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Elementary Principal and Assistant Principal Instructional Leadership Practices Influencing Student Literacy

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

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EdS, Tennessee Technological University, 2009

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

The problem of a rural school district's declining reading scores for students in Grades 3 through 8 was a significant concern because effective reading skills are of paramount importance to student success in school and life. Evidence suggests that principal instructional leadership practices influence student achievement; therefore, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to examine the district's elementary principals' and assistant principals' instructional leadership practices that influenced student literacy. Murphy's model of instructional leadership served as the conceptual framework. The research question for this study addressed how these elementary administrators implemented instructional leadership practices at their schools to influence student literacy. Eleven elementary principals and assistant principals from this rural school district in the southern United States were interviewed using semistructured, predetermined questions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, followed by provisional and open pattern coding with thematic analysis. Three major themes arose from the data analysis: (a) literacy-focused instructional leadership practices supporting teachers, (b) literacy-focused instructional leadership practices to support student literacy, and (c) instructional leadership practices supporting literacy schoolwide. This study may foster positive social change by positively influencing student literacy and improving the reading skills and abilities of the students within the school district as principals and assistant principals evaluate the instructional leadership practices they have employed or are considering for future use in their schools.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to the most important people in my life.

First, this study is dedicated to my best friend and husband, Bo, as well as to our two wonderful sons, Garrett and Will, for the steady stream of support you have provided along the way. Your love and constant encouragement were exactly what I needed, and it is my hope my perseverance during this time will teach our boys that a person can accomplish great things with hard work and determination.

Further, I dedicate this study to my mom and dad, Donna and Larry England, who instilled in me a strong work ethic and also taught me the value of education. I hope I have made you proud. I also dedicate this to my younger brother, Bryan, the first doctor in our family. Good things come to those who wait.

Additionally, this study is dedicated to my extended family and friends for your understanding, prayers, and well wishes. Please know I tried my best to balance my time between family, my job, my friends, and my education, and I appreciate every kind word and thought you sent my way throughout this journey.

Finally, I give honor to God for the mental and physical strength to successfully complete this educational marathon. “For I know the plans I have for you.,” declares the Lord. “Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

--NIV: Jeremiah 29:11

Acknowledgments

A special thank you to my committee members, Dr. Robert Flanders and Dr. Salina Shrofel. You have led me through this extensive process with patience and grace. I appreciate your thorough feedback, encouragement, expertise, and never ending support. Without your professional assistance, this work would not have been possible.

My heartfelt thanks go out to my husband and sons, mom and dad, and extended family and friends—I love you all so very much. Thank you also to my little dog, Pepper, who has been my study partner throughout this journey. Soon he will become an honorary doctor too—my sweet sidekick, Dr. Pepper.

I wish to thank the school leaders who volunteered to participate in this study. The examples you provided of the work you do each day were inspiring. It was evident that the ultimate goal of every principal was to help the children they serve each day.

Finally, thank you to Delta Kappa Gamma Sorority International, a professional organization of which I have been a member for many years. Your assistance with my doctoral degree in the form of local, state, and international scholarships was invaluable. I hope to continue to be a leader in education and appreciate the support offered from my DKG sisters.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The complex role of the school principal has been the focus of considerable research for almost four decades. Over time, school leaders have transitioned from the managerial role of fiscal budgeting, student discipline, and managing staff to a role incorporating knowledge of instructional strategies, best practices, and practical data analysis (Pietsch & Tulowizki, 2017; Sebastian, Camburn, & Spillane, 2018). Ross and Cozzens (2016) stated the primary responsibility of a school principal has become ensuring students are learning. Therefore, it has become critical for principals to develop strong instructional leadership skills in order to positively influence student learning and achievement (Cruz-Gonzalez, Segovia, & Rodriguez, 2019; Lunenburg & Irby, 2014). The complex role of a school principal has become concentrated on the connection between the principal's leadership abilities and student learning.

An increased interest in the principalship has emerged over the past four decades, especially in regard to the instructional leadership component. In the mid-1980s, instructional leadership became the emphasis for school principals (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014). Multiple studies focused on the instructional leadership elements of a school principal's responsibilities and principals' knowledge of curriculum and effective classroom instruction, as well as their expertise in analyzing student assessment data (Blase & Blase, 2000; Costello, 2015; Glatthorn, Jailall, & Jailall, 2016; Hallinger, 2003; Mette et al., 2017). However, a shared approach to instructional leadership began to develop in the early 2000s, in which the school leader became more of a facilitator of teacher improvement than an inspector of teacher practice (Urick, 2016). Principals

began to collaborate with teachers regarding curriculum, content standards, and teaching strategies to affect student achievement (Urick, 2016). Student achievement became connected to the theme of instructional leadership, such that it seemed possible to develop high-achieving schools through a principal's use of strong instructional leadership practices (Woods & Martin, 2016). Urick (2016) noted instructional leadership had the greatest effect on student achievement in relation to other leadership styles, explaining a school leader must understand why specific instructional leadership practices are essential. Through the implementation of effective instructional leadership practices, principals are able to influence student learning.

Student learning, achievement, and continuous improvement of schools are monitored at the local, state, and federal levels. In recent years, accountability measures have emphasized the role principals play in fostering effective teaching and student learning (Mitani, 2018). Beginning with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) legislation of 2002, there has been an increase in accountability for school principals to demonstrate evidence of student academic improvement (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; Mitani, 2018). Under NCLB's accountability provisions and the quest for continuous school improvement, school leaders set annual goals to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) in reading and math on state assessments (NCLB, 2002). Principals had the responsibility to review, analyze, and communicate the school's assessment data with all stakeholders (NCLB, 2002). NCLB required the identification of all schools with inadequate or low student performance, mandated public reporting of a school's achievement results, and imposed consequences for low-performing schools (NCLB,

2002). The age of serious accountability had begun, ushering in a newly added level of pressure and stress on school administrators nationwide as student proficiency on state assessments became a component of the high-stakes environment (Mitani, 2018).

The mandates under NCLB began the accountability process, but after more than a decade, change came in the form of a new law. The transition to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) paved the way for a more supportive accountability environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). This act focused on improving schools through the support and development of exceptional teachers and school leaders. The ESSA provided models for interventions to schools in need of support and reframed school improvement (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Although these new positive support systems were put into place, the attention placed upon school principals did not waver.

It became widely accepted that principals were critical components of student and school success (Babo & Postma, 2017; Lunenburg & Irby, 2014). These school leaders are considered the primary change agents in the process of supporting student achievement (Allensworth & Hart, 2018). School principals and assistant principals have the authority and responsibility to ensure teaching and learning are taking place in their schools each day (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; Mette et al., 2017; Woods & Martin, 2016). Research has shown that aside from the influence of an effective teacher, a school administrator is the most critical factor contributing to student achievement, potentially accounting for up to one fourth of the factors influencing student achievement (Bush, 2015; Wallace Foundation, 2016; Wu, Gao, & Shen, 2019). In fact, for students attending

lower performing schools, the implementation of effective instructional leadership practices by school principals plays a more significant role than in higher performing schools (Cosner & Jones, 2016).

Although there has been research supporting the importance of a principal's instructional leadership practices, school leaders spend a limited amount of time each week focused on improving teacher effectiveness or working to improve student achievement (Pietsch & Tulowizki, 2017; Sebastian et al., 2018). Principals stress their inability to find time to incorporate significant and continuous instructional leadership practices (Pollock, Wang, & Hauseman, 2015; Van Vooren, 2018). National, state, and local student reading achievement data revealed limited instructional leadership practices as national and state standardized test results indicated a decline in elementary student reading achievement in recent years (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2019). According to the 2019 NAEP results, fourth graders and eighth graders across the country saw a decline in reading (NAEP, 2019).

At the state level, a decline in literacy was also evident. Data from a national test revealed fourth- and eighth-grade students scored lower in reading in 2019 (NAEP, 2019) than they had scored in almost a decade within this southern state. Additionally, according to assessment data, a rural school district within this southern state identified a consistent decline in third-grade through eighth-grade student reading scores. Over the past 7 years, in this rural school district, the number of students in Grades 3 through 8 who scored proficient in reading dropped from 56.4% in the 2012-2013 school year to 37.5% in 2018-2019 (see Table 1). The literacy decline is a significant concern within the

school district; therefore, improving student literacy became the focus for the entire community, including the elementary administrators and the director of schools. The director established literacy as a top priority and stated in an interview with a local newspaper, “It takes every one of us to make sure that literacy is in the faces of our people.” However, in this rural district, it was unknown what the elementary principals and assistant principals were doing to address the student literacy issue.

Table 1

District English Language Arts (ELA) Results: Percent of Grades 3-8 Students at or Above Proficiency Level on State Assessment

School year	District ELA percentages
2012-2013	56.4%
2013-2014	54.2%
2014-2015	54.2%
2015-2016	State testing suspended
2016-2017	38.2%
2017-2018	35.3%
2018-2019	37.5%
2019-2020	State testing suspended—COVID-19

The findings from this qualitative study could foster positive social change by providing information and knowledge on elementary principal instructional leadership practices that influence student literacy. This research may inform elementary principal and assistant principal practice at the local level. The intentional review of the instructional practices at the local level can assist school administrators in improving their instructional practices. This, in turn, may strengthen the district elementary administrative team and have a positive effect on student learning.

Background

School improvement has emphasized the instructional role of principals. Currently, principals are accountable for school improvement and the academic achievement of all students in their school (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; Wu et al., 2019). Ross and Cozzens (2016) conducted studies regarding student achievement and the underlying effects of principal instructional leadership on school and student achievement, in which they found a connection between student achievement and principal leadership. Research has been consistent with the idea that principals directly and indirectly influence student achievement (Heaven & Bourne, 2016; Ross & Cozzens, 2016). Additional research has suggested successful school leaders affect student achievement by providing a clear vision for the school, enhancing teacher knowledge, and fostering leadership within the school, as well as promoting a positive school climate (Hitt & Tucker, 2016).

Other studies have connected principals to indirect leadership habits influencing student achievement, such as fostering relationships with teachers, providing instructional guidance throughout the school year, or having purposeful contact with the students in the school (Ross & Cozzens, 2016). Case studies of exemplary schools have shown their school leaders provided instructional leadership through continuous teacher support and encouragement toward student success (Heaven & Bourne, 2016). Without effective instructional leadership, positive academic performance will not be achieved by schools because ultimately, the school principal is held responsible for the complete success or failure of a school (Heaven & Bourne, 2016). Principals must have strong knowledge of

related content to provide accurate teacher guidance and support as well as organizational skills to design and implement programs to affect the areas of student achievement in the greatest need of improvement (Blase & Blase, 2000; Heaven & Bourne, 2016; Lunenburg & Irby, 2014).

Proficient literacy skills are essential to life success inside and outside of the school environment. Many basic life tasks require reading and writing skills (Kim, Petscher, Wanzek, & Al Otaiba, 2018). Therefore, learning to read and write is of paramount importance to students' positive school experiences and prepares them for a successful future. In one rural school district, the state's assessment data indicated 56.4% of third- through eighth-grade students scored at the proficient level in reading during the 2012-2013 school year. In subsequent years, the reading scores for students in this district began to decline, and in the 2016-2017 school year, only 38.2% of the district's third- through eighth-grade students scored proficient in reading. By 2018-2019, 37.5% of third- through eighth-grade students received proficiency scores. The increasing proportion of below-proficient scores could potentially impact students throughout their school careers and beyond.

Principals must consider various factors contributing to declining literacy proficiency scores in order to establish the basis for the selection of their leadership practices. A potential cause of decreasing reading scores across the nation is a lack of motivation to read. Multiple studies have indicated a student's motivation to read declines between the elementary and middle school years (Klauda & Guthrie, 2015; Vaknin-Nusbaum, Nevo, Brande, & Gambrell, 2018). This lack of motivation could lead to a

student's lack of persistence in reading, as well as a lack of effort and attention to the task of reading (Klauda & Guthrie, 2015). Students view themselves as less competent readers as they move through the grades from elementary school into middle school (Vaknin-Nusbaum et al., 2018). This lack of motivation may result in a decline in student reading scores. Principals who recognize this as a problem in their schools can develop a plan to implement specific instructional leadership practices to stop the decline.

Ross and Cozzens (2016) and Wu et al. (2019) established a strong connection between student achievement and the effect of a school principal's instructional leadership practices. Heaven and Bourne (2016) also noted principals who employ strong instructional leadership practices can positively affect student achievement. In fact, multiple researchers have acknowledged the effect school leaders have on student learning outcomes, with a critical aspect of the principalship being the instructional leadership component (Heaven & Bourne, 2016; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Johnston, Kaufman, & Thompson, 2016). However, it is unknown how principals and assistant principals in this district have implemented instructional leadership practices to specifically influence student literacy. Therefore, this study was needed to better understand the instructional leadership practices of these school principals and assistant principals.

Problem Statement

In a rural school district in the southern United States, student literacy scores had declined over the past 7 years. The number of students in Grades 3 through 8 who scored proficient in reading on annual state assessments dropped from 56.4% in the 2012-2013

school year to 37.5% in 2018-2019. This decline in student literacy was a significant concern within the district; therefore, the superintendent established literacy as a top priority for the school system. School leaders are often viewed as the primary change agents who can improve student achievement (Allensworth & Hart, 2018), and are critical to student and school success (Babo & Postma, 2017). However, it was unknown how the principals in this district were providing instructional leadership that influenced literacy at their schools. The gap in practice I addressed in this study was a lack of understanding of how the elementary principals and assistant principals in this rural school district implemented instructional leadership practices within their schools to influence student literacy.

Purpose of the Study

The ability to read is essential to school and life success. Across the country, there is increasing mindfulness of a deficit in student literacy achievement. Results from the NAEP (2019) revealed students are reading and comprehending below their expected levels. Research has connected reading to academic accomplishment and life success, particularly the importance of students' ability to read fluently, accurately, and independently, as well as their ability to comprehend text (Canto & Proctor, 2013; Park, Chaparro, Preciado, & Cummings, 2015; Spiro, Bruce, & Brewer, 2017). Students who read on grade level are more engaged in school, receive fewer conduct violations, and are more likely to complete high school, which opens the door to more opportunities in life (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016). Therefore, the teaching of reading and students' ability to comprehend texts are significant components of a successful literacy program.

Administrators must ensure effective reading instruction is taking place in their schools each day. Principals and assistant principals provide the instructional leadership and guidance necessary to set a vision for academic progress, and teachers follow with instruction in the classroom. Teachers rely on their principals' content knowledge and instructional support to assist them as they deliver high-quality literacy instruction (Kindall, Crowe, & Elsass, 2018). Researchers have studied the impact of instructional support on the outcome of student assessments and found the quality of the teacher's instruction determined the quality of student learning (Beard, 2013; Hagaman, Casey, & Reid, 2016; Mette et al., 2017; Reardon, Valentino, & Shores, 2016). In turn, the quality of the principal's leadership determined the quality of the teacher's instruction (Beard, 2013; Hagaman et al., 2016; Mette et al., 2017; Reardon et al., 2016). In today's high-stakes testing environment, it is critical principals implement focused instructional leadership practices to impact student learning outcomes (Beard, 2013; Mette et al., 2017).

Research has revealed a connection between a principal's instructional leadership and student achievement (Heaven & Bourne, 2016; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Wu et al., 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how elementary principals and assistant principals in a rural school district in the southern United States implemented instructional leadership practices to influence student literacy at their schools. To achieve this understanding, I conducted individual semistructured interviews with 11 elementary principals and assistant principals to gain an understanding of the instructional leadership practices employed in the schools of this rural school district which had declining student literacy scores.

Research Question

School administrators work to provide the necessary leadership to support teachers and students. In one rural district in the southern United States, data from state assessments over 7 years showed a decline in student literacy scores. Therefore, for this study, I focused on the instructional leadership practices influencing student literacy implemented by the elementary principals and assistant principals within the district. I designed the study to investigate the instructional leadership practices of school administrators specifically affecting the literacy of the students in their building and created one research question my study would explore: How have elementary school principals and assistant principals implemented instructional leadership practices in their schools to influence student literacy?

Conceptual Framework

Murphy's conceptual framework of instructional leadership (1983) was used to inform this study's interview protocol questions, analysis, and interpretation of the data. Murphy viewed instructional leadership as a multifaceted and complex system and created a framework comprised of the most significant perspectives on instructional leadership of the early 1980s (Murphy, 1983). To create a model of the framework that clearly demonstrated the interrelatedness of the various instructional leadership perspectives, Murphy designed a cube-shaped arrangement and chose the term *dimensions* to identify significant leadership perspectives (Murphy, 1983). Murphy's three dimensions are (a) instructional functions or the leadership practices employed by the principal, (b) principal organizational processes,

and (c) types of principal activities. Each of these dimensions is further divided into subgroups in Murphy's conceptual framework model (see Figure 1).

The activities dimension includes a principal's direct and indirect interaction with teachers, whereas the processes dimension involves the organizational work performed by a principal, such as daily communication or decision making. The third dimension describes principal functions or principal instructional practices, which comprise the most important instructional leadership components of the conceptual framework and include instruction evaluation and monitoring student performance (Murphy, 1983). Collectively, these three dimensions form the model for Murphy's (1983) instructional leadership conceptual framework (see Figure 1).

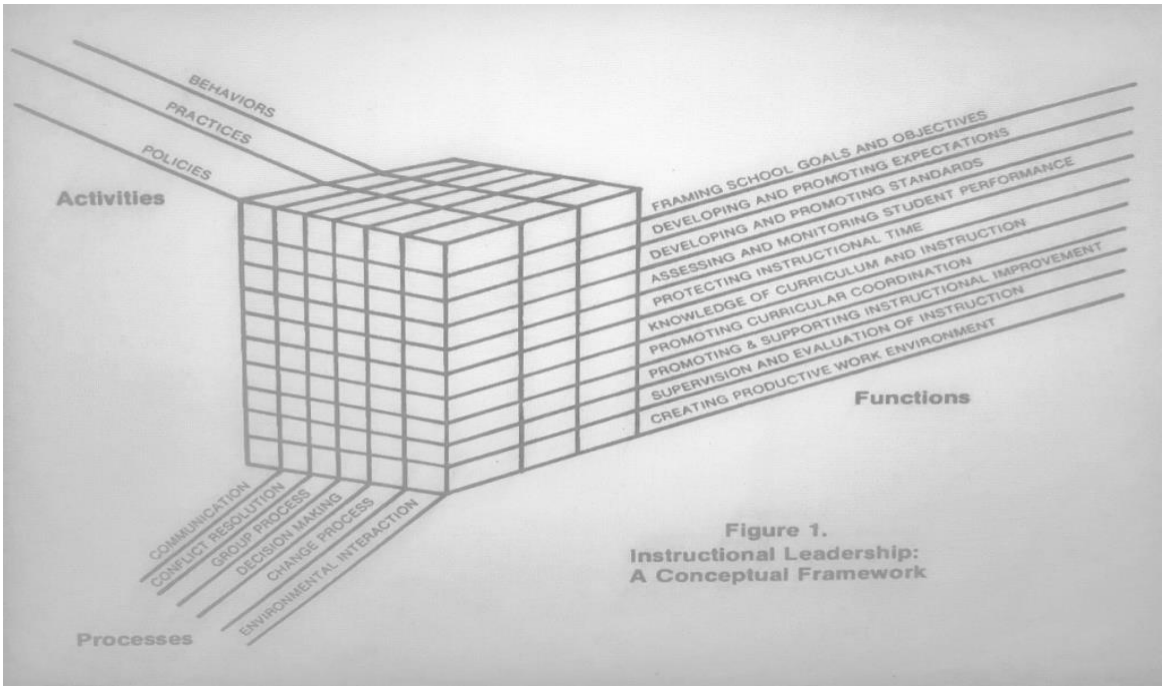

Figure 1. Murphy's instructional leadership conceptual framework. From "Instructional Leadership: A Conceptual Framework," by J. Murphy, 1983, *Planning and Changing*, *14*(3), p. 139. Copyright 1983 by Joseph Murphy. Reprinted with permission.

Murphy's (1983) 10 principal instructional functions were used to ground my study (see Figure 1). These 10 functions encompassed specific leadership practices successful instructional leaders employed and included the following: (a) framing school goals and objectives, (b) developing and promoting expectations, (c) developing and promoting standards, (d) assessing and monitoring student performance, (e) protecting instructional time, (f) using knowledge of curriculum and instruction, (g) promoting curricular coordination, (h) promoting and supporting instructional improvement, (i) supervising and evaluating instruction, and (j) creating a productive work environment (Murphy, 1983).

Nature of the Study

This research was a basic qualitative study in which I examined district elementary principals' and assistant principals' perceptions of their instructional leadership practices influencing student literacy. Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated basic qualitative research studies contribute to fundamental knowledge and theory. Qualitative research is about viewing, understanding, and engaging with people as experts in relation to their own life experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Fifteen elementary principals and assistant principals employed in the district were invited to participate in the study, with 11 administrators volunteering to participate. The principals had varying teaching backgrounds and school administrator experience.

I collected data by conducting semistructured interviews with each participant and used an interview protocol with interview questions I developed (see Appendix A). I asked probing and clarifying questions of each administrator to gain a greater

understanding of the instructional leadership practices employed by each school principal or assistant principal. I used an iPhone and a separate Phillips digital recorder as a recording device, and I collected field notes during the interviews. All information was compiled and analyzed to identify common themes, categories, and patterns.

Definitions

In this study, I used the following terms. The definitions of the terms reflect their meaning in the context of this study:

CBM or *easy CBM:* Easy CBM is a curriculum-based measurement tool used to progress monitor students in Response to Intervention (RTI) Tier 2 or 3. In this computer program, the following reading skills can be measured: letter names, letter sounds, phoneme segmenting, word reading fluency, passage reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

Elementary school: Elementary schools signify the early stages and grade levels of standard public education before secondary school and include varying grade spans. *Grade-span configuration* refers to the range of grades within a school (Jones, Slate, Moore, & Martinez-Garcia, 2017). For this study, *elementary schools* referred to schools with a grade span of prekindergarten through eighth grade.

Instructional leadership: Instructional leadership refers to the practices or behaviors of the school principal or assistant principal to promote student learning and includes the leadership ability to foster relationships between individuals (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Mestry, 2017).

Instructional leadership practices: Strategies intended to generate improvements in a school and involve setting clear goals, managing curriculum, monitoring lesson plans, allocating resources, and regularly evaluating teachers to support student learning (Murphy, Weil, Hallinger, & Mitman, 1985).

*Response to Intervention (RTI):*A multitiered approach to maximize student achievement. Students are identified for potential poor learning outcomes and are monitored while being provided research-based intervention strategies (American Institutes for Research, 2020).

STAR: A computerized, leveled comprehensive assessment providing student data to guide literacy growth for emergent readers, struggling readers, English learners, and high achievers (Renaissance Learning, 2020).

Assumptions

An assumption for this study was the participating administrators understood the instructional leadership skills and literacy content knowledge required of them to influence student achievement and could articulate their perceptions effectively. I assumed the participating principals and assistant principals regarded the questions seriously and provided honest and accurate responses throughout the interview process.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope and delimitations of a study define the size of the study and refer to the researcher's choices enabling him or her to control the study. For this study, I restricted the scope of the study to 11 elementary principals and assistant principals from one rural school district in the southern region of the United States. The main delimitation of this

study was the same as the scope, with the participants being 11 elementary school principals and assistant principals from a single school district in the southern region of the United States.

Limitations

Limitations of research include factors out of the specific control of the researcher and are a component of all studies. These limitations must be identified to acknowledge areas of potential weakness (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this study, school administrators from one rural school district were represented, which was a limitation to the study. The participant sample was a limitation in that there were only 11 elementary principals and assistant principals involved in this study. Additionally, during the time of this research, the COVID-19 pandemic limited the interview process such that all interviews had to be conducted via phone rather than conducted in person in order to meet social distancing requirements. COVID-19 also impacted the study in that principals and assistant principals were not able to establish the effectiveness of their instructional leadership practices implemented throughout the school year as the schools in this district were closed in mid-March due to the pandemic and students did not return for the remainder of the year to complete any end-of-year reading assessments.

Significance

This study addressed the local problem of declining reading achievement scores of third- through eighth-grade students on state assessments by identifying the instructional leadership skills influencing student literacy. The gap in practice was a lack of understanding of how the elementary principals and assistant principals in this rural school district

implemented instructional leadership practices within their schools to influence student literacy. The results from this research provide data regarding elementary principal instructional leadership practices and how these practices were perceived by the principals to influence student literacy.

Positive social change may be achieved through this study as the findings provide additional information and knowledge of elementary principal instructional leadership practices influencing student literacy. The data from this research may support social change when participating elementary principals in this school district reflect on their instructional leadership practices to promote literacy improvement in their buildings. The participating principals may share what they have learned about their individual practices with other district elementary principals and beyond. The intentional review of the instructional practices by the participants may assist other school administrators in improving their instructional practices, if collaboration with other principals occurs. This, in turn, may strengthen the district administrative team and impact learning in children. Therefore, improvements made in instructional leadership practices may create a positive effect on student learning.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I introduced the problem of declining literacy achievement of third- through eighth-grade students in a rural school district in the southern region of the United States. The gap in practice was a lack of understanding of how the elementary principals in a rural school district in the southern United States implemented instructional leadership practices within their schools to influence student literacy. One research question guided the

study: How have elementary principals and assistant principals implemented instructional leadership practices in their schools to influence student literacy? I explained my selection of Murphy's instructional leadership model (Murphy, 1983) as the conceptual framework, and I described the assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations of the study.

In Chapter 2, I review the literature to provide the research context for my study and include the research strategies I used to locate information related to the instructional leadership practices of principals. I provide a synopsis of past and current scholarly research related to the problem of this study and the gap in practice. The literature review focuses on principal instructional leadership and is organized around the following topics:

1. Conceptual framework
2. The history of the concept of instructional leadership
3. The principal as the instructional leader
4. The influence of school leaders on student literacy achievement
5. The importance of school leaders on student achievement
6. The importance of literacy skills in students
7. The significance of principal content knowledge

The remaining chapters complete the description of the study. In Chapter 3, I describe the research methodology used in this study and my role as the researcher. I also describe the process for data collection and analysis. In Chapter 4, I describe the findings from the principal and assistant principal interviews. I summarize the analysis and

interpretation of the results and present a conclusion and future recommendations relating to instructional leadership regarding student literacy in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The objective of the literature review is to describe the research literature to provide a context for my study. In a rural school district in the southern region of the United States, student literacy scores had declined for the past 7 years; therefore, it was essential to understand the implementation of the instructional leadership practices employed by the district's elementary administrators. The research problem was the lack of understanding of elementary principals' and assistant principals' instructional leadership practices influencing student literacy. Current research reflected how school principals play a critical role in improving student achievement; however, what administrators identify as their instructional leadership practices was not understood (DeMatthews, Serafini, & Watson, 2020; Dutta & Sahney, 2016; McKinney, Labat, & Labat, 2015; Quin, Deris, Bischoff, & Johnson, 2015).

In a literature review, current research related to a specific topic is collected and offered to readers, building their knowledge base and creating a solid foundation for a study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). I conducted a review of literature regarding the history of the concept of instructional leadership, including the conceptual framework of the instructional leadership model based on the seminal work of Murphy (1983), and I reviewed leadership development for principals. Additionally, I examined research studies regarding the influence of school leaders on student achievement and reviewed recent research on the importance of student literacy as well as the significance of a principal's content knowledge as it relates to instructional leadership.

Literature Search Strategy

Locating current research relevant to my study involved an extensive and systematic search using various electronic online databases provided in Walden University's Library, including ProQuest, ERIC, EBSCO, SAGE, and Google Scholar. Using the search feature in the online library, I entered keywords and phrases directly linked to instructional leadership practices of elementary principals and student literacy. The criteria for literature selection applied to articles published in the English language and were peer reviewed. Also included were full-text articles published between the years of 2016 and 2020. The specific keywords and phrases used to search for supporting articles included *instructional leadership, student achievement, principal leadership practices, instructional leadership practices, literacy, principal effect on student achievement, leadership styles, school principal responsibilities, influence of school leaders, leadership skills, student growth, elementary principals and instructional practices, effective school leadership, importance of student reading,* and *principal leadership*. Furthermore, I combined search terms when current resources were not observed. The combined search terms included *school principal + student achievement* and *principal instructional leadership practices + student achievement*, which provided additional sources.

The selected literature relating to instructional leadership included educational books, peer-reviewed articles, articles cited by other articles or journals, and dissertations, with these works published within the past 5 years. I made an exception to the 5-year criterion if an article was an important part of the history of instructional

leadership or was a seminal component of the conceptual framework of instructional leadership. I excluded articles referencing mathematics as well as articles that were not peer reviewed. The bulk of the references for this study came from research conducted within the United States. I included a small number of studies that made reference to research conducted in other countries because these studies supported the work conducted in the United States and presented instructional leadership on a global continuum.

Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this research was to examine the instructional leadership practices of elementary principals and assistant principals. In 1983, Joseph Murphy presented a conceptual framework of instructional leadership indentifying specific behaviors and instructional practices of school leaders. Murphy's conceptual framework relied on research concerning effective schools in addition to research regarding a principal's influence on a school (Murphy, 1983). At that time, the literature had not clearly connected the multitude of tasks required of a school principal or assistant principal to instructional leadership. Additionally, the behaviors of school leaders had not been researched and connected to the concept of instructional leadership until Murphy presented his instructional leadership framework (Hallinger, 2005).

Murphy's work began with a focus on school effectiveness, but by 1983, it had expanded to a model or framework for instructional leadership. The instructional leadership research at that time primarily considered only a single view of leadership at a time (Murphy, 1983). However, Murphy viewed instructional leadership as a complex system, and his

analysis of the multifaceted components of instructional leadership led to the design of his conceptual framework (Murphy, 1983). Murphy created a framework comprised of three of the most significant perspectives on instructional leadership of that time (Murphy, 1983). Murphy designed a cube-shaped model clearly displaying the three significant perspectives, which were labeled as dimensions (see Figure 1). The three dimensions of Murphy's instructional leadership model included the instructional practices employed by the principal, a leader's organizational processes, and the type of principal activities (Murphy, 1983). Each of these dimensions was further divided into subgroups in Murphy's conceptual framework model. Murphy's creation of the three-dimensional model helped others to better understand the connectivity of the instructional leadership components and became a significant conceptual framework used for instructional leadership.

In the mid-1980s to 1990s, as researchers applied Murphy's conceptual framework, instructional leadership became the most studied model of school leadership. Murphy's conceptual framework was a substantial component of principal leadership programs across the country, ensuring future administrators were better prepared for their role as instructional leaders (Hallinger, 2005). As a result, over 100 empirical studies referenced Murphy's instructional leadership conceptual framework and its corresponding model (Hallinger, 2005). Murphy's instructional leadership framework appeared to have made an impression in the educational arena, as it was ultimately regarded as a complex idea leading to a better understanding of the link between principal practices and school effectiveness.

Murphy's (1983) conceptual framework grounded my basic qualitative study with a focus on 10 principal instructional functions or principal instructional practices (see Figure 1). These 10 functions encompass specific instructional leadership practices that successful principals and assistant principals employ, and include the following: (a) framing school goals and objectives, (b) developing and promoting expectations, (c) developing and promoting standards, (d) assessing and monitoring student performance, (e) protecting instructional time, (f) using knowledge of curriculum and instruction, (g) promoting curricular coordination, (h) promoting and supporting instructional improvement, (i) supervising and evaluating instruction, and (j) creating a productive work environment (Murphy, 1983). Murphy's design allowed for variations in instructional leadership based upon different school needs in addition to differences in leadership styles used by school leaders.

Key Concepts and Variables

The History of the Concept of Instructional Leadership

Historically, the idea of instructional leadership encompassed a broad range of perspectives. Interest in the concept of instructional leadership began in the 1970s, when it was determined the expectations of school leadership were difficult for principals to meet (Hallinger, 2011). By the early 1980s, further research regarding instructional leadership revealed approaches school principals employed to specifically contribute to teaching and learning and found school principals adapted their leadership practices to the needs of the students and school (Rowan, Bossert, & Dwyer, 1983). The concept of instructional leadership intensified in the United States as evidence began to swell

regarding principal leadership having a positive outcome on student learning and achievement (Bush, 2015). Thus, instructional leadership became the emphasis for school principals in the mid-1980s (Hallinger, 1992). At that time, studies began to focus more on the practices of instructional leadership—including school leaders' knowledge of the curriculum, their understanding of classroom instructional strategies, and their effectiveness of analyzing student data—than on organizational instructional leadership (Blase & Blase, 2000; Costello, 2015; Hallinger, 2003; Rowan et al., 1983). Although there were varying perspectives on what instructional leadership necessitated, the concept's acceptance and understanding expanded.

By the early 1990s, instructional leadership became the leading model in most principal preparation programs in the United States (Hallinger, 2003). Continuous study of instructional leadership revealed a stronger connection between leadership practices and student achievement and established instructional leadership as a significant component of a productive learning environment and school improvement (Cray & Weiler, 2011; Shouppe & Pate, 2010; Suber, 2012; Wu et al., 2019). Subsequently, more than 125 studies were conducted on multifaceted practices of instructional leadership between 1980 and 2000 (Hallinger, 2003). Indeed, it was time for a definitive description of instructional leadership and its practices.

Over the last 30 years, the study of instructional leadership has resulted in numerous definitions and models. Sun and Leithwood (2015) explored the idea that there is no clear understanding of the array of leadership practices surrounding the term *instructional leadership*. Spiri (2001) suggested in his case study of Philadelphia

principals that school leaders have only a general conceptualization of the term *instructional leadership*. In fact, in Spiri's study, he found no connection between leadership practices and teaching or learning when described by the principals who viewed themselves as instructional leaders. This discrepancy between the previous findings for connections between student learning and instructional leadership stemmed from a lack of a clear understanding of the concept on the part of school administrators. While some principals acknowledged their instructional decision-making responsibility, Martin (2018) reported principals in a previous study did not describe themselves as instructional leaders.

Over the 30-year period of focused research regarding instructional leadership, many definitions emerged and similarities were noted. Each one focused on principal responsibilities or practices connected to student learning, student or school data, student and staff monitoring or supervising, and assisting or supporting teachers. One definition of instructional leadership surfaced as the process through which school principals identify the pathway for the school, inspire the staff, and organize school strategies intended to improve teaching and learning (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012). Expanding on this idea, Shen et al. (2012) defined instructional leadership as the actions necessary for school principals to take to increase student achievement. Similarly, Suber (2012) described instructional leadership as the behaviors of principals that encourage student achievement. Instructional leadership includes communicating a school mission, establishing professional development opportunities for teachers, and creating a sense of community within the school (Urick, 2016). Hoerr (2016) defined instructional leadership

as the degree to which a principal displays knowledge of the curriculum, monitors and provides feedback on instruction, and is aware of best practices for curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Gumus and Bellibas (2016) asserted the broad view of instructional leadership encompasses all aspects of a school regarding student learning and achievement. While these definitions may differ slightly, they each reference a principal's responsibilities connected to learning, monitoring, and supporting teachers.

Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) reported results consistent with findings in Gumus and Bellibas (2016) and Shen et al. (2012) regarding the connections between the implementation of instructional leadership practices and positive student achievement. The more principals focused their leadership practices on building relationships and teaching and learning within the school, the greater their impact was on student outcomes (Robinson et al., 2008). Therefore, research supported the idea that a principal's implementation of instructional leadership practices is strongly connected to student achievement.

The Principal as the Instructional Leader

The position of the school principal is significant to the success of students and faculty and encompasses a multitude of responsibilities. Pietsch and Tulowizki (2017) noted instructional leadership was centered on the quality of the teaching in the classroom. In other words, principals should focus on the quality of teaching taking place in their buildings each day. However, the typical workday for a school principal includes managing staff, meeting organizational responsibilities, performing maintenance-related duties, and fiscal budgeting, which leaves little time for definitive instructional leadership activities (Pietsch & Tulowizki,

2017; Sebastian et al., 2018; Van Vooren, 2018). Scheduling complexities such those associated with attending parent, teacher, or district meetings and resolving student discipline issues prevent most principals from spending quality time in classrooms or informally evaluating instruction (Sebastian et al., 2018). Assistant principals' typical daily responsibilities are similar, consisting of paperwork, student issues, and addressing needs of school stakeholders, which additionally impedes their ability to work as instructional leaders (Searby, Browne-Ferrigno, & Wang, 2017). Van Vooren (2018) also noted principals of lower performing schools spend more time managing student behavior than time visiting classrooms in their schools to observe and support teaching and learning. Nevertheless, the task of being an instructional leader is the most important one a principal will carry out each day. As pressure for accountability has increased for every school, it has become widely accepted school leaders must be more than merely the facility's managers and should use their leadership abilities to focus on student achievement and improving instruction (Kafele, 2015; Kalman & Arslan, 2016; Van Vooren, 2018). A school's success can be significantly impacted by the implementation of effective instructional practices by the school's leader in addition to the various other duties expected of an administrator on a daily basis.

The incorporation of instructional leadership practices is necessary to the success of students and teachers. It is critical and necessary for principals to purposefully carve out time to implement their instructional leadership practices and concentrate on student learning and achievement in order to positively influence student achievement (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Van Vooren, 2018). Additional research reported dedicated instructional leadership practices have equated to positive student achievement for low-

performing and high-achieving schools (Bellibas & Liu, 2017; Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Therefore, the incorporation of sound instructional leadership practices is a critical component for principals as they focus on student achievement and improving student learning.

There are various instructional leadership practices a principal may employ as a school's leader. Woods and Martin (2016) reported principals from high-performing schools established and maintained high expectations in addition to demonstrating other distinctive instructional leadership practices. High expectations began with clear communication from the building principal, along with the belief that all students can succeed and academic excellence is not to be set aside for a select group (Woods & Martin, 2016). School leaders must communicate with the faculty and frequently monitor expectations for students, teachers, and the school as a whole (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). School leaders with high and established expectations must create a specific plan for monitoring classroom instruction for sustainability (Mette et al., 2017). A study by Ozdemir (2019) revealed considerable evidence that the many variables related to classroom instruction have a large impact on student achievement. Mette et al. (2017) agreed on the importance of continually monitoring teachers' classroom instruction, which is vital as a principal can identify instruction that is successful or not effective. Monitoring opportunities are not always formal and could consist of informal evaluations, learning walk-throughs, or short classroom visits, with the focus being on promoting improvement for students through better instructional practices (Ozdemir, 2019). In a study conducted by Mette et al. (2017) on the balance between supervision and evaluation as an instructional practice, the idea of continual development of

teachers through feedback was viewed as teacher supervision, whereas teacher evaluation was the measurement of the teacher's abilities to teach, with each being integrated into an effective classroom observation. Mette et al. (2017) also found feedback for teachers based on classroom visits was an important leadership practice often missing or forgotten by less effective principals. Planned, systematic evaluation of instruction and close monitoring of student performance were instructional leadership practices that frequently emerged in effective schools (Mette et al., 2017). The school principal, as the instructional leader of the school, has the responsibility to recognize effective instruction as well as obtain adequate knowledge of instructional strategies to make practical suggestions when conducting teacher evaluations and observations (Bellibas & Liu, 2017; Mette et al., 2017; Woods & Martin, 2016). Considered together, all of these findings indicate how principal instructional practices can influence student learning.

Principals are the connectors between student learning, teacher instruction, and best practice. The twenty-first-century educational system has high standards, and the school principal is at the center as the school's curriculum leader (Glatthorn et al., 2016). Glatthorn et al. (2016) also noted principals are more effective leaders if they maintain a broad knowledge of the current curriculum and content. School principals who were involved in curriculum development and its implementation in their schools were more effective curriculum leaders (Glatthorn et al., 2016). Glatthorn et al. (2016) further expanded on this idea, and stated skilled principals can marry grade-level content with appropriate curriculum knowledge. Effective instructional leadership demands content knowledge from principals and requires that curriculum resources are made readily available to the faculty.

A thorough knowledge of current curriculum materials is vital if the principal is to effectively coordinate the school's curriculum (Glatthorn et al., 2016). As a leadership practice, principals can promote curricular coordination by working collaboratively with district supervisors and teachers to correlate standards to the curriculum and rigorous student tasks. Nonetheless, as long as high standards and accountability are in full force in our educational system, school principals will need to continue their roles the curriculum leader in their schools (Glatthorn et al., 2016).

Studies have also found the significant instructional leadership role a principal plays in the success of professional development in the school. By creating a culture of learning where receiving professional development is the custom for the faculty, principals can successfully guide teachers to continual professional development opportunities (Bean, 2020). Within this culture of educator learning, teachers can receive the on-going and current professional development required to ensure students are provided with high-quality instruction (Didion, Toste, & Filderman, 2020). Bean (2020) also recommended principals become familiar with the requirements of each content area and maintain knowledge of solid instructional practices in order to assist with improving teaching and learning through professional development. By incorporating this leadership practice, principals can encourage and develop the master or exemplary teachers in the building to provide successful learning experiences for faculty. Developing mentoring plans and providing opportunities for teachers to collaborate are vital to establishing connections between teachers within the school (Bean, 2020). Bean (2020) also found evidence of successful implementation and outcomes related to student learning based on a mentoring program by exemplary teachers

who modeled best practices with novice or underperforming teachers in the comfortable environment within their school. Principal instructional leadership supported teacher collaboration in a school which ultimately strengthened student learning and achievement (Bean, 2020).

Providing a productive work environment conducive to student success and achievement is a goal for school leaders as they work to incorporate instructional leadership practices affecting student learning in various ways. In a study conducted by Kiboss and Jemiryott (2014), it was found a school's working environment was a product of and cause for the level of teacher morale. A working environment with a positive school environment, climate, and culture additionally impacted teacher morale, and affected student achievement (Hollingworth, Olsen, Asikin-Garmager, & Winn, 2018; Reeves, Pun, & Chung, 2017). Just as a school's climate affected teacher morale, the leadership of school principals and assistant principals also contributed to the culture and climate of a school, which indirectly impacted teacher morale and student performance (Reeves et al., 2017; Tan, 2018). Research indicated a strong correlation between teacher morale and student performance (Reeves et al., 2017); therefore, a principal's incorporation of instructional leadership practices to improve the school climate by increasing teacher morale was valuable and worthwhile (Hollingworth et al., 2018).

School Leader Influence on Student Achievement

Principals are influential to student achievement. Datnow and Park (2018) suggested school leaders must make student achievement their top priority. Multiple studies examined principals' efforts to improve student achievement (Glatthorn et al.,

2016; Tan, 2018; Wu et al., 2019). Principal effort and influence were measurable. Researchers have documented effective principals affected student achievement (Wu et al., 2019) and increased student test scores as much as 5 to 10 percentile points on standardized tests or improved value added scores in only one year (Dhuey & Smith, 2018). Additional researchers found effective principals increased the achievement of students in their schools by as much as 2 to 7 months in one school year, whereas ineffective principals ultimately lowered student achievement by the same amount (Krasnoff, 2015). Glatthorn et al. (2016) also noted a principal's influence was second only to that of a teacher when considering student improvement. Likewise, Woods and Martin (2016) established a principal's behaviors and practices accounted for one quarter of the achievement of the students in their schools. It is interesting to note Tan (2018) found principals have a more significant influence on student outcomes in lower-achieving and high-poverty schools than principals at less challenging schools have. In a recent revisit to previous research, Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2020) updated the effect of a principal from being second to that of a classroom teacher to stating school leadership has a significant effect on the school which impacts teaching and learning. Nevertheless, it has been established a principal can impact his or her school's achievement in a major way, whether positively or negatively.

Additional research findings reveal various connections between the influence of a principal and student achievement. Hitt and Tucker (2016) noted the link between student achievement and a principal's influence related to the establishment of a clear vision for the school and explicitly communicated expectations for quality instruction.

Cosner and Jones (2016) ascertained strong principal leadership greatly influenced and transformed low performing schools. Principals also influence student achievement when they exhibited behaviors influencing teachers' professional learning (Allen, Grigsby, & Peters, 2015; Bean, 2020; Gumus & Bellibas, 2016). High performing schools signified the principal's influence on student achievement in their role of curriculum coordinator (Cosner & Jones, 2016). High performing schools also established the use of data by the instructional leader to inform school-wide decisions (Poortman & Schildkamp, 2016). Research conducted by Datnow and Hubbard (2016) found principals whose teachers are encouraged to use data to drive their classroom instruction increased their students' academic achievement. A principal's instructional leadership is linked to student performance (Mette et al., 2017).

Principals may influence student achievement in various ways, such as clearly framing and articulating the school's goals and objectives and collaboratively creating a mission for the school (Rey & Bastons, 2018). Promoting academic goals provided purpose to the learning activities of schools, an area where the principal had a considerable impact (Ozdemir, 2019). Shaping a vision of academic and behavioral success for all students is a necessity. Making high standards clear and public is imperative for raising the overall achievement of all students and is crucial to meeting the ever-changing needs of a school (Glatthorn et al., 2016). Rey and Bastons (2018) concur, adding creating a shared vision designed around continuous school improvement was essential for school achievement and was used to guide instructional leadership practices throughout the school year.

School principals may be overwhelmed by the multitude of job related responsibilities in addition to increasing student achievement. As a principal's workday includes long hours and diverse tasks, time to focus specifically on instruction and student achievement can be scarce (Sebastian et al., 2018). Research conducted by Grissom, Loeb, and Mitani (2015) suggested principals spend the majority of their day working on administrative and managerial duties and little time visiting classrooms or on instruction-related duties. Principals must make difficult decisions about how to allocate their time among competing job demands. School principals devoted less than one-fifth of each school day on intentional instructional activities (Goldring et al., 2019). A study by Murphy, Neumerski, Goldring, Grissom, and Porter (2016) also found the time a principal dedicated to instructional responsibilities had not changed much over the past twenty-five years and amounted to a range of only 9-15% of a school day. However, a principal simply spending more time visiting classrooms is not enough; instead, how the principal engaged with the classroom instruction was the determiner for potential change in teachers and instruction which is one goal of instructional leadership (Goldring et al., 2019).

Principals influenced student achievement in other ways. A shared responsibility of increasing student achievement between the classroom teacher and the school principal fostered teamwork (Malloy & Leithwood, 2017). Principals and teachers collaboratively established and created learning environments where students thrive and experience success daily (Malloy & Leithwood, 2017). School leaders ensured accurate content and required curriculum were guided by state standards, and teachers employed best practices

in the classroom (Mette et al., 2017). Before this can happen, school leaders must work to promote positive relationships with the teachers in the building as relationships and bonds between teachers and principals are vital to the success of collaboration efforts (Malloy & Leithwood, 2017). Although the instruction in the classroom was a significant contributor to student achievement, the principal's role was essential to the overall success of the school and must be considered. Together, teachers and principals employing specific leadership practices was crucial to implementing successful school improvement and influencing student achievement.

Monitoring student achievement is necessary. Student achievement defined the effectiveness of a school and must be monitored frequently (Mette et al., 2017). Principals set the tone and direction for student data usage for the teachers in their schools as monitoring student performance was found beneficial for principals on a school-wide scale and teachers on a classroom level (Datnow & Hubbard, 2016). Principals who established systematic procedures for reviewing student data from a school-wide perspective to ensure alignment with school goals had greater success and higher student outcomes (Mette et al., 2017). Therefore, teachers used student data to make necessary adjustments to their classroom instruction and ultimately observed greater student achievement (Datnow & Hubbard, 2016). The monitoring of student data in these cases was a collaborative partnership between the teacher and the principal, who functioned as the school's instructional leader.

Another leadership practice contributing to student achievement was protecting instructional time. The instructional leadership task of protecting classroom instructional time also translated to improved student achievement (Brown, 2016). Brown (2016)

examined specific principal behaviors most effective in increasing student achievement and found creating learning environments with uninterrupted instructional time was high on the list. Brown (2016) recommended principals protect this necessary and vital time and also suggested protecting instructional time is a school leader's responsibility. This instructional leadership practice can be done by establishing policies relating to frequent interruptions such as a clearly defined master schedule or established expected beginning and ending times for each instructional period.

Student Literacy

A child's reading ability is a critical component of their future success (Hagaman, et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2018). Reardon et al. (2016) agreed, stating proficient reading and writing are vital to a student's success in school, promotion in the workplace, and day-to-day aspects of life. The ability to read well, with comprehension, was found to be necessary for the lifelong learning needs of students (Hagaman et al., 2016; Reardon et al., 2016). As a student moved through the grades in school, the act of reading with comprehension became increasingly important as gaining information and making meaning of the written word became the primary manner for students to obtain knowledge (Hagaman et al., 2016). Reardon et al. (2016) also recommended literacy proficiency must be emphasized for students in elementary grades through high school because it is fundamental for continued success during school and post-graduation. Quality literacy instruction is paramount to an effective educational program with multiple researchers recommending principals implement consistent instructional leadership practices to ensure effective literacy instruction is occurring in their schools

(Hagaman et al., 2016; Mette et al., 2017; Reardon et al., 2016). Reading proficiency is such an important factor in a student's success in school that reading assessments are administered by teachers throughout a school year providing information on school-wide student progress.

The student reading data from various tests have been disappointing. Considering the emphasis on the importance of reading, schools across the country are currently underperforming in reading (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2019). According to the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results, fourth-graders and eighth-graders across the country declined in reading (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2019). This dismal decline was alarming to educators who instructed students in reading.

Teaching students to read is not an easy task. In fact, learning to read has been described as miraculous (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). Grabe and Stoller (2019) suggested humans are not biologically predisposed to become readers; therefore, reading must be taught. In data collected from the last world census, there are over 700 million adults throughout the world who are still unable to read, with the majority of the non-readers being female (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). This shocking fact demonstrates the critical necessity of teaching students to read as an essential component of a school's mission. Reading requires a structured system of direct instruction and a well-designed plan to assist struggling readers (Grabe & Stoller, 2019; Kim et al., 2018). This on-going effort should take on a collaborative approach with the school principal assuming the lead for design, implementation, on-going professional support for teachers, and monitoring of

instruction (Hagaman et al., 2016; Mette et al., 2017). Principals and assistant principals who provide instructional support for teachers to teach reading was found to be key for a school's success, as literacy is often considered the foundation for all learning.

Principal Content Knowledge

Principals begin their administrative roles with varying educational backgrounds and teaching experiences. Shava (2017) found in many cases, the principal was not the educational or content expert in a school, which created a problem when he or she selected and implemented instructional practices. Successful principals continually used their literacy skills, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking to communicate with stakeholders, but even so, a principal's instructional literacy content knowledge may be lacking.

Not all principals have a strong familiarity with every area of instruction (Kindall et al., 2018). A principal's level of understanding regarding any content area had a significant impact on their ability to address observed instructional inadequacies or academic issues (Hoerr, 2016). Principals may struggle with their capacity to support teachers as an instructional leader in content such as reading and literacy due to their lack of understanding of quality literacy instruction and strategies (Hoerr, 2016). Overholt and Szabocsik (2013) stated in the same way teachers require knowledge to assist students with learning content, principals also require basic content knowledge connecting their instructional leadership practices to their central effort of supporting teaching and learning. Principal instructional practices played a significant role in how teachers implement literacy programs, regardless of a principal's literacy background (Yoon, 2016).

Principals are significantly important to the literacy success of elementary-age students (Kindall et al., 2018). Principals who understood the value of literacy were willing to gain the necessary content knowledge to efficiently collaborate with teachers regarding literacy instruction (Kindall et al., 2018). Although school leaders may not need the same degree of literacy content knowledge as a literacy teacher, they do require a deep understanding of best practices grounded in effective teaching strategies (Overholt & Szabocsik, 2013). School leaders who are not skillful with their knowledge of literacy instruction have a challenging time observing literacy instruction and providing appropriate instructional feedback for teachers (Hoerr, 2016). A principals' knowledge of literacy is relevant to the instructional support they may provide through their concentrated and intentional instructional leadership practices; therefore it is critical principals remain current in best practices for instruction (Newman, Supovitz, Prociw, Hull, & Collins, 2017).

Another instructional leadership practice for principals was to use their content knowledge to support teachers in effectively aligning content with standards. Standards assist with the consistency of student expectations and provide clear learning targets for students and educators, which, in turn, promotes student achievement (Glatthorn et al., 2016; Kindall et al., 2018). Academic standards are guides to common expectations and student grade-level learning targets. The accountability movement was in its early stages in 1994 with the introduction of national academic standards (United States Department of Education, 2017). This movement required minimum standards to be met by students to demonstrate their mastery of content. The requirements for all students to receive instruction based on high academic standards would better prepare them to be successful in college or the workforce

(United States Department of Education, 2017). Stakeholders would be informed by the principal of collective student progress in every school. This shared information would encompass the percentage of students making progress on meeting the content standards based on results from state assessments (United States Department of Education, 2017). Therefore, principals must establish state standards as the foundation for all instruction (Glatthorn et al., 2016). By incorporating the expectation for alignment of content to grade level standards, principals can guide teachers and indirectly assist students with making adequate progress

Summary and Conclusions

The review of the literature indicated a connection between instructional leadership practices of school principals and student achievement, as well as the importance of student literacy skills. Multiple definitions within the literature established the term instructional leadership and emphasized the themes of learning, monitoring, and supporting teachers. The reviewed literature provided a focus on the principal's role as an instructional leader, establishing the importance of curriculum knowledge and school climate. The identification of a link between a principal's knowledge of curriculum content with standards acknowledged the idea that instructional leadership supported classroom instruction and impacted student achievement (Glatthorn et al., 2016).

The influence a principal has on student achievement was also reviewed in the literature, indicating principals potentially affect up to 25% of their students' achievement (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Establishing a school administrator’s influence on student learning and achievement is second only to that of having an effective teacher in

the classroom (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). The literature reviewed also indicated as the role of a school principal continued to evolve from an organizational manager to an instructional leader, administrators have the responsibility to improve student achievement and employ various instructional leadership practices. With the multitude of daily responsibilities required to effectively manage a school, finding time for dedicated instructional practice designed to affect student learning was a challenge for most principals (Sebastian et al., 2018). The reviewed literature provided evidence indicating the ability of a principal‘s instructional leadership practices and activities to influence the academic performance of students in their schools. Reviewed literature also indicated reading and writing was essential to a student’s success in school and potential promotion in the workplace and was necessary for the lifelong learning needs of students (Reardon et al., 2016).

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The problem of interest in this study was the declining student literacy scores of third- through eighth-grade students within one rural school district in a southern state in the United States. The purpose of this study was to examine the principal and assistant principal instructional leadership practices influencing student literacy in this district. Chapter 3 includes a discussion of the rationale for a basic qualitative design and the role of the researcher. I provide a description of the methodology, including information regarding the participants, the sampling strategy, and recruitment procedures. I describe the instrumentation for the study. I collected data by conducting semistructured, one-on-one interviews with 11 elementary principals and assistant principals from the same school district, and I analyzed the qualitative data through multiple coding cycles. Following a description of the data analysis, I discuss trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, and dependability. In addition, I provide an explanation of the ethical design of my study, including information regarding the purpose of the study, the process, and participant protection.

Research Design and Rationale

One research question guided the study:

RQ: How have elementary principals and assistant principals implemented instructional leadership practices in their schools to influence student literacy?

A basic qualitative study was used to explore, provide a thorough description, and address the research question. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), qualitative research is conducted in an attempt to better understand an individual, a group, or a phenomenon in a natural setting in a manner accurately reflecting a person or group's meaning based upon their experiences. Qualitative research is about viewing, understanding, and engaging with people as experts in relation to their own life experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Basic qualitative research studies contribute to fundamental knowledge and theory. A qualitative research approach allows the researcher to experience situations from the participants' perspectives, record important information from interviews, and better understand the issue to be studied (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The basic qualitative research design was appropriate for this study because the intent was to contribute to fundamental knowledge and a better understanding of the instructional leadership practices employed by elementary principals and assistant principals to influence student literacy.

Role of the Researcher

As the sole researcher, I planned and conducted a basic qualitative study to address the research question. By design, the study included 11 elementary principals and assistant principals with whom I conducted semistructured interviews, recording each interview with an iPhone and a separate Phillips digital recorder and transcribing the elementary administrators' responses verbatim using collected field notes as a supplement. I analyzed the transcripts by identifying common patterns or themes and

coded the data accordingly. After a thorough analysis, I explained the data and described the findings.

I currently work as an elementary principal in the same school district as the participants, which provided an opportunity to form a professional association with them. I did not communicate details about this study beyond the information provided to all research participants and did not hold any authority over the participants, as I was of equal professional status with each of the participants in the school district.

While I maintained positive working relationships with study participants, I was viewed as the researcher during the interview process with the district principals. I worked to curtail any potential bias because I did work in the same school district as the elementary principals and assistant principals. Bias exists in all research, according to Ravitch and Carl (2016). Therefore, in order to curtail any potential biases, I maintained a personal journal and acknowledged any biases before, during, and after data collection, which assisted with the study's validity. I conducted this research to provide insight into principal and assistant principal instructional leadership practices influencing student literacy, and I acknowledged and reflected on potential bias throughout the research process.

Methodology

Introduction

The methodological approach for this study was a basic qualitative study. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), qualitative research is conducted in an attempt to better understand an individual, a group, or a phenomenon in a natural setting in a

manner accurately reflecting the person or group's meaning based upon their experiences. Hancock and Algozzine (2017) stated qualitative research has a goal of understanding a "situation under investigation primarily from the participants', not the researcher's perspective" (p. 8). The basic qualitative research approach is not linear but involves systematic research processes of interpreting views and making meaning of experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Basic qualitative research affords a researcher the opportunity to explore a phenomenon from a real-world perspective (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). With basic qualitative research, researchers anticipate acquiring a greater understanding of a situation (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). In this basic qualitative study, I intended to address a gap in practice whereby it was unknown how elementary principals and assistant principals implemented instructional leadership practices to influence student literacy. The problem for this research was related to declining student literacy scores in a rural school district in the southern United States, which was important because it involved a local concern related to elementary principal and assistant principal instructional leadership practices and student literacy. This study established grounds for future research on instructional leadership practices focused on influencing student literacy.

Participant Selection

The participants in this study were 11 elementary school principals and assistant principals from a rural district in the southern United States. All participants in this study volunteered to participate and came from the population of six female principals, two male principals, six female assistant principals, and one male assistant principal. One

elementary school in the district had no assistant principal due to its low student population.

The study's sample size was relatively small; however, Patton (2015) stated it is common for qualitative research to have a smaller number of participants which enhances the deep and rich nature of the study design. A small sample size could range from five to 20 participants; there is no exact number of required participants for qualitative research, as sample size is based on the purpose of the study and the research questions (Patton, 2015).

I sent an email invitation to each of the district's elementary principals and assistant principals requesting they participate in this study (see Appendix D). In this email, I explained the study, its purpose, and the matter of their voluntary participation. I also informed them of the ethical considerations of this study, including a formal consent form ensuring the confidentiality of each principal. Additional information was provided to each potential participant, explaining their ability to refuse to answer any question if they did not feel comfortable. I also made each principal aware they could withdraw from the study at any time during the process. Participants had the opportunity to contact me by email if they had any questions. Sampling for this study included the steps below:

1. I obtained written permission from the chief academic officer of the district to conduct this research study (see Appendix C).
2. Email invitations for participation in the study were sent to all district elementary principals and elementary assistant principals who were eligible to participate (see Appendix D). In the email, I explained the study, its purpose,

and the matter of their voluntary participation. I also informed them of the ethical considerations of this study, including a formal consent form.

3. I followed up with every administrator from whom I had not received a response, requesting a reply within 3 days.
4. At the close of the participant selection period, when all participant consent forms had been received, I scheduled an individual interview time with each principal and assistant principal.

Instrumentation

The data collection instrument for this basic qualitative study was a researcher-created interview protocol including the interview questions (see Appendix A). In this protocol, I created five questions designed to gather responses from the participants, which successfully answered the research question. I provided these questions to two supervisors who had earned doctorate degrees to ensure the protocol questions were effectively aligned with my research, and I was open to making any necessary adjustments to the interview protocol questions based upon their feedback. This process helped to ensure the validity of the protocol.

Data were gathered during interviews with the participants, who were asked the same five questions for consistency. I asked probing and follow-up questions to garner the ideas, views, instructional practices, and leadership behaviors of all participants. By using a semistructured interview format, I was able to ask clarifying questions not included in the provided protocol.

The field notes I documented during the interviews included participants' verbal reactions in addition to any other behavioral patterns I could hear. After each interview, I provided the participant the opportunity to ask questions to clarify their interview responses or the research process. By using a semistructured interview format, I had the ability to ask clarifying and follow-up questions not included in the provided protocol. I assigned each administrator a number from 1-11 and identified each in the study's results as Participant 1--11 to ensure confidentiality. All information and data collected during the research were locked in my home office. After 5 years, I will dispose of the collected data and audio recordings.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

After securing approval from the school district (Appendix C) and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for this study (approval # 06-30-20-0031253), I sent a recruitment letter through email to each elementary principal and assistant principal from the local school district (Appendix D). My contact information was included in the event any participant had a question. The letter also outlined specific information regarding the study.

Once these responses were received from the principals, I sent the qualifying participants the consent form, which provided a more thorough description of the study and included the study problem, purpose, and detailed information regarding data collection and storage. The information provided each participant's rights as well as an explanation of the confidentiality aspect of the study.

Data Collection

As this was a basic qualitative study, I collected data through one-on-one interviews with district elementary administrators. The main goal of using interviews was to obtain a clear understanding of individuals' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Creswell and Poth (2016) also stated interviews are effective ways of collecting rich, descriptive qualitative data. The individual semistructured interviews were conducted in July when school was not in session. Due to COVID-19, all participants indicated a telephone interview was their preference rather than the option of an in-person interview or a Zoom meeting. The audio from each interview was maintained for transcription purposes. The interviews were conducted from my home office or school office. Each interview was scheduled to accommodate the participants' individual schedules and lasted between 23 and 45 minutes each. The focus of each interview was the instructional leadership practices the participants had implemented at their schools to influence student literacy. I used an iPhone and a separate Phillips digital recorder to record the interviews for transcription accuracy. I took field notes to document additional evidence from the interview assisting with my understanding of the principals' perceptions and to improve the depth of my findings. Interviewees were noted as being uncertain, hesitant, excited, or confident. Once each interview was complete, I encouraged questions from the participant, followed the interview protocol (see Appendix A), and thanked the participant for their assistance and time. Each interview was transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. All transcriptions were thoroughly analyzed and coded to identify themes.

Data Analysis

Analyzing qualitative data can be overwhelming due to the amount of information to be managed and processed (Burkholder, Cox, & Crawford, 2016; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The activity of data analysis must be organized, with the researcher categorizing data and placing it into segments to create meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2016). I used a two-cycle process of provisional coding and open pattern coding. I used information regarding instructional leadership practices from my study of the literature and the conceptual framework to develop a list of 15 provisional codes prior to conducting the interviews (see Appendix A). The plan for the management of all data collected is critical (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). I used Creswell and Guetterman's (2019) steps as guidance for analyzing and organizing the data, including the following:

1. Exploring the data
2. Determining commonalities using codes
3. Establishing themes by thoroughly analyzing the identified codes
4. Representing the results of the study in narrative or visual forms
5. Interpreting the meaning of the data findings
6. Validating the results

Each recorded interview was downloaded to my personal computer, which is password protected. I transcribed each interview within 3 days of conducting it using Microsoft Word. Once each transcription was complete, I reviewed it for accuracy and provided the interview transcription to each participant. I continued to analyze and code the data for common words, phrases, and themes and used a spreadsheet to organize the

responses by participant question. I transferred each code into a spreadsheet using each participant's assigned number.

Provisional coding is conducted with a master list of codes, which is created before a researcher performs any research. I created a list of 15 provisional codes for this study from the conceptual framework and the literature review. Ten codes came directly from Murphy's 10 functions of instructional leadership and five codes were derived from the literature review. The process of coding began by taking the large amount of information from each interview and organizing it into a manageable amount. The process of coding took time and multiple cycles. I identified similar words or phrases and noted commonalities of words and phrases during this process, and recorded these words in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Field notes and observations were kept in an online journal using Microsoft Office.

Following the first cycle, I completed a second cycle using open coding where I closely examined the provisional coded items from the first cycle and grouped together the words or phrases with like ideas, commonalities, and patterns. These pattern codes were used to determine the major themes and categories. The pattern codes were also used to connect the data to the findings. There were nine categories established using both coding cycles, with three themes emerging from the data.

Trustworthiness

To address the validity, or trustworthiness, of my study, I referred to Ravitch and Carl (2016), who asserted trustworthiness refers to the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of research. Researchers should consider the issues that

might arise within the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are all concepts for assessing the rigor of a study, which ultimately assist researchers plan for valid studies (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility refers to the researcher's ability to formulate a perspective of and accurately share the participants' views as the researcher engages in specific strategies such as peer review, transcript validation, and member checking. Peer review is a validity strategy used to when a researcher shares their research with a peer to gather input and feedback on the aspects of the research itself (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Transcript validation involves participants verifying the accuracy of the transcribed interview and serves to decrease the incidence of incorrect responses. Member checking is a process in which the researcher checks-in with or takes information back to participants regarding the participants' thoughts and feelings of the research in order to determine accuracy or credibility (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

In this basic qualitative study, I used peer review, transcript validation, and member checking to ensure credibility. After conducting each interview, I transcribed the audio-recorded interviews and provided each participant with a copy of their interview transcript so we could discuss their transcribed responses and ensure I had correctly portrayed their ideas and experiences (Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Ravitch and Carl (2016) explained participant validation strategies are opportunities for researchers to "check-in" with participants regarding aspects of the study, which would include a conversation regarding how the participants feel about the data pertaining to them when

verifying their statements or transcripts. Throughout this dialogue, I provided the participants with an opportunity to clarify their responses which strengthened the credibility of the study.

To ensure credibility, I used peer reviewers with an earned doctorate degree in the field of education and who had experience with qualitative research. Securing an appropriate peer reviewer was vital to receiving feedback that challenged my research critically and provided constructive criticism or comments in a purposeful way (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). My peer reviewers reviewed my data and codes to reduce the likelihood of any breach in validity and reliability. Revisions were made to correct any issues.

Transferability

Transferability is the ability of the researcher to apply the findings of a study to a larger population (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Accurate descriptions ensure the transferability of the study as Ravitch and Carl (2016, p.189) explained, “The goal of qualitative research is not to produce findings that can be directly applied to other settings and contexts.” Instead, the findings from research can be used to make comparisons to other studies and situations which can then transfer to other contexts. By using rich, thick descriptions, I enhanced transferability with the clear details of the interview and specific perspectives of the study's participants.

Dependability

The concept of dependability is important to trustworthiness because it establishes research findings as consistent, stable, and able to be replicated (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). It is critical for a researcher to present findings other researchers would come to

the same consensus and interpret the findings in the same way based on the same data. I provided a detailed description of the data plan and the rationale for the choices regarding the data collection as outlined in Chapter 4. The findings were presented in a clear, concise manner so future researchers could effectively replicate the study and produce the same findings. Additionally, the process of data collection and analyzing was time consuming, especially in regards to the transcription process. However, through the methodical steps of recording interviews and transcribing verbatim what was said by each participant in the interview, the research component of this study was stable and easily replicable. Ravitch and Carl (2016) state research must provide support for the decisions made regarding data collection, which involves using appropriate and sequenced methods to answer the research questions for the study.

Confirmability

Confirmability in qualitative research pertains to the degree of researcher neutrality or the verification that the findings from the study were supported by the data from the participants rather than being shaped by the researcher (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated confirmability can be considered the idea that someone besides the researcher can confirm data from a study. Therefore, a researcher's ability to be neutral is critical.

As a researcher, I maintained neutrality throughout the process of collecting data and analyzing the data. When coding the data from the interviews, I ensured all themes came from the participants' responses rather than from my own thoughts or ideas. I reflected in an online journal throughout the research process to safeguard against bias or

personal opinions as a way to ensure trustworthiness of my study. This process of reflection throughout the study allowed me to thoroughly consider the data from all angles and ensure the findings were based solely on the data and were not guided or directed by my own thoughts. Throughout the process, there was a natural tendency to acknowledge my own opinion regarding the questions or responses. However, by using the reflection journal, I was able to think through my personal opinions and remove them from the collected data.

Ethical Procedures

In research studies, there are various ethical procedures to which one must adhere. Due to the subjectivity of qualitative studies, bias can take place without instituting precautions at the beginning of a study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). It is also important no harm comes to the study participants or anyone associated with the study either by physical or emotional means (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Permission for conducting the research is also essential. For this qualitative study, the district granted permission in writing, and I obtained individual participant permission in writing at the appropriate stage of the study. The Walden IRB also provided approval for the research to begin, keeping in mind the safety of each participant. For participants, in the initial email invitation, I provided a consent form including the full disclosure of the study and its purpose. I also explained the interview process, including an explanation of how the data from the research will be used. I protected the participants from physical, mental, or professional harm throughout the study; provided participant confidentiality; assured principals their participation in this study is optional, and provided the

opportunity for participants to exit the interview or research at any time. I also ensured the participants were aware no participant would receive compensation for their interview or any participation in the study.

It is essential to acknowledge the proper handling of the data is critical to valid research results. I collected data using individual, semistructured interviews and used an interview protocol to ensure the consistency of the interview process. I audio recorded each interview on an Iphone and a separate Phillips digital recorder and transcribed each into a Word document. I protected the confidentiality of the participants as I stored the interview data in a password protected file on my personal computer and stored the computer in my home office. I also created backup copies of the data on a flash drive and maintained copies of all transcriptions and field notes in a locked safe in my home office.

Summary

A basic qualitative research study approach was used to explore elementary principals' and assistant principals' perceptions of their instructional leadership practices influencing student literacy. Using Murphy's 10 functions from the conceptual framework of instructional leadership, a semistructured interview protocol was created and used during the data collection process. By understanding the perspectives of the elementary administrators and specific practices used to address literacy in their schools, data were established, providing a complete picture of the current state of principal and assistant principal instructional leadership practices within the local context.

I justified and explained the research design and rationale for the study and included participant information, the context of the study, and my role as the researcher

as the sole person responsible for the collection of data for this research in Chapter 3. I described the ethical considerations and trustworthiness regarding the study's data. I used peer reviewers, transcript validation, and member checking to address the credibility of the study. I also used rich, thick descriptions to assist with transferability. Dependability was addressed through a detailed description of my data plan and the rationale for the choices regarding the data collection methods including the data analysis. Finally, to address trustworthiness, I ensured my neutrality as a researcher by reflecting on all aspects and decisions in the process, and tracking these reflections in an online journal. I also explained how the data would be organized, analyzed, and interpreted into emergent themes. In Chapter 4, I presented the findings from the study based on the analysis of the data. I concluded with a discussion of the findings, recommendations for action, and further study, as well as the implications for social change in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4: Results

This basic qualitative research study was conducted to explore the local elementary principals' and assistant principals' perceptions of the instructional leadership practices they implemented to influence student literacy. The following research question guided the study:

RQ: How have elementary principals and assistant principals implemented instructional leadership practices in their schools to influence student literacy?

Chapter 4 contains the setting, procedures for the data collection, data analysis process, results of the study, and components involved in establishing the trustworthiness of the findings in this research study. This chapter concludes with a summary.

Setting

The setting for this basic qualitative study was a rural school district in the southern region of the United States. Each district elementary principal and assistant principal was invited to participate in an individual, semistructured interview. The local district had nine elementary schools at the time of the research. Eight of the schools had both a principal and an assistant principal. One elementary school had no assistant principal due to its small student population. The district's student enrollment at the time of the study was 7,143. The rural school district did not have a diverse student population compared to those of surrounding districts: Black, Hispanic, and Native American students, combined, represented 7.6% of the student population, whereas White students represented 92.4%. Further, 98.4% of the students spoke English, leaving only 1.6%

regarded as English learners. Additionally, 13.9% of the district's students had a disability. All elementary schools in the district received Title 1 funds, although there were varying percentages of identified economically disadvantaged students in each elementary school. In the 2018-2019 school year, the district had an overall student growth level of Level 3 on a scale of 1 to 5, with Level 5 being the highest. The district's Level 3 rating included growth for all tested subjects in Grades 3 through 12. No district score was available for 2019-2020 due to the cancellation of state testing.

At the time of participant selection for this study, schools had been closed for 4 months due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The district principals and supervisors were exploring ways to initiate a safe return to school for all students and staff for the upcoming school year. It is important to note the district administrators may have been under pressure as the plan for starting school had not been decided upon at the time, and the start of the new school year was only a few weeks away. Additionally, the instructional leadership practices the district administrators had in place had ended abruptly, with no opportunity for administrators to gather student or school data regarding the success of the instructional practices they had implemented specific to the 2019-2020 school year.

Eleven elementary administrators consented to participate in the study. All participants met the established criteria of being employed as an elementary principal or assistant principal in the local school district, and each had implemented instructional leadership practices in his or her school. According to Merriam and Grenier (2019), interviews should contain questions to gather the demographics of the participants;

therefore, each interviewee was asked basic demographic questions (Table 2). Of the 11 participants, two were male, and the remaining nine were female. Six elementary principals participated in this study, as did five elementary assistant principals. One of the administrators was new to the local district, and all others had been employed as school administrators in this district for up to 7 years. All had advanced degrees, with four of the 11 holding a master's degree, six of the 11 holding a specialist degree, and one principal holding a doctorate degree.

Table 2

Demographics of Study Participants

Administrators	Degree	Years working in education	Grade and subject of prior teaching experience
Principal 1	Master's	23	3-8, 9-12, Math, ELA, Science, Social Studies, Special Education
Principal 2	Doctorate	22	6-8, ELA, Science
Principal 3	Specialist	12	6-8, ELA, CTE (Career & Technical Education)
Principal 4	Master's	24	3-8, Math, ELA, Science, Social Studies
Principal 5	Master's	21	PreK-2, 3-8, Math, ELA, Science, Social Studies
Principal 6	Specialist	21	9-12, ELA
Principal 7	Specialist	33	PreK-2, 3-8, Math, ELA, Science, Social Studies, CTE
Principal 8	Specialist	9	6-8, 9-12, SPED
Principal 9	Master's	15	6-8, Math, Science
Principal 10	Specialist	26	3-8, 9-12, Math, ELA, Science, Special Education
Principal 11	Specialist	13	6-8, Math

Data Collection

I collected interview data for this basic qualitative study to address one research question. The intent was to gain descriptions of each participant's experiences as an instructional leader regarding implementing instructional leadership practices influencing student literacy in their school. To recruit participants, principals and assistant principals at the local site were invited to participate in the study through an email invitation.

Fifteen elementary administrators in the district were eligible and invited to participate. Of the 15 principals and assistant principals invited to participate, 11 consented to be interviewed. For the study, I created an interview protocol to use during each administrator interview, which included the five open-ended questions. The interviews were semistructured. Additional clarifying and probing questions could be asked and could allow participants to share more detail about their lived experiences.

I conducted the interviews during the summer months when elementary administrators were not at work, which allowed for more flexibility during the day. Initially, in the plan outlined in Chapter 3, all interviews were to be conducted outside of regular school day hours and through face-to-face meetings. To accommodate the study's participants and as indicated in the informed consent, each was provided with the option of a face-to-face interview, phone interview, or an interview via the audiovisual computer meeting platform Zoom. Due to COVID-19 constraints, and for the safety of all, all 11 participants elected for their interview to be conducted via phone. While face-to-face interviews have been the primary source of data collection for qualitative research, phone interviews have also been established as an appropriate method. Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) found transcript data from phone and face-to-face interviews revealed no significant differences. However, other research has indicated "the telephone mode is not well-suited to the task of qualitative interviewing primarily because the lack of face-to-face contact is said to restrict the development of rapport and a 'natural' encounter" (Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013).

Following my approved IRB application, I conducted the 11 semistructured individual phone interviews with the local school district's elementary principals and assistant principals. Each phone interview was conducted in an office setting using a speakerphone and was recorded with the audio recording app Voice Memo on a password-protected iPhone and a separate Phillips digital recorder. I used the interview protocol (Appendix A) with each participant, asking the same five questions aligned to my research question. However, various clarification and probing questions were asked during each interview. The recorded phone interviews were transcribed verbatim and added to the research data collection.

The interview protocol (Appendix A) was used to gain the administrators' perceptions of their instructional leadership practices influencing student literacy. The interviews varied in length, but none lasted more than 45 minutes. All questions from the interview protocol were asked in the same order. Probing questions were asked of each participant to clarify thoughts without influencing their responses. On two occasions during the interviews, I was told or asked, "I hope that is what you are looking for," and "Did that answer your question?" When responding, I avoided leading the interviewees toward a specific answer and encouraged them to share their thoughts, instructing them there were no wrong answers.

Each interview was recorded using the recording app Voice Memo. I placed my office phone on speaker or hands free mode and set the iPhone and a separate Phillips digital recorder on the table beside the speaker. I turned each Voice Memo recording off between participant interviews. There were 11 separate voice recordings captured during

the interview phase with written consent to record all 11 participants. In addition, each participant also confirmed consent for their interview to be recorded prior to each interview. After the completion of the interviews, I transcribed each one verbatim into a Microsoft Word document. Using the comment tab, I coded the participants' responses and then organized them into a Microsoft Excel document.

Data Analysis

I conducted the data collection and analysis in a systematic manner. Initially, the data were coded using the provisional codes from Murphy's conceptual framework for instructional leadership (1983) and the literature review (Appendix B). During the second round of coding, I used the process of pattern coding, emphasizing the emerging themes. I performed data analysis and entered the data into a Microsoft Excel worksheet. The step-by-step approach for the data analysis process was described in more detail in Chapter 3.

- Step 1 of the coding process included a close read of each interview line by line for words and phrases related to Murphy's (1983) 10 instructional leadership practices from his conceptual framework and the provisional code list (Appendix B) based upon the literature review. The words and phrases were assigned a provisional code.
- Step 2 of the coding process involved open coding and rereading the participant responses, searching for patterns appearing in the data related to the research question.

- Step 3 of the coding process involved assigning themes to represent the categories of the key patterns found in the interviews. I examined the data for the themes across all interviews.
- In Step 4, I checked the codes for overlapping meaning. This process allowed me to connect the codes in groups to secure my initial list of main themes. I merged some of the patterns.
- In Step 5, I sorted the coded data into groups to create meaning from the participant responses. Data were examined for relationships of the categories to the research questions.
- Throughout the coding process, I maintained my thoughts and understanding regarding the emerging themes in my journal. The journal also helped me analyze the data as I thought through each connected pattern. The data were coded into three major themes relating to the research question.

Study Results

This basic qualitative research study focused on one research question and was investigated through individual semistructured interviews with 11 elementary principals and assistant principals from one local school district.

RQ: How have elementary principals and assistant principals implemented instructional leadership practices in their schools to influence student literacy?

The principals and assistant principals participating in this study had an understanding of instructional leadership practices that could specifically influence

student literacy. Each administrator provided numerous examples of practices employed in their schools. To analyze the data from the principals' interviews, I utilized a two-cycle coding process, using provisional codes and pattern codes to identify patterns in the participants' responses to the interview questions. The provisional codes (Appendix B) are displayed in the blended list created from the conceptual framework and the review of literature. Fifteen total provisional codes were used during the first cycle coding. Ten provisional codes were aligned with the conceptual framework, and the remaining five provisional codes correlated to the literature review regarding instructional leadership.

The second cycle, open coding data, was used to assign themes for the research. In Cycle 2 of the coding process, I used pattern coding to identify the emerging themes. I derived pattern codes from the interview data, reviewing each participant's coded transcript. From this I determined a final list of codes. I established nine categories, with three significant themes rising from this qualitative research study analysis (Table 3).

Table 3

Data Analysis Categorization

Categories	Themes
Supporting instructional improvement Monitoring literacy instruction and teacher evaluation Promoting a positive school climate	Theme 1: Instructional leadership practices to support teachers
Establishing school goals to support literacy Promoting literacy expectations Monitoring student literacy progress	Theme 2: Instructional leadership practices to support student literacy
Facilitating personnel and programs Developing recognitions, rewards, and celebrations Promoting family and community involvement	Theme 3: Instructional leadership practices to support literacy schoolwide

These themes were (a) literacy-focused instructional leadership practices supporting teachers, (b) literacy-focused instructional leadership practices supporting students, and (c) instructional leadership practices supporting literacy schoolwide. A description and discussion of each theme is provided below.

Theme 1: Instructional Leadership Practices to Support Teachers

Supporting instructional improvement. All 11 participants conveyed specific ideas about instructional leadership and the practices used in their schools. When considering the basic premise of instructional leadership, the district administrators were similar. “Instructional leadership means facilitating my teachers and guiding them in the right direction in terms of providing instruction for students in the classroom,” Participant 1 explained. Participant 2 described instructional leadership as “making sure teachers have all the tools, resources, time and everything they need to do their job.” Participant 6 explained “instructional leadership means knowing […] staff and how to best support them through the leader's actions.”

Principals and assistant principals provided numerous examples of how they supported instructional improvement through instructional leadership practices focused on student literacy. Within each participant’s definition of instructional leadership, they included references to the importance of supporting teachers for instructional improvement. It was evident from all participating administrators they felt a responsibility to support the teachers in their buildings.

The district's school leaders provided examples of how they led professional learning communities (PLCs), data meetings, faculty meetings, and in-service training,

which afforded them the opportunity to keep teachers focused on best practices in literacy instruction as they collaboratively revisited quality literacy instructional strategies. Participant 5 stated she had a “multiyear plan for staff literacy training, beginning with the lower grade teachers in the building.” This principal's support for the teachers was dedicated to improving small group reading instruction and involved teacher training in how to effectively introduce a book, the kinds of questions to ask while reading a book, and how to group students for small group instruction. After the first year, small group reading instruction became the principal’s expectation for K-4 literacy teachers.

District instructional coaches were also used to support instructional improvement. Participant 2 explained, “The district instructional coach came to a faculty meeting to talk to us about the new (ELA) curriculum but specifically about reading strategies and how to make sure these kids are not left behind.” The district's elementary administrators seemed open to learning more about literacy practices and strategies to support their teachers. One administrator described an example of the district instructional coach assisting her with the writing expectations for kindergarten students stemming from an observation of a teacher during a literacy block. Once the instructional coach worked with the administrative team and had cleared up the confusion, the principal stated, “It was a huge learning curve for me.”

In addition, supporting teachers by providing high-quality resources was a commonly used practice. By carefully examining the school’s RTI program and student reading interventions for students in Tier 1 and Tier 2, one school principal decided to purchase a research-based leveled library for younger aged students and novel sets for the

older students. Participant 9 stated he had purchased books for the school library, adding to the high-quality reading material for students and teachers to use with instruction, stating, “We are beginning to add more nonfiction books into the equation.” Participant 2 discussed the multitude of quality resources already available to the teachers but noted her concern, “We are not moving kids and we just keep doing it and doing it and using the same resources with the students when the RTI data clearly says it is not working.” This concern about pushing programs or buying more resources as a potential band-aid to the real problem aligns with the statement from Participant 6 who stated, “I am a big believer in people over programs any day.” Even so, the majority of principals and assistant principals declared the practice of allocating funds to provide teachers with resources would promote instructional improvement.

Monitoring literacy instruction and teacher evaluation. The principals and assistant principals expressed a desire to visit classrooms frequently to remain knowledgeable about the instruction provided to the students in their schools. Participant 6 stated, "I absolutely want to get in classrooms.” When discussing how often the principals observe and monitor their teachers, Participant 5 stated, "I see every teacher ideally once a week but realistically once every other week." For Participants 6 and 8, daily observations were the goal. Participant 8 stated, "We do walkthroughs daily." In this particular school, the principal and assistant principal assigned grade spans to visit each day to ensure they were able to informally observe all teachers in every grade level each week. This continual monitoring of instruction provided insight into what the teachers were teaching, and if the students were learning. Participant 5 described how she

begins her observation cycle each year and uses the observation data to identify her school's needs.

> My admin team starts by calibrating our walkthroughs together. We come out, talk about what we saw, and we give feedback on the teachers. Once we do that and I get a good handle on where we are in the school and what instructional practices are going on in the classrooms, I'm able to determine what our next steps are.

Opportunities for administrators to offer support are directly related to the strategies they observe when conducting informal or formal evaluations.

There was a range of expectations from the district's elementary administrators regarding what literacy-related strategies they may be looking for during their informal classroom visits. For some administrators, there were required procedural details. Participant 7 stated, "We make sure teachers have posted each day on their door what level of book they are reading, their objective, and the materials they are using." Additional information as to what these administrators do with the objective, book level, and materials list was not provided. Participant 5 stated, "I am intentional when I do observations. I don't set teachers up for failure. I trained them, and I have given them feedback, so they know what I'm expecting." Other administrators mentioned specifics such as student engagement with their texts, small group reading instruction, phonics lessons, and writing.

Knowing what quality literacy instruction looks like is critical to a principal's effective evaluation of instruction (Mette et al., 2017). The school principal, as the

instructional leader of the school, has the responsibility to recognize effective instruction as well as obtaining adequate knowledge of instructional strategies to make practical suggestions when conducting teacher evaluations and observations (Bellibas & Liu, 2017; Mette et al., 2017). One principal discussed her purposeful collaboration with another district elementary principal. She stated:

> I had a partnership with a principal in the county. I had her come to my school and conduct walkthroughs with me during the literacy blocks, and then we touched base about what we saw in the lower grades. That experience was very helpful. (Participant 1)

She felt this experience allowed her to grow as an administrator in her ability to evaluate literacy instruction in the lower elementary grades more effectively.

Principals and assistant principals stated their evaluations were connected to the state's teacher assessment model. This model revolves around principals and teachers working together to ensure the best possible instruction is in classrooms every day. The model is a comprehensive, student outcomes-based, statewide educator evaluation system using a rubric and a scale of 1-5 in twelve indicators related to classroom instruction. Participant 10 stated, "For evaluations and making a connection between the literacy in the classroom; we use the (state) rubric to make it all come together." This administrator stated she used no new literacy-based criteria other than the criteria from the state rubric when she visited classrooms. When considering teacher evaluations and the state's rubric as a guide for literacy observations, Participant 2 added, "It is research-based and a good model on how to support teachers as instructional leaders."

Participant 5 took another approach to teacher observations and evaluations. Her focus was clearly on useful feedback, whether it pertained to an informal or formal observation. This principal stated, "When I conduct observations, I give feedback on one thing that the teacher did that is impactful if they were to replicate it." She further stated her feedback is specific, so the teachers know what was most beneficial in improving student learning. This type of focused feedback came from an idea she read about in a professional text related to research regarding principal walkthrough evaluations and feedback for teachers. Another principal also supported teachers and their instructional improvement by providing focused feedback from informal and formal observations. Participant 1 indicated her feedback plan for teachers, which included a different weekly literacy focus. She stated, "One week, I would focus on writing. I would go through the building and would look for writing samples in the hall. I would give feedback to the students and feedback to the class on little post-it notes." Teachers would then have one-on-one conversations with the principal and receive their feedback. It was the principal's plan to reduce any anxiety teachers may have felt. "I had to make myself present several times in a variety of non-threatening ways before the formal observation" (Participant 1).

Promoting a positive school climate. Research indicates a strong correlation between teacher morale and student performance (Reeves et al., 2017); therefore, a principal's incorporation of instructional leadership practices to improve the school climate by increasing teacher morale is valuable and worthwhile (Hollingworth et al., 2018). Principals and assistant principals in this study mentioned several activities to increase teacher morale within the school day. Participant 8 stated, "It's the little stuff, the

little rewards that we get teachers." Ranging from the teachers' favorite drinks to handwritten notes of encouragement, to effective communication to keep teachers knowledgeable about school happenings have found a place in the district's elementary schools. Participant 4 said, "I have the reminder app for all of my faculty and staff, and every day I send them out a positive quote. You know, if it affects even one of them, then that is ok with me." Participant 9 explained the thought behind the unique things their leadership team does for the teachers and staff, "We're not perfect, but we try to make sure everybody feels they are valued; everyone from kindergarten to the janitors. At least they feel welcome, and that's the very least that we can do." Participant 6 considered the connection between the administration and the teachers and added, "I think with the success we have seen, everything comes down to the relationship component." Other ideas provided by the principals and assistant principals to increase teacher morale were to greet teachers every morning as they came into the building and to maintain an open-door policy, where teachers feel welcome and comfortable to share concerns or ideas with the administration. These morale boosters have additional positive results as Participant 7 explained, "The staff is a family, and we want each other to succeed. Our teachers have been there for years and years. We have very little turnover."

Theme 2: Instructional Leadership Practices to Support Student Literacy

Establishing school goals to support literacy. Promoting academic goals provides purpose to schools' learning activities, an area where the principal has a considerable impact (Ozdemir, 2019). The majority of participants discussed a school goal in terms of a student reading goal correlated to a particular program providing points

and school rewards for student reading. Participant 9 addressed the school literacy goal in a broad sense stating, "We want quality instead of quantity. We want these kids to look at books like they are becoming part of their lives." This statement was in regards to the reading program which tracked student reading comprehension and awarded points to the readers. The school or teacher could reward students for their reading based upon the points earned if they chose to do so. Participant 9 went on to say, "There comes a point where the focus isn't the book, it is on the points. Where is the interaction with the book?" The uncertainty of how best to proceed with using this program schoolwide was evident.

All administrators acknowledged the use of this program to some degree in their schools. However, seven of the 11 school leaders stated they had already reduced the number of grade levels participating in the program or had considered not using the program at all in the future. The struggle for the administrators who were considering eliminating this program came down to monitoring student reading. Participant 5 stated, "Teachers are in love with AR. I think it's because of the way they can track what their kids are doing. We have already done away with AR in K and 1. I will continue to wean them (teachers) away." However, Participant 3 felt the need to maintain this program in the school. She stated, "AR is something that we could easily put to the side, but I feel it is useful, so I'm consistent with how I want it used in the building."

School literacy goals can be set on an individual student basis and be connected to reading improvement as Participant 6 explained, "We do the goal setting. Students take the STAR reading test and we have one-on-one conversations with them to set

(individual) goals. That has been beneficial to improving literacy across the school." Additionally, the schoolwide goal of improving reading can connect to student recognition or rewards. Children enjoy being recognized for their accomplishments. Because there is a concentration on schoolwide literacy, Participant 6 said, "Our awards programs will emphasize literacy. We want our children to be lifelong learners." This administrator continued by applauding the teachers in the school for fostering the love of reading while "including the appropriate level of rigor" (Participant 6).

Another school goal mentioned by one elementary administrator was differentiation. "We were trying to focus this year on differentiation in all aspects. I think this hits on those literacy skills" (Participant 11). However, this administrator suggested what might work for one student may not work for another; therefore, the administration at this school had worked to collect a "bank of strategies for every teacher to make sure every student is successful" (Participant 11). Additionally, Participant 2 explained another example of establishing school goals was the school's emphasis on cross-curricular reading. Participant 2 stated, "One thing we do with intentionality is to get everybody to the table, cross-curricular. I've tried to help connect the dots through training and teacher sharing." This principal continued to explain a specific in-service held in her building where the special area teachers described to the faculty ways they could support the work in the regular classes. The training also consisted of support from the district ELA instructional coach on specific reading strategies that could be used in any content area to support student comprehension.

One school administrator's objective was "to create a safe and fun learning environment" (Participant 2). This goal was emphasized through the creative examples of the instruction taking place in the school. For example, in science, a full-size skeleton was rolled to the gym, and students raced with cards to label each bone. Additionally, this administrator had a teacher goal requiring each teacher to "build success into every student's day even where they're not as strong" (Participant 2). Therefore, teachers identified where the students' lowest achievement was and coordinated with their greatest learning strength. This focus assured the faculty and staff "know their kids and did not just label them" (Participant 2).

Promoting literacy expectations. Evidence of the district's principals and assistant principals promoting their literacy expectations was noted. Participant 7 stated the administration at their school had the expectation "to get the kids reading and spending more time reading because the more time they spent reading, the better their achievement test scores are." This administrator also stated the students are very aware of the administration's reading expectations because they "really push it" (Participant 7). Students were able to earn t-shirts at varying levels related to the number of points earned in a school-wide reading program. Each year approximately 400-600 t-shirts are distributed. Participant 3 explained their primary literacy expectation for students was concentrated on bringing back the joy of reading. "I made every teacher in the building do an activity with their students just for the love of reading, just something related to books for a while to get the kids back into doing fun things with books."

Another literacy expectation for students was specific to a particular grade level. “Our expectation is that all third graders will be on grade level in reading by the end of third grade” (Participant 2). To promote this expectation, teachers were encouraged to build in reading enrichment opportunities for every child. For students, this literacy expectation meant taking time each day for independent reading. The principal also discussed buddy reading, an opportunity in which students in the upper grades were paired with students in the lower grades to spend time reading together. In a similar example, this principal discussed the Junior Beta students in her school, engaging in "study reading" and literacy activities with the younger students each day before the morning bell. Participant 2 discussed her effective utilization of the large number of community volunteers who would visit the school and read with the children. With this program, she provided the students with the additional reading practice time they desperately needed. This plan had worked well for their school as the majority of the volunteers were retired teachers. Each of the strategies utilized by the district elementary principals promoted their literacy expectations and featured student-friendly opportunities to have books in hand as well as time to practice reading each day.

Monitoring student progress. Hitt and Tucker (2016) explained the key to productive leader expectations is consistent monitoring. These researchers stated school leaders must frequently monitor their expectations for students, teachers, and the school (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). The district administrators participating in this study worked to promote literacy in their buildings with their students through a focused student goal-setting plan implemented to monitor student literacy progress (Participant 11). "We have

meetings every month to set student literacy goals. We are focused on literacy, and so I help teachers set goals for that term" (Participant 11). This administrator went on to disclose they do not display student progress on the wall, in their building, such as information presented on a data wall. Instead, the teachers maintain a class data binder, which they use to track each student's progress. These binders are brought to every meeting and are a helpful way to organize all of the student data.

Participant 3 explained one example she and her staff used to monitor student progress. “I have teachers to bring student writing samples into our data meetings a few times each year. We can look at how much students have grown” (Participant 3). She continued to explain how they collectively used data meetings to monitor individual student growth and examine the differentiation strategies teachers used in regards to the varying ability levels of students in each class. By studying the student work and potential growth of high, medium, and lower abilities throughout the year, the teachers and administrators could see potential areas of improvement needed to meet all students' academic needs.

Although each principal or assistant principal explained they hold monthly data meetings with teachers and staff to monitor student progress, another principal used these meetings to carefully examine the universal screener or progress monitoring assessment results provided by the district to study a specific subgroup. Based on this particular school's data, students with disabilities were identified as a subgroup in need of improvement. "At our data teams, we take a look at student STAR information throughout the year and CBM probes. We are looking at what is going on in the RTI

groups as we track student success" (Participant 6). Additionally, Participant 1 said of the data meetings, "Not only are we looking at a student's high stakes year-end data, but we look at real-time data. I think those are some of the most productive meetings we have."

Theme 3: Instructional Leadership Practices to Support Literacy Schoolwide

Facilitating personnel and programs. As an instructional leader, facilitation of personnel and knowing where to best place teachers is a useful instructional leadership skill. One administrator explained a turnover issue with certified personnel that impacted her school. “I got a new ELA teacher in November last year, and we had a science teacher to move Fall Break. I also had to find somebody to teach math, so we had to rearrange. That was a struggle" (Participant 4). Finding the best fit for a teacher’s grade level or subject to teach takes time as school leaders watch for their staff's strengths and encourage professional growth and development in areas that would best develop the teacher.

Another district leader explained, "Having the right people in place is more beneficial than having any program” (Participant 6). Participant 6 continued to disclose their administrative team's thoughts behind the placement of staff, as they were intentional with the assignment of teaching assistants in the school to have the most influence on student growth and achievement. "When we schedule assistants, we look for the assistant's strengths first and foremost and try to place them at the most appropriate level. We also consider which teacher this assistant would work best with" (Participant 6). Content knowledge is just as important for a teaching assistant, as is his or her ability

to work well with others and must come into play when placing in classrooms for support. Considering the best placement of staff supports schoolwide improvement, which is why the training of assistants is an integral component to an effective plan for continuous improvement. Participant 5 explained, she had trained teaching assistants and teachers in her school over a two year period, on the selection of and usage of high-quality materials for literacy intervention.

Participant 4 spoke about facilitating personnel with the placement of contracted instructional facilitators to support their schoolwide literacy improvement initiative. "I used my instructional money to hire four instructional facilitators who are retired teachers, which was a chunk of money, but I feel they're well worth it." She explained these instructional facilitators work approximately 45 minutes daily in the school's kindergarten through second-grade classrooms to support student reading. These retired educators worked two to three days each week and spent most of the time working with students in a small group setting.

The facilitation of personnel was discussed as were the principals' leadership practices involving the scheduling of schoolwide programs. District principals spoke about adjusting the master schedule to allow for better placement of mandated programs such as Response to Intervention, or RTI. "One thing that will not happen this year is there will not be interruptions in the literacy block. We moved the lower grades RTI time from late morning to early afternoon" (Participant 1). Participant 11 also discussed the protected literacy time in their school's master schedule. "We were very consistent across the board. We took a structured approach with everybody following the same schedule.

There were limited reasons why we messed with the instructional time of teachers. It was protected, sacred time" (Participant 11). This principal explained their structured and consistent approach to their protected schedule was well received by the teachers.

Additionally, the use of district instructional coaches was discussed numerous times. Participant 1 explained how the coaches would come to school to model literacy lessons for the teacher and would meet with the teacher afterward to debrief. She would cover the class herself during the debriefing time to allow for this interaction of personnel. "I helped facilitate some small groups so the teacher and the coach could have more time to work together to focus on best practices for literacy. This time was also tailored to the individual teacher's needs" (Participant 1). As a school, the coaches would work with teachers across all grade levels, so this facilitation of personnel did add to the collective goal to improve student literacy in the school.

Developing recognitions, rewards, and celebrations. Elementary students are excited by extrinsic rewards, recognitions, and celebrations. The district principals developed schoolwide opportunities for students to be recognized for reading accomplishments or improvement. Principals shared ideas such as students earning t-shirts for reaching specific reading goals, winning gift cards as prizes, or recognitions at award celebrations focusing on student literacy. "The Accelerated Reader point system encourages students to read" (Participant 6). This system of reading comprehension quizzes awarding points to students who then received a class or school reward was used in every school in some form; however, the majority of the schools had explored the idea of eliminating this program's use in their building as discussed previously. Nonetheless,

students received tangible rewards and recognition for earning points through the AR system in every elementary school in this district.

Another opportunity to acknowledge student independent reading accomplishments and milestones revolved around the number of words students read. Participant 3 explained how students could be added to the school's millionaire wall, which was an idea gleaned from a book by Donnalyn Miller. After documenting having read one million words, students would have their name placed prominently on the wall outside the school library. At this school, the millionaire readers would earn rewards such as $25 to use at the school's book fair and earn a field trip to a local university to take a tour of the campus and visit the university's library. However, reaching one million words could take some time; therefore, to motivate all students, the principal and staff decided to recognize students as they progressed toward the one million word goal. Each student would be provided a paper design that coincided with the school's yearly theme. For example, one year, the school had an emoji theme. "Everybody started with a plain round yellow emoji face. Once you read 1,000 words, you would get emoji eyes, then receive a nose for more words, and so on. The more words students read, the more detailed their emoji" (Participant 3).

Three of the 11 school administrators discussed promoting a Battle of the Books competition where students read books and answered questions relating to the book in a quiz bowl type format. Teams were created, and students competed against other grade-level teams within their buildings or with other schools in the district. The focus of this

program was “to increase the number of books read by students” (Participant 4). This annual competition became a schoolwide event as Participant 7 described the program:

> Teams of students in grades 3-5 and 6-8 competed in the Battle of the Books in front of the entire student body. They answered questions about their books and would cheer for each other. We kept the score on the basketball scoreboard, and each student on the winning team would get a $25 gift card from Walmart.

However, one principal decided to adjust and reduce the number of celebrations in the school overall. As she worked to guard interruptions to the instructional day, she recognized their school had numerous out-of-class celebrations throughout each grading period. To continue on the path of protecting instructional time and the connection to rewarding students, this principal also stopped all "feel good" field trips unless a clear correlation to expected state standards could be made. Participant 2 had explained to her staff the "partying" had to stop as they were not at the schoolwide level academically they needed to be. She shared they had "a lot of work to be done," but this new focus did not remove all student recognition relating to academics. Meaningful celebrations relating to reading and learning continued to take place.

Promoting family and community involvement. Involving families and the community in schoolwide events to promote reading was a theme across the participant's interviews. According to Hitt and Tucker (2016), school leaders must communicate expectations for students, teachers, and the school. To accomplish this goal, the principals created opportunities for families and community volunteers to become a part of the school leaders' plans to support literacy schoolwide. District schools invited and utilized

experienced volunteers to work with students individually on reading skills. The community volunteers would encourage students and provide them with additional reading practice during the school day. "Before COVID hit, we had wonderful volunteers coming from the retirement community. Many were retired educators who were coming to our school. We couldn't wait to see what we were going to do next" (Participant 2).

Another leadership practice implemented to support literacy schoolwide was to involve the students' parents and families. Participants 2 and 4 described how they had included families throughout the year by developing Family Literacy Nights. At these select after school events, parents and families could return to school with their children to receive free books to take home to build their home libraries and encourage independent reading. The families and students would enjoy read alouds by the school staff, modeling ways for parents to interact with their children when they read at home. At these meetings, discussions of books were held, all the while maintaining a close correlation to the state standards. Before, during, and after reading strategies were shared with families. Snacks would be provided to families as well, as the purpose of these events was to build the school and home connection while infusing the importance of student literacy.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness must be used to evaluate the validity of qualitative research. The trustworthiness is directly associated with the researcher who is collecting and analyzing the data in addition to the researcher's ability to interpret the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Ravitch and Carl (2016) trustworthiness refers to the credibility,

dependability, confirmability, and transferability of research. Therefore, to ensure valid studies, researchers should develop approaches that align with the research questions. It is the researcher's responsibility to ensure the accuracy of the research.

In this basic qualitative study, during the interview process of data collection, each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure no data were lost. No technical issues were experienced during the recorded interview. The recordings were clear which made the transcription process easier. However, after the first interview, I learned to adjust the volume and the exact distance to place the recording device to make certain I obtained the best sound recording for each interview.

Credibility

Credibility is established by showing the research participants are informed about the research and are knowledgeable about the topic (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The participants in this study were cognizant of the declining elementary literacy scores in the district as each was employed as an administrator in the participating district. Also, each administrator was able to provide rich, thick descriptions of the instructional leadership practices implemented in their schools to influence student literacy.

In this basic qualitative study, the methods I used to establish credibility were transcript validation, member checking, and peer reviewers. After conducting each interview, I transcribed the audio recorded interviews and emailed each participant to request they review their interview transcript for accuracy and respond to the email regarding whether they were content with the information as is or if they would like to clarify any part or make other changes. This validation process ensured I had correctly

portrayed their ideas, details, and experiences (Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016) and strengthened the credibility of the study. No participant requested a change to the interview transcript; therefore, no data were changed. However, it was interesting to note some expressed they were hopeful their responses were beneficial to the research.

At the conclusion of the data analysis, I used member checking to "check-in" with the participants. This method served to decrease the incidence of incorrect data or incorrect interpretation of the data so the findings were authentic while establishing credibility through the participants' experiences and perceptions (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). No amendments were made as a result of the member checking. Additionally, to ensure credibility, I used peer reviewers with earned doctorate degrees in education and who had experience with qualitative research. There was a suggestion from one peer reviewer I should include more detail in the process of the data analysis. I reviewed my data analysis and added more detail to make the information more clear and understandable for all readers.

Dependability

Dependability is important to trustworthiness because it establishes the research findings as consistent, stable, and able to be replicated and involves the participants' evaluation of the findings, researcher interpretations, and recommendations of the study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). A researcher must present findings other researchers would come to the same consensus and interpret the findings in the same way based on the same data. To ensure dependability, I kept a personal online journal of procedural notes and additional notes providing an awareness of potential bias throughout the study.

I also maintained consistency with the data analysis process when identifying themes and patterns from principal and assistant principal interviews and documented this consistency in my online journal to support the decisions I made regarding data analysis. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), researchers must provide support for the decisions made regarding data collection, which involves using appropriate and sequenced methods to answer the research questions for the study. In the journal, I described the research steps from the beginning of the research to the results and findings. The online journal reflected my thinking regarding the study, its progression, and the data analysis process and included my initial thoughts of the data as well as the final conclusions. This journaling process provided the opportunity to carefully consider the data in an in-depth manner.

Confirmability

Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated confirmability is the idea someone besides the researcher can confirm data from a study. Therefore, a researcher's ability to be neutral is essential. As a researcher, steps were taken to maintain neutrality throughout collecting data and analyzing the data. The findings represented the participants' thoughts and opinions. Their responses were transcribed verbatim and quoted verbatim when reporting the results from the research. When coding the data from the interviews, I ensured all themes came from the participants' responses rather than from my thoughts or ideas. I managed my biases by constantly monitoring my personal opinions so they would not become a factor when I analyzed the data. Additionally, I was systematic and methodical in my approach to the research decisions including the logistics of my study and kept an

online journal to self-reflect throughout the research process to safeguard against potential bias as a way to ensure the trustworthiness of my study. Keeping a reflection journal is supported by Ravitch and Carl (2016).

Transferability

According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), "The goal of qualitative research is not to produce findings that can be directly applied to other settings and contexts." Instead, the findings from research can be used to compare or transfer to other studies, situations or contexts. Transferability is the researcher's ability to apply the findings of a study to a larger population (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Rich, thick, and descriptive data increased the potential for transferability in my study. I supported the transferability by including participant quotes when applicable, and reported the results using heavy descriptions. Transferability was enhanced with the clear details of the interview and specific perspectives of the study's participants. However, the perspectives from the study's participants reflected their personal experiences and practices, which may limit transferability to others in different settings. It was my goal to present clear information about this study to assist in the transferability to other settings and environments.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I presented details regarding the setting of this study, including specific information about the participants and the local school district. The data collection procedures were thoroughly outlined and described as systematic steps for the data analysis process, including the coding process using provisional codes in the first cycle and open coding in the second cycle. The results of the study were discussed in

detail with three major themes emerging from the data analysis. These themes were (a) literacy-focused instructional leadership practices supporting teachers, (b) literacy-focused instructional leadership practices supporting students, (c) instructional leadership practices supporting literacy in the school. Additionally, the components involved in establishing the trustworthiness of the findings in this research study were provided.

Chapter 5 will reiterate the purpose of the study. I will present my interpretation of the findings, revisit the study's limitations and describe my recommendations for further research. Positive social change implications stemming from this study will be discussed as well.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In this basic qualitative research study, I investigated the perceptions of elementary principals and assistant principals regarding the implementation of instructional leadership practices influencing student literacy. One research question guided this study:

RQ. How have elementary principals and assistant principals implemented instructional leadership practices in their schools to influence student literacy?

The problem igniting this study was the local school district's declining student literacy scores over the past 7 years and the lack of understanding of the instructional practices employed by the elementary administrators to influence their students' literacy. I invited 15 elementary principals and assistant principals from the local school district to participate. Eleven administrators volunteered to participate. I conducted semistructured interviews to provide meaningful information to answer the research question. Key findings revealed examples of how the district elementary administrators implemented instructional leadership practices focused on student literacy. Three major themes emerged from this study: (a) literacy-focused instructional leadership practices supporting teachers, (b) literacy-focused instructional leadership practices supporting students, and (c) instructional leadership practices supporting literacy in the school.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings showed the principals' perceptions of how they implemented instructional leadership practices corresponded with the research literature regarding

effective instructional leadership practices. The principals in this study broadly described instructional leadership as behaviors of an administrator supporting teachers and impacting student learning. That description reflects Hallinger and Murphy's (2012) definition of instructional leadership as "The process through which school principals identify the pathway for the school, inspire the staff, and organize school strategies intended to improve teaching and learning." All 11 participants discussed methods of instructional leadership practice implementation relating to student literacy. The most common leadership practice was supporting instructional leadership. The participants explained supporting instructional leadership meant supporting teachers by supporting their instructional improvement, monitoring the literacy instruction taking place in the classroom each day through formal and informal teacher evaluations, and promoting a positive school climate.

Additionally, the findings of this study revealed the most common leadership practices to support students were establishing school literacy goals, promoting clear student literacy expectations, and monitoring student literacy progress. In a study conducted by Ozdemir (2019), it was determined by promoting academic goals, a principal provided purpose to the learning activities of the school, which could have a considerable impact. However, promoting goals alone was not the only important leadership practice supporting students. Participants explained they worked to provide clear student expectations regarding literacy. High expectations began with clear communication from the building principal, along with the belief, all students can succeed (Woods & Martin, 2016). In a study by Mette et al. (2017), close monitoring of

student performance was an instructional leadership practice that frequently emerged in effective schools.

The participants also provided examples and explained how they implemented specific leadership practices to support literacy schoolwide, including facilitating personnel and schoolwide programs; developing schoolwide recognition, rewards, and celebrations; and promoting family and community involvement. Although these were recurring themes discussed in some form with all 11 participants, none of these were explicitly aligned with Murphy's (1983) 10 instructional leadership practices from his conceptual framework. Alternately, the study's findings revealed the majority of these district administrators are not implementing instructional leadership practices to develop and promote standards, which is one of Murphy's 10 instructional leadership functions from the conceptual framework.

Lastly, the findings of this study revealed all participants perceived they were implementing numerous instructional leadership practices to influence student literacy in their buildings positively. The participants expressed their responsibility to be the building instructional leader. This finding aligns with the literature. Kalman and Arslan's (2016) and Van Vooren's (2018) studies supported the recommendation that school leaders should focus their instructional leadership practices on influencing student achievement and should become the school's instructional leader. The participants did not merely suggest they should be the school's instructional leader in general terms, but stated an approach focused on student literacy was required.

These district administrators explained their desire to improve student literacy in their schools because they were not satisfied with their state assessment results. Three school administrators expressed they had received the designation as a state "Reward School" the previous school year based upon student improvement in reading or math, which had been an honor and a boost to the teachers in their buildings. However, even with these pockets of success in the district, the district as a whole continued to have low reading scores for students in Grades 3 through 8, maintaining their proficiency rate in the lower bracket of 38.4% for ELA in 2018-2019 as opposed to their 56.4% ELA proficiency rate in 2012-2103. The work toward improving student literacy proficiency was not done; as one Reward School administrator acknowledged, "I do not think we have, in any way, arrived" (Participant 6). Research from the literature review was consistent with this statement and the overall idea that these district principals were aware their dedicated instructional leadership practices may equate to positive student achievement, as demonstrated in Bellibas and Liu's (2017) research. Additionally, Lunenburg and Irby (2014) stated in their research it is critical and necessary for principals to purposefully carve out time to implement their instructional leadership practices and concentrate on student learning and achievement in order to positively influence student achievement.

Based on the findings of this study, the principals' perceptions of how they implemented instructional leadership practices corresponded with the research literature regarding effective instructional leadership practices. The findings confirm their understanding of how to implement instructional leadership practices. The findings also

extend knowledge regarding principal instructional leadership practices to include a focus on influencing student literacy.

I conducted this study to answer one research question. The collected and analyzed data revealed three major themes providing answers to the research question. The three themes were thoroughly outlined and discussed in Chapter 4.

Limitations

Limitations of research include factors out of the researcher's specific control and are present in all studies. This basic qualitative study was conducted in a rural school district in the southern region of the United States. In this school district, elementary administrators faced declining student literacy scores of third through eighth-grade students over 7 years. In Chapter 1, I explained this study's four limitations: (a) elementary school administrators from only one rural school district were represented; (b) the participant sample size was a limitation, as there were only 11 elementary principals and assistant principals involved in this study; (c) all interviews were conducted via phone due to COVID-19 social distancing requirements; and (d) COVID-19 forced school closures, such that no end-of-year assessment data were available for principals or assistant principals to use to determine the effectiveness of their instructional leadership practices. Creswell and Poth (2016) stated limitations must be identified to acknowledge areas of potential weakness in a research study.

Implications for Social Change

In this study, I explored how elementary principals and assistant principals implemented instructional leadership practices to influence student literacy. With this

study's results, the elementary school administrators reinforced their perceptions that their focused instructional leadership practices had positively impacted the students' literacy achievement in their schools. The study's implications for social change involve improving student literacy at the local level, as a local study can only have local social change implications. The intentional review of instructional practices at the local level can help school administrators improve these practices, which may strengthen the district's elementary administrative team and positively affect student learning locally.

Recommendations

Recommendations for further research are based on the strengths and limitations of this study. Every school administrator participating in this research implemented instructional leadership strategies with an intentional focus on influencing student literacy, with the most common leadership practices being establishing school literacy goals, promoting clear student literacy expectations, and monitoring student literacy progress. Elementary principals and assistant principals experienced no difficulty implementing instructional leadership practices focusing on improving the literacy of students in their schools. However, with the limitation of early school closure due to COVID-19 and the lack of end-of-year assessment data, the school administrators were not able to discern whether the instructional leadership practices they had implemented had an effect on student reading achievement. Based on my findings, I have a recommendation intended to improve administrator instructional leadership practices focused on student literacy.

Evaluate the Effectiveness of the Implemented Instructional Leadership Practices

I recommend a quantitative study to evaluate the effectiveness of the literacy-focused instructional leadership practices employed by district elementary principals. Because student literacy has been a focus in this district, it is important for the district to recognize and identify the specific instructional leadership practices that have a significant effect on improving student literacy. With this information, school leaders could make more informed decisions about which leadership practices should be continued and which practices should be discarded.

Conclusion

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of elementary principals and assistant principals related to how they implemented instructional leadership practices to influence student literacy in their schools. I collected data via semistructured interviews with the school administrators. Through analyzing the collected data, I determined principals and assistant principals perceived instructional leadership as a way to support teachers and improve student academic achievement. In addition, the majority of principals perceived supporting instructional improvement as a practice connecting the principal to the classroom teacher. Three themes were gleaned from the data: instructional leadership practices that support teachers, instructional leadership practices that support student literacy, and instructional leadership practices that support literacy schoolwide. Future studies at the local level should concentrate on recognizing and identifying the specific instructional leadership practices that have the most significant effect on improving student literacy. A closer examination of the

effectiveness of the instructional practices being implemented by district elementary administrators may assist with future determinations for support at the local level. In light of the findings reflecting many instructional leadership practices influencing student literacy, the responsibility rests mainly with district administrators and supervisors to use the recommendation to ensure positive social change.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol and Questions

Date: _____ Time of Interview: _____

Location: _____

Interviewer: _____

Interviewee: _____

Introduction: I appreciate you for taking the time to participate in this interview. Your participation in this educational research is important because this study will lead to a deeper understanding of the instructional leadership practices implemented by elementary principals and assistant principals that influence student literacy.

When we finish today's interview and I transcribe your responses, I will provide a copy of the transcript and will share it with you so that you may check it for accuracy. Your name will never be included in any documentation related to this study. At any time during this interview, you may pause the interview, or completely stop the interview as you are voluntarily participating in this research. ***Do you have any questions about the interview or the process before we begin?***

Questions

1) What does the term instructional leadership mean to you?
2) Explain the instructional leadership practices you have utilized in your school.
3) Which instructional leadership practices do you implement in your school to specifically influence student literacy?
4) Are there literacy focused instructional practices you have implemented that you will not continue to use? Explain.
5) Are there other literacy focused instructional practices you are considering for future school years? Explain.

Closing: Thank you!

Appendix B: Provisional Code List

Provisional codes from conceptual framework

1) framing the school goals and objectives
2) developing and promoting expectations
3) developing and promoting standards
4) assessing and monitoring student performance
5) protecting instructional time
6) knowledge of curriculum and instruction
7) promoting curricular coordination
8) promoting and supporting instructional improvement
9) supervision and evaluation of instruction
10) creating a productive work environment

Provisional codes from the literature review

11) instructional leadership
12) the principal as the instructional leader
13) influence of school leaders on student achievement
14) importance of literacy skills in students
15) significance of principal content knowledge

Appendix C: District Consent for Participation

Dear Walden University Education Leadership program staff,

I understand that, as per the student's doctoral program requirements, the student will conduct research and then publish a dissertation in ProQuest following ethical standards:

a. The student will be responsible for complying with policies and requirements regarding data collection (including the need for the organization's internal ethics/regulatory approval).

b. The student is required to maintain confidentiality by removing names and key pieces of evidence/data that might disclose an organization's or an individual's identity.

c. Via an Interview Consent Form, the student will describe to interviewees how the data will be used in the dissertation study and how all interviewees' privacy will be protected.

I confirm that I am authorized to support/approve research activities in this setting.

Signed,

XXXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXX, Ed.D.
Chief Academic Officer
XXXXXXX Schools
XXX-XXX-XXXX
10/16/2019

Appendix D: Email Invitation to All Prospective Participants

Dear Elementary Principals and Assistant Principals,

This email serves as an invitation for elementary principals and assistant principals to participate in a study that I am conducting as a doctoral candidate at Walden University under the direction of Dr. Robert Flanders. The title of the study is *Elementary Principal and Assistant Principal Instructional Leadership Practices Influencing Student Literacy*. This letter is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to better understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

The doctoral study will concentrate on the instructional leadership behaviors and practices of elementary principals and assistant principals within the XXX School District. Leadership practices that specifically influence student literacy will be the main focus.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate. If you decide to participate in this research, you may withdraw at any time.

The study will entail a single interview in which you will respond to questions regarding your instructional leadership practices. This interview will be scheduled at a time that is most convenient for your schedule and may be conducted by phone or via ZOOM meeting. Your name, email address, or school name will not be included in the research.

Principals or assistant principals will receive no payment or compensation for participating in this study.

Please respond to this email if you agree to participate, and I will follow up with a brief consent acknowledgement form that contains additional information regarding the study. In the next email, there will be three questions for you to answer for consent to participate. These questions will include:

1. verifying you have read the information concerning the interview
2. understand that you are volunteering to participate
3. certifying that you are 18 years of age or older

This research has been reviewed according to Walden University's IRB procedures for research involving human subjects. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Magnusson

Jennifer Magnusson
Doctoral Candidate
Walden University

Appendix E: Permission to Print

July 22, 2020

Dr. Joseph Murphy
Vanderbilt University
Nashville, TN

Dear Dr. Murphy:

I am completing a doctoral dissertation at Walden University entitled "Elementary Principal and Assistant Principal Instructional Leadership Practices Influencing Student Literacy."

I would like your permission to reprint in my dissertation excerpts from the following:

Murphy, J. (1983). Instructional Leadership: A Conceptual Framework. *Planning and Changing, 14*(3), 137-49.

The excerpt to be reproduced is the figure below.

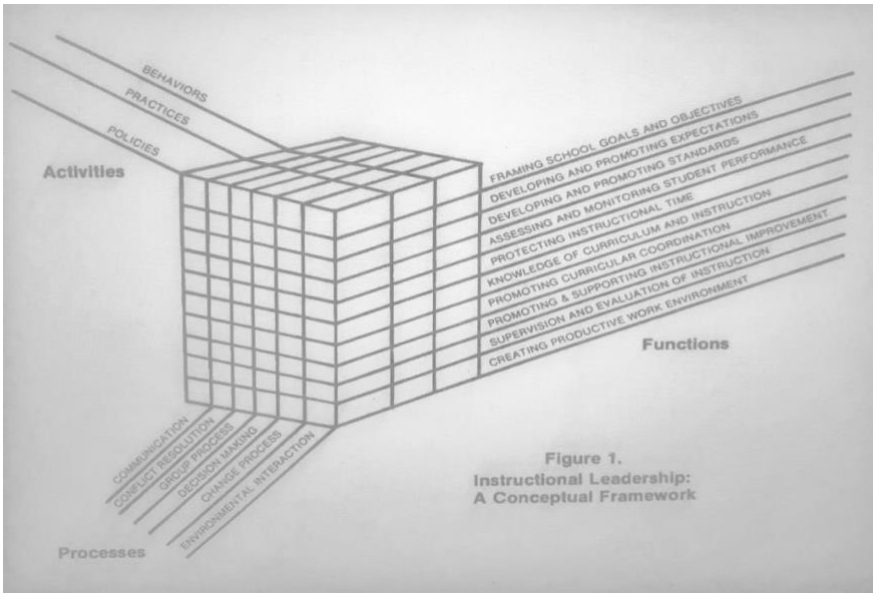

Figure 1.
Instructional Leadership:
A Conceptual Framework

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If these arrangements meet with your approval, please sign this letter where indicated below and return it to me in the enclosed return envelope.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Magnusson

Jennifer Magnusson

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE USE REQUESTED ABOVE:

Joseph Murphy

Dr. Joseph Murphy

Date: 25 August 2020