AESOC leaders in Texas. Once the lead committee members agreed to participate, communication was restricted to one contact member to reduce the influence and maintain committee independence. The selection committee determined the criteria for exemplary AESOC leaders.

The committee identified 22 exemplary leaders 1 month after the formation of the committee. The selection committee did not rank order the prospective leaders as requested. As more than 22 leaders were needed to obtain the required 20 participants, this step became moot. The selection committee provided names, school and district names, and contact information. Recruitment emails were sent to all 22 identified leaders. Identified leaders not responding to the recruitment email received up to three follow-up emails. Leaders agreeing to participate received an informed consent form explaining the voluntary nature of research and expectations of the participants. Nine out of the original 22 identified leaders agreed to participate.

One leader stated that the school district refused permission to participate in the research. Using the contact information provided by the leader, the interviewer contacted the school district requesting participation permission and offering to provide any information needed by the district. The district denied participation without explanation.

Failing to obtain the required 20 informed consents, the committee was asked to provide additional names of exemplary leaders. Forty-three additional leaders were identified as exemplary AESOC leaders. Five possible participants had an undeliverable address and were dropped from the pool of prospective leaders. Two leaders did not meet the criteria of the study.

One led a special education disciplinary school and not a school of choice. The other

leader only had 2 years of experience in an AESOC, not the required 3.

Unresponsive leaders received up to three recruitment emails. Following a

positive response agreeing to participate, the prospects received an informed consent

form. Following the receipt of the signed informed consent form, scheduling interviews

took place. Nine additional leaders agreed to participate.

A third recruitment round of two additional emails covered both initial and second

sets of identified leaders. One leader from the original set agreed to participate and 2

additional leaders from the second set agreed to participate. Only 2 of the leaders

followed through with signed informed consent forms. Twenty signed informed consent

forms were returned by exemplary leaders meeting the study criteria

### *Informed Consent Time Frame*

Recruitment of participants began with contacting the lead committee member in

mid-April following ACE IRB approval. The committee sent the first list of identified

AESOC leaders the second week of May. Recruitment of participants from the initial list

lasted until the end of June when no further responses occurred.

The selection committee began assembling the second list the last week of June,

sending the list of 43 identified prospective participants the last of July. Recruitment

continued into September, with up to five additional invitations to participate sent to

identified leaders. The final participant returned the signed informed consent form in

October. The informed consent timeframe lasted approximately 6 months.

### *Participants Collected*

The selection committee identified 65 exemplary AESOC leaders in Texas. Sixty

prospects had valid contact information. Fifty-eight identified leaders met the study criteria. One

leader's school district refused participation in the study. The selection committee returned 57

eligible participants for the study. The approved methodology required 20 signed informed

consent forms and subsequent interviews. Signed responses from 20 out of 57 eligible

participants resulted in a 35% response rate. Once informed consent was received from

participants, the interview process commenced.

**Interviews**

Scheduling of semi-structured, open-ended interviews occurred following the receipt of

the participant's signed informed consent form. The interview consisted of questions derived

from servant leadership questionnaires. Subject matter experts reviewed the question before IRB

submission. All participants were asked the same interview questions (see Appendix D).

Depending on the responses, follow-up and elaboration questions sought clarification and

extension.

*Location*

Interviews were conducted via teleconference, using the Zoom teleconference application

for 19 out of the 20 interviews. One participant requested a FaceTime application to interview

while traveling in a car. Teleconferencing allowed for increased flexibility in scheduling

interviews and eliminated the problem of traveling long distances in Texas to conduct in-person

interviews, increasing the available population of potential participants.

The interviewer used a personal computer in a home office to conduct interviews. The

computer was connected to the internet via a Virtual Personal Network (VPN), adding a layer of

security to the encrypted computer. Interviews were conducted alone and in private, insuring

confidentiality on the part of the interviewer.

Participants decided where and when to connect for the interview. Twelve

participants used school offices while 7 preferred to interview at home. Six participants

were interviewed in family rooms, 1 located in a home office. Participant 8 requested to

interview in the car while commuting to work. Participants decided on levels of privacy

and confidentiality based on personal wishes and circumstances. Participants could

briefly pause the interview to attend to other responsibilities. This occurred rarely, and

only when leaders interviewed during school hours. Recordings were paused and audio

muted when school business was conducted, then resumed at the direction of the

participant. Interview times ranged from 31 minutes to 80 minutes, with an average time

of 52 minutes. Despite the best effort to follow approved procedures, deviations occurred.

**Deviations from Plan**

The plan called for the committee to rank order the potential participants, who

would be contacted in rank order. The committee did not rank the participants. This

requirement became moot, as all potential participants needed were contacted to obtain

the necessary number of participants.

The selection committee was asked to send a letter introducing the interviewer to the

prospective participants. The committee was given a sample letter to send. When asked if the

letter was sent, a clear response was not provided. The assumption is that the letter of

introduction was not sent.

Data collection timeframe took longer than estimated. Original estimate for collecting,

analyzing, and reporting data was 2 months for all aspects. The actual time for collecting data

was 6 months. Obtaining consent to participate took most of the extended time. This includes

obtaining lists of exemplary leaders and obtaining consent to participate. Scheduling and interviewing proceeded as expected.

Zoom provided a live closed caption option, allowing for real-time transcription. Zoom transcription provided the text for participant review and data analysis. NVivo transcription was not used as the service required additional subscriptions. One interview, conducted through FaceTime did not record audio, only video. Participant time constraints did not allow for another interview to occur. Interview was excluded from study. Challenges encountered in obtaining data occurred.

**Significant Circumstances Encountered**

Obtaining lists of potential participants and obtaining consent to participate posed a challenge. The leaders who responded overwhelmingly responded positively. The majority did not respond in any form. Five potential participants' emails were returned as non-deliverable. It is unknown whether other non-respondents received any emails sent. The assumption is that the emails were ignored as the addresses seem to be valid.

The requests for participation were directed at the individual leaders. Two leaders sought district approval before agreeing to participate. One district denied participation without comment. The other district clarified questions, sought assurances covered by IRB, then gave permission. A large school district denying participation for school leaders without explanation to the leader was an unexpected circumstance.

Technical difficulties in recording interviews occurred in two interviews. One interview, using Zoom did not record. The participant agreed to a second interview, conducted 2 days later. The other technical problem occurred with the FaceTime interview in the car. The video was recorded, but not the audio. Participant time restraints precluded a re-interview.

The live closed caption aspect of Zoom allowed the participants to see and hear the interview. The transcript prepared by Zoom allowed the participant to receive a copy of the interview for review promptly while fresh in the mind. Transcripts were transferred to Nvivo.

All participants received a copy of the interview transcript for member checking. Follow-up correspondence did not reveal any changes or clarifications to the original interview. Several participants sent encouraging statements, and several expressed a desire to know the results obtained.

### Data Analysis and Results

A thematic approach to coding, emphasizing participants' lived experiences, interpreted clusters of meanings from interview statements into themes (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Usher & Jackson, 2014). Clusters of meanings emerged from participant statements and were recognized in the analysis as themes. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) NVivo, v. 12 helped to analyze codes and themes from the interview transcripts. CAQDAS provided an effective framework for coding and determining themes of data collected in interviews (Freitas et al., 2017). Transcripts were provided by Zoom teleconference application during the interview. NVivo assisted in organizing the data and seeking codes, sub-codes, and themes.

An initial reading of transcripts revealed possible significant responses. Focusing on possible significant responses revealed preliminary codes. Following initial readings, transcripts were uploaded to NVivo. Significant responses identified in the initial reading provided the initial top-tier codes. Text search queries of commonly noticed occurrences revealed added codes. Additions and modifications of codes occurred as commonalities

were revealed. Table 4, Examples of Codes Developed from Interviews, demonstrates types of

codes and an example quote corresponding to code.

**Table 4**

*Examples of Codes Developed from Interviews*

| Top-level code | Sublevel code | Example Quote |
|---|---|---|
| Accountability | | "[The] biggest way I hold them accountable is not because of the threat of a reprimand. I hold them accountable saying hey you're a member of the team. You're like, and hopefully their team members are the ones that are holding them accountable". |
| | Restorative | "[B]ecause we are restorative campus, so it was what are our collective commitments, as a staff that we're going to hold each other accountable" |
| Decision Focus | | "The priority is always going to be what's best for the student". |
| Leadership Styles | Servant Leader | "I would absolutely identify myself as a servant leader. But I would also say that. I think God calls us to what we're supposed to do, and this is absolutely what I'm supposed to do". |
| Mission | | "Our mission is to help students successfully complete high school graduation requirements but more importantly prepare them for school after high school to be great". |
| Relationships | | "I've seen the value of relationships". "It's all about building relationships" |
| | Respect | "I think it's you know everywhere; respect needs to play an important role. We all need to be respectful of each other. And we're talking, you know, socially and emotionally. Respect is one of the biggest tools that we carry here and that's a restorative practice of learning how to respect other people". |

*Note:* Examples of quotes identified as top-level codes. Sub-level code given as example only, not

inclusive.

An attempt to code all relevant responses was made. An exception to coding responses occurred for practices mandated by state education agencies for all schools. Mandated practices were not coded. An example of a mandated practice is the T-TESS state evaluation system. All administrators must use the T-TESS evaluation system. How the system was used elicited a code, only using it did not. Analysis of codes revealed trends in exemplary AESOC leaders.

**Trends**

Analysis revealed Relationships as the overarching theme of AESOC's. Relationships influenced Mission and Vision, Leadership Style, Accountability, and Respect. Leader #5 stated relationships intertwine throughout the AESOC:

> If you don't know your kids, we have, we have a lot of kids that come to us and they seem to be struggling, and people have kind of written them off because where they're from or they're at MC hears because of behavior, either lack of trying or lack of effort or, you know, truly outright behavior issues. When we build those relationships, we're able to see that maybe they're acting that way because of an academic concern or a social-emotional issue that's going on within the family, or within themselves and so kind of building those relationships and knowing that about the kids.

Relationships interacted with all themes observed in AESOC leaders. Establishing and maintaining relationships permeated throughout the alternative education experience.
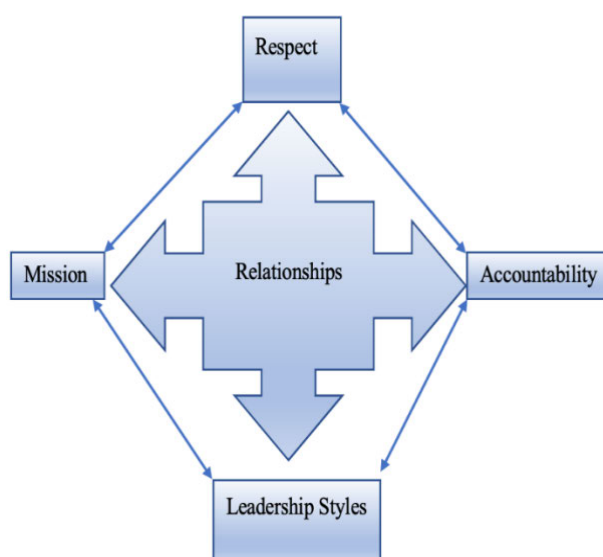
*Relationships*

Figure 3, Interaction of Relationships with major themes related to AESOC, shows how relationships interact to affect leadership style, mission, accountability, and

respect. Leadership style affects accountability, which affects respect, affecting the mission of the school. In turn, respect affects the mission, accountability, and relationships. AESOC involves complex interactions centered around relationships.

**Figure 3**

*Interaction of Relationships with Major Themes Related to AESOC*



*Note:* Relationships, based on respect, affect all as aspects of AESOC, influencing mission, leadership style, and accountability.

Relationships affect the leadership style of effective AESOC leaders, which in turn affects the accountability of the AESOC, including both staff and students. Relationships are the value in the mission and vision of the AESOC. Relationships affect respect, which then affects relationships in return as well as accountability and the mission. Leader # 10 stated the importance of relationships: "I worked at this alternative high school since it was built, it really is building those relationships. That is my number one job.

*Respect*

Respect theme interacted with relationship in all major themes of AESOC. Leader #20 explained the interactions by stating:

It's part of our mission. Respect is a requirement I could say I could honestly say because we're not going to disrespect any of the kids or any each other and we're not going to tolerate it from them as well, so respect is a big role.

Leader # 6 succinctly stated "without respect. Do you really can't get anything accomplished". Respect interacts with empathy and acceptance of others, as shown in Figure 4, Respect Theme Interactions of AESOC.

**Figure 4**

*Respect Theme Interactions in AESOC*
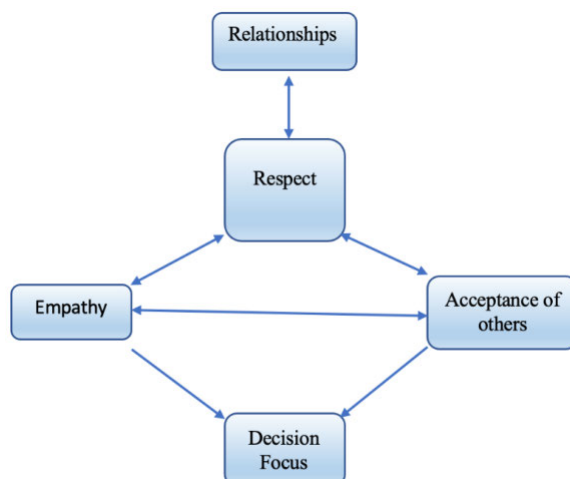


*Note:* Respect interacts directly with relationships, empathy, and acceptance of others, which influences decision focus.

Empathy affects acceptance, which affects respect. Empathy, often implicit rather than explicit, permeated throughout relationships. Relationships are the capstone, built on respect, reinforced by empathy and acceptance. The relationship built on respect drives

the decision-focus on students. Leader #11 summed up the common theme of making decisions as "my decisions, always revolve around what's best for the students and the staff. The priority is always going to be what's best for the student".

*Leadership Style*

Relationships, shaped by respect and influencing decision making, influenced leadership style of AESOC leaders. Leadership styles, shaped by relationships, focus decisions on others. Leaders described personal styles as styles focused on others, using servant leader, collaborative, and team most often. Only one described themselves as an instructional leader. Leader #11 spoke for many by stating, "I would absolutely identify myself as a servant leader. But I would also say that I think God calls us to what we're supposed to do, and this is absolutely what I'm supposed to do." Leader #4 gave a common response, "I surround myself on that type of leader that will pull in people who are very strong in areas that I may be weaker in, and I learned from them". While Leader #9 described the difference between alternative education and regular education leadership impacted by the decision-making focus:

Alt ed versus being in a regular ed school. Yes. And so, I think that one of the big differences and like one of the things I think I've leaned on a lot in is, is the collective responsibility for the students as a whole.

Relationships, based on respect, guide the focus of decisions, affecting leadership style.

Relationship-based leadership style influences the mission of the school, empowering others, and how leaders address accountability, including mistakes. Leader #2 stated:

I like to empower my team. So, although I might have an idea about something or vision. I give it to others and then let the others take ownership of it. And then I just, I mean I'm there if they need me if they need help, but for the most part like

once I give it to you, then you take it run with it because I feel if it's only me and

my vision is limited because it's only limited to what I can think of.

Leader #21 addressed empowerment and decision-making when stating, "I can trust them to lead

appropriately and so they make decisions, and they make them with the best interest of kids in

mind". As shown in Figure 5, *Leadership Style Theme Interactions,* leadership style guides

empowerment, mission, and accountability.

**Figure 5**

*Leadership Style Theme Interactions*



*Note.* Leadership style influenced by relationships, respect, decision focus, and mission.

Empowerment, leading to fostering independence fosters talents, growth, and meaningfulness

with an accountability focus on finding solutions.
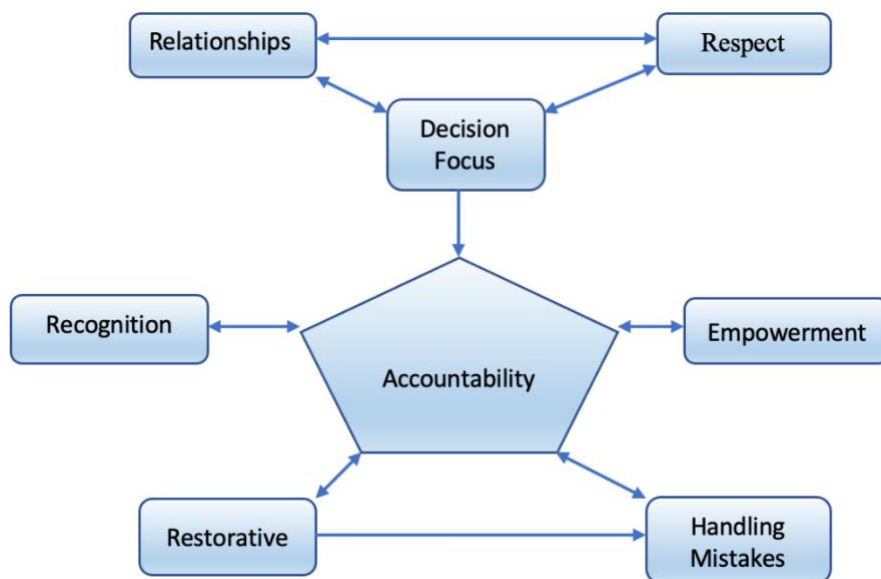
*Accountability*

Accountability by alternative education leaders centered around empowerment, recognition, and restorative practices. As Leader #17 stated, "We're not punitive at all, it's all more about restorative practices and respect is a huge component of that." Other leaders described positive behavior intervention practices. As an example, Leader #5 said, "We have positive behavior in our building. So, we have campus expectations that we teach the children, and that we hold them accountable for."

The focus of accountability is based on the decision focus of what is best for the students, influenced by relationships. A common sub-theme of accountability was recognition for positive actions. Celebrations for success, however small, encouraged positive behaviors. Leader #11 addressed recognition in:

> We celebrate, lots of different things on our campus… It's very important for most of our kids because traditionally most of them had very limited success in academia, and in their academic careers. So, for when they come to quest and they start experiencing some of that success, it really builds on itself and their self-advocacy grows, and they realize hey I can do this. They just build up, it takes off.

Restorative practices, focusing on solving problems and restoring relationships, is a common component of accountability measures in AESOC. Mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning. AESOC leaders empower staff and students to positively correct mistakes and learn from the mistakes.

Figure 6, Accountability Interactions, shows what themes influence accountability and how accountability is expressed. The decision focus and relationship basis established the basis for accountability. Accountability is influenced by what is in the best interest of the student.

**Figure 6**

*Accountability Interactions*



*Note:* Accountability, based on relationship and respect in decision focus, encourages

recognition and empowerment. Restorative practices guide handling mistakes

Accountability is based on empowering individuals by providing recognition and

encouraging positive behaviors. AESOC leaders interviewed viewed mistakes as the

learning process. Correcting the problem is the focus, not administrative punitive

measures. As Leader #10 said:

I tried to not only let them know I'm a human being; I'm gonna make mistakes

and it's okay, the world is not stop turning and it's okay to make mistakes. Just

own up to a mature person, an adult takes care of what that you know takes care

of their what they, their choices. If you don't like that choice next time, I get better

choice and teach them that's okay. Everybody's got to do trial and error, it's part of

growing up.

Common accountability practices focused on building up others and restoring relationships.

### *Mission and Vision*

Relationship-based leadership is a component of the mission of the school. Educating the whole student, academically, behaviorally, socially, and emotionally is a common thread for AESOC. The mission and vision of AESOC looked past high school graduation to prepare students for life success. Figure 7, Interactions of Mission and Vision, show how the mission and vision of AESOC begin with the decision focus based on relationships and respect.

**Figure 7**

*Interactions of Mission and Vision*
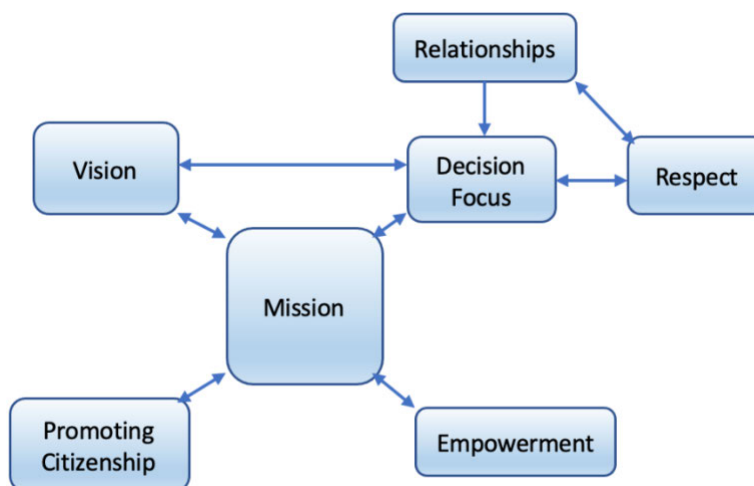


*Note:* Decision focus, based on relationships and respect, shape mission and vision. Mission and vision include empowering individuals and promoting citizenship throughout lifetime.

An environment where everyone feels safe, respected, and accepted is a component of AESOC's. As Leader #20 stated, "Our mission is to make sure that kids are educated in a comfortable environment, a safe environment, positive environment where they feel welcome,

and they feel they're respected, and they achieved the goal of graduation". Leader #2

added, "Our mission is to give students real-world applications of not only their

academics, but also social skills and leadership skills, so they can be productive outside

of school".

The mission of AESOC expands to include helping students become productive

members of the community. Empowering the individual, increasing self-efficacy and

self-regulation, are common in AESOC's. The relationship-based mission prepares all the

students for success in school and after graduation. Maintaining a positive environment

where the best interest of the individual students is central to the mission and vision of

AESOC. Empowering students to take responsibility for behaviors, learning, and goals is

embedded in the mission of AESOC.

**Meaning of Findings**

Research Question 1 asked: "What servant leader characteristics are exhibited by AESOC

leaders' lived experiences in Texas?" Interviews with exemplary AESOC leaders revealed

characteristics of a relationship-focused leadership style based on respect and servicing others.

Relationships and respect lead to empowerment and growth of others. Accountability through

restorative practices is common.

Research Question 2 asked: "How do servant leadership characteristics exhibited by

AESOC leaders' lived experiences advance the mission of AESOC?" The participants indicated

a key mission of AESOC's is to educate the whole student in preparation for life after school.

Relationships are key to reaching marginalized and disadvantaged students. Meeting the needs of

the whole student by basing decisions on the best interest of the student helps fulfill the mission

of the AESOC to recover and restore students. Soundness in answering research questions depends on the reliability and validity of the methods used to collect data.

## Reliability and Validity

Qualitative research validity refers to creditable, trustworthy, and transferable studies (Sundler et al., 2019). The credibility and dependability of the study began with the participant selection process. An independent selection committee of knowledgeable professionals chose the sample pool to minimize bias in selecting exemplary leaders. Secure video conferencing tools allowed for privacy and confidentiality during the interview. The interviewer used reflexivity and self-reflection during the interview, promoting rigor, trustworthiness, reliability, and validity (Darawsheh, 2014; Roberts, 2013).

Participants received a copy of the interview transcript for review, as a member check of transactional validity (Caretta & Perez, 2019). Responses did not identify changes or mistakes in the interviews. Participants sent words of encouragement and thanks for recognizing alternative education.

Common responses generated general themes and codes. Succinct code definition helped avoid definition drifts, increasing consistency. The use of NVivo, v. 12 to analyze codes and sub-codes provided a means to increase reliability and validity. NVivo allowed for text queries, code queries, code cross-checking and allowed relevant code examples to be viewed and evaluated together.

Trustworthiness of results, based on judgments of the interpreter, depends on moral character. Trustworthiness of the study increased by using an independent selection committee, use of a semi-structured interview reviewed by subject matter experts, and the character of the interpreter to report honestly and truthfully.

**Chapter Summary**

This phenomenological qualitative study sought to answer two research questions:

Research Question 1: What servant leader characteristics are exhibited by AESOC

leaders' lived experiences in Texas? Research Question 2: How do servant leadership

characteristics exhibited by AESOC leaders' lived experiences advance the mission of

AESOC?

Relational components to servant leadership appear in all versions of servant

leader characteristics. Relationships, built on respect, form the central theme of

exemplary AESOC leaders. All common themes start with relationships. AESOC leaders

exhibit servant leader characteristics in the mission of the AESOC, leadership style, and

accountability. Servant leader characteristics exhibited by exemplary AESOC leaders

include relationships, service, empowerment, humility, participatory and collaborative

involvement, and accountability.

Service to others is the mission of AESOC in preparing students for life-long

success. Accomplishing the mission of the AESOC begins with building relationships

based on respect, a servant leader concept. Empowering students and staff to fully

participate and collaborate furthers the mission. Accountability begins with humility, as

evidenced by how exemplary AESOC leaders handle mistakes. Accountability focused

on positive improvements, helping fulfill the mission of the AESOC.

Exemplary leaders of alternative education schools of choice exhibit

characteristics comparable to servant leader characteristics. Using social learning theory

concepts in conjunction with servant leader characteristics, AESOC exemplary leaders

further the mission of the AESOC to provide a different method to empower marginalized and disadvantaged students to succeed in life.

The following chapter, Chapter 5, is a discussion of the purpose and nature of the study. The findings will be analyzed and interpreted in the context of the conceptual framework. Interpretations, conclusions, and limitations will be discussed. Recommendations for policy, practices, and further research will be presented.

**Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

The purpose of the phenomenological study was to explore what servant leadership characteristics are revealed in the lived experiences of exemplary leaders of AESOC in Texas and how those characteristics advance the mission of AESOC. Two research questions were investigated. Research Question 1 asked what servant leader characteristics are exhibited by AESOC leaders' lived experiences in Texas? Question 2 sought to determine how do servant leadership characteristics exhibited by AESOC leaders' lived experiences advance the mission of AESOC. The study explored the lived experiences of exemplary AESOC leaders in Texas using open-ended semi-structured individual interviews.

Answering the first research question, relationships emerged as the overriding theme of servant leader characteristics exhibited by exemplary AESOC leaders in Texas. Other observed servant leader characteristics effected by relationships consisted of respect, servant leadership style, accountability, and mission and vision of the school. In response to the second research questions, servant leader characteristics of AESOC leaders were found to further the AESOC mission of helping students become productive members of the community by providing a safe positive environment where the students are welcome and respected. Results are limited to exemplary AESOC leaders.

Findings indicate the overarching theme of AESOC leaders is relationships. Lived experiences of AESOC leaders revealed servant leadership as the predominate leadership style. Servant leader characteristics of AESOC leaders were interpreted as the basis for providing an environment for marginalized students to succeed in school. The characteristics of a servant leader were concluded to further the mission of AESOC in preparing students to become productive members of the community. Findings were limited to exemplary AESOC leaders who

volunteered to participate in the interviews. Recommendations for further research include the need to compare characteristics of AESOC leaders with regular education leaders. Comparisons of job satisfaction and turnover rates between AESOC and regular education leaders should be a future research area.

The study revealed servant leadership as the predominant leadership style of exemplary AESOC leaders in Texas. Interpretation and reflection on findings found relationships, based on respect, effected mission, accountability, and decisions. The study concluded servant leader characteristics furthered the mission of the AESOC. The qualitative phenomenological study's limitations include the population, sample size, transferability, and trustworthiness related to the study. Recommendations made for further research include comparing AESOC leadership with general education leadership and comparing AESOC to other types of alternative education leaders. Implications for leadership address the unique mission of AESOC and the need for leadership possessing servant leader characteristics. The study concluded servant leader characteristics exhibited by exemplary AESOC leaders furthered the mission of the AESOC in educating marginalized students.

## Findings, Interpretations, and Conclusions

Common themes found in exemplary AESOC leader descriptions provide insight into the servant leader characteristics of the leaders. Servant leader characteristics focus and guide the mission of the AESOC. Prior research has linked general concepts of servant leadership in AESOC (Eliot, 2020). Findings support and extend peer-reviewed literature of servant leadership by directly linking characteristics to exemplary AESOC leaders. Common servant leader themes emerging from interviews with exemplary AESOC leaders include relationships, respect, trust,

accountability, and the mission of the school. Findings reflect the effective attributes of AESOC leaders.

**Reflections on Findings**

Servant leader characteristics meet the criteria of effective leadership attributes (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). Research has linked social learning processes to improved perceptions of trustworthiness and participatory behaviors, both servant leader characteristics (De Cremer et al., 2018). Previous research found servant leaders' characteristics in relationship-focused and community-building schools (Kloss, 2018; Maillet, 2017). Relationships built on trust are a key characteristic of a successful alternative school.

Exploring the lived experiences of independently identified exemplary AESOC leaders confirmed servant leadership as the predominant leadership style of effective AESOC leaders. Specific servant leader characteristics emerged as positively influencing the climate and mission of the schools. Identified by Kloss (2018) as a key characteristic, relationships emerged as affecting all other aspects of the school and other servant leader characteristics. Relationships influenced respect, the mission of the school, and accountability. Empathy, decisions focusing on the needs of individuals, and empowerment of others resulted from the impact of relationship building. Analysis and interpretation of findings suggest exemplary AESOC leaders utilize servant leadership.

**Analysis and Interpretation of Findings**

Servant leadership is an ethics-based style focused on serving others (Greenleaf, 1970/2008). AESOC seeks to educate students who have not been successful in regular education. Marginalized students need different educational settings to succeed (Jordan et al., 2017). Exemplary AESOC leaders exhibit servant leader characteristics based on relationships to

provide an educational setting focused on the needs of the individual student. Building

relationships empowers students and staff to make decisions focused on the student and how to

help the student prepare for a successful community-oriented life.

Relationships allow leaders and subordinates to establish mutual respect based on trust.

Building respect through building relationships affects the decision-making of leaders and

subordinates. Leaders interviewed stressed that building relationship-based respect was often the

first task, as marginalized students often lack a concept of mutual relationship-based respect.

Only after the establishment of relationships and mutual respect can the hard work of providing

for the behavioral, personal, and environmental needs of the student to succeed begin.

Social learning theory incorporates servant leader characteristics to encourage success in

staff and students (Henderson et al., 2018). Servant leader characteristics advance the mission of

the AESOC by providing an educational setting focused on the needs of the learner. The mission

of the AESOC is to educate the whole student to prepare for a successful community-focused life

after graduation (Wilcox et al., 2018). Social learning theory addresses the behavioral, personal,

environmental aspects of learning as well as the concepts of self-efficacy and self-regulation.

Servant leadership characteristics and social learning theory concepts meet the needs of the

AESOC students and allow the mission of the AESOC to succeed.

**Defense of Findings**

Interpretations, inferences, and conclusions are limited to the lived experiences of

exemplary AESOC leaders in Texas. The scope of the study focused on exemplary AESOC

leaders exclusively. The experiences related by the participants formed the sole basis for the

development of the themes and codes found in the study.

Findings from personal experiences of exceptional AESOC leaders help explain the characteristics possessed by AESOC leaders and how characteristics further the mission of the AESOC (Peterson, 2019). Phenomenological qualitative research methods employed allowed an in-depth study to explore leader characteristics of a targeted population. Findings, interpretations, and conclusions are restricted to the targeted population of exemplary AESOC leaders in Texas.

**Conclusions from Study**

Exemplary AESOC leaders in Texas exhibit servant leader characteristics of relationships, respect, accountability, empowering others and having a clear mission and vision. Servant leadership characteristics of exemplary AESOC leaders further the mission of the AESOC in providing an environment in which the student and staff can grow, learn and become part of the community. Focusing on the needs of the individual learner drives the decision-making process at both the individual and organizational levels.

The study explored exemplary AESOC leaders in Texas, limited to identified exemplary leaders of voluntary schools of choice. Not included in the study were other types of alternative education schools, non-voluntary discipline and remedial schools, Type 2 and Type 3, nor leaders from regular education schools. Findings and conclusions only apply to the targeted population of exemplary AESOC leaders in Texas.

Exemplary AESOC leaders exhibit servant leader characteristics focusing on the needs of the whole child. Building relationships based on mutual respect with staff and students is the overarching theme reported by exemplary AESOC leaders. Exemplary AESOC leaders encouraged growth and empowerment in both staff and students through recognition of achievements and focusing on learning from and correcting mistakes. Relationship-based

restorative practices were a common tool used for accountability for both staff and students.

Conclusions are restricted to the limitations of the phenomenological qualitative study.

## Limitations

Transferability indicated the usefulness and relevance of findings to the field of study (Sundler et al., 2019). Knowing what servant leader characteristics are exhibited by exemplary AESOC leaders in Texas furthers the mission of providing alternative education to marginalized students. Results are limited to exemplary alternative education schools of choice. Findings are relevant by providing criteria for leader selection and improvement.

Trustworthiness relates to a qualitative study's dependability, confirmability, and credibility (Flynn et al., 2019). Using an independent selection committee to identify potential participants increased the level of credibility as the selection method increased the reliability of selecting participants who met the criteria of exemplary AESOC leaders. The credibility of the study was limited by the criteria used by the selection committee to determine exemplary leaders. Participation in the study was limited to leaders who voluntarily chose to participate in interviews. Experiences of those leaders who did not choose to participate were not explored, limiting the study.

Dependability increases through reviewing transcripts, cross-checking codes to eliminate definition drifts, member checking, and reflexivity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Following interviews, participants received a transcript of the interview provided through closed captioning technology of the teleconference software. Participants reviewed the transcripts for accuracy and had the opportunity to clarify any statements. NVivo, a computer data analysis software, provided cross-checking capability to increase interrater reliability and eliminate code definition drift. The interviewer reflected on the purpose and the research questions throughout the

interviews. Dependability is limited by the participants' accuracy in reviewing transcripts. Reviews were requested, but verification was not required.

Phenomenological research replaces objectivity with confirmability (Peterson, 2019). Confirmability is increased by using software to transcribe recordings to text, eliminating possible bias in transcription. The use of CAQDAS provided a means to analyze and organize themes found in the interviews. Transcripts and recorded interviews kept for future review increase the level of confirmability. Confirmability is limited by the subjective nature of analyzing and organizing themes. The themes revealed were limited by questions asked and responses given by participants.

Findings, limited to exemplary AESOC leaders in Texas, are not generalizable to other settings. Phenomenological studies explore participants' personal experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). Phenomenological studies seek to answer why, what, and how questions using in-depth interviews. Small sample sizes preclude generalizations to larger populations. Restricted to AESOC leaders, the study precluded other types of alternative education programs. Statements concerning Type 2 and Type 3 school leaders are beyond the scope of this study. Findings on characteristics of exemplary AESOC point to the need for further research in other types of alternative schools. Recommendations made are based on the findings of the study.

## Recommendations

Servant leadership focuses on individual relationships to meet the needs of the students and staff. Alternative education schools serve a smaller population with greater needs. Based on tests and performance results, alternative education campuses in Texas are cost-effective (Gronberg et al., 2017). Marginalized students benefit from a relationship based individualized focused education. Systems benefit as a cost-effective measure to educate those who are not

successful in a regular setting. Further research on exemplary AESOC schools and leaders should provide schools with additional information to help provide marginalized students with an appropriate education. Further research is recommended to increase the knowledge base concerning exemplary AESOC leader characteristics.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The current study focused on exemplary AESOC leaders exclusively. Three additional study areas should be researched before making generalized statements. Recommended research should determine if there is a difference in leadership characteristics between exemplary AESOC leaders and other AESOC leaders. A second research area should determine if there is a difference between AESOC leader characteristics and regular education leader characteristics. The third research question should determine if there is a difference in leadership characteristics between exemplary AESOC and exemplary regular education leaders.

Servant leadership, linked to low burnout rates and related to thriving workplaces, presents another opportunity for further research (Sheikh et al., 2019). As exemplary AESOC leaders exhibit servant leader characteristics, research should determine if there is a difference in turnover and job satisfaction between schools with servant leaders and non-servant leaders. Comparing turnover rates and job satisfaction rates for different types of leaders will provide evidence to help schools keep qualified personnel.

Future researchers should have experience in alternative education and regular education settings when conducting phenomenological research on the two types of schools (Neubauer et al., 2019). Researchers should keep in mind that alternative education serves a different population than regular education (Jordan et al., 2017). The needs of students are different. When

implementing policies and procedures in alternative schools, recognition of the differences should be at the forefront of decision-making (Jordan et al., 2017).

Obtaining data from school districts is an obstacle researchers should address before undertaking studies. Publicly available data, such as aggregated test scores are inadequate to evaluate decisions for marginalized students. Researchers should form research collaboratives to collect data across multiple school systems. Each researcher would be responsible for obtaining permission for participation from systems with which the researcher has a history of cooperation and personal connections. Analysis of combined data would increase the power, effect, validity, and reliability of the results. Cooperatives would work for both qualitative and quantitative studies. Accurate knowledge of the characteristics of AESOC leaders have leadership implications affecting the educational experiences of marginalized students.

**Implications for Leadership**

Exemplary AESOC leaders exhibit servant leader characteristics and further the mission of the AESOC. Effective alternative schools of choice have the potential to positively impact the individual and society (Campbell et al., 2017). Individuals in AESOC have shown a large increase in academic achievement (West, 2016). AESOC students are more likely to participate in productive post-graduation activities (Unterman & Haider, 2019). Schools of choice improve the meaningfulness of students' post-graduation lives educationally, socially, and economically (Wilcox et al., 2018). Parents of the school of choice students show an increase in trust in the school and parental participation compared to regular school attendance (Strier & Katz, 2016). Increased parental involvement benefits students and schools alike.

Organizationally, study findings suggest school system leadership should focus on servant leadership characteristics when choosing AESOC leaders. System leaders should

recognize AESOC are different from regular education, needing relationship-focused leadership. Focusing on the needs of marginalized students, servant leaders help organizations by increasing graduation rates and reducing staff turnover.

Schools of choice show a long-term influence on lives long after students leave school (Wilcox et al., 2018). Recognizing the long-term impact of successfully educating marginalized students should help system leaders seek successful ways to assist students who are not successful in the regular setting. A mindset of individual differences must take priority in setting policy and procedures in public schools. Recognizing, planning, and promoting the needs of all students must take priority, not function just as a slogan. System leaders must truly believe all students have worth and deserve an education based on individual needs, not system convenience. Individual-based education depends on relationships, the basis of servant leadership. Stakeholders and leaders of educational systems must seek servant leaders to help guide marginalized students to life success.

## Conclusion

Analysis of in-depth semi-structured interviews of exemplary AESOC leaders revealed relationships as the overarching characteristic exhibited. Other servant leader characteristics of respect, mission, accountability, and leadership style were all influenced and affected by relationships. Exemplary leaders viewed building relationships as necessary before meeting the educational needs of marginalized students. Gaining mutual respect follows creating a relationship, both with students and staff. The mission of the AESOC, meeting the individual needs of the student to prepare for a successful life, is dependent upon treating each person as an individual. Recognizing individual students have varied behavioral, personal, and environmental

factors sets the stage for addressing each student's strengths and weaknesses as related to the individual needs.

Exemplary AESOC leaders address accountability from a servant leader perspective. The goal of accountability is the correcting of mistakes. The leaders viewed mistakes as learning opportunities. Consequences for mistakes were built on learning and related to relationships in the school. Leaders used restorative practices to correct mistakes and maintain relationships. Decisions made in AESOC focused on the best interests of the individual student. Recognition of the individuality and uniqueness of each person is at the core of the mission.

Exemplary AESOC leaders utilize servant leadership in meeting the needs of marginalized students. Servant leader characteristics further the mission of meeting the needs of marginalized students. Systems and leaders should use this information to identify servant leader characteristics in potential leaders. System leaders should recognize that marginalized students, who have not succeeded in regular education, need servant leaders in alternative schools. Educational and community leaders should recognize that educating marginalized students requires addressing the whole student: behavior, personal attributes, and environmental factors. Only after addressing the needs of the whole student will the school begin helping marginalized students to succeed.

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**Appendix A**

**Participant Letter of Introduction Example**

███████

Chair, Exemplary AESOC Leaders Selection Committee
School position
School Affiliation

Date:

Greetings,

You will receive an invitation from David Randall Pratt to participate in a doctoral research project studying exemplary alternative education school of choice (AESOC) leaders. The invitation will explain the nature of the study and will request your participation. I have known Mr. Pratt professionally for several years and can attest to his professionalism and dedication to helping marginalized students succeed. As an identified exemplary AESOC leader, please consider participating in this research project. The request to participate in the research project will come from ████████████████████████████
Thank you for your consideration. Feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

███████

Chair, Selection Committee

**Appendix B**

**Recruitment Letter**



Date:

Dear ------

I am a doctoral student at American College of Education. I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a dissertation research study.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the servant leadership characteristics of alternative education school of choice (AESOC) leaders and how those characteristics further the mission of the AESOC. The study will examine the experiences of exemplary AESOC leaders through a video conference interview. The interview will take approximately one hour to complete.

Exemplary leaders of AESOC in Texas, identified by a committee of leading AESOC leaders, are eligible to participate. The leaders chosen for this study have at least three years of leadership experience in an AESOC.

Your participation in the study will be voluntary. If you wish to withdraw from the research at any time, you may do so by contacting me using the information below.

I may publish the results of this study; however, I will not use your name nor share identifiable data you provided. Your information will remain confidential. If you would like additional information about the study, please contact the following

**Researcher:** David Randall Pratt, Doctoral Candidate

**Organization:** American College of Education

**Email:** ██████████████    **Telephone:** █████████

**Researcher's Dissertation Chair**: Carolyn Price, Ph.D.

**Organization and Position:** American College of Education

**Email:** Carolyn.price@ace.edu

If you meet the criteria above, are interested in participating in the study, and would like to be included in the potential participant pool, please review and accept the attached informed consent. Thank you again for considering this dissertation research opportunity.

David Randall Pratt

**Appendix C**

**Informed Consent Letter**



**Research Participation Informed Consent**

**Prospective Research Participant:** Read this consent form carefully and ask as many questions as you like before you decide whether you want to participate in this research study. You are free to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research.

**Project Information**

**Project Title:** A Phenomenological Study of Servant Leadership Characteristics in Alternative Education School Leaders

**Researcher:** David Randall Pratt

**Organization:** American College of Education

**Email:** ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ **Telephone:** ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

**Researcher's Dissertation Chair:** Carolyn Price, Ph.D.

**Organization and Position:** American College of Education

**Email:** Carolyn.price@ace.edu

**Introduction**

I am David Pratt, and I am a doctoral candidate student at the American College of Education. I am researching under the guidance and supervision of my Chair, Dr. Price. I will give you some information about the project and invite you to be part of this research. Before you decide, you can talk to anyone you feel comfortable with about the research. This consent form may contain words you do not understand. Please ask me to stop as we go through the information, and I will explain. If you have questions later, you can ask them at any time.

**Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of the phenomenological qualitative study was to investigate what servant leadership characteristics are exhibited by leaders of alternative education schools of choice (AESOC) in Texas and how those characteristics advance the mission of the AESOC. You are being asked to participate in a research study that will assist with understanding the characteristics of AESOC leaders in Texas and how those characteristics further the AESOC mission. Conducting this qualitative study will provide information on the decisions regarding AESOC leadership positions and professional development.

**Research Design and Procedures**

The study will use a qualitative methodology and hermeneutic phenomenological research design. The study will comprise of 15 participants, purpose selected, who will participate in semi-structured interviews. The study will involve personal interviews conducted via teleconferencing technology. Interviews will be recorded to prepare transcripts for review and to provide digital input for computer assisted data analysis. Participants will have the option of full video/audio recording or audio only recording. Recordings will be held confidentially on an encrypted, password protected computer.

**Participant selection**

You are being invited to take part in this research because of your experience as an alternative education school of choice leader who has been identified as an exemplary leader, which meets the criteria for this study. Participant selection criteria: leaders of AESOC in Texas, three years' experience as AESOC leader, chosen as an exemplary leader by a panel of experienced Texas alternative education leaders.

**Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate. If you choose not to participate, there will be no punitive repercussions and you do not have to participate. If you select to participate in this study, you may change your mind later and stop participating even if you agreed earlier. If you agree to participate, you also agree to recording the interview, either video/audio, or audio only.

**Procedures**

We are inviting you to participate in this research study. If you agree, you will be asked to participate in a personal interview. The type of questions asked will range from a demographic perspective to direct inquiries about the topic of your personal experiences as an AESOC leader. Participants will receive a transcript of their interview to review for accuracy.

**Duration**

The pre-interview introduction portion of the research study will require approximately 10 minutes to complete. If you agree to participate and meet the criteria, the time allocated for the interview will be 60 min. using teleconferencing at a time convenient for the participant. The interviews will be recorded to allow analysis of responses and to provide accurate transcripts for review. A follow-up debriefing session will take 15 min.

**Risks**

The researcher will ask you to share personal and confidential information, and you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the discussion if you don't wish to do so. You do not have to give any reason for not responding to any question.

**Benefits**

While there will be no direct financial benefit to you, your participation is likely to help us find out more about the leadership characteristics of AESOC leaders. The potential benefits of this study will aid the school systems in providing an appropriate educational experience for marginalized and disadvantaged students.

**Confidentiality**

I will not share information about you or anything you say to anyone outside of the researcher. During the defense of the doctoral dissertation, data collected will be presented to the dissertation committee. The data collected will be kept in a locked file cabinet or encrypted computer file. Any information about you will be coded and will not have a direct correlation, which directly identifies you as the participant. Only I will know what your number is, and I will secure your information.

**Sharing the Results**

At the end of the research study, the results will be available for each participant. It is anticipated to publish the results so other interested people may learn from the research.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

Participation is voluntary. At any time, you wish to end your participation in the research study, you may do so without repercussions.

**Questions About the Study**

If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact the researcher. This research plan has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the American College of Education. This is a committee whose role is to make sure research participants are protected from harm. If you wish to ask questions of this group, email [IRB@ace.edu](mailto:IRB@ace.edu).

**Certificate of Consent**

I have read the information about this study, or it has been read to me. I acknowledge why I have been asked to be a participant in the research study. I have been provided the opportunity to ask questions about the study, and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I certify I am at least 18 years of age. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print or Type Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily. A copy of this Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Print or type name of lead researcher: _____

Signature of lead researcher: _____

Date: _____

**PLEASE SIGN AND RETURN TO THE RESEARCHER BY EMAIL TO**

███████████████████████

**PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR YOUR RECORDS.**

**Appendix D**

**Interview Questions**

Servant Leadership Interview Questions for AESOC Leaders

1. Introduction

   a. Thank you for participating.

      i. Remind voluntary participation

      ii. Video recording

      iii. Opportunity to review interview and follow-up

   b. How do you view your leadership style?

      i. What makes you say that?

      ii. Could you share an experience that makes you believe that?

   c. How do think others view your leadership style?

      i. What makes you say that?

      ii. Could you share an experience that makes you believe that?

   d. What is the mission of your school?

Interview Questions

1. Empowerment

   a. How do you encourage persons in your school to use their talents?

      i. Staff?

      ii. Students?

      iii. Parents?

   b. How do you contribute to the growth of your staff?

        i. Professionally?

       ii. Personally?

  c. How do you encourage meaning in the work and life of your:

        i. Staff?

       ii. Students?

  d. What authority does your staff have to act independently?

        i. Examples?

  e. What independent actions do your students have authority to make?

2. Accountability

  a. What do you hold your staff accountable for?

        i. Official teacher evaluation?

       ii. Other accountability standards?

  b. How do you hold your staff accountable for their performance?

  c. What is the basis for the accountability?

  d. How do you hold students accountable?

        i. Behaviorally?

       ii. Academically?

      iii. Socially?

3. Forgiveness

  a. How do you handle mistakes made by staff?

  b. How do you interact with staff after dealing with the mistake?

4. Standing back

  a. How are achievements recognized?

    b. Who receives the recognition?

        i. Where is the focus during recognition?

5. Humility

    a. How do you handle criticism?

        i. From staff? Example?

        ii. From students? Example?

        iii. From superiors? Example?

    b. What did you learn from the criticism?

    c. Give an example of when you learned something from a staff or student's different viewpoint or opinion.

6. Authenticity

    a. What are your areas for growth as a leader?

    b. If I were to ask a staff member about your areas of improvement, what do you think they will say?

        i. Students?

    c. How well does your staff know you, both professionally and personally? Example?

    d. Can you give an example of when you were touched by something that happened at school and your staff/students saw the expression of your emotions?

        i. Good situation?

        ii. Unpleasant situation?

7. Courage

    a. Give an example of an instance when you made a decision not knowing if your superiors would support your decision.

b. What is the basis for making decisions?

c. What is the priority?

8. Interpersonal acceptance

    a. How have you shown acceptance of others?

    b. What role does respect play in your school?

        i. How do you encourage the display of respect?

    c. How have you expressed empathy with others?

    d. How has the acceptance of others furthered the mission of the school?

9. Stewardship

    a. When making decisions, where is the focus?

        i. What is the driving force behind the decisions?

    b. What is your vision for the school?

        i. Short-term?

        ii. Long-term?

    c. How do you promote citizenship behavior?

        i. Staff?

        ii. Students?

        iii. How does this fit in with the mission of the school?

    d. Give an example of when you had to make a difficult decision based on a moral principal.

        i. What fallout resulted?

    e. Give an example of when a staff or student made a decision based on a moral principle?

      i.   What was your response to the decision?

     ii.   How did you support the staff or student?

10. Conclusion

    a.   Thank you for your time.

    b.   Do you have any additional information you would like to share concerning your experiences as a leader in an AESOC?

    c.   I will send you a copy of this interview.  Please contact me if you have any corrections or additions.

**Appendix E**

**Subject Matter Experts Response Verification**

Gmail - Research Interview question review                                     8/23/20, 4:00 PM

## Gmail

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**Research Interview question review**

---

**Madeline Ducate**
To: Randall Pratt

Dear Randall

I reviewed your questions which seem very straight forward and non-intrusive however, I don't know what AESOC stands for.   I assume that the people being interviewed may know, but it is an acronym to me -- and the only thing I could find is Australian Education Senior Officials Committee!

I like that you have headings for each section which will be read to the individuals - and I read up on Servant Leadership which is about leading by example.    Your questions also have good balance of positive/negative - and asking for examples.

Just to also let you know that I am on the Concordia University IRB in Austin Texas and we do review educational student applications such as yours.

Just let me know what AESOC means.   And I would spell it out anyway the first time it is used in the questionaire.

Regards

Madeline Ducate MS MPH MA

On Friday, August 21, 2020, 01:02:57 PM CDT, Randall Pratt ████████████████ wrote:

Interview questions

attached.  Thanks again

[Quoted text hidden]

Page 1 of 1

Gmail - Research Interview Question Review                    8/28/20, 4:46 PM

M Gmail                                                  ████████

## Research Interview Question Review

**Rachel Gallardo** ████████████████                              ████████
To: Randall Pratt ████████████

Hi Randall,

Attached is my feedback for your interview questions. There are a few items to think about, possibly to clarify for the questions. You want to be sure the questions are direct and ask exactly what you mean for them to ask. Do you plan to record your participants? Will you be using just those verbal responses or will you also include nonverbal cues in your analysis?

**Thank you!**

*Rachel Gallardo, Ph.D.*

*Department Head, Psychology & Anthropology*

*Blinn College, Social Sciences Division*

████████████████

████████████

███████████████████

*TCCTA Campus Representative – Brenham*

M Gmail                                                                           **Randall Pratt**

## Dissertation Interview Question review

**Margie Martinez**

To: Randall Pratt

Thank you for seeking my opinion.  I think that overall the questions are meaningful for the study.  I imagine that the groundwork will be set for the interviewee to understand the relevance and context for each question.  I wonder if questions like, "How do others view your leadership style?" is too close-ended.  For example, would it be better to ask, How do you think others view your leadership style?  What makes you say that?  Could you share an experience that makes you believe that?  Also, along the same lines as I imagine that the purpose and meaning of the study will be understood by interviewees when questions like "How do you encourage persons in your school to use their talents?" are asked.  As these type questions assume that the leader does in fact encourage talent use.

"Does your staff know your true feelings?"  As the reader, I am wondering, feelings about what?

Maybe change the word "weaknesses" to 'areas for refinement' or 'areas for growth'

What would your staff say your weaknesses are?  How about, If I were to ask a staff member about your areas for improvement, what do you think they would say?

 Hope these ideas are helpful.  Overall, the questions are appropriate.

[Quoted text hidden]

--

Dr. Margie Martinez,

Seventh-Grade Principal

CSMS

**Appendix F**

**ACE IRB Approval Letter**

AMERICAN COLLEGE *of* EDUCATION

April 12, 2021

To: David Randall Pratt
     Carolyn Price, Dissertation Committee Chair

From: Institutional Review Board
        American College of Education

Re: IRB Approval

"Phenomenological Study of Alternative Education School Leader Servant Leadership Characteristics in Texas"

The American College of Education IRB has reviewed your application, proposal, and any related materials. We have determined that your research provides sufficient protection of human subjects.

Your research is therefore approved to proceed. The expiration date for this IRB approval is one year from the date of review completion, April 12, 2022. If you would like to continue your research beyond this point, including data collection and/or analysis of private data, you must submit a renewal request to the IRB.

Our best to you as you continue your studies.

Sincerely,

Becky Gerambia
Assistant Chair, Institutional Review Board