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Conceptualizing Education as an Economic Good: A Case Study That Describes the Tensions Experienced by School Leaders Amid Conceptual Misalignment Between School Leaders and Their Organizations

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This dissertation, *CONCEPTUALIZING EDUCATION AS AN ECONOMIC GOOD: A CASE STUDY THAT DESCRIBES THE TENSIONS EXPERIENCED BY SCHOOL LEADERS AMID CONCEPTUAL MISALIGNMENT BETWEEN SCHOOL LEADERS AND THEIR ORGANIZATIONS*, by BREANA MITCHELL, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Philosophy, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

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by

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Under the Direction of Yinying Wang, Ed.D.

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This dissertation explores how experienced educational leaders, operating under the Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA) and its systems of accountability, articulate and navigate tensions between their personal conceptualizations of education as an economic good and the dominant perspectives within their organizations, shaped by broader systemic demands. **Theoretical Framework:** The study is grounded in four perspectives of education as an economic good: education as a product, education as an investment, education as a service, and education as an identity. Each perspective includes distinct public goals, processes, outcomes of interest, and the essence of the good. **Methods:** Using criterion-based purposive sampling, four participants from various U.S. regions were selected. Data collection involved interviews, document analysis, and reflective journaling, analyzed through the lens of the "Competing Conceptualizations of Education as an Economic Good" framework. **Data Analysis:** A two-step methodology guided the analysis. For the first set of research questions, the four conceptions of the theoretical framework were used as themes to code and identify both leaders' and organizations' conceptualizations. To explore how leaders navigate tensions arising from conceptual misalignment, thematic coding was applied to uncover patterns and strategies in decision-making processes. **Findings:** Leaders and organizations exhibited diverse but dominant conceptualizations of education, which often led to tensions described as a "push or pull." These tensions were most notable with education as a product, where measures towards educational goals are grades and test scores. Leaders employed two main strategies to address these challenges. The Trojan Horse Strategy involved outwardly aligning with organizational priorities while embedding personal values into broader goals. The Floor is Lava Strategy focused on avoiding areas of misalignment "hot spots" and prioritizing "safe zones" where personal and organizational priorities aligned. **Implications:** In the cases of conceptual alignment, the leader's efforts were catalyzed. Improving alignment between leaders' and organizations' conceptualizations can enhance organizational synergy and outcomes and provide valuable insights for leadership practices and policy development.

INDEX WORDS: Education, Economic Good, Conceptualization

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DEDICATION

This dissertation represents hard work and dedication. It stands as a testament to the unwavering support and endless guidance I've received. As with every accomplishment in my life, this is not the result of my efforts alone. I dedicate this work to my family. To my children, Gary, Gavin, and Magnolia: thank you for your patience and understanding as I prioritized writing over some of the things we love to do together. To my husband, Gary Sr.: you've watched me spend countless hours working on this project, yet you've consistently shown grace and support. You've been my rock through years of school, from earning two master's degrees to now completing this terminal degree. To my siblings, Tamara and Courtney: I'm finally finished! Thank you for helping with my kids and making sacrifices to support me in reaching this goal. To my mother, Patricia, and my late father, Joe: thank you for doing everything possible to help me achieve this monumental personal milestone. From watching my children during Saturday classes to giving me time to write, your sacrifices mean more to me than words could ever express. You both deserve far more than I could ever give you. To my Cohort 7/11—Dominique, Tasha, Nitra, Jay, Antonio, and Sam: You are some of the smartest and most gracious people I know. Thank you for helping me navigate and complete this journey. Your support means everything. To my chair, Dr. Wang and committee Dr.'s Cowan and Ogletree: You all have been a constant source of guidance and support throughout this journey. You've encouraged me, challenged me, and helped me grow in ways I never imagined. I am so grateful that Dr. Sauers honored my request in bringing this team together. This accomplishment is ours, and I'm deeply grateful to each of you.

LIST OF TABLES	12
LIST OF FIGURES	13
CHAPTER 1 THE PROBLEM	14
Statement of the Problem	15
Purpose of the Study	16
Background	16
<i>The American Revolution</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Industrial Revolution.....</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>Globalization.....</i>	<i>25</i>
Significance of the Study	29
Organization of the Study	30
<i>Key Terms.....</i>	<i>33</i>
CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	35
The Historical Foundations of Education as an Economic Good.....	35
Conceptual Framework.....	39
<i>Education as a Product for Private Consumption</i>	<i>41</i>
<i>Education as an Investment for Private Consumption</i>	<i>45</i>
<i>Education as a Service for Public Consumption.....</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Education as an Identity for Public Consumption.....</i>	<i>56</i>
Competitive Nature between the Conceptualizations.....	59
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY	62
Data Collection	62
<i>Instruments</i>	<i>65</i>
<i>Procedures.....</i>	<i>67</i>

Introduction of Participants.....	72
Data Analysis.....	77
Trustworthiness and Rigor	80
<i>Credibility.....</i>	<i>81</i>
<i>Transferability.....</i>	<i>81</i>
<i>Confirmability.....</i>	<i>82</i>
<i>Dependability</i>	<i>82</i>
Positionality	83
CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS	86
Leader Preference for Task Execution	155
Tensions with Standardization of Education	160
Findings Summary.....	163
CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION	166
Connections to the Literature	167
<i>Tensions and competing conceptions</i>	<i>171</i>
Policy and Practical Implications for Leadership Training	174
Policy and Practical Implications for Policy Development.....	175
Limitations of the Study	176
Recommendations for Future Research	178
Concluding Remarks	181
References.....	184

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Competing Conceptualizations of Education as an Economic Good Conceptual Framework developed by Teachers College Summer Principals Academy	27
Table 2. Data Sources and Role in Analysis	54
Table 3. Types of Data and Procedures for Collection and Other Details	57
Table 4. Grid Method	59
Table 5. Participant Profiles	63
Table 6. Leader and Organization Conceptualizations.....	76
Table 7. Earle’s Conceptualization vs Earle’s Organization Conceptualization	129
Table 8. Sunni’s Conceptualization vs Sunni’s Organization Conceptualization	133
Table 9. Tara’s Conceptualization vs Tara’s Organization Conceptualization	136
Table 10. James’ Conceptualization vs James’ Organization Conceptualization	140
Table 11. Task Execution	148

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Historical Timeline	16
Figure 2. Leaders and Organizations Conceptual Distribution	75
Figure 3. Conceptual Mind Map Depicting the Relationship between the Constructs.....	125
Figure 4. Leader vs. Organization Conceptions/Earle.....	126
Figure 5. Leader vs. Organization Conceptions/Sunni.....	130
Figure 6. Leader vs. Organization Conceptions/Tara.....	134
Figure 7. Leader vs. Organization Conceptions/ James.....	137
Figure 8. Competing Conceptions Concept Map	150

CHAPTER 1 THE PROBLEM

This dissertation aims to generate a rich description that illuminates the ways in which educational leaders describe tensions and navigate those tensions that stem from misalignment between their personal and organizational conceptualizations of education as an economic good. Initially, the problem statement is introduced, synthesizing diverse views on educational services as either public or private commodities that serve as mechanisms for economic or cultural advancement. The study's guiding research question is then presented: How do experienced educational leaders, operating under the accountability provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act, articulate and navigate the dynamics that arise from misalignments between their personal conceptualizations of education as an economic good and those endorsed by their organizations, which may be shaped by broader systemic demands?

To set the context, a historical background is offered to shed light on the evolving perceptions of education, thereby providing crucial context for understanding the many ways in which educational services have been employed to achieve broader societal objectives. This historical perspective helps illustrate the shifting priorities in education, from a means of personal and intellectual development to a tool for economic and social structuring. The analysis of the discourse highlights the need for an empirical investigation into education as an economic good. The significance of this research is discussed, highlighting its potential to foster greater synergy between school leaders and governing bodies, and to influence policy making that considers the economic and cultural objectives of educational services. The chapter will conclude with definitions of key terms—including conceptualization, economic good, process conceptions, essence of the good, outcome of interest, measures, and public goals—to ensure clarity and consistency throughout the study.

Statement of the Problem

Educational institutions have traditionally been viewed as the remedy to many societal challenges (Bass, 2008). This is evidenced by the criticism they receive from various quarters: state legislators call for tangible outcomes in the form of improved test scores; employers insist that students be adequately prepared for the workforce upon graduation; communities anticipate that schools will nurture individuals who uphold congruent values; and some individuals from marginalized or intersecting backgrounds expect schools to act as agents of liberation (Bass, 2008). Education is a multidimensional construct with varied perspectives of its purpose and the construction of knowledge surrounding it. Throughout history, influential leaders wielding political, economic, and legal power have held diverse opinions regarding the conceptualization of education as an economic good.

The diversity in conceptualizations of education necessitates differences in their operational processes to meet their varied objectives. A review of historical contributions to the field of education, based on differing ideals about its purpose, indicates that perceptions of its role have varied over time. An analysis of the literature suggests that traces of this diversity are still apparent in the approaches of leaders and their organizations today.

Despite education's vital contribution to societal development and the diverse interpretations of its purpose, a substantial gap persists in our comprehension of how educational leaders and their organizations conceptualize education as an economic good. If fundamental misalignment exists in these varied knowledge constructions, understanding how individuals and institutions describe, navigate and reconcile tensions between personal and organizational conceptualizations of education as an economic good is worthy of empirical investigation. This study aims to bridge this gap.

Purpose of the Study

The objective of this study is to understand how leaders conceptualize education as an economic good, how their respective organizations conceptualize education as an economic good, and if there exists conceptual misalignment how do the leaders describe those tensions and the resolution of the tensions to ultimately carry out organizational tasks or initiatives. The research aims to generate a comprehensive description that illustrates how phenomena is experienced by experienced educational leaders that work in organizations responsible for complying with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and thus comply with accountability measure, navigate and articulate tensions from conceptual misalignment. This case's binding was selected to showcase the uniqueness of experienced educational leader's work that may face pressures to conceptualize educational effectiveness in accordance with a larger governing organization. The following question guided the research. How do experienced educational leaders, operating under the accountability provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act, articulate and navigate the dynamics that arise from potential misalignments between their personal conceptualizations of education as an economic good and those endorsed by their organizations, which may be shaped by broader systemic demands?

Background

In 1788, the Founding Fathers ratified the United States Constitution, thus becoming the cornerstone of this nation's legal system. The governing doctrine sets the framework for laws and regulations, in essence, embodies the basic standard of our morality and consequently core values (Honoré, 1993). This foundation of ethics establishes the primordial principles that guide the United States Government's actions across its branches, including the executive branch to which educators belong. Notably absent from the United States Constitution is any mention of a

public education system. The absence of such an essential pillar in society has left room for ongoing debate and interpretation regarding the conceptualization of the role and significance of public education. Including at a bare minimum the consensus for guidance on how education is conceptualized as an economic good subject to exploitation by the American economy. Despite the omission of a republican education system in the Constitution, the Founding Fathers and other prominent figures throughout history have held well-informed opinions about the conceptualization of a federal education system in American society. Their diverse perspectives have contributed to divergent goals and operational processes rooted in political or ethical dogma from different periods. Contemporary educational leaders may have inadvertently followed suit.

A quantitative study conducted by Franke, Foerstl, and Heese (2021) sought to explore the effect of goal misalignment and the distribution of metaknowledge, defined by the authors as the knowledge of who knows what, on cross-functional team politics and performance in operations and supply chain management. Researchers employed a vignette-based experimental methodology to manipulate the two independent variables: goal misalignment and metaknowledge distribution. The baseline scenario portrayed a hypothetical motorcycle manufacturing firm tasked with selecting a vendor for new engine parts. Data from 468 participants grouped in 156 sourcing teams were analyzed in a hierarchical linear regression model. The findings indicate that under goal alignment, centralized metaknowledge leads to the catalyzation of cross-functional expertise, reducing team politics and enhancing team performance. However, under goal misalignment, centralized metaknowledge significantly amplifies team politics and reduces performance (Franke and Heese, 2021). While this study provided valuable insights, the use of experimental vignettes involves artificially simplified hypothetical settings that fail to fully capture the complexity of real-life situations. Participants'

responses to vignettes might not reflect their behavior in actual situations due to the artificial nature of the scenarios. This can limit the applicability of the findings to more dynamic, real-world contexts, thereby affecting external validity.

Congruently, Gerber et. al, (2016) conducted a medical case study that described the experience of a recently diagnosed patient with advanced lung cancer who engaged in a clinical trial. The quality of the patient's care suffered significantly due to challenges within cross-functional team dynamics. The case serves as a tool for comprehending the emergence of tensions between research and clinical teams, and how these tensions ultimately influence patient care. The findings of the case highlight issues and challenges in several areas: (1) a lack of alignment in goals, (2) rivalries among teams, (3) coordination and communication problems, and (4) trust issues. The research emphasizes that while the overall objective of the clinical trial is to provide optimal care for patients, clinic and research staff harbor their own local goals and agendas, sometimes conflicting with each other. This lack of clarity makes coordination and the division of labor unclear. In this instance, the absence of clarity led to the patient not receiving a chemotherapy teaching session before the initial treatment. Task misalignment between groups was seen as inconvenient and resource-consuming, resulting in frustration towards research staff for issues related to protocol design, a matter they were not involved in. Perceptions of clinic and research teams about themselves and each other further complicated functionality. Clinical staff perceived research staff as less hardworking, leading to resentment due to differences in patient follow-up and clinic presence. These conflicting goals and misaligned expectations diminished clinic efficiency, impacting the quality and safety of care.

Gerber et al.'s study has enhanced our understanding of the dynamics of goal alignment. However, the small sample size and context-specific limitations raise questions about the

applicability of their findings to educational leadership. This dissertation aims to build on their work by exploring how educational leaders describe the tensions they experience due to conceptual misalignment. Additionally, the study will include a larger sample size, increasing the generalizability of the findings and contributing valuable insights to the field of education.

Contextual parallels can be drawn from these two studies and my proposed study. Organizations at large, such as districts or other governing agencies, and the leadership at the local school may operate as *de facto* cross-functional teams. Similar to the teams in the study, each party likely shares the broad overarching goal of educating children. However, the specific processes, measures, outcomes, core principles, and public objectives outlined in the conceptual framework may differ between the leader and the organization. A closer look at how each participant conceptualizes that goal may reveal differences. These cases demonstrate that relationship complications can emerge due to competing priority goals and operational processes, potentially leading to frustrations. These tensions could stem from fundamental differences in how the organization and the school-based leader view education as an economic good while working together to accomplish tasks. This highlights a potential issue in the practice of educational leadership.

Labaree (1997) highlighted the fundamental differences in our perceptions of education, offering an insightful perspective on the debate surrounding school improvement. He argues that the crux of the issue lies in values—what kind of schools we desire—and the interests that support these educational values, rather than merely launching more initiatives to determine what works. Labaree emphasizes the importance of public debate on the desirability of different social outcomes of schooling. Essentially, Labaree believes we must reflect on what we hope society will become versus its current state, balancing political ideals with economic realities. According

to Labaree, the problem is not a lack of knowledge on how to improve schools, but rather disagreements about the goals schools should pursue (Labaree, 1997).

This study seeks to contribute to the field by exploring the diversity in how we construct our understanding of the purposes of education. Existing literature primarily focuses on the concept of education as a public or private good, supporting the basic premises of this study. However, this research intends to place the leader as a practitioner within this phenomenon, a perspective that is underrepresented in current literature. It will delve into how these dynamics and tensions manifest specifically under ESSA accountability measures, an area with limited exploration on how leaders navigate and implement policies successfully.

The theoretical framework, "The Competing Conceptualizations of Education as an Economic Good," will be utilized to address gaps in the literature by providing a unique perspective. It distinguishes between two forms of public good—education as a service and education as an identity—and differentiates between two forms of private good—education as a product and education as an investment. A perspective that is also underrepresented in extant literature.

Historical Discourse

Analyzing the discourse from influential leaders can provide valuable insights into the patterns of power, thus influence, and its impact on the field of education (van Dijk, 1993). According to Van Dijk (1993), researchers must delve into the cognitive interface of modes, including knowledge, attitudes, ideologies, and other social constructs, to genuinely understand sociological phenomena, such as the one this study aims to shed light on (van Dijk, 1993). Therefore, this section will provide a concise overview of the public discourse among prominent figures throughout American and some aboard history. The aim of analyzing discourse is to

establish a background that sheds light on the evolution of conceptualizations of education as an economic good. Through the examination of the statements and writings of prominent figures to gain insights into their perspectives on the philosophical conceptualizations of education as an economic good and how those influences contribute to our de facto perceptions of functionality of K-12 schools.

The American Revolution

While there is no mention of public education in the U.S. Constitution, the Founding Fathers extensively expressed their conceptualizations for the role of public education in the Constitutions of their respective states as evidenced by their writings in public-interest pamphlets, and in letters to their counterparts. James Madison wrote in an 1822 letter to William T. Berry, “Learned Institutions ought to be favorite objects with every free people. They throw that light over the public mind which is the best security against crafty & dangerous encroachments on the public liberty” (Madison, 1822 National Archives). Madison further asserts that educated individuals would multiply in number, and with their enhanced capacity, they could elect from among themselves a fair representation of public officials for various roles, particularly those responsible for crafting laws. Madison conceptualized education as a valuable tool that could safeguard liberated individuals against potential threats to their freedom.

In the Massachusetts Constitution, John Adams emphasized the importance of generously spreading education among the population (Mass. Const. chap. V § 2). To achieve this, Adams firmly believed that it became the responsibility of legislatures and magistrates to foster the advancement of literature and the sciences in public schools and grammar schools across the towns (Mass. Const. chap. V § 2). Furthermore, he stressed the significance of endorsing and instilling principles of humanity in society (Mass. Const. chap. V § 2). Adams conceptualized

education as an identity that empowers individuals to refine culture and establish values as they engage with knowledge and ideas.

Thomas Jefferson held a strong belief that education formed the very bedrock of democracy (Jewett, 2008). He emphasized the necessity of economic liberty to bolster political freedom (Jewett, 2008). According to his vision, as these two pillars advanced together, the natural outcome would be cultivating cultural refinement within society (Jewett, 2008).

In January of 1787, Dr. Benjamin Rush, a renowned philanthropist, physician, and patriot, penned an article titled "Address to the People of the United States." In this article, Rush candidly discussed the shortcomings of the young nation at that time. His vision was to establish a government that would allocate substantial funds to create a federal school system to spread knowledge and extend government principles to every corner of the United States. He emphasized the importance of reaching every state, city, county, village, and township in the union. Rush wrote, "It remains yet to establish and perfect our new forms of government; and to prepare the principles, morals, and manners of our citizens, for these forms of government, after they are established and brought to perfection" (Rush, 1786, p.3).

Despite the lack of public education legislation in the U.S. Constitution, the Founding Fathers and other prominent figures engaged in rich discourse that revealed how they conceptualized the function of education. Thematic coding of their writings reveals a focus on liberty, democracy, and cultural refinement. The role of hegemony is intriguing because it appears that the concept of a public education system or republican education was deliberately omitted from the Constitution due to the prevailing ideology at the time of statehood establishment. The states emerged from under the yoke of British tyranny, which might have influenced the decision to exclude any mention of a mandated governmental encroachment, even

regarding education. The Founding Fathers, though unified in the belief that an educated populace could liberate economically, politically, and socio-culturally, varied in their means of achieving their respective visions.

From 1795 to 1797, the Duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, a French educator, social reformer, and member of a noble French family, spent thirty months in America. He spent time exploring the regions from Pennsylvania to New England (Williams, 2004). His observations led him to the conclusion that the United States was a dynamic country constantly changing in terms of its population, establishments, prices, and commerce. at one point would not necessarily hold true after six months (Williams, 2004).

Industrial Revolution

During the course of the American Industrial Revolution, the nation's focus shifted toward economic growth, which the populace considered crucial for national security (Williams, 2004). Alexander Hamilton's earlier efforts laid the groundwork for the eventual emergence of the Industrial Revolution. Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay authored The Federalist Papers under the pen name Publius (Starling, 2022). In this collection of 85 essays, Publius argued that to safeguard liberty and ensure prosperity, the economy must flourish. This perspective viewed the government's responsibility as a vital force in strengthening the nation.

Numerous studies over the decades have emphasized the vital role of human capital in economic development (Beckner, 1964; Wiess, 1975; Rosen, 1983; Schultz, 1961). Human capital refers to the valuable skills and knowledge embodied by individuals or the labor force, enabling them to generate earnings in the labor or stock market (Beckner, 1964; Goldin, 2016; Rosen, 1983). These skills and knowledge are embedded in the population through formal education and job training. The Industrial Revolution was marked by a transition from agrarian

to industrial jobs that necessitated a significant adaptation, making education essential for coping with radical changes in the workforce (Becker, Hornung, & Woessmann, 2011).

Throughout this period, the economy heavily relied on highly regimented jobs (Hopkins, 1982). During the initial phase of industrialization, there prevailed a conventional belief that notable technological advancements played a pivotal role. These advancements, however, were perceived to lead to a decline in required skill levels in the workforce, thereby resulting in a reduced emphasis on the necessity for education. (Acemoglu, 2002; Becker, Hornung, & Woessmann, 2011). In 2022, Raphaël Franck and Oded Galor conducted research using a mixed methods methodology to examine various factors, including observable exogenous confounding geographical and institutional characteristics to determine the relationship between industrialization and human capital formation in France during the time of the Steamboat invention (Franck & Galor, 2022). In contrast to the traditional belief that early industrialization primarily led to the deskilling of the workforce, the Industrial Revolution facilitated human capital formation, resulting in significant improvements in literacy rates and educational achievements. However, this progress was predominantly limited to basic literacy and numeracy skills and did not result in a notable increase in the proportion of students attending middle and high schools in the population.

Researchers Sascha O. Becker, Erik Hornung, and Ludger Woessmann conducted a similar study using a quantitative approach, examining 334 counties in Prussia (now part of Germany and Poland) from the pre-industrial period of 1816 to two industrial phases in 1849 and 1882. Employing pre-industrial education as an instrumental variable for later education, they discovered a significant association between basic education and industrialization during both phases of the Industrial Revolution. While these studies were focused on Europe, their findings

may also have relevant implications for American contexts.

Throughout history, American Presidents have consistently viewed education as a crucial asset for the economy (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2016). Recognizing the interconnection between the health of the economy and the American workforce, the business industry has shown significant concern in the education sector. (Goldberg, Traiman, Molnar, & Stevens, 2001). This mutual understanding highlights the pivotal role education plays in fostering economic growth, prosperity, and global competitiveness (Goldberg, Traiman, Molnar, & Stevens, 2001). During this time frame education was conceptualized as a product with efficiency as a goal.

Globalization

In 1957, the Soviet Union launched the world's first artificial satellite, Sputnik. The launch marked a significant milestone in space exploration and the beginning of the Space Age. Sputnik was equipped with radio transmitters, and its successful launch and orbit around the Earth had a profound impact on global politics, the space race, and scientific research. This, consequently, led to increased emphasis on science education and the advancement of space programs in various countries, particularly in the United States. Soon after the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was enacted by the 89th United States Congress and signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on April 11, 1965, as a significant component of his "War on Poverty" initiative. The purpose of the act was to provide all children with significant opportunities to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education and close achievement gaps (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965). According to ESEA (1965), this would lead to industry-recognized credentials that meet the quality criteria established by the State under section 123(a) of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (29 U.S.C. 3102). Shortly

before the enactment of the ESEA in 1965, the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) was passed in 1958. The NDEA aimed to allocate funds for the improvement of math and science education, prompted by the national defense crisis triggered by the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik (Casalaspì, 2017).

Goldberg, Traiman, Molnar, and Stevens (2001) argue that globalization is intricately linked to the economy. The United States' worldwide share of production for both goods and services has decreased by half since the conclusion of World War II, despite the gross domestic product (GDP) quadrupling since the 1950s. The authors attribute this trend to the globalization of finance, capital, technology, and labor, which enables products to be designed in one country, manufactured in another, and distributed anywhere within a single day.

In this context, school standards play a vital role in cultivating the workforce by equipping individuals with essential skills and knowledge (Beckner, 1964). A well-educated and skilled workforce is essential to adapt to the challenges and opportunities brought about by globalization, ensuring the nation's continued economic growth and competitiveness. This landmark act stands as one of the most comprehensive and influential pieces of federal legislation ever passed by the United States Congress, having a profound impact on the education landscape. Over time, the ESEA has undergone further emphasis and reinvention to adapt to changing educational needs and priorities.

In 1983, a pivotal report called "A Nation at Risk" was jointly released by President Ronald Reagan, along with representatives from the private sector, government, and education sector. This landmark publication sought to once again address the challenges faced by the nation (Wang, 2020). The goal was to use schools to design a competitive workforce.

The idea of using schools to design a workforce that suits the needs of a nation is a topic

that has been discussed previously in American discourse, as demonstrated in the discourse in this paper. In more contemporary times, there has been a stronger sense of hegemony through centralized government structures. According to Wang (2020), government intervention in education policy has the potential to make the subject matter politicized.

National efforts to influence the conceptualization of education as an economic good can be tied to funding. The United States Department of Education was founded in 1980 with a \$68 billion budget (United States Department of Education). The department's mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access (United States Department of Education). The National Science Foundation, another federal education governing entity, was established by Congress in 1950 to promote the progress of science in order to advance the national health, prosperity and welfare of the American people (National Science Foundation). Another goal of the NSF is to secure national defense and promote the progress of science to provide advancements for the American people (National Science Foundation). NSF director, Sethuraman Panchanathan, stated "America's economic and national security depend on our ability to invest heavily in the technologies of today while making the discoveries that are the foundation for the technologies of tomorrow (National Science Foundation)."

Throughout history, educational services have served as instruments for societal advancement, whose course was shaped by political leaders, industry, global influences, and pivotal events. From the inception of the U.S. Constitution, through the transformative Industrial Revolution, to the globalized modern era, each epoch has left its mark on educational ideologies. By exploring the legacy of these diverse perspectives, this introductory section aimed to contextualize theoretical assertions about education as an economic good, using that scope of

knowledge to frame the research question.

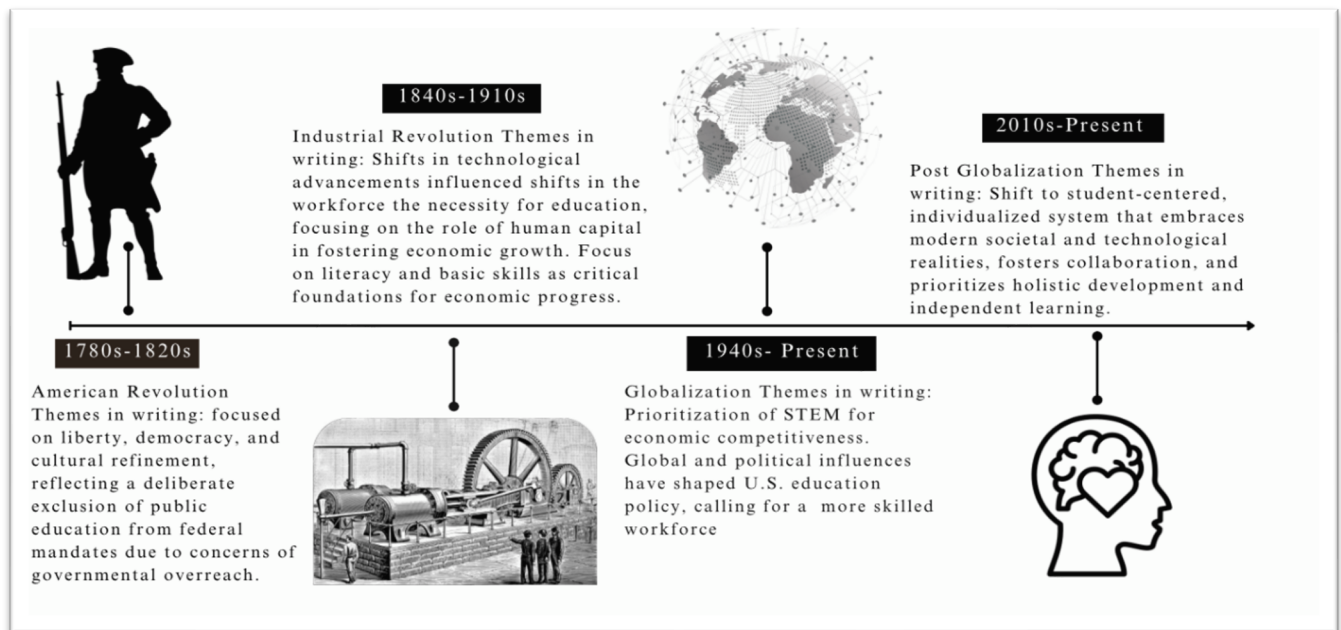
Post Globalization

In recent literature, authors argue that traditional education reform has been largely ineffective in equipping students to improve the world (Fitzgerald & Laurian-Fitzgerald, 2020). They assert that education systems must undergo transformative change, led by educators, to embrace a more individualized and differentiated approach that recognizes the unique potential of each student. Measures of success, they argue, should be tailored to reflect this individuality (Fitzgerald & Laurian-Fitzgerald, 2020). The authors critique education systems rooted in Industrial Revolution-era frameworks, deeming them unsuitable for addressing the social, technological, and informational complexities of the modern world. They emphasize the profound impact of artificial intelligence on society and advocate for a student-centered approach to prepare learners for the future. Proposed strategies include eliminating standardized exams, fostering co-development of curricula by students and teachers, forming community partnerships, and empowering both educators and learners. Such reforms aim to shift the role of educators from mere knowledge transmitters to advisors and facilitators of learning (Fitzgerald & Laurian-Fitzgerald, 2020). A critical objective of this reimagined education system is to cultivate independent learners. This vision highlights the importance of building positive relationships among students and between students and teachers, while addressing the emotional, intellectual, physical, and social needs of all students. This represents a shift away from focusing solely on economic outputs to more cultural outputs (Fitzgerald & Laurian-Fitzgerald, 2020). As demonstrated in Figure 1, a timeline was created to summarize the evolution of thought construction over time. The timeline highlights key historical eras and their influence on the evolving conceptualizations of education as an economic good. It traces the interplay between

major societal events and shifts in educational thought, illustrating how specific moments in history propelled certain conceptions—such as education as a product, investment, service, or identity—into prominence. By situating these conceptualizations within broader political, economic, and cultural contexts, the timeline reveals how dominant societal priorities shaped the purposes, processes, and perceived value of education over time.

Figure 1

Historical Timeline of the evolution of thought construction surrounding the conceptualization of Education as an Economic Good



Significance of the Study

Investigating the tensions and resolutions of those tensions stemming from conceptual misalignment between education leaders and organizations on education's economic value offers substantial implications for practice and policy. This research aims to unveil insights that could inform policy formation, enrich leadership development programs, and refine educational strategies. By examining the nature of conceptual misalignment, the study aspires to enhance collaboration between educational leaders and their institutions, thereby enhancing synergy and

streamlining the execution of educational objectives. The methodology is crafted to unearth themes that augment the existing theoretical framework, enriching our understanding of educational leadership within the economic context and filling a notable void in scholarly discourse.

Future research could extend this inquiry to a national scale, examining educational leadership and experiences against the backdrop of this theoretical framework to bridge daily activities and the broader objectives outlined by the U.S. Department of Education.

Alternatively, subsequent studies might focus on leadership in specialized settings such as community schools or arts-themed schools, where there may be a more natural alignment between leaders' and stakeholders' views on education's economic aspects. Exploring this alignment offers fascinating insights into how it could enhance organizational efficacy and advance educational missions.

Organization of the Study

The study's first chapter will serve as an introduction to the subject matter, providing an overview of the research topic. In Chapter two, a comprehensive review of the existing literature will be presented. Chapter three will delve into the methodology employed for conducting the study. Chapter four will be dedicated to showcasing and analyzing the results obtained from the research. Finally, Chapter five will be a detailed discussion of the findings and their implications for the broader context.

The case study intends to answer the following question: How do experienced educational leaders, operating under the accountability provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act, articulate and navigate the dynamics that arise from potential misalignments between their personal conceptualizations of education as an economic good and those endorsed by their

organizations, which may be shaped by broader systemic demands? The four sub-queries guiding the research aim to describe: (1) how leaders personally conceptualize education as an economic good, (2) how their affiliated organizations conceptualize education as an economic good, (3) how leaders articulate tensions stemming from concurrent misalignments, and (4) how leaders describe the resolution of these tensions and the subsequent execution of organizational goals. The research's focus is to construct a rich description that illustrates how experienced educational leaders who work in organizations responsible for complying with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and thus are measured by systems of accountability, navigate and articulate tensions from conceptual misalignment.

Criterion and theory-based sampling will be employed to purposively select four school leaders to participate in the study. I intend to collect data through (a) semi-structured interviews (b) document analysis and (c) reflective journaling. The data yielded will be analyzed in a twofold approach employing a typological approach as described by Hatch to address how leaders and their organizations conceptualize education as economic good, followed by multiple iterations of coding to extend the existing theory in order to address how leaders articulate tensions and resolution of those tensions to subsequently carry out task and contribute to theoretical framework. Potential limitations of the study include a lack of generalizability and asserting as truth that leaders act in ways that are rooted in a pursuit of larger goals and the influence of politics and power presents some form of friction between leaders and their organization as a result of misalignment.

The review of extant literature was driven by the postulations presented in the theoretical framework, which are consistent in the belief that consumption of educational services provides benefits. However, the ways we come to understand the benefits demonstrates divergence in the

way we conceptualize education as an economic good. Robinson (2001) highlights the starkness of the conceptual divide, citing that some philosophers argue that education should never be regarded in instrumental terms. Asserting that the purpose of education should be purely intrinsic and detached from economic considerations. I interpreted this conceptualization of education as having a social or cultural benefit. However, Robinson contends that this perspective contradicts students' expectations and the desired return on their educational investments (Robinson, 2001). I interpreted this conceptualization as education having an individual benefit rooted in potential for prosperity.

The Teacher's College Columbia University Competing Conceptualizations of Education as an Economic Good is a theoretical framework that posits four competing conceptualizations of education. Education as a product for private consumption, education as investment for privation consumption, education as service for public consumption and education as an identity for public consumption. This conceptual framework implies that leaders with different conceptualizations are driven by different goals and thus employ different operational processes and measures to ensure the execution of their goals. These divergent ways of knowing and operating do not appear to be universally adopted, as mentioned at the onset of this chapter, there is not mention of this in the Constitution and thus no moral, ethical or legal foundation calling for a unification in understanding. As demonstrated in the historical overview in this chapter, divergence in understanding has emerged out of a need to shift the role education plays in handling societal changes or individual trajectories. The residuals of these shifts may still linger in our psyches, prompting a need for an empirical investigation that seeks to describe (1) how leaders conceptualize education as an economic good, (2) how organizations conceptualization education as an economic good, and (3) how leaders articulate the tensions they face as a result

of conceptual misalignment, and (4) how do leaders articulate the resolution of those tensions to ultimately.

Key Terms

Conceptualization-

The process through which leaders interpret, understand and make meaning of the diverse nature of education as an economic good.

Economic Good-

The commodification of educational services. This signifies that education can be traded for a price and provides economic or cultural benefits to its consumers, societally or individually. The theoretical framework presented by The Teachers College, titled "Competing Conceptualizations of Education as an Economic Good," introduces four distinct perspectives: education as a product, education as an investment, education as a service, and education as an identity. To establish the intellectual framework for each conceptualization and attribute meaningful definitions, key constructs are employed. These include process conceptions, the essences of the good, individual outcomes of interest, measures, and the public goals associated with education as an economic good.

Process Conceptions-

The methods and actions that can be employed to achieve the intended educational outcomes.

Essence of the Good-

The immediate value or core benefit derived from educational services when they are distilled to their fundamental purpose.

Outcome of Interest-

The specific results or benefits individuals are expected to gain from consuming educational

services.

Measures-

The tools or metrics used to externally validate the effectiveness and quality of educational services.

Public Goals-

The overarching societal purposes and objectives that education is intended to fulfill.

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter introduces the conceptual framework and connects its postulations to the proposed study. It provides a comprehensive examination of existing literature, organized thematically in alignment with the propositions outlined in the framework. The chapter synthesizes the current body of literature, critically evaluates it, and identifies gaps that warrant further investigation. This study seeks to explore how experienced educational leaders conceptualize education as an economic good, how their respective organizations conceptualize it, and whether conceptual misalignments exist. To address these objectives, each section focuses on a specific conceptualization outlined in the theoretical framework, supported by a comprehensive review of relevant literature. Additionally, the study investigates how leaders describe and navigate these tensions to effectively implement organizational tasks or initiatives. The chapter concludes with an examination of research suggesting competition within the framework and its conceptualizations, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of how leaders and their organizations conceptualize education as an economic good.

The Historical Foundations of Education as an Economic Good

Throughout centuries, schools have played a crucial role as vital institutions, situated at the intersection of community and the workforce. For more than 150 years, Americans have transformed their cultural concerns and aspirations into fervent calls for changes in education, highlighting its significance in addressing societal needs (Tyack and Cuban, 1995). Schools impart core competencies to the population, equip the workforce with essential skills, and shape beliefs and attitudes. In doing so, these institutions have significantly contributed to the formation of societal values (Ehman, 1980; Husu & Tirri, 2007). A concise review of influential events in American history that have shaped identity will be portrayed to emphasize the

interconnected relationship between schools and society as a whole.

In 1814, Thomas Jefferson expressed his thoughts on education, writing “In the first place we must ascertain with precision the object of our institution, by taking a survey of the general field of science and marking out the portion we mean to occupy at first, and the ultimate extension of our views beyond that, should we be enabled to render it in the end as comprehensive as we would wish” (National Archives, 2010). Jefferson emphasized the importance of defining the objectives of education by surveying the vast realm of knowledge and determining the specific labor market and scientific areas to be initially focused on, with the potential for expansion in the future. This is one of the earliest conceptualizations of education as an economic good in American History. This perspective is captured in his proposition for a two-track educational system, distinguishing between the laboring class and the learned class (National Archives, 2010). Jefferson envisioned a system where at the commencement of elementary school, there would be a division of the education received based on track. Those destined for the labor track would engage in the business of agriculture or handicapped apprenticeships while the students on the learned track would go on to pursue the sciences in general school and subsequently professional school (National Archives, 2011). Jefferson went on to write “I have long entertained the hope that this our native state would take up the subject of education, and make an establishment, either with or without incorporation into that of William & Mary, where every branch of science, deemed useful at this day, and in our country, should be taught in its highest degree.” (National Archives, 2010) This demonstrates his belief in the necessity of establishing an education system that could meet the evolving needs of society.

Then during the 1840s to 1860s, the agriculture industry experienced a significant decline, while the manufacturing industry witnessed a notable rise. According to Hirschman and

Mogford over the span of a few decades, the United States was transformed from a predominately rural agrarian society to an industrial economy centered in large metropolitan cities (Hirschman and Mogford, 2009). During the period from 1880 to 1920, employment in the manufacturing sector experienced a substantial four-fold increase, with the number of workers rising from 2.5 million to 10 million (Hirschman and Mogford, 2009) This period was known as the American Industrial Revolution, and it brought about a significant transformation of the labor force. In response to this shift, employers turned to schools to provide a skilled workforce. In the early twentieth century, educational leaders joined forces with business and professional elites in an effort to reshape the landscape of school politics. Their objective was twofold: to expand the ranks of prosperous and well-educated individuals within society and to establish a policy making framework inspired by the organizational structure of business corporations (Tyack and Cuban, 1995; Gelberg, 2007). Business leaders criticized the schools, asserting that schools failed to adequately prepare students for the demands of the newly industrialized economy (Gelberg, 2007). This highlights the influential role that education has played in shaping and preparing the workforce to meet the evolving needs of industries. It also highlights the role of politics and influence on the education industry by players outside of the field.

Decades later in 1945, the passing of the GI Bill provided working-class men with an opportunity to achieve upward mobility, emphasizing the perceived role of education in enabling individuals to climb the socioeconomic ladder. Then in 1954, the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* declared segregated schools as inherently unequal and mandated their abolition. This ruling highlighted the pivotal role of educational institutions as frontline workers in addressing and eliminating one of the nation's most pervasive problems. In 1983 a *Nation at Risk* was published, calling for reform in public education to meet the needs for

national security. The report highlighted various issues and challenges facing the education system, including inadequate academic standards, low student achievement levels, high dropout rates, and international competitiveness. It argued that the declining state of education posed a risk to the nation's economic prosperity, national security, and overall social well-being. The report emphasized the role schools play in meeting the educational needs required for national security.

The brief overview of shifts in the American education system demonstrates the role of educational institutions and how they may evolve in response to changes in societal priorities. This dynamic provides an opportunity to generate empirical research that aims to describe How do educational leaders articulate conflict and resolution arising from the tension between their personal conceptualizations of education as an economic good and that of their organization, which is potentially influenced by the broader demands of the educational system?

This thematic literature review seeks to explore relevant studies, philosophical literature, and theories that provide insights into how contributors to the field of educational leadership conceptualize education as an economic good. The Teachers College Columbia University *Competing Conceptualizations of Education as an Economic Good* identifies four distinct conceptualizations of education within its conceptual framework: (1) Education as a product or good for private consumption; (2) Education as an investment a good for private consumption; (3) Education as a service a good for public consumption; (4) Education as an identity a good for public consumption. I intend to utilize this framework as the foundation for my literature review and the intellectual structure for my research. By seeking to describe the different conceptualizations within this framework, my aim is to expand the discussion surrounding the objectives of educational institutions, add a layer of cognition as leaders and their organizations

aim to synergize in order to prioritize and execute tasks. This endeavor will allow for a deeper understanding of the diverse viewpoints regarding the economic and societal impacts of education and understanding of perspectives of each conceptualization.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptualization of education as an economic good refers to viewing education primarily through an economic lens, where its value is assessed in terms of its potential economic or cultural returns and benefits. The focus is often on the acquisition of skills and knowledge that are directly applicable in the labor market, aligning education with workforce needs and economic demands. This perspective emphasizes the economic value and outcomes of education, both for individuals and society.

This conceptual framework serves as the intellectual structure for the study, providing guidance on the scrutiny of the phenomena, collection of data, analysis of data and the interpretation of the findings. It outlines my expectations for observing the behaviors and inspecting the beliefs of leaders and organizations based on their respective conceptualizations. The inherent distinctiveness of each conceptualization, aligned with the differences in beliefs, has been used as a justification for the design of my research question. The framework suggests conditions for potential tensions due to misalignment, anticipating that leaders and organizations aim to make decisions aligned with their respective conceptualizations. It asserts that diverse conceptualizations, driven by different public goals, lead to variations in processes, the nature of the good, outcomes, and measures, which may result in tensions due to disparate operational approaches.

This framework suggests that there are four distinct ways of conceptualizing education as an economic good: education as a product, an investment, a service, and an identity. Each

conception carries a unique perspective on the process of education, the nature of the good, the desired outcomes, the methods of measurement, and the public goals it aims to achieve.

Table 1

Competing Conceptualizations of Education as an Economic Good Conceptual Framework developed by Teachers College Summer Principals Academy

	Conceptualization 1 Education as a Product (private good)	Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment (private good)	Conceptualization 3 Education as a Service (public good)	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity (public good)
Process conceptions (Activate Outcomes)	Production	Opportunity	Delivery	Creation
The essence of the good (immediate value)	Can be stockpiled	Currency/ Value Delayed	Immediately Consumed	Morally sanctioned
Outcome of interest (individual)	Residual Knowledge	Improved life Chances	Learning experiences	Quality of Life
Measures (external validity)	Grades, test scores	Access to jobs, colleges	Civic engagement	Culture, values
Public Goals	Efficiency	Security	Equity	Liberty

The conceptual framework forms the foundation of this study and the accompanying literature review. Notably, there is a lack of published literature within the past five years that employs this framework, highlighting the importance of this proposed study and its potential to

address a significant gap in the field. According to the model, leaders who conceptualize education as a product for private consumption primarily focus on the public goal of efficiency. The underlying belief is that the desired outcome of education is the acquisition and retention of knowledge by the individual who consumes education. Leaders who conceptualize education as an investment for private consumption are primarily driven by the public goal of security. The underlying belief is that the intended outcome of education is to improve individuals' life chances, particularly their access to better job opportunities and higher education. Leaders who conceptualize education as a service for public consumption are primarily driven by the public goal of equity. The underlying belief is that the ultimate objective of education is to provide inclusive and enriching learning experiences for the public as a whole, equipping the populace with the skill sets to engage civically in a democracy. Leaders who conceptualize education as an identity for public consumption are primarily motivated by the public goal of liberty. The underlying belief is that a liberated society is one that has the power to act, think, do, and change without restrictions.

Education as a Product for Private Consumption

According to *The Competing Conceptions of Education as an Economic Good Framework* (Teachers College Columbia University, 2006), leaders who conceptualize education as a product for private consumption primarily focus on the public goal of efficiency. The underlying theory is that the desired outcome of education is the acquisition and retention of knowledge by the individual. This knowledge is then measured and assessed through grades and test scores, serving as indicators of the knowledge retained. To achieve the intended outcome, a production line-inspired process is employed, treating education as a systematic and standardized procedure. Those adhering to this philosophy acknowledge the importance of having a repertoire

of effective educational mechanisms and strategies that can be implemented to facilitate learning. The emphasis is placed on optimizing the efficiency of the educational system to ensure students' acquisition and retention of knowledge. Education can be broken down into 'inputs' and 'outputs' and 'production functions' (Grace 1989).

In 1911, the father of Scientific Management Frederick Taylor, wrote the book *The Principles of Scientific Management*. Taylor aimed to discover a singular optimal approach for each task, standardizing both work methods and tools with the aim of enhancing productivity. Taylor was an American manufacturer who later became a consultant during the Industrial Revolution. His background holds significance as it shapes his perspective and priorities. His *Principles of Scientific Management* placed a strong emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness achieved through impersonal authority. He emphasized that administrators must have a clear understanding of their expectations from subordinates and ensure that they perform their duties efficiently and effectively.

Sir Ken Robinson argues that remnants of this efficiency-focused model are still evident in our current approach to educating children (Robinson, 2001). Robinson draws a comparison between our education system and a factory, where students are treated as inputs and are inundated with a stockpile of the curriculum. The emphasis lies in measuring the outputs or the residual knowledge that remains after the programming. According to Robinson, (2001) this style of education was advantageous during the peak of the industrial revolution when schools needed to prepare students for factory roles. Sir Robinson stated that the education system, as we know it, emerged during the industrial age to prepare students to occupy roles in maximizing a country's capacity to generate wealth (Robinson, 2001). Approaching education as a product was the most efficient and effective for that time period. During that period, educational leaders such

as Snedden, Cubberley, Thorndike, and Spaulding were outspoken supporters of educational reforms and structures that resembled factory-like, capitalist production systems (Au, 2011). Snedden was an educator who promoted social efficiency and vocational education, Cubberley was an educational leader who promoted centralized governing bodies of school systems, and Thorndike was a psychologist who studied stimulus and response contributing to the field that behaviors could be shaped by stimulus and response and repetition. These ideals from influential figures worked in harmony to establish the social efficiency movement. Kliebard posits that the operating and success criteria of schools, which take order from the management industry, has had long lasting impacts on the way the United States think about curriculum (Kliebard, 1979). Kim in 2018 would posit that education reform movements are more than school accountability issues, but also an ontological issue which is saturated with politics. He argues that practices stemming from a culture of high-stakes testing are closely linked to principles of quality control and management, which are foundational to the social efficiency movement. This connection is further supported by the Competing Conceptualizations of Education as an Economic Good Framework, where the measures in conceptualization 1 are grades and test scores and the public goal is efficiency.

In the post-World War II era, Bloom conducted extensive research on student achievements and shortcomings (Doughty, 2006). The changing economy necessitated a demand for a highly educated workforce. He discovered that the disparity between high-performing individuals and those who struggled was not primarily due to good work habits, innate intelligence, or educational background. Instead, it predominantly stemmed from unequal problem-solving skills, which can be imparted onto students by their teachers.

In 1956, Benjamin Bloom and a team of collaborators introduced a framework that

hierarchically organized educational goals (Doughty, 2006.) When reflecting on the decades of research Bloom concluded “What any person in the world could learn almost all persons could learn with appropriate prior and current conditions” (Bloom, 1985, p.4). Bloom goes on to argue that 95% of students are very similar in their measured achievement, learning ability, rate of learning, and motivation for learning when learning conditions are favorable (Bloom, 1985). Bloom employs this perspective as a foundation for the concept of mastery learning. According to this theory, mastery learning adopts a scientific approach to education, whereby the level of learning achievement is measured by residual knowledge. It quantifies this achievement by stating that, under mastery learning, approximately 85% of students taught conventionally will attain mastery-level performance (Bloom, 1985). This strategy embodies the qualities associated with conceptualizing education as a product. Bloom’s Taxonomy has shaped educator practice significantly, and revised versions are still commonly referenced today. Doughty concludes that Bloom’s model has led to the development of a curriculum that is organized into distinct and manageable modules, which can be sequentially presented to students. At the completion of each unit of instruction, specific and measurable learning outcomes are established, followed by assessments to gauge student readiness for the subsequent stage. This approach yields empirical measurements of student success in terms of their achieved learning outcomes. Doughty argues that stockpiling education into rigid templates goes against the ideology that schools should aim to cultivate students as effective communicators, socially conscious individuals, culturally literate beings, scientifically and technologically knowledgeable individuals, and politically responsible citizens. Bloom's contributions to the field of education embodies the conceptualization of education as a private good.

Au argues the current era of high stakes testing in public education in the U.S. is

reviving the fundamental principles of scientific management (Au, 2011). This resurgence is leading to a shift in classroom practices, with a growing emphasis on standardized, high stakes testing and scripted curriculum. A 1989 qualitative study conducted by Gerald Grace in New Zealand examined the educational ideologies of the governing institutions. The author explored their nation's conceptualization of education. The study examined whether education was regarded as a private commodity or a public good driven by the public goal of service. A key finding relevant in the American setting is about the role of the government. The author contends that perceiving education as a commodity rather than a public good carries significant implications, particularly regarding our perspective of the government's role in education, because of the education industry's proximity to equity in the private costs and benefits. (Grace, 1989).

Education as an Investment for Private Consumption

According to the Competing Conceptions of Education as an Economic Good Framework, leaders who conceptualize education as an investment for private consumption are primarily driven by the public goal of security. The underlying theory is that the intended outcome of education is to improve individuals' life chances, particularly their access to better job opportunities and higher education. To activate this desired outcome, leaders focus on providing individuals with access to opportunities that can enhance their prospects. They recognize that the value of education as an investment is not immediate, but rather it is accrued over time, like any long-term investment. In this philosophy, the emphasis is placed on equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills, and credentials that can open doors to higher education and lucrative careers. The measure of success lies in the individual's ability to capitalize on these opportunities and secure a brighter future (Holzer, 2012). According to

Holzer, (2021) in-depth research conducted by economists have concluded that education and job training programs that are targeted towards well-paying business sectors tend to raise participant earnings (Holzer, 2021). By viewing education as an investment for private consumption, leaders strive to create a secure and promising path for individuals, ensuring that their educational journey leads to tangible benefits and improved life chances. Over the course of decades, numerous studies have been conducted to examine the empirical outcomes of investment in education (Hanushek, 1996; Jorgenson& Fraudmeni, 1992; Becker 1964, Schultz, 1972; Mincer,1984).

Papanikos 2022, wrote that an ideal democracy requires education and virtue. He called it pedagogy. Papanikos argued that to achieve an ideal democracy equity must be discriminated against. Additionally, an ideal society should discriminate according to levels of education obtained and the acquisition of material wealth. He went on to conclude that if democracy is ideal, then each citizen has the same opportunity to be more educated and wealthier (Papanikos, 2022). Papanikos' contributions emphasize the idea that this conceptualization of education discriminates based on an individual's level of consumption signaling the belief that education is a private good. His ideals also suggested that this conceptualization is activated by opportunity. This supports the postulations presented in the conceptual framework, under education as an investment.

In the American setting in 1962 American economist Gary Beckner found that providing resources to people can influence the real income of those people and the productivity of an organization, he called this phenomenon human capital (Beckner, 1964). This concept gained notoriety through further empirical research, thus the Human Capital Theory emerged. This theory postulates that education can be conceptualized as a product for public and private

consumption. When the product is consumed there may be positive implications for the individuals that consume it and the society that consumes it. As a private good or one that is consumed by an individual, education has the propensity to increase access to better-paying careers. Access to better paying careers increases access to access to higher-quality healthcare (Beckner, 1964). As a public good, education has the ability to foster an ideal labor market, with the capacity to innovate and reduce poverty (Holden & Biddle, 2017).

American economist, Andrew Weiss, defined Human Capital as the collection of productive skills embodied in a person that can be used to generate earnings in the labor market and to augment household consumption options (Weiss, 1975). Rosen defined the construct as the productive capacities of human beings as income-producing agents in the economy (Rosen, 1983). Golden (2016) defined it as the stock of skills that the labor force possesses. By investing in themselves, people can enlarge the choices available to them. It is one way to enhance their welfare (Schultz, 1961). According to Shultz, one way to make this investment is through formalized organized elementary, secondary, and higher education levels. As a public investment, consumed by society at large, research suggests the benefits can be multitudinous. Including nationwide economic growth through increased productivity, social stability, and healthier lifestyles (Maringe, 2015).

A nation's wealth, specifically the monetary value of goods and services produced within a given period, is measured by its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita. Analysis of data from the World Bank reveals a positive correlation between education expenditures per full-time equivalent (FTE) student at the elementary/secondary and postsecondary levels and GDP (OECD, 2022). A quantitative comparative analysis study by Wolff, Baumol, and Saini (2014) explored the costs and outcomes educational expenditures in the United States compared to other

OECD countries. The authors collected data from an OECD database that looked at the average annual rates of growth in education spending (by level) and GDP per capita in OECD countries, 1998–2007. The study examined primary school spending, secondary school spending, tertiary school spending, and GDP per capita. The study found that the U.S. total educational spending as a share of GDP is about 26 percent higher than the average of the other OECD countries (Wolff, Baumol, and Saini, 2014).

As a private investment, the more education consumed leads to increased earnings for those that have earned advanced degrees and access to increased employment opportunities (Maringe, 2015). According to the research findings presented by Ronald Hy, (2009) the substantial expenditures made by countries on education can be attributed to the perception that such investments will guarantee children acquire the essential skills and knowledge required to secure well-paying jobs. Consequently, this belief aligns with the objective of fostering economic development within the state. In this context, the financial commitment to education is seen as surpassing the potential costs associated with societal issues such as crime, welfare dependency, and teenage pregnancy (Hy, 2009). This is why Grace (1989) argued the conceptualization of education on behalf of the government is crucial in setting the educational landscape. By advocating the notion that the government's actions reflect a determined effort to establish a new dominant influence over educational discourse and policy, one can assert that it contradicts the ideal of conceptualizing education as a public good (Grace, 1989)

The government's endeavors can be perceived as a strong bid to shape and control the narrative surrounding education, thereby exerting its authority over the direction and content of educational policies. This concerted effort to establish hegemony implies a desire for a monopoly on educational decision-making, potentially limiting diverse perspectives and alternative

approaches that could better serve the needs and interests of the public. The government's pursuit of hegemony may prioritize its own interests or specific ideologies over the broader societal benefits of education. This can lead to policies that serve partisan agendas, marginalize certain groups, or neglect the diverse educational needs of individuals (Grace, 1989).

The implementation of a standardized curriculum is often regarded as a way for governments to shape educational quality. This approach, corresponding to the second conceptual framework, has proven effective in several countries, including Finland, Singapore, Alberta (Canada), and New Zealand. These countries are celebrated for their consistently high-quality and demanding curricula. Notably, New Zealand is also acclaimed for integrating a curriculum that is sensitive and responsive to cultural diversity.

Longitudinal data from the United States Census Bureau consistently demonstrate that the higher the educational attainment, the more money individuals earn (United States Census Bureau (2022)). In 2015, the Social Security Administration also found individuals who hold bachelor's degrees, particularly men, can expect to earn approximately \$900,000 more in median lifetime earnings compared to high school graduates (Social Security Administration, 2015). Women with bachelor's degrees, on the other hand, can anticipate earning around \$630,000 more. Men who possess advanced degrees can anticipate earning an impressive \$1.5 million more in median lifetime earnings than their high school graduate counterparts, while women with graduate degrees can expect to earn approximately \$1.1 million more (Social Security Administration, 2015). In this theory in areas of gender, degrees, and subjects studied, and levels of qualifications obtained among other stratifying constructs (Maringe, 2015).

American economist Walter Heller served as chairman of Kennedy's Council of Economic Advisors. He brought with him knowledge of Beckner's idea about human capital.

Heller used his knowledge to bridge education policy and economic policy (Holden & Biddle, 2017). Heller contributed to the discourse surrounding education policy in the United States (Holden & Biddle, 2017). In Heller's publication, *Economics of the Race Problem* (1970), he quantitatively evaluates the cost of discrimination. Heller's meta-analysis utilized data from various sources, including the U.S. Department of Commerce, the U.S. Department of Labor, the report on the Social and Economic Status of Negroes in the United States (1969), a report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics on race and poverty, as well as articles such as "The Cost of Being a Negro," and several other relevant sources (Heller, 1970). His contributions reveal that if Black people and White people in 1960 had the same educational attainment, occupational composition, and geographic distribution, Black people would still earn \$1,000 a year less per person than white people (Heller, 1970). He deemed the income gap the cost of discrimination.

Heller's study (1970) highlights a point of contention with the Human Capital Theory. The contention is that the educational investment may yield a lower return for minority groups. Research today shows that the income gap is as wide today as it was in 1960. Despite economic progress being a national goal. In 2019, the median white household had a net worth of \$188,200, compared to just \$24,100 for the median Black household (Nova, 2023). According to UN Women, it is estimated that gender gaps cost the economy 15 percent of GDP (UN Women, 2018). Lyndon B. Johnson, like Kennedy, had goals that aimed to eradicate poverty and integrate women and minorities into the economy (The White House Historical Association n.d.).

When marginalized people are given access to the economy, this empowerment boosts productivity, increases economic diversification and income equality (UN Women, 2018). As a result of this economic burgeoning in the 1960s, economists began to study the phenomena of

investing in people to reduce poverty and close the earning gap (Weiss, 2015). Despite the existence of an apparent income gap influenced by race and gender, research conducted by Psacharopoulos (2018) reveals that the returns on investment for female education surpass those for male education. Additionally, the returns for secondary school education exceed those for vocational education, and the returns for the private sector are higher compared to the public sector (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018).

Government investment in education continues today. In 2021, President Joe Biden signed an Executive Order titled "Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government (Exec. Order No. 13985, 2021)." In this order, the President emphasized that equal opportunity serves as the foundation of American democracy. The President acknowledged that disparities in laws, public policies, and institutions, both public and private, have often deprived individuals and communities of that equal opportunity. The executive order included a historic allocation of \$20 billion to support high-poverty Title I schools, as well as investments in high-quality early childhood education. These measures included the provision of universal preschool for all three and four-year-olds and improved access to affordable childcare (Exec. Order No. 13985, 2021). Furthermore, the order aimed to expand college and career pathways for middle and high school students. The President emphasized that these resources would unlock opportunities for millions of Americans, fostering greater equity and access to education and improving prospects.

Education as a Service for Public Consumption

According to the Competing Conceptions of Education as an Economic Good Framework, leaders who conceptualize education as a service for public consumption are primarily driven by the public goal of equity. The core theory states the ultimate objective of

education is to provide inclusive and enriching learning experiences for the public as a whole. These experiences are measured and assessed based on the public's ability to engage in civic participation actively. In this philosophy, the emphasis is placed on ensuring that education is readily accessible and beneficial to all members of society. These leaders strive to create an educational system that promotes equal opportunities, removes barriers to learning, and fosters a sense of community engagement and active citizenship. Followers of this mindset value the immediate consumption of education and its immediate benefits to individuals and society. They recognize the importance of providing learning experiences that are relevant, meaningful, and impactful, enabling individuals to develop the knowledge, skills, and perspectives necessary to participate actively in their communities. By viewing education as a service for public consumption, leaders prioritize equity, inclusivity, and active civic engagement, aiming to create a society where everyone has equal access to quality education and the opportunity to contribute positively to the collective well-being.

In 1938, amidst racial tensions in Germany and Italy, John Dewey drew parallels to racial intolerance in America. Dewey addressed the treatment of Black people, growing intolerance of immigrants, anti-Semitism; he juxtaposed that reality against the ideals set forth by our Nation's democracy (Dewey, 1938). He posed a crucial question that resonates to this day: "What are our schools doing to cultivate not merely passive toleration that will put up with people of different racial birth or different colored skin, but what are our schools doing positively and aggressively and constructively to cultivate understanding and goodwill which are essential to democratic society?" (Dewey, 1938, p.98) Dewey called upon schools to play a pivotal role in addressing equity in society. He went on to challenge the idea that national security could only be achieved by bolstering military forces, and ensuring factories had the capacity to produce munitions

(Dewey, 1938).

Horace Mann held the belief that the primary purpose of education is to foster and develop one's personality and character, emphasizing the practical application of knowledge in daily life (Mudge, 1937). The ultimate objective is to cultivate a citizenry that possesses the qualities essential for the successful functioning of a democratic society (Mudge, 1937). Mann's vision aimed for the individual's perfection, with an understanding that an individual's growth must be connected to the broader social fabric. The aspiration of each adult to find their ideal role, leveraging their unique traits to contribute most effectively to the community in which they reside (Mudge, 1937). Leaders that align with this ideology may likely redesign courses and curricula to incorporate community-based service activities explicitly linking traditional academic learning objectives to civic learning objectives to produce a civic-minded graduate (Bringle and Clayton 2004).

Bringle and Clayton (2004) identify reciprocity as a key feature of learning where students and community members are co-educators, co-learners, and co-generators of knowledge. In 2010, member institutions of Campus Compact offered an average of 64 service-learning courses, an increase from the reported average of 43 courses in 2008 (Bringle and Clayton, 2004). This dynamic suggests that there was an increased value placed on civic engagement in academia- the adoption of service learning as a significant aspect of institutional change linked to civic engagement in the United States and globally in both K-12 education and higher education settings. Felton and Clayton (2011) found that community service exhibited a noteworthy correlation with various positive outcomes in academic performance, student readiness for service, introspection, and enthusiasm towards subject matters.

Billig (2002) called the pedagogical approach service learning. Service based learning

typically entails addressing the genuine needs of the community and involving students as both the planners and implementers of service activities. Billig administered a mixed methods survey to members of school communities. The study found that service learning was often adopted as a key educational reform strategy to enhance student achievement. Its successful adoption was more likely when community values were integrated into the service-learning approach when administrators provided support, and when there were ample human and financial resources dedicated to professional development. (Billig, 2002) Billig also found that implementation of service learning would have a positive effect on career awareness, citizenship and civic responsibility. Leaders who advocated for service learning identified the following as key reasons for its implementation:

1. To facilitate students' active participation and engagement within the community.
2. To enhance students' knowledge and comprehension of the community.
3. To address authentic community needs and foster connections between the school and the surrounding community (Skinner and Chapman, 1999).

A quantitative study conducted by researchers Stemler and Bebell (1999) sought to systematically analyze a sample of high school mission statements to better gain a perspective on how our nation conceptualizes the purpose of schooling as defined by the educational institutions themselves. Findings show despite variations in politics and geography, there is a consensus among all states regarding at least three major purposes of secondary education: civic development, emotional development, and cognitive development. This study brings attention to a consensus within the field regarding what we claim to value, among those goals are civic development this has implications for our philosophical conceptualizations of education as a good. Civic development is in alignment with education as a service.

George Theoharis (2007) defined social justice leadership as school “principals that make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision” (Theoharis, 2007, p.223). Theoharis conducted interviews of seven school leaders that were identified as social justice leaders. Each discussed different aspects of their lives all showing themes from preservice periods of their lives that were rooted in an equity-based orientation that they attribute to shaping how they lead. Principal Taylor spoke to Theoharis about fleeing from Vietnam with her family after the Vietnam War seeking a better life and better education. Taylor spoke about leaving everything behind including money, possessions, and community status. She asserted that her commitment to social justice came from her parents, the Catholic Church, and her experience leaving Vietnam, that triad taught her to do the right thing not just for themselves but for the good of everyone. According to Theoharis, that experiment cemented her need to do equity and justice work as a school administrator (Theoharis, 2007). This theme of service work for a cause greater than oneself is common in social justice leaders.

In 2018, Barnett conducted a study to explore the impacts of service-based learning. The participants were all enrolled in the course POLS 4360: Latino Politics and the Law. The study utilized a modified version of the Center for Service Learning and Volunteerism survey to assess the impact of service learning. Responses were collected from 10 students in May, 15 students in September, and 16 students in December. The findings revealed that students engaged in service learning demonstrated a stronger belief in their capacity to effect positive change within the community. They also displayed increased concern for community issues. Furthermore, these students expressed a heightened belief in their ability to contribute to the improvement of their

own neighborhoods in the near future (Barnett, 2018).

When education is considered a service, the focus expands beyond economic outcomes to encompass the broader goals of personal growth, critical thinking, creativity, and social engagement. Education is seen as a tool for nurturing well-rounded individuals, fostering a sense of social responsibility, and equipping learners with the knowledge and skills necessary to contribute meaningfully to society. This perspective emphasizes the societal benefits of education, such as promoting cultural understanding, social cohesion, and democratic participation. In this conceptualization, the role of education extends beyond individual advancement and encompasses the collective benefit of an educated populace, ultimately contributing to the betterment of society.

Education as an Identity for Public Consumption

According to the Competing Conceptions of Education as an Economic Good (Teachers College Columbia University, 2006) Framework leaders who conceptualize education as an identity for public consumption are primarily motivated by the public goal of liberty. Locke (1823) described liberty as a perfect freedom in which members are able to order their “own actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of Nature, without asking leave or depending upon the will of any other man” (Locke, 1823, p.106) Liberty pertains to the society’s power to act, think, do, and change without restrictions. The extent to which the public goal of liberty is achieved is measured and assessed based on the established norms, culture, and values of a society. It is through the ability to foster creativity, critical thinking, and self-expression that the intended outcome of improved quality of life is activated. Followers of this viewpoint place great value on the moral sanctity of education as an instrument for promoting and safeguarding liberty. They believe that education should empower

individuals to exercise their rights, make informed choices, and contribute meaningfully to society. By nurturing a sense of identity, agency, and respect for diversity, leaders in this philosophy seek to create an educational environment that upholds the principles of liberty and fosters a harmonious society.

The idea of morally sanctioned education dates to antiquity (Batista, 2015). Socrates believed that virtue served as the ultimate objective towards which one's thoughts should converge. In his perspective, philosophy was therefore regarded as the most elevated form of education for cultivating virtue (Batista, 2015). Newman believed societies have obligations to fulfill towards humanity, the state we belong to, the social environment we inhabit, and the individuals we encounter throughout our lives. He believed that a philosophical or liberal education, which he considered the primary role of a university, should not prioritize professional interests or even economic interests, but rather prepare individuals for their role as moral citizens (Langford, 2019). Newman further argued that a liberal education and a broad understanding of education were crucial because they aimed to elevate the intellectual standards of society, cultivate the collective mindset, refine national sensibilities, provide genuine principles to public enthusiasm, and establish clear objectives for individual pursuits. Newman presented a counterargument to Locke's utilitarian concept, which emphasizes that educational institutions should primarily focus on cultivating practical skills aligned with economic objectives (Langford, 2019). Newman, in contrast, rejected the notion of measuring or quantifying education (Langford, 2019). According to Newman, the purpose of education should be envisioned in a broader context. He advocated for a university curriculum that encourages exploration across various disciplines, enabling students and scholars to identify connections and actively engage with humanity's most challenging philosophical inquiries, social concerns, and

scientific problems.

Aligned with this conceptualization a study was conducted on a relationship between broader external forces and the internal perspectives of people within a given community. The author sought to determine if schools have an impact on the political socialization of students. Results show significant changes were observed in the political knowledge and attitudes of students aged 13-17 years old between 1969 and 1976. The study revealed a decline in knowledge regarding the structure and function of government, as well as a decrease in understanding and participation in the political process. However, there were positive changes observed in attitudes towards members of different racial groups and in the adoption of conflict resolution strategies to avoid war (Ehman,1980). The students in the age group during that time period were exposed to significant events in the geopolitical and sociopolitical landscapes. They experienced the impact of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., which had a profound effect on civil rights movements and racial tensions in the United States. Additionally, they witnessed the tense Cold War between the United States and Russia, which eventually led to the Vietnam War. The subsequent peace talks in Geneva marked a significant turning point in international relations. These events could have contributed to the changing attitudes and beliefs observed in the study.

In this framework, education is seen as more than just a means to acquire knowledge and skills. It is a transformative force that enables individuals to embrace their unique identities, exercise their rights responsibly, and participate actively in shaping the social fabric. By emphasizing the public goal of liberty, leaders aspire to cultivate an educational landscape that values individual freedom within the broader context of societal harmony and collective well-being. Conceptualizing education as an identity recognizes that education shapes not only what

we know but also who we are. It influences our perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors, and helps to define our roles within society. Education becomes an integral part of personal and social identity, contributing to the formation of values, cultural awareness, and a sense of belonging. Moreover, this perspective acknowledges that education is a dynamic and ongoing process, continuing beyond traditional schooling and adapting to evolving personal and societal needs. It encourages a lifelong commitment to learning and personal growth, fostering a sense of curiosity, adaptability, and continuous self-improvement. By conceptualizing education as an identity, it becomes a central element in shaping individuals' lives, contributing to their self-awareness, personal fulfillment, and meaningful engagement with the world.

Competitive Nature between the Conceptualizations

At the core of each of these conceptualizations is the belief that education possesses the power to be utilized as a tool for shaping the economy, fortifying democracy, or designing cultural values for society as a whole. They all recognize the fundamental role of education as an institution in fostering personal development, driving social progress, and contributing to the overall welfare of individuals and society. However, these conceptualizations diverge when it comes to their goals, processes, measures, and outcomes. Their differences result in varied perspectives on the function of education, which has implications for educational leader behavior.

Bottery (2001) wrote that an irony lies in the implementation of standardization and stringent inspection systems as a response to global pressures. He argues that this actually hinders the creation of an interconnected global future. This observation emphasizes the competitive nature inherent in conceptualizing education as a product versus conceptualizing education as a service or an identity. Bottery further argues that a more centralized, directed, and

controlled educational system undermines the potential for achieving a truly transformative education and leadership. If a leader perceives their practices as aligning with the conceptualization of education as a service or identity, it is worth considering how the established standardizing systems in their schools might be working against that philosophy.

Adding to the possible contradictions in philosophy, Grace's writing explores the role of government in shaping educational discourse and policy. When government intervention links funding to achievement goals, it can influence the actions of educational leaders. This linkage may encourage leaders to approach education as a product, prioritizing measurable outcomes over other conceptualizations. As evidenced in the section on conceptualizing education as an investment, this inclination aligns with the typical stance of our government. However, this particular conceptualization can contribute to the establishment of hegemonic control, potentially undermining the pursuit of a fair and inclusive education system or the goals associated with conceptualizing education as a service or identity (Grace, 1989). This can result in the formulation of policies that serve partisan agendas, marginalize certain groups, or overlook the diverse educational needs of individuals. Tyack and Cuban (1995) suggest that public institutions, including schools, to be responsive to innovative ideas advocated by politically organized groups. Tyack and Cuban go on to state that Superintendents, in order to secure their positions, had to convince their school boards and policy elites that they were willing to embrace improvements.

American economist and business theorist, Deming, cautioned against prioritizing short-term profits, highlighting that it leads to a focus on immediate gains, which contradicts the sustained purpose of a business. Reflecting on Deming's insights, Cawelti emphasized that a heavy reliance on singular goals or narrowly defined markers of success tends to encourage

people to make minor adjustments to the system instead of implementing fundamental changes in schools and classrooms to ensure student mastery of standards. This can result in a scenario where making the numbers look right becomes more important than actual system improvement. This phenomenon explains why some states might manipulate their cut scores to demonstrate higher numbers of "proficient" students. For instance, the state of Georgia is expected to show gains in English Language Arts and high school graduation rates in 2023 when College Career Readiness Performance Index scores (CCRPI), Georgia's ESSA accountability requirement, are reported due to a lowered proficiency threshold.

According to Robinson (2001), philosophers argue that education should never be regarded in instrumental terms. They assert that the purpose of education should be purely intrinsic and detached from economic considerations. However, Robinson contends that this perspective contradicts students' expectations and the desired returns on their educational investments (Robinson, 2001). This divergence in conceptualization has raised a point of contention that calls for empirical investigation which seeks to empirically investigate: How do experienced educational leaders that lead under the provisions of the Every Child Succeeds Act, and thus are measured by systems of accountability educational leaders articulate, navigate tensions that stem from misalignment between their personal conceptualizations of education as an economic good and those held by their organization, which may be influenced by the broader demands of the educational system?

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

This study was guided by the following question: How do experienced educational leaders, operating under the accountability provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act, articulate and navigate the dynamics that arise from potential misalignments between their personal conceptualizations of education as an economic good and those endorsed by their organizations, which may be shaped by broader systemic demands? To address this question, four sub-queries were examined: (1) how leaders personally conceptualized education as an economic good, (2) how their affiliated organizations conceptualized education as an economic good, (3) how leaders articulate dynamic from concurrent misalignments, and (4) how leaders described the resolution of these tensions and the subsequent execution of organizational goals.

Data Collection

To effectively answer the research question, a qualitative case study methodology was combined with multiple iterations of data analysis. The case study method, as detailed by Yin and Merriam, allowed for an in-depth examination of complex social phenomena seeking to answer a “how” question (Yin, 2018; Merriam, 2002). Merriam (2002) emphasized that the deliberate selection of the case was driven by the researcher’s interest, with the bounded system chosen purposefully. The case study protocol was designed to bring forth the unique characteristics of the case. The idiosyncrasies identified through the case study protocol guided the data collection process. The case study methodology was deemed appropriate because of the specific focus on experienced school leaders operating under state and federal accountability systems. The aim was to generate a description of the unique work of leaders navigating pressures to conceptualize educational effectiveness in alignment with the demands of a larger governing organization. This exploration sought to understand how leaders conceptualized

education as an economic good, how their organizations categorized education as an economic good, how leaders described tensions arising from misalignment, and how the leader navigates the tensions to carry out initiatives. Data were gathered through a meticulous process, starting with a pre-screening of participants who articulated their views on education as an economic good through vision and mission statements. This was followed by the purposive selection of four leaders, representing diverse conceptualizations of education, to ensure a rich and varied data set. Data collection encompassed semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and reflective journaling, each designed to capture the diverse conceptualizations and tensions within educational leadership. This case bounding was intended to contribute to theory extension. The conceptual framework employed in this study was the Teachers College Competing Conceptualizations of Education as an Economic Good Framework, which served as the intellectual structure crucial for data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the phenomena (Wang, 2024). While the TC conceptual framework labeled conceptualizations as competing, it lacked a detailed description of the competitive nature—specifically, how these tensions were articulated and navigated by practitioners to implement initiatives at the organizational level. The analysis employed a typological approach as described by Hatch (2021) to categorize data, followed by multiple iterations of coding to complement the methodology and aims of the study. This approach uncovered emergent themes during data analysis, enriching the theoretical framework through a detailed coding process. Additionally, it illuminated the complex dynamics of leadership, exploring how the leader and organizational conceptualizations of education as an economic good, presented tensions when fundamental misalignments occurred.

Participants

Following the approval from the Internal Review Board, IRB number H24585, the recruitment of participants involved the distribution of flyers via social media and email communications directed at organizational leaders. Existing networks within school leadership circles to which I had connections were utilized to recruit participants from various U.S. geographical regions. To ensure a diverse pool of perspectives, efforts were made to include leaders from institutions with varying educational missions, demographics, and policy priorities. This approach allowed for a richer analysis of how conceptualizations of education as an economic good manifest across different organizational contexts. This study employed a dual approach to purposive sampling—criterion-based and theory-based—to recruit four participants who contributed information-rich data through the conceptual framework's lens. For theory-based purposive sampling, one participant was sought for each of the four conceptualizations, allowing for the exploration of patterns in behavior and thought construction regarding tensions and resolutions related to misaligned conceptualizations of education as an economic good. To enhance sample diversity, consideration was given to participants' demographics and grade bands (elementary, middle, and high) during prescreening, with the intention of selecting individuals with varied backgrounds to increase representation, reliability, and generalizability of the data. This approach ensured that insights were drawn from leaders with distinct educational contexts, providing a well-rounded examination of the conceptual framework in practice. Additionally, purposive sampling allowed for a targeted investigation into how different educational environments shape leaders' responses to conceptual misalignment. By incorporating multiple perspectives, the study aimed to capture a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and strategies leaders employ within their unique organizational settings.

The criteria for participant selection were as follows:

1. All participants serve as school-building leaders from a U.S. region. Justification: Hallinger emphasized the influence of personal attributes, values, beliefs, knowledge, and experience on leadership practice, suggesting that leaders implemented practices aligned with their personal conceptualizations of education as an economic good (2010).
2. All participants were required to have served in a leadership role for a minimum of four years. Justification: Research indicated that experienced principals were more likely to remain in one position, reflecting higher stability ratios and a lower likelihood of instability (Baker et al., 2010). This duration contributed to participants being more grounded in their identities as leaders, influencing their practices.
3. All participants work in schools that adhere to state or federal standards for performance measures set forth by ESSA. Justification: This criterion addressed tensions arising from broader pressures to meet specific standards, acknowledging the impact on leadership practice.

Recognizing the common critique of small sample sizes in qualitative studies, I sought to mitigate this limitation by collecting data from participants with diverse demographics and conceptualizations, enhancing the study's potential for generalizability.

Instruments

To address the research question, my approach incorporated interviews, document analysis, and reflective journaling, positioning myself as the central instrument in the study. This role necessitated additional scrutiny to reduce bias and enhance credibility, confirmability, dependability, transferability, and trustworthiness. This research design ensured a rigorous examination and interpretation of data, emphasizing the importance of reflection in maintaining

the integrity and depth of the research findings. I conducted follow-up interviews, addressing credibility, confirmability, dependability, transferability, and trustworthiness through a comprehensive approach. Prolonged engagement with the phenomena through initial interviews, document analysis, post-interview reflections, and journaling contributed to a deeper understanding, enhancing the credibility of the findings. To increase confirmability, I engaged in regular and systematic journaling, focusing on debriefs and the evolution of thought on the conceptual framework. To enhance dependability, the study employed standardization of data collection across sites and participants, coupled with triangulation of data sources. This approach ensured consistency and reliability in the study's findings. To address transferability, careful attention was given to the sampling strategy, incorporating criteria designed to highlight the uniqueness of cases and promote diverse representation. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the collected data were established based on the conceptual framework's constructs and the study's objectives. The constructs included process conceptions (activating outcomes), the essence of the good (immediate value), the outcome of interest (individual), measures (external validity), and public goals. Data were included if they contributed to an understanding of conceptualization based on these constructs and excluded if they could not be categorized within a construct. This systematic approach ensured the relevance and applicability of the findings beyond the specific cases studied. Additionally, thick descriptions were used to provide rich contextual details, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to their own settings.

Dependability was further reinforced through an audit trail, documenting each stage of data collection, coding, and analysis to maintain transparency. By integrating these strategies, the study enhances both the trustworthiness of its findings and the potential for meaningful application in broader educational contexts. Table 2. presents the various data sources utilized in

the study, identifying their origins and outlining their specific roles in the analysis.

Table 2

Data Sources and Role in Analysis

Types of Data	Source of Data	Role in Analysis
Interviews	Two one-hour interviews with 4 participants. Occurring 2-3 weeks apart	To understand: (a) the leader's conceptualization of education as an economic good; (b) the leader's perception of the conceptualization held by the organization to which they belong; (c) the leader's articulation of the tensions arising from conceptual misalignment; (d) the leader's description of the resolution of conflicts stemming from misalignment; (e) understand the conceptual framework and generate limitations or clarifications on the existing TC theory.
Document Analysis	Student handbook, school event flyers, meeting minutes (faculty, admin team school board, mission and vision statement, memos, websites, strategic plans, CSIP, newsletters)	To understand: (a) the text for the case; (b) the information gathered through interviews; (c) enhance reliability; (d) between organizational conceptualization and organization conceptualization; (e) identify patterns, trends, or recurring themes within the case, specifically evidence of conflict and resolution of tensions stemming from conceptual misalignment.
Reflective Journaling	Researcher's Journal	To understand: (a) how the researcher's understanding of the case and TC theory has evolved throughout the study; (b) becoming aware of heuristics and minimizing the impact of biases; (c) recording or constructing a mind map that illustrates limitations or clarifications on the current TC framework.

Procedures

During the study's prescreening stage, I gathered demographic data, including each

prospective participant's name, job title, the district and school of employment, years spent in leadership roles, racial background, age, educational level, and whether their school had been evaluated by a state system of accountability required by the Every Student Succeeds Act. These inquiries aimed to ensure that candidates fit the necessary criteria and brought a range of demographic insights. The pre-screener was a questionnaire used as a pass/fail criterion for entry into the study. Those who did not meet all three pre-established criteria were not approved for entry. I discarded the data of respondents who did not meet the initial requirements. This sensitive information was stored in a password-protected folder to protect the identities of potential participants. Additionally, at this stage, each potential participant was asked to craft a mission and vision statement through a structured fill-in-the-blank form. These submissions aimed to reveal how each educational leader perceived the role of education in economic terms, informed by the conceptual framework's constructs: process conceptions, essence of the good, outcome of interest, measures, and public good. I analyzed the statements using thematic coding to categorize each leader's conceptualization of education in alignment with conceptualizations posited in the framework: education as a product, investment, service, or identity.

Four participants were chosen, with one representing each perspective of education as an economic good. I contacted the selected individuals to provide them with IRB documentation, confirm their consent, and discuss the time commitment required for the study. Once consent was obtained, each participant engaged in the first of two interviews. During this initial interview, I conducted semi-structured interviews using predesigned interview questions, aiming to understand more deeply how each leader viewed education's economic aspects, tensions they experienced, and how they described moving past these tensions to carry out organizational tasks. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai. This meeting also served as

an opportunity to schedule the follow-up interview. After the first interview, I reflected on the discussion by making an entry in my reflective journal. This entry covered my understanding of the interview content, the theoretical framework, any biases I might have, and possible adjustments in my approach to gather more pertinent information. During the interviews and reflections, I conducted a document analysis to further comprehend how each leader and their organization conceptualized education as an economic good. I examined the district's website for initiatives or priorities, such as strategic plans, records from school board meetings, and other documents to categorize the organization's stance on education as an economic good. Similar to the methods of coding used when analyzing the mission and vision statements, I used constructs from the theoretical framework as a lens for drawing conclusions about the organization. After reviewing the evidence in several iterations, I documented my thoughts, biases, and evolving understanding of the conceptual framework in my reflective journal. Following the completion of the initial interview, reflection, and document analysis, I conducted a follow-up interview. This interview served as a reference point, comparing the insights gained from the first interview and document analysis. It provided an opportunity to clarify and deepen my understanding of the data collected thus far. This follow-up step was crucial for ensuring thoroughness and accuracy in the analysis.

Table 3 presents the types of data used throughout the course of the study, including the vision/mission pre-screener, interviews, document analysis, and reflective journaling. The table details the procedures for data collection, specifying how each data type was gathered, alongside relevant information such as specific questions asked of participants. This structured presentation supports methodological transparency and facilitates replication. By articulating these elements clearly, the table enhances the study's validity and transferability. Moreover, it demonstrates

alignment between the research questions and the data sources. Its inclusion ultimately strengthens the reliability of the findings and underscores the rigor of the research process.

Table 3

Types of Data and Procedures for Collection and Other Details

Type of Data	Procedure for Data Collection and Other Details
Vision/ Mission Screening	<p>During the prescreening phase of data collection, potential participants drafted structured fill-in-the-blank vision and mission statements to capture their conceptualization of education as an economic good, with the data used to purposively select one participant from each conceptualization.</p> <p>Outcome of Interest: As a leader, I believe education should primarily benefit students by providing _____, equipping them with _____. This outcome ensures that every student _____.</p> <p>Process Conceptions: As a leader, I believe we can activate the desired outcome of education through/by _____. Ensuring that students gain _____</p> <p>Measures: As a leader, I gauge our progress towards the intended purpose of education by measuring _____. This metric allows us to _____, highlighting our effectiveness in preparing students for/to _____.</p> <p>Public Goal: As a leader, I perceive the public goal of education as _____, thereby imparting on society _____.</p> <p>Essence of the Good: As a leader, I perceive the immediate value of education to be _____, highlighting that education's worth is _____</p>
Interviews	<p>Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Share your beliefs about education that inspired the creation of your vision and mission statements. (2) If your organization crafted the statements, how would they compare to yours? (3) Describe a recent school event or initiative, executed under your leadership that embodies what you perceive as the goal of education/schooling. (4) How would you measure progress towards achieving the goal of education/schooling, and how does your organization compare (5) What should individuals expecting educational services anticipate gaining from the experience, and how might your organization's response differ? (6) Describe the tensions you have experienced stemming from differences in your understanding of the purpose of education compared to that of your organization. How did you navigate those tensions? (7) How would you rate the tensions you experience? (low, moderate, significant)

- (8) Also, elaborate on how you implemented initiatives valued by your organization but not aligned with your own beliefs.
- (9) How would you describe the tensions arising from misalignment in objectives and processes?
- (10) How do you reconcile these differences to achieve organizational objectives?
- (11) Can you narrate a classroom lesson that represents the purpose of schooling?

Table 3. Types of Data and Procedures for Collection and Other Details (continued)

Type of Data	Procedure for Data Collection and Other Details
Document Analysis	With the participants' permission, an array of pertinent documents was collected, photocopied, or downloaded and printed. A grid, delineating the constructs in the framework, was utilized to organize the documents according to the conceptual framework. Following this organization, the documents were coded for further analysis.
Reflective Journal	The researcher committed to recording entries via paper and pen in a personal notebook after interviews, coding, or reflection moments. This practice aimed to monitor the evolution of thoughts regarding the effectiveness of the conceptual framework in explaining the leaders' behaviors and to identify shifts or limits in the theory.

Table 4 illustrates the grid method employed during the data analysis phase. This graphic organizer was used to categorize relevant data in meaningful ways, providing a structured approach to organizing and interpreting information. Interview transcripts, expert insights, documents, and mission/vision statements were categorized according to the constructs in the theoretical framework—process conceptions, the essence of the good, the outcome of interest, measures, and public goals. This systematic categorization allowed the research team to analyze data consistently and clearly. The approach is particularly effective because it facilitates pattern recognition, enabling the identification of relationships between concepts and emerging themes. Furthermore, it enhances the consistency of coding and categorization, which reduces potential biases and increases the reliability of data interpretation. By organizing the data within the context of the theoretical framework, the grid method ensures a strong alignment between the

research questions, data analysis, and study findings. This alignment ultimately contributes to the study's validity by ensuring that conclusions drawn are rooted in the conceptual framework and reflect the core objectives of the research.

Table 4

Grid Method

	Mission/Vision Statement	Interviews Responses	Documents
Process conceptions (activate outcomes)	[Entered text into each box from the data collected from the participants]		
The essence of the good (immediate value)			
Outcome of interest (individual)			
Measures (external validity)			
Public Goal			

Introduction of Participants

Earle is an elementary school principal within a large urban school district in Memphis, Tennessee. Having grown up in the inner city near the community he now serves, he has always aspired to transcend the limitations often associated with challenging neighborhoods. Data gathered from Earle's prescreener, interview transcripts, and documents indicate that he conceptualizes education in various ways, however the majority of his responses are in alignment with education as an identity. According to the theoretical framework, leaders who conceptualize

education through this lens are primarily driven by the public goal of liberty, grounded in the belief that a liberated society empowers individuals to act, think, innovate, and effect change without constraints. The second most dominant conceptualization Earle held was education as an investment. Leaders who conceptualize education as an investment for private consumption are primarily driven by the public goal of security. The underlying belief is that the intended outcome of education is to improve individuals' life chances, particularly their access to better job opportunities and higher education. I will explain how Earle's conceptions manifest against the constructs of the conceptual framework.

Earle's organization is situated in an urban area of Memphis, Tennessee, and operates within the largest school district in the state. Notably, this district ranks among the top 25 most populated school systems in the United States. The organization oversees a diverse portfolio of more than 200 schools, which include traditional K-12 schools, themed programs, alternative education settings, career and technical education (CTE) schools, virtual schools, and charter schools. Together, these schools serve a student population of approximately 106,000, making the organization the largest employer in Shelby County, Tennessee. The district serves a predominantly minority student body, with 72.2% identifying as Black, 18.2% as Hispanic/Latino, 5.3% as White, 0.8% as Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 0.1% as American Indian or Alaska Native, and 3.3% identifying as two or more races. Economically, 55% of the students are classified as economically disadvantaged.

Sunni is an assistant principal at an elementary school in a large urban district in Atlanta, Georgia. She identifies as a Black and Asian queer woman and, while aware that her identity could marginalize her, her experiences at home and in schools have empowered her, shaping ideals that promote freedom of expression. These values are reflected in her conceptualization of

education as an economic good. Data from Sunni's prescreening, interview transcripts, and relevant documents show that she primarily views education as a public good rather than a private one, with most of her responses aligning with the concept of education as a service. According to the theoretical framework, leaders with this perspective are primarily motivated by the public goal of equity. This view emphasizes providing inclusive and enriching learning experiences for the entire community, equipping individuals with the skills necessary to actively participate in a democratic society. Sunni's organization operates within a large urban school district in Atlanta, Georgia. The district encompasses 91 schools and programs organized into 9 clusters, serving a total of 52,416 students. This makes it the seventh-largest school district in Georgia. The organization employs 5,294 teachers. The student population is predominantly 72.9% African American, followed by 15.9% Caucasian, 7.6% Hispanic, and 2.4% other groups. Additionally, 69% of the students are identified as economically disadvantaged.

Tara is an assistant principal in a large suburban district in near Atlanta, Georgia. Tara reflected on her upbringing as one of few ethnic minorities in an affluent neighborhood, where the majority of her peers were Jewish. She expressed an acute awareness of the opportunities she had access to, acknowledging that many individuals from similar backgrounds did not share the same privilege. Tara emphasized her commitment to creating pathways to opportunity through rigorous coursework. Data from Tara's prescreening, interview transcripts, and relevant documents show that she primarily conceptualizes education as a private good with most of her responses aligning with Conceptualizing Education as an Investment. According to the theoretical framework, leaders with this perspective are primarily motivated by the public goal of security. The underlying theory is that the intended outcome of education is to improve individuals' life chances, particularly their access to better job opportunities and higher

education. Tara's organization is situated in a suburban county just outside of Atlanta and is the eighth largest school district in Georgia. The district encompasses 52 schools, including three academies. Since the 1990s, the county's community population has more than doubled, growing from 113,000 residents to over 244,000 residents. Similarly, student enrollment has also doubled, with the district now serving 43,000 students. The organization employs approximately 4,500 staff members. James has built a diverse professional background, including experience in the military, as a musician, and now in education. His varied career paths have shaped his openness to diverse perspectives on measuring student success. Currently, James serves as an Assistant Principal in an alternative school within a large suburban district in Georgia.

James primarily conceptualizes education as a service, where leadership is driven by the public goal of equity. This perspective aligns with the core theory that the ultimate purpose of education is to provide inclusive and enriching learning experiences that foster equity. Additionally, James demonstrates a strong alignment with conceptualizing education as both an identity and a product, further reflecting his nuanced understanding of education's role in society. An analysis of James' transcripts and related documents supports these conclusions. He views education as a tool to reclaim and support students who have struggled or been unsuccessful in traditional school settings—those who have, in his words, “fallen by the wayside.” This perspective highlights his commitment to equity and his belief in education as a means of creating meaningful opportunities for all students. James' organization is situated in a suburban area north of metro Atlanta, Georgia. It is the largest school district in the state, serving 182,000 students and employing 24,000 educators and support staff, making it the largest employer in the county. The district comprises 142 schools. The student body in his organization reflects diverse demographics: 17% White, 32.7% Black, 11.5% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 34.3%

Hispanic/Latino, 0.2% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.1% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. Additionally, 4.2% of students identify as two or more races. Additionally, 38.9% of students are classified as economically disadvantaged.

Table 5

Participant Profiles

Participant	Job Title	Organization Type and Location	Race Ethnicity	Age Range	Highest Degree Achieved
Earle	Principal	Public Elementary School Urban Memphis District	Black or African American	35-44	Master's Degree
Sunni	Assistant Principal	Public Elementary School Urban Atlanta District	Black or African American and Asian	25-34	Doctorate Degree
Tara	Assistant Principal	Public High School Suburban Atlanta District	Black or African American	35-44	Master's Degree
James	Assistant Principal	Public High School Urban Atlanta District	Black or African American	45-54	Specialist Degree

Table 5. presents demographic information for each participant, including their pseudonym, job title, organization type and location, race/ethnicity, age range, and highest degree earned. The participants represent a diverse range of leadership roles, from assistant principals to principals, and vary in educational attainment. They also come from both urban and suburban regions, reflecting a broad spectrum of educational settings. Additionally, their age ranges add to the diversity of perspectives included in the study. However, there was less diversity in race and

ethnicity, which is an important consideration when analyzing the generalizability of the findings. Including this demographic information enhances transparency, provides context for interpreting the data.

Data Analysis

The methodology for analyzing data was shaped by the objectives of the research (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). This study sought to provide a detailed description of how experienced educational leaders leading in organizations that were required to adhere to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and, as a result, were evaluated and measured by systems of accountability, managed and expressed the tensions arising from conceptual misalignments. Furthermore, this research aimed to contribute to the existing conceptual framework by adding a detailed description of these tensions, thereby revealing the inherent competitiveness of these conceptualizations as suggested by the framework's title. To fulfill these objectives, I adopted a method of analyzing the data, aiming to grasp how the leaders and their organizations perceived education as an economic good and how they described the tensions and how they navigated those tensions rooted in conceptual misalignments. This analysis involved thematic coding to identify and develop themes.

To accomplish the objectives of this study, it was essential first to understand how school leaders and their institutions conceptualized education as an economic good. This understanding set the foundation for the research, as embedded within the research question were the conditions under which tensions might have emerged due to divergent conceptualizations. My approach involved thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns within qualitative data, a process that required systematic coding of this data into themes, which was the primary analytical goal (Clarke & Braun, 2021). The analysis employed three primary strategies: first-

level coding, second-level coding, and theme generation. Following the approach outlined by Crabtree and Miller (1992), a theory-driven coding method was applied, using the existing conceptual framework to develop the codebook. This codebook guided the attachment of specific codes to textual data.

Initially, I familiarized myself with the data by reading through transcripts, documents, and journal entries. The first step involved first-level coding, which focused on identifying initial codes derived from the study's conceptual framework. These initial codes captured the framework's constructs, including process conceptions, the essence of the good, outcomes of interest, measures, and public goals. Textual materials, such as vision/mission statements, interview transcripts, and documents, were examined and coded using these initial constructs. For example, if a participant's vision/mission statement expressed a belief that education should provide increased opportunities leading to greater access to college and careers, I coded this expression as a process conception, as it indicated the leader's or organization's ideals about activating a desired outcome.

To visually differentiate between constructs, I used a color-coded scheme corresponding to each construct in the theoretical framework, while also adding separate colors to identify conceptual misalignment and tensions. In the second-level coding phase, I used the framework and these coded expressions to determine which conceptualization most closely aligned with the leader's or organization's text. For instance, a focus on opportunity suggested alignment with Conceptualization 2, "Education as an Investment," where process conceptions emphasized opportunity. Additionally, if the leader or organization mentioned greater access to college and careers, this was coded as a measure in first-level coding, as it provided external validity towards reaching a goal.

In second level coding, I aligned the expressions with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, where the measure of access to college and careers was key. This coding process was applied consistently across all collected textual data, ensuring systematic analysis aligned with the conceptual framework. I examined patterns within the constructs of the theoretical framework, assessing whether they aligned with or challenged the propositions outlined in the conceptual framework. This process contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the framework's constructs. The refinement of these themes was an iterative process. I reviewed and revised the established themes, ensuring consistency with the conceptual propositions.

To understand how experienced educational leaders, who led under the provisions of ESSA and were evaluated and measured by a state accountability system, articulated tensions stemming from conceptual misalignment, I utilized thematic analysis. The process began with a familiarization of the data by reading the transcripts, documents, and journal entries. During first-level coding, I color-coded all expressions related to tensions. Using a grid method, I inserted those expressions into the grid and analyzed them to identify relationships between conceptions and uncover underlying dynamics. These dynamics were then used to generate themes. This iterative approach refined the existing conceptual framework of Competing Conceptualizations of Education as an Economic Good, shedding light on the competitive nature of these conceptualizations, particularly in the context where educational leaders encountered pressures to align their conceptualizations with those of larger governing bodies.

I moved back and forth between the conceptual framework and the leaders' descriptions of tensions to grasp the competitive nature of the framework, thereby enhancing descriptions currently undefined within the conceptual framework. Finally, I examined patterns between the themes using the theoretical framework, contributing to a deeper understanding of the

framework's constructs and conceptualizations. This process refined and enriched the existing conceptual framework, offering insights into the complex dynamics of conceptual misalignment experienced by educational leaders.

A case study methodology was chosen for this research design because of its ability to provide in-depth insights into complex phenomena within a real-life context. By focusing on a specific case, such as experienced educational leaders working under pressure to conceptualize education as a product, I examined the uniqueness of the situation. Through detailed data collection methods such as interviews, document analysis, and reflective journaling, I captured rich and diverse perspectives, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation. According to Yin, the case study methodology is well-suited for answering "how" questions, which this research sought to address. A phenomenology was considered but deemed not the best fit. While phenomenology is useful for understanding the essence and meaning of lived experiences from participants' perspectives, this research did not seek to explore lived experiences. Instead, it focused on how participants constructed knowledge about the intricate nature of education. Additionally, this research was deeply guided by a conceptual framework and imposed certain preconceptions, making phenomenology an unsuitable approach.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Hayes and Singh (2011) emphasize the importance of trustworthiness in qualitative research, focusing on strategies that ensure credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of findings. They argue that trustworthiness is fundamental to establishing the validity of qualitative studies. In accordance with the guidance set forth by Hayes and Singh multiple strategies were employed to enhance methodological rigor and ensure the reliability of the results. This section describes the strategies employed in this qualitative study.

Credibility

To achieve credibility, the study employed triangulation by utilizing multiple data sources, including interviews, organizational documents, and reflective journaling. Each participant was interviewed twice, with each session lasting up to an hour. Between interviews, I engaged in reflective journaling, documenting my evolving understanding of the phenomenon, unexpected findings, and challenges to my initial assumptions. During these intervals, I also conducted document analyses and compared the insights derived from interviews with conclusions drawn from organizational documents. This triangulation of data sources strengthened the reliability of the findings.

Additionally, I consulted with my dissertation chair to address limitations, clarify confusing aspects, and explore unexpected emergent issues. Prolonged engagement with the data, including repeated reviews and analyses, ensured a deep and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. For each construct in the conceptual framework—public goals, measures, process conceptions, essence of the good, outcome of interest, as well as the additional constructs of navigation and tensions—I systematically read and coded the organizational documents, interview transcripts, and entries from my reflective journal. These strategies collectively validated the study's findings and reinforced the authenticity and rigor of the research process.

Transferability

The transferability of findings was prioritized to increase their applicability to other contexts or populations. Thick, rich descriptions of participants, organizational settings, and contexts were provided to help readers determine the relevance of the findings to their unique

circumstances. Detailed participant and organizational profiles were generated to offer additional context, contributing to a deeper understanding of the environments and individuals involved.

Confirmability

Confirmability was ensured by grounding the findings in the participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's biases or preconceptions. Reflective journaling was employed to document the researcher's assumptions and monitor potential biases throughout the study. Data triangulation further supported objectivity, with interview data compared against organizational document analyses to validate interpretations and reduce the influence of personal bias.

Dependability

Dependability was enhanced through the consistent use of reflective journaling, which served as a critical tool for documenting my evolving understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. By regularly reflecting on my interpretations, I was able to identify and question my assumptions, track shifts in my perspective, and address potential biases as they arose. This process allowed me to engage in self-critical inquiry, asking questions that sought to elicit surprises that emerged from the data, and name preconceived notions.

The journal also served as a repository for tracking revisions to my understanding of the phenomenon, creating a clear audit trail of how my interpretations developed throughout the study. This transparent process contributed to the study's dependability by ensuring that any adjustments to the research process or emerging insights were systematically recorded and analyzed. Additionally, peer debriefing was employed as a strategy to enhance dependability. By engaging colleagues and my dissertation chair in discussions about the findings, interpretations, and methodological decisions, I was able to identify areas of potential bias, clarify confusing elements, and address unexpected dilemmas.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations and data security were central to this study, ensuring the protection of participants' rights, confidentiality, and dignity throughout the research process. Before data collection commenced, informed consent was obtained from all participants, outlining the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. To safeguard anonymity, pseudonyms were used, and all data were securely stored using a Georgia State University-approved system. Participants were informed of their right to voluntarily participate and withdraw from the study at any stage, minimizing potential harm or discomfort.

The researcher maintained a current Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certification, demonstrating proficiency in ethical research practices involving human subjects. Access to data was restricted to authorized research team members. Identifiable information was removed from the dataset after the study concluded, with de-identified data retained for one year for potential future research. Hard-copy data were securely stored in locked file cabinets, while digital data were protected through password encryption. A separate code sheet linking participant identifiers to de-identified data was stored in a secure, password-protected file and was discarded along with audio recordings after the study concluded. These measures ensured participants' privacy and confidentiality.

By adhering to the ethical guidelines established by Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board and employing these robust strategies, the study upheld the highest standards of ethical qualitative research. These practices ensured that the findings were credible, transferable, confirmable, and dependable, contributing valuable insights to the field while maintaining respect and integrity for all participants.

Positionality

My experiences as a graduate student in educational leadership have significantly shaped my interest in exploring how educational leaders conceptualize education as an economic good. During my master's program, self-development was a central focus, encouraging a deeper understanding of myself to become a more effective leader. As part of this journey, I completed the Gallup StrengthsFinder and the Birkman Method assessments, which revealed my natural disposition toward a strong belief in core values. These values not only govern my personal actions but also inform my strategic decisions in school operations. This perspective, while a strength, could also introduce bias, as it assumes all leaders operate with a similar values-driven approach, which may not always align with their experiences or organizational contexts.

Additionally, my professional background is rooted in working within Title I schools, often serving populations that have been historically marginalized. These roles required navigating systemic accountability measures, policy mandates, and diverse stakeholder priorities, providing me with firsthand experience of the tensions that arise when organizational goals and personal values are misaligned. These experiences gave me valuable insights into the complex dynamics of leadership and policy implementation, but they also have the potential to influence my interpretation of participants' experiences.

As a woman of color, my commitment to equity and inclusivity has also shaped my perspective on the intended goals of education. These values fueled my commitment to this research, highlighting the significance of recognizing diversity in how we construct knowledge about the purposes and intentions of education. However, I recognize that my beliefs about education's role in addressing systemic inequities could inadvertently color my interpretations of participants' narratives and organizational practices.

To mitigate potential biases, I employed several strategies to enhance the rigor and transparency of this study. Reflective journaling allowed me to critically examine my assumptions and document how my understanding of the phenomenon evolved throughout the research process. This practice facilitated self-awareness and provided a space to identify and address intersections between my experiences and the data. I also engaged in debriefing with my dissertation chair and colleagues, creating opportunities to discuss emergent findings and challenge my interpretations to ensure they were firmly grounded in the data rather than shaped by preconceived notions. While my position has influenced my approach, I have taken deliberate steps to ensure that my interpretations are transparent, credible, and reflective of the participants' authentic experiences. This acknowledgment of positionality highlights the importance of reflexivity and accountability in qualitative research.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

This chapter presents the study's findings, starting with an introduction to two key strategies school leaders use to navigate tensions arising from both conceptual misalignment and alignment: the "Trojan Horse" and "Floor is Lava" strategies. These overarching themes illustrate how leaders manage the challenges created by differences between their personal conceptions of education and those upheld by their organizations. The chapter then explores how leaders and their organizations conceptualize education through five key constructs: process conception, outcome of interest, essence of the good, measurement, and public goal. It examines how each leader employs the Floor is Lava strategy, the Trojan Horse strategy, or a combination to navigate the tensions they encounter. The chapter further examines how organizational pressures influence leaders' decisions to adopt a particular strategy based on contextual factors. Additionally, the chapter addresses how leaders execute tasks amid conceptual misalignment, framing task execution through the lens of these two strategies. Finally, the chapter concludes with a reflection on the strategies, illustrating how they offer a valuable framework for understanding the study's findings and the complexities of educational leadership. It also highlights the connections between the five constructs and provides insights into the relationship between the constructs.

Trojan Horse Strategy

In Greek mythology, after a long siege, the Greeks built a giant wooden horse and hid soldiers inside. They left it at the gates of Troy as a supposed gift. The Trojans, believing it was a sign of peace, brought it into the city. That night, the Greek soldiers emerged, opened the gates for the returning army, and captured the city, leading to Troy's downfall. This story illustrates how some leaders navigate the tensions they face due to conceptual misalignment within their organization. In a way like the Trojan Horse strategy, leaders outwardly comply with the

structure and organizational priorities, but they have subtly learned to shift the focus of the initiatives toward conceptions that align with their own. Through this approach, leaders can integrate their passion into the larger organizational goals. In doing so, they navigate the tension between organizational expectations and their own values, much like the Greeks cleverly used the Trojan Horse to infiltrate Troy.

Floor is Lava Strategy

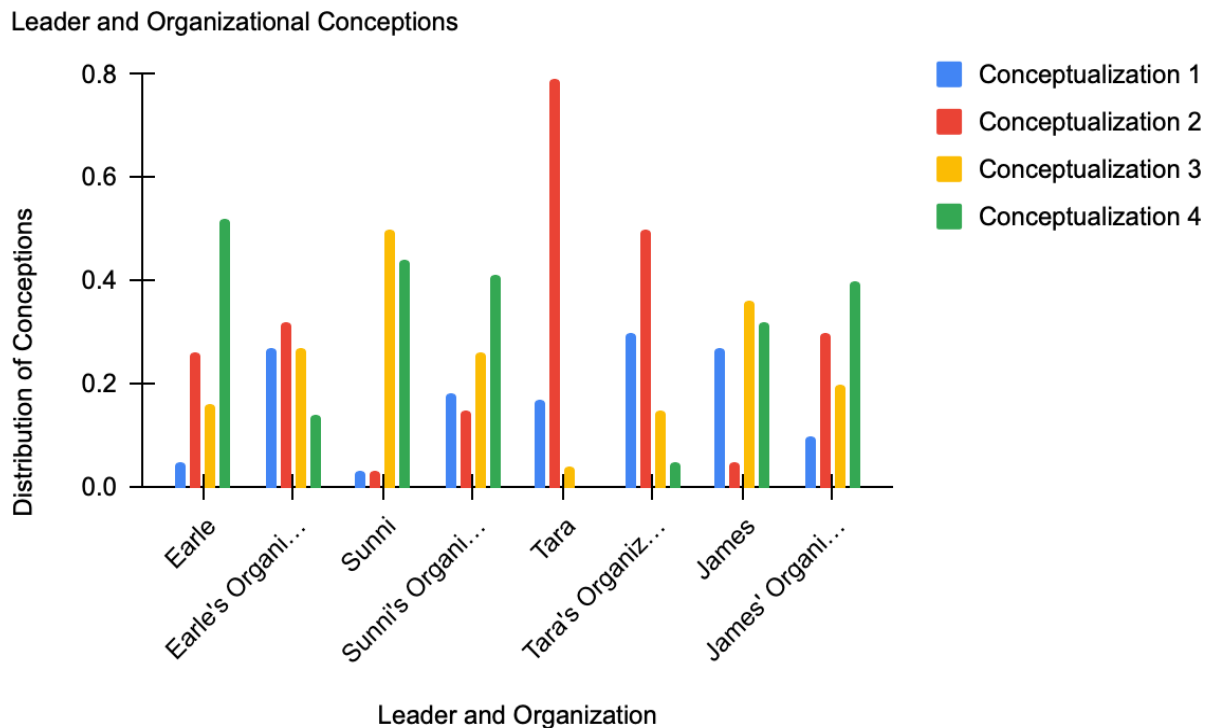
In the childhood game *The Floor is Lava*, children imagine the floor is molten lava, a looming threat they must avoid. To stay "safe," they navigate the space by leaping onto secure spots like furniture, pillows, or cushions, requiring strategy and quick thinking to evade danger. This game serves as a fitting analogy for how some leaders in this study navigated tensions. These leaders demonstrated similar strategic thinking, carefully sidestepping areas of conceptual misalignment—the metaphorical lava. Instead, they concentrated their efforts on areas where their conceptualizations aligned with those of their organizations. These aligned areas acted as safe zones—the metaphorical pillows and cushions—where leaders could operate with confidence. This comparison underscores the delicate balance leaders must maintain as they navigate complex organizational dynamics.

The leaders in the study utilized these two strategies, individually or in combination, to navigate tensions stemming from conceptual misalignment. Their application of these approaches highlights both their commitment to their own educational conceptualizations and their determination to operate within frameworks that align with their personal conceptualizations of education as an economic good.

How Leaders and their Respective Organizations Conceptualize Education as an Economic Good

Interview transcripts, supporting documents, and prescreening materials were systematically coded using the Competing Conceptions of Education as an Economic Good framework. Each occurrence where a leader or their organization expressed beliefs corresponding to Conceptualization 1, 2, 3, or 4 was documented and quantified, creating individual profiles that illustrate their conceptual distributions. Figure 2 denotes the variation in conceptualization between leaders and their organizations. The findings indicate that Earle, Sunni, Tara, and James, along with their respective organizations, align with multiple conceptions of education as an economic good.

Figure 2
Leader and Organization Distribution of Conceptions



While leaders and their respective organizations hold ideas that align with multiple conceptions, a closer examination revealed that both the leaders and their respective organizations demonstrated a dominant conceptualization of education, as indicated by a higher

frequency of alignment with one conception over others. Their held conceptions became particularly evident as leaders discussed and organizations documented their mission and vision statements, recent initiatives related to the purpose of education, and the anticipated outcomes for students. The diversity in expressions highlights the varied perspectives between leaders and their organizations, revealing potential opportunities for misalignment and the emergence of tensions as shown in Table 6.

Table 6
Leader and Organization Conceptions

Leader/ Organization	Conceptualization Distribution	Dominate Conceptualization	Direct Quotes
Earle	C1 5%, C2 26%, C3 16%, C4 52%	Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity	Process Conceptions: “Students would conduct school tours for visitors and parents. They wrote their own scripts; they designed schedules for guests and hosted the event. We are preparing kids to go into the world now.”
Earle’s Organization	C1 27%, C2 32%, C3 27%, C4 14%	Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment and Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product	Process Conception: Advance Programs/Optional Schools- Ensures that students with exceptional academic abilities or specific interests receive the challenges and opportunities they need to reach their full potential.
	C1 3%, C2 3%, C3 50%, C4 44%	Conceptualization 3: Education as a Service	Public Goals: “There is an explicit teaching of equity, like really having conversations with folks about who they’re working with.” Tensions: “Equity can’t be an item on the plate, it has to be the plate. It has to undergird everything that we do.”

Table 6 Leader and Organization Conceptions (continued)

Leader/ Organization	Conceptualization Distribution	Dominant Conceptualization	Direct Quotes
Sunni's Organization	C1 18%, C2 15%, C3 26%, C4 41%	Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity	Measures- Build Trust: Identify and develop additional systems and structures to promote transparency and accountability that will continue to build trust with the community.
Tara	C1 17%, C2 79%, C3 4%, C4 0%	Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment	Measures- "EOC scores, benchmarks, common formative assessments gage the level of mastery of the standards. These are the things we use to measure. The data yielded will drive our PLCs."
Tara's Organization	C1 30%, C2 50%, C3 15%, C4 5%	Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment	Measures- Advance opportunities, access, and outcomes for every student group in college, career, and life-ready skills post- graduation.
James	C1 27%, C2 5%, C3 36%, C4 32%	Conceptualization 3: Education as a Service	Outcome of Interest- "Students should become critical thinkers. They should take ownership and accountability even when they don't like learning. We should be aiming to produce productive citizens. Problem solvers to be the creators. Once a person gains the skill of critical thinking, they can accomplish anything else."
James' Organization	C1 10%, C2 30%, C3 20%, C4 40%	Conceptualization 4: Education as an Investment	The Essence of the Good: Students will exhibit emotional intelligence – they are introspective and self- aware.

Leader and Organization Conceptions of Public Goals

Public goals refer to the leader's or the organization's beliefs about the broader societal purposes of education. The theoretical framework established the intellectual structure for this study. It outlines four conceptions of public goals: efficiency, security, equity, and liberty, corresponding to conceptualizations 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively. The findings reveal a range of conceptualizations among school leaders and their organizations. Each expressing dominant perspectives shaped by personal experiences, organizational missions, and values. Their narratives illustrate how these conceptions influenced leadership practices and decision-making. This section examines how leaders and their organizations conceptualize the public goals of education. It is structured to first explore those who employ the Floor is Lava strategy, followed by those who utilize the Trojan Horse approach.

Leaders Using the Floor is Lava Strategy to Navigate Tensions in Public Goals

Earle primarily conceptualizes education as an identity, closely followed by education as an investment. He is driven by the public goal of fostering liberation by cultivating students with the qualities necessary for leadership and societal transformation. Reflecting on his childhood love for unconventional interests like video games and Legos, Earle emphasized the importance of honoring creativity and individuality in educational settings. He believes schools should focus helping students discover their inherent genius and potential, rather than assessments. With passion in his voice, Earle said, "Children are innately geniuses," he explained, "and it may not be academic. The goal of the adult in the educational setting is to find that genius and push it." He believes that these innate passions and genius can serve as tools to access lucrative industries, thereby leading to increased earning potential. Earle conceptualizes education as a tool for unlocking passions and genius to access lucrative industries, viewing it as an investment where learning equips students for meaningful careers and active economic participation. This

motivation is rooted in the public goal of security. Earle also expressed public goal conceptions that leaned toward education as a public good rather than a private one, demonstrating that a leader can hold multiple conceptions within a single construct. He emphasized the role of schools in shaping students into responsible, self-reflective citizens who contribute positively to their communities. This perspective aligns with the conception of a public goal rooted in liberty, as it underscores education's role in fostering autonomy, critical thinking, and civic engagement. By preparing students to participate actively in society, this view reinforces the belief that education extends beyond individual economic gain to support democratic participation and personal agency.

Earle conceptualizes the public goals of education as both a tool for liberation and an investment, while his organization primarily emphasizes equity and liberty. The organization is vast, with numerous departments, including the Department of Student Affairs (DOSA), which plays a pivotal role in shaping the student experience by fostering development both academically and beyond the classroom. DOSA's mission closely aligns with the organization's broader commitment to equity and liberty. Its overarching educational goals are centered around amplifying student voices and preparing them for success in learning, leadership, and life. The department's vision states that it “aspires to engage ALL students in innovative and equitable student-centered programs.” Its three core pillars—Academic Equity/Student Voice, Student Engagement/Student Leadership, and Early Literacy/Postsecondary Readiness—reflect a commitment to fostering student empowerment and access to opportunities. The organization's emphasis on equity and amplifying student voice underscores its broader conception of public goals, prioritizing long-term societal impact and community well-being. This approach aligns with Conceptualization 3, where the public goal is equity, as equity is explicitly identified as a

foundational pillar. Additionally, it aligns with Conceptualization 4: Education as Identity, where the public goal is liberty. By centering student voice, leadership, and student-driven programs, the organization reinforces the idea that students are active co-creators of their learning environments, fostering agency, self-determination, and empowerment.

Earle and his organization demonstrate both conceptual alignment and misalignment within the construct of public goals. Earle leans toward the public goals of security and liberation, which span both public and private conceptions, while his organization emphasizes equity and liberty, both public conceptions. Earle employs the Floor is Lava strategy within leadership initiatives that prioritize liberation. Both Earle and his organization place significant value on student-centered leadership, with Earle favoring perceived safe zones through this approach. Earle's leadership initiative focuses on student-centered leadership within the school, where students take active roles in programming by greeting guests, hosting events, and writing their own scripts. This initiative will be explored in greater detail later in the chapter. In areas of conceptual alignment—specifically, the conception of the public goal of liberation—these student-centered leadership initiatives serve to amplify student voices, fostering agency and empowerment. Earle displayed an amplified response, exceeding standard expectations and demonstrating an exceptional commitment to aligned goals. Notably, Earle placed greater emphasis on security, a private conception, compared to the organization which focused more heavily on equity. This perceived misalignment resulted in Earle's aversion to discussing equity in the context of public educational goals. Security, as a private conception, often reinforces the stratification of individuals based on their investment in education. In contrast, equity as a public conception seeks to limit such stratification, creating a tension between these competing perspectives.

Sunni conceptualizes education primarily as a service, closely followed by education as an identity. She is motivated by the public goals of equity and liberation. As a queer Black and Asian woman leader, Sunni's personal experiences have shaped her commitment to fostering inclusive and equitable school environments. She highlighted the importance of operationalizing equity, asserting, "Equity can't be an item on the plate—it has to be the plate." Sunni shared how explicit teaching of equity has been a cornerstone of her leadership strategy, particularly when working in historically disenfranchised communities. Without this approach, she warned, leaders may unintentionally perpetuate inequities. Sunni critiques the traditional education system, describing it as a "caste system" that divides people into "haves and have-nots." To counteract this dynamic, she emphasized that education should affirm students' identities rather than mold them into predetermined societal roles. She asserted, advocating for learning experiences that empower students to explore their identities and engage meaningfully with others.

Sunni's organization holds conceptions that are rooted in equity. The organization's mission statement was reviewed to gain insight into its conceptions of the public goals of education. The mission statement reads: "Through a caring culture of equity, trust, and collaboration, every student will graduate ready for college, career, and life." The organization placed an emphasis on the idea of equity. Its strategic plan also dedicates significant focus to equity, including detailed Equity Commitments. These commitments are described as a framework to guide staff in addressing educational equity in specific and impactful ways, ensuring that equity is embedded in decision-making processes. The organization emphasizes that ethics rooted in equity are central to demonstrating integrity, fostering community engagement, and achieving excellence.

The organization further highlighted its approach by stating it is “Leveraging School Improvement to Advance Equity.” This involves integrating school improvement efforts with targeted strategies and interventions to ensure all students have the opportunity to reach their full potential. Additionally, the organization is committed to equity in funding, pledging to allocate resources equitably and appropriately to provide high-quality programming for all students while closing resource gaps.

The organization’s efforts to create a more equitable educational system are evident in its commitment to expanding access to effective strategies, resources, and opportunities for all students. This commitment reflects public goals that align with the organization’s broader collective aims, which are deeply rooted in equity. Moreover, this approach strongly corresponds with Conceptualization 3: Education as a Service, where the primary public goal is achieving equity.

An analysis of the board meeting agenda revealed that the board discussed and approved motions to recognize LGBTQIA+ Pride Month, commemorate Juneteenth, and acknowledge Caribbean-American Heritage Month. The motion was unanimously approved, with all nine voting members in favor. These actions serve as expressions of public goals, reflecting the organization’s commitment to celebrating and honoring traditionally marginalized groups. By formally recognizing these observances, the organization demonstrates its dedication to fostering inclusivity and equity as core values. This aligns strongly with Conceptualization 3: Education as a Service, where the public goal is equity.

In the area of public goals, Sunni and her organization demonstrate conceptual alignment, both leaning toward the public goal of equity. Both Sunni and her organization have developed celebrations that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. Sunni highlighted arts-based artifacts

shared on the school's site, created by students and curated by staff. These artifacts thematically focused on LGBTQIA pride and Black pride, reflecting a strong conceptual alignment with the broader organizational values. Sunni employed the Floor is Lava strategy by operating in areas perceived as safe, leveraging creative expression to foster a culture of inclusivity and equity.

Tara holds markedly different conceptions from Sunni and Earle, predominantly viewing education as an investment with a secondary emphasis on education as a product. Unlike the other leaders, she exhibited little alignment with education as an identity or as a service. Her leadership is driven by the public goals of security and efficiency. Tara recounted how her initial career aspirations in economic development and urban planning shaped her educational philosophy. "I wanted to do economic development and urban planning because I believed the only way to improve the economy was to revitalize the education system," she explained. Tara's focus on security aligns with her belief that education opens opportunities for economic stability. Her emphasis on efficiency was evident in her efforts to enhance course offerings, including the introduction of Advanced Placement (AP) courses such as AP Biology and AP African American Studies. She implemented structural innovations, such as creating AP homerooms, allowing continuous instruction until testing. "We put all of the kids that are in AP in an AP homeroom," she described, emphasizing her strategic efforts to improve academic outcomes through systematic structures.

Tara's organization holds public goal conceptions that promote security. To gain insight into how the organization constructs its conceptions about the public goals of education, the mission vision statement was reviewed. The vision statement says the organization's aim is "to ensure a high-quality, world-class education for every student," reflecting a commitment to providing an educational experience that meets global standards. The mission statement

complements this vision, emphasizing the organization's purpose "to empower all students with exceptional opportunities and access that lead to success in a global society." Together, these statements highlight a focus on preparation, aiming to equip students to be competitive and successful in a rapidly interconnected world by ensuring access and opportunity for all learners.

The focal point of the organization is access to opportunity, highlighting conceptions that are in alignment with public goals because they articulate a collective aim for broader societal outcomes that extend beyond individual achievement. There is a strong alignment with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, where the public goal is security. By focusing on creating pathways to global competitiveness, the organization highlights the role of education in promoting long-term stability and prosperity for both individuals and society.

The organization's strategic plan features the tagline that states, "Taking action to advance opportunities, access and outcomes, so that every student in our school district has exceptional opportunities and an expectational future." This statement highlights the organization's commitment to fostering opportunities for a better future. By emphasizing opportunities, access, and outcomes, the organization highlights its focus on creating pathways for long-term individual and collective growth.

The organization's focus on bridging opportunity reflects its conception of a public goal, as it embodies a broader collective aim rooted in educational equity and student empowerment. This aligns strongly with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, where the public goal is security. The focus on advancing opportunities and ensuring an exceptional future for all students illustrates the belief that investing in education serves as a safeguard for personal stability and societal prosperity.

Tara and her organization both uphold conceptions that emphasize the goal of security, with Tara also leaning toward the public goal of efficiency—both of which are private conceptions. She demonstrated the Floor is Lava strategy by operating within areas of conceptual alignment. Both Tara and her organization highly value advancing opportunities through security. In these areas of alignment, Tara's actions were notably amplified, as she exceeded expectations by creating numerous opportunities for students to access and enroll in AP courses. Her efforts exemplified a strong commitment to fostering academic advancement through secure educational pathways which would be supported by her organization.

Leaders Using the Trojan Horse Strategy to Navigate Tensions in Public Goals

James presented a more balanced conceptual distribution, nearly evenly divided across education as a process, service, and identity. His dominant conceptualization was education as a service, followed by education as an identity. James expressed conceptions that demonstrate he is motivated by the public goals of liberation, equity, and security. He views education as a tool for societal advancement and fostering autonomy. Reflecting on the historical role of education, James noted its use to influence societal behaviors: "Our world used it for religious purposes. In the South, that meant a greater focus on agriculture rather than industrial industries—that's why you have a lot of mechanical and agricultural schools down South." He emphasized the need for education to develop critical thinkers, problem solvers, and creators who can address societal challenges. "Once you gain those skills, you can accomplish anything," he asserted. James' vision centers on using education to transform societal structures and equip individuals to contribute meaningfully to their communities.

James' organization embodies public goal conceptions centered on security. A review of its mission and vision statements reveals a foundational commitment to long-term aspirations.

This vision articulates the goal of becoming a system of world-class schools where students acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for success in college and careers. The mission underscores a dedication to excellence in academic knowledge, skills, and behavior for every student, with a focus on measurable improvement against local, national, and global benchmarks.

The organization defines "world-class" as a distinction achieved through both qualitative and quantitative measures, recognizing a product, service, or entity as among the best in its category. This status is affirmed by customers, stakeholders, professional peers, and competitors, emphasizing a pursuit of excellence acknowledged on a broad scale.

Additionally, the organization's adopted curriculum standards emphasize preparing students for college and 21st-century careers within a globally competitive landscape. These standards align with the mission and vision by equipping students with the essential skills, knowledge, and competencies necessary to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world. College and career readiness is the organization's focal point, embodying its conceptions of public goals and broader aspirations for its graduates. Through second-level coding, this alignment correlates with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, where national security and the development of a competent workforce are central outcomes.

James demonstrates more diverse conceptions of public goals compared to his organization, encompassing elements of liberation, equity, and security. In contrast, the organization primarily emphasizes security, with a strong focus on college and career readiness—private conceptions of educational public goals. James leaned more heavily toward public conceptions, striving to address holistic student development beyond academic and career pathways. His execution of the mentorship program exemplifies the Trojan Horse strategy. While the outward-facing purpose centered on preparing young males for college and careers,

James subtly embedded character development opportunities within these sessions. By integrating lessons on personal growth and responsibility, he went beyond traditional academic preparation, fostering a more comprehensive educational experience that aligned with his expansive vision for public goals.

Leader and Organization Conceptions of Process Conceptions

The process conceptions of these leaders and their organizations convey how they perceive and implement systematic methods to achieve desired educational outcomes for students. The theoretical framework posits four conceptions for processes: production, opportunity, delivery, and creation, corresponding to Conceptualizations 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively. Their distinct approaches reflect the impact of personal experiences and organizational contexts, shaping both their leadership practices and decision-making strategies.

Leaders Using the Floor is Lava Strategy to Navigate Tensions in Process Conceptions

Earle's process conception is rooted in creation, aligning with Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity. His consistent emphasis on fostering student leadership emerged as a defining theme throughout his reflections. Earle described his implementation of a school-wide book study based on Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* as a pivotal initiative designed to enhance school culture. This effort inspired the establishment of "a pathway to leadership" for students from kindergarten through fifth grade. Students assumed active roles in the school's operations, such as serving as tour guides, organizing schedules, and hosting events during "no pass days," where they crafted their own scripts and schedules. These experiences, according to Earle, prepared students to be future leaders by encouraging creativity and responsibility. His vision highlights the importance of students as creators and co-designers of their school culture, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment.

Like Earle, his organization holds process conceptions that are rooted in creation. To gain insight into how the organization has constructed knowledge about its intended processes for activating outcomes, I reviewed job descriptions for teachers and leaders. These descriptions provide valuable information about the roles, responsibilities, and expectations for educators, shaped by the organization's strategic goals and educational philosophy. Teachers in this organization are expected to demonstrate a "fierce commitment to actualizing a bold vision that yields ambitious outcomes." To achieve this, they are tasked with presenting innovative ideas, finding alternative pathways when challenges arise, delivering measurable results for students and families, and mobilizing efforts to remove stubborn barriers that hinder success.

The capacities expected of teachers and their implications for the processes used to activate outcomes for students are central to this approach. It aligns most closely with Education as an Identity, where the process conception is creation. The emphasis on innovation, empowerment, barrier removal, and inclusivity reflect a process that actively constructs new pathways and opportunities tailored to student success. Rather than focusing solely on producing predetermined outcomes or offering opportunities, the district adopts a creative and transformative approach to meet the unique needs of its students and families, dynamically working toward ambitious outcomes.

Both Earle and his organization believe that the process for achieving intended educational outcomes is rooted in creation, aligning with Conceptualization 4: Education as Identity. This alignment, as seen with other leaders, demonstrates an amplified response, with efforts exceeding standard expectations to execute initiatives reflecting this belief. Earle's development of a student-focused leadership series, where students served as co-creators of the school's culture, design, and fabric, was likely fueled by conceptual alignment.

Tara's conceptions align with Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product and Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, where process conceptions are rooted in production and opportunity. Reflecting on her experiences as one of the few Black students in an affluent Jewish community, Tara emphasized how access to rigorous coursework shaped her educational journey. Exposure to college-preparatory courses starting in elementary school prepared her for higher academic achievement. Tara highlighted the importance of strategic structures that create educational opportunities, particularly for historically marginalized students.

She described her work in implementing a tracking system, dividing students based on their academic abilities to provide targeted educational experiences. Although tracking is often critiqued in educational literature, Tara believes it can be improved by expanding access to gifted programming and advanced coursework. Her focus reflects a production model, where organized inputs, such as rigorous courses and academic structures, are designed to yield measurable outcomes, including student achievement and success.

Like Tara, her organization demonstrates conceptions that emphasize opportunity. A review of the organization's strategic plan highlights a central theme of taking action to enhance opportunities, access, and outcomes in pursuit of ambitious goals. This framework establishes the organization's approach to fostering equity and excellence across all areas of education. The plan outlines several priority areas, a few of which are highlighted here:

- Priority Area 1: The organization commits to advancing opportunities, access, and outcomes for every student group in literacy proficiency at every grade level.
- Priority Area 2: It focuses on improving opportunities, access, and outcomes for all student groups in readiness to learn at every level.

- Priority Area 3: It emphasizes preparing all student groups with the necessary skills to be college, career, and life ready upon graduation.

The priorities function as processes because they explicitly describe how the organization intends to activate its intended outcomes. Each priority outlines a structured approach to creating opportunities and ensuring that all students have access to learning experiences that support their development. This aligns strongly with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, where the process conception is opportunity. The organization's focus on building the pathways needed for future success reflects the principles of investing in human capital.

Tara and her organization both hold privatized conceptions of process conceptions. Tara leans toward production and opportunity, while the organization primarily focuses on opportunity. Their shared emphasis on college preparation created conceptual alignment, leading Tara to employ the Floor is Lava strategy. This alignment also triggered an amplified response, with Tara going above and beyond to provide extensive support in this area.

James shares similarities with Earle and Sunni in aligning with Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity, where creation is central to the educational process conceptions. He emphasized the importance of fostering critical thinkers who can engage meaningfully with the world. James recounted asking his students to pose questions about the world, emphasizing that the goal was not whether their answers were right or wrong but simply to encourage independent thought.

To illustrate the importance of critical thinking, James provided the example of a student studying agriculture. He explained how critical thinking would enable the student to innovate by asking questions like, "What can I do to make this food better? What can I do to produce more?" This narrative underscore James' belief that education should cultivate problem-solvers and

innovators capable of driving advancement across diverse fields. His urgency to develop these skills in students mirrors Earle's desire to cultivate leadership now, contrasting sharply with Tara's delayed value approach inherent in the investment model.

James' organization holds conceptions that are rooted in creation, like James, but also opportunity and delivery- spanning across public and private conceptions. A review of the organization's strategic plan highlights a deliberate focus on building internal capacity to effectively execute its stated priorities, goals, and objectives. Central to the strategic plan are core objectives designed to anchor the organization's efforts in order to see the intended goals reach fruition. The focus is on commitment to empathy, equity, effectiveness, and excellence. According to the organization, these objectives are intended to manifest in the school's culture and climate.

The organization emphasizes empathy as a key value, aiming to cultivate an environment where understanding and compassion underpin all stakeholder interactions. Empathy is activated through efforts to increase cultural competence, enhance cultural proficiency, prioritize staff well-being, and encourage self-care. Equity ensures that resources and support systems are distributed to meet the diverse needs of the student body. The organization plans to achieve this by developing a comprehensive Multi-Tiered System of Supports framework addressing academic and non-academic needs, increasing access to rigorous coursework, enriching arts and gifted programs, expanding STEM and career/technical education, and allocating resources equitably based on students' academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs. Effectiveness reflects the organization's commitment to evidence-based practices that produce measurable outcomes. This includes redefining the inputs, behaviors, and outcomes tied to student success, transforming talent management and human resources, and focusing on the educational return on

investment. Finally, excellence represents the organization's commitment to high standards in all aspects of education. This is achieved by preparing every student for post-secondary success, offering multiple pathways aligned with their knowledge, skills, abilities, and interests.

The organization's focal areas illustrate how the organization intends to activate its desired outcomes, aligning with several conceptualizations of education. Developing cultural competencies under the goal of empathy, redefining inputs, behaviors, and outputs, and transforming talent management to meet organizational goals aligns with Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity, where the process conception is creation. The emphasis on allocating resources to meet the diverse needs of the student body under the goal of equity aligns more closely with Conceptualization 3: Education as a Service, where the process conception is delivery. Additionally, the organization's commitment to educational return on investment and preparing students for post-secondary success aligns with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, where the process conception is opportunity.

There is evidence that James employees the Floor is Lava strategy particularly in areas where James aligns closely with his organization's goals, such as fostering empathy and equity, which emphasize student support and opportunity creation. In these aligned areas, his efforts seem intensified, with James going above and beyond, such as embedding critical thinking and problem-solving elements into tasks that align with organizational goals around college and career readiness. This exacerbated focus in areas of alignment—where James invests significant energy and attention—strongly indicates characteristics of the Floor is Lava strategy, where leaders "stay safe" by focusing on preferred areas while strategically navigating potential tensions elsewhere.

Leaders Using the Trojan Horse Strategy to Navigate Tensions in Process Conceptions

Sunni holds ideals aligned with Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity, where creation drives the process conception, she also embodies elements of Conceptualization 3: Education as a Service, where delivery plays a central role. Sunni explained that education should offer culturally responsive and anti-racist experiences that empower students by providing “mirrors into their own lives and windows into the world around them.” To achieve these outcomes, Sunni advocates for the implementation of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, which fosters intellectual, personal, emotional, and social development through a rigorous, well-rounded curriculum. Sunni envisions learning as a dynamic process where knowledge is self-generated, valid, and reliable.

She recounted a story involving a student frequently disciplined for behavioral issues but passionate about cosmetology, particularly solving problems related to thinning hair. Together, Sunni and the student researched remedies for hair loss, transforming a disciplinary relationship into a learning partnership grounded in creativity and curiosity. Sunni emphasized that the goal was not whether the student was right or wrong but whether they could think critically and freely. Her approach embodies a dynamic process of education that adapts to student interests, fostering engagement and self-discovery.

Sunni’s organization, like herself, holds process conceptions that are rooted in delivery with mechanisms that underpin equitable education through the implementing strategies and systems designed to provide meaningful educational experiences. By emphasizing delivery as a critical pathway, the organization connects its strategic objectives to its broader goal of achieving equity, ensuring that all students have access to opportunities that support their growth and success. Sunni’s organization has clearly outlined its strategic objectives within its comprehensive strategic plan, detailing the processes it will implement to achieve its goals and

mission. These objectives include expanding the impact of high-performing schools by replicating best practices from those that effectively close racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps. Additionally, the organization aims to foster inclusive and collaborative environments that support all students, including those with disabilities and English learners. Recognizing the importance of leadership and educator influence, the plan also emphasizes shifting adult mindsets to prioritize equity and fairness. Furthermore, the organization seeks to adopt equity-focused timelines that tailor support and intervention strategies based on the unique needs of individual schools. Finally, the strategic plan commits to equitably distributing and maximizing resources to ensure that every school has the necessary tools to succeed.

Sunni and her organization demonstrate alignment in employing delivery as a process conception to advance the broader public goal of equity. Both prioritize delivery; however, Sunni also gravitates toward creation, which her organization does not, presenting a potential area of tension. In this instance, Sunni applied the Trojan Horse Strategy by embedding her true conceptions within an outwardly defined role. As an AP responsible for managing behavioral concerns, rather than simply enforcing disciplinary actions, she leaned into the creation aspect of her process conception. She provided the student with an opportunity to become a co-creator in learning initiatives, moving beyond the traditional delivery-focused approach, when together they search for a solution to a real-world problem.

Leader and Organization Conceptions of the Essence of the Good

The essence of the good refers to the immediate, tangible benefits that education provides to individuals or society. It emphasizes education as a resource with practical or moral value, focusing on the expected outcomes or advantages for those receiving educational services. This essence is rooted in the immediate value of education. The theoretical framework asserts that the

essence of the good, or its immediate value, can be stockpiled, take the form of currency/be delayed, be immediately consumed, or be morally sanctioned. These conceptions correspond to Conceptions 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively. To explore this concept, I focused on each leader's leadership initiative, seeking out explanations to offer insight into their conceptions about education's immediate value.

Leaders Using the Floor is Lava Strategy to Navigate Tensions in the Essence of the Good

Earle holds conceptions closely aligned with Conceptualization Four: Education as an Identity, where education's immediate value is morally sanctioned. Reflecting on his work with a school-wide book study, Earle consistently emphasized his belief that all children possess an innate genius, even if it is not academic. He viewed school as a place where students can recognize their uniqueness and leverage it to impact their communities. He elaborated, "Students should feel that they have an ability that sets them apart from everyone else, and they can lead in their community because of that uniqueness." This deep conviction drove his leadership initiatives. Earle's focus on cultivating students' inner strengths and fostering a sense of worthiness and leadership highlights the immediate moral value of education, shaping character and promoting social responsibility. Through these processes, Earle aimed to develop individuals who contribute meaningfully to their communities, embodying social responsibility and moral purpose.

Earle's organization, like Earle, embraces conceptions strongly aligned with Conceptualization Four: Education as an Identity, where education's immediate value is morally sanctioned. Additionally, it reflects elements of Education as a Product, emphasizing the stockpile and preservation of knowledge as a valuable resource. The Office of Academics oversees the planning, development, implementation, assessment, and continuous improvement

of teaching and learning, along with related support for students and staff. According to its website, the office's primary goal is to ensure students achieve high academic standards and are prepared for career and college readiness. Its vision statement articulates a commitment to producing well-rounded graduates who can compete globally by persevering through challenges, thinking critically, advocating for their own learning, and collaborating effectively with diverse peers.

The essence of good is emphasized through measurable qualities and a clearly articulated purpose. The notion that education should aim to produce well-rounded, globally resilient graduates who think critically and advocate for their own learning aligns with Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity, where the essence of the good is morally sanctioned. The organization's LEA improvement plan outlines five goal areas, with the top two priorities rooted in academics: reading/language arts and mathematics. The primary strategy for addressing these priorities is standards-aligned core instruction, ensuring students access a curriculum that promotes mastery of state standards and prepares them for career and college readiness. Key action steps include resource alignment initiatives such as reading and math prescriptions, re-teach calendars, performance-based objectives, curriculum maps, curriculum toolkits, and pacing guides. These tools provide structured support for achieving measurable improvements in student outcomes. This approach aligns with Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, where the essence of the good is stockpiled through the accumulation of measurable academic achievements.

Earle and his organization demonstrate some alignment in viewing education as a morally sanctioned good. However, they also demonstrate divergence in their conceptualizations, as the organization also embraces education as a product, emphasizing the accumulation and

standardization of curriculum resources. Earle employed the Floor is Lava strategy in this area of misalignment, opting not to prioritize the stockpiling of curricular materials. His approach to resources is shaped by personal experiences and investments, focusing on student individuality and passions. In contrast, the organization emphasizes standardized instruction through pacing guides, toolkits, and curriculum maps, promoting a more uniform educational approach.

Tara, unlike Earle, holds conceptions that lean toward the delayed value of education, indicated by Conceptualization Two: Education as an Investment, and Conceptualization One: Education as a Product, where the essence of the good is viewed as a stockpile. Reflecting on her leadership initiative, Tara described collaborating with her administrative team to restructure the school's master schedule, adding five new Advanced Placement (AP) courses—including AP African American Studies and AP Calculus—and restructuring the school's Extended Learning Time (ELT) for targeted interventions and enrichment. AP students were grouped by course for advanced learning, while remedial students were placed in focused homerooms.

Tara's initiative stockpiled courses and resources to address student needs. Because her focus included AP courses offering potential college credit, her actions exemplified an investment, where the immediate value of education is delayed, contingent upon student success in AP exams. Tara observed a stratified system where "opportunity tracks are set up for them," indicating that educational pathways can significantly shape future outcomes. Her perspective underscores the notion of delayed value—education as a strategic investment yielding long-term benefits.

Tara's organization embodies conceptions aligned with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, where the value of education is realized over time, as well as Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, where education is considered beneficial because it

can be accumulated and stored for future use. Both conceptions lean towards the privatization of education. A review of the organization's strategic plan emphasizes themes such as exceptional opportunities, exceptional futures, exceptional support, and exceptional access. These themes serve as guiding values, underscoring the organization's commitment to fostering long-term outcomes for its students—outcomes that may be delayed but are intended to hold significant value for their future success.

The organization has identified several strategic initiatives to achieve these aspirations, including increasing students' exploration of, access to, and participation in advanced coursework and educational experiences. Furthermore, a core policy outlined by the organization's board, advance opportunities, access, and outcomes, reinforces the focus on delayed value, as these actions aim to equip students with skills and opportunities that will benefit them over time.

The essence of the good is reflected in the defining features the organization has identified as central to its mission and vision. This aligns strongly with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, where the essence of the good is characterized by its delayed value—benefits that students will reap in the form of improved life opportunities and future success. To advance the access to opportunity, the organization strategically emphasizes the offering of AP courses and a robust collection of curricular resources. This extensive repertoire resembles a stockpile of pre-designed materials ready for deployment by schools. Such an approach aligns with Conceptualization One Education as a Product, where the essence of education is deemed beneficial because it can be accumulated and stored for future use, stockpiled. Both Tara and her organization align in viewing the essence of education as having a delayed value and the capacity to be stockpiled. Tara employed the "Floor is Lava" strategy by

operating within safe zones of agreement with the organization. This alignment resulted in an amplified response to her initiatives, demonstrating mutual reinforcement.

James demonstrated conceptions aligned with immediate consumption, contrasting Tara's focus on delayed outcomes. James promoted the idea of fostering critical thinking in students with a sense of urgency, believing this work can begin immediately. "It doesn't have to wait for a moment; it can just start," James asserted. This immediacy reflects his belief that critical thinking empowers students to contribute meaningfully to societal progress right away. He provided the example of students in agriculture who could innovate by asking questions like, "What can I do to make this food better? What can I do to produce more?" James's focus on real-time engagement parallels Sunni's vision of immediate value. Both emphasize education as a process that fosters civic engagement and practical problem-solving in real-time, which also hold conceptions that are morally sanctioned. This urgency contrasts sharply with Tara's investment-focused approach, where education's value is deferred. Like Earle, James also highlighted the importance of students questioning the world around them, promoting a creative engagement model that empowers immediate contributions to both personal development and societal advancement. James' organization aligns closely with Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity, where the essence of education is morally sanctioned. According to the organization's Blueprint for the Future document, the organization highlights its long-standing legacy of performance and innovation, emphasizing its belief in having positively contributed to the county's economic growth. At its core, the organization is committed to building effective practices, promoting diversity, and delivering innovative and thematic programming to students. The blueprint outlines a focus on increasing access to career and technical education certifications, advanced academics, college credits, as well as opportunities in music, arts, and

athletics. Additionally, it prioritizes creating a safe and supportive environment where students can thrive. This includes fostering positive behaviors and ensuring that young people have opportunities to learn and grow as much as possible, equipping them for success in life's endeavors. The essence of the good is reflected in the organization's core educational purpose or intent, which serves as the foundation for constructing knowledge about education as an economic good. This aligns strongly with Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity, where the essence of the good is morally sanctioned.

Both James and his organization share the belief that the essence of education is morally sanctioned. Additionally, James views education as something that can be immediately consumed, highlighting its practical and present-day impact on learners. These perspectives align with the idea of education as a public good. James actively encourages students to pose questions about their capacity for innovative thinking and contributions to society, aligning with the organization's desire to foster innovation in student thinking. He employs the Floor is Lava strategy by prioritizing initiatives that align with the shared conceptions of both the leader and the organization.

Leaders Using the Trojan Horse Strategy to Navigate Tensions in the Essence of the Good

Sunni, like Earle, leaned toward the immediate value of education being morally sanctioned but also emphasized education at its essence should have the capacity for immediate consumption. She believes that education should cultivate students' personal conscience and shape cultural values. Sunni critiqued the current system as inherently opportunity-based and stratified, with access dependent on social positioning. She described education as "an opportunity to gain force-fed knowledge and some critical thinking skills, but the worth depends on the student and the opportunities they're afforded." Sunni expressed a desire for an education

system capable of delivering immediate, tangible results through practical, real-world learning. For example, she described a student learning about a musical instrument and immediately understanding its purpose or how to play it. This viewpoint aligns with Conceptualization Three: Education as a Service, where education is immediately consumed, reflecting Sunni's belief that education should yield actionable outcomes students can immediately apply.

Sunni further articulated her beliefs about the moral and cultural impact of education. She said, "It looks like kids being able to speak up and speak out about themselves." Sunni recounted her experience leading a student poetry club to its first participation in a district-hosted poetry slam. Initially facing resistance from organizers who questioned the readiness of her elementary students, Sunni persisted—booking transportation, arranging lunch, and preparing her students despite the possibility of rejection. She reframed her young poets as "blooming artists" rather than "babies." Her students shared powerful, original poems such as "My Black is Beautiful" and pieces on LGBTQ issues, representing diverse perspectives. This experience highlighted Sunni's dedication to the moral essence of education by amplifying student voices and promoting cultural expression.

Sunni's organization embraces conceptions aligned with Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity, where the essence of education is morally sanctioned. Additionally, it reflects Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, where education serves as a currency with a focus on delayed returns. A review of the organization's strategic plan highlights a strong emphasis on building a lasting legacy. The plan outlines a vision for fostering a high-performing school district where students thrive and love learning, educators inspire, families actively engage, and the community places its trust in the educational system.

The organization's held conceptions align with Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity, where the essence of the good is framed as being morally sanctioned. This alignment suggests that the organization's vision reflects a deeper moral and ethical commitment to fostering a positive and inclusive educational environment. By prioritizing love for learning, inspiration, engagement, and trust, the organization positions itself as a steward of not only academic excellence but also communal well-being, aiming to create a shared identity centered on mutual respect, collaboration, and moral responsibility.

An analysis of a publicly accessible grant application from the organization to the Georgia Department of Education revealed a request for federal funds to support Comprehensive Support and Improvement elementary schools. The grant application sought funding not to exceed \$7,804,200 in federal funds to establish a structured literacy support coach position. The essence of the good is emphasized by addressing critical needs through structured literacy support, which demonstrates the immediate value of education. This investment in literacy coaching reflects a tangible effort to improve student outcomes. There is a strong alignment with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, where the immediate value of education is seen as both currency and delayed value. The financial investment anticipates a measurable return through improved literacy rates, enhanced teacher capacity, and better school performance.

Sunni holds conceptions rooted in the belief that education offers immediate benefits and that its essence is morally sanctioned. While her organization shows partial alignment, there are also areas of misalignment. The organization predominantly leans toward the idea that the essence of education is morally sanctioned, aligning with Sunni's values. However, its focus on education as an investment, emphasizing delayed returns, diverges from Sunni's views. Sunni

employed the Floor is Lava strategy, prioritizing and leaning into areas of conceptual alignment, particularly by promoting arts, culture, and diversity as morally sanctioned endeavors. Sunni conceives education as immediately beneficial, emphasizing its value through direct and immediate consumption. In contrast, her organization leans toward conceptions that prioritize delayed outcomes, creating a potential area of tension. Similar to Earle, Sunni operates with a strong sense of urgency, believing in the power to input and achieve intended outcomes in the present. This approach may conflict with the organization's longer-term, delayed outcome focus, highlighting possible points of contention. This was evident in Sunni's poetry initiative. While the organization sought delayed value, preferring the "Blooming Poets" to wait until their perceived maturation, Sunni acted with urgency to impart her intended conceptions in the present, as she conceives the essence of education to be immediately consumed. In this instance, Sunni employed the Trojan Horse strategy. Outwardly, she and the organization demonstrate conceptual alignment, as both parties place value on morally sanctioned conceptions, indicators on conceptualization 4. As a result, both value the poetry and arts-based initiative of a poetry slam. However, Sunni also holds conceptions rooted in immediate consumption, an essence of the good outlined in Conceptualization 3. To navigate this, she embedded her own priorities by acting decisively and inviting her "blooming poets" to the event, despite the organization's recommendation to wait until they were older.

Leader Conceptions of the Measures

Measures refer to the methods that leaders use to externally validate their progress toward achieving educational goals, allowing them to assess how closely they are moving toward desired outcomes and public goals of education. The theoretical framework posits that measures can be conceptualized as grades and test scores, access to jobs and colleges, civic engagement, or

cultural values. These conceptions represent measures from conceptualization 1,2,3, and 4 respectively. To explore this concept, leaders were asked about how they measure progress toward achieving educational goals.

Leaders Using the Trojan Horse Strategy to Navigate Tensions in Measures

Sunni holds conceptions that emphasize culture and values, aligning with Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity. She also shares perspectives aligned with Conceptualization 3: Education as a Service, which highlights civic engagement, and Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, focusing on grades and test scores. Sunni believes progress can be measured when students are empowered to question and be questioned about the world around them. Progress, in her view, becomes evident when students acquire and use knowledge and skills to construct valid arguments or propose solutions to real-world issues. Sunni passionately advocated for education as a tool for empowerment, enabling individuals to make informed choices and contribute actively to society.

Sunni recalled a pivotal moment with a young male student interviewed by a well-known barber about his career aspirations. Initially, the student mentioned wanting to be a football player. After reflecting, he shifted his response, expressing a desire to become a zoologist to help address ocean pollution. Sunni highlighted this as a defining example of progress towards educational goals—the student’s ability to articulate thoughtful ideas, think critically, and form a well-informed perspective on his future. His advocacy for animal rights and environmental protection exemplified Sunni’s conception of educational success as fostering problem-solving skills and civic engagement.

Surprisingly, Sunni also emphasized academic measures aligned with Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product. She described reviewing formative assessments such as the Measure

of Academic Progress (MAP), common assessments, and benchmark data to inform instructional planning. Sunni explained that progress became clear when students advanced from grade-level performance to higher levels or when those initially below grade level moved toward developing proficiency on the GMAS reading. Despite her strong orientation toward education as a public good, Sunni noted that personalized learning initiatives could simultaneously enhance both student engagement and academic achievement.

Sunni's organization adopts a dual approach to educational measures. It aligns with Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, where success is evaluated through grades and test scores. At the same time, it reflects Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity, emphasizing culture and values as key indicators of educational outcomes. A review of district-wide priority areas, including graduation rates, Georgia Milestones Math scores, and Georgia Milestones English Language Arts scores, highlighted a strategic focus on key objectives. These include closing the achievement gap for students scoring proficient or above in ELA and Math, as well as boosting student performance on the SAT and ACT. The plan emphasizes the need for growth in these key areas across all schools within the district. The report also highlighted achievements related to these grades and test scores metrics, noting significant progress in student performance. In 2019, the district recorded its highest gains to date in the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on the Georgia Milestones End-of-Grade and End-of-Course Assessments across all subjects. Approximately one-third of students scored proficient or better in all 24 assessments. Furthermore, 2,506 students graduated on time in 2019, the highest number since 2012. The district's strategic goals are designed to build on these objectives. These held conceptions are measures because they reflect how the organization externally validates its

progress toward achieving its goals. These expressions align strongly with Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, where measures are accessed through grades and test scores.

The organization has also articulated a clear set of core values that guide its mission and operations. These core values include prioritizing students and schools, committing to teamwork, focusing on effective communication, demonstrating mutual respect, maintaining accountability, acting with integrity, and embracing and driving change. These principles form the foundation of the organization's culture and serve as a compass for decision-making and stakeholder interactions. These conceptions are measures, as they reflect the organization's external validity and the standards by which it evaluates its practices and relationships. Further analysis revealed a strong alignment with Conceptualization 4, where measures are rooted in culture and values. By embedding these values into its operations, the organization has measures that are not only quantitative but also deeply qualitative. It is important to note that Sunni perceives her organization as being primarily aligned with Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, where success is measured through grades and test scores.

Sunni embraces a broad range of conceptions about educational measures, including grades and test scores, civic engagement, and culture and values, aligned with Conceptualizations 1, 3, and 4, respectively. However, her view of using grades and test scores as measures comes with a caveat. Sunni feels that her organization places excessive emphasis on CCRPI-related metrics for school improvement, as evidenced by their expectation for her to lead data chats with staff. Despite this, Sunni prefers to use these meetings to address equity issues. Employing a strategy reminiscent of the Trojan Horse, she adheres to the structure of the data chats but subtly shifts the conversation toward equity. This approach allows her to integrate her passion for equity, using it as a framework for discussing the data her organization prioritizes.

Leaders Using the Floor is Lava Strategy to Navigate Tensions in Measures

Tara's conceptions span Conceptualizations 1 and 2, where education is measured by grades, test scores, and access to college and career pathways. She emphasized data-driven measures, such as End of Course test scores, content mastery rates, district benchmarks, and common formative assessments. Tara highlighted that these data points play a critical role in guiding Professional Learning Communities focused on student learning goals and instructional improvements. She drew connections between increased content mastery and rising achievement scores, emphasizing her commitment to ensuring students truly learn and understand the curriculum. For Tara, success was not just about high scores but about deep comprehension and mastery—an approach rooted in preparing students for future success and aligning with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment.

Tara's organization holds conceptions aligned with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, emphasizing access to college and career pathways. It also reflects Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, where grades and test scores are used as key indicators of external validation. The organization's strategic plan includes priority student outcome goal statements, each accompanied by specified measurement tools to assess their progress and external validity in meeting these goals.

For Priority Student Outcome 1, which states the organization “will advance opportunities, access, and outcomes for every group in literacy proficiency at every grade,” the measurement tools include Lexile levels via MAP test (with plans to transition to Lexile via RI or HMH Reading Growth), the use of a District Common Writing Benchmark aligned with the forthcoming writing and word work program, and a report on student participation in world language programs.

For Priority Student Outcome-2, which states the organization “will advance opportunities, access, and outcomes for every student group in readiness to learn at every level,” measures include a report on student participation in advanced coursework.

For Priority Student Outcome 3, which aims to “advance opportunities, access, and outcomes for every student group in college, career, and life-ready skills post-graduation,” metrics include performance data from ACT, SAT, and PSAT 8/10 exams, reports on students’ college readiness in ELA and Math, and a report on students completing a pathway and earning a passing score on the End of Pathway Assessment (EOPA) in areas offering an industry credential.

These metrics externally validate the organization progress towards meeting goals. There is an alignment with Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, where grades and test scores are the primary indicators of achievement. Metrics such as MAP test scores, Lexile levels, district benchmark scores, ACT, SAT, and PSAT results are directly tied to academic performance and reflect traditional measures of educational progress.

Additionally, I observed some alignment with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, where the focus extends beyond academic achievement to include access to college and career opportunities. For example, the passing score on the industry credential and standardized tests like the ACT, SAT, and PSAT can serve a dual purpose: as grades and test scores and as gateways to post-secondary education and career readiness.

Both Tara and her organization share conceptions that emphasize access to college and career pathways alongside grades and test scores. This alignment has fueled Tara's initiatives, creating a strong sense of cohesion. According to Tara, she and her organization "think alike," which has fostered increased synergy and collaboration between them. Tara employs the Floor is

Lava strategy, though it seems she doesn't need to navigate perceived danger zones. She still had some concerns about using grades and test scores as truly accurate measures of content mastery. However, her alignment with organizational values creates what can be described as larger "safe zones," reducing potential areas of tension and conflict. This conceptual alignment allows her to move more smoothly and easily through her leadership journey.

James, like Sunni, demonstrated conceptions that span public and private constructs. As a leader in an alternative school setting, he emphasized individualized assessments, metaphorically describing measurement as a "tailor-made measuring stick" suited to each student's growth in academic, social, or behavioral areas. He acknowledged the challenge of capturing diverse forms of progress but emphasized the necessity of measurable criteria. James also leaned toward measures involving grades and test scores, noting that some of his students, though in the tenth grade, read at a second-grade level. He questioned the fairness of assessing these students against grade-level peers, advocating instead for recognizing progress when a student advanced from a second grade to a sixth grade reading level by year's end. This perspective highlights the importance of growth-oriented measures tailored to individual student needs, emphasizing both immediate and long-term success.

Both Sunni and James focused on test scores, particularly emphasizing reading proficiency as a critical value, which set them apart from the conceptions held by Tara. While Tara prioritized content mastery and preparing students for future academic success, Sunni and James highlighted the immediate and practical importance of improving reading skills. Their perspectives highlight a belief that reading proficiency serves as a foundational tool for broader educational engagement and lifelong learning, offering students immediate opportunities to access and interact meaningfully with knowledge.

The organization's strategic plan outlines Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to track both future outcomes and past events, aligned with goals of Empathy, Equity, Effectiveness, and Excellence. For Empathy, KPIs include student and family survey data measuring cultural proficiency, belonging, well-being, diversity, and Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) student retention. Equity KPIs focus on Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) data, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) implementation, reading levels, milestone improvements, advanced coursework participation, gifted program representation, and post-secondary assessment participation.

Effectiveness KPIs assess College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) target achievement, ACCESS growth rates, and teacher retention initiatives. Excellence KPIs track employee retention, satisfaction surveys, graduation rates, college readiness, Career and Technology Education (CTE) pathway completion, and STEM performance.

These KPIs align with multiple educational conceptualizations: Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product emphasizes grades and test scores; Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment focuses on career and college access; Conceptualization 3: Education as a Service highlights civic engagement; and Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity underscores culture and values. Together, these measures provide a comprehensive framework for assessing organizational success.

James and his organization share overlapping conceptualizations of educational measures, creating a sense of alignment in their priorities and approaches. When asked to identify which organizational tenet he would most or least like to support, James struggled to make a distinction, even in a hypothetical scenario. This difficulty highlights his strong commitment to the organization's conceptions of measures and his belief in the

interconnectedness of its goals. Rather than ranking priorities, James views them as equally essential components of a comprehensive educational strategy, each contributing to the development and success of students in meaningful ways. In this case concerning measures, James, like Tara, has broader perceived safe zones and fewer areas of perceived danger, allowing for easier navigation.

Leaders Using both the Floor is Lava Strategy and Trojan Horse Strategy to Navigate Tensions in Measures

Earle exemplifies a leader who evaluates progress toward public goals through dual lenses: access to college and career pathways, aligning with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, and the cultivation of culture and values, reflecting Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity. Reflecting on industry connectedness to student passions particularly for gaming, Earle asserted that students should be able to tap into the multibillion-dollar gaming industry. He challenged traditional approaches that often dissociate children from video games, advocating instead for leveraging their passions. He focused on bridging student interests with real-world career possibilities, fostering a sense of purpose in education. Earle also noted challenges his students faced with character development, particularly in human interaction and managing the effects of anger and failure on mental health. In response, he introduced a character development series, aiming for success when “kids are able to work together, collaborating and focusing on teamwork while prioritizing work over play.” He emphasized that these qualities were essential for students to thrive in the real world, aligning his leadership vision with personal growth and social responsibility.

Earle’s organization embraces conceptions aligned with Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, where grades and test scores serve as indicators of external validity. Additionally,

the organization holds conceptions aligned with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, emphasizing access to college and career as a critical measure of the value of educational services. An examination of the organization's website showed prioritization of standardized assessment. Four out of five of the featured news stories centered on standardized assessment data and college accessibility. One notable article highlighted the district's performance on the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS), boasting a three-year trend of achievement. The district reported attaining a Level 5 TVAAS overall composite score—the highest measure of student growth across all grade levels and subjects—including Literacy, Numeracy, Science, and Social Studies.

According to Earle, his organization prioritizes literacy and mathematics over the performance of other disciplines. This prioritization has resulted in Earle experiencing tensions with his district, which will be explored further in this chapter. An analysis of the district's organizational chart further supports Earle's characterization of a literacy-focused orientation. The organization chart reveals a dedicated Executive Director of Literacy who reports directly to the Assistant Superintendent, supported by two literacy managers. In contrast, other disciplines including mathematics, science, social studies, fine arts, world languages, and health/physical education—are overseen by a single Executive Director who also manages responsibilities related to textbooks and libraries.

This organization's strategic focus on aligning resources—both human and financial—with state and national metrics reflects its conceptualization of education as a product measured by grades and test scores. The investment in district-level leadership roles for literacy highlights a commitment to improving performance in literacy and mathematics, emphasizing the broader expectation for strong standardized test results in these core areas. The organization also

transitioned to a 10-point grading scale, citing its adoption as a means to "level the playing field for students who will soon apply for awards, scholarships, and other academic opportunities." Further justifying this shift, the organization emphasized academic advantages, stating, "Colleges and universities already use this grading scale, and it motivates students to strive for Honors/Advanced Placement courses." The statements make central the idea of relying on grades and test scores to bridge access to opportunity and these conceptions reflect how the organization externally validates student progress toward specific goals, making them effective measures. These conceptions align closely with Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, where success is measured through grades and test scores. Furthermore, the stated intention behind the grading scale change—to increase access to colleges and universities—aligns with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, where access to higher education is seen as a key measure of the value of educational services.

Earle assesses progress toward public goals using two key perspectives: the first focuses on access to college and career pathways, in line with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment. The second emphasizes the development of culture and values, aligning with Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity. His organization embraces elements of Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, where grades and test scores serve as important indicators of external success. Like Earle, his organization values the idea of education as an investment, highlighting college and career access as a crucial measure of educational impact. Earle strategically employs the Floor is Lava strategy, carefully avoiding operating areas of tension.

He reflected on how his leadership series impacted teachers in state-tested subject areas. Many were upset that their students would be missing class and potentially important material

for the assessments, as they held conceptions aligned with measures such as grades and test scores. Surprisingly, he didn't seem concerned by this. Instead, he held the belief that if students focused on developing leadership skills and character, they would also experience benefits on the assessments. In this instance, Earle employed the Trojan Horse Strategy, subtly embedding his true conceptions of meaningful measures, culture, and values within those embraced by the organization.

Leader and Organization Conceptions of the Outcome of Interest

Outcome of interest refers to the anticipated benefits or results that leaders and organizations expect individuals to gain from educational services. The conceptual framework posits that conceptions of the outcome of interest can be residual knowledge, improved life chances, learning experiences, or quality of life. These conceptions correspond to conceptualizations 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively. To explore this concept, participants were asked what individuals consuming educational services should expect to gain from the experience.

Leaders Using the Floor is Lava Strategy to Navigate Tensions in Outcome of Interest

Earle holds conceptions about the outcome of interest that align closely with Conceptualization Three: Education as a Service, where the outcome of interest is learning experiences, and Conceptualization Four: Education as an Identity, where the outcome centers on improving quality of life. Earle's conceptions centered on the theme of equity in education, particularly through the value of experiential learning opportunities. He emphasized the importance of creating opportunities for meaningful experiences within the school, regardless of a student's financial means or access to resources. He elaborated by stating that students should have access to curriculum-related experiences that provide them with a real sense of what is

happening in the world. Earle advocated for engaging community partners as essential contributors who can help students see beyond their current circumstances or neighborhoods.

These responses highlight Earle's belief that students should access meaningful learning experiences equitably, regardless of their socioeconomic background. He views these experiences as essential for developing an informed worldview, which fosters civic engagement and connections to the broader community. This vision aligns with Horace Mann's historical perspective, which ties individual growth to social contributions (Mudge, 1937). Earle's approach demonstrates an advocacy for educational experiences that serve both individual development and the community.

Earle further articulated that educational services should enable students to see beyond their immediate boundaries. He passionately described the importance of nurturing a sense of possibility even at the elementary level, training students to envision what is possible. This fosters a broader awareness in students, enhancing their quality of life by introducing experiences that expand their perspectives. This perspective aligns with Conceptualization Four: Education as an Identity, which emphasizes fostering personal growth to improve quality of life. Earle's vision highlights a dual outcome of interest—rich learning experiences and an enhanced quality of life—reflecting his commitment to equity and experiential learning.

Earle's organization embraces the outcome of interest specified in Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, emphasizing the potential for improved life chances. To better understand how Earle's organization conceptualizes the outcome of interest in education, I reviewed the organization's mission statement: "Preparing all students for success in learning, leadership, and life." I also reviewed the superintendent's first 100 days report, which outlined the leader's vision of "Building a Legacy." A priority initiative was the launch of the new

Central Office CHAMPS program, where Central Office staff will mentor 15,000 middle school students. The organizational patterns focus on preparing students for future success, which reflects the construct outcome of interest. The district's emphasis on "success in learning, leadership, and life" aligns strongly with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, highlighting the potential for improved life outcomes. This initiative underscores the long-term personal impact on individual students and demonstrates the organization's commitment to their future success.

Earle's conceptions align with Conceptualization 3: Education as a Service, emphasizing meaningful learning experiences, and Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity, where the focus is on improving quality of life. In contrast, his organization leans toward Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, highlighting education's role in enhancing life opportunities.

While Earle shared views aligned with education as an investment, his ideas centered on immediate career exploration rather than future life quality. He emphasized career awareness as a driver of innovation, framing it as a societal benefit rather than solely an individual gain, suggesting a connection to the broader public good. Despite this potential area of tension, Earle and his organization largely agree on the desired outcome of student leadership. This alignment leads Earle to adopt the Floor is Lava strategy, where the perceived safe zones are broader, and the danger zones are smaller. This dynamic allows him to navigate tensions more easily, fostering increased synergy between Earle and the organization.

Leaders Using the Trojan Horse Strategy to Navigate Tensions in Outcome of Interest

Sunni, like Earle, holds conceptions that center on learning experiences indicated in Conceptualization Three: Education as a Service and quality of life as described in Conceptualization Four: Education as an Identity. Sunni's structured vision and mission

statements revealed her philosophy of education as one rooted in equity. She expressed that education should be equitable, just, and inclusive of each student's uniqueness. Sunni believed this could be accomplished by amplifying students' voices, choices, and agency, empowering them to advocate for themselves and their communities.

Sunni emphasized that true empowerment in education means fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and curiosity rather than promoting passive information consumption. She believes engaging students in debates on current and historical events supports these outcomes. Her focus on debates and community engagement underscores her commitment to learning experiences as an outcome, while her emphasis on voice, choice, and agency reflects a belief in improving students' quality of life. These conceptions align with both Conceptualization Three: Education as a Service and Conceptualization Four: Education as an Identity.

Sunni's organization embraces conceptions aimed at improving the quality of life, aligning with Education as an Identity. Like many other school districts in Georgia, Sunni's organization has developed a "Portrait of a Graduate," which outlines the key character strengths the district seeks to instill in students. These include being self-reflective, globally connected, self-directed, goal-oriented, fully engaged learners, academically prepared, resourceful, driven, critical thinkers, and problem solvers.

The attributes described here reflect the qualities an individual is expected to gain from the educational experience. These ideas align with Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity, where the outcome emphasizes an enhanced quality of life. The characteristics listed highlight a holistic approach to education, focusing not only on academic achievement but also on the development of personal and interpersonal traits that prepare students for a fulfilling life.

Sunni and her organization both conceptualize education as a public good, though with slightly different emphases. Sunni leans toward learning experiences and improved quality of life, while her organization focuses primarily on improved quality of life. To navigate this difference, Sunni employs the Trojan Horse strategy by embedding her commitment to learning experiences within discussions centered on community engagement. By encouraging debates and amplifying student voice, she underscores both learning experiences and the shared value of enhancing quality of life.

Leaders Using both the Floor is Lava and Trojan Horse Strategy to Navigate Tensions in Outcome of Interest

Tara, unlike the other participants, holds conceptions that promote residual knowledge, aligning with Conceptualization One: Education as a Product, where the outcome of interest is the retention of knowledge and skills. When Tara reflected on the metrics used to assess progress toward achieving educational goals, she focused primarily on grades and test scores. She highlighted indicators like End-of-Course test scores, benchmarks, and common formative assessments to measure students' performance on specific standards and elements. Comparing her school's graduation rate of nearly 90% to content mastery scores of only 20%, Tara voiced concern about the discrepancy. "How are our kids passing their courses but failing their tests?" Tara asked. "This means teachers are either arbitrarily giving grades or not assigning standard-specific work." Her concerns reflect a belief in residual knowledge—students should retain meaningful understanding and skills post-instruction. The disparity between passing courses and failing tests suggests her concern that students may not achieve lasting comprehension of core content.

Tara's organization embraces conceptions rooted in improved life chances, aligning with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment. To gain insight into the organization's outcomes of interest, I reviewed its priority student outcomes, which were collaboratively designed with input from both the community and the school system. This collaborative effort reflects a shared vision for student outcomes. The established outcomes focus on ensuring students are ready for various stages of their academic and personal development. Specifically, the organization aims for students to be ready for kindergarten with foundational skills for learning, ready to read and write at or above grade level with a curriculum enriched by literature and world languages, and ready for success in advanced coursework at every grade level. Additionally, the outcomes emphasize being prepared for life through the development of strong soft skills, personal growth, and a focus on health and well-being. This aligns with Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity, which centers on improving quality of life. Finally, the organization emphasizes that students should be ready for college, career, and post-secondary success, equipped with industry certifications, competitive test scores, and scholarship opportunities.

The patterns highlight the characteristics students should acquire or embody as a result of their educational experience. There is also alignment with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment, where the outcome focuses on improved life chances. By emphasizing readiness at every stage—from kindergarten and grade-level proficiency to advanced coursework and life skills—the organization demonstrates a strategic commitment to preparing students for long-term success and better life opportunities.

Tara tends to focus on ideas that prioritize retaining knowledge and skills to improve life changes, while her organization emphasizes enhancing the overall quality of life and improving

life chances, blending both private and public perspectives. Tara uses the Floor is Lava strategy, as she notably does not mention improving the overall quality of life. Instead, she focuses on improving life chances. This approach is linked to the concept of stratification, which aims to improve life for a few through access. This trait is typical of private conceptions of education. She also employs the Trojan Horse strategy when she encourages her staff to engage in reflection about the discrepancy between content mastery and grades and test scores.

James, like Sunni and Earle, holds conceptions that are aligned with quality of life as indicated in Conceptualization Four: Education as an Identity. He expressed a belief that students should develop a sense of ownership over their learning, even when the subject matter may not be enjoyable. James highlighted essential traits such as accountability, stating, “We should aim to produce productive citizens, problem-solvers, and creators who can accomplish anything.” He emphasized the importance of life skills, including knowledge of mortgages and everyday living expenses—not just career-focused competencies but essential skills for life.

James’s focus on practical knowledge, personal responsibility, and life skills underscores his belief that education should equip students to lead meaningful, capable, and engaged lives. His emphasis on accountability and citizenship suggests that educational outcomes should prepare students to be active, adaptable participants in society. James' organization embraces ideas rooted in improving the quality of life, as upheld in Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity. The organization developed a Portrait of a Graduate, outlining the qualities and capacities that graduates of the organization are expected to possess. This Portrait of a Graduate serves as a guiding framework for the organization’s educational priorities and outcomes.

This vision reflects the organization’s aspirations for its students to thrive in a complex and interconnected world. It emphasizes six key qualities and capacities that define its

educational priorities. The first is adaptability, which involves the ability to navigate ambiguous environments effectively, respond constructively to feedback, and persevere with confidence in the face of failure or adversity. The second is collaborative leadership, where graduates are expected to build relationships based on trust and compassion while fostering a win-win mindset in their interactions and decision-making. The third capacity is resourcefulness, characterized by the ability to innovate and generate meaningful, creative solutions to address challenges or opportunities. The fourth is empathy, which aims to cultivate graduates who demonstrate emotional intelligence, curiosity, and the ability to engage meaningfully with diverse perspectives. The fifth priority is critical thinking, encouraging students to analyze the bigger picture, critically evaluate information, and become discerning consumers of knowledge. Finally, the organization aspires to develop graduates who excel in effective communication, enabling them to articulate their thoughts clearly and appreciate the values and perspectives of others. Collectively, these qualities reflect the organization's commitment to preparing students for success in an ever-changing world. The characteristics described outline the organization's intended educational outcomes for individuals benefiting from its services. These objectives align strongly with Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity, where the focus is on improving quality of life.

James holds conceptions aligned with improving the quality of life, as outlined in Conceptualization Four: Education as an Identity, and his organization shares these same views regarding the desired outcome. Both James and his organization demonstrate similar values rooted in practical knowledge, personal responsibility, life skills, curiosity, and critical thinking. This alignment has created greater synergy between James and his organization. James employs

the Floor is Lava strategy, supported by strong pillars of safety, which allows for smoother navigation in his role as a leader.

Conclusions

Each of these leaders bring their unique conceptions of education to their roles as school leaders, shaping how they approach decision-making, lead initiatives, and execute tasks. Their ways of knowing, deeply influenced by personal experiences and professional values, guide their leadership practices and priorities. Whether fostering student leadership, promoting culturally responsive learning, or restructuring academic programs, these leaders demonstrate how their educational beliefs directly influence their strategies and actions within their schools. Their conceptions not only inform their leadership styles but also shape the educational experiences and opportunities they create for students. Organizations also hold unique conceptions that shape the direction of the organization but also the actions of the leaders that lead within it. Both leaders and their organizations hold various conceptions regarding the constructs, public goal, process conceptions, measures, essence of the good, and outcome of interest. These conceptions often fluctuate across four major conceptualizations: Conceptualization 1, where education is seen as a product; Conceptualization 2, viewing education as an investment; Conceptualization 3, framing education as a service; and Conceptualization 4, emphasizing education as an identity. Leaders find themselves navigating these perspectives to align strategies and objectives within objectives of the larger organization.

Leaders are employing two main strategies to navigate the tensions or even cohesion they experience, The Floor is Lava and the Trojan Horse Strategies. The "Floor is Lava" strategy has been employed by leaders seeking to strategically avoid areas of conceptual misalignment within their organizations. This approach is also favored by leaders who prefer to operate strictly within

established conceptual frameworks. In cases where alignment is imperfect, leaders often rely on larger pillars of safety—stable organizational elements to which they agree—and minimize exposure to perceived "lava" or areas of misalignment. This strategy frequently fosters greater synergy between leaders and their organizations, enabling leaders to take more deliberate and impactful actions toward executing organizational goals that align with their personal values.

Conversely, some leaders adopt the "Trojan Horse" strategy to navigate conceptual misalignment. In this approach, leaders subtly embed their personal conceptions within broader organizational tasks. This tactic allows them to reconcile tensions between their individual values and the organization's directives while reclaiming their work by infusing it with meaningful contributions they personally value.

Interestingly, certain leaders have found success by employing both the Floor is Lava and Trojan Horse strategies simultaneously. This combined approach enables them to skillfully navigate both aligned and misaligned conceptual landscapes, balancing strategic avoidance with creative integration to achieve organizational and personal goals.

Construct Connections

The constructs in the theoretical framework—public goals, process conceptions, measures, outcome of interests, and the essence of the good—form the organizational schema through which leaders conceptualize the multidimensional nature of education. These constructs are deeply interconnected. Participants often expressed overlapping conceptions across different constructs when answering questions. Analysis of the collected data revealed meaningful relationships between these constructs, emphasizing the complexity of educational leadership perspectives.

Figure 3 presents a mind map illustrating the relationships described by the leaders in the study. Participants conceptualized a system where students, represented by gray circles, serve as both the input and the output of educational processes. As an input, students receive educational services, depicted in the blue box as process conceptions, which represent the mechanisms through which these services are delivered. Embedded within this process is the "essence of the good," symbolized by the gear shifts, which reflects the fundamental nature of education as perceived by the leader. This essence influences how educational experiences are designed and delivered, shaping the overall learning environment. After progressing through the system, the student, now as the outcome of interest, embodies what individuals are expected to gain from educational services. This outcome encompasses both immediate benefits, such as skill acquisition and academic achievement, as well as long-term advantages, including career readiness and personal development.

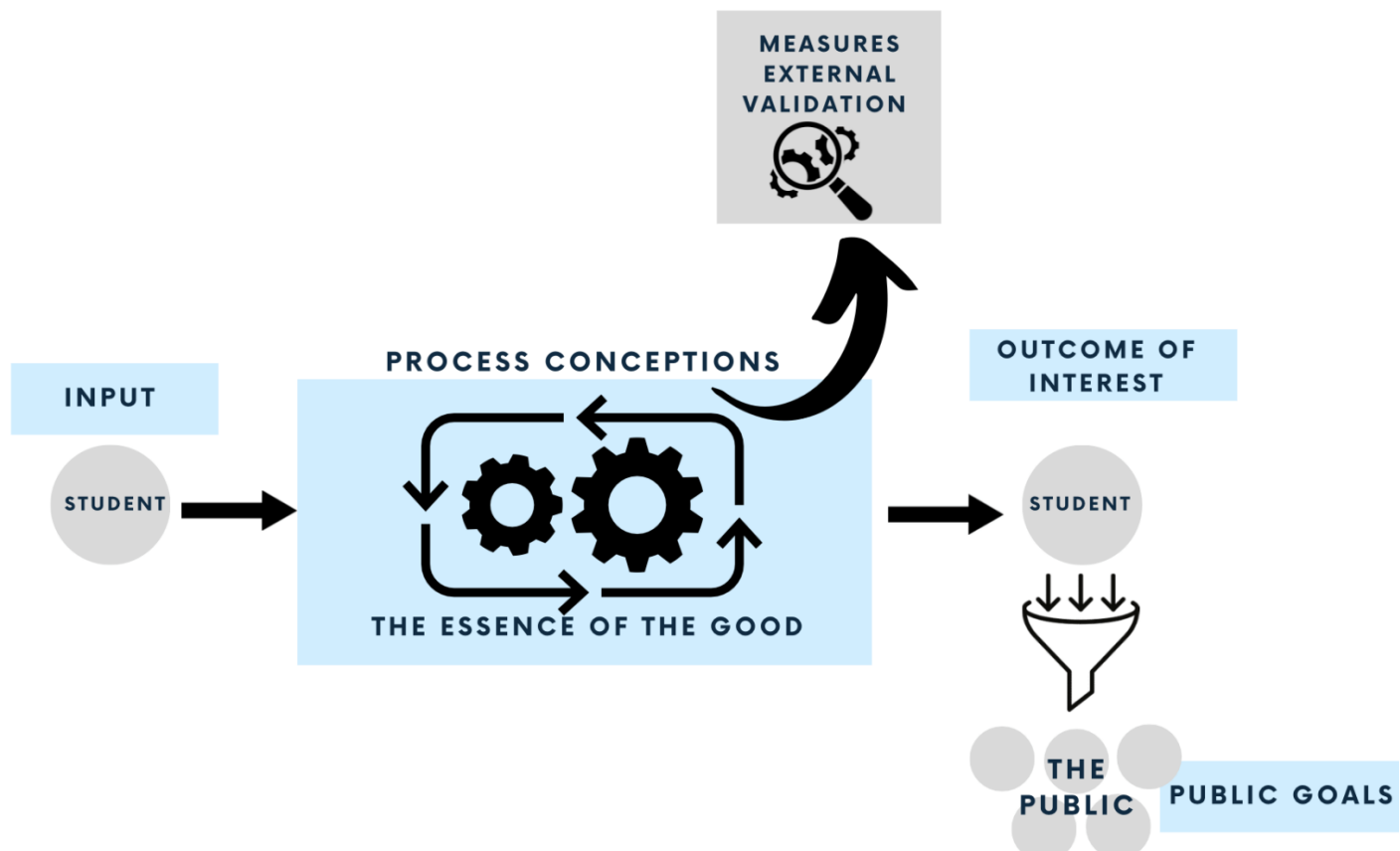
Measures are depicted within the system but positioned outside the process, as they serve as a form of external validation and a means to assess the process conception and progress toward public goals. They function as critical benchmarks, providing evidence of whether educational initiatives align with intended outcomes. The measures help leaders evaluate effectiveness and identify areas for growth.

The public goal, positioned near a group of students on the mind map, signifies the broader societal objectives that education strives to fulfill. These goals reflect collective aspirations for education, demonstrating the essential role of education in shaping individuals and society at large. Furthermore, the placement of public goals within the map illustrates the ongoing interaction between individual student development and larger societal needs. This reinforces the idea that education is not only a means of personal advancement but also a vehicle

for fostering social equity, civic engagement, and economic stability. Leaders' conceptualizations of public goals influence their decisions regarding process implementation, assessment measures, and curricular focus, ultimately shaping the educational landscape within their organizations.

Figure 3

Conceptual Mind Map Depicting the Relationship between the Constructs



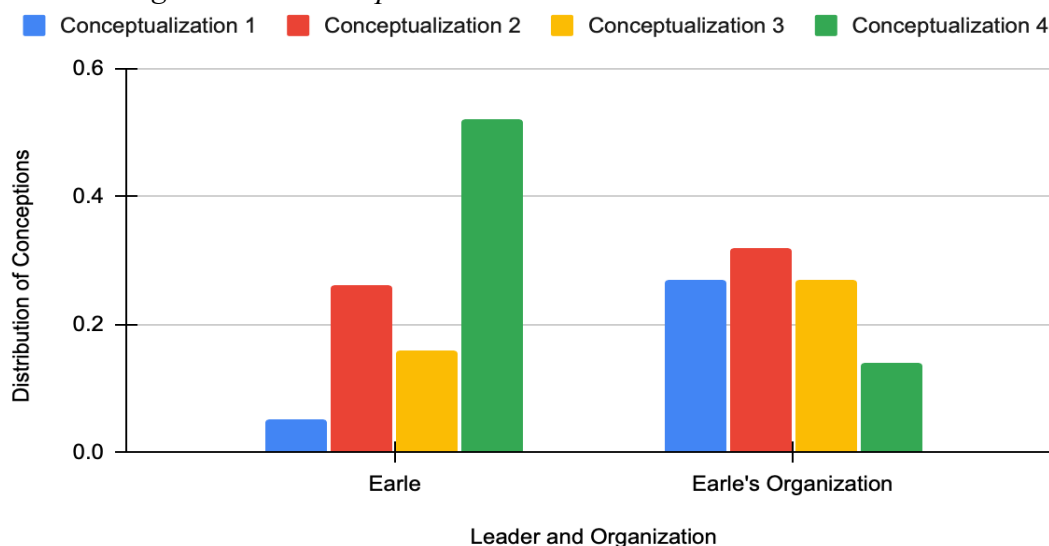
Leaders' Descriptions of Tensions Given Conceptual Misalignment

The findings reveal that leaders experience tensions stemming from conceptual misalignment. One participant described this tension as a "push or pull," while another likened it to a plate, where they struggled to fit the organization's priorities within their own conceptual framework. This participant emphasized that their conception of public goals should form the foundation or "plate" itself. These results underscore that tensions arise due to conceptual misalignments. However, an unexpected finding highlighted instances of conceptual alignment, where a participant's conceptualization of education closely mirrored that of their organization, resulting in increased synergy in areas of alignment. This section will present patterns in the descriptions of tensions by sharing each participant's responses, highlighting their individual conceptions, and summarizing the findings.

Earle primarily conceptualizes education as an identity, with investment being a secondary perspective. In contrast, Earle's organization primarily viewed education as an investment, followed by its conceptualization as a product and service. This divergence in perspectives seems to have created tensions between Earle and his organization as denoted in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Leader vs. Organization Conceptions/ Earle



Earle described the tensions he has faced due to differences in his conceptual understanding of the purpose of education compared to that of his organization. He likened the tension to a “push and pull feeling” he experiences when thinking about test scores, particularly in elementary education, where the primary focus is often on reading and math. He explained, “The problem with test scores is the primary focus on reading and math. When we hold people accountable, that’s what they focus on.” He described the consequence of this narrow focus on measurable educational services, which in turn shapes the priorities of teachers and schools. He noted, “Kids may like and be good at social studies, but that will not be taught with the same intensity as reading and math. Now we have generations of kids who do not have a deep understanding of social dynamics in the world. Kids should know and understand what’s happening at the border. They may get a brief interaction with other content areas.”

The tensions he expresses are between measures in Conceptualization 1 Education as a Product, grades and test scores, and the measures from Conceptualization 3 Education as a Service, civic engagement. Earle further explained that the structure of early elementary

education, where teachers are not departmentalized, exacerbates these tensions. He said, “A single teacher may teach all subjects. What if they were held accountable for reading and math the same way they are for science and social studies? That would shift the focus.” Earle referred to his state’s College and Career Readiness (CCR) data and a memo released by the Tennessee Department of Education, which prioritizes early literacy as a key milestone for student achievement.

Earle’s attention then shifted to the capacity of teachers: “If teachers have the skill set, they can merge content through reading informational texts. But when we hyper-focus on test scores, we stray away from developing viable citizens.” He described how the tensions were felt at the building level, particularly with teachers who taught in tested areas. “I experience tensions with teachers in state-tested grade levels,” Earle stated. As an example, he highlighted his school’s character development initiatives, where some teachers resisted, believing that character work was not part of their job but an added responsibility. He remarked, “I have met kids that come from good schools, they are academically sound and socially sound, but they are sad. This is why I think character building is important— not every kid will pass these state assessments, but every kid can develop characteristics that will benefit them in the world and their life.” He recalled that teachers began voicing concerns about his growing emphasis on student-based leadership development, particularly regarding students being allowed to participate in “no pass” days, during which they facilitated student tours. Teachers were upset that students were missing class time for these activities. This situation once again highlights the tension between the focus on grades and test scores, a key measure of Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, and the measures of Conceptualization 3: Civic Engagement and Conceptualization 4: Culture and Values, both of which align more closely with Earle's conceptualizations.

Earle acknowledged that while academic success is important, a well-rounded education extends beyond test scores to include character development and leadership opportunities. He argued that fostering student leadership not only builds confidence but also equips students with essential life skills such as communication, problem-solving, and teamwork. Despite teacher concerns about missed instructional time, Earle believed that these experiences provided valuable real-world learning that could not always be captured within traditional classroom settings. He emphasized that preparing students for life beyond school requires balancing academic rigor with opportunities for personal growth and civic engagement. Earle's perspective challenges the conventions established in Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product. This includes the standardization of curriculum, the emphasis on regimenting skills and efficiency, and the heavy reliance on assessment and accountability as primary measures of success. Table 7. illustrates the conceptions held by Earle and his organization, highlighting similarities and differences in their held conceptions.

Table 7

Earle's Conceptualization vs Earle's Organization Conceptualization

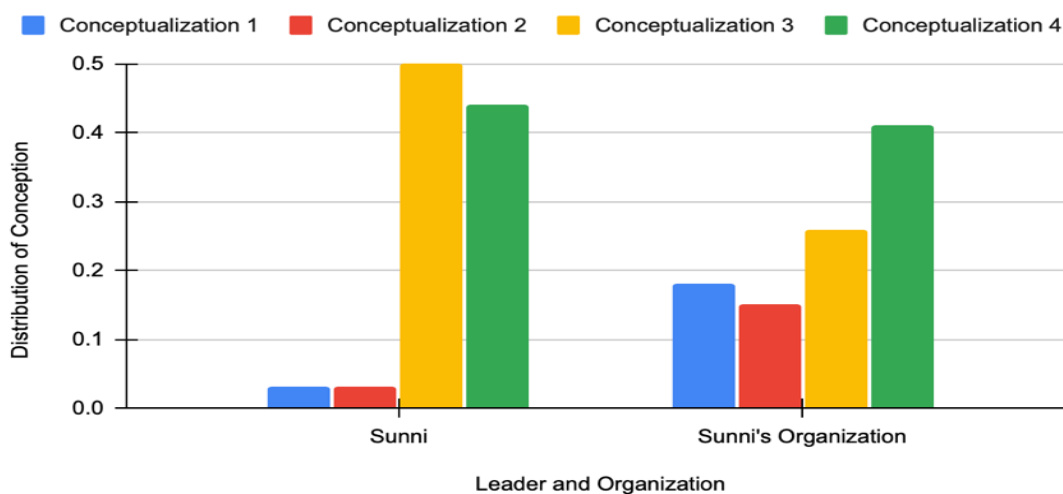
	Earle	Earle's Organization
Outcome of Interest	Conceptualization 3 Education as a Service: The Learning Experience (Public Good) Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Quality of Life (Public Good)	Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment: Improved Life Chances (Private Good)
Essence of the Good	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Morally Sanctioned (Public Good)	Conceptualization 1 Education as a Product: Stockpiled (Private Good) Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Morally Sanctioned (Public Good)

Process Conceptions	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Creation (Public Good)	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Creation (Public Good)
Measures	Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment: Access to College and Career (Private Good)	Conceptualization 1 Education as a Product: Grades and Test Scores (Private Good)
	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Culture and Values (Public Good)	Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment: Access to College and Career (Private Good)
Public Goal	Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment: Security (Private Good)	Conceptualization 3 Education as a Service: Equity (Public Good)
	Conceptualization 3 Education as a Service: Equity (Public Good) Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Liberty (Public Good)	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Liberty (Public Good)

Sunni and her organization predominantly align with Conceptualization 3: Education as a Service and Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity, though Sunni often expresses tensions from conceptual misalignment. As shown in Figure 5, both Sunni and her organization lean heavily toward Conceptualizations 3 and 4, which emphasize education as a public good. However, Sunni notably aligns less with Conceptualizations 1 and 2 compared to her organization.

Figure 5

Leader vs. Organization Conceptions/Sunni



When reflecting on the current state of the education system, she stated, “Education is an opportunity to gain force-fed knowledge and some critical thinking skills.” She emphasized that the value of the education services provided is “dependent on the student and opportunity afforded.” These statements highlight a tension between Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, process conceptions, with its emphasis on the standardized, production-like aspects of education, and Conceptualization 4: Education as Creation, process conceptions, which values individuality and the creative development of students. The idea of being “force-fed” information that is deemed important by someone else represents a point of conflict for Sunni, who favors a more student-centered, creative approach. This tension is centered on a perceived conflict between public goal in Conceptualization 1 as it promotes standardization and efficiency, and process conception in Conceptualization 4 encourages tailoring education to students’ identities, interests, and needs.

In her reflections, Sunni also expresses tension between Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, which measures success through grades and test scores, and Conceptualization 3: Education as a Service, which focuses on civic engagement, as well as Conceptualization 4:

Education as an Identity, which emphasizes culture and values. Sunni stated, “Kids should feel like they are getting something more out of education beyond purely academic. My vision is to create a school environment where kids don’t have to lose themselves at the door.”

Her emphasis on affirming students' identities, particularly considering her own experiences as a member of multiple marginalized groups, is in tension with Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, which prioritizes efficiency, standardization, and measurable outcomes. Sunni’s vision, in contrast, aligns more with the goals of Conceptualization 3: Education as a Service where measures are civic engagement and Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity where measures are culture and values. She expresses frustration with the current education system’s focus on fragmented, standardized knowledge, preferring an approach that includes identity development without sacrificing efficiency. Sunni also shared her frustration with her organization’s lack of alignment on mission and vision, especially when these discussions are disconnected from the goal of affirming students' identities. She said: “We have to sit through accountability conversations, but Continuous School Improvement Plans are not aligned to how we are providing an education that can affirm kids’ identities and spotlight critical thinking.”

Sunni critiqued the current framing of school improvement plans, which often center on student attendance, suspension rates, and standardized test performance, demonstrating the tension with Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, where measures are heavily focused on grades and test scores. She questioned whether her organization’s actions or processes truly align with her own conceptions of education, particularly as districts are large and made up of many departments with competing agendas. Sunni expressed frustration with the disconnect, saying:

“I want to have PLCs that focus on explicit bias surrounding People of Color, but instead, my Monday meetings have to focus on data talks for testing. Equity is not really being assessed, so it’s easy to put those things on the back burner because there is no reward. There is no success tied to having an equitable school. What we do has to align back to those metrics that we are assessed on, like standardized tests, attendance, and behavior.”

This tension reflects the challenges Sunni faces in aligning her organization’s practices with her conceptions of equity and meaningful change. It underscores the ongoing struggle between short-term metrics—such as standardized test scores and attendance rates—and the broader, long-term educational goals that prioritize student growth, well-being, and social development. While her organization emphasizes quantifiable outcomes as markers of success, Sunni envisions an approach that extends beyond these measures to include equitable opportunities, cultural responsiveness, and the holistic development of students. Much like Earle, who also in part views education as a public good, Sunni finds herself at odds with the conventions established in Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product.

Table 8

Sunni’s Conceptualization vs Sunni’s Organization Conceptualization

	Sunni	Sunni’s Organization
Outcome of Interest	Conceptualization 3 Education as a Service: Learning Experience (public good)	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Quality of Life (public good)
Essence of the Good	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Quality of Life (public good)	Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment:

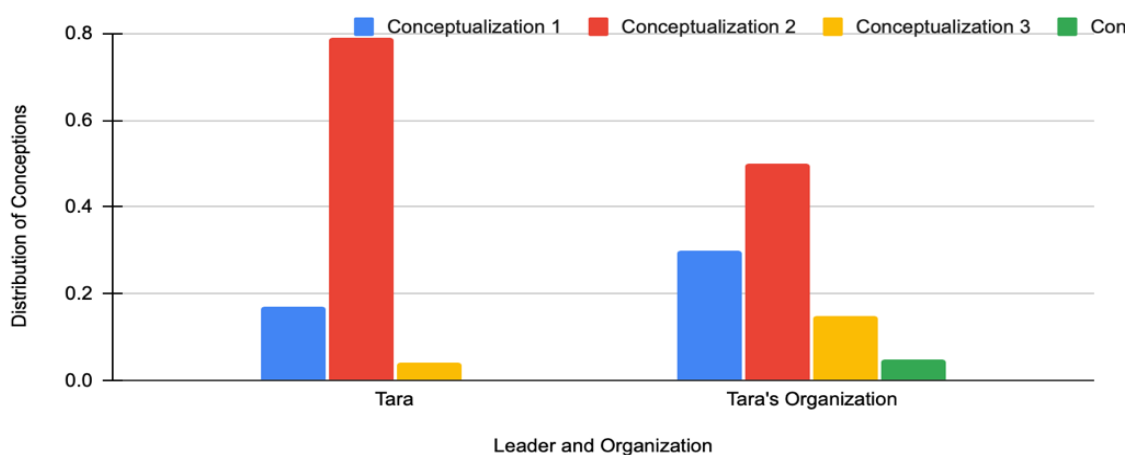
	Immediately consumed (public good)	Currency/Valued Delayed
	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Morally Sanctioned (public good)	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Morally Sanctioned (public good)
	Conceptualization 3 Education as a Service: Delivery (public good)	
Process Conceptions	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Creation (public good)	Conceptualization 3 Education as a Service: Delivery (public good)
	Conceptualization 1 Education as a Product grades and test scores (private good)	Conceptualization 1 Education as a Product: grades and test scores (private good)
Measures	Conceptualization 3 Education as a Service: Civic Engagement (public good)	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Culture and values
	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Culture and values (public good)	
	Conceptualization 3 Education as a Service: Equity (public good)	Conceptualization 3 Education as a Service: Equity (public good)
Public Goal	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Liberty (public good)	

This study focuses on describing the tensions leaders face due to conceptual misalignment. However as demonstrated in Table 9., Tara represents a unique case where her conceptualization of education as an economic good aligns closely with that of her organization, minimizing the friction often experienced by other leaders. Both Tara and her organization mostly lean towards Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment as denoted in Figure 6. This alignment allows her to navigate institutional expectations with greater ease, demonstrating how shared conceptions can facilitate smoother decision-making and implementation of educational initiatives. Because her views on education align with the organization's goals, Tara

can focus on achieving results without being hindered by conflicting priorities. This harmony between personal and institutional perspectives fosters a collaborative environment that encourages the efficient execution of policies. In contrast to the struggles many leaders face when their visions are at odds with the system, Tara's experience highlights the potential benefits of alignment between individual values and organizational goals.

Figure 6

Leader and Organization Distribution of Conceptions/ Tara



She has actively operationalized these district priorities at the school level. She and her administrative team have added five new AP courses to increase student access to advanced educational opportunities. In addition to the new AP courses, Tara emphasized the school's strong emphasis on honors classes. She reiterated, "The district has a big focus on the honors track; the goal is to get more kids involved in and exposed to advanced educational opportunities." Tara, and her district both conceptualize Education as a Product.

While alignment exists between Tara's conceptualization of education and her organization's goals, tensions still arise within Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product,

which emphasizes measures such as grades and test scores. Tara expressed difficulty reconciling a high graduation rate with low content mastery scores. She questioned:

How is the graduation rate approaching 90%, but the content mastery rate is 20%?

Students are graduating but not demonstrating proficiency on assessments. An analysis of grades showed that teachers were assigning passing grades arbitrarily. They were not giving standards-based work or were assigning work at a much lower level of rigor, which led to a low proficiency rate.

Tara's reflections on the challenge of balancing high graduation rates with meaningful content mastery illustrate how tensions can arise even within a single conceptualization of education. The pressure to meet institutional benchmarks may sometimes conflict with broader understandings of long-term student success, raising questions about whether educational priorities are truly aligned with student mastery. Her experience highlights the complexity of educational leadership, where even alignment in conceptualization does not always eliminate the challenges of implementation and accountability.

Table 9

Tara's Conceptualization vs. Tara's Organization Conceptualization

	Tara	Tara's Organization
Outcome of Interest	Conceptualization 1 Education as a Product: Residual Knowledge (private good)	Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment: Improved Life Chances (private good)
Essence of the Good	Conceptualization 1 Education as a Product: Can be stockpiled (private good)	Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment: Currency/ Delayed Value (private good)

	Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment: Currency/ Delayed Value (private good)	
Process Conceptions	Conceptualization 1 Education as a Product: Production (private good)	Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment: Opportunity (private good)
Measures	Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment: Opportunity (private good) Conceptualization 1 Education as a Product: Grades and Test Scores (private good)	Conceptualization 1 Education as a Product: Grades and Test Scores (private good)
Public Goal	Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment: Access to jobs and college (private good) Conceptualization 1 Education as a Product: Efficiency (private good)	Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment: Access to jobs and college (private good) Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment: Security (private good)
	Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment: Security (private good)	

James expressed significant tensions arising from conceptual misalignment between his personal beliefs about education and those held by his organization. James articulated that he views education to produce critical thinkers, contrasting sharply with the Conceptualization 1 framework of Education as a Product, which prioritizes residual knowledge as an outcome.

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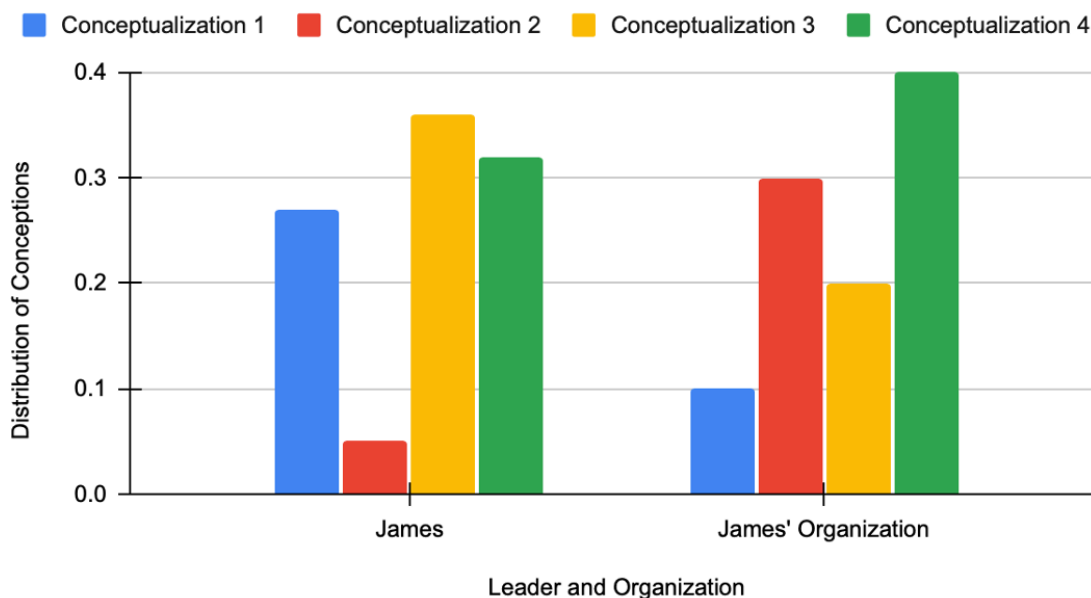
divergence is illustrated in Figure 7. This misalignment created challenges in implementing instructional strategies that emphasized inquiry-based learning and student autonomy. He often found himself navigating institutional pressures to focus on standardized test performance, which he believed limited deeper intellectual engagement. As a result, James developed strategic approaches to advocate for pedagogical practices that aligned with his vision while still meeting organizational expectations. He explained:

"Education is not a bunch of information to be digested and regurgitated. I think we've allowed that in our society for a long time, especially when we're looking at testing, preparing students for tests, and giving those test-taking strategies."

However, James acknowledged the value of test preparation when integrated with critical thinking, citing it can be beneficial in preparing students to be critical thinkers to alleviate some of the social and societal ills students face. This tension pits Conceptualization 1's measures focused on grades and test scores against Conceptualization 4, which emphasizes culture and values and the outcome of interest, which focuses on quality of life.

Figure 7

Leader and Organization Distribution of Conceptions



James further highlighted these tensions, arguing that data runs the risk of dehumanizing students and shifting the purpose of education to focus on passing an assessment. He argues that CCRPI is a metric, but it only tells a portion of a student's story, omitting improvement in a student emotional or social status. He acknowledged that there are limits in a district's capacity to capture the human side of growth. James's observations point to the limitations of data-driven educational approaches that fail to account for holistic student development. As a leader in an alternative school, James noted parallels between behavioral and academic challenges, emphasizing the need for innovative approaches to address the needs of his students. He believes that many of his students face significant behavior challenges, and the traditional "sit and get" approach is ineffective. This realization led him to shift his mindset and adapt his teaching practices, encouraging students to become active creators in their learning process.

This reflection highlights tensions between Conceptualization 1's production-driven process and Conceptualization 4's creation-driven process. James described the traditional education model as ineffective, particularly for his students, many of whom face challenges that transcend academic assessments. He lamented the lack of relevance of performance bands such

as “proficient” or “distinguished,” which he views as unimportant to his students: “They’ve fallen by the wayside.” James also expressed frustrations with education’s inability to equip students with practical life skills: “How many of us have advanced degrees, but we don’t really understand how a mortgage works or other things we need to survive?”

This critique reveals a disconnect between academic achievement and the practical knowledge necessary to improve quality of life, further highlighting tensions between Conceptualization 1 Education as a Product and Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity. When asked how he navigates these tensions, James emphasized the importance of passion. James’s passion sustains him as he challenges traditional approaches and advocates for personalized education that measures progress beyond test scores. He described his mindset shift since transitioning to an alternative school setting: He recognized that his current students face more significant challenges, such as violence and substance abuse, requiring a tailored approach that prioritizes reaching everyone. James argued that educational progress must address academic, social, and personal development, not just standardized metrics. James’ leadership approach reflects his commitment to addressing these tensions. By focusing on personalized, holistic education, James navigates the complexities of conceptual misalignment by continuing to advocate for a model that values students’ growth beyond traditional academic measures. This approach is James’ attempt to challenge existing structures within his organization, as he acts in a manner that prioritizes education to meet the diverse needs of all students. Through his leadership, James fosters an environment where learning is viewed as a multifaceted journey, not solely defined by standardized success.

Table 10 provides a synthesized comparison of how James and his organization conceptualize education across the five dimensions of the study’s theoretical framework:

outcome of interest, essence of the good, process conceptions, measures, and public goals. The data suggests that both James and his organization draw from a range of conceptualizations of education as an economic good, reflecting conceptions that are both situated within the public and private conceptions. While there is significant overlap—particularly in their shared emphasis on Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity, a public good—there are also notable divergences that highlight their distinct conceptions.

Both James and the organization predominantly lean toward conceptions of education in terms of identity and service. There are instances of multiple held conceptions on behalf of the leader and the organization. For example, references to grades and test scores align with Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product (private good), while the emphasis on opportunity and security aligns with Conceptualization 2: Education as an Investment (private good). These private good elements, embedded within a primarily public good framework, suggest a strategic negotiation between accountability pressures and broader social aims.

Taken together, this complex pattern indicates that neither James nor his organization adheres rigidly to a single conceptualization. Instead, they engage in a multidimensional orientation, reflecting the competing demands placed on educational leaders.

Table 10

James' Conceptualization vs. James' Organization Conceptualization

	James	James' Organization
Outcome of Interest	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity:	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity:

	Quality of Life (public good)	Quality of Life (public good)
Essence of the Good	Conceptualization 3 Education as a Service: Immediately Consumed (public good)	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Morally Sanctioned (public good)
Process Conceptions	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Creation (public good)	Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment: Opportunity (private good) Conceptualization 3 Education as a Service: Delivery (public good) Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Creation (public good)
Measures	Conceptualization 1 Education as a Product: Grades and Test Scores (private good) Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Culture and Values (public good)	Conceptualization 1 Education as a Product: Grades and Test Scores (private good) Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment: Opportunity (private good) Conceptualization 3 Education as a Service: Civic Engagement (public good) Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Culture and Values (public good)
Public Goal	Conceptualization 4 Education as an Identity: Liberty (public good)	Conceptualization 2 Education as an Investment Security (private good)

Leader Preference for Task Execution

The findings suggest that, due to tensions stemming from conceptual misalignment, leaders have developed strategic approaches to navigate these challenges. The leaders primarily employed two strategies: the Trojan Horse Strategy and the Floor is Lava Strategy. The Trojan Horse Strategy involves outwardly aligning with organizational priorities while subtly embedding personal values into broader goals. In contrast, the Floor is Lava Strategy focuses on

avoiding "hot spots" of misalignment and prioritizing "safe zones" where personal and organizational priorities align. This section will present participants' responses, highlight their individual navigation strategies, and summarize the findings.

Earle is a leader who mostly conceptualizes education both as an identity and as an investment. To understand how Earle approaches executing tasks amid his conceptualizations, I asked him to reflect on several district initiatives and identify which ones he would be most likely to support, as well as those he would be least likely to prioritize, and why. Earle explained that his primary focus would be on the Next Level Readiness Initiative, stating, "It not only focuses on academic achievement but also the soft skills and mindsets that children need to possess to be successful both inside and outside of the school system. In order for students to be ready to engage with college-level courses or enter the workforce, they must be well-versed in effective communication and collaboration skills from a young age, as well as be exposed to the concept of college and the workforce." Earle further elaborated, "Even children in elementary school could go on field trips to college campuses, learn from career days, and hear motivational speakers, helping them envision possibilities for their futures." These views align strongly with his conceptualization of education as both an investment—preparing students for future success—and as an identity, fostering a sense of purpose and self-awareness in students.

Conversely, Earle stated that he would be least likely to focus on the statewide initiative aimed at reducing lead exposure in drinking water. He noted that technology had enabled his school to redesign water fountains into water stations, where students could bring their own water bottles and refill them with filtered water. He acknowledged that while the issue of lead exposure was important to the community and parents, he felt that it was less aligned with his educational focus. Earle explained, "Ironically, I was leading a school that just so happened to

have one of the highest lead counts in Memphis as cited by the local newspaper. Parents were highly upset with the district and the city during that time, and we had to navigate through a crisis with little information and lean on the parents' trust for the school and our staff as we had to help assure them that their children would be safe." While the issue of lead exposure was a concern, Earle's prioritization of initiatives that directly align with his educational philosophy led him to view it as a solvable problem, thereby not making it a priority in his leadership approach. Sunni is a leader who conceptualizes education as mostly a service and an identity. To understand how Sunni executes tasks based on these conceptualizations, I asked her to reflect on several district initiatives and identify which ones she was most likely to support, as well as those she would be least likely to prioritize, and why. Sunni expressed a strong preference for supporting initiatives aligned with spoken word clubs, arts-based programs, and equity work. For example, her school emphasized arts-based equity work during Black History Month through a poster contest. The submissions featured themes such as HBCUs and the empowerment statement "Black Lives Matter." These initiatives align with Sunni's conceptualizations of education, demonstrating her preference for executing tasks that integrate artistic expression and social justice.

On the other hand, Sunni showed the least enthusiasm for supporting initiatives that emphasized disciplinary actions not rooted in restorative justice or that relied on exclusionary practices. As a leader committed to equity, Sunni prioritizes approaches that address student behavior constructively and inclusively, seeking to create a supportive and just school environment. Her values and conceptual framework reflect a strong belief in promoting fair, equitable practices that minimize punitive measures and foster positive student growth. Sunni's

leadership approach showcases the importance of community-centered solutions and restorative techniques, aiming to repair harm and build a healthier school culture.

Tara predominantly conceptualizes education as an investment, followed by conceptualizing it as a product. She expressed the greatest enthusiasm for supporting initiatives focused on student achievement, specifically those that emphasize grades and test scores as measured by evaluations. In her pre-screener, Tara conveyed process-oriented conceptions, suggesting that the desired outcome of education is to prepare students for college and career readiness. She believes this can be achieved by evaluating students against specific learning targets. As part of her initiatives, Tara worked to expand the number of AP courses offered at her school and strategized to adjust the master schedule to improve grades and test scores.

Tara was less likely to support initiatives related to her district's health and wellness focus. While her district emphasizes structures to promote health and wellness, including Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies, Tara made no mention of equity, creation, or social-emotional factors, which were highlighted by other participants. Health and wellness initiatives did not seem to be a priority for Tara, as her leadership approach was primarily focused on academic outcomes and achievement.

James' conceptualizes education as a service, followed by identity, and then as a product. To explore how his conceptualization influences his priorities, I asked James about several initiatives in his district. He expressed the most enthusiasm for supporting initiatives aligned with empathy. James emphasized his commitment to supporting teachers as they work to integrate social-emotional learning and character development into their classrooms. Consistent with his conceptualization of education, James plays a key role in his school's Positive Behavior Intervention Supports system. His school has developed cultural and values artifacts to promote

character competencies, including responsibility, respect, and resilience. Additionally, James meets with a group of young men, coaching them on establishing and maintaining healthy relationships with peers and adults.

James expressed the least enthusiasm for supporting initiatives that emphasize uniformly high academic and behavioral standards. He argued that measuring student growth should be personalized and tailored to each student's unique needs and areas for improvement. According to James, growth is not limited to academic progress but also includes the development of social skills, addressing personal challenges, and overall well-being. He believes that assessments should go beyond test scores and grades, and that progress should be measured based on individualized goals—whether academic, social, or personal.

Role theory, as described by Biddle (1986), is a sociological and psychological framework that explains human behavior in relation to the social roles individuals occupy. These roles come with specific expectations that shape how individuals think, feel, and act within particular contexts. In the case of educational leaders—such as principals, assistant principals, and organizational leaders—their lived experiences within these roles may influence how they construct and enact their conceptions of education as an economic good. From a role theory perspective, the expectations associated with their formal leadership positions may shape, constrain, or even conflict with their personal beliefs, ultimately influencing their behaviors, decision-making, and professional identity. For example, Sunni's conceptions were strongly centered around the public commodification of education. Her role as an assistant principal—and by extension, a compliance manager—appeared to influence her emphasis, albeit limited, on grades and test scores, which are central to Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product.

Tensions with Standardization of Education

The study participants share similar experiences in encountering tensions due to conceptual misalignment, yet they display both commonalities and differences in the strategies they use to navigate the challenges associated with viewing education as an economic good. Earle grapples with the tension between the test-centric measures of Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product and the holistic goals of Conceptualization 3: Education as a Service and Conceptualization 4: Education as Culture and Values, emphasizing character development alongside academics. Sunni's reflections reveal frustration with the standardized, process-driven nature of Conceptualization 1, as she champions identity affirmation and equity, aligning with Conceptualization 4. While her strategic embedding of equity discussions into data-focused PLCs mirrors Earle's attempts to integrate organizational priorities with personal values, her dissatisfaction with the system's metrics highlights deeper conflicts. Tara represents a contrast, experiencing alignment between her views and her district's alignment with Conceptualization 1 emphasis on academic outcomes, but tensions still emerge within this conceptualization, particularly around reconciling high graduation rates with low content mastery. James, like Sunni and Earle critiques the test-focused approach of Conceptualization 1, also advocating for a holistic approach to education outlined in Conceptualization 4. His leadership in an alternative school setting highlighted the need for innovative, student-centered methods that prioritize personal and social development. Together, Earle, Sunni and James largely represent conceptualizations that lean more towards education as a public good, their narratives reveal shared tensions with standardization of education and metrics defined by grade and test scores, which is a cornerstone of Conceptualization 1 Education as a Product. All participants question

the overreliance on metrics like test scores, pointing out their limitations in capturing meaningful life chances, learning experiences or quality of life.

Execution of Tasks Amid Misconceptualization

The four leaders in this study demonstrate distinct approaches to the execution of tasks based on their conceptualizations of education, reflecting key differences in their preferences for district initiatives. Earle, who conceptualizes education as both an investment and an identity, prioritizes initiatives that prepare students for future success, such as the Next Level Readiness Initiative. This initiative emphasizes academic achievement as well as essential soft skills like communication and collaboration, aiming to equip students with the tools they need to succeed in both higher education and the workforce. Earle's view of education aligns with his belief in the broader community's future, and he sees issues like lead exposure as non-priority, solvable problems that do not directly impact educational goals.

Sunni, who views education as both a service and an identity, similarly values initiatives that promote the holistic development of students. She prioritizes arts-based programs and restorative justice practices, advocating for student voice, social justice, and inclusivity. Sunni rejects punitive disciplinary actions and favors community-centered solutions that support positive growth. Like Earle, Sunni's focus on student well-being reflects her belief in education as a public good, but she leans more heavily into social justice and restorative practices as a means to support the greater good of the community.

James, who conceptualizes education as a service, followed by identity and product, places a strong emphasis on empathy and social-emotional learning. He advocates for programs like PBIS and mentoring, which focus on character development, relationship-building, and personalized growth. While James values academic achievement, he is less focused on

standardized outcomes, preferring assessments that are tailored to the individual needs of each student. His approach aligns with his belief that education should nurture the holistic growth of students, emphasizing personal development alongside academic success.

In contrast, Tara, who primarily conceptualizes education as an investment, is most focused on initiatives that emphasize academic achievement, such as expanding AP courses and improving grades and test scores. While Tara's leadership aligns with the goal of preparing students for college and career readiness, she shows less interest in initiatives related to student wellness or social-emotional development. Her focus on academic outcomes over social-emotional considerations distinguishes her approach from Sunni, James, and Earle, who all prioritize student well-being as part of a broader, community-oriented view of education.

Overall, while all leaders share a commitment to fostering student success, Sunni, James, and Earle align more closely in their emphasis on initiatives that support the holistic development of students. These leaders prioritize social justice, character development, and soft skills alongside academic achievement, reflecting a shared belief in education as a public good that nurtures well-rounded individuals. Tara's focus, however, is more narrowly centered on academic performance, distinguishing her approach from the others in terms of the balance between academic achievement and broader student well-being. Table 11 shows how leaders that lean toward the Trojan Horse Strategy and leaders that lean toward the Floor is Lava Strategy may approach the same issue. Trojan-Horse leaders and Floor-is-Lava leaders adopt distinct approaches to navigate organizational issues. Trojan-Horse leaders embed their personal values and goals subtly within organizational tasks, often reframing initiatives to align with both their beliefs and the organization's priorities. This approach allows them to advance their vision while minimizing potential pushback. In contrast, Floor-is-Lava leaders avoid areas of conflict

altogether, strategically focusing their efforts on initiatives and tasks where their values already align with the organization. By sidestepping contentious issues, they minimize resistance and ensure smoother task execution. However, while this strategy reduces friction, it may also limit the leader's influence in driving more substantial changes, as seen in the increased efforts leaders experience when there is conceptual alignment. In both cases, leaders must carefully consider how they approach task execution, balancing personal goals with organizational expectations to maintain effectiveness and foster progress.

Table 11

Task Execution

Issues	Trojan-Horse Leaders	Floor-is-Lava Leaders
Standardized Testing	Embed alternative metrics (e.g., critical thinking or creativity) within test-driven initiatives.	Avoid discussions focused on test scores, instead emphasizing extracurricular activities.
Discipline	Embed restorative practices and alternatives into traditional disciplinary measures.	Avoid disciplinary actions that conflict with their beliefs, prioritizing PBIS strategies.
PLCs	Embed equity-focused goals subtly while maintaining alignment with organizational objectives.	Avoid topics they do not value, focusing solely on areas where alignment exists.
Resource Allocation	Secure funding for innovative initiatives by framing them to fit organizational priorities.	Avoid budget disputes by focusing on pre-approved, low-resistance initiatives.

Findings Summary

The findings reveal that leaders hold a range of conceptualizations of education, spanning education as a product, an investment, a service, and an identity. These conceptualizations often intersect, with leaders simultaneously navigating conceptions that teeter between public and private goods. Similarly, organizations embody multiple conceptualizations, shaped largely by the priorities and strategic plans of superintendents and school boards. In cases of conceptual

misalignment, leaders report experiencing significant tensions. Many describe this tension as a "push or pull" dynamic or compare it to the challenge of fitting the "right proportions onto a plate" when they feel that their public goal should instead be "the plate" itself. These tensions influence how leaders prioritize and execute tasks, often driving them to focus on organizational priorities that align more closely with their personal conceptualizations. When faced with misalignment, leaders tend to employ two distinct strategies:

1. The Trojan Horse Strategy: Leaders outwardly align with organizational priorities while subtly embedding their personal values into broader goals. This approach allows them to navigate organizational demands while advancing their own educational philosophies.
2. The Floor is Lava Strategy: Leaders strategically avoid "hot spots" of misalignment and instead prioritize "safe zones" where their personal and organizational priorities align. This method minimizes friction while enabling them to operate within areas of shared values and goals.

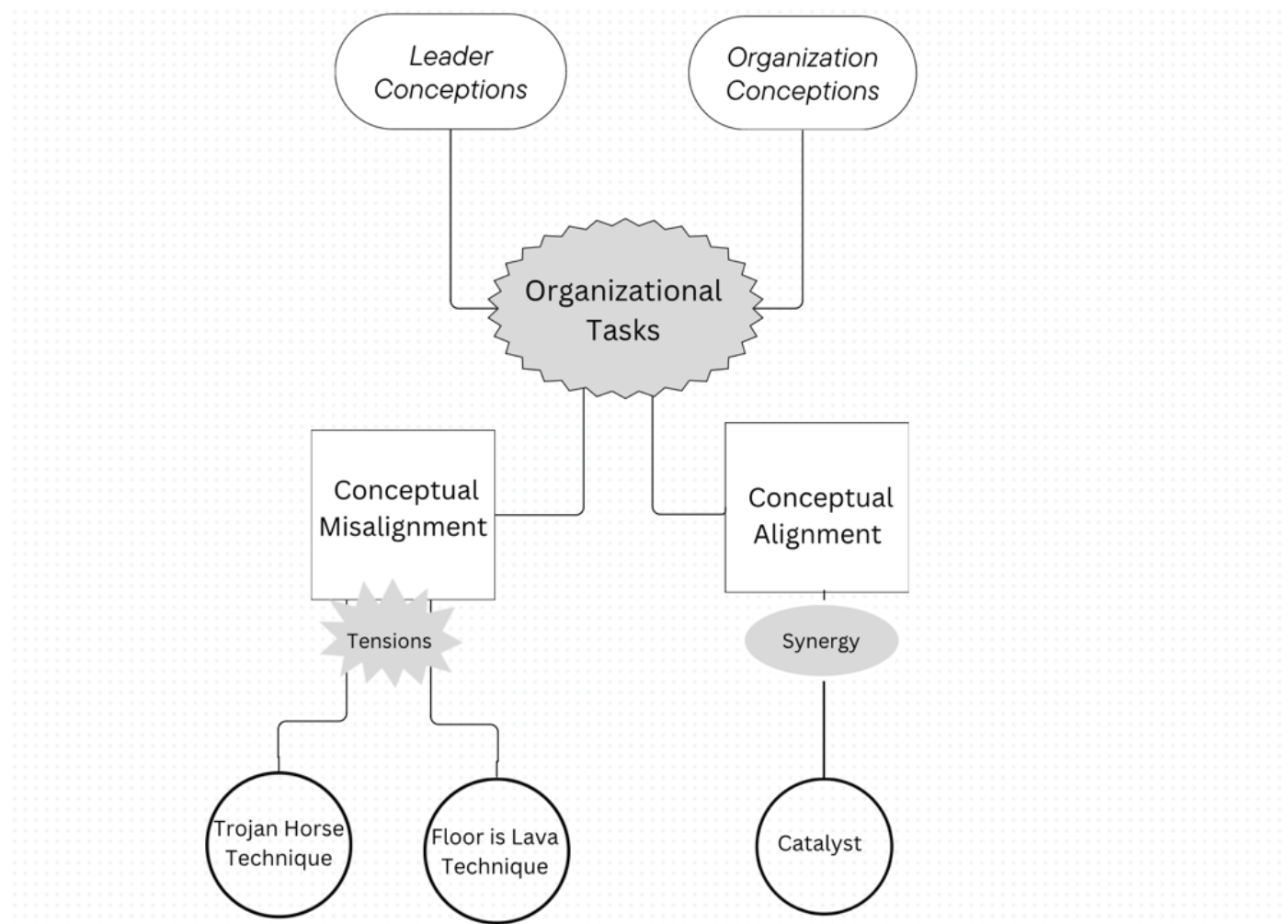
These strategies reflect the adaptability and creativity leaders employ to reconcile their conceptualizations with organizational demands, ultimately shaping how they approach task execution and leadership priorities.

Figure 8 is a concept map that illustrates how leaders navigate the tension they experience due to the competitive nature of the conceptions. It depicts how leaders navigate both conceptual misalignment and alignment within their organizations. Leaders and their organizations bring distinct conceptions to their roles. These conceptions influence the execution of organizational tasks. In cases of conceptual misalignment, tensions emerge, prompting leaders to employ strategies such as the Trojan Horse Strategy and/or the Floor is Lava Strategy. Conversely, when conceptual alignment occurs, leaders experience synergy with their

organizations, serving as catalysts for their initiatives. Notably, some leaders have demonstrated a variation of the Floor is Lava Strategy, where the "safe zones" of alignment are expansive, with smaller pockets of perceived danger and misalignment.

Figure 8

Competing Conceptions Concept Map



CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

This dissertation study explored how experienced educational leaders, operating under the provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and evaluated by systems of accountability, articulate, navigate, and reconcile tensions between their personal conceptualizations of education as an economic good and those prevalent within their organizations, influenced by broader systemic demands. The study is theoretically grounded in four primary conceptualizations of education as an economic good: education as a product, education as an investment, education as a service, and education as an identity. Each of these conceptualizations is defined by unique public goals, process conceptions, and measures. The findings suggested that leaders and their respective organizations conceptualized education as an economic good in diverse ways, reflecting elements of all four conceptualizations: education as a product, investment, service, and identity. This diversity emerged across the constructs of process conceptions, outcomes of interest, essence of the good, measures, and public goals. However, leaders and organizations tended to lean toward one dominant conceptualization, which significantly influenced their leadership approaches.

When conceptual misalignment occurred, leaders often experienced tensions, particularly with Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, where measures such as grades and test scores dominated organizational priorities. These tensions were described as a "push or pull," where leaders struggled to balance their personal priorities with those emphasized by the organization. Most tensions were related to the Conceptualization 1 Education as Product Measures which are grades and test scores. Leaders employed two primary strategies to navigate these tensions:

1. The Trojan Horse Strategy: Leaders aligned with organizational priorities outwardly but embedded their personal priorities within broader organizational goals. This approach

allowed them to subtly advance their individual values while meeting external expectations.

2. The Floor is Lava Strategy: Leaders avoided areas of misalignment—conceptual "hot spots"—and focused on "safe zones" where their priorities and the organization's values aligned. These "safe zones" represented initiatives and efforts both parties valued, enabling leaders to avoid potential conflicts.

Although this study did not aim to explore what happens in the case of conceptual alignment, it found that when alignment occurs, leaders' actions are significantly catalyzed. They often go above and beyond to execute initiatives that are mutually valued by both the leader and their organization. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how educational leaders conceptualize education as an economic good and how these conceptualizations affect their leadership practices. Furthermore, the study highlights the significant influence of conceptual misalignments, and the strategies leaders employ to navigate these challenges, offering valuable insights for leadership theory and practice. Adding this layer of scrutiny to organizational synergy promotes a connection between societal goals and leaders' priorities in practice.

Connections to the Literature

The conceptions held by the leaders in this study reflect significant parallels with theories discussed in the literature. Earle's beliefs about process conceptions were evident in his excitement about initiatives such as "no pass days," where students created their own scripts and schedules, acting as tour guides for guests. Earle emphasized that these experiences prepared students to become future leaders in their communities and beyond. This approach aligns with Newman's perspective in the literature, which advocates for educational institutions to elevate students' intellectual and moral standards, cultivating a collective mindset that shapes both

individual and community identity. Earle's initiative mirrors Newman's concept of the "spirit of the place," as it implicitly teaches leadership and fosters a school climate that values leadership development.

Sunni's conceptions regarding the desired outcomes of education echoed John Dewey's (1938) perspective, which poses the essential question: "What are our schools doing to cultivate not merely passive toleration that will put up with people of different racial birth or different colored skin, but what are our schools doing positively and aggressively and constructively to cultivate understanding and goodwill which are essential to democratic society?" (Dewey, 1938, p. 38). Both Dewey and Sunni advocate for an educational approach that actively informs and empowers students as contributors to a democratic society, rather than merely fostering passive compliance.

Sunni's perspectives on the public goals of education also resonate with Locke's views on personal freedom and identity. Sunni articulated that education should be identity-affirming, providing opportunities for students to explore themselves and others rather than imposing a rigid framework of how they should act or be perceived. This perspective aligns with the liberation-focused view of education described in Conceptualization 4: Education as an Identity, which sees education as a means to affirm identity and foster personal freedom, reflecting Locke's 1823 ideals of freedom and self-actualization discussed in the literature. Moreover, Sunni's emphasis on racial equity and dismantling systemic barriers aligns with the principles of social justice leadership described by George Theoharis (2007). Theoharis highlights the necessity for leaders to prioritize issues related to race, class, gender, disability, and other marginalizing conditions in their advocacy and practice.

Tara's beliefs about process conceptions emphasized advocating for gifted students to enroll in classes aligned with their abilities, ensuring that they receive appropriate challenges and enrichment. Her perspective aligns with Sir Ken Robinson's critique of education as a production-line process, advocating for structured educational inputs that yield meaningful opportunities for students to realize their potential. Additionally, Tara explicitly connects student mastery and achievement with college and career readiness, reflecting ideals held by Human Capital theorists such as Beckner (1964). These theorists argue that educational attainment expands career opportunities, leading to higher earnings and improved socioeconomic mobility.

Theoretical Implications

The Competing Conceptualizations of Education as an Economic Good framework posits that these conceptualizations are inherently competitive, as leaders have limited resources such as time, attention, and effort. However, the framework does not explicitly articulate how these conceptualizations compete. Through my research, I found that much of the tension centers around the measures associated with Conceptualization 1—grades and test scores. Even leaders whose personal conceptualizations aligned with Conceptualization 1 expressed significant dissatisfaction with using grades and test scores as the primary metrics for evaluating the consumption of educational services. They often emphasized that student knowledge extends far beyond what can be captured by standardized tests.

Findings indicate that leaders hold multiple conceptualizations within the constructs outlined by the conceptual framework: process conceptions, outcome of interest, essence of the good, measures, and public good. The leaders' expressions aligned with the propositions of the framework, suggesting a sense of external validity for the model. The study's questions were intentionally designed to elicit leaders' conceptualizations through the lens of this framework.

For instance, leaders were asked how they measure progress toward educational goals—this question aimed at drawing out their conceptions of measures. Their responses consistently aligned with the propositions in the framework. For example, Tara, who predominantly conceptualized education as a private good—specifically as a product and an investment—relied heavily on measures such as grades and test scores, and access to college and career as anticipated by the framework. This alignment with the framework’s presuppositions was evident throughout the study.

The same complexity can be observed in organizations, where the synergy between leaders and their organizations becomes more intricate due to each party’s unique conceptualizations of the constructs in the framework—process conceptions, essence of the good, outcome of interest, measures, and public goal. This nuanced understanding emphasizes the multidimensional nature of educational leadership and highlights the dynamic interplay between leaders’ and organizations’ perspectives.

When navigating tensions arising from conceptual misalignments, the findings extend the framework by offering insights into how leaders manage the competitive dynamics of these conceptualizations. Specifically, leaders employed strategies such as the "Trojan Horse Strategy" and the "Floor is Lava Strategy." These strategies illustrate how leaders navigate competing priorities and conceptual conflicts. Notably, the competitive nature of these conceptualizations is not explicitly addressed in the framework, nor are the specific strategies leaders use to resolve such tensions directly referenced within it. The Trojan Horse Strategy involves leaders embedding their personal priorities within broader organizational goals, effectively advancing their values under the guise of alignment. In contrast, the Floor is Lava Strategy sees leaders

avoiding areas of conceptual misalignment and focusing their efforts on initiatives that both they and their organizations value, effectively "clinging" to zones of safety. [OBJ]

Future research could expand upon these theoretical contributions by investigating whether additional constructs or conceptualizations of education as an economic good exist. In this study, the theoretical framework limited the ways of knowing to the conceptualizations it outlined. While this framework effectively captured the perspectives of the participants examined, it raises the question of whether there are other ways of conceptualizing education, particularly in different cultural or national contexts where values, governance structures, and levels of government intervention may vary. Exploring these alternative perspectives could enhance the framework's applicability and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how education is conceptualized across diverse settings.

Tensions and competing conceptions

Accountability in education often centers on learning outcomes and curriculum achievement at high levels, raising questions about whether teachers perform well or not. Despite increasing interest in measuring outputs through standardized assessments, as noted by David Labaree, this focus has grown in prominence in recent years (Labaree, 2011). Education's connection to the economic productivity of a country is critical, but the process of moving through the system is often less about hard academic skills and more about developing soft skills, social skills, and extracurricular training necessary for adults in a modern society. Labaree critiques the push for standardized curriculum and assessments, which prioritize certain measures of success while sidelining broader conceptions of learning (Labaree, 2011).

Existing literature often categorizes education as either a public good or a private good, treating these perspectives as distinct and separate. However, findings from my study suggest

that these conceptualizations are more dynamic and multifaceted. Leaders' perspectives frequently reflect an interplay between constructs. For example, a leader might emphasize measures such as grades and test scores—aligned with a private-good perspective—while simultaneously advocating for equity-based initiatives consistent with education as a public good.

In 1989, Gerald Grace highlighted the fundamental nature of education as a question of national and international significance with far-reaching implications. Grace's work explored whether education is regarded as a private commodity or a public good driven by collective service goals. His findings, particularly in the context of New Zealand, underscore the role of government in shaping education. Grace contends that viewing education as a commodity undermines equity and public benefits. This same conundrum arose in my study. Leaders who conceptualized education measures as a product still grappled with the limitations of grades and test scores as indicators of progress toward public educational goals.

Grace conducted his research in New Zealand, a nation with deep cultural and power divides between the Māori, the Indigenous people of New Zealand, and the ruling European-descended class. This divide is rooted in colonization, land dispossession, and systemic inequities. Parallels can be drawn to the United States, where a long history of cultural and power divides has similarly resulted in enduring political, economic, and social inequalities. For example, one participant in my study, who openly identified as a member of multiple marginalized groups, emphasized the public goal of equity and liberation. This perspective often conflicted with privatized conceptions of education that prioritize individual achievement and external validation through standardized measures.

These dynamics support Grace's argument about the role of hegemony in education, citing that education can be used as a tool for dominant groups in society to maintain their power and control. He argues that education systems are not neutral but are shaped by the cultural, political, and economic interests of the ruling class. Labaree adds another dimension, observing that for marginalized groups, education often represents an opportunity for social and economic mobility rather than the preservation of existing advantages. Education becomes a tool for striving toward equality, but Labaree critiques this as a romanticized view, while also acknowledging it may be true in part (Labaree, 2006). For some, education offers security, allowing them to maintain their socioeconomic position. This dual nature of education, particularly as reflected in public-good and private-good conceptions, illustrates the structural tension within educational systems.

Labaree (1997) argues that historical conflicts over competing visions of education have resulted in a contradictory system structure that undermines its overall effectiveness. He identifies three primary goals of education—preparing citizens, training the workforce, and promoting social mobility—representing the perspectives of the citizen, the taxpayer, and the consumer, respectively (Labaree, 1997). My research reveals that most leaders experience tensions surrounding the measures, explicitly. Implicitly these tensions are tied to the public goals of conceptualizations 1 and 2—social efficiency and national security, respectively. These concepts function to preserve the existing status quo, where some individuals benefit while others are left behind.

The findings of this dissertation study align with Labaree's and Grace's conclusions. This conceptually fragmented approach to understanding and action will undoubtedly continue to challenge our society. It perpetuates a focus on what schools are perceived to be doing wrong

and amplifies efforts to measure accountability, rather than addressing the crucial question: What are schools truly for? These contributions highlight a need for national attention to focus on reconciling education's public goals, process conceptions, measures, essence of the good, and outcomes of interest. However, as long as power dynamics partition society into "haves" and "have-nots," consensus on the purpose of education will remain elusive. The purpose of education inherently differs depending on one's social and economic position, perpetuating these divides and complicating the path toward a unified vision of education.

Policy and Practical Implications for Leadership Training

Addressing conceptual misalignment between leaders and their organizations requires a strategic focus on leadership training. School leaders, acting as street-level bureaucrats as described by Honig (2006), are pivotal in shaping how organizational priorities are enacted on a daily basis. Leadership training programs should include tools such as alignment surveys and structured interviews to assess prospective leaders' conceptualizations of education as an economic good. These assessments would evaluate whether a leader's views align with the dominant conceptualizations upheld by the organization.

Building on these assessments, organizations could implement customized leadership placement policies. By matching leaders with schools or departments where their conceptualizations align with organizational values, leaders can operate with greater effectiveness and less friction. For instance, leaders prioritizing "Education as an Investment" may excel in settings focused on college and career readiness, while those emphasizing "Education as an Identity" may thrive in roles that center on diversity and inclusion initiatives. Such alignment ensures leaders are positioned to succeed and minimizes the tensions caused by conceptual misalignment. Leaders in this study frequently expressed significant challenges with

the measures associated with Conceptualization 1, which views education as a product. The reliance on grades and test scores as primary indicators of success often created friction, highlighting the need for leadership training that prepares leaders to navigate and reconcile these tensions effectively.

Policy and Practical Implications for Policy Development

Policy development plays a crucial role in mitigating the challenges of conceptual misalignment between leaders and their organizations. The issue at hand is not one of capacity but prioritization, given the limited resources of time, energy, effort, and funding. Conceptual misalignment arises when leaders and organizations differ in their understanding of key constructs such as measures, process conceptions, outcomes of interest, and public goals related to education.

At the national level, policymakers could address these challenges by introducing flexibility in accountability measures, particularly under frameworks like the Every Student Succeeds Act. Expanding these systems to include qualitative metrics—such as social-emotional learning outcomes and broader measures of student growth—would provide leaders and organizations with more comprehensive tools to evaluate success. This approach ensures that metrics better align with shared conceptualizations of education, reducing friction and enabling more holistic assessments of educational outcomes.

Additionally, organizations could adopt policies that allow for a more nuanced evaluation of success, moving beyond traditional metrics like test scores and grades. By incorporating broader indicators of student growth and social-emotional learning outcomes, organizations can foster environments where leaders and teachers are empowered to prioritize educational goals that reflect the values and needs of their communities.

Limitations of the Study

This dissertation acknowledges several limitations inherent in its design and scope. Case studies often focus on specific individuals, groups, or situations, which inherently limits the generalizability of findings to a broader population. This study, centered on experienced educational leaders operating under the provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act. In this case, the leaders and their organizations are measured by systems of accountability unique to federally funded public schools. Recognizing that variations in educational policy and leadership priorities may differ between federally and non-federally funded schools, leaders may feel pressure to act in ways that prioritize the system of accountability. Future research could expand to include a wider array of sectors to capture a more comprehensive picture of educational leadership dynamics. Each educational system may operate within its unique cultural, economic, and policy landscape.

A common criticism of qualitative research, including this study, is the limited sample size. With only four participants, the findings may not adequately represent the diversity of perspectives or experiences within the broader population of educational leaders. This small sample size poses challenges in achieving a comprehensive understanding of the complex and varied nature of educational leadership. The qualitative approach employed in this study prioritizes in-depth situational insights over the generalizability typical of quantitative research. Consequently, this methodology inherently involves the researcher's interpretations, which can be influenced by personal biases. To mitigate this, reflective journaling was incorporated throughout the research process to critically assess and manage potential biases that may emerge.

My belief in the enduring influence of core priorities on behavior underpins this study. It presupposes that leaders experience tensions when their core values are challenged. However,

this assumption may not universally apply. Some leaders, as described by Bolman and Deal, operate within a political frame, where skills like agenda setting, political mapping, coalition building, and negotiation play a more significant role in their governance rather than core values (Bolman and Deal, 2021). These leaders might navigate tensions differently, influenced more by political dynamics than steadfast principles.

Additionally, organizations are complex entities with leaders holding diverse, and sometimes conflicting, conceptualizations of education as an economic good. For instance, a Curriculum and Instruction department may view education as a product, focusing on measurable outcomes like test scores, whereas a Special Education department may emphasize education as a public good, prioritizing equity and inclusivity. This diversity made it challenging to determine a definitive organizational conceptualization of education as an economic good. Moreover, discrepancies emerged between the document analysis conclusions and the participants' perceptions. For example, a participant might feel tension in balancing social studies and science equally with math and literacy, perceiving their district as favoring math and literacy. However, my document analysis suggested a more balanced emphasis. This divergence highlighted the importance of leaders' perceptions in shaping the tensions they experience. Thus, both leaders' perceptions and the organization's documented priorities were considered to provide a nuanced understanding of these dynamics.

During the document analysis process, I frequently reviewed the organization's website, which often presented board-filtered representations of the organization. Distinguishing between espoused conceptions and priorities versus those grounded in reality proved challenging, as these representations were subject to social desirability bias, where the organization has a desire to appear more favorable. For example, one organization publicly claimed to value diversity,

aligning its messaging with the public goal of equity. However, the operational realities appeared to differ. The appointment of the district's first Black superintendent in 2021, for instance, was met with mixed reactions, including significant challenges and opposition from various community members. This contrast underscored the difficulty of deciphering the gap between espoused values and actual practices.

The study's reliance on the theoretical framework, *The Competing Conceptualizations of Education as an Economic Good*, introduces certain limitations. This framework provides a structured lens for analyzing education through specific conceptualizations—public good as a service or identity and private good as a product or investment. However, its focused approach may inadvertently exclude alternative perspectives or dimensions that fall outside its scope, like aspects of education that are not fully accounted for in this economic lens. Consequently, the study's findings are shaped and potentially constrained by the assumptions and categories inherent in the chosen framework. This limitation highlights the need for future research to explore broader or alternative theoretical approaches that might provide a more comprehensive understanding of how education is conceptualized, particularly in contexts or settings that differ from those examined in this study.

Lastly, it is possible that the social environment or prevailing events of the time are influencing the responses of the leaders and the priorities of their organizations. The literature review in this study highlights notable and relevant work across varied time periods and acknowledges that significant societal events can elevate certain conceptions of education into prominence. However, this study is limited in that regard. An exploration of broader societal and environmental factors extends beyond the scope of this research.

Recommendations for Future Research

To build on this study's findings, future research could investigate how conceptual alignment between educational leaders and their organizations influences key outcomes such as leader satisfaction, organizational coherence, and student achievement. Specifically, examining the extent to which alignment mitigates tensions experienced by leaders, how alignment shapes leaders' decision-making, prioritization of initiatives, and allocation of resources, and whether organizations with high levels of conceptual alignment demonstrate better performance on accountability measures compared to those with significant misalignments.

Future studies could also explore the long-term effects of conceptual alignment on the retention of educational leaders, particularly in high-pressure environments. Research could examine whether leaders in aligned organizations experience lower burnout rates and greater job commitment compared to those in misaligned settings. Additionally, comparative case studies across different educational systems—such as urban, rural, and charter schools—could provide insight into how contextual factors influence the role of alignment in shaping organizational outcomes.

Another avenue for research could involve understanding how alignment evolves over time, particularly as leaders and organizations adapt to shifting educational priorities, policy changes, and societal demands. Longitudinal studies could assess how sustained or disrupted alignment impacts organizational resilience, innovation, and adaptability in the face of external pressures.

Finally, future research could investigate how cultural and contextual factors influence conceptual alignment, particularly in diverse settings where stakeholders may have differing values and expectations about the purpose of education. For instance, examining how cultural identity, socioeconomic conditions, and community engagement interact with alignment could

provide a more holistic understanding of its role in promoting equity and inclusion within educational organizations.

Recommendations for Practice This study found that conceptual misalignment between leaders and their organizations exists and significantly impacts how leaders execute tasks. Leaders are employing strategies such as the Trojan Horse Strategy and the Floor is Lava Strategy to navigate these misalignments. To mitigate the effects of street-level bureaucracies, it is crucial for the organization to clearly define its conceptions, outlining its public goals, process conceptions, essence of the good, measures, and desired outcomes. Furthermore, organizations should seek out leaders who conceptualize education in a similar manner, which can help improve overall organizational functioning.

An effective approach to addressing this issue is to develop alignment tools, such as surveys and interviews, to assess prospective leaders' conceptualizations of education. These tools should focus on understanding the thought processes of potential leaders using the framework of education as an economic good. By doing so, organizations can ensure that their perspectives align with candidates' priorities. Based on these assessments, organizations can implement customized leadership placement by assigning leaders to schools or departments where their educational conceptions match. This alignment allows for greater synergy between the leader and the organization, improving effectiveness and reducing friction.

Additionally, to address tensions related to traditional success measures, such as grades and test scores, accountability systems should be redefined to include qualitative metrics. According to Labaree, the concept of a curriculum is synonymous with the essence of schooling and has long been a cornerstone of education (Labaree, 2011). However, the notion of assessing what students retain from that curriculum through standardized testing is a relatively recent

development. I propose redefining how we measure progress toward our educational goals to move beyond the narrow focus of standardized assessments. These could involve measures of social-emotional learning, student growth, and community impact. Advocating for flexibility within frameworks like the Every Student Succeeds Act would enable schools to prioritize metrics that align with their shared conceptualizations of education, fostering a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of success. Organizations should also establish ongoing feedback loops to continuously assess alignment between leaders and organizational goals. Regular surveys, leader reflections, and organizational reviews can inform iterative adjustments, ensuring that priorities remain aligned over time. Finally, fostering collaboration in goal setting between leaders and stakeholders is essential for developing a shared vision that accommodates diverse conceptualizations of education. By blending traditional and qualitative metrics, organizations can create a more holistic framework that reflects a broader range of educational values, ultimately reducing misalignment and improving outcomes.

Concluding Remarks

This dissertation explored how experienced educational leaders, operating under the provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act and evaluated by systems of accountability, articulate, navigate, and reconcile tensions between their personal conceptualizations of education as an economic good and those prevalent within their organizations, which are shaped by broader systemic demands. The study was grounded in four primary conceptualizations of education as an economic good: education as a product, education as an investment, education as a service, and education as an identity. Each of these conceptualizations is defined by distinct public goals, process conceptions, and measures.

The findings revealed that leaders and their respective organizations conceptualized education as an economic good in diverse ways, often incorporating elements of all four conceptualizations. However, both leaders and organizations tended to lean toward one dominant conceptualization, which significantly influenced leadership practices and organizational priorities. In cases of conceptual misalignment, leaders frequently experienced tensions, particularly with Conceptualization 1: Education as a Product, where measures such as grades and test scores dominated organizational priorities. These tensions created a “push or pull” dynamic, as leaders struggled to balance their personal priorities with the organization’s emphasis.

To navigate these tensions, leaders employed two primary strategies:

1. The Trojan Horse Strategy: Leaders outwardly aligned with organizational priorities but subtly embedded their personal priorities within broader organizational goals.
2. The Floor is Lava Strategy: Leaders avoided areas of misalignment and focused instead on "safe zones" where their personal priorities aligned with organizational values.

The study also found that when conceptual alignment occurred, leaders’ actions were significantly catalyzed. In such cases, leaders frequently went above and beyond to execute initiatives that were mutually valued by both the leader and their organization. These findings highlight the critical role conceptual alignment plays in enhancing organizational effectiveness.

This research holds valuable implications for organizations seeking to implement policies and initiatives effectively. Misalignment between organizational priorities and leaders’ values can hinder implementation, as leaders, acting as street-level bureaucrats, may selectively prioritize or reinterpret directives they do not personally value. This research is also significant for leaders motivated by causes that may differ from those of their organizations. Leaders should

recognize that the organization's priorities may take precedence over their own and that they may need to think and operate creatively to implement initiatives that align both with their personal conceptions and the organization's conceptions. On a national level, we must confront the reality that the current educational system is not as effective as it could be due to varying and often conflicting conceptions of education. These differences create inherent imbalances, with the scales tipping in favor of certain groups over others. Addressing this issue requires a collective effort to redefine educational priorities, reflecting the needs of a more diverse stakeholder group. Without this critical shift, the system will continue to perpetuate disparities rather than eliminate them, ultimately undermining the potential for education to be what we desire it to be. The hope is that this research will be applied in the field to promote organizational coherence, enabling leaders and organizations to work collaboratively as extensions of each other in carrying out their missions and visions as intended. By fostering alignment, organizations can enhance their strategic selectivity and ensure their goals are executed with fidelity and shared purpose.

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