HOW DO ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS NAVIGATE COMPETING DEMANDS TO FOCUS ON INSTRUCTIONAL PRIORITIES?

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ABSTRACT

The research on high-poverty, high-performing schools, suggests instructional leadership is an essential component for principals to be effective school leaders. Unfortunately, in spite of themes in the research, and shifts in principal preparation initiatives, practice suggests principals struggle to hold to instructional priorities. Given the significant costs of education reform this challenge to prioritize instructional leadership needs to be understood, particularly in the area of leading the improvement of high-poverty, lower performing schools. The gap between research and practice, and the causes for these differences in principal leadership, were the subject of this study. Qualitative methods were used to study eight instructionally-centered principals in their schools to identify "how" they navigate the competing demands to focus on instructional priorities. Common themes emerged from the interview, observation, and calendar study data providing strategies for how these principals navigate demands to remain focused on instruction.

Findings affirmed the research from effective school reform and school leadership research. Themes also emerged for practices aligned with the research on organizational leadership; for example, principals delegated purposefully, served as relatable "lead learners," and used data to create a sense of urgency and leverage improvements to instruction. Principals were also found to be "kid-centered" in their decision making.

Most interesting in the themes that emerged; however, was the unanimous belief that all students can learn. Principals demonstrated evidence of self-efficacy about their leadership, and perhaps more importantly, the belief that the "locus of causality" for learning lies within the school and teachers. This set of beliefs appeared to drive their planning towards creating a data-centered environment in their schools. Implications for further research and principal professional development are discussed.

DEDICATION

This dedication is to my husband George.
My deepest gratitude for putting me through college,
standing by me through graduate studies,
and finally for encouraging me to stick with it and finish this work.
You are the best friend ever.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-first Century learners enter a world of work entirely different from generations past yet schools have failed to shift practices and prepare students accordingly (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Friedman, 2005). Driven by internet and technology developments, and globalization of job markets, traditional thinking about education has become obsolete (Daggett, 2008). In the interim, research suggests schools need effective, instructionally-centered principals to close this gap; principals who can create a sense of urgency, develop collaborative learning cultures among teachers, and shift instruction to better prepare graduates for the future (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Elmore, 2000; Wagner, Kegan, Lahey, Lemon, Garnier, Helsing, Howell, & Rasmussen, 2006).

Unfortunately, in spite of these findings in the literature, and the shifts in principal preparation programs emphasizing the importance of instructional leadership (Wallace Foundation, 2012), practice in the field suggests principals continue to struggle to maintain focus on the instructional priorities (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007). This struggle needs to be understood if we are to improve learning environments and outcomes in schools, particularly for the students in high-poverty, consistently lower performing schools.

The gap between research and practice, and the cause for these differences, was the subject of this case study research. This section and the sections that follow highlight the body of research on effective school reform models, and further describe the problem of inconsistent instructional leadership by principals. Provided is a discussion of the competing demands principals face in the field, along with gaps in the literature regarding the manner in which effective school leaders achieve the ideal. The limitations and delimitations of this study are discussed along with a description of how this study adds to the extant literature.

In the second chapter, a thorough review has been provided of current research on school reform including models that have emerged defining the role of the principal. Also included is a synthesis of the research on principal leadership and a review of case study findings for effective principals from high-poverty, high-performing schools. Theoretical frameworks from *Attribution Theory* are described and applied to examine individual belief systems as possible effects on principal priority setting and decision making. *Turbulence Theory* is also included as a theoretical lens for considering organizational impacts and everyday tensions that might impact school leaders on a daily basis.

Case study methodologies for this study are outlined in Chapter Three, including a description of the sample selection process and data collection methods. Data analysis methods and the coding strategies implemented during each phase of the data collection period are explained, as are methods of verification used to support validity and reliability.

Findings are described in Chapter Four beginning with an introduction to the eight case study participants, along with the demographic information for each of their schools. The organization for presenting the findings is by major themes and sub-themes that emerged within and across the case studies. Major themes are described, along with detailed descriptions for sub-themes in each category, and supported by quotes and observations that provide evidence for each theme.

Major themes discussed include consistent evidence of leadership practices aligned with the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Standards, the defining criteria used for selecting the sampling, and the tenets from models of effective school leadership that were drawn from the school reform research (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). Additional themes are discussed regarding the findings of strategies principals used to organize around the competing demands in their schools to remain focused on priorities. Organizational strategies fell into four broad themes, including delegating purposefully and effectively, leveraging relationships as lead learners, and questioning using a critical lens. Additionally, principals in this study were found to be principled, "kid-centered" decision makers. This fourth area was more of a leadership quality; however, participants appeared to consider whether something was student-centered as a metric for effective decision-making.

In addition to the leadership strategies and qualities stated above, principals in this study held the prevailing belief that “all kids can learn.” This belief about learning went beyond the typical “vision statement found on the website," and extended to beliefs

about school, and teacher efficacy. The impact of this belief that "all kids can learn," and at high levels of performance, was leadership observed in the field with a sense of accountability for student achievement. This system of beliefs about student learning and teacher efficacy was observable in participants' day-to-day interactions with students and teachers and was confirmed in the closing interview.

Finally, the discussion section in Chapter Five examines these findings through the theoretical constructs of *attribution theory* and *turbulence theory*, two possible lenses for explaining the decisions and actions observed. Findings are explored in terms of implications for principal preparation and development, and considerations for additional empirical research that might build on the conclusions from this study.

Statement of the Problem

Decades of policy changes, government and foundation funding of school reform initiatives, and scientific research studying the problem of low student achievement in schools have failed to produce sustained improvement in student achievement levels as assessed by national and international assessments (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Wagner et al., 2006). In a review of the research on school reform and effective school leadership, this problem appears to be less about identifying effective models and more about failing to take evidence-based solutions to scale (Calkins et al., 2007). If we have evidence, for example, that high-performing, high-poverty schools are led by principals that are instructional leaders first, and who consistently organize around instructional priorities,

why are we failing to effect systemic change in this area? This pervasive problem requires attention for a number of reasons.

First, principal leadership matters in schools, particularly in schools for the traditionally underserved (Bryk et al., 2010; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom 2004; Tough, 2008). According to Hattie, principals who serve as instructional leaders focused on student learning have a more significant effect on learning outcomes, with an effect size of .42 (2015). Of course, effective teaching matters most in impacting student learning (City, 2011; Hattie, 2015); however, schools with principals who serve as instructional leaders create the professional environment most conducive to effective teacher development (Wagner et al., 2006; Wallace Foundation, 2012). This finding gives principals tremendous power to affect learning and achievement in schools, a force that needs to be harnessed (Fullan, 2015).

Second, failing school reform initiatives have been a high cost to the nation (Editorial Projects in Educational Research Center, 2004). Linda Darling-Hammond refers to the term "popcorn reform" in describing the tendency for schools and systems to spend resources on short term innovations (2010). Innovations then come and go without being fully evaluated, and systems move on to the next "quick fix" strategy (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The focus on ineffective "quick fixes" is, in part, due to the variety of possible models and strategies that can have some effect on learning. Hattie describes in his research on effect sizes that nearly every approach can be measured to have an effect

on education, yet only some are of high impact (2015). We need school leaders who understand this and support high leverage instructional strategies.

Finally, our failure to improve schools for all students can be measured in societal losses. As a nation we can find losses in productivity in industry, losses in opportunities for individuals in the workforce (Daggett, 2005; Friedman, 2005), and worst of all, the cost in billions of dollars spent each year in the school to prison pipeline that results when students drop out of school or graduate ill-prepared for the workforce (Darling-Hammond, 2010). As globalization continues to impact the economy, a failure to improve education outcomes will likely continue to erode the middle class in the United States and contribute to the ever increasing income disparities (Friedman, 2005), factors that can affect the very health of our democracy.

Purpose of the study

A review of the literature makes a case for the importance of instructional leadership in schools, mainly if we are to affect the achievement of traditionally underserved students (Leithwood et al., 2004). Effective school reform models and research on instructional leadership indicate a common set of qualities needed for school leaders (Dewitt, 2017; Fullan, 2010; Hattie, 2015; Wallace Foundation, 2012). Models consistently describe leadership qualities such as communicating a vision and setting high expectations for learning, using data to create a sense of urgency and to inform decision making, developing a culture of learning for adults while serving as lead learner,

and leveraging core resources in support of instructional priorities (Bryk et al., 2010; Elmore, 2000; Wagner et al., 2006).

While common descriptors and themes appear across the literature defining instructional leadership, little is written about how effective principals actually navigate the competing demands in the field to remain focused on instructional priorities. The purpose of this study was to examine practices for principals known to be instructional leaders and to understand better how these principals navigate the day-to-day demands in their schools to remain focused on their vision to improve instructional and student achievement.

This qualitative study employed case study methods to carefully examine the thinking and practices of experienced instructional leader principals in high-poverty schools. Data analysis examined potential themes across principal case studies that might shed light on behaviors, strategies or beliefs that influence decision making and priority setting in schools. The data were also considered using *Attribution Theory* and *Turbulence Theory* as theoretical lenses to analyze principals interview data, observation, and time study data for individual cases and, again, across the eight case studies. The goal of the study was to better understand the decisions and actions these principals made to hold to instructional priorities and to create a theory of action for change.

Additionally, this study sought to fill the gap in knowledge about factors such as how effective principals weigh decisions or develop strategies to navigate demands; and

where possible, to identify patterns across multiple case studies of principals that might lead to a theory about priority development for principals.

For comparison, the principal sample was drawn from high-poverty elementary schools, and included experienced principals identified by leadership to be effective "instructional leaders." Data collection included interview and observation data to allow comparison between participant thoughts about instructional leadership, and their actions in the field when faced with the daily demands of their role. Through the analysis of interview responses, and the observation data from site visits, patterns did emerge regarding decision-making and action-taking for principal participants. Trends that emerged from these bounded case studies are shared in the discussion section, along with recommendations for further research.

Research Questions

While models of school reform and effective principal leadership have been developed to define instructional leadership qualities, questions remain regarding how principals go about navigating the policy mandates, discipline demands, and daily interruptions of managing a school to "be" effective instructional leaders.

The overarching question for this study was the following: How do effective elementary principals in high-poverty schools navigate the competing demands to focus on instructional priorities?

Related sub-questions explored during the initial and closing interviews towards better understanding the research question included:

- How do principals understand and define instructional leadership?
- How do principals enact their vision of effective instructional leadership?
- How do principals prioritize their time in response to competing demands?
- What internal beliefs affect principals as they make decisions about priorities?
- What principal preparation strategies influenced priority setting for instructional leadership or managing for instructional priorities?

Delimitations and Limitations of this Study

Efforts were made in the selection of the sample to account for the socio-economic and demographic variables in the schools served. Principals invited to participate included those recommended to be effective instructional leaders by state and district leaders. This purposive sampling of exemplar cases of instructional leaders was intended to improve the trustworthiness of the patterns or themes that were noted across case studies; however, the absence of contrasting ineffective principals is a delimitation for this study. The absence of the contrasting sample is related to the practical considerations of identifying and recruiting weak principal leaders. Delimitations for this study restrict generalizability beyond cross-case comparisons (Yin, 2009).

Limitations for this case study design include the understanding that data collected and analyzed in each school milieu represented individual bounded events. This study stands on its own and is valuable in and of itself for the richness of the data

collected from each individual case study. Patterns and trends identified in the data analysis within and across cases are not generalizable beyond this study; however, they may contribute to informing and encouraging further empirical research.

Significance of the Study

Substantial research has been collected on effective school reform models defining the qualities of effective instructional leadership, and specific case studies have been cited defining leadership qualities found in high-poverty high-achieving schools. In each category, evidence suggests the leadership role played by the principal is critical for influencing that success (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015; Fullan, 2015; Calkins et al., 2007; & Wagner et al., 2006). States and higher education institutions have made significant changes in principal preparation programs as a result of this body of research and districts invest considerable resources in principal mentoring programs (Wallace Foundation, 2012). The significance of this study centers on the importance of understanding the gap between research and practice for school leaders towards the goal of improving our schools.

There are many challenges offered as to why principals struggle to focus on instructional priorities, but some succeed. This study sought to determine whether case study participants, identified to be effective leaders, were influenced by principal preparation efforts or mentoring and whether principals held different beliefs about their control or non-control over the instructional matters in their schools. The study set out to examine how the tensions in the school, such as agreeability of the teachers mattered, or

whether methods of delegating or shared leadership were observed. Generally, the study sought to know how instructional leader principals navigate the challenges and demands to focus on instructional priorities.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review includes an overview of the research on successful school reform models and principal leadership studies. The review outlines connections across the emerging models for effective school reform, and qualities found across studies of effective principals. The term "instructional leadership," which is often used to describe effective principals, is explored for common themes occurring across reform models, as shown in Table 2.1. In addition to examining school reform and instructional leader models, specific case studies of high-poverty, high-achieving schools were reviewed for the purpose of better understanding how effective leadership is defined in the field in some of the most demanding conditions.

A discussion of the tensions school leaders manage is included in this section towards providing a more nuanced view of the competing demands principals balance in their daily role as school leaders. This challenge, one I navigated myself for fourteen years, is one that needs to be understood if we are to develop the leaders we need to improve our schools, particularly to improve them at scale. Finally, the review highlights gaps in the literature regarding the manner in which effective principals navigate the competing demands to achieve the instructional leadership ideal.

History of the Education Reform Initiatives

Despite decades of policy making directed towards improving student achievement, public schools in the United States continue to be viewed as falling short (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012; Walker, 2013). Beginning with the *A Nation at Risk* report, policymakers called for reform measures to increase the percentage of students attending college, and to increase achievement levels for all students in preparation for participation in the emerging global economy (Berliner & Bruce, 1995; Gardner et al. 1983; Freidman, 2005; The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

In response to the report, policymakers focused on structural changes, for example, expectations for states to adopt standards, the development of state assessments for students, and experimenting with governance structures such as site-based management (Elmore & Burney, 1997). Early improvement initiatives impacted policies at the state and district levels but did not, in the end, result in any real shift in instructional practice in classrooms (Elmore, 1997).

Models of Effective School Reform Emerge

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was reauthorized in 2001 under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), with specific targets for growth in achievement, and accountability systems for schools and districts that failed to meet targets (United States Department of Education). As the policy environment shifted in the direction of greater accountability, school improvement models moved in the direction of business models

for school leadership. Effective principal leaders were then expected to improve organizational improvements, much like division managers or CEOs in business (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, & SRI 2011; Public Agenda, 2008). In the decade that followed NCLB models for school improvement emerged, including new expectations for principals to serve as instructional leaders in their schools (Fullan, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2004; Reeves, 2009; Wagner et al., 2006).

Instructional leadership became a common phrase in the literature, and over time was included as part of the standards for principals as defined by state and national associations (Wallace Foundation, 2012). Studies of large-scale school reform led to the development of models for leading successful change (Bryk et al., 2010; Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2014).

Often inferred from business models, leaders were expected to create a sense of urgency for change, communicate a vision for improvement, and apply effective supervision to create change in teacher practice (Kotter, 1996; Morgan, 2006). As the debate raged in the field about how to improve schools, the effectiveness of teachers, and ultimately student achievement, the research often focused in on "instructional leadership" as an essential component. Four specific models of school reform are shared here emphasizing the leading thinking on effective strategies for improving schools at scale.

Emerging from a study of school reform efforts in Chicago, authors in Bryk et al.'s model emphasize the importance of effective school leaders as "the levers of change" (2010). The model describes effective leadership qualities to include three critical areas defined as instructional, managerial, and facilitative leadership (2010). Instructional leaders in Bryk et al.'s model were further described to hold high expectations for teaching and to be inclusive of teacher voice in decision making (2010). Additional components in this reform model are all led by the principals, including building professional capacity by coaching teachers, providing feedback about instructional practices, and growing a collaborative professional learning community among teachers (2010). Managerial leadership, as described by Bryk, consists of managing the operations side of schools to ensure that schedules, staffing, and material resources support the instructional vision (2010). In other words, Bryk et al.'s model suggest managing in support of learning.

Similar to Bryk's model, which views school leadership as an essential driver of improvement, Fullan also found instructional leadership to be pivotal (2015). Like Bryk's model, Fullan defines the instructional leader role to consist of setting the vision and ensuring teachers are resourced adequately with the tools to do good work (2010). Recently Fullan expanded on this earlier thinking, stating, "We have placed too great an emphasis on monitoring and evaluating instruction (2015)." He further clarified that

effective instructional leadership is less about the principal being the instructional expert, and more about serving as a lead learner; the principal who continues to learn alongside the teachers versus the most expert (Fullan, 2015). This quality, Fullan states, has demonstrated a more significant effect size than other instructional leadership factors (2015).

In terms of district-wide or system-wide reform, Fullan suggests in his most recent model that instructional leadership includes a component beyond building leadership responsibilities (2015). Fullan describes this necessary component as “system leadership,” and requires principals to serve by leading upward into central administration along with leading their school. This aspect of principal work is about committing to the growth of other schools, and towards improving the whole system (Fullan, 2010). Essentially, Fullan describes instructional leadership as having the skills to serve as a change agent, using timely data-based conversations to move practice forward at the building and system level.

Recognizing the importance of principal leadership to improve student achievement, the Wallace Foundation funded a study and identified three core components for effective reform (Leithwood et al., 2004). Core components in this model define focus areas for school leaders. Leithwood et al. describe instructional leadership as one part "keeping an eye on the organizational ball," and also serving as the critical catalyst for change. Effective principals in this model focus on developing teachers through focused professional development and guidance (2004). Effective principal

leaders according to this framework also strive to redesign the organization to better serve students. This redesign involves partnering with parents and the community towards engaging them in the environmental and policy context of the school (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Wagner et al., in their text *Change Leadership: A practical guide to transforming our schools,* emphasize similar qualities to describe instructional leadership for school reform. According to Wagner et al., creating a shared vision for teaching and learning is an essential component for leaders, along with using data to move effective instructional practices forward (2006). This model also includes the need for principals to contribute to systems-based instructional change and supports using achievement data not only to drive change but to create a sense of urgency for school reform (Wagner et al., 2006). Focused instructional leadership is further defined as prioritizing meeting time to be centered on collegial discussion about instructional best practices (Wagner et al., 2006).

Table 2.1 provides a comparison of the four leading models for effective school and system reform. Included are specific descriptors of instructional leadership behaviors and qualities. The three components found cited in all four models highlighted in this comparison (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). The term "instructional leadership," is defined in each framework to include similar leadership qualities for the principal. Each model describes the importance of creating a shared vision for learning and setting non-negotiables based on that vision. Three of the models compared include managerial leadership or managing in support of

learning, as an essential component of instructional leadership (Bryk et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006).

Developing professional capacity is a component found in all four models, with authors using terms such as building capacity, or developing professional capital for teachers. Professional capacity is said to be developed by implementing ongoing professional development that and by cultivating a collaborative professional environment in the school. One additional component cited in all four models is the need to build supportive relationships with students, relationships that provide high expectations for learning, and high supports for students to be able to achieve those high expectations (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006).

Table 2.1: Models of School Reform (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006).

Models of System Reform	Lessons from Chicago: Bryk et al., (2010)	Ontario Principal Council: Fullan, (2015)	Wallace Foundation Leithwood et al., (2004)	Change Leadership: Wagner et al., (2006)
Effective Leadership Qualities	School Leadership • Instruction leadership as setting high standards and leading school reform as a priority • Leadership is inclusive of a teacher's voice • Serves as an effective managerial leader	Instructional Leadership • Participates as lead learner • Works to set a vision • Obtain resources System Leader • Contributes to system growth Change Agent Skills • Facilitates change	Instructional Leadership • Leader as a critical catalyst for change • Setting direction and planning for improvement • Keeping "an eye on the organizational ball" • Collaborative/distributive leadership	Leadership Focus • Create Urgency for Instructional Improvement • Shared Vision of Good Teaching • Meetings are focused on instruction and are about the work of good teaching
Developing Professional Capacity	Professional capacity • Supporting professional learning across the school community • Focus on the capacity of new staff members • Developing teachers through coaching and feedback regarding effective practice	Professional Capital • Builds capacity • Human capital- improving people • Social capital- Improving collaboration • Decision capital- Focusing on evidence	Developing People • Building teacher capacity through professional development aligned with the vision • Professional community among teachers • Providing instructional guidance	Supervision and Professional Learning • Effective supervision focused on instruction • Professional development is intensive, collaborative and job-embedded • Data based accountable collaboration between teachers
Personalized Learning for Students	Student-Centered Learning Climate • Establishing a safe and nurturing environment • Teachers press for expectations and provide high support	New Pedagogies for Deep Learning • Deep Learning: Collaboration, Citizenship, Character Education, Critical Thinking, Creativity, Communication • Relationships among students and teachers • Students, teachers, and families become involved in the interest-driven curriculum • Curriculum is less defined at the outset but rather grow of student interest and is then shaped by the process of letting go and reigning in the learning	Redesigning the Organization • Understanding the organizational context • Meeting the needs of the specific student population • Redesigning within a policy context • Relationships with parents and the broader community	Effective Instruction • Rigor- focused on mastering core competencies • Relevance- Curriculum based on real-world application • Relationships- the critical motivator for learning
Engaging the Community	Parent-Community Ties • Creating a welcoming environment • Strengthening family connections to outside institutions • Teacher outreach to parents • Encouraging community relationships			No criteria for engaging the community in this model
Defining Curriculum and Assessments	Instructional Guidance • Curriculum is well defined across the system • Standards-aligned assessments		No criteria for system leadership in this model	A shared vision of student results • Well defined performance standards • Consistent understanding of what quality work looks like across the system
System Leadership	No criteria for system leadership in this model	Leading from the Middle • Action leadership • Learning by doing • Improvement discussion extends up into the system to improve schools systemically	No criteria for system leadership in this model	

Changes in Expectations for School Leaders

In addition to the research on school reform, the literature regarding the emerging role of principals as reform leaders was also explored. Expectations for principals have shifted in response to the research, and have increasingly been viewed to be a key component in the formula for improving schools. The role of the principal, in fact, the role of educational leaders at all levels, has changed in significant ways. "The days when a public school leader could be successful by being a good organizational manager are over," writes Moore, Dexter, Berube, and Beck (2005). School leaders are expected to be adept at using assessment data to leverage both accountability and instructional improvement in the schools they supervise (Moore et al., 2005). Reasons this shift towards greater accountability have occurred can be directly linked to changes in the global economy and the need to better prepare students for the world of work (Daggett, 2008; Friedman, 2005).

William Daggett, president for the International Center for Leadership in Education, reported more than a decade ago about entry-level jobs exceeding the skill levels of graduates, including those from higher education (Daggett, 2008). Additionally, college graduation rates in the United States, while higher in terms of percentage of the population graduating, consistently fall below the number of graduates in competing nations (Daggett, 2005, Friedman 2005). According to leading economists, guaranteeing high levels of achievement for students is vital to their future employment, and for that matter, to the national economy (Friedman, 2005). Given this mandate for improvement,

public school leaders at all levels have been increasingly expected to focus on achievement results over the traditional role of school managers.

Instructional Leadership as a Priority

The term instructional leadership has been cited in school improvement literature, along with components such as managing in support of learning, developing professional capacity, personalizing learning for students, and engaging the community. This section examines the literature describing instructional leadership as a construct and compares it to the research on the effects of principal leadership qualities in schools. Once again, themes are explored across studies and models towards establishing a working definition of "instructional leadership."

Peter Dewitt writes about six components most important for effective principals (2017). Dewitt lists instructional leadership first and refers to John Hattie's research on effect size as he defines the essential focus areas for instructional leader principals (Dewitt, 2017; Hattie, 2015). Essential roles for instructional leaders, according to Dewitt, include participating in teacher learning and development, setting and communicating goals and expectations, coordinating and evaluating instruction, and finally managing resource allocations in alignment with priorities (2017). Additional components include supporting teacher efficacy, designing professional development, developing assessment capable learners, providing critical feedback, and engaging families in the school community (Dewitt, 2017). For Dewitt, four of the additional five components are directly connected to instructional leadership.

In another six-year study of effective school leaders, the Wallace Foundation identified five core functions for today's principals (2012). Interestingly, this study, which examined the achievement data for students in 180 schools, found no single example of improved student achievement absent effective principal leadership in the school. The executive summary cites these core functions for principals to be considered effective instructional leaders: shaping a vision for student success, creating a school climate conducive to learning, growing the leadership of others, improving instruction, and managing data and resources in support of improving learning (Wallace Foundation, 2012).

Another research group, Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin, studied principal effects on schools using value-added measures from a large Texas database (2013). The value-added measures were used as a strategy to adjust for student demographic variables by comparing the growth of student achievement across years versus using proficiency data to attribute improved achievement (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013). An important finding in the Branch et al. study was that ineffective teachers were more likely to leave the schools that had higher growth measures. The authors inferred from these data that principals in more effective schools, as measured by the growth formulas, were more likely to supervise teachers to improve or exit them from teaching. Ineffective schools, as defined in this study as having lower growth rates, were more likely to hold onto ineffective teachers in their schools (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013).

A Public Agenda study examined both effective qualities for successful principals, and some of the challenges school leaders cite as getting in the way of their work (2007). Principals in this study were observed to be deemed as transformers or copers (Public Agenda, 2007). The "Transformer" principals were defined to be instructional leaders, principals who exhibited a "can do" approach. Transformer principals were said to set a vision for learning, walk hallways daily to keep abreast of the learning in the school and use data to support teachers to adjust their teaching. These principals were seen to be consensus builders versus disruptors of the status quo and saw their role as growing the teachers they had versus trying to replace them (2007).

In their article *Leading for Learning,* Chenowerth and Theokas (2012) studied 33 principals in high performing schools, identifying similar descriptors or components for principals they describe as "highly effective." Principals in their study set a vision for all students to succeed. They establish a school culture of respect, expect teachers to hold to professional tenets, and lead staff to focus on the challenges of instruction, all the while cultivating a collaborative environment where teachers worked together to solve problems. In terms of management, the principals in this study took hiring very seriously and conveyed the importance of collaboration to new hires. Management is a leadership activity that is shared by principals in this study. They create a leadership team in their building to ensure that operations support instruction (Chenowerth & Theokas, 2012).

The principal studies referenced here aligned with the research on effective school reform models. Themes emerging across both bodies of research included the use of a

common language for describing instructional leadership behaviors (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2006). Models describe instructional leadership as communicating a vision of success for all students, building the capacity of staff through professional learning, focusing on instruction as the priority, and aligning management functions with instructional priorities (Chenowerth & Theokas, 2012; Dewitt, 2017; Public Agenda, 2007; Wallace, 2012).

Descriptions of instructional leadership qualities for principals align with the description for principal leadership in the models of school reform (Bryk et al., 2010; Chenowerth & Theokas, 2012; Dewitt, 2017; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2014; Public Agenda, 2007; Wallace, 2012; Wagner et al., 2006). Given the focus on transforming lower-performing schools in the United States, the section below examines school leadership research for principals of high-poverty, yet high-performing schools. The summary of leadership qualities is then compared with the tenets indicated in the school reform, and effective principal leadership research.

Leaders of High Poverty, High Performing Schools

The executive summary for *The Turnaround Challenge* suggests three ‘C's for turning around the most challenged schools (Calkins et al., 2007). They include changing conditions for learning, building the capacity of the teaching team, and clustering community support (2007). Several studies of high-poverty, high-performing schools point to leadership factors as a component of that success (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013; Corallo & McDonald, 2001; McGee, 2003). This section reports on studies of high-

poverty, high-performing schools, and the leadership components believed to be factors influencing that higher performance for students.

Corallo and McDonald (2001) examined three components operating in schools with high community poverty that are “beating the odds” in terms of achievement. According to Corallo and McDonald, components include focusing on the instructional program, including aligning curriculum with standards and examining the manner in which content is taught; establishing a planning process for using student achievement data to monitor achievement and adjust instruction; and finally creating a collaborative culture among teachers and building administrators (2001).

A study of high poverty, high achieving "golden spike" schools in Illinois, found four similar leadership practices (McGee, 2003). First, leadership was found to establish a culture of high expectations for student learning. Second, a priority was placed on early literacy and creating extended learning opportunities for students needing intervention supports. Third, their system included using student achievement data as a critical component for improving instructional decision making. Increasing parent involvement in schools was the fourth strategy found in this study (2003).

In a 2007 study about professional learning, the Institute for Learning (IFL) found teacher engagement in professional development, and implementation of the learning in classrooms, to be higher when principals participated along with them in the sessions. This study of urban districts participating in professional development with IFL

examined survey and observation data and found teachers were more likely to invest when their principals engaged in the professional development (Quint, Akey, Rappaport, & Willner, 2007). Additionally, third-grade achievement in reading and math was also higher in schools where principals actively scheduled and participated in professional development sessions, lending additional support to the thinking that principals need to attend directly to building the capacity of teachers through professional learning opportunities.

Effective instructional leadership was cited in a synthesis of studies reviewed by Mulford, Kendall, Ewington, Edmunds, Kendall, and Silins (2007). In this study, the authors found common descriptors for principal leaders in high poverty, high achieving schools from the United States and Canada and compared them to the leadership qualities found in high poverty, high achieving schools in Australia. High performing leaders in each setting were found to have common strategies for improving achievement. They were found to set high expectations for learning, were said to have been master teachers themselves capable of coaching teachers, and found to cultivate collaborative relationships among staff members (Mulford et al., 2007).

A consistent set of vocabulary has emerged across studies of school reform models, research on effective principal qualities, and the research on high poverty, high performing schools; however, a word of caution is needed. The specific activities conducted by instructional leaders and the manner in which they navigate competing demands are less understood. Longitudinal research on effective instructional leaders

found that looking at time spent on instructional activities alone was insufficient (Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013). In this study, principal walk-through activities alone were negatively associated with student achievement; while principal coaching activities with teachers had a positive effect on achievement. This research about walkthroughs is an example of how a single activity that would typically be considered to be instructional leadership appeared to be less than effective. The findings in this particular study shed light on the complex nature of school leadership that must be considered within the complex milieu that are schools.

Conflicting Demands

As with any leadership change initiative, expectations for school leaders to be instructional leaders come at a cost. Superintendents and educational leaders interviewed about work pressures reported they have the worries of their colleagues of the past, and the additional pressures of academic performance, technology communication demands such as email, and the new accountability measures placed directly on leaders to achieve results (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, & SRI, 2011; West, Peck, & Reitzug, 2010). These additional pressures make it increasingly difficult to recruit leaders into the most challenging schools and districts as time goes by (Public Agenda, 2008).

Challenges also exist in terms of the level of experience district and school leaders bring to the work. Researchers examining the challenges identified by superintendents found a significant relationship between the tenure or experience of the

district leader and the level of concerns they were experiencing (Trevino, Braley, Brown, & Slate 2008). Given the added level of accountability placed on leaders to turn achievement around quickly, we may have a real challenge in front of us to identify enough leaders with the desire to be principals, particularly where they are needed most. This challenge will be independent of the need to support these leaders once they take on the work.

The focus on instructional leadership in this dissertation is not to suggest the dismissal of research regarding other critical factors impacting achievement in schools. Attention needs to be paid to the variables most pervasive in the literature. Students who are not reading on grade level by the end of first grade, for example, have a predictable future in terms of high school graduation and college attendance (Sparks, 2011). Therefore, deliberate attention is needed regarding literacy instruction in schools. Certainly, the effects of poverty and the relationship between poverty and students in historically underperforming student groups require community action beyond the scope of a school leader (Bryk et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Goodwin, 2010; Tough, 2008). Race has also been found to be a factor, and deliberately tackling barriers such as school segregation and funding inequities for schools is a must (Bryk et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Finally recognizing the effects at work in successful schools, districts, and even nations should inform the work of educational leaders at every level (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Nations like Finland and Singapore that enjoy high percentages of students graduating high school and college, from all segments of their population, have cited an emphasis on early childhood education and effective professional development initiatives as critical factors in achieving their results (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Additionally, these nations report equitably funding education quality regardless of income, removing ability tracking in favor of offering the same rigorous curriculum for all students, reducing the number of topics taught in the curriculum at each level, and investing significantly in teacher professional development (2010).

That said, the area of instructional leadership has emerged as a necessary component for school principals if they are to improve the quality of instruction and the resulting student achievement. Therefore, the manner in which principals navigate the demands inherent in the role to be effective instructional leaders is a topic of importance to the field. It is also the primary interest of this study. Today's school principal is expected to be an instructional leader knowledgeable about effective instructional practice (Elmore, 2000; Wagner et al., 2006).

The literature tells us principals serve as instructional leaders by focusing on instruction, and by creating a culture of learning towards improving achievement in their schools (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2012; Manwaring, 2011; Public Agenda, 2008; Wagner et al., 2006). Additional variables found for principals of high poverty, high achieving schools included establishing a guiding vision, monitoring student achievement data and adjusting instruction, cultivating a professional learning

community among teachers, and devoting resources to develop the team professionally (Chenowerth & Theokas, 2012; Dewitt, 2017; Public Agenda, 2007; Wallace, 2012).

While models of instructional leadership have been defined, less understood is how principals achieve this ideal of the instructional leader. This study set out to address this gap in the research by examining effective instructionally centered principals in the field. The focus was to better understand how they focus on priorities and to infer possibilities for additional empirical research regarding this question.

Theoretical Frameworks

Attribution Theory and explanations regarding locus of control were of interest in this study as one possible factor impacting decision making for principals. This theory is applied in the discussions about belief systems impacting decision making and action taking for principals (Jones, 1976; Martinki, Harvey, & Douglas 2007).

Turbulence Theory was also used to examine the degree to which the impact of external forces impacted decision making inside of each school system (Gross, 2014; Shapiro & Gross, 2007). The theories were used to compare individual case studies, and across case studies for potential patterns or trends in how principals responded to, and sometimes leveraged turbulence to create a sense of urgency for changes in practice.

Attribution Theory

Attribution Theory is one theory that was applied as a lens to explain some of the differences observed in priority setting for principals deemed to be effective instructional leaders (Martinki et al., 2007). The cognitive aspect of attribution theory tells us an individual's self-perceptions influence beliefs about success or failure as a result of actions. The explanations that people tend to make to explain their own success or failure experiences can be analyzed in terms of three sets of characteristics:

First, the cause of the success or failure may be seen as *internal* or *external*. That is, people may believe they succeed or fail because of factors that have origin within themselves, internally caused; or due to factors that originate in the environment, externally caused.

Second, the cause of the success or failure may be viewed as either *stable* or *unstable*. If a person believes cause to be a stable phenomenon, then they expect the outcome is likely to be the same if they perform the same behavior on another occasion. If a person believes a cause is unstable, they will expect the outcome is likely to be different on another occasion even if they perform the same behavior.

Third, the cause of the success or failure may be seen as either *controllable* or *uncontrollable*. A controllable factor is one a person believes they can alter if they choose to by selecting a different course of action. An uncontrollable factor is one that a person

does not believe they can easily alter and therefore will not spend the effort to change action.

This theory is used to explain why principals of high poverty schools may or may not shift priorities to those other than instruction on several levels. If a principal believes they have little influence on the factors that impact student achievement in the school themselves, for example if they believe poor achievement results are based on the district's decision to allow larger class sizes or the districts incorrect choice for instructional programs, they may blame the external factors versus taking action on the factors within their control, for example holding teachers accountable to apply best practices in the classroom. A principal that believes students will generally follow their parent's outcomes, and that the occasional success story is a random event, may not organize their school for learning. This nature versus nurture belief would lead the principal to believe they have no capacity to produce student success as a stable outcome.

The most likely characteristic of *Attribution Theory* that impacts principals in their priority setting would be their belief about whether they have control, or do not have much control, over the outcomes for their students. A principal who believes that they "make the rain" in their school through their leadership decisions, will take actions to strategically impact learning outcomes for students. Provided information on effective leadership research, the principal with this belief, operating with an internal locus of control, will remain focused on the factors that matter and may achieve better results.

Principals having an external locus of control believe that external factors are in control of outcomes. A principal with an external view will find it easier to believe that family influences, poverty, neighborhood crime, or "luck of the draw" in terms of teachers, are the factors that cause student achievement outcomes. These principals would be less likely to set the instructional priorities necessary to turn their schools around. *Attribution Theory* provides a possible explanation for principal decision making in terms of internal belief systems, but does not consider the external pressures faced by principals as they balance many conflicting responsibilities and opposing constituencies.

Turbulence Theory

Turbulence Theory speaks to the "turbulence" or pressures that systems and organizations encounter as they interact with internal and external forces. Given the complexity of schools, and school systems, and their relationship to the broader community, school leaders often respond to situations with varying degrees of turbulence (Gross, 2014; Shapiro & Gross, 2007). This pressure, which surrounds decision making most when it involves other people, has the potential for significant impact on principal priority setting. Therefore, turbulence theory is a useful tool for studying decision making under pressure.

An example of how *Turbulence Theory* might impact principal decision making can be found in the Table 2.2. The table shows a turbulence gauge completed based on a principal's decision to focus all meeting agendas on instruction.

Table 2.2: Turbulence Gauge

Degree of Turbulence	**General Definition**	**Turbulence in this Situation**
Light	Little or no disruption	Teachers believe the priority should be improving discipline.
Moderate	Widespread awareness of the issue	Teachers are complaining to parents about the lack of principal support for discipline problems.
Severe	**Fear for the entire enterprise**	**Parents have gone to board members who believe discipline is out of control in the school.**
Extreme	**Structural damage to the institution**	**A serious discipline event has resulted in poor press for the school.**
Source: Gross, S.J. (2014) Using turbulence theory to guide actions. In Branson, C.M., Gross, S.J. (Eds.) *Handbook on Ethical Educational Leadership.* New York: Routledge. Pp. 246- 262.		

The framework for *Turbulence Theory* provides an understanding of how the pressures of a situation might cause a principal to adjust thinking or even stated priorities, in response to the turbulence level of the environment. There are three drivers in this model that are useful for evaluating the degree of turbulence individuals might experience in a given situation. Positionality, considers the specific position the individual holds in relationship to the organization, which suggests principals will experience a different level of turbulence about their school's state assessment data, for example, than the superintendent or the students in the school.

A second driver of turbulence, cascading, refers to the number of multiple turbulent forces encountered simultaneously, and explains how a teacher filing grievance about an unsatisfactory evaluation will cause a different level of turbulence for a newer

principal who has become unpopular with parents, than for a veteran principal who has been assigned a transfer teacher with a history of marginal performance.

The third driver of turbulence, stability, explains how well established school leaders (or models, or organization) will likely experience turbulence differently than those that are less well established. For example, a principal with a positive reputation will experience less turbulence over a sudden increase in playground fights, than an unproven principal who has come under fire for multiple student fights in their school.

In the examples provided here, turbulence can have a negative effect on decision making. Taken to extremes, a principal with a low tolerance for turbulence, or experiencing a cascading series of turbulent events, might become increasingly reactive in priority setting, finding themselves responding to the crisis of the moment versus proactively planning towards a vision. Turbulence can also be used to leverage change in a system, a strategy described in school reform and organizational research (Kotter, 1996; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). Effective school leaders, for example, can use student achievement or discipline data to leverage changes in practice (Wagner et al., 2006). This aspect of Turbulence Theory is used to examine the manner in which principals used data to create a sense of urgency.

Finally, *Attribution Theory* and *Turbulence Theory* are described in the finding section in terms of possible interactive effects for principals of high poverty schools. Principals in this study, for example, appeared to have and act on beliefs that all students

can learn and learn at high levels. It appeared that the participants held a high degree of efficacy regarding their schools' ability to impact learning for students. Having an internal locus of control may be a factor that makes this group of principals believe and act on those beliefs.

Schools with greater poverty have students that endure higher levels of stress as a result of the poverty. Therefore, school leaders of high poverty schools are more likely to experience turbulence in their schools in terms of unmet needs for students. In this study of purposively sampled effective principals, the theme of managing for learning suggests instructional leader principals employ strategies to better support students in their schools to offset some of the turbulence, and leveraged student achievement data to create a sense of urgency for changes in practice.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The overarching question in this study was one best suited for a qualitative design. School leadership occurs within the context of a complex social phenomenon and understanding how instructional leader principals think and operate differently required studying them inside of the complex multi-variant environment we call schools. Experimental research was not conducive in this case as it would not be possible to artificially control and isolate the many variables that might influence principals thinking and decision making around different priorities (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009).

This research question was inductive; therefore, the study was designed using case study methods, to observe the phenomenon of principal leadership in the field, and to discover and develop a theory of action. Of interest was the manner in which effective instructional leader principals manage the social climate in their school and the management concerns that principals typically face, while still holding to instructional priorities. Selecting and studying negative cases was rejected, as recruitment of ineffective, weak instructional leader principals might have presented ethical dilemmas for the educational leaders making the referrals.

The question was also most suited to case study methods, as was the decision to recruit multiple instructional leader principals to serve as individual cases. Using a case study design allowed for intensely investigating examples of the phenomenon we call

"instructional leadership" for principals. Through the collection of "rich" data, and the close examination of a small number of cases, this study found some significant features associated with instructional leadership and common themes emerged about how principals respond to the pressures in their role.

Observation data were collected by shadowing principals in the field and using interview questions to unpack decisions and metacognitions about those decisions. Each principal case study represented a separate bounded event rooted in the context of the specific school, and a thickly descriptive report was collected for each case. Collecting and organizing the descriptive reports within each case study first, and then synthesizing across the data for multiple cases, allowed for themes to emerge. The themes identified do not necessarily represent cause and effect; however, theories did emerge about how instructional leaders in this study weighed demands and took actions to allow them to remain focused on instructional priorities.

Sample Selection

This study applied case study methods to collect data about priority setting and decision making for a sample of experienced elementary principals in high-poverty schools. The sample of eight principals was purposively drawn through a process of network sampling, towards the goal of studying principals from which the most could be learned (Merriam, 2009).

For this case study design, the sample was recruited from principals referred to be exemplars in the area of "instructional leadership." The unique sample of recommended principals was referred by state education leaders, including one Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Program Coordinator, and two Pennsylvania Department of Education Distinguished Educators. Principal participants were referred using the instructional leadership criteria outlined in the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Standards (PILS), standards developed through a partnership between the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the National Institute for School Leadership, and aligned with the research on effective school leadership available at that time (National Institute for School Leadership, 2019).

The principal selection was controlled by socioeconomic data, and the level of grades served. Recruitment from high-poverty schools was decided based on the assumption that demands on principals might be different in high-poverty schools than schools with lower levels of poverty. This thinking also applied to the decision to study elementary principals, as the leadership demands for secondary principals might be significantly different than elementary. Through the use of open coding and constant comparison methods of data analysis, patterns within and across principal case studies were examined for themes about how they navigate the demands of their position. In other words, what did these instructional leader principals do differently in response to demands? How did they organize around the work? Also, how did they develop capacity in their buildings?

It was expected that the principals in this unique sample might behave in ways that were aligned with the research about effective instructionally centered principals. This finding only reinforces what has been found previously. Additional insights were gleaned from analyzing the interviews, observations, and anecdotal data collected during site visits. The number, eight, in terms of participants was due to logistical considerations, to establish a manageable unit of analysis, and to allow for the collection of rich, thick descriptions for each case study. The goal of this research was to better understand this problem and use the data analysis to create a theory of change.

Definitions

The following definitions are provided to clarify terms used in describing the sample, or other data collected in the study:

1. High-poverty school – High-poverty, for the purposes of this case study, was defined as schools with a free and reduced lunch percentage of more than 40% of the students, the threshold for Title I school-wide status.
2. Experienced principals- Experienced for this case study were principals with five years of experience in administration and three or more years of experience in one school.
3. Instructional leader- The term instructional leader, for this study, was defined as principals recommended to be instructional leaders based on the criteria from the Pennsylvania Instructional Leadership Standards (PILS) categories found in Table 3.1. Principals were also vetted based on positive trend lines for AYP and SPP scores.

Table 3.1: Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Standards

Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Standards (PILS)	
Core Standard I	Knowledge and skills to think and plan strategically creating an organizational vision around personalized student success.
Core Standard II	Understanding of standards-based systems theory and design and the ability to transfer that knowledge to the leader's job as an architect of standards-based reform.
Core Standard III	The ability to access and use appropriate data to inform decision-making at all levels of the system.
Corollary Standard I	Creating a culture of teaching and learning with an emphasis on learning.
Corollary Standard II	Managing resources for effective results.
Corollary Standard III	Collaborating, communicating, engaging and empowering others inside and outside the organization to pursue excellence in learning.
Corollary Standard IV	Operating in a fair and equitable manner with personal and professional integrity.
Corollary Standard V	Advocating for children and public education in the larger political, social, economic, legal and cultural context
Corollary VI	Supporting professional growth of self and others through practice and inquiry.
Pennsylvania Department of Education. (2007). *Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Standards.* Retrieved from: https://www.education.pa.gov/Teachers%20-%20Administrators/PA%20Inspired%20Leaders/pages/default.aspx	

Data Collection

Data collection was planned across a full semester to allow principals to become comfortable with my presence. The initial interview was scheduled at the start to establish rapport with participants and confidentiality expectations. Initial site visits were scheduled, with considerations for avoiding confidential student meetings, or staff evaluations. Visits were scheduled during a range of times during the day and across the semester to achieve intensive involvement in each school (See Appendix D).

Intensive Involvement

Intensive involvement was achieved by studying principals in several ways over the full spring term for 2018. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the start of the semester for the purpose of studying participant views about instructional leadership and preparation. Brief interviews at the end of each site visit were conducted to clarify observations, and a closing interview was conducted after all site visits were completed to probe more intently on the themes that had emerged across the site visits.

Initial interviews focused on perceptions of instructional leadership for each principal and how they implemented their vision of instructional leadership in their specific building. Questions also probed for influences participants believed to have caused them to hold the priorities they hold and strategies they use to lead, and how much power they believed principals actually hold over priority setting. Initial interviews were recorded and transcribed in their entirety. The opening interview protocol can be found in Appendix A.

Follow-up interviews at the end of each site visit focused on unpacking the metacognitive thinking behind decisions and actions observed in the field. The follow-up interviews served as member checks regarding the data observed and perceptions of the observer. Notes from follow-up interviews during site visits were collected in an observation protocol template.

Site visits were conducted to collect observation data about participant actions in the field. Each site visit allowed me to be immersed in the field, shadowing principals in the context of their school environment. A total of two days was spent in each school. This time was scheduled in half-days for most visits and was scheduled monthly to the degree possible.

Observation data allowed for the collection of a thick descriptive narrative about how each principal managed events and demands, and how the principal interpreted those decisions at the moment. An observation protocol was used to record a chronology of notes consisting of scripting the content of the interactions observed. Data collected were recorded as descriptions first, with a separate column for impressions and possible coding after. Open coding was used to analyze the data for patterns or a convergence of evidence.

In addition to interviews and observations, other relevant documents were collected that provided anecdotal evidence of the leadership priorities including communications to staff, faculty meeting, and professional development agendas. A sampling of weekly calendars was collected from each principal, using the same week each month for four months. Calendar data were tallied using the themes and subtheme categories from the ongoing data analysis.

Finally, a closing interview was conducted with each principal with questions that emerged from the interactions observed in site visits. The closing interview focused on principal beliefs about student learning and influences impacting belief systems.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was accomplished in phases beginning with the initial interview which was planned to set parameters for the site visits and to gain insight about participant thoughts regarding instructional leadership. Phases are described here, including the type of data collected and the data analysis performed for each phase and type. Closing interviews were created based on the major themes and sub-themes that had emerged across visits and semi-structured interviews as a way to confirm or disconfirm observer perceptions during observations.

Data Analysis: Phase I

In phase one of data collection, semi-structured opening interviews were conducted with each of the eight participants. Opening interviews allowed for establishing rapport with participants, gathering demographic information for each participant and school, and gathering insights about principal perceptions about instructional leadership and the role of an effective school leader. Initial interview questions were developed to gather each principal's definition of instructional leadership and a description of organizational strategies employed to navigate day-to-day demands. Also included were questions about individual belief systems about a principal's control

over priorities, and the influences that led to their beliefs. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes depending on the interviewee. Initial interviews were guided by questions in the Initial Interview protocol found in Appendix A.

Following each interview, open coding was completed using the constant comparison method defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), to analyze individual interview transcripts for descriptive codes. Interview transcripts were read and coded manually to identify codes that might represent themes within each case study, and as additional interviews were collected, across the case studies. Cross interview analysis involved axial coding to surface commonalities between cases and possible themes. Beginning by charting possible themes, the constant comparison method was used to revise and refine the codes. As new factors emerged in the data, new categories were added for possible coding.

At times a statement might appear to overlap two themes and would need to be coded for both. Transcripts were printed in different colors for each participant and manually assigned to theme categories. This method allowed for easy identification of different interview sources and quantifying the data collected from each interviewee under each code. The use of different colors for interviews from each case allowed for a useful visual to compare connections between cases and made it helpful to see themes as they emerged. As themes emerged from interviews, they became codes for analyzing the additional data from site visits.

Field Observations: Phase II

Phase two of the data collection involved conducting site visits to shadow principals in their day-to-day work. Visits were scheduled in monthly half-day blocks, for a total of four visits between February and June. Scheduling of visits was planned with principals to avoid confidential parent meetings or evaluation meetings with staff. Scheduling exceptions included one school where snow day cancellations caused the need for one full-day visit in place of two separate half-days and two other schools where rescheduled visits occurred at the beginning and end of the same month.

Data collected during site visits were collected on a template organized with five-minute intervals. Descriptive field notes were collected detailing information about the events and activities observed, people involved, and principal metacognitions shared while walking about shadowing participants in the field. Observations were scripted throughout the visits and reviewed afterward for completeness and emerging insights and themes. Selective coding of the interview data was completed after two rounds of the site visits, falling about midway through the data collection period. At this point, it was possible to separate the data aligned with the tenets of the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Standards (the criteria used for member participation in the study) from data describing participant's thoughts and actions for how they implement and organize around their stated priorities.

Analyzing the case study data from each interview and site visit was an iterative process; therefore coding categories changed and evolved across site visits and follow-up interviews. Through the triangulation of the data from multiple sources of evidence, patterns and themes emerged. The patterns and themes were the sources for developing closing interview questions.

Closing Interviews and Theoretical Coding: Phase III

Constant comparison methods were used throughout the data collection period to distill further thinking at each level of analysis. Data from follow-up site visits and calendar data were used to compare and refine themes from the first level of coding. The analysis then focused on principal descriptions and actions that demonstrated how they organized the work, in big and small ways, to remain focused on instructional priorities. Finally, theoretical coding was applied to develop closing interview questions towards confirming findings and triangulating data across case studies.

Closing interview questions honed in on actions observed across the semester, probing more deeply about themes that had been noted in the analysis, and what principals had to say about their work to hold to instructional priorities. The interview protocol, which can be found in Appendix B, began with a question about principal beliefs about student learning. The question, drawn from Richard DuFour's prerequisites for high-performing learning communities, separates beliefs about the impact teachers and schools can have on student learning. Participants chose from the four answers in Table 3.2 below.

In addition to the first question where principals selected a response from the table, questions asked principal participants how they came to hold the beliefs they stated about student learning. Principals were asked if prior experiences influenced their beliefs, for example, undergraduate education, teacher experiences, principal preparation, mentoring experiences, or other factors. Follow-up questions explored how each principal's beliefs about student learning might influence their leadership in their principal position.

Table 3.2: Interview question from "*Make Mission Statements Come to Life*"

Question: Which answer best describes what you believe about student learning?	
1. We Believe All Kids Can Learn…	We believe that all students can learn, but the extent of their learning is determined by their innate ability or aptitude. This aptitude is relatively fixed and, as teachers, we have little influence over the extent of student learning. It is our job to create multiple programs or tracks that address the different abilities of students and then guide students to the appropriate program. This ensures that students have access to the proper curriculum and an optimum opportunity to master material appropriate to their ability.
2. We Believe All Kids Can Learn…	We believe that all students can learn if they elect to put forth the necessary effort. It is our job to provide all students with this opportunity to learn, and we fulfill our responsibility when we try to present lessons that are both clear and engaging. In the final analysis, however, while it is our job to teach, it is the student's job to learn. We should invite students to learn, but honor their decision if they elect not to do so.
3. We Believe All Kids Can Learn…	We believe that all students can learn and that it is our responsibility to help each student demonstrate growth as a result of his or her experience with us. The extent of the growth will be determined by a combination of the student's innate ability and effort. It is our job to encourage all students to learn as much as possible, but the extent of their learning is dependent on factors over which we have little control.
4. We Believe All Kids Can Learn…	We believe that all students can and must learn at relatively high levels of achievement. It is our job to create an environment in our classrooms that results in this high level of performance. We are confident that with our support and help, students can master challenging academic material, and we expect them to do so. We are prepared to work collaboratively with colleagues, students, and parents to achieve this shared educational purpose.
Source: DuFour, R. (1997). Make the Words of Mission Statements Come to Life. *Journal of Staff Development*. *(Summer). (18)3.*	

Calendar data were collected for four weeks during the data collection period, with one week selected for each month. Meeting and event categories were analyzed using the constructs from the interview and site visit data analysis. These data proved to be the least valuable in terms of telling the story. They were; instead, a window into the way principals kept reminders. Four of the case study principals kept electronic calendars, two of whom shared the calendars with a secretary who would monitor for reminders. Three participants kept calendars that were scribbled lists that were difficult to follow. One principal kept only a "game plan" calendar that was shared with the building. This shared calendar indicated specific meetings or events of importance to the principal as well as the school.

Methods of Verification

In addition to intensive long term involvement, internal validity was achieved by collecting “rich” data through audio recordings of interviews, site visit observation protocols, and calendar sampling. Respondent validation was achieved by including a short debriefing conversation at the close of each site visit.

“Rich” Data

In addition to intensive long term involvement, internal validity was achieved through the collection of "rich" data through the recordings. Rich data also included a thick narrative description from each interview and observation protocol. Interviews provided rich data about the principal's beliefs about their priorities and how those

priorities have come to be. Site visits provided opportunities to engage as a participant observer and to collect information with an emic perspective of the events in each school. Calendar time study data confirmed or disconfirmed principal descriptions about how principals actually spend their time. Questioning provided insights about each principal in terms of their belief systems in terms of efficacy in effecting change.

Trustworthiness

Respondent validation was solicited in site visits by follow-up interviews. Each of the data collection periods provided additional opportunities for the interviewees to clarify or restate their beliefs about priority setting based on their actual actions. The site visits also allowed observation of the everyday turbulence or pressures within the context of each school, and whether this had an impact on decision making along the way.

Intervention

As Maxwell states (2005), field researcher presence always impacts the situation as an intervention and this case study was no different. The interview strategies implemented would have had the impact of calling on principals to consider their priorities. Stating priorities aloud for the interviewer may have created an intervention effect of shaping principal behaviors to be more aligned with the statements made in the interview. Repeated visits to the site and asking principals to discuss leadership strategies may have also influenced principals to refocus on priorities. Each site visit, for example, may have had the effect of reminding principals of their stated priorities and therefore, affected principal behaviors in terms of staying with their priorities.

Searching for Discrepant Evidence and Negative Cases

Examining data for discrepant evidence was part of logic testing in this case study research. Interview and observation data are reported in the findings, along with a discussion of theoretical frameworks that have been impacting perceptions and decision making in real time. Checking-in with each principal following interviews and site visits, and asking clarifying questions about interpretations in the closing interview, all served to verify perceptions about events and ensured checking for researcher biases.

Triangulation

Triangulation in this case study included the collection of data using different methods. Data used to analyze principal priority setting included interviews about each principal's perspectives and beliefs about priority setting. Observing principals in action provided data that confirmed or disconfirmed what was stated regarding the choices principals make, and how time is used to achieve the stated priorities. Collecting calendar time studies gave further data about time use to support priorities. The use of the calendar time study added data points that may be less vulnerable to researcher intervention as they were recorded when the researcher was not present. Triangulation of the data provided a chain of evidence for the possible explanations for why this group of purposively selected principals believed and behaved similarly in their school leadership styles.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were applied to analyze the interview data, and codes from this analysis were used to analyze types of activities in site visits. Tallies were used to analyze principal time and the way it was spent during the site visit days. The tallies were used in subsequent visits and combined with the calendar time study to produce data sets that could be analyzed from principal to principal. They included a rubric describing the type of activity the principal was involved in and where it fell as a priority:

- Instructional Leadership- activities that directly involve influencing instruction such as visiting classrooms, observing instruction, leading meetings to discuss instruction, planning around instructional matters.
- Management Activities- activities related to the scheduling, and organizational aspects of events or items in the school, pupil services/discipline activities, problem-solving.
- Developing Capacity - referring to attending or leading professional development meetings for staff, relationship building activities
- Engaging the Community-activities such as interacting socially with parents, or staff members.
- Personalized Learning for Students- Interacting with students, meeting about student social, emotional, or academic matters; data discussions towards improving instructional response planning.

Cross-Case Analysis

Although comparison is most effective when used in quantitative research, this case study benefited from cross-case comparison as participants were selected based on purposive criteria (Maxwell, 2005; Yin, 2009). In this case study, principals were selected in a purposive manner. Principals were recommended for participation based on PILS instructional leadership criteria and from schools deemed to be high-poverty. Analysis of the data across cases looked for a convergence of evidence.

Member Checks

In the member check area, check-ins with participants occurred during follow-up visits and interviews to check the accuracy of what was perceived by the observer. Inter-rater reliability was accomplished through triangulating the data for common statements in interviews and behaviors observed in the field.

Ethical Issues

Research involving human subjects carries the potential for harm; therefore ethical issues were considered in each phase of the research. Principals could have experienced psychological distress resulting from stating priorities and then becoming aware of the conflicts between stated and observed priorities. Negative consequences and entanglements were avoided by keeping participant information confidential. Participant names and school locations have been kept confidential and reported using pseudonyms. Statements of informed consent were reviewed and collected from participants.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher's experience often influences case studies, and this study is no different. Having served as a principal for fourteen years, I approached this study with ideas about possible influences from my principal work, and that of others in the field. I have observed as a practitioner, colleagues who spend large portions of their days managing cafeteria and recess areas, two low leverage activities in terms of directly impacting learning. The research question served as a function of my intellectual curiosity about the phenomenon of leadership in schools and why we struggle to move practices closer to the instructional leadership ideal we need to affect learning in schools.

Positionality

As a practitioner, I am a naturally curious and reflective school leader. I believe these qualities match those needed to do qualitative research. In addition to my interest in studying questions through qualitative methods, the course work I participated in, and certification I received through the master's program in Counseling Education at West Chester University provided me with expertise in the area of building rapport and using interviewing strategies. Listening skills essential to the counseling process are the same skills needed to conduct case study interviews. For example, interviewers need to build a comfortable rapport with the subjects by explaining the parameters of the interview and statements of confidentiality; and practice active listening skills such as paraphrasing and clarifying what was heard, and asking probing questions to get to a deeper level of an answer from the client or subject.

Interviewers need to refrain from expressing opinions or applying value judgments about the content shared by participants. In order to gather the rich tapestry of descriptive data needed for case study research the subjects need to feel comfortable and confident. As an experienced practitioner in the area of interview strategies, I believe I was able to set the conditions in the interview and field observation settings.

In checking for researcher biases, I worked to be actively aware of how my own beliefs and experiences regarding instructional leadership might impact my understanding of others. I believe that principals need to be focused instructional leaders, and it is possible that I might have had challenges probing for answers without inserting my beliefs. Prior professional learning experiences from sessions with Dr. Richard Elmore, Deana Burney, and Michael Fullan have provided experiences that impacted my view of effective principal leadership, potential biases I needed to keep in check while in the role of researcher. It was important to control those thoughts and provide unconditional positive regard towards principal participants. This was important to ensure each case study emanated from the perspective of the subjects or participants.

Summary

The research on high-poverty, high-achieving schools suggests effective principals achieve improved results in their schools by setting instructional leadership as the priority. In spite of repeated research restating this finding, and shifts in principal preparation programs towards emphasizing the importance of instructional leadership, practice in the field suggests principals still fail to set priorities based on instruction or to

lead using evidence-based strategies. Given the considerable costs of education reform this failure to apply the research on effective principal leadership needs to be addressed, particularly in the area of reforming high-poverty and consistently lower performing schools. The gap between research and practice, and the causes for these differences in principal priority setting, were the subject of this case study research.

The case study research question in this dissertation is grounded in real experience. As a researcher, and as a school leader, I have a real curiosity about why principals make such different choices in how they spend their time, and the aspects of school leadership that get school leaders' attention. As stated, the body of research on school reform, and school leader effectiveness, presents compelling evidence that effective leaders focus on the instruction in their schools. Despite this widely held understanding, I have observed tremendous differences in principal priority setting in practice. This study was designed to impact the field by observing effective principals and collecting data towards forming a theory of action. The goal was to understand if this discrepancy between research and practice is a function of personally held beliefs, gaps in principal preparation programming, or a function of principals responding to the pressures of the job, for example influences within the specific context of the district. In addition to culling information from the study and coming to an improved understanding of the problem, the results might be used to create a theory of change to impact this concern.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter contains the results of case study research planned to better understand how instructionally-centered principals navigate competing demands to remain focused on instructional priorities. Research on school reform continues to suggest instructional leadership is an essential component for schools to affect student achievement (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). Unfortunately, despite this growing body of research, practice suggests that principals continue to struggle to hold to instructional priorities (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007). This gap between research and practice, and the causes for these differences, were the subject of this cross-case study research. Given the considerable impact to the community when schools fail to prepare students, the challenge to consistently prioritize instructional leadership needs to be understood, particularly in the area of leading the reform of high-poverty, lower performing schools. Specifically, the research question in this study asked: "How do elementary principals navigate competing demands to focus on instructional priorities?"

The information in this chapter details the findings from eight case studies of elementary principals known for their instructional leadership abilities. The goal was to better understand the strategies, decisions, and actions these effective principals use to hold to instructional priorities. More specifically, the study examined how they navigate the ever-present competing demands to remain focused on instruction. Major findings are

summarized, along with background information and demographic data for principal participants and their schools. Finally, findings are discussed in detail by major themes and subthemes, along with specific quotes and observation evidence from the field. Quotes cited in the chapter directly represent best case samples. Additional examples can be found in Appendix E.

Analysis of interview and observation data for case study principals found consistent evidence of leadership practices aligned with the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Standards, the criteria given for principal recommendations to this study. In each case, principal participants consistently demonstrated actions aligned with tenets from PILS, and models of effective school leadership from school reform research (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). Principals were found to focus on instruction, manage available resources in support of instructional priorities, and to cultivate a learning community among the educators in their schools.

Themes also emerged regarding "how" principals organized around the competing demands to remain focused on their stated priorities. Principals in this study were observed to have established leadership teams in their schools and to delegate frequently, particularly for non-instructional tasks. Systems were observed for managing discipline referrals, family engagement events, positive behavior supports, and school spirit types of functions.

The principals in this study exhibited similarities in the way they relate to people. Generally, participants appeared to be “relatable” people who leveraged relationships with students, teachers, and community members in support of moving their vision forward. In the role of developing the capacity of teachers, the leadership style most observed could be described as "lead learner" versus resident "expert" in discussions about teaching and learning. However, while examples were found of intentionally engaging the strengths of team members, principals in this study were observed to be critical, asking hard questions when examining data and practices. This critical lens was observed in grade level Professional Learning Communities, district leadership meetings, leadership team meetings, and meetings with teachers about specific students. Principals were observed to be consistently "kid-centered," and to make principled decisions based on the best interest of the kids.

Most interesting in the themes that emerged was a prevailing belief that all kids can learn and that schools, and teachers, are accountable to create an environment that ensures their success. This belief system was observable in the day-to-day interactions participants had with students and teachers, and was confirmed in the closing interview. Interview questions showed seven out of the eight participants reported believing all students can learn at high levels, and that schools are accountable for making that learning happen. These beliefs and values appeared to drive priority setting and decision making and seemed to do so regardless of the distractions in the present.

Case Study Participants

As mentioned in Chapter Three, participants were recruited from purposive sampling of elementary principals recommended to consistently demonstrate the instructional leadership qualities defined by the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Standards. Principal recommendations were obtained from Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Program Regional Coordinators, and the Pennsylvania Department of Education Distinguished Educators, and were drawn from five Pennsylvania counties. The criteria used for participant selection included:

- Elementary principals recommended to demonstrate instructional leadership qualities as defined by PILS
- School poverty rate greater than 40%
- Growth achievement trend line using AYP and SPP measures
- Minimum of five years in administration and three years in one school

Recommended principals were invited to participate in this confidential study involving interviews and site visit observations. From the principals recruited, eight agreed to participate in the study. The table below summarizes demographic data for each case study principal and their school. Case study descriptions are also included to better introduce individual participants.

Table 4.1: Principal participant demographic data.

Name[1]	Years of Teaching Experience	Years of Principal Experience	Years in Current Position	Student Enrollment	School Poverty Level
Adams, Wendy	8	3	3	448	97%
Breslin, Stephen	10	3	2	938	40%
Edwards, Samuel	30	12	3	527	91%
Griffin, Harold	10	36	36	791	100%
Martinez, Maria	12	11	11	488	79%
Reynolds, Rebecca	5	8	1	720	84%
Robinson, Owen	8	7	7	448	86%
Sanchez, Severo	7	8	5	661	100%

Wendy Adams, Franklyn Elementary School

Wendy Adams is a white female, who has worked for her current district for thirteen years. Starting as a middle school special education teacher out of college, she taught learning support and later became a reading specialist. Wendy ran the after-school and summer programs for a while, which led to an interim principal opportunity for two months. The interim principal position led to a two-year assignment as assistant principal where she had been teaching previously. Staff members recognized Wendy as an informal leader in the building, so she was reasonably well accepted as the assistant principal. Two years later Wendy was made principal at Franklyn Elementary where she has remained for three years.

[1] All names people and schools in the study are pseudonyms.

Franklyn serves 448 students in grades Kindergarten through fourth grade. It is an urban school with poverty falling at 97% for the 2016-17 school year. Student demographics for the school include 52.23% Hispanic, 41.74% Black or African American, 1.34% Asian, 2.23% White, .22 American Indian, and 2.23% Multi-racial students. English Learners make up 10.94% of the student population and 13.39% receive special education services.

Achievement at Franklyn has been sporadic; however, under Wendy's leadership, the school has improved the SPP score to 53.3 and has improved Academic Growth on PVAAS to a score of 77 in Mathematics, 79 in English Language Arts, and 61 in Science. When asked "what does instructional leadership mean" to you, Wendy shared:

> I think that instructional leadership, for me, is helping to develop ... what are critical needs, and how do we get there? … Then constantly assessing what the needs of the staff and the students are based on our data; our walkthroughs. (W. Adams, personal communication, February 14, 2018).

Stephen Breslin, Patterson Elementary School

Stephen Breslin is a white male. He has been the principal at Patterson Elementary for three years. Before becoming an administrator, Stephen was a classroom teacher for ten years, with most of that time spent in fifth grade. While very satisfied with his role in the classroom, his building principal suggested when he started his master's program that he might want to consider education administration. Stephen had taken on

leadership opportunities in the school, and the principal suggested it was something he should consider. After completing the program, he was not actively pursuing a position when the Assistant Superintendent contacted him and told him he was going to be assigned to a building for the following year. Stephen decided then to apply for other openings and accepted the position at Patterson.

Patterson serves 938 students in grades Kindergarten through fifth grades. It is a suburban school with poverty recorded at 40% for the 2016-17 school year. Demographics for the school include 2.35% Hispanic, 1.71% Black or African American, 16.42% Asian, 76.65% White, 11% American Indian, and 2.35% Multi-racial students. English Learners make up 22% of the student population and 12.58% receive special education services.

Achievement at Patterson has been consistently high, including for the rapidly increasing population of English Learners. The SPP score for 2016-17 was 81, with Academic Growth on PVAAS scores of 76 in Mathematics, 99 in English Language Arts, and 72 in Science. Stephen provided this definition for instructional leadership:

> It means I'm present during instruction, that it's not uncommon for me to be in classrooms, that it's not uncommon for me to be engaging teachers in conversation about what it is that I saw in their classroom (S. Breslin, personal communication, February 1, 2018).

Samuel Edwards, Stanton Elementary School

Samuel Edwards was the principal for five years at the nearby middle school, and four years at the district's high school before becoming principal at Stanton Elementary School. He is a black male and has been the principal of Stanton for three years. Experiences before becoming a principal included thirty years as an elementary teacher in grades Kindergarten, second, and third grades, and as assistant principal at the high school. He has worked in the same district for thirty-nine years. In addition to classroom teaching, Samuel has taught first and fourth grades in the summer program, and ESL.

Stanton serves 527 students in grades Kindergarten through fourth grade. It is an urban school with poverty reported to be 91% for the 2016-17 school year. Student demographics for the school include 53.32% Hispanic, 38.9% Black or African American, .38% Asian, 3.8% White, and 3.61% Multi-racial. English Learners make up 16.89% of the student population and 6.07% receive special education services.

Achievement at Stanton has been more stagnant since the change in state assessments; however, under Samuel's leadership the school has improved the SPP score for three years to 52.7 for 2016-17, and has improved Academic Growth on PVAAS to a score of 84 in Mathematics, 82 in English Language Arts, and 66 in Science. Samuel believes instructional leadership means no excuses:

> You can't use the excuse that, well, they come from poverty, or they are in an inner city school, or they don't get support at home or you know, all those excuses; because one thing that we know research says is schools grow because of solid instructional leadership (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 2, 2018)."

Harold Griffin, Lexington Elementary

Harold Griffin is a white male and has worked in his current school district for 46 years. He taught for ten years as a physical education teacher while pursuing a masters, and considered teaching at the university level. After being transferred to his current school, Harold was approached by his supervisors about becoming a principal. He went on to pursue principal certification and was hired first as the acting principal, and then for the permanent opening at Lexington Elementary. Harold stated that Lexington, at the time of his hire, met all of the perceptions one would have of a high-poverty, inner-city school. "It was a bad school at the time. The school was very, violent," stated Harold. His ability to handle the concerns was the reason he was hired for the opening.

Today, Lexington serves 791 students in grades Kindergarten through fifth grades. It is an urban school in a distressed neighborhood, with poverty falling at 100% for the 2016-17 school year. Student demographics for the school include 86.24% Hispanic, 9.17% Black or African American, 3.95% White, and .64% Multi-racial students. English Learners make up 18.85% of the student population and 15.03% receive special education services.

Lexington held the status of a 90, 90, 90 school under the older state testing model. Under the new assessment system, proficiency levels have been lower (as has most of the state); however, Lexington has improved the SPP score consistently from to 50.6 for 2015-16, to 55.6 in 2016-17 with Academic Growth on PVAAS scores of 100 in Mathematics, 76 in English Language Arts, and 90 in Science. Harold described instructional leadership as more than just talking the talk: "We can't talk the talk. You've got to demonstrate it by your action. That means you have to work harder than the staff. You have to be visible. You have to follow through… (H. Griffin, personal communication, January 31, 2018).

Maria Martinez, Martin Luther King School

Maria Martinez is a Hispanic female who grew up in the community where her school is located. Both of her parents were school teachers in the same district and community. Maria taught English in grades six through eight for twelve years, and then accepted the assistant principal position in her school for two years. She did not want to leave the assistant principal position, but supervisors coached her into the principal position. She has been the principal for Martin Luther King School (MLK) for eleven years.

MLK serves 488 students in grades Kindergarten through eighth grades. It is an inner-city school, in a distressed neighborhood, with a poverty level of 79% for the 2016-17 reporting period. Demographics for the school include 50% Hispanic, 41.19% Black or African American, 1.23% Asian, .41% White, .2 American Indian, and 6.97% Multi-

racial students. English Learners make up 11.89% of the student population and 21.31% receive special education services.

Achievement for MLK has shown a consistent trend line of making AYP under the older state standards. This trend has been more sporadic since the change in state assessments. However, the schools PVAAS growth measures were up significantly for 2016-17, with scores of 75 in Mathematics, 79 in English Language Arts, and 67.5 in Science. Maria states instructional leadership requires the following: "…that I have a strong team. I do believe that I have to be the leader, but I have to have a team that's going to support in the vision (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018)."

Rebecca Reynolds, McMillan School

Rebecca Reynolds is a white female and has been an elementary principal for eight years. The first position was an inner-city school for seven years, and at the time of this study, Rebecca had just been moved to a new building. She started in the banking business in her twenties and went back for her master's in education. Starting as a middle school teacher, Rebecca taught for five years and was recruited into school administration. Rebecca was the principal for McMillan for seven years before she transferred to the new assignment.

McMillan, the school Rebecca led for seven years, served 720 students in grades Kindergarten through eighth grades. It is an urban school with poverty falling at 85.7% for the 2016-17 school year. Student demographics for the school include 3.2% Hispanic, 12.8% Black or African American, 50.1% Asian, 23.6% White, and 10.3% Multi-racial. English Learners make up 19% of the student population and 7.4% receive special education services.

Achievement at McMillan has improved consistently under Rebecca's leadership with a recent SPP score of 69.7% and improved Academic Growth on PVAAS to a score of 100 in Mathematics, 82 in English Language Arts, and 81.7 in Science. Rebecca has recently been assigned to Centerville Elementary, a school that has been experiencing falling achievement for several years. In Rebecca's view, instructional leadership means, "It's making yourself visible, its building trust, it is being in the classroom every day as much as possible (R. Reynolds, personal communication, March 9, 2018)."

Owen Robinson, Belmont Elementary School

Owen Robinson has worked in his current district and building, Belmont Elementary School, for 15 years. He taught sixth grade at Belmont for eight years, completing his principal certificate and interning with the principal in the same building, and then became principal. Owen is a white male and has held his principal position for seven years.

Belmont Elementary School serves 448 students and is now a Kindergarten through the fourth-grade building. It is an urban school and believed to be the neediest in the district, with poverty falling at 78% for the 2016-17 school year. Student demographics for the school include 14.89% Hispanic, 38.91% Black or African American, .3% Asian, 31.61% White, .3 American Indian, and 13.37% Multi-racial children. English Learners make up 3.04% of the student population and 13.37% receive special education services.

While Belmont has the highest poverty in the district, their SPP score is typically higher than others in the district falling at 78 for the 2016-17 school year, and Academic Growth on PVAAS to a score of 86 in Mathematics, 84 in English Language Arts, and 95 in Science. Gap closure scores for Belmont were at 100% in every area for that same year. Owen explained what he believed to be an essential quality for instructional leadership: "I'm going to set high standards for the people around me, and I'm going to raise the standards (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 1, 2018)."

Severo Sanchez, Tyler Elementary School

Severo Sanchez is a Hispanic male. He has been an educator for 20 years in his same school district. Beginning his career as an ESL teacher, he taught in that role for seven years and then spent two years as an Instructional Supervisor before becoming a building administrator. Severo was an assistant principal in two different buildings over the next three years and was then given his first principal position. He has been a principal for eight years, five of which have been at Tyler Elementary School.

Tyler serves 661 students in grades Kindergarten through fifth grades. It is an inner-city school surrounded by urban blight. Transiency in this school is higher than others in the city and poverty falls at 100% for the 2016-17 school year. Student demographics for the school include 83.97% Hispanic, 10.53% Black or African American, 5.04% White, and .46% Multi-racial. English Learners make up 20.46% of the student population and 22.29% receive special education services.

Achievement at Tyler has been improving over the last two years with SPP scores of 48.4 in 2015-16 and then to 53.3% in 2016-17. The improvement has been related to Academic Growth on PVAAS, with a most recent score of 88 in Mathematics, 82 in English Language Arts, and 70 in Science. For Severo instructional leadership means, "You need to lead by example (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018)."

Findings, Themes, and Subthemes

Principal participants in this study were drawn from six districts, in five different counties in Pennsylvania. They led elementary schools of different sizes and grade configurations, and each was unique in terms of personal style; however, common themes emerged in the interviews and across observations in the way they led their schools and approached the work. Overall themes found in and across the case studies fell into three broad categories: leadership qualities aligned with the school reform research, strategies principals employed for "how" they organize to focus on instructional priorities, and

beliefs about teaching and learning. Major themes and subthemes are described for each category.

Leadership Qualities Aligned with School Reform Research

The first theme was somewhat expected due to the purposive sampling. Principals, recommended and recruited for this study based on the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Standards, did, indeed, exhibit the leadership qualities defined by PILS and the models for school reform found in the literature (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). Participant principals described in interviews, and demonstrated through actions in site visits, that they set forth a vision for learning in their schools and manage in support of that vision. Leadership themes included a significant focus on developing professional capacity through regular professional learning opportunities. Instructional conversations were observed to be centered on student needs and effective, relevant instruction. There was also evidence that most principals had developed the ability to engage the larger community in support of the vision.

How They Do It!

The second category of themes included organizational strategies for "how" they focus their work. This area included strategies for how principals manage the demands of their work to remain focused on priorities, for example delegating strategically and building effective leadership teams. This area provided valuable insights in answer to the

research question for this group of principals. It was evident that most of these principals were masters at delegating to manage the day-to-day distractions, yet, they seemed to notice everything. On many site-visits I would observe multi-tasking “on the fly,” and the use of established systems to delegate things that needed to be addressed. Principals appeared to use data to their advantage in each case study, sometimes using the data to leverage and promote critical thinking, and sometimes to support making shifts in curriculum organization or instructional practice.

A number of principals were critical about their work, and several were observed to ask hard questions in meetings with staff. These principals could talk about instructional best practices with authority; however, on the whole, these principals came across as regular relatable people. Their ability to "know what they don't know," made them approachable "lead learners" capable of leveraging the strengths of the people around them.

Beliefs about Teaching and Learning

A third theme that grew out of the site visit data and was confirmed in the closing interview was a commonly held belief system about student learning and educator accountability. Though in each case study principals provided somewhat different insights about why they might have come to hold the beliefs they do, the beliefs themselves were similar. This third set of themes will be discussed in terms of theoretical constructs such as attribution theory and turbulence theory.

Leadership Qualities Aligned with School Reform Research

I was most interested in instructional leadership, therefore opening questions led to discussions about this area specifically. The specificity of the questions may have influenced answers; however, the tenets of the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Standards, and components of effective school reform (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006), were found throughout the interview data and observed to be in practice during site visits.

Principals used a common language from the research to describe instructional leadership including terms such as vision setting and creating a sense of urgency for change (Dewitt, 2017; Public Agenda, 2007; Wallace, 2012). In practice, they modeled serving as a lead learner and managed in support of instructional priorities. Participants described additional components from effective reform models as part of their action plans for improving teaching and student achievement, for example developing teacher capacity through ongoing professional development, and working towards a vision of more personalized learning opportunities for students (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004). Finally, while not the focus of this study, principals described strategies for engaging families and the broader community in support of their vision priorities (Chenowerth & Theokas, 2012; Dewitt, 2017; Public Agenda, 2007; Wallace, 2012).

Instructional Leadership

Participant descriptions of effective instructional leadership and the actions observed in site visits aligned with the research, including building teams to support their vision, and engaging others in the use of data to improve instruction (Bryk et al., 2010; Chenowerth & Theokas, 2012; Dewitt, 2017; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Public Agenda, 2007; Wagner et al., 2006; Wallace, 2012). Findings for the theme "instructional leadership" have been organized using the following descriptors: vision setting, change agent, lead learner, and managing in support of learning (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006).

Harold Griffin, an experienced principal, most notably captured the term instructional leader: "Everything is about helping instruction get stronger (H. Griffin, personal communication, January 31, 2018)."

Vision Setting

Principals described having a vision or overarching plan for their school as part of their definition of instructional leadership. Several specifically referenced the term "vision" as they answered the question, "what does instructional leadership means to you?" In addition to describing a need to lead with a vision, several described the need to

communicate the vision effectively and build a community of practice around their implementation plan.

Stephen Breslin described setting a vision for his school as if it were obvious: "It's just guiding people the way you want to be guided…developing a vision and a mission, and developing goals and implementing them…. (S. Breslin, personal communication, January 29, 2018)."

Maria Martinez expanded on the importance of setting a vision, and also explained the need to cultivate a leadership team that can implement the vision. In Maria's words, "I have to have a team that's going to support the vision and mission of the school (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018)."

Wendy Adams emphasized the critical nature of communication. In addition to having the vision and leadership team, she described an effective leader this way: "To be a good leader, I think you have to be organized, and have a vision, and you have to be a good communicator…. (W. Adams, personal communication, June 21, 2018)."

While several principals used the term "vision," Samuel Edwards described setting the direction through plan goals. Samuel conveyed this information as if it were a widely accepted truth, suggesting instructional leadership is simply focusing on the goals:

"I just focus on the goals…. I focus on the goals, and I focus on the kids. All the other stuff, I'm not wasting my energy on (S. Edwards, personal communication, May 30, 2018)."

Owen Robinson used the term "guiding principles" as the tenets that focus his instructional leadership. In his words, "I can say from the get-go, I had two, really, guiding principles that I committed to early on … when things get complicated, you go back to these two things. One is, all decisions are made in the best interest of students, and two is teachers and staff will have what they need to do their jobs (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 1, 2018)."

Change Agent

Principals described the need to be change agents in their schools by setting high standards for teaching and learning, and often by holding people accountable (Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2014). For example, Samuel described communicating expectations and providing instructional guidance for pedagogy: "What I started to do as an instructional leader was to provide teachers with instructional expectations…. I want to see the level of instruction increase, and I want to see a change in the students (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 2, 2018)."

Harold Griffin specifically described the need to create "a sense of urgency" to improve learning in his school: "We have to have a sense of urgency. We don't have years (H. Griffin, personal communication, June 12, 2018)." This need to create a "sense

of urgency" is described in Bryk's model for school reform, indicating that principals need to be "levers for change," and inspire staff towards implementing a vision for improvement (Bryk et al., 2010).

Severo Sanchez conveyed the importance of teacher accountability for achievement stating, "You also need to have expectations, and you also need to hold them accountable, but there's a way to do it that they're not living in fear…. Living in fear is a problem (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018)."

Similarly, Maria talked about working to achieve a balance and shared, "I know there are times I can be unreasonable, but I think we need to strive for excellency (M. Martinez, personal communication, June 8, 2018)!"

Lead Learner

In terms of the specifics of instruction, principals made statements indicating they definitely knew about good instruction; however, they were quick to recognize the strengths of their teachers and relied on the expertise of leadership team members as well. The term "lead learner" would best describe many of the statements about leading the instruction.

Stephen captured the essence of a lead learner with this statement: “I don't think that instructional leadership means that you have to be the smartest and best teacher in the room because I'm most certainly not. But instead it means that you know how to tap into people who are (S. Breslin, personal communication, January 29, 2018).

Maria expressed a similar view about leveraging the strengths of others: “There are areas where academically I'm stronger, and then there are areas where the early literacy specialist is stronger (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018).”

Rebecca Reynolds spoke about the importance of building trusting relationships, and elaborated about the need to earn teacher respect as an instructional leader: “Its building trust… and really having the teachers respect you for your knowledge so that you can have that collaborative relationship and then be working together (R. Reynolds, personal communication, March 9, 2018).”

Harold also noted the importance of listening and relying on the feedback of others as an effective lead learner strategy. He suggested these questions to be useful towards being an inclusive leader: "How do you solicit advice and support, and what do you do with that advice when you get it? Is it just talk or do you really take the advice that people give you (H. Griffin, personal communication, January 31, 2018)?” Harold’s description is aligned with the collaborative, distributive leadership described by the Wallace Foundation, and in Bryk’s description of leadership that is inclusive of teacher voice (Bryk et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2004).

Management for Learning

Strategic managerial leadership was described to be an essential role of the principal by all eight of these case study participants. Generally, principals in this study described effective management much like the research, to be a critical function to support the implementation of instructional priorities (Chenowerth & Theokas, 2012). They seemed to recognize that everything matters, and yet, they have created organizational structures and strategies to ensure that all of those things that matter receive the attention they deserve (Chenowerth & Theokas, 2012; Dewitt, 2017; Public Agenda, 2007; Wallace, 2012). For example, seven of the eight participants in this study had created leadership teams in their schools where they could delegate responsibilities, and reduce distractions. The eighth principal had fewer staff members but relied heavily on office staff to reduce disruptions and ensure operations were in support of instructional priorities.

When principals described managerial strategies for organizing around instructional priorities, they emphasized that it does not happen by accident. Wendy made it very clear, "You have to have a plan for the instructional leadership component, or it doesn't happen (W. Adams, personal communication, February 14, 2018)."

Several principals described spending time in classrooms as a priority. Rebecca explained her strategy for ensuring classroom visits take priority: "You have to carve out time every day like it's an appointment on your calendar. I'm going to be in the

classrooms from this time to this time (R. Reynolds, personal communication, March 9, 2018)."

Stephen echoed the need to plan strategically, and described how he communicated his goal for spending time in classrooms to his teachers: “I gave every teacher a picture frame last year and had them each set a goal…. Mine says, "Every class, every week," which is very ambitious (S. Breslin, personal communication, January 29, 2018).”

Harold drove home the importance of advanced planning before the school year starts. He described setting up a detailed calendar with the events, professional development, meetings, committees, and processes, and then rolling it out to the team in August:

> My summer is spent… setting up every process…. Then we run the first faculty meeting and the first staff development, and then we run our plan for the opening of school. If those things go well, the school is ready to run for the rest of the year. Everybody knows their roles…. This school can run itself. It allows me then to fine tune things that maybe don't work. I'm the fine tuner (H. Griffin, personal communication, January 31, 2018).

Principals described delegating discipline, phone messages, school events, and other non-instructional matters. Owen said it best: “I would work very, very hard to put these systems in place so that it would free me up to do other things (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 1, 2018).”

Developing Professional Capacity

An additional theme observed to be in alignment with effective reform models was the focused attention to developing professional capacity in schools (Bryk et al., 2010; Chenowerth & Theokas, 2012; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). Principal participants discussed planning collaborative professional development that is job-embedded; using in-service time, grade level meetings, and coaching to grow instructional practices. Principals also commonly referenced spending significant time in classrooms. Three specific subthemes emerged under developing professional capacity: investing time and attention to professional development as a strategy to improve instruction, being knowledgeable about instructional pedagogy, and relying on data-driven discussions to cultivate a learning community among teachers.

Professional Development to Develop Professional Capacity

Professional development was observed to take many forms. Principals used in-service time, early dismissals, faculty meetings, and grade level meetings to provide professional development. Several principals delegated a staff position to instructional coaching, and one set an expectation for teachers to engage in cross-grade level peer-visits every year. All conveyed the importance of ongoing staff development for improving teaching.

Wendy conveyed a sense of urgency to provide professional development in reading instruction for her teachers: “How we can have proficient readers by third grade?

We're really working through what explicit phonics instruction looks like in K-2 (W. Adams, personal communication, February 14, 2018)."

Improving professional collaboration is an essential strategy from the research (Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). Owen shared his model for developing collegiality among teachers:

> They had to do peer visits every month, and it didn't go over so well to start with, but once they started doing it, it ended up being phenomenal. They weren't allowed to see the same person twice. You had to see three things that you liked, two things you have questions about, one thing that you plan on taking back to your room (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 1, 2018).

Maria described how her leadership team organizes professional development that is personalized for teachers: "The leadership team helps in implementing the strategies by going into the classrooms and providing feedback to teachers. Our professional development is aligned to the goals, and… teachers' individual needs (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018)."

Knowledgeable of Instructional Pedagogy

A subtheme related to professional capacity was the need for the principal to be knowledgeable about best practices in instructional pedagogy (Chenowerth & Theokas, 2012; Dewitt, 2017; Public Agenda, 2007; Wallace, 2012). Stephen underscored the need for principals to remain current: "I also have to know good instruction. And, that comes about by, I think, remaining as current as possible (S. Breslin, personal communication, January 29, 2018).

Harold, a principal with a great deal of experience, explained the need to be in classrooms regularly: "You have to be visible…. I do at least two formal observations a week… probably a minimum of 10 walk-throughs a week… probably two or three or four peer collaboration-action research meetings (H. Griffin, personal communication, January 31, 2018)."

Samuel coaches teachers to think about assessment on a daily basis: "You need to assess how your kids are doing… as they read…. He's good with first sound fluency, but he struggles with blending those letters together… (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 2, 2018).

Data-Driven Discussions

Principals referenced the need to use data to leverage instructional change. This strategy is part of the PILS training for principals now, and an essential component of school reform models : (Bryk et al., 2010; Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2014); however, Harold Griffin was focusing on data before it was "fashionable." When he took his first principal assignment, more than 30 years ago, Harold asked, "Where can I go to see the best schools based on federal programs, Title I data (H. Griffin, personal communication, June 12, 2018)?" From there he began shaping his school forward.

Today looking at data is more commonplace; however, understanding the data can be challenging. Severo described leading teachers to use data to inform instruction for

students not meeting standards: “You have to strategize as to how to use that data. I increased my scores pretty good this past year (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018).

Wendy echoed the need to use data to inform both the instruction for students and professional development needs for teachers: "Constantly assessing what the needs of the staff and students are based on our data… our walkthroughs (W. Adams, personal communication, February 14, 2018).”

Owen discovered a second-grade teacher in his district had students outperforming every other classroom on the DIBELS assessment. He spoke to his second-grade team, and they are collaborating with this teacher and learning from her in Professional Learning Community meetings and through site visits (O. Robinson, personal communication, June 5, 2018).

Maria talked about the development of their data room and shared where the data projections come from: “It’s where we meet weekly with teachers, and we constantly focus on data… in order to tell us if our kids are making progress and if our teaching is effective (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018).” For Maria, every student needs to make growth every year.

Personalizing Learning for Students

For this sample of principals, much of the discussion about improving instruction was grounded in making it more relevant, engaging, and needs-based for the students. Principal participants were able to articulate a vision for instructional practice, organize time and human resources around the vision, engage teachers in using data to inform instruction, and work to cultivate a collaborative learning environment for both adults and students : (Bryk et al., 2010; Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2014).

Safe and Welcoming Climate

Principals talked about the importance of safety, and most often referred to the school climate work they focused on at the start of their careers in leadership. Several principals described needing to create systems to reduce office referrals when they were first assigned to a school. Rebecca's voice represented the group when she stated, "My number one priority is the safety of all children (R. Reynolds, personal communication, March 9, 2018)."

Severo spoke about the need to focus on climate at the beginning of his principal assignment: "Everyone I spoke to just talked about… how school climate was so bad…. I decided what I was going to do here first was to improve the school climate. (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018)." He further explained how he engaged staff

in the process by convening a "climate committee," and once up and running; he would delegate the planning of activities.

The participants in this study had been leading schools for a few years, and the climate observed during site visits was welcoming and pleasant. That is not to say I did not observe student concerns. At least once in each school, a student was observed to be having a melt-down. As Wendy would describe it, "Like in urban areas we might have more things happen than in others, but we have a plan, you know what I mean, so… we don't get totally off track…, even if a student is "losing their mind," the show still goes on (W. Adams, personal communication, June 21, 2018)."

While every school encountered the occasional student melt-down, this was not the norm. More importantly, there always appeared to be a system to respond to the child in need at the moment. The principal would definitely stop to check in, but rarely did it take them off course. This type of event, which might cause significant turbulence in some schools, was managed as part of a plan by the staff (Gross, 2014).

It is also important to note that school climate meant more than physical safety to these principals, and extended to include emotional wellbeing. Wendy made this clear when explaining her goal statements: "Our third goal is around culture and climate, and having a safe and nurturing environment (W. Adams, personal communication, February

14, 2018).” Embedded in this goal under the term nurturing was a plan for cultivating a growth mindset about academic achievement.

Student-Centered Instruction with a Growth Mindset

A common theme related to using data was planning interventions for students based on their individual needs. Principals talked about coaching teachers to be strategic in this area. Team planning, for example, was a big part of the strategy for Owen's building: "I sit down with my reading intervention team, and we map out data meetings before we meet (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 1, 2018).”

Maria echoed Owen's approach and elaborated about the sense of urgency she holds about student achievement. Her building looks at data using six to seven-week cycles to ensure monitoring for student growth:

> We have to meet the kids' needs wherever they are…. We have to make sure that they're making progress. It is not acceptable for them to start at, let's just say, a level I on a DRA level, and two months later they're still sitting at a level I, there's something wrong there…. Every six to seven weeks, we are revisiting… and making adjustments (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018).

Samuel emphasized the importance of using formative assessment for teachers. He described this scene from a classroom where students could not figure out the language of the problem to be solved:

> Students were doing a problem... It said "unbundle" a 10, and the students couldn't figure it out. I said, do you know what that word means? … "Unbundle"

> means "to take apart." If you take a "10" apart, what do you do? Then they were able to proceed and get the problem. It's important to determine why kids aren't able to succeed (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 2, 2018)."

Relationships Matter

Aligned with school reform research, principals emphasized the importance of cultivating relationships in their schools (Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). The importance of relationship building came up over and over in discussions about principals with teachers, teacher-to-teacher collegial relationships, and of course teachers-to-student relationships.

Rebecca, who is endlessly walking the halls saying "Hey there," and giving fist bumps, stated principals need to know the kids, "So, it's making yourself visible, it's building trust, it is being in classrooms every day as much as possible, talking with the students (R. Reynolds, personal communication, March 9, 2018)."

Owen described an exercise from a faculty meeting planned to remind his teachers about the importance of teacher to student connections: "I asked them, "Who was an influential person in your life and why?" … "It was a coach." … "But why?" … "Well, this person believed in me…" Once teachers identified an experience with an influential adult from their own childhood, he challenged them: "Today … I want you to think about that five times… I want you to think about that person and the why. The why is so much more important (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 1, 2018)."

Harold explained the importance of principals building supportive relationships with teachers, and shared the commitment he makes to his new hires: “If we make a commitment to you… I'm gonna do everything I can and give you coaching and all the support to help you become a good urban educator (H. Griffin, personal communication, January 31, 2018).”

Severo also referenced the critical nature of having trusting relationships with teachers: “Be visible, be approachable… I think building relationships and building trust is important (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018).”

Samuel, who was most outspoken about standing up for the students, underlined the importance of looking out for the teachers too: “One thing you do have to also do is, make sure your teachers are okay. Sometimes teachers go through some things, and struggle, and…. you have to make sure that they are okay (S. Edwards, personal communication, May 30, 2018).”

Engaging the Community

Questions and observations for this case study research focused specifically on instructional leadership with a lens towards “how” effective instructional leader principals achieve their goals; however, there was evidence in every building that principals valued participation from the community and welcomed parents.

Stephen described how important it was to invest in relationships with parent leaders at the start: “I spent endless hours investing our PTA, being present getting to know people because… if there is ever an issue, they are attacking the issue and not the person (S. Breslin, personal communication, January 29, 2018).”

Community engagement is an important component of the school culture for Harold. He describes systems he has created to ensure parents and community members have a voice in the school:

> A lot of things I do here is what I've learned from parents. I study all of our parents' surveys, and we do every year. I look at what the rating is high in, what they don't rate as high in. We're very lucky! They rate us high in everything. We're in the business of parents. The parents are our consumers (H. Griffin, personal communication, January 31, 2018).”

Maria grew up in the neighborhood where she now serves as principal. While she had less to say about community relations, it was clear in observing her interactions that they matter. When asked specifically about engaging the community it was clear that, while she delegates that work, she is intentional about making parents fully part of the school, including providing work opportunities in a neighborhood that has little to offer:

> We are fortunate… to have support staff that had been president of the Home and School Association. She lives in the neighborhood, she's still working here, and she has that connection with the parents… bringing in parents every month.... She averages about 25 to 30 parents a month, which is not typical in the inner city. She's been able to get…volunteers. We've actually managed to hire some of the parents…, opening up those positions has also brought more parents onboard with our initiatives. We try to be as transparent as possible (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018).

How They Do It!

The previous section described the thinking and actions coded that aligned with the research about instructional leadership and school reform. This next section outlines themes for "how they do it." Several overarching patterns were found that cut across case studies and went beyond the basic tenets of PILS. Common themes emerged for how participants organize around the many demands of their work. Also observed was a critical lens several in the group brought to the table when attending meetings about instruction and achievement data. The term critical here refers to thoughtful questioning and probing the layers of a problem. Principals were observed to ask hard questions of staff about possible decisions and actions, or what Leithwood et al. (2004) might refer to as a "critical catalyst" (2004).

Also noted were human qualities that made these principals generally relatable. The first was a sense that most of these principals see themselves as regular, everyday people, and not superheroes. Secondly, it was very evident that these folks just "get a kick out of the kids!" Perhaps more importantly, they seemed to enjoy the kids even when they were not at their best. Subthemes for this section on leadership strategies and qualities have been organized under the headings: delegate purposefully, applying a critical lens, leading as a relatable lead learner, and kid-centered decision making.

Delegate Purposefully

Principals in this study seemed to notice everything and deal with things right away; however, this was often done by delegating, and much of it happened “on the fly.” Delegating was the most consistently observed behavior during site visits, and when asked about delegating, principals described how it was purposefully done. Often delegating tasks was observed to occur as a principal was on the way to, or in between, activities that were planned based on the priorities. This set of principals also formed leadership teams and strategically delegated responsibilities.

Wendy explained how she delegates many initiatives in her building to teachers: "We have staff that led those kinds of things, and we'll have staff that'll lead different initiatives…. There's our leadership team and a team leader at every grade… to really keep the ball rolling (W. Adams, personal communication, April 25, 2018).”

Stephen described a strategy for being efficient about messages: "My phone will never go to voicemail because I end up spending 20 minutes getting to the part I needed to call back…. It goes directly to my secretary who, nine times out of 10, can handle the call anyway." In the context of less-urgent discipline referrals, Stephen delegates the responsibility to teachers: "I've found if I give people a little bit of time, they oftentimes will find the right answer on their own… If a teacher would email me with something a student did, I would respond with how “they” should address it. You do that enough

times, and they realize that you're not just going to take all of their problems and solve them (S. Breslin, personal communication, June 18, 2018)."

Harold elaborated about the importance of building a leadership team, and sharing the load by delegating responsibilities to that team:

> By yourself, you can't do a good job at anything. I'm busy just in all the things instructionally…. If I had to spend my day dealing with discipline? … I get involved with some of it... If I see something I don't like I'll call the team together…. But I have so many pairs of eyes out there making sure…how we walk through the halls, how they come in, how are the manners… Then you get things done... That's wonderful because it's theirs…I trust them (H. Griffin, personal communication, February 31, 2018)."

In Maria's building, she has cultivated a leadership team with diverse experiences. She believes that is what makes her team most effective: "I believe having a strong team, and folks that their background is in the different areas that we're focusing on, is what makes us stronger (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018)."

Owen has a smaller staff, and while he has an intervention team, they are all assigned to teaching positions for most of the day. In the absence of an assistant principal or coaching position, Owen relies on office staff and his head custodian for some tasks: "I have a very organized secretary who really keeps things flowing. She knows what I think… expectations across the building… She's pretty good at filtering out things that shouldn't come to me (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 1, 2018)."

Samuel attributed his ability to delegate effectively from his experience as a high school assistant principal. He learned about it from “PEEL” leadership classes, including how to set deadlines for receiving project updates to keep on top of tasks that had been delegated (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 2, 2018).

This purposeful delegating is about attending to all of the needs while focusing on the instructional priorities. Severo said it best: "I think instructional leadership has a lot to do with teamwork. I'm not just sitting here telling people what to do, I want to be part of the team (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018).”

Though Severo believes in his ability to cultivate teamwork, he also expressed benefiting from a bit of "luck" when his assistant principal was assigned to his school by the central office. He had the good fortune to be assigned an assistant principal with extraordinary organizational skills. This was disconfirming evidence from his earlier statements about having influence and control over priorities. He didn't have any "say" in the assignment and feels "lucky" to have her on the team (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018).

Applying a Critical Lens

Several principals from the case studies were observed to be critical of their work and to question the thinking of the people around them. Principals again seemed to notice everything and asked critical questions as part of decision making. Wendy, for example, was critical about her abilities when asked, "How do you manage the competing demands? Wendy answered, “Sometimes I think not well… When things get in the way, we are doing walkthroughs that are less meaningful. You're in a room for a couple of minutes, where you would … stay and really give meaningful feedback (W. Adams, personal communication, February 14, 2018).”

Samuel shared an example of questions he asked of a newer teacher to challenge her assumptions about a kid:

> Tell me who your highest-performing kid is… and what does that mean for your instruction? The teacher … picked out some of her highest-performing kids, but she didn't pick out her highest … because he is a behavior problem…. I said, “Steve is the highest, had the highest score in reading in your class…. he gets in trouble a lot, but he's your highest performing reader in your class. What does that mean for your instructions (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 2, 2018)?”

Stephen talked about how asking the hard questions can feel in conflict with being collaborative, and inclusive of the teacher's voice. Having provided training about inclusion for two years; however, and faced with a couple of resistant teachers he found himself suggesting, "If you say "I'm not going to implement those things," and you've

been asked to do that, you're going to find yourself receiving questions about why (S. Breslin, personal communication, May 14, 2018)."

Harold made it clear he expects teachers to look at standards and assessment, and not teachers' manuals to inform their instruction: "If I'm an instructional leader, I'm looking at my data. If my data is saying what the district program isn't good, it doesn't make any sense to teach just because it's in a teacher's edition (H. Griffin, personal communication, January 31, 2018)."

Leading as a Regular Everyday People

In terms of personal qualities, these principals frequently made statements indicated they consider themselves to be pretty regular people. Principals appeared to be very much lead learners versus superheroes in their schools (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015). They spoke about leveraging relationships and knowing the strengths of team members as important leadership strategies. Essentially, the leadership behaviors described here made these principals relatable individuals who were pretty humble about their work. This aspect of their leadership could be an important quality for empowering members of a learning community.

Wendy, whose teaching experience was at the middle school level, conveyed the importance of being a team that collaborates around instructional decisions: "We're very

collaborative. It's definitely not like I am the expert on things. We're learning with the staff (W. Adams, personal communication, February 14, 2018).”

Samuel spoke about faulty perceptions some may have about the principal, "Teachers have to understand, I'm a real person, and I'm in the struggle with them. It's not the Wizard of Oz, behind the curtain... the work is in the classrooms and the only way I'm going to know what the work is, is if I'm there with you (S. Edwards, personal communication, May 30, 2018).”

Maria also emphasized the importance of relying on the strengths and experiences of others on the team: “My background was middle years English, so I make sure that I have the voice of the early literacy specialist and the teacher leader that taught in those lower grades in order to support teachers (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018).”

Owen had a similar view about respecting the expertise of others: “If I were to walk into a first grade teacher's classroom and only talk about the X's and O's of teaching, I think that they would run circles around me because I've never taught first grade (O. Robinson, personal communication, March 20, 2018).” He respects the experience teachers bring to the table; however, he expects them to be open to improving by learning from those who have found strategies for success.

Rebecca shared a question she asks during teacher evaluation conferences: “I usually ask what they think their strengths are, I already have something in mind, and then what would they like to work on (R. Reynolds, personal communication, April 26, 2018).” She has learned that by knowing the strengths of individual staff members, she can grow the capacity of the team.

Kids Centered Decision Making

Principals in this sample really seemed to “get a kick out of the kids” This colloquial language best described my early perceptions about the way principals in the study responded to and felt about, the students. Participants in this study seemed, by and large, to be "kid-centered." They were observed to know kids by name and often knew their stories. For example, when shadowing principals during site visits, six out of eight participants were observed greeting students around the building and giving fist bumps, high-fives, or handshakes. It was also commonly observed that principals would have a quick chat with a kid or two about something they knew that was personal to those specific students.

It was observed even in discipline situations that principals were “rooting for the kids.” Five out of eight participants, for example, were observed to be hiding a smile over some student’s misdeed. These perceptions were noted in site visits and confirmed in follow-up interviews and closing interviews when principals were asked directly about reactions observed.

Samuel made compelling remarks on this matter when talking about “kids being kids” (S. Edwards, personal communication, April 4, 2019). He shared that educators need to remember their psychology class to frame their understanding of student behaviors:

> One of the most important classes people forget about… is psychology, because if you understand how kids develop, how kids think, how kids behave ... You can't get upset when a kindergartner or first grader has a temper tantrum, because they're in that developmental stage… that's what they do (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 2, 2018).

When it comes to discipline, Samuel had definitive beliefs: "You have to learn to temper justice with mercy…. Kids are funny, and if you are that intent on getting a kid in trouble maybe you shouldn't be in education (S. Edwards, personal communication, May 30, 2018).”

Stephen provided similar perspectives when asked about his response to a discipline matter during a site visit. On this day he was following up with a fourth-grade girl about swearing under her breath at a boy in the after-care program. The girl, when called to his office, was literally shrinking in the chair. It seemed it was all Stephen could do to keep from smiling while she described the teasing behavior that occurred at the start of the conflict. Stephen responded that he understood the problem, and then gave her a warning about the language. After the talk, she bounced her way down the hall to the lunchroom.

When asked about the interaction Stephen had this to say about his role as disciplinarian, “They know I’m not an alarmist when it comes to student behavior… that I don’t throw the book at kids so to speak (S. Breslin, personal communication, January 29, 2018)." He went on to explain his commitment to student-centered decision making, and how he stands up to teacher resistance by asking this question of staff: "Is this a kid problem or an adult problem? If it's an adult problem… let's come back around to solve it after we come to the solution for kids (S. Breslin, personal communication, May 14, 2018).”

Principals were also observed to celebrate students’ successes. Rebecca shared how she connects with kids by celebrating writing in her school. It all began when she collected writing samples to talk with the teachers. She wrote post-it notes on the samples and was shocked by the response from the students when they received her feedback:

> I would go in the classrooms with… writing samples and be like, "Oh my gosh, this writing since the beginning of the year, it's improved so much; I'm so proud of you...." Well, the kids starting taping the Post-Its inside the desk. So I said… give me three per week so… I can communicate with all the kids (R. Reynolds, personal communication, April 2, 2018).

Severo was also observed during site visits to be visiting classrooms giving out “brag tags,” a form of recognition planned by the climate committee to “catch kids doing good” for academic or social behaviors. In Wendy’s building, students would pop into her office for a check-in celebration when a student would meet Positive Behavior Support plan goals.

Several participants shared why they pursued the principal role. Their responses could be described as fulfilling what Michael Fullan describes as moral purpose (Fullan, 2001). For example, Severo stated his reason for becoming a principal was because "I love working with kids…. I can't wait for the day that one of my kids comes… and says, Mr. Sanchez, do you remember me? … I'm successful…. I can't wait for that day. Especially… one of my kids who struggled (S. Sanchez, personal communication, April 2, 2018).

Owen conveyed a similar desire to make a difference for kids: “I want them to look back on the experience that they've had with me… and think something like “that guy didn't give up on me (O. Robinson, personal communication, June 5, 2018).”

Harold, the most experienced principal participant, reflected on his thoughts about kids and how his thinking evolved over time:

> I understand kids a lot more now. And I can relate… because I didn't like school. And I know how their stomach is churning inside… So I have to laugh behind my desk because I should probably be tough on them… and somehow I'm going to find a way to maybe get them off the hook (H. Griffin, personal communication, June 12, 2018).

By and large, principal decision making was observed to be principled and based on the best interest of the kids. One could sum up a common tenet about decision making

with Owen's statement: "All decisions are made in the best interest of students… (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 1, 2018)."

Samuel's statement captured the sentiment typically observed when kids made mistakes when he said, "You can't get upset with a kid for being a kid (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 21, 2018)."

Believe All Kids Can Learn

The findings above outlining how principals navigate the competing demands to stay focused on priorities, or "how they do it!" could stand alone in answer to the research question. There was, however, one more theme that emerged in the data in terms of participant beliefs about learning and educator efficacy. This theme first emerged during initial interviews, when principals were asked whether they believed they had power or influence over priority setting in their schools. Five principals stated they believed they have the power to set priorities in their schools, and the remaining three principals believed they can influence the priorities by managing their time effectively.

Additional evidence related to locus of control and educator efficacy was observed and collected across site visits (Dewitt, 2017; Martinki et al., 2007). For example, principal attendance in grade level meetings, agendas for staff meetings, and observations of principals delegating disruptions to continue to their intended classroom

visits all demonstrated a commitment to and belief in their plan to improve instruction. Questions were selected for the closing interview to confirm or disconfirm observations, and to clarify the relationship between beliefs and actions for this set of principal participants. Subthemes to be discussed in this section include principal perceptions about the ability to control priorities, participant beliefs about teacher efficacy and student learning, and principal inferences about belief development in this area.

Control Over School Priorities

One area of interest for this study was how principal perceptions and beliefs affect their decisions and actions in the field. Questions were included in the initial interview to explore participant perceptions about "how much control they believed principals have over setting the priorities in their schools?" This question sought to identify perceptions and beliefs principals hold about their ability to influence practice or "set the agenda" for change in their schools. On the whole, principals from this study believed they had a lot of power over the priorities and how they focused the attention of their staff.

Wendy explained the balance between central office and site-based control explaining that while there are indeed expectations from the central office in a city where the district has multiple schools, there are also opportunities to set priorities:

> I think we have a lot of control over instructional priority. There are parameters… as far as SLO's and observations. We're required to do 15 walkthroughs…. But we have a lot of control over what our schedule looks like, how do we use our human capital, … I think we have pretty good control over instructional priority (W. Adams, personal communication, February 14, 2018).

As a principal in a different urban district of similar size, Severo explained that the central office assigns tasks to principals, and the timing of assignments is not always well thought out. That said, Severo believes he has a great deal of power over the instructional priorities in his school: “I mean, I think we do have most of the power (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018).”

Maria, who leads a school in a vast urban district, agrees with this thinking: "I think… based on our data, we have the flexibility to determine our goals. We can determine our academic, our climate, and our parental involvement goals. We have flexibility in that area (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018).”

Stephen, the principal in this sample with the largest building enrollment, explained how the district gave him a great deal of power to make decisions; however, managing his own time could be a challenge. He described how he managed communications over time so that staff would know what to expect, and have something of a framework for making decisions. By giving what might be called "wait time," teachers began to make more decisions on their own, and then follow-up to report it. Stephen could then affirm the decisions, and encourage greater independence. In time staff became empowered to make decisions on the "everyday stuff" without him:

> I'm often taken down by time… but the longer I've been in this position… I've found that if I give people a little bit of time, they oftentimes will find the right answer on their own (S. Breslin, personal communication, January 29, 2018).”

Owen shared his strategy for making sure the team remains focused by using well-planned meetings. His building is all instructional staff, with no assistant principal or coach. In place of additional leadership positions, he relies on the reading intervention team to plan out goals and related meeting topics for the year. They plan out the initial data conversations and all of the follow-up meetings needed to check-in and make sure they are working towards the goals: "I sit down with my intervention team and… we're pretty good at trying to think more long terms…. we literally embedded in our calendar, dates so that it doesn't become just "something that you talk about" (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 1, 2018)."

Beliefs about Teaching and Learning

Principals purposively sampled for their effective instructional leadership abilities in this study were consistent in their perceptions about their power to influence the instructional priorities in their schools. This perception was explored in the initial interview and then observed in the field. Across the semester principal participants demonstrated in action the beliefs stated in the initial interview. Principals were observed to meet regularly with leadership teams, to plan "data digs" and follow-up meetings with grade level teams, to engage teacher leaders to share strategies in faculty meetings and to be intentional about getting into classrooms.

As part of the closing interview, participants were asked to confirm beliefs about student learning by selecting from four statements drawn from DuFour's prerequisites for high performing learning communities (DuFour, 1997). The question, which can be found in Appendix C, separates the degree to which educators hold themselves directly accountable for student learning, versus learner aptitude or effort. When asked about their beliefs about students and learning, this group of principals was nearly unanimous in selecting the following statement:

> We believe that all students can and must learn at relatively high levels of achievement. It is our job to create an environment in our classrooms that results in this high level of performance. We are confident that with our support and help, students can master challenging academic material, and we expect them to do so. We are prepared to work collaboratively with colleagues, students, and parents to achieve this shared educational purpose (R. DuFour, 1997).

Wendy selected statement four; however, she qualified her answer by adding a belief about supporting a growth mindset: "I'm gonna say number four, but I would say that it's our job to help students have a growth mindset. And that struggle can be productive, and failing doesn't mean stopping. Like you learn and then try again, so that's what I think (W. Adams, personal communication, June 21, 2018)."

Stephen explained that this belief grew out of experience: "Four… I don't know that I always had it… I think that as I grew… that became more evident to me, that I can expect all of my students to achieve at a relatively high levels (S. Breslin, personal communication, June 18, 2018)." He explained that even after leaving the classroom, he had had a firsthand view of teachers who are doing it.

Samael, Rebecca, and Severo all selected four as well and provided experiences they have encountered with students who achieved differently with different teachers from year to year. Severo explained it best: “I've experienced teachers who say you know, Johnny, he can't do it, right? But then Johnny goes to another teacher and now he's doing what teacher A said he couldn't do (S. Sanchez, personal communication, June 8, 2018).”

Providing a theoretical framework in support of his belief, Harold explained that statement number four is about mastery learning, “You know, that all kids can learn. They maybe learn at different rates, but… they can learn (H. Griffin, personal comment, June 12, 2018).”

Maria selected number four as representative of her experiences and beliefs: “I think that for me, it's based on experiences I've had in my years here at MLK…. I have seen students… with a disability… making progress apart from that fact…. (M. Martinez, personal comment, June 8, 2018).”

The one principal who differed from the group, Owen Robinson, had difficulty choosing between statements three and four. In his view, the language about growth mindset from statement three was also important and belonged in four. Owen agreed with the language from answer number four about the responsibility for teachers to create an

environment where students can meet high expectations (O. Robinson, personal communication, June 5, 2018.

Influences Related to Beliefs

As a follow-up to the question about beliefs, principals were asked to share how they came to hold the beliefs they do about student learning, and how they think those beliefs impact their leadership style. Wendy shared an important crossroad in her own teaching as a middle school special educator, trying to teach long division and wondering about the importance of that specific skill in the big picture:

> So when I was like… let's learn how to use a tool for this… and we started doing basic algebra… that was like a moment for me… 'cause then I had students who were going back to their regular education class and were helping the students in their class and I was like, "Oh man, like we just have to decide what's really the most important thing" (W. Adams, personal communication, June 21, 2018).

Samuel shared that his belief system grew out of seeing teachers evolve in their practice: "It's the basis of how teachers evolve as instructional leaders in their classroom and begin to focus more on student learning as opposed to teaching (S. Edwards, personal communication, May 30, 2018)."

For Harold, it was noting how the data differed from teacher to teacher, and some had consistently higher achievement data regardless of the students: "So when I became principal, I became privy to the data…. I formed it right away that it's the teacher that matters. It's not the kids. It's the teachers. That's what makes a difference (H. Griffin, personal communication, June 12, 2018). Harold emphasized the impact this awareness

has had on his leadership in this statement: "That's probably the big difference between what I do… my belief system in how kids learn, that all kids can learn because it's what we do. It's not just the teachers, but it's what I do. What kind of support do I provide the teachers (H. Griffin, personal communication, June 12, 2018)?"

When asked how beliefs have impacted Stephen's leadership style he indicated that the expectations he puts forward for staff are drawn from those beliefs: "I expect them to all go into their classroom expecting all of their students to learn and achieve, I expect them to do whatever it takes, and I recognize that differentiating your instruction is hard, but I don't really care that it's hard, because that's what we do (S. Breslin, June 18, 2018)."

Disconfirming Evidence

Severo provided some disconfirming evidence with this question when talking about his teachers. While he believes all students can learn, his description of the staff was less hopeful in terms of beliefs about what might be possible for the teachers. One could infer that believing in teachers would be an essential factor for leading them to believe in the kids:

> I mean, we have a lot of teachers who don't think that some kids can learn anything. But they can. Just it's a lot of hard work, and some of the teachers don't want to work that hard, you know? It's a bell-shaped curve, like everything. You have the really high achievers, and then everybody in the middle, and then you have your low achievers (S. Sanchez, personal communication, June 8, 2018).

Owen also shared discrepant evidence regarding his belief that all students can learn when he indicated that educator outlook can worsen over time for people. He shared this statement about losing sight of the vision: "You look at people who have become burned out who started… like naively optimistic… and they sort of go to a place where their skill set could be the highest… but their mindset is a lesser version of itself (O. Robinson, personal communication, April 5, 2018)."

Alexis also shared that the many state-level consultants that were working with her building asked for a redundant thing during site visits, robbing time that might be better used in classrooms (W. Adams, personal communication, April 25, 2018).

Discussion about Theoretical Frameworks

Turbulence theory was one framework that was expected to be observed, given the high need populations served in this cross-case study research. However, evidence of the experience of turbulence for principals was observed less frequently than expected during the site visits. Events were observed that might cause turbulence for some principals, mostly relate to student disciplinary matters; however, as mentioned previously principals from this study seemed to have a plan in place for this type of situation.

Given the already established structures, discipline matters rarely took them off course. Principals were observed during these events to take the time to check-in about it before moving on with plans. For example, a kindergartner in Severo's building was

observed having separation anxiety from his mother. Severo knew about the situation and was aware that the child's father had been arrested and removed from the home recently. The school counselor was called to the area, along with an assistant who had made a connection to the student (S. Sanchez, personal communication, May 15, 2018).

There were also times when a parent meeting would call a principal away from the shadowing experience to handle a confidential student matter. This type of situation was also taken in stride. It seemed with this sample of principals, their ability to manage in support of instructional priorities meant they were highly effective at avoiding turbulence or managed it effectively before it became extreme (S. Gross, 2015).

During one site visit to Martin Luther King School, the principal, Maria, became aware of a potential fight after school. On this date, it was evident that she and the Assistant Principal were experiencing turbulence. Once again, however, she relied on her leadership team and a plan for managing dismissal that seemed to be known by staff. The conflict was managed before turning into a full out fight between students (M. Martinez, personal communication, March 26, 2018).

Summary

The findings shared in this chapter were drawn from eight individual case studies of elementary principals known for their instructional leadership abilities. The goal was to study the strategies, decisions, and actions these effective principals applied to focus

on instructional priorities and to examine the data for cross-case study themes. Major findings from the cross-case analysis fell into three broad themes.

First, interview and observation data for this sample of purposively selected principals found evidence of leadership practices aligned with the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Standards, the criteria given for participant recommendations, and the tenets of effective school reform (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). Principals consistently demonstrated actions aligned with effective school leadership models from current school reform research (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). Principals focused on instructional matters as the priority and managed the available resources in support of instruction. They were also observed to spend considerable time cultivating a trusting learning community among their teachers and staff.

Second, themes emerged for "how" principals organized around the competing demands. Principals had established leadership teams with the positions available to them and were observed to delegate purposefully to members of that team. Systems also appeared to be in place for managing discipline referrals, parent concerns, and school climate and parent engagement events. This group of principals seemed to be regular, relatable people who thought in "kid-centered" ways and served as “lead learners" and not "superheroes” in their schools. Intentionally critical about the work, these principals appeared to ask hard questions and use data to leverage change in their organization.

The third and most interesting theme that emerged was a universal belief system for principal participants that all kids can learn. Principals in this study conveyed a great deal of self-efficacy and a belief in teacher efficacy. This belief in the power of schools and the power of teachers to create the supportive learning environments students need to succeed seemed to set these principals apart. Beliefs about teacher and principal efficacy appeared to drive priority setting for these leaders. These findings and the implications for the findings will be discussed at length in the discussion section in terms of how they relate to the extant literature, and implications for potential research in this area.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to better understand how instructionally centered principals navigate competing demands to remain focused on instructional priorities. This chapter includes a discussion of the major findings from eight case studies of elementary principals known for their instructional leadership abilities, including common leadership practices found to be in place across multiple cases. The discussion will highlight findings from this study that affirm the body of research on instructional leadership and models for school reform, strategies for how this unique set of principals focus on the instructional priorities they set for their schools, and finally the commonly held beliefs principal participants shared about student learning, teacher efficacy, and causal attribution.

Theoretical frameworks will be discussed, including *attribution theory* and *turbulence theory,* as lenses for helping to make sense of the findings. The chapter will close with a discussion about the limitations of this study, and case study methods generally, in terms of generalizing these findings to the broader community. Compelling themes did emerge from this study; however, and the possible implications of those themes will be explored for future research and professional development for principals.

The goal of this study was to better understand the strategies, decisions, and actions effective principals use to hold to instructional priorities. More specifically, the

study examined: How do elementary principals navigate competing demands to focus on instructional priorities?

Research on school reform models, principal effectiveness, and research on high poverty, high performing schools continues to suggest instructional leadership is an essential component for schools to effect and improve student achievement (Bryk et al., 2010; Chenowerth & Theokas, 2012; Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Dewitt, 2017; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2014; McGee, 2003; Public Agenda, 2007; Wallace, 2012; Wagner et al., 2006). Effective principal leadership is essential; in fact, the Wallace Foundation examined achievement data for students in 180 schools and found no single example of improved student achievement absent an effective, instructionally centered principal (2012).

The core leadership functions identified in the Wallace Foundation study and leading models of school reform included: communicating a vision for learning and student success, creating a supportive school climate for personalized learning, growing collaborative leadership among staff, leveraging data to improving instruction, and managing resources in support of improving learning (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2006; Wallace Foundation, 2012). Unfortunately, progress in the area of improving schools has been uneven in the field, and some studies suggest principals struggle to achieve this high bar (Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007). This gap between research and practice was the subject of this cross-case study

research, with the objective of better understanding of how principals identified to be effective instructional leaders achieve instructional goals and priorities.

Summary of Findings

Major findings for this study included evidence of effective instructional leadership practices among case study principals. Principal participants showed they implement leadership practices aligned with the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Standards, and models of effective instructional leadership from school reform research (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006. Participants were found to establish a vision and focus on the quality of instruction. They managed available resources in support of instructional priorities and cultivated a learning community among educators in their schools. The focus for these principals was to drive instructional change towards more personalized learning for students.

Findings also suggest these principals, recommended to be instructional leaders, have effective strategies for organizing around competing demands. In this study I found participants to use four definitive strategies to navigate the demands and focus on instructional priorities: (a) principals established leadership teams and delegated much of the non-instructional work, including implementing systems for managing discipline, and creating committees to plan family events, positive behavior supports, and school social events; (b) participants came across as "relatable" lead learners who were deliberate in developing collaborative relationships among teachers, and engaging the strengths of team members; (c) as instructional leaders, principals in this study were observed to be

critical, asking hard questions of teachers and colleagues when examining data or considering instructional practices; and (d) the principals in this study were found to be principled, kid-centered decision makers. The four strategies observed served to focus planning and decision making for principals in alignment with instructional priorities, and seemed to have a synergizing effect which will be discussed in the implications section.

Most interesting in the themes that emerged was one related to beliefs about learning. Eight out of eight principals selected an answer indicating they believe all students "can and must learn at high levels," and seven out of eight conveyed the belief that the "locus of causality" for ensuring learning occurs belongs with schools and teachers. This belief system, regarding school accountability for impacting learning and achievement, was first noted in initial interviews in response to a question about principals' having the power to set priorities in their schools. It was then observed to be a theme in the conversations principals held with their teachers while I was shadowing participants in site visits.

This observation about beliefs was then confirmed during the closing interview, by using a question about collective efficacy borrowed from Rick DuFour scale for measuring the collective beliefs of professional learning community groups (DuFour, 1997). Follow-up interview questions unpacked the development of this belief for principals, identifying that most had grown into the belief through teaching and leadership experiences in the field. What is most important about identifying this

common belief was that it appeared to be the driving force behind priority setting and decision making for these principals, even when faced with competing views or demands.

Relationship of the Findings to Previous Research

Principals from this study were observed to apply tenets from the research on effective principals and models for school reform in their daily work (Bryk et al., 2010; Chenowerth & Theokas, 2012; Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Dewitt, 2017; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; McGee, 2003; Public Agenda, 2007; Wallace, 2012; Wagner et al., 2006). The findings affirmed participant recommendations that had been made by Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Program Coordinators, and PDE Distinguished Educators, and district leaders for instructionally centered principals.

Principals in this study were, indeed, instructional leaders and placed this aspect of their work first. Definitions of instructional leadership, provided by principal participants in the initial interview, highlighted the qualities described in school reform models and the research on effective principal leaders (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). They talked about aligning their work to their vision and setting goals about instructional practice. Several talked about the importance of communicating the vision, and all eight principals spoke about using data to inform instructional decision making. Principals in this study organized leadership teams with the staff members available and managed available resources in support of instructional priorities.

In addition to defining instructional leadership and aligning leadership practices to the research, participants articulated the need to organize around distractions in effective ways to remain focused on instructional matters. Seven out of eight established a system to reduce office referrals at the start of their principal tenure, and a number of them shared supervisory or coaching moves they made to improve teacher ownership for student behaviors. Creating meeting structures to cultivate a more collaborative professional environment was also observed to be a strategy. Principals went beyond establishing leadership teams and moved to empower teachers to tackle and solve problems using distributive leadership.

These strategies described by participants for organizing around demands, while not explicitly defined in school reform frameworks, can be found in the research about organizational leadership in the broader sense. Leading authors of research on organizational leadership speak to the importance of cultivating a leadership team and delegating effectively. For example in *Good to Great*, Collins talks about organizing people based on their talents to be a high leverage strategy in the leadership hierarchy (Collins, 2001). Collins also described effective leaders as "channeling their ego away from themselves" and towards the larger goal of growing the organization (2001). This leadership quality from Collins framework broadly aligns with the humble, "lead learner" qualities I observed in the case study participants from this study (2001).

The same could be said about organizational leadership and the practice of asking hard questions and thinking critically about all areas of the school program. Kotter, in his

book *Leading Change,* described the danger of "complacency" for organizational leaders if they fail to look critically at their business model regularly (Kotter, 1996). His model would suggest school leaders are "spot-on" to be viewing achievement data and instructional practices as a means to ensure schools remain responsive to the needs of their customers-- the students and their families (Kotter, 1996).

In terms of action taking, one final theme found for principal participants was principled, "kid-centered" decision making. This quality, too, can be found in the research for effective school leaders and is one that is embedded in the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Standards (Table 3.1). Shapiro and Gross conveyed principled decision making to be a critical quality for school leaders in *Ethical Educational Leadership in Turbulent Times* (Shapiro & Gross (2007). Applying *ethics of care*, according to these authors, is a critical component when making decisions about children that could impact their future.

As a summary of this discussion about organizational strategies, many of the strategies observed are also broadly aligned with research for effective organizational leadership (Collins, 2001; Kotter 1996). The principled, "kid-centered," leadership can also be drawn from principal frameworks. Ethical leadership can be found in the PIL Standards, the framework for principal preparation in Pennsylvania, and is a tenet in the standards most recently adopted by the Council of Chief State School Officers (National Policy Board for Education Administration, 2015). This statement should not be taken to

mean these leadership strategies and qualities are not important; rather it is to point out in the discussion that they are not really new.

Limitations of the Study and Results

Before going further into the discussion about implications, it is important to state up front the limitations for generalizing these findings beyond the bounded cases from this study. I set out to examine "how" elementary principals navigate competing demands to focus on instructional priorities. To gain insight into this question participants were purposively sampled based on recommendations for their instructional leadership qualities. I hoped that by studying effective instructionally centered principals, it would lead to a theory about "how" these effective principals develop strategies and achieve the ideal.

Case study methods were used to allow for the close study of the phenomenon "instructional leadership." Qualitative case study methods were best for studying this "how" question, as they allowed for observing participants within their complex social milieu. I was able to collect data about the vast array of variables that may cause principals to think or behave in certain ways.

While the decision to use case study methods offered a close-up view of the phenomenon under study, there is limited value in terms of validity, reliability, or generalizability from the findings. Instead, the benefit of this collection of "rich" data is that it allows the reader a window into the cognitions and beliefs of effective principals,

and provides an exemplar portrait, if you will, for how select principals lead for results. Moreover, while the findings cannot lead to conclusions regarding causality, they may lead to a theory of action for additional studies, including possible empirical research.

Interpretations of the Findings

So, what does this study mean for school leaders, and what are the implications for the field? This research study was aimed at understanding "how" elementary principals navigate competing demands to remain focused on instructional priorities. As stated in the findings section, principals in this study implemented the core components from effective principal and school reform research (Bryk et al., 2010; Chenowerth & Theokas, 2012; Dewitt, 2017; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wallace, 2012; Wagner et al., 2006). Themes also emerged through principal interviews and site visit observations for strategies participants implemented as the means to navigate demands and focus on instructional matters. Those themes and strategies can also be said to align with leadership qualities previously identified from the broader field of organizational leadership (Collins, 2001; Kotter 1996). The key finding in this study, however, may be more related to participant beliefs about the work. This finding ran somewhat counter to what I expected.

Principals in this study stated they believe all students can learn and achieve at high levels and provided compelling evidence that, for them, "all means all." In practice, it appears that beliefs about learning may serve as the "constant" they hold to or the lens they use to evaluate decisions in their schools. This belief implies a sense of self-efficacy

for these principals, and also represents beliefs about the efficacy of teachers on their team, and in turn the students. Together, these beliefs about learning appeared to "give a lift" to the separate components from the leadership frameworks, making them more powerful from the effects of the collective synergy.

Dewitt talks about this phenomenon in his recent book, *Collaborative Leadership: Six Influences that Matter Most* (2017). In it, he talks about the term, "Collective Teacher Efficacy," as one of six components that occur when school leaders build a supportive, collaborative professional culture that helps teachers believe they can meet goals. Hattie also weighed in on this component recently, identifying the effect size for “collective teacher efficacy” as the “new number one,” with an effect size of 1.57 in his most recent meta-analysis research (Hattie, 2017). Hattie defined collective teacher efficacy as the following:

> Collective Teacher Efficacy is the collective belief of teachers in their ability to positively affect students. With an effect size of d=1.57 Collective Teacher Efficacy is strongly correlated with student achievement. (Hattie, 2017)

Hattie goes on to explain this factor as more than teachers “feeling good” about themselves, but instead “collective teacher efficacy” occurs when teachers understand and believe that they “cause the learning” (Hattie, 2017). Indeed, this is what I observed to be conveyed by the principal participants I studied. In interview answers and daily actions, the principal participants from this study showed evidence of self-efficacy about their leadership, and perhaps more importantly, the belief that the "locus of causality" for learning lies within the school and teachers. This set of beliefs appeared to drive their

planning towards creating intentional forums for professional collaboration among teachers and cultivating a data-centered environment in their schools.

The recognition that school leaders need to build collaborative professional cultures among teachers is a central component found to cross models for effective school reform (Bryk et al., 2010; Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2014). This component is also emphasized in research for organizational leadership and extended regarding the need for the team to look at problems using a critical lens (Collins, 2001; Kotter, 1996). Dewitt and Hattie have extended this thinking and added on regarding the "sense of team" needed for real learning to happen for the adults (Dewitt, 2017; Hattie, 2017). Hattie makes the case that collective efficacy means "collaborative conversations based on evidence," versus the "feel good" conversations most common when teachers get together to share (Hattie, 2017). In this study, the participants' beliefs that "all students can learn at high levels," may provide the "grit" required to regularly confront what Collins calls "the brutal facts" in the data (Collins, 2001), and to lead teachers to be critical of their own results.

Theoretical Models

The theories examined in this study contribute to explaining the findings. First, *turbulence theory* applied to the findings from this study on several levels. Turbulence, depending on how it is managed, can be either a positive or negative force in a system (Gross, 2014). Principals in this study appeared, on the whole, to manage turbulence to their advantage.

All participants were observed to be impacted by some situations involving student discipline during the data collection period, and a number of them spoke about discipline being a negative force early in their tenure. At the time of this study; however, participants had used that turbulence early in their tenure to leverage change. They had organized around discipline, so they were no longer threatened by the events. Through the creation of organizational structures, they were able to create some stability and drive the level of turbulence much lower in their schools. Indeed, seven out of eight principals had leveraged other positions in the building, or committees to organize around discipline matters and responding to student needs. Several buildings had instructional or behavioral coaches in place to support teachers, and the general expectation in all of the buildings was that teachers take charge of their classroom management.

Principals still reported demands from state or central office mandates, indicating turbulence created by the positionality of principals inside of a larger system. Several principals had plans changed due to emergency meetings or calls about parent matters, additional symptoms of turbulence; however, again these situations did not appear to take them off course for very long. Rather, it was noted that this set of school leaders often leveraged the turbulence to their advantage towards creating a sense of urgency for change. In situations where some principals might "feel the heat" about wavering achievement data, or parent dissatisfaction, these principals used it to promote "creative tension," and motivate shifts in practice. This difference in response to turbulence may be about the stability they have achieved as experienced instructional leaders. It may also be

related to the belief systems participants appeared to hold about self-efficacy which is where *Attribution Theory* comes in.

Attribution Theory, a theory used to explain differences in achievement motivation, and a related component called *locus of control,* are useful in explaining these findings. The term attribution, as it is used in motivational studies, is defined as an individual's perceptions about causes of success or failure and is related to self-efficacy. It is known, for example, that those with higher levels of self-efficacy tend to set more challenging goals for themselves and are more persistent towards achieving those goals (Garner & Kaplan, 2016). They also tend to have an internal *locus of control*, believing that control over outcomes lies within the individual versus from outside forces. This theory is useful in explaining how principal beliefs in this study may influence their decisions and actions.

Principals in this study stated they believe they have the ability to control the priorities in their schools and can make a difference in student achievement, both indicators of self-efficacy. Participants also conveyed beliefs about the locus of causality for school outcomes to be with the teachers and indicated they believe schools are responsible for the success or lack of success for student learning. These beliefs, indicating an internal *locus of control*, appeared to influence principals to serve as levers of change, versus "fixers" that manage by taking on all the problems. It may also be the "secret ingredient" so to speak, that kept principals focused and moving their vision forward.

Dewitt and Hattie talk about "collective teacher efficacy," to describe the cumulative effects when teacher beliefs combine to lift the level of collaborative problem solving (Dewitt, 2017; Hattie, 2017). In a more recent article, Donohoo, Hattie, and Eells explain how school leaders can cultivate the conditions to support "collective teacher efficacy" by creating non-threatening, evidence-based teaching environments (2018). The findings in this study indicate that these principals worked to create this type of environment, one that supports "collective educator efficacy" and lifts the effectiveness of the entire team.

Figure 5.1 shows a graphic representation for this relationship idea. This graphic borrows from Victoria Bernhardt's use of multiple Venn diagrams to demonstrate interaction effects, and represents how principal believes may serve as an overlay to the effective leadership strategies observed (Bernhardt, 1998). The figure also considers the layers of complexity, and contextual nature of beliefs and perceptions of attribution, found in Garner and Kaplan's *Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity* (Garner & Kaplan, 2017). The theory proposed here regarding the positive achievement trend lines for these principals is that their actions follow their beliefs, which results in leadership that is in support of “collective teacher efficacy.”

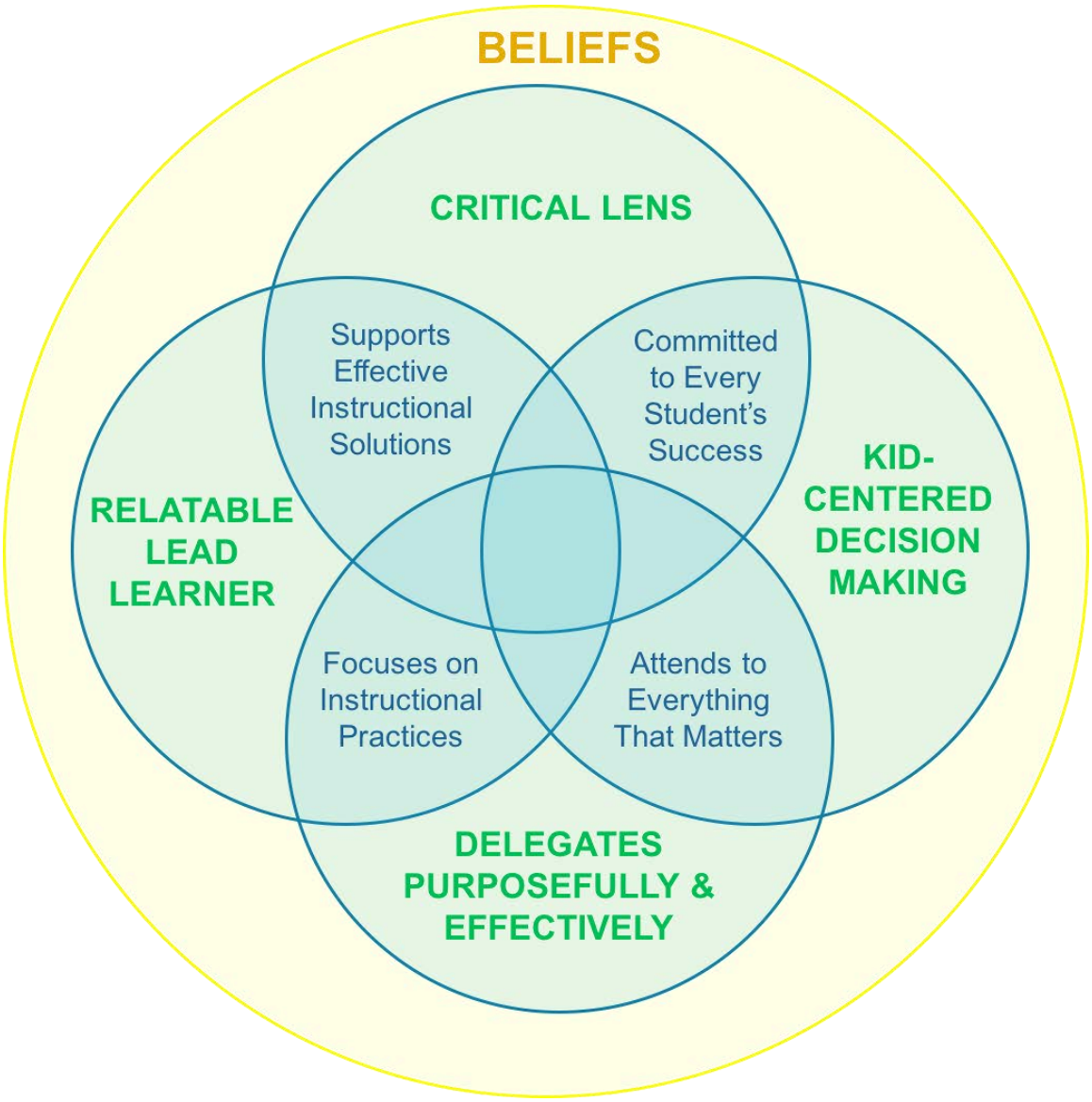

Figure 5.1 Theoretical Model for Actions Follow Beliefs

Implications for Further Research

What does all this mean for the research? First, the principal participants in the study were observed to align their practices with those found in school reform frameworks. This part of the findings, as stated previously, was expected. One inference in terms of these findings is that the framework for principal preparation (PILS) and professional development about the research, is working. Of course, this is a small set of principals, and given principal recommendations for this study were minimal; I believe the phenomenon of instructional leadership is not as widespread as is needed. Moreover, even if the finding suggests models like PIL Standards are working, the next question would be, do vision statements and data meetings alone really make a difference by themselves? I am not sure they do.

As a matter of fact, it is not difficult to find principals “talking the talk” about their vision, and using data to leverage engaging teachers in some type of "popcorn reform” (Darling-Hammond, 2010). That type of circular practice does not garner the real engagement and collaboration needed to leverage pedagogical shifts and improved achievement. The second category of "how to" strategies provide insights, but again, principals are often selected based on their relatability, and remaining strategies are embedded in the literature about organizational leadership generally.

The field of research about effective principals and school reform holds a degree of agreement about the need for principals to be instructional leaders (Bryk et al., 2010; Chenowerth & Theokas, 2012; Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Dewitt, 2017; Fullan, 2015;

Leithwood et al., 2004; McGee, 2003; Public Agenda, 2007; Wallace, 2012; Wagner et al., 2006). In terms of areas for additional research, one avenue for future consideration might be to understand better the degree of impact principal beliefs have on their leadership and their ability to cultivate collective teacher efficacy. This theme would be interesting to do as part of a more extensive, more empirically based study. A study that measures beliefs about student learning with a more extensive set of effective instructionally centered principals, for example, might give insight as to whether this is a widespread phenomenon.

Also, participants in this study referenced their own teaching, or school leader experiences, as having an impact on their beliefs about teacher efficacy, indicating that experiences can shift beliefs. It would also be informative to study whether principals can be intentionally exposed to experiences that would change their beliefs about teacher efficacy. State certification programs, for example, and ongoing professional development programs could include engaging candidates in site visits with exemplar principals to observe instructional leadership first hand, and measuring pre and post beliefs about learning. If so, this could inform the types of experiences needed in principal preparation programs.

A final recommendation would be to study whether there is a certain tipping point in principal self-efficacy that is needed to develop the “collective teacher efficacy” from Hattie’s research (2017). This information could assist districts in the selection process of identifying school leaders.

Implications for Principal Professional Development

The findings from this study have implications for principal preparation and professional development. As stated above, principals in this study cited personal experiences that influenced their beliefs about *teacher efficacy* and *locus of control,* indicating that it is possible for specific experiences to shape educator beliefs about student learning. If this is so, state and district leaders programming for principal preparation for new and "would be principals" could connect them with exemplary model principals. The scenario described above, for example, engaging new principals in site visits with exemplar principals, could provide experiences that might shape beliefs.

There is growing evidence in the field that professional development for principals can make a difference. A recently released study, by Rand Corporation, found that districts improved student achievement in schools by engaging principals in ongoing professional development (Gates, Baird, Master, & Chavez-Herrerias, 2019). The study, conducted in six large school districts, found that districts were able to impact the quality of school leadership and student achievement in schools, through the use of *Principal Pipelines* (Gates et al., 2019). Components of the pipeline model included developing leadership standards, improving preservice preparation, engaging in selective hiring and placement, and providing principal induction, evaluation, and ongoing professional development supports.

The Rand study, along with the ideas referenced earlier about "collective teacher efficacy," indicates there is hope in the field for improving school leadership and teacher

effectiveness. There are also road maps provided in DeWitt's model for collaborative leadership, and Donohoo et al.'s recommendations for principals to create evidence-based environments in which teachers can collaborate (DeWitt, 2017; Donohoo et al., 2018). Given the critical gap in achievement in our schools, particularly for those in underserved populations, we need to keep searching. The kids are depending on us to get it right!

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL- INITIAL INTERVIEW

Vaites: **Dissertation**
Title: **How do Elementary Principals Navigate Competing Demands to Focus on Instructional Priorities?**

Interview Protocol

Introduction: This interview is for the purpose of collecting data for case study research. Information drawn from this interview will be used to better understand principal decision making and factors that influence decision making and priority setting.

Statement of confidentiality: The content of this interview will be used for the purpose of this research project only and will not be shared with anyone. Identifying information about the interviewee will be kept confidential, including the name of participants, schools, and district work locations.

Background information: In order to provide a context for the questions that I will be asking about your principal experience, please share a brief history of your work in administration including different assignments that you have held and the type of assignment that was held (middle school, elementary, urban, rural, etc.). It is unnecessary to share the specific names of school or districts if you do not wish to do so.

Interview Questions:

1. How do you define instructional leadership as a building principal?

2. What would you say would be the priorities you set as most important in your work as an instructional leader?

3. What factors or experiences have caused you to see these priorities as most important to instructional leadership above others?

4. How do you navigate the competing demands to remain focused on priorities?

5. What power or influence does a principal have over priority setting?

6. Probe deeper for impact that might have come from the following: Why do you think you hold the beliefs you do about the principal's role?

   Experiences?
   a. Prior educator experiences before becoming a principal

   Education/learned?
   b. University preparation for the role of the school principal
   c. Mentoring experiences early in the principal assignment
   d. Professional development influences or ongoing learning while in the position, such as conferences, district training, etc.

   Other Influences?
   e. Outside influences such as state mandates, district directives, district initiatives, political forces, teacher union influences
   f. Other influences that have not been discussed

7. Can you give examples of how one would observe your priorities in action in terms of instructional leadership, or how do you take them from idea to action? What would teachers say?

8. How do instructional priorities affect the way you schedule time, meeting agendas, or other structural aspects of you day/week/month?

9. What influences/interferences most get in the way of your instructional leadership priorities?

10. Please share examples of ways you have handled the disruptions to lessen the impact on your priorities?

11. How have your priorities changed since becoming a principal?
    a. Effects of different building assignments
    b. Influences of different district leadership
    c. Changes that have grown out of experience in the position

12. Management of the school systems can be demanding. How do you manage school systems including staffing, schedules, parent engagement, discipline systems, and other expectations while holding to instructional priorities?

13. Is there anything else that I may not have covered which you think would be helpful in fully understanding your view of instructional leadership and how you have sought to implement your vision?

The interview type for this interview was semi-structured, therefore the content of the interview led to additional probing questions.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL- CLOSING INTERVIEW

Vaites: **Dissertation**
Title: **How do Elementary Principals Navigate Competing Demands to Focus on Instructional Priorities?**

Interview Protocol- Closing Interview

Introduction: This interview is towards the purpose of gaining further clarity, about the leadership behaviors observed, and thinking shared across interviews and site visits.

Statement of confidentiality: The content of this interview, like the others, will be used for the purpose of this research project only and will not be shared with anyone.

Background information: You were initially recommended as an instructionally centered principal, as defined by the PIL Standards, one who is able to prioritize around instruction. The focus of my study is to better understand how instructional leader principals manage to remain focused on instructional priorities, and how do they navigate the "stuff" that gets in the way for many principals.

Interview Questions:

1. The first question goes to your beliefs about teaching and learning. Please read over the following statements and select the one that most describes your beliefs about teaching and learning.

   How do you think you came to hold this belief about teaching and learning?

   How have your beliefs shaped your principalship?

2. Instructional leadership appears to serve as a framework in your approach to the principal role. What challenges have you encountered in setting the vision for your school and how do you navigate them?

3. How important is developing teachers in your view?

4. It seems like you "get a kick out of the kids," even in disciplinary situations. Can you talk about how you became kid centered?

5. You seem to be critical about the work and ask hard questions. How do you use questioning and decision making to move your school forward?

6. Everything matters. You seem to notice everything and deal with things right away. How important is it to attend to detail in this way? Talk about your decisions about what to delegate or take on yourself?

7. Operating as your shadow, I have observed a regular person. You come across as very genuine. Not a super hero. How important is this aspect of your leadership?

8. Have I captured the essence of how you navigate the competing demands to remain focused on priorities? Have I missed any big ideas or smaller nuances in your approach?

APPENDIX C

CLOSING INTERVIEW TEMPLATE: QUESTION #1

What do we believe?

1. We Believe All Kids Can Learn… We believe that all students can learn, but the extent of their learning is determined by their innate ability or aptitude. This aptitude is relatively fixed and, as teachers, we have little influence over the extent of student learning. It is our job to create multiple programs or tracks that address the different abilities of students and then guide students to the appropriate program. This ensures that students have access to the proper curriculum and an optimum opportunity to master material appropriate to their ability.	**2. We Believe All Kids Can Learn…** We believe that all students can learn if they elect to put forth the necessary effort. It is our job to provide all students with this opportunity to learn, and we fulfill our responsibility when we try to present lessons that are both clear and engaging. In the final analysis, however, while it is our job to teach, it is the student's job to learn. We should invite students to learn, but honor their decision if they elect not to do so.
3. We Believe All Kids Can Learn… We believe that all students can learn and that it is our responsibility to help each student demonstrate growth as a result of his or her experience with us. The extent of the growth will be determined by a combination of the student's innate ability and effort. It is our job to encourage all students to learn as much as possible, but the extent of their learning is dependent on factors over which we have little control.	**4. We Believe All Kids Can Learn…** We believe that all students can and must learn at relatively high levels of achievement. It is our job to create an environment in our classrooms that results in this high level of performance. We are confident that with our support and help, students can master challenging academic material, and we expect them to do so. We are prepared to work collaboratively with colleagues, students, and parents to achieve this shared educational purpose.

Source: DuFour, R. (1997). Make the Words of Mission Statements Come to Life. *Journal of Staff Development*. *(Summer). (18)3.*

APPENDIX D

DISSERTATION

DISSERTATION CASE STUDIES- DATA COLLECTION SCHEDULE

School	Initial Interview	Calendar Collection	Site Visit I	Site Visit II	Site Visit III	Site Visit IV	Closing Interview
Robinson, Owen Belmont Elementary	February 1, 2018	Completed	February 21	March 20	April 5	June 5	June 5th 8:00 AM
Breslin, Stephen Patterson Elementary	January 29, 2018	Completed	February 20	March 19	April 5	May 14	June 18th 3:00 PM
Reynolds, Rebecca McMillan School	March 9, 2018	Completed	March 9	April 2	April 26	May 17	June 5th 3:30 PM
Adams, Wendy Franklyn Elementary	February 14, 2018	Completed	February 22	April 3	April 25	May 8	June 21st 3:30 PM
Edwards, Samuel Stanton Elementary	February 2, 2018	Completed	February 21	April 4	May 21	May 30	May 30th 11:00 AM
Griffin, Harold Lexington Elementary	January 31, 2018	Completed	February 20	March 5	April 6	June 11	June 12th 9:00 AM
Sanchez, Severo Tyler Elementary School	January 30, 2018	Completed	February 19	April 4	April 26	May 15	June 6th 3:30 PM
Martinez, Maria Martin Luther King School	February 5, 2018	Completed	February 23	March 26	May 11	May 11	June 8th 11:30 AM

Initial Interviews Completed: 8/8

Site Visits Completed 32/32

Closing Interviews Completed 8/8

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW DATA BY THEME

Themes and Subthemes	Interview Data
Principals Defining Instructional Leadership	Wendy, "I think that instructional leadership, for me, is helping to develop ... what are critical needs, and how do we get there? … Then constantly assessing what the needs of the staff and the students are based on our data; our walkthroughs. (W. Adams, personal communication, February 14, 2018)." Stephen, "Instructional leadership for me is having a vision. It means I'm present during instruction that it's not uncommon for me to be in classrooms, that it's not uncommon for me to be engaging teachers in conversation about what it is that I saw in their classroom (S. Breslin, personal communication, January, 2018)." Samuel, "You can't use the excuse that, well, they come from poverty, or they are in an inner city school, or they don't get support at home or you know, all those excuses; because one thing that we know research says is schools grow because of solid instructional leadership (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 2, 2018)." Harold, "We can't talk the talk. You've got to demonstrate it by your action. That means you have to work harder than the staff. You have to be visible. You have to follow through… (H. Griffin, personal communication, January 31, 2018)." Maria, "…that I have a strong team. I do believe that I have to be the leader, but I have to have a team that's going to support in the vision (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018)." Rebecca, "It's making yourself visible, it's building trust, it is being in the classroom everyday as much as possible (R. Reynolds, personal communication, March 9, 2018)." Owen, "I'm going to set high standards for the people around me, and I'm going to raise the standards (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 1, 2018)." Severo, "You need to lead by example (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018)."
Instructional Leadership Components	**Interview Data**
Vision Setting	Wendy, "To be a good leader, I think you have to be organized, and have a vision, and you have to be a good communicator… (W. Adams, personal communication, June 21, 2018)." Stephen described setting a vision for his school as if it were obvious, "It's just guiding people the way you want to be guided…developing a vision and a mission, and developing goals and implementing them… (S. Breslin, personal communication, January 29, 2018)." Samuel, "I just focus on the goals…. I focus on the goals and I focus on the kids. All the other stuff, I'm not wasting my energy on (S. Edwards, personal communication, May 30, 2018). Harold, "Everything is about helping instruction get stronger (H, Griffin, Personal communication, January 31, 2018)." Maria, "I have to have a team that's going to support the vision and mission of the school (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018)." Owens, "I can say from the get go, I had two really guiding principles that I committed to early on … when things get complicated, you go back to these two things. One is, all decisions are made in the best interest of students, and two is teachers and staff will have what they need to do their jobs (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 1, 2018)." Severo, "Instructional leadership, I think communication, I think you say what you're going to do and do what you said (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018)."

Change Agent	Samuel, "What I started to do as an instructional leaders was to provide teachers with instructional expectations…. I want to see the level of instruction increase and I want to see a change in the students (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 2, 2018)." Harold, "We have to have a sense of urgency. We don't have years (H. Griffin, personal communication, June 12, 2018)." Sanchez conveyed the importance of teacher accountability for achievement stating, "You also need to have expectations, and you also need to hold them accountable, but there's a way to do it that they're not living in fear…. Living in fear is a problem (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018)." Maria, "I know there are times I can be unreasonable, but I think we need to strive for excellency (M. Martinez, personal communication, June 8, 2018)." Owen, "I'm going to set high standards for the people around me, and I'm going to raise the standards (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 21, 2018)."
Lead Learner	Stephen captured the essence of a lead learner with this statement, "I don't think that instructional leadership means that you have to be the smartest and best teacher in the room, because I'm most certainly not. But instead it means that you know how to tap into people who are (S. Breslin, personal communication, January 29, 2018)." Samuel, "If we are a team, we have plays and we have to execute our plays to be successful… (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 21, 2018)." Harold, on inclusive leadership, "How do you solicit advice and support, and what do you do with that advice when you get it? Is it just talk or do you really take the advice that people give you (H. Griffin, personal communication, January 31, 2018)?" Maria expressed a similar view about leveraging the strengths of others, "There are areas where academically I'm stronger, and then there are areas where the early literacy specialist is stronger (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018)." Rebecca spoke about the importance of building trusting relationships, and elaborated about the need to earn teacher respect as an instructional leader, "Its building trust… and really having the teachers respect you for your knowledge so that you can have that collaborative relationship and then be working together (R. Reynolds, personal communication, March 9, 2018)." Severo, "Instructional leadership has a lot to do with teamwork (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018).
Management in Support of Learning	Wendy, "You have to have a plan for the instructional leadership component, or it doesn't happen (W. Adams, personal communication, February 14, 2018)." Stephen echoed the need to plan strategically, "I gave every teacher a picture frame last year and had them each set a goal…. Mine says, "Every class, every week," which is very ambitious (S. Breslin, personal communication, January 29, 2018)." Samual stated, "We need to be visible (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 2, 2018)". Harold, "My summer is spent… setting up every process…. Then we run the first faculty meeting and the first staff development, and then we run our plan for the opening of school. If those things go well, the school is ready to run for the rest of the year. Everybody knows their roles…. This school can run itself. It allows me then to fine tune things that maybe don't work. I'm the fine tuner (H. Griffin, personal communication, January 31, 2018). Maria, "We have on our leadership team an early literacy specialist, a school-based teacher leader, a math teacher leader, ESOL teacher, our special education liaison… and we have our dean of students and our counselor (Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018)." Rebecca explained her strategy for ensuring classroom visits take priority, "You have to carve out time every day like it's an appointment on your calendar. I'm going to be in the classrooms from this time to this time (R. Reynolds, personal communication, March 9, 2018)." Owen, "I would work very, very hard to put these systems in place so that it would free me up to do other things. I found there are plenty of ways to use technology to try to free up your time so that you're not inundated with looking through all these emails. I've spent a lot of time figuring out how I could remove the barrier so people could do their jobs and give them what they need (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 1, 2018)." Severo: "I don't procrastinate, I never procrastinate (Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018)."

Developing Professional Capacity	Interview Data
Professional Development as Building Capacity	Wendy, "How we can have proficient readers by third grade? We're really working through what does explicit phonics instruction look like in K-2 (W, Adams, personal communication, February 14, 2018)?" Samuel, "We do PLC meetings every Wednesday. They originally started just getting teachers talking. Now we are talking about curriculum, so now we need to talk about data and assessment. We talk about the curriculum, now what level of rigor is involved in your instruction (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 2, 2018)." Owen, "They had to do peer visits every month, and it didn't go over so well to start with, but once they started doing it, it ended up being phenomenal. They weren't allowed to see the same person twice. You had to see three things that you liked, two things you have questions about, one thing that you plan on taking back to your room (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 1, 2018). Maria, "The leadership team helps in implementing the strategies by going into the classrooms and providing feedback to teachers. Our professional development is aligned to the goals, and… teachers' individual needs (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018)." Severo, "I try to meet with each grade level every month, you know… just so that they can talk to me and tell me what's going on in their classroom (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018)."
Knowledgeable of Instructional Pedagogy	Stephen, "I also have to know good instruction. And, that comes about by, I think, remaining as current as possible (S. Breslin, personal communication, January 29, 2018)." Harold, "You have to be visible…. I do at least two formal observations a week… probably a minimum of 10 walk-throughs a week… (H. Griffin, personal communication, January 31, 2018)." Rebecca, "It's being in the classroom everyday as much as possible (Reynolds, personal communication, February 8, 2018)." Samuel, "You need to assess how your kids are doing… as they read…. He's good with first sound fluency, but he struggles with blending those letters together… (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 2, 2018). Maria, "We are constantly in the classrooms supporting teachers. I'm in classrooms every day (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018)."
Data Driven	Wendy, "Constantly assessing what the needs of the staff and the students are based on our data… our walkthroughs (W. Adams, personal communication, February 14, 2018)." Samuel, "I… tell the teachers if a kid is in school for one whole year, the minimum amount of growth you should expect to see in them is a year. It's reasonable to say if your kids have been in school a half year, they should reflect half a year of growth (S. Edwards, personal communication, April 4, personal communication, February 2, 2018)." Harold, "Where can I go to see the best schools based on federal programs, Title I data (H. Griffin, personal communication, June 12, 2018)?" Maria, "I'm in classrooms every day, every day. I make sure that I visit every single room… I'm always here, I participate in all the professional development sessions, in all of the weekly PLCs, I'm all over the place…we meet weekly with teachers, and we constantly focus on data… in order to tell us if our kids are making progress and if our teaching is effective (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018)." Owen, "I sit down with my reading intervention team and we map out data meetings (O. Robinson, personal communication, June 5, 2018)." Severo, "You have to strategize as to how to use that data. I increased my scores pretty good this past year (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018).

Personalized Learning for Student	**Interview Data**
Safe Welcoming Climate	Wendy: "Our third goal is around culture and climate, and having a safe and nurturing environment (W. Adams, personal communication, February 14, 2018)." Rebecca: "My number one priority is the safety of all children (R. Reynolds, personal communication, March 9, 2018)." Severo: "Everyone I spoke to just talked about… how school climate was so bad…. I decided what I was going to do here first was to improve the school climate. (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018)." Harold, "When teachers do root causes, they never look at themselves so they'll look at the parent involvement. They'll look at transiency. They'll look at discipline. They'll look at lack of parents' support. Those are all the things that teachings threw on the table. I then tackle those knowing full well that many of the issues were instructional but I had to get my staff to buy into what I wanted to do… (H. Griffin, personal communication, March 5, 2018)."
Student Centered Instruction with a Growth Mindset	Wendy, "We lead the data chats. We lead grade level meetings. We go to instructional collaborative planning meetings. The staff want the students to be successful in that (W. Adams, personal communication, February 14, 2018)." Stephen, "I would identify something that I saw in classrooms that I think is positive and I would ask teachers to run a 30 minute professional development session for their colleagues that tied into the direction we were going (S. Breslin, personal communication, February 20, 2018)." Samuel described this scene from a classroom where students couldn't figure out the language of the problem to be solved, "Students were doing a problem.... It said "unbundle" a 10, and the students couldn't figure it out. I said, do you know what that word means? … "Unbundle" means "to take apart." If you take a "10" apart, what do you do? Then they were able to proceed and get the problem. It's important to determine why kids aren't able to succeed (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 2, 2018)." Maria, "We have to meet the kids' needs wherever they are…. We have to make sure that they're making progress. It is not acceptable for them to start at, let's just say, a level I on a DRA level, and two months later they're still sitting at a level I, there's something wrong there…. Every six to seven weeks, we are revisiting… and making adjustments (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018). Severo, "I set up a school climate committee, and they meet, they come up with activities, what they're going to do. We love it, the stuff that they come up with, we love it and people laugh and we have a great time here, and the kids love it (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018)."
Relationships Matter	Samuel, who was most outspoken about standing up for the students, underlined the importance of looking out for the teachers, "One thing you do have to also do is, make sure your teachers and okay. Sometimes teachers go through some things, and struggle, and…. you have to make sure that they are okay (S. Edwards, personal communication, May 30, 2018)." Harold explained the importance of principals building supportive relationships with teachers, "If we make a commitment to you… I'm gonna do everything I can and give you coaching and all the support to help you become a good urban educator (H. Griffin, personal communication, January 31, 2018)." Rebecca is endlessly walking the halls saying, "Hey there," and giving fist bumps, stated principals need to know the kids, "So, it's making yourself visible, it's building trust, it is being in classrooms everyday as much as possible, talking with the students (R. Reynolds, personal communication, March 9, 2018)." Owen described the importance of teacher to student connections, "I asked them, "Who was an influential person in your life and why?" … "It was a coach." … "But why?" … "Well, this person believed in me…" Once teachers identified an experience with an influential adult from their own childhood, he challenged them: "Today … I want you to think about that five times…. I want you to think about that person and the why. The why is so much more important… (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 1, 2018)." Severo also referenced the critical nature of having trusting relationships with teachers: "Be visible, be approachable… I think building relationships and building trust is important (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018)."

Engaging the Community	Interview Data
	Wendy, "Every homeroom does a community meeting every day, and then parent engagement is under that goal (W. Adams, personal communication, February 14, 2018)." Stephen, "I spent endless hours investing our PTA, being present getting to know people because… if there is ever an issue, they are attacking the issue and not the person (S. Breslin, personal communication, January 29, 2018)." Harold, "A lot of things I do here is what I've learned from parents. I study all of our parents' surveys, and we do every year. I look at what the rating is high in, what they don't rate as high in. We're very lucky! They rate us high in everything. We're in the business of parents. The parents are our consumers (H. Griffin, personal communication, January 31, 2018)." Maria "We are fortunate… to have support staff that had been president of the Home and School Association. She lives in the neighborhood, she's still working here, and she has that connection with the parents… bringing in parents every month.... She averages about 25 to 30 parents a month, which is not typical in the inner city. She's been able to get…volunteers. We've actually managed to hire some of the parents…, opening up those positions has also brought more parents onboard with our initiatives (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018)."

How They Navigate the Demands	Interview Data
Delegate Purposefully	Wendy explained how she delegates initiatives, "There's our leadership team, and a team leader at every grade… to really keep the ball rolling. We have staff that'll lead different initiatives (W. Adams, personal communication, April 25, 2018)." Stephen described a strategy for being efficient about messages, "My phone will never go to voicemail, because I end up spending 20 minutes getting to the part I needed to call back…. It goes directly to my secretary who, nine times out of 10, can handle the call anyway." In the context of less-urgent discipline referrals, Stephen delegates the responsibility to teachers: "I've found if I give people a little bit of time, they oftentimes will find the right answer on their own… If a teacher would email me with something a student did, I would respond with how "they" should address it. You do that enough times, and they realize that you're not just going to take all of their problems and solve them (S. Breslin, personal communication, June 18, 2018)." Harold elaborated about the importance of importance of sharing the load by delegating responsibilities, "By yourself, you can't do a good job at anything. I'm busy just in all the things instructionally…. If I had to spend my day dealing with discipline? … I get involved with some of it.... If I see something I don't like, I'll call the team together…. But I have so many pairs of eyes out there making sure…how we walk through the halls, how they come in, how are the manners… Then you get things done... That's wonderful because it's theirs…I trust them (H. Griffin, personal communication, February 31, 2018)." Maria believes her team most effective, "I believe having a strong team, and folks that their background is in the different areas that we're focusing on, is what makes us stronger (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018)." Owen relies on office staff and his head custodian for some tasks, "I have a very organized secretary who really keeps things flowing. She knows what I think… expectations across the building… She's pretty good at filtering out things that shouldn't come to me or answering questions that I shouldn't be inundated with (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 1, 2018)." Severo said it best, "I think instructional leadership has a lot to do with teamwork. I'm not just sitting here telling people what to do, I want to be part of the team (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018)."

Critical Questioning	Interview Data
	Wendy was critical about her own abilities, "How do you manage the competing demands? Wendy answered, "Sometimes I think not well… When things get in the way, we are doing walkthroughs that are less meaningful. You're in a room for a couple minutes, where you would … stay and really give meaningful feedback (W. Adams, personal communication, February 14, 2018)." Stephen, "If you say "I'm not going to implement those things," and you've been asked to do that, you're going to find yourself receiving questions about why (S. Breslin, personal communication, May 14, 2018)." Samuel shared questioning a teacher, "Tell me who your highest-performing kid is… and what does that mean for your instruction? The teacher … picked out some of her highest-performing kids, but she didn't pick out her highest … because he is a behavior problem…. I said, "Steve is the highest, had the highest score in reading in your class…. he gets in trouble a lot, but he's your highest performing reader in your class. What does that mean for your instructions (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 2, 2018)?" Harold, "If I'm an instructional leader, I'm looking at my data. If my data is saying what the district program isn't good, it doesn't make any sense to teach just because it's in a teacher's edition (H. Griffin, personal communication, January 31, 2018)." Maria, "We have to make sure that we meet the kids' needs wherever they are at when they come into our classrooms, into our school, and we have to make sure that they're making progress." It is not acceptable for them to start at, let's just say, a level I on a DRA level, and two months later they're still sitting at a level I, there's something wrong there (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 2018)."

Authentic Regular People	Interview Data
	Wendy, "We're very collaborative. It's definitely not like I am the expert on things. We're learning with the staff (W. Adams, personal communication, February 14, 2018)." Stephen, I don't think that instructional leadership means you have to be the smartest and the best teacher in the room because I'm most certainly not. But instead means that you know how to tap into the people who are (S. Breslin, personal communication, January 29, 2018)." Samuel, "Teachers have to understand, I'm a real person and I'm in the struggle with them. It's not the Wizard of Oz, behind the curtain... the work is in the classrooms and the only way I'm going to know what the work is, is if I'm there with you (S. Edwards, personal communication, May 30, 2018)." Maria, "My background was middle years English, so I make sure that I have the voice of the early literacy specialist and the teacher leader that taught in those lower grades in order to support teachers (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018)." Owen, "If I were to walk into a first grade teacher's classroom and only talk about the X's and O's of teaching, I think that they would run circles around me because I've never taught first grade (O. Robinson, personal communication, March 20, 2018)." Rebecca, "I usually ask what they think their strengths are, I already have something in mind, and then what would they like to work on (R. Reynolds, personal communication, April 26, 2018)." Severo, "I told the teachers you let me know when you want me to come teach. I'll come in. I'll teach. You can observe me (S. Sanchez, personal communication, June 8, 2018)."

Kid Centered Decision Making	Interview Data
	Stephen: "They know I'm not an alarmist when it comes to student behavior… that I don't throw the book at kids so to speak (S. Breslin, personal communication, March 19, 2018)." Stephen, "Is this a kid problem or an adult problem? If it's an adult problem… let's come back around to solve it after we come to the solution for kids (S. Breslin, personal communication, May 14, 2018)." Samuel, "One of the most important classes people forget about… is psychology, because if you understand how kids develop, how kids think, how kids behave ... You can't get upset when a kindergartner or first grader has a temper tantrum, because they're in that developmental stage… that's what they do (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 2, 2018). Samuel, "You can't get upset with a kid for being a kid (S. Edwards, personal communication, February 21, 2018)." Samuel, "You have to learn to temper justice with mercy…. Kids are funny, and if you are that intent on getting a kid in trouble maybe you shouldn't be in education (S. Edwards, personal communication, May 30, 2018)." Harold, "I understand kids a lot more now. And I can relate… because I didn't like school. And I know how their stomach is churning inside… So I have to laugh behind my desk, because I should probably be tough on them… and somehow I'm going to find a way to maybe get them off the hook (H. Griffin, personal communication, June 12, 2018)." Maria, "I think we've actually had students that have slipped through the cracks. In all the years that I've been here, we've had…conversations about student achievement…and I've been shocked when I'm given the data and the kids haven't made any progress…They have to make progress. It doesn't matter what we have to do (M. Martinez, personal communication, May 2018)." Rebecca, "I would go in the classrooms with… writing samples and be like, "Oh my gosh, this writing since the beginning of the year, it's improved so much, I'm so proud of you...." Well, the kids starting taping the Post-Its inside the desk. So I said… give me three per week so… I can communicate with all the kids (R. Reynolds, personal communication, April 2, 2018). Owen, "I want them to look back on the experience that they've had with me… and think something like "that guy didn't give up on me… All decisions are made in the best interest of students… (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 1, 2018)." Severo, "I love working with kids…. I can't wait for the day that one of my kids comes… and says, Mr. Sanchez, do you remember me? … I'm successful…. I can't wait for that day. Especially… one of my kids who struggled (S. Sanchez, personal communication, April, 2, 2018).

Principal's Beliefs	Interview Data
Control Over School Priorities	Wendy, "I think we have a lot of control over instructional priorities. I think we have a lot of control over instructional priority. There are parameters… as far as SLO's and observations. We're required to do 15 walkthroughs…. But we have a lot of control over what our schedule looks like, how do we use our human capital, … I think we have pretty good control over instructional priority (W. Adams, personal communication, February 14, 2018). Maria, who leads a school in a very large urban district, "I think… based on our data, we have the flexibility to determine our goals. We can determine our academic, our climate, and our parental involvement goals. We have flexibility in that area (M. Martinez, personal communication, February 5, 2018)." Stephen, the principal in this sample with the largest building, explained how the district gave him a great deal of power to make decisions, "I'm often taken down by time… but the longer I've been in this position… I've found that if I give people a little bit of time, they oftentimes will find the right answer on their own (S. Breslin, personal communication, January 29, 2018)." Owen shared his strategy for making sure the team stays focused, "I sit down with my intervention team and… we're pretty good at trying to think more long terms…. we literally embedded in our calendar, dates so that it doesn't become just "something that you talk about" (O. Robinson, personal communication, February 1, 2018)." Owen, "In the faculty meeting I asked who was an influential person on your life and why? "Well, this person believed in me." Good! Today, your mission for the day, I want you to think about that…I want you to think about that person and the why. The why…it is so much more important (Robinson, personal communication, April 5, 2018)." Severo, "I mean, I think we do have most of the power (S. Sanchez, personal communication, January 30, 2018)."

Believe All Kids Can Learn	Interview Data
	Wendy, "I'm gonna say number **four**, but I would say that it's our job to help students have a growth mind set. And that struggle can be productive and failing doesn't mean stopping. Like you learn and then try again, so that's what I think (W. Adams, personal communication, June 21, 2018)." Stephen, "**Four**… I don't know that I always had it… I think that as I grew… that became more evident to me, that I can expect all of my students to achieve at a relatively high level it (S. Breslin, personal communication, June 18, 2018)." Samuel, "I would say **four** at this point. It's the basis of how a teacher becomes an instructional leader in their classroom…and begins to focus more on student learning instead of teaching…(S. Edwards, personal communication, May 30, 2018)." Harold, "**Four**. You know, that all kids can learn. They maybe learn at different rates, but… they can learn (H. Griffin, personal comment, June 12, 2018)." Maria, "**Four**. I think that for me, it's based on experiences I've had in my years here…. I have seen students… with a disability… making progress apart from that fact…. (M. Martinez, personal communication, June 8, 2018)." Rebecca, "Probably **four**…there's a sentence in each that I like (R. Reynolds, personal communication, June 5, 2018)." Owen, "I don't know that there's one…This one is the majority…with the exception of extended learning…I like the idea of growth…encourage and effort…I have a problem with "honor their decision that they do not." That would not be okay. It sounds like you are just doing the minimum… little to no control?…it almost lays the foundation for an excuse…I agreed with the language from answer number **four** about the responsibility for teachers to create the environment where students can meet high expectations (O. Robinson, personal communication, June 5, 2018)." Severo, "So I pick **four.** I've experienced teachers who say you know, Johnny, he can't do it, right? But then Johnny goes to another teacher and now he's doing what teacher "A" said he couldn't do (S. Sanchez, personal communication, June 8, 2018)."

Influences Related to Beliefs	Interview Data
	Wendy, “So when I was like… let's learn how to use a tool for this… and we started doing basic algebra… that was like a moment for me… 'cause then I had students who were going back to their regular education class and were helping the students in their class and I was like, "Oh man, like we just have to decide what's really the most important thing” (W. Adams, personal communication, June 21, 2018).” Stephen, “I expect them to all go into their classroom expecting all of their students to learn and achieve, I expect them to do whatever it takes, and I recognize that differentiating your instruction is hard, but I don't really care that it's hard, because that's what we do (S. Breslin, personal communication, June 18, 2018).” Harold, “So when I became principal, I became privy to the data…. I formed it right away, that it's the teacher that matters. It's not the kids. It's the teachers. That's what makes a difference…That's probably the big difference between what I do… my belief system in how kids learn, that all kids can learn, because it's what we do. It's not just the teachers, but it's what I do. What kind of support do I provide the teachers (H. Griffin, personal communication, June 12, 2018)?”

APPENDIX F

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background Problem

Decades of school reform initiatives and research studying the problem of low student achievement in schools have failed to produce sustained improvements (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Wagner et al., 2006). Research shows that this problem is less about identifying effective models and more about failing to take evidence-based solutions to scale (Calkins et al., 2007). This pervasive problem requires attention if we are to improves schools for students, particularly in communities with the most significant degree of need.

A review of the literature makes a case for the importance of instructional leadership in schools (Leithwood et al., 2004). School reform research indicates a common set of qualities needed for school leaders (Dewitt, 2017; Fullan, 2010; Hattie, 2015; Wallace Foundation, 2012). Models describe qualities such as communicating a vision, using data to inform instruction, developing a culture of continuous learning for adults, and leveraging core resources in support of instructional priorities (Bryk et al., 2010; Elmore, 2000; Wagner et al., 2006). While common descriptors define instructional leadership in the field, little is written about how effective principals actually achieve the instructional leadership ideal.

Purpose of the Study

There are many challenges offered as to why principals struggle to focus on instructional priorities, but some succeed. The purpose of this study was to better

understand how instructionally centered principals navigate competing demands to remain focused on instructional priorities. By studying the practices of principals known to be instructional leaders, this study sought to identify patterns, or themes, for how they maintain their focus towards improving instruction in their schools.

Research Question

The overarching question for this study was the following: How do effective elementary principals in high-poverty schools navigate the competing demands to focus on instructional priorities?

Related sub-questions included:

- How do principals understand and define instructional leadership?
- How do principals enact their vision of effective instructional leadership?
- How do principals prioritize their time in response to competing demands?
- What internal beliefs affect principals as they make decisions about priorities?
- What principal preparation strategies influenced priority setting for instructional leadership or managing for instructional priorities?

Methods

Qualitative methods were used to study eight instructionally-centered principals to identify "how" they navigate competing demands to focus on instructional priorities. Through analyzing interview responses and observation data from site visits, grounded theory methods were used to search for patterns and themes. Themes did emerge regarding decision-making and action-taking for principal participants.

Major Findings

Findings from the cross-case analysis identified three major themes. First, principal participants showed they implement instructional leadership practices aligned with the research (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2006). Participants communicated a vision and focused on the instruction. They managed available resources in support of instructional priorities and cultivated a learning community among teachers. The focus for these principals was to drive instructional change for students.

Second, principals implemented strategies from the field of Organizational Leadership (Collins, 2001; Kotter, 1996). Strategies observed included establishing leadership teams and delegated much of the non-instructional works; serving as "relatable" lead learners who engage the strengths of team members; asking hard questions and being critical when examining data; and being principled, kid-centered decision makers. The organizational strategies observed allowed principals to better focus on priorities.

Most compelling in the themes that emerged; however, was related to principals' beliefs. Using a scale measuring belief about student learning, eight out of eight principals indicated they believe **all** students "can and must learn at high levels," and seven out of eight conveyed that the "locus of causality" for ensuring learning occurs belongs with schools and teachers (DuFour, 1997). This belief about learning went

beyond the typical “vision statement found on the website," and extended to beliefs about school, and teacher efficacy.

Implications for the Field

This study was aimed at understanding “how” elementary principals navigate competing demands to remain focused on instructional priorities. As stated, principals implemented components of instructional leadership in their schools (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wallace, 2012; Wagner et al., 2006). Themes also emerged regarding strategies to navigating competing demands. Those strategies aligned with leadership tenets from the field of organizational leadership (Collins, 2001; Kotter 1996). The key finding in this study; however, may be about participant beliefs about learning.

A recent meta-analysis of education effect sizes found “collective teacher efficacy” to be the “new number one” in the educational research, with an effect size of 1.57 (Hattie, 2017). The term describes the collective effects that occur when teachers, operating as a professional team, believe they can “positively affect student achievement” (DeWitt, 2017; Hattie 2018). This phenomenon may describe what was observed in this study and conveyed by principals. Principals from this study showed evidence of self-efficacy, and more importantly, they described the belief that "locus of causality" for learning lies within the school and teachers. Together, these beliefs about learning and moves to deliberately cultivate learning communities among teachers appeared to "give

lift" to the separate components from the leadership frameworks, making them more powerful from the effects of collective synergy.

Recognition that principals need to build collaborative professional cultures is a central component for effective school reform (Bryk et al., 2010; Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2014). This component is also emphasized in frameworks for organizational leadership (Collins, 2001; Kotter, 1996). Dewitt and Hattie have extended this thinking and added on regarding the "sense of team" needed for real learning to happen for the adults (Dewitt, 2017; Hattie, 2017). In this study, participants' beliefs that "all students can learn at high levels," may lead them to support the development of "collective teacher efficacy," which may be the "secret ingredient" that makes them effective.

Limitations of this study prevent generalization of the findings to the extended community; therefore, the results can only be said to apply to this bounded set of principal participants. Additional empirically-based research would be needed to support generalizing these findings. The idea that principals' beliefs about learning may impact collective teacher efficacy is a compelling one; however, and one that deserves to be studied. If it were found to be true, and principals' beliefs about learning are critical to developing teacher efficacy, this understanding could influence principal preparation practices. Principals from this study indicated their beliefs came from experiences. While further research is necessary, this information might influence principal preparation programming towards leveraging the improvement we need in our schools at scale.