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Principal Literacy Leadership Perspectives and Practices

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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Megan Shay

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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2024

Abstract

Principal Literacy Leadership Perspectives and Practices

by

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MA, Towson University, 2010

BS, Loyola College of Maryland, 1997

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Education Administration and Leadership

Walden University

May 2024

Abstract

Current elementary data from a large suburban district in the eastern part of the United States demonstrate that less than half of students in Grades 3 through 5 are demonstrating sufficient literacy achievement as measured by state assessments. This problem is of great concern since strong literacy achievement is fundamental to student success in school and preparation for college and career. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of elementary principals from this district on their role and practices as leaders in their students' literacy achievement. The conceptual framework for this study is Murphy's model of instructional leadership. The research questions for this study address the elementary principals' perspectives on their role as leaders for student literacy achievement and the specific literacy leadership practices they employ to improve student literacy achievement. Ten elementary principals were selected using purposive sampling and interviewed using a semi-structured approach. Key findings indicated that elementary principals believe they have a critical role in promoting student achievement in literacy. Thematic analysis using a two-cycle approach revealed six themes from this study: (a) the importance of early literacy, (b) the importance of elementary literacy leadership, (c) the importance of building capacity, (d) the importance of time spent in classrooms, (e) the importance of progress monitoring, and (f) the importance of structures for collaboration. This study may positively impact social change by improving overall student literacy achievement resulting in increased chances for overall student success in school and readiness for college and career, while also decreasing chances for negative outcomes caused by illiteracy including risk for dropout, incarceration, and underemployment.

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Dedication

For my mom, who always wanted a doctor in the family. While this may not be exactly what she meant, I hope I made her proud, nonetheless.

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I would like to express my love and gratitude to my husband Brendan, for all of his support and patience on this journey and to our three incredible children, Annie, Ryan, and Connor for their encouragement and love, and to Archie, for serving as my faithful late-night writing companion.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Developing strong literacy skills is critical for student achievement and preparing for successful participation in society. It is arguably the most essential skill to be learned in elementary school (Georgiou et al., 2020). And yet, data trends on national assessments of literacy achievement are concerning, with the most recent average scores in literacy demonstrating a decline of 3 points in both Grade 4 and Grade 8, with overall scores in literacy at the lowest they have been since 2005 for Grade 4 and 1998 for Grade 8 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Because of the importance of literacy development and out of concern for declines in literacy achievement, a growing body of research has deepened the knowledge and practice standards required for literacy instruction aligned to the science of reading and identified the content and pedagogical knowledge required for teacher preparation (Hudson et al., 2021). Similarly, decades of research have analyzed the relationship between instructional leadership and student achievement overall and have prioritized knowledge of curriculum and instruction as critical to overall school improvement (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019; Liu et al., 2021; Maponya, 2020). And yet there is minimal research to connect these dots by identifying the specific instructional leadership actions that best support student literacy achievement. This study was critical because it addressed this gap in practice by examining elementary principals' perspectives on their role as leaders for increasing literacy achievement and identifying the specific leadership practices to positively impact student achievement in literacy.

Further, this study can have a positive social change by informing principals of the specific literacy leadership practices that have the strongest impact on improving literacy achievement outcomes. Since literacy achievement is foundational to student success both in school and in developing readiness for college and career, these efforts to identify specific leadership practices to promote student literacy will increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for students while also decreasing the likelihood of negative outcomes linked to low levels of literacy including the risk of drop out, incarceration, and underemployment. Illiteracy can have tremendous economic, social, and health impacts and prevent individuals from achieving high levels of self-sufficiency and productivity (McNamara et al., 2019). This study may positively impact social change by improving overall student literacy achievement, resulting in increased chances for overall student success in school and readiness for college and career, while also decreasing chances for negative outcomes caused by illiteracy including risk for dropout, incarceration, and underemployment. Therefore, this study has the potential to positively impact social change by identifying specific literacy leadership practices that can inform elementary principal training and practice to ensure all students achieve high levels of literacy success.

In this chapter, I will provide a summary of the background research literature related to this topic of instructional leadership for literacy and describe the gap in practice of specific literacy leadership practices that this study addressed. I will identify the specific problem addressed in this study and frame the purpose of this study with the specific research questions addressed within the conceptual framework of instructional

leadership. Finally, I will briefly outline the research design and methodology for the study including any definitions, assumptions, and limitations of the study design, while further establishing the significance and potential for positive social change.

Background

Extensive research supports the critical importance of developing early literacy skills and underscores the role of instructional leadership in supporting student achievement overall. To understand the importance of literacy leadership at the elementary level, it is important to recognize the critical role of effective literacy instruction on student achievement. Petscher et al. (2019) defined models of effective reading instruction, including the simple view of reading, supported by evidence, and applied to developing specific reading interventions. Data were drawn from a significant database at a southern university and distilled to identify only those students who had multiple data points from Grades 3 through 10 and then analyzed using descriptive statistics. Findings demonstrated that vocabulary knowledge in Grade 3 is highly predictive of high school reading comprehension and that reading fluency is predictive for students who are proficient readers. The findings of this study serve as foundational support for why low literacy achievement levels are a problem while also identifying that there are specific evidence-based practices that can improve literacy achievement. Robledo and Gove (2019) identified these specific instructional practices that support early reading development, including systematic and explicit instruction in foundational literacy skills and access to high-quality texts in large quantities. Findings identified five components of an effective early literacy program: effective teaching strategies, access to

high-quality text, sufficient time for instruction, regular use of formative assessment, and appropriate language. This research informed the current study by identifying the most effective instructional practices for early literacy development, while also underscoring the need for strong leadership to support instruction.

The impact of this strong leadership on student achievement in literacy is foundational to the purpose of this study. Engin (2020) studied the effect of principals on student achievement using a meta-analysis design and statistical analysis and found that educational leadership positively affected student achievement, specifically at the elementary level. These results support the underlying premise of the current study, which, given this potential impact, sought to understand the instructional leadership practices that contribute to elementary literacy achievement improvements. Grissom et al. (2021) synthesized decades of research, concluding that the effect of principals on student achievement is more significant than previously believed and therefore supports the goal of investing in a high-quality school leadership workforce. Specifically, McGeehan and Norris (2020) identified literacy leadership as a critical role of the principal and examined the extent to which school leadership development programs prepared principals for literacy leadership. The research design included a content analysis study of 100 educational leadership programs and found that only seven programs required any coursework in literacy. The findings of this study are essential to the identified problem and purpose of the current study which was to identify the perspectives and practices of the elementary principal that impact literacy leadership.

Establishing a vision and setting clear expectations for both classroom instruction and professional learning are key elements of the framework for instructional leadership overall and therefore critical for literacy leadership as well. Johnson and Voelkel (2021) described the role of principals in establishing the conditions for professional learning communities which are necessary for teachers to work collaboratively to support literacy instruction. Tremont and Templeton (2019) examined how reading difficulties were addressed with a principal's instructional leadership practices by conducting a single embedded descriptive case study in one rural elementary school. Using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and achievement data analysis, researchers demonstrated the positive impact of the principal's instructional leadership on reading intervention progress. Specifically, principals were actively utilizing formative assessments and interim data cycles to closely monitor student performance in literacy and attempt to support teachers with designing responsive instruction to address identified needs. While analyzing formative data to support student achievement is an example of a successful instructional leadership practice, the study further underscored the challenge for principals to support teachers with responsive instruction in literacy without a strong knowledge base in literacy instruction itself.

This importance of a strong knowledge base for literacy instruction for leaders is a consistent theme in the literature and a focus of this study. S. Özdemir et al. (2020) explored this using the Strategic Leadership Scale and the Education Administrators' 21st-century skills and identified specific and strategic instructional leadership practices that supported literacy achievement. Findings from this study demonstrate that principals'

knowledge of information literacy and media literacy instructional practices were vital to overall increases in literacy achievement for students. Another study conducted by Plaatjies (2019) investigated the principal capacity for literacy leadership using a qualitative, multiple-case study research design and conducted semi-structured interviews with six principals. Findings identified specific factors critical for literacy leadership, including knowledge of the literacy curriculum, supervision of literacy teachers, and support of literacy-rich classrooms. These factors are essential for understanding principals' perspectives in their roles as literacy leaders.

As instructional leaders, elementary principals are expected to effectively supervise and support their teachers. The relationship between an elementary principal's knowledge of reading or literacy curriculum and their ability to effectively supervise and support literacy teachers is important to consider. Taylor et al. (2019) conducted a mixed-methods study to explore how elementary principals promoted literacy development in their schools, examining the differences between quantitative and qualitative measures of school leadership. Results suggested that a principal's knowledge of reading and how it is taught led to more strategic deployment of resources and increased literacy achievement, which supports the central assertion in this study. This study also examined the differences in instructional leadership practices at high-performing and low-performing schools with similar demographics to identify those specific practices that resulted in increased literacy achievement.

A critical component of the principal's role as evaluator includes providing meaningful feedback to improve instruction, and at the elementary level literacy

instruction is the priority. Georgiou et al. (2020) examined teacher perceptions of the factors contributing to school improvement in literacy scores. This mixed-method study included teacher questionnaires, quantitative analysis of reading achievement data, and interviews with the principal and a lead reading teacher. Findings indicated that from the teachers' perspective, collaborative planning, common assessments, and a culture of continuous growth were the factors that most contributed to increased literacy achievement. This study also supported the importance of alignment between teacher perceptions and principal actions (i.e., the principal providing time for teacher collaboration which teachers cited as a critical factor). Merga et al. (2021) also examined teachers' perceptions of the extent to which school leadership was committed to literacy and to realizing a whole school approach to literacy achievement. The study was completed using teacher survey data that was synthesized and analyzed. Findings indicate that most teachers surveyed do not believe the whole school culture is committed to literacy achievement. Findings also detailed the criticality of a principal's commitment to creating a school-wide culture of literacy, specifically related to the needs of struggling learners. Recommendations for future study include extending the survey to include additional stakeholders such as principals and students. This research provides background on the specific instructional leadership practices principals may use to develop a culture of literacy which directly relates to the purpose of the current study. This research further underscores the strong relationship between leadership commitment to literacy and literacy achievement of the school, which is foundational to the significance of the current study.

While much of the research supports the relationship between the principals' instructional leadership, teacher perceptions, and student achievement in literacy, there is a notable gap in research supporting the training elementary principals receive on early literacy. Sharp et al. (2019) examined the perspectives of literacy educators to identify specific instructional leadership practices needed for educational leaders to impact literacy achievement positively and to gauge the perception of the current levels of preparation for literacy teachers and leaders. This study was conducted using a cross-sectional survey with purposive sampling. The findings of the study indicated that literacy educators identified professional learning and literacy leadership as two areas that preservice candidates are less prepared to assume in their role as educators. This lack of training can disadvantage elementary principals in supporting the literacy achievement of their students as well as negatively impacting a leader's self-efficacy. McBrayer et al. (2020) explored the relationship between a principal's application of specific instructional literacy practices and self-efficacy through a cross-sectional survey methodology and data analysis. The study found that when principals employ specific instructional leadership practices, such as providing particular literacy feedback and utilizing interim progress monitoring data, leadership's feelings of self-efficacy increase, leading to increased student achievement.

Although substantial research supports the importance of developing strong literacy skills and the impact of principal leadership on student achievement overall, there remains a gap in practice connecting the specific role of the elementary principal as it relates to improving student outcomes in literacy. This study addressed this gap in

practice by identifying those specific instructional leadership practices that elementary principals employ to improve student achievement in literacy while also examining the principals' perspectives on their role in leading these efforts. Since elementary principals are charged with ensuring all students achieve high literacy levels, this study was needed to better understand the specific instructional leadership practices that will support these efforts.

Problem Statement

Strong literacy skills are essential for student success in school and developing readiness for college and career. The problem addressed in this study was the need for increased literacy achievement among elementary students in a large suburban school district in the eastern part of the United States. Research demonstrates the critical role of literacy in overall student success and the negative consequences of illiteracy (McNamara et al., 2019). Current data trends in the district of study provide evidence that less than half of elementary students in Grades 3 through 5 are meeting expected proficiency standards on literacy assessments (see Table 1).

Table 1*Percent Proficient on English Language Arts (ELA) State Assessment*

Year	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5
2015	42.0	47.2	45.5
2016	36.2	37.4	37.8
2017	37.7	40.4	39.1
2018	37.0	39.4	40.1
2019	37.3	39.9	40.0

Note. The U.S. Department of Education granted waivers for assessments for the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years. Therefore, no data are available for those years.

Research has demonstrated leadership's influence on student achievement overall (Engin, 2020; Grissom et al., 2021) while identifying a gap in the practice of specific instructional leadership strategies for increasing literacy instruction (Taylor et al., 2019). Further, Taylor et al. (2019) indicated that principal knowledge of effective foundational literacy practices influences their ability to effectively allocate resources (both human and material) to support literacy achievement and can also impact their ability to provide effective professional learning for teachers.

As instructional leaders, principals are charged with increasing student literacy achievement. Therefore, more insight is needed into their literacy perspectives and practices in their role as leaders in literacy achievement.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of elementary principals from one large suburban school district in the eastern part of the

United States on their role and practices as leaders in their students' literacy achievement. This study aligned with a constructivist research paradigm since the intent of the study was to explore the perspectives of the study participants and co-construct knowledge of the phenomenon of instructional leadership for literacy through the experiences of the elementary principals interviewed.

While much research has been done to identify specific elements of effective reading instruction (Robledo & Gove, 2019), more is needed to know about the particular knowledge, and skills principals need to have to effectively lead for literacy achievement (Taylor et al., 2019).

Research Questions

- What are elementary principals' perspectives on their role as leaders in their students' literacy achievement?
- What are elementary principals' perspectives on the instructional leadership practices they apply to address student achievement in literacy?

Conceptual Framework

This study was grounded in the conceptual framework of instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2005; Murphy et al., 1983). In the Instructional Leadership Framework, Murphy et al. (1983) identified the processes, functions, and activities that define instructional leadership and reflect their interconnectedness. This framework identifies the three dimensions or perspectives of effective school leaders: (a) instructional functions or the leadership practices employed by the principals, (b) principal organizational processes, and (c) types of principal activities (Murphy et al., 1983). Each

of these dimensions is further divided into specific functions of the principal. The instructional functions or leadership practices dimension identifies the 10 instructional functions that successful leaders rely upon, including (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 et al., 1983). This framework underscores the importance of instructional leadership while asserting that little time is spent on instructional leadership practices. One reason for this disconnect may be that some principals need more confidence in their curriculum and instruction knowledge base. In some instances, school leadership programs may not prioritize this knowledge, nor is it often used in hiring decisions (Murphy et al., 1983). This study built upon the instructional functions identified as critical for effective school leadership to identify the specific instructional leadership practices that will improve student literacy achievement.

Nature of the Study

To address the research questions for this study, I used a basic qualitative design. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), “qualitative researchers contend that knowledge is developed from individuals’ subjective experiences” (p. 5). The purpose of this study was to understand the perspective of the elementary principals in the district of study related to their role as leaders for literacy and the instructional leadership practices they apply to

address student achievement in literacy. A basic qualitative study was appropriate since I sought to understand perspectives and conducted the study in a naturalistic setting. This aligns with a post-positivist, constructivist paradigm (Burkholder et al., 2020), which was suitable for this study since I sought to understand the instructional leadership perspectives and practices of specific principals within the district of focus. Data collection included conducting semi-structured interviews of 10 elementary principals using a responsive interview protocol I developed, aligned with the research questions identified. Interviews were transcribed verbatim followed by open coding and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Definitions

Elementary school – For this study, the term *elementary school* has been used to describe a school serving students in grades Prekindergarten through Grade 5 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Instructional leadership – For this study, I have used the Wallace Foundation’s definition of instructional leadership, which is “Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers. Forms of engagement with teachers center on instructional practice, such as teacher evaluation, instructional coaching, and establishing a data-driven, school-wide instructional program to facilitate such interactions” (Grissom et al., 2021, p. 15).

Literacy – For this study, I am using the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, n.d.) definition of literacy:

Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts.

Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.

Assumptions

This study assumed that elementary principals understand the instructional leadership and literacy achievement expectations and would be able to speak knowledgeably about their perspective on their role as leaders. Additionally, I assumed that elementary principals would understand the interview questions and would answer them honestly and accurately based on their experiences. This assumption was necessary based on the constructivist research paradigm for this study, which relies on the experiences and perspectives of individuals to generate meaning.

Scope and Delimitations

Although literacy achievement is critical throughout all of school, the scope of this study was explicitly limited to the perspectives and practices of the elementary school principals in the focus district since the primary measure of student achievement in elementary school is literacy. In addition, I chose to limit this study to 10 elementary principals as a representative sample from the focus district to ensure sufficient time and depth for each interview while still allowing for transferability. While the intent of a qualitative study is not a generalization, the results of this qualitative study must have meaning beyond this immediate context (Burkholder et al., 2020). To support

transferability, I provided a sufficient description of each interview setting and the participants. I also strengthened transferability by using the maximum variation strategy of purposive sampling for intentionally diversifying participants to increase the applicability of the study (Burkholder et al., 2020). This supports the potential for transferability of this study's findings to support other districts with similar literacy needs. To increase the dependability of the study, I used the strategy of an audit trail. An audit trail is a detailed account of exactly how a study is conducted including data collection methods aligned to the research questions, as well as any reflective journals or memos (Burkholder et al., 2020). By maintaining transcripts of each interview and having them reviewed for accuracy by interview participants, I increased the dependability of the study.

Limitations

It is essential to consider the potential limitations of this study. The participants of this study were all from one suburban district, which is a potential limitation. In addition, the study included a representative sample of 10 principals, which may not reflect the perspectives and practices of all 108 principals from the district. To address this limitation, I used the maximum variation strategy to select diverse principal participants with a wide range of experience from schools representing different geographic areas of the focus district and diverse populations served (i.e., Title I and non-Title I, large and small, etc.). I also increased transferability by including thick descriptions of both the interview setting and the participants selected. Finally, while I do not supervise principals, I am familiar with the principal participants, which could impact principal

responses to interview questions. I intentionally limited bias by focusing on my body language and verbal expression during interviews. I also intentionally focused on actively listening to interview participants and using their language to ask follow-up questions. Finally, I shared the interview transcript with participants to ensure accuracy and limit bias.

Significance

This study addressed a local problem by identifying specific instructional leadership perspectives and practices that support literacy achievement. If students do not develop a solid foundation in literacy in the early grades, they are at an increased risk of failing courses and dropping out of school and are less likely to pursue high-skilled, high-wage jobs if they graduate (Hernandez & Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). This study is unique because it addressed an area of leadership development that has yet to be fully explored (Plaatjies, 2019). This study may positively impact social change by improving overall student literacy achievement resulting in increased chances for overall student success in school and readiness for college and career, while also decreasing chances for negative outcomes caused by illiteracy including risk for dropout, incarceration, and underemployment. This study may positively impact social change since insights gained will help inform the knowledge and skills of school district leaders and can potentially inform professional development for principals and aspiring principals. Having district leaders with high levels of skill in instructional leadership for literacy will positively impact students' achievement in literacy. Increased literacy achievement will result in positive social change by reducing the chances that students will experience the negative

outcomes associated with illiteracy including the risk of dropping out of school, incarceration, and under-employment. By focusing on developing the literacy leadership practices that most positively impact student achievement in literacy, principals can support positive social change and ensure a greater likelihood of success for students.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I established that strong literacy skills are predictive of student achievement in school and in preparation for success in college and career. Yet current data, both nationally, and specifically in the district of study, demonstrate declining levels of literacy achievement. Research supports the importance of strong instructional leadership on student achievement but fails to identify specific instructional leadership practices that best support literacy achievement. Knowing that there are clear expectations for elementary principals to ensure high levels of literacy achievement for students, we must have a deeper understanding of their perspectives on their role as leaders for literacy. Additionally, in this study I sought to identify specific instructional leadership practices that would positively impact student literacy achievement, thereby supporting positive social change.

In Chapter 2, I will review the current research that provides the context for my study and identify the specific research strategies I utilized to conduct an exhaustive review of instructional leadership for literacy. I will provide a detailed description of the conceptual framework for this study and include a summary of research supporting key concepts for this study including the importance of literacy, the principal as instructional leader, and the principal's impact on student achievement and literacy leadership.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of the literature review is to describe the current research, which provides the foundation for my study. The problem addressed in this study was the lack of literacy achievement of elementary students in a large suburban school district in the eastern part of the United States. Research has demonstrated the overall impact of the principal's instructional leadership on student achievement (Engin, 2020; Grissom et al., 2021; Liebowitz & Porter, 2019; Robinson & Gray, 2019), but less is known about the specific instructional leadership practices that improve literacy achievement (Plaatjies, 2019). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of elementary principals from one large suburban school district in the eastern part of the United States on their role and practices as leaders in their students' literacy achievement.

To support this study, I conducted a thorough review of the research on instructional leadership. In this chapter, I outline details on the literature search strategy utilized to perform an exhaustive review including keywords used and databases accessed. I also include a detailed analysis of the conceptual framework of instructional leadership proposed in the seminal work of Murphy et al. (1983). Additionally, this chapter includes sections on additional research examining instructional leadership and the principal's impact on student achievement overall as well as the current research on literacy leadership. In addition, I am including a review of the literature on the importance of student literacy and the effects of high-quality literacy instruction.

Literature Search Strategy

To complete an exhaustive review of the current literature on this topic, I conducted a systematic and thorough search using a variety of educational databases provided through the Walden University library, including Education Source, ERIC, ProQuest, SAGE, Taylor and Francis, Thoreau, and EBSCO. In addition, I reviewed dissertations on topics similar to mine. My search parameters included only peer-reviewed sources published in the last 5 years, with exceptions for seminal works foundational to the topic, such as the conceptual framework of instructional leadership introduced by Murphy et al. (1983) and Hallinger (2005). I used citation chaining through Google Scholar to identify additional sources, explicitly searching for seminal works related to literacy leadership in elementary school.

The specific keywords and phrases used for the database search included instructional leadership, principal leadership, principal impact on student achievement, literacy leadership, effective literacy practices, literacy instruction, the importance of literacy, elementary literacy instruction, reading instruction, reading success, school leadership, and literacy achievement. Initial search results were not limited to full text or by date but were limited to peer review. In addition, I used advanced search to combine terms and explore synonyms to broaden my search. Combined keywords included elementary school OR primary school OR grade school + principals OR school leaders OR administrators +literacy OR reading OR writing +leadership. I then repeated this search but substituted the fourth box with perspectives OR practices to search for specific examples of each reflected in the literature.

The results of this search included educational leadership books, articles published in peer-reviewed journals, and published dissertations. Sources included research conducted in the United States and some studies of the impact of literacy leadership in other countries, which supported the study's importance. Sources were limited to only those published within the last 5 years to reflect the most current research. Exceptions were made to include seminal works as noted above and to include sources cited in subsequent literature.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that provided the foundation for this study is the model for instructional leadership proposed by Joseph Murphy in 1983 as part of his work with the School Effectiveness Program (Murphy et al., 1983). In the School Effectiveness Program model, there are three areas of leadership: instructional, school academic climate, and school social climate leadership (Murphy et al., 1983). Murphy et al. (1983) defined instructional leadership by identifying the types of activities, functions employed by the principal, and organizational processes used, of which the functions are the most substantial. Murphy et al. used a cube model to illustrate the complexities of instructional leadership by showing how these areas are interconnected. This proved highly effective as Murphy's model became influential in informing principal leadership development programs across the country (Hallinger, 2005).

For my study, I focused on the 10 instructional leadership functions identified in the framework proposed by Murphy et al. (1983), including (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) knowledge of curriculum and instruction, (g) promoting curricular coordination, (h) promoting and supporting instructional improvement, (i) supervision and evaluation of instruction, and (j) creating a productive work environment.

It is important to note that within this framework, Murphy et al. (1983) also offered that while the focus on instructional leadership by the principal was increasing, the amount of time devoted to it remained the same. Murphy et al. noted that a critical reason for this lack of time spent on instructional leadership stems from a need for more solid knowledge of instruction and curriculum for principals. Strong knowledge of content and instruction had not traditionally been a focus of leadership development programs, nor was it a factor in the hiring of principal candidates. With solid content knowledge, it is easier for principals to perform many of the instructional leadership functions identified, especially coordinating curriculum, promoting instructional improvement, and, most notably, supervising and evaluating instruction.

This study benefits from this framework because it underscores the principal's primary role as an instructional leader. The current study built upon this framework by identifying specific instructional leadership perspectives and practices to improve student literacy achievement.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts

Importance of Literacy

Strong literacy skills are essential for student success in school and as participants in a global economy. Reading and writing skills are foundational to student achievement

and, therefore, a critical focus for instruction in elementary grades (Silverman et al., 2020). Students need to be strong readers and writers with access to high-quality texts of sufficient complexity to successfully learn across disciplines and function in society (Robledo & Gove, 2019). Strong levels of literacy ensure students can access future learning and achieve high levels of success in school and beyond.

In addition to the positive outcomes identified, developing strong literacy also reduces the likelihood that students will experience the negative outcomes associated with low levels of literacy. Research demonstrates that students who fail to develop proficiency in literacy are at increased risk for adverse consequences, including dropping out, underemployment, and possibly incarceration (Didion et al., 2020). Despite the strong indications of the importance of developing strong literacy skills, data on national assessments of reading proficiency continue to reflect declines in reading achievement at the elementary level. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Achievement data, fourth-grade average scores in reading in 2022 were the lowest since 2005 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). In Grade 4, 37% of students scored Below Basic, with more significant declines among lower-performing student groups and no change for students scoring in the 90th percentile. These declines were evident across multiple racial groups, including Black, Hispanic, and White students (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Strong literacy skills must include increasing automaticity with decoding while also developing increasingly strategic readers able to apply these skills to a variety of complex texts. Skilled readers can derive meaning from text efficiently and accurately

and simultaneously employ multiple skills in decoding and comprehension (Petscher et al., 2019). Various models of reading have been proposed that describe the reading process from either a decoding, word recognition approach, or a language-based approach, but most agree with some degree of integration of both, and that skilled readers must become increasingly automatic with word recognition and increasingly strategic with language comprehension to make meaning of the increasingly complex text (Zingan, 2022).

The foundations for literacy established in elementary school are critical for student success throughout school and beyond. Research indicates that the literacy skills explicitly taught to mastery at the elementary level, including decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, are predictive of higher levels of reading comprehension in high school and, therefore, critical to overall success and readiness for college and career (Lovett et al., 2021; Petscher et al., 2019). Further, students who do not master these specific reading skills in elementary school often struggle when required to demonstrate comprehension of complex texts in middle and high school (Filderman et al., 2022). As the body of knowledge around the evidence-based approaches to reading instruction continues to grow, more must be done to implement these evidence-based practices in schools, which will depend on principals to lead (Fien et al., 2021).

Since these early literacy skills are proven to be so crucial for students, it is equally important that teachers be expected to demonstrate content knowledge and pedagogical skills related to early literacy instruction. As a result, it is critical that literacy remains the focus of ongoing professional learning and job-embedded instructional

feedback (Hudson et al., 2021; McMahan et al., 2019; Sharp et al., 2019). Research has demonstrated clear evidence of the importance of the Science of Reading as an approach for providing systematic and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension in the elementary grades, and yet there is little evidence of the inclusion of Science of Reading in teacher preparation programs (Hindman et al., 2020). Since elementary teachers are typically trained as content generalists, it is unlikely that preservice candidates are given sufficient time and experience with the complexities required to effectively teach reading, making it all the more likely that they would require ongoing job-embedded professional learning and feedback from their instructional leaders (Hindman et al., 2020).

Principal as Instructional Leader

Historically, there have been multiple models of principal leadership proposed. The paradigm shift to instructional leadership as the principal's primary role was initiated by research that found that a principal's capacity for instructional leadership could positively influence teachers' instruction, resulting in improved student achievement (Hart et al., 2020; Tremont & Templeton, 2019). Initially, the term "instructional leader" emerged from research on effective schools and soon became a focus of school turnaround efforts and education policy (Hallinger, 2005). Because of this focus, instructional leadership was initially viewed as a directive, "top-down" approach to leadership. During the 1980s, most references to instructional leadership did not address teacher leaders or even assistant principals (Hallinger, 2005). Few effective instructional leadership models were described within a typical school's context.

However, this approach does not account for the varying contexts of the larger school context. Instead, Hallinger (2005) offered that instructional leadership is most successful when it is linked to the school's needs as part of a cycle of continuous improvement. In his study, Hallinger noted that evidence demonstrates that principals contribute to school effectiveness and student achievement both directly and indirectly and that strong instructional leaders focus on setting clear goals focused on student learning, establishing a culture of continuous improvement, and taking a more active role in coordinating curriculum and monitoring instruction.

The principal's instructional leadership can impact students directly and indirectly. One way a principal's instructional leadership can indirectly impact student achievement is through the development of self-efficacy of both the leaders themselves and the teachers they supervise (Liu et al., 2021; McBrayer et al., 2020). In one study, McBrayer et al. (2020) examined how instructional leadership practices predict leadership self-efficacy. The study utilized a cross-sectional survey methodology using a survey instrument adapted from the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale and the School Leaders' Self-Efficacy scale. Researchers used a combination of descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze the degree to which instructional leadership practices inform leadership self-efficacy. Results indicate differences by position, with principals noting that supervision and evaluation of instruction were significant predictors of leadership self-efficacy. In contrast, assistant principals noted only that curriculum coordination was a significant predictor (McBrayer et al., 2020). Within the conceptual framework of instructional leadership, supervision, and evaluation of instruction include

the use of instructional feedback provided by principals to improve achievement. The findings from this study support that this is standard practice for principals while also identifying that this is an area of further study for assistant principals.

Additional research indicates that principals' efforts to focus on instructional leadership can also have a critical impact on overall school culture. Principals can cultivate trust with teachers and create a professional learning community in which teachers see feedback as constructive, leading to instructional improvements. This focus on instructional leadership also positively impacts teacher job satisfaction and self-efficacy (Liu et al., 2021). This study employed a secondary data analysis using a structured equation model of the Teaching and Learning International Survey to examine multi-country comparisons about instructional leadership and school culture, specifically teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction (Liu et al., 2021). Data from the study confirmed that instructional leadership helps develop teachers' instructional beliefs and a culture of collaboration and support, which ultimately impacts student achievement (Liu et al., 2021).

It is widely accepted that school principals are responsible for ensuring their students' academic success. The research underscores that many factors influence a school's effectiveness (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019; Robinson & Gray, 2019). One study was based on the ontological assumption that "instructional leaders have a certain influential role they play in the academic achievement of learners" (Maponya, 2020, p. 185). Utilizing a descriptive phenomenological research design, researchers used in-depth interviews with principals, deputy principals, and heads of departments in secondary

schools in South Africa to gain their insight and perspective on the role of principals as instructional leaders. Results of this study revealed that participants felt that learner academic achievement was the principal's primary responsibility (Maponya, 2020) and further identified that the principal's instructional leadership responsibilities extended to motivating teachers, providing clear communication, and establishing a positive culture for teaching and learning. This study's research design and methodology are similar to mine in that I sought to understand principal perspectives and practices related to instructional leadership.

One ongoing challenge facing principals is the management of time. Leaders are often faced with competing challenges and must learn to balance the tasks related to management and those centered on instruction (Huang et al., 2020). Despite the growing body of research supporting the need for a focus on instructional leadership and its positive impacts on student achievement, current studies indicate that principals, on average, spend less than 20% of their time on instruction (Goldring et al., 2020). In addition to quantitative measures of principal time, examining the quality of time spent on instructional activities is essential to fully realize the positive impacts. Specifically, the time principals spend on instruction must yield positive changes in teachers' instruction (Goldring et al., 2020).

Principal's Impact on Student Achievement

It is clear from the research outlined above that principals serve a wide range of roles in schools, including establishing a clear vision and mission, supporting the professional growth of teachers, ensuring a safe and supportive learning environment,

and promoting rigorous teaching and learning. But it is also essential to understand the differential impact strong principals have on increasing levels of student achievement. A recent synthesis of research on principal leadership demonstrates that this impact may be even more significant than previously thought (Grissom et al., 2021). Robinson and Gray (2019) discovered that, indeed, principals make a difference, and their study examined specific instructional leadership practices that have positively impacted achievement, including setting goals and expectations; resourcing strategically; ensuring the quality of teaching; leading teacher learning and development; and ensuring a safe and orderly environment. Likewise, in a synthesis of research on principal behaviors and the impact on student outcomes, Liebowitz and Porter (2019) found positive relationships between principal time and skill and student achievement.

But principals do not do this alone. Research suggests that instructional leaders might best contribute to student achievement by empowering teachers to make instructional decisions (Bluestein & Goldschmidt, 2021). Further findings indicate that this effect of instructional leadership is most significant in the primary grades (Engin, 2020) and for disadvantaged students such as those receiving services for special education or English learners (N. Özdemir et al., 2022).

As noted above, the relationship between principal leadership and student achievement may be direct, with principals having a specific impact on instructional decisions, curriculum implementation, and goal setting. In addition, principals likely have the most substantial influence on student achievement indirectly through their efforts to improve school climate (Leithwood et al., 2020; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2019). When

examining changes in school leadership over time, researchers found that efforts to create environments in which teachers felt safe to take professional risks and receive feedback for improving practice and in which students experienced authentic engagement and emotional safety resulted in increased student achievement (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2019). These impacts were consistent across schools regardless of the strength of their climate before the change in leadership. While it may seem obvious for schools that have a high number of suspensions or disruptions to focus on climate, this study demonstrates that focusing on climate is a worthwhile endeavor for any school leader seeking to increase outcomes for students. This research illustrates that even in schools with strong climates, principal leadership efforts to continue strengthening climate can positively impact student achievement (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2019).

School leaders can most powerfully impact student achievement in many ways. Specifically, leaders can increase achievement by improving specific classroom and school conditions that support student learning, including establishing a culture of collaboration and strengthening relationships between teachers, staff, students, and families (Leithwood et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020). This focus on developing a strong climate is closely related to instructional leadership efforts since successful principals seek to create a culture focused on learning. These efforts include the organizational structures needed to sustain a focus on student achievement, including setting clear and ambitious goals, scheduling opportunities for monitoring progress, and trusting and empowering teachers through distributed leadership opportunities (Gordon & Hart, 2022).

While the body of research supporting the principal's impact on student achievement continues to grow, less is known about the principals' perspectives on their role. In one study, Rodrigues and Ávila de Lima (2021) explored the perspectives of several principals from Portugal to determine what, if any, impact they felt their leadership had on student achievement and found mixed results. Some principal participants did not believe their primary focus was on instruction and instead focused on management (Rodrigues & Ávila de Lima, 2021). Others felt their role was intended to focus on instruction but that tasks related to safety and management diverted their attention and time, resulting in a weak impact on student achievement overall (Rodrigues & Ávila de Lima, 2021).

The findings from this study also underscore the importance of considering the school district's structure since this context can either contribute to or detract from the principals' feelings of agency regarding curriculum and instructional leadership. Similar studies have demonstrated that rather than separating instructional leadership from organizational effectiveness, principals simultaneously see themselves as strong or weak in both, which indicates that to improve student achievement, principal preparation programs should focus on strengthening both aspects of leadership development (Sebastian et al., 2019).

Literacy Leadership

To effectively implement specific school actions to improve literacy, literacy leaders must have a strong foundation in literacy knowledge. This includes deep knowledge of the body of research on reading acquisition, collectively known as the

science of reading, as well as best practices for instruction (Bean, 2020). In their revised standards for literacy professionals, the International Literacy Association (2018) stated, “The principal’s role as an instructional leader is critical for ensuring all students receive effective literacy instruction” (p. 97). As noted above, research on effective schools has demonstrated the impact of strong principals on student achievement overall. Still, less is known about their role in supporting achievement in literacy specifically. Further, although the importance of solid leadership for literacy is noted in the research on reading achievement overall, there is a noticeable gap in practice in preparing principal candidates to serve in this role.

Given the critical role of literacy in elementary school, it is important to understand the training principals receive to support this priority. One study by McGeehan and Norris (2020) focused on the extent to which educational leadership preparation programs prepare principals for literacy leadership and found that principals lacked the content and pedagogical knowledge to be able to provide meaningful feedback to teachers of literacy, citing the International Literacy Association’s Standards for Literacy Leadership. In addition to increasing the quality of teacher feedback, studies show that a principal’s strong literacy content knowledge was demonstrated to improve their ability to set clear expectations for literacy instruction resulting in improved literacy achievement, as well as effectively allocate resources and demonstrate a commitment to improving literacy achievement through the establishment of a schoolwide culture of literacy (Merga et al., 2021; Plaatjies, 2019; Taylor et al., 2019). This schoolwide culture of literacy is strengthened when it extends to include the entire community (Townsend &

Bayetto, 2022). The research also supports the relationship between the principal's commitment to literacy and the overall literacy achievement of the students (Merga et al., 2021; Sharp et al., 2020; Thompson & Brezicha, 2022).

It is also essential that principals demonstrate their commitment to learning. Principals can prioritize learning about evidence-based strategies for teaching reading and model engaging in professional development as the "lead learners" in their building (Wilson et al., 2020). By engaging in sustained, high-quality professional learning aligned to evidence-based reading instruction, principals can ensure consistency of literacy instruction by employing a range of instructional leadership practices, such as a shared language for collaborative planning and professional dialogue around literacy instruction (S. Özdemir et al., 2020) which was demonstrated to have an overall positive impact on student literacy achievement.

Another aspect of literacy leadership shown to positively impact teacher practice and student achievement in literacy is the principal's commitment to establishing a culture of continuous improvement. In schools that have demonstrated growth in literacy achievement over time, teachers were given opportunities for authentic collaboration, such as examining student work, planning for literacy instruction, and monitoring student progress (Georgiou et al., 2020). In this way, effective literacy leaders can create opportunities for teachers and leadership team members to take "collective responsibility for improving reading results" (Georgiou et al., 2020, p.354).

Of course, not all principals are equally prepared for this role. Principals' ability to lead for literacy likely exists along a spectrum based mainly on their experience as

teachers and leaders (Durance, 2022). Many principals rely on the expertise of literacy coaches in their building or the district to provide specific content knowledge and requisite coaching to their teachers. Other principals are left to lead these efforts on their own. Either way, principals must invest their time in engaging in professional learning for literacy alongside their teachers to develop a depth of understanding of approaches to literacy instruction that are necessary to support their teachers and provide specific feedback on literacy instruction (Wilson et al., 2020).

In addition to demonstrating a commitment to a culture of continuous improvement, principals must demonstrate their investment in developing their literacy content knowledge. Research has demonstrated that engaging in job-embedded, continuous professional learning can increase the leadership capacity of principals (Levin et al., 2020). Principal content knowledge in literacy has positively impacted novice teachers' literacy practice. When new teachers perceive their principals as having high content knowledge in literacy instruction, they are more likely to transfer professional learning into classroom practice (Plaatjies, 2020).

Summary and Conclusions

The reviewed literature demonstrated the importance of developing strong literacy skills in the elementary grades and the relationship between literacy skills and student achievement overall. Further, a review of current research underscores the harmful impacts of failing to develop proficiency in literacy, including increased risk for dropout, underemployment, and incarceration (Didion et al., 2020).

The literature reviewed demonstrated the impact of the principal on student achievement overall, specifically through their ability to influence teacher practice by setting high expectations for literacy instruction and providing meaningful feedback supported by content and pedagogical knowledge (N. Özdemir et al., 2022). Principals can impact achievement directly through their efforts to inform instruction. Still, even more significant are the indirect impacts principals have through their efforts to create structures to support a positive school climate (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Much of the literature reviewed confirmed the research on models of effective school leadership focused on instructional leadership, specifically the role of principals in setting high expectations for rigorous teaching and learning, establishing the conditions for sustained professional growth, and demonstrating a commitment to literacy. Studies demonstrate a strong relationship between the principal's commitment to literacy and overall literacy achievement (Merga et al., 2021) and improvements in teacher practice. And yet, there was little research to support the specific instructional leadership practices most likely to result in improved achievement in literacy. In summary, the literature reviewed reflects the conceptual framework identified for this study. It supports the identified gap in practice in connecting elementary principals' perspectives on literacy leadership with the specific instructional leadership practices they should employ for literacy achievement.

In Chapter 3, I describe the methods used to address this gap in the literature through the basic qualitative study, including semi-structured interviews with a sample of elementary principals from the focus district. Through responsive interviewing and open

coding with thematic analysis of the transcripts, I applied a constructivist approach to the phenomenon of literacy leadership relying on elementary principals' perspectives to co-construct knowledge of best practices for literacy leadership.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The problem addressed in this study is the need for increased literacy achievement for elementary students in a large suburban school district in the eastern part of the United States. Research has demonstrated the importance of strong literacy skills for success in school and readiness for college and career. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of elementary principals from one large suburban school district in the eastern part of the United States on their role and practices as leaders in their students' literacy achievement. Chapter 3 includes a rationale for the basic qualitative design and the role of the researcher. It also describes the methodology used for the study including the purposive sampling and selection process for identifying participants and the recruitment procedures employed. I also describe the study instrument and the data collection process consisting of semi-structured interviews with 10 elementary principals from the district of study, followed by verbatim transcription and thematic analysis. Following the description of the data analysis, I include a discussion of the trustworthiness of the study including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Finally, I include a discussion of the ethical design of the study including the treatment of participants and the confidentiality of data gathered.

Research Design and Rationale

This study addressed two research questions:

- What are elementary principals' perspectives on their role as leaders in their students' literacy achievement?

- What are elementary principals' perspectives on the instructional leadership practices they apply to address student achievement in literacy?

Central Concept

The central concept of this study is the perspectives of elementary principals on their role in leading for literacy and the specific instructional leadership practices elementary principals apply for literacy leadership.

Research Tradition

To address the research questions for this study, a basic qualitative design was employed. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), "Qualitative researchers contend that knowledge is developed from individuals' subjective experiences" (p. 5). The primary purpose of qualitative research is to observe and describe phenomena to gain an understanding of their complexities (Burkholder et al., 2020). Since the purpose of this study was to understand the perspective of the elementary principals in the district of study related to their role as leaders for literacy and the instructional leadership practices they apply for literacy, a basic qualitative study was appropriate. From an epistemological perspective, qualitative research contends that knowledge is gleaned from individuals' lived experiences and as such is shared (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Therefore, it was appropriate to utilize a basic qualitative design so that through the semi structured interviews, principals might share their lived experiences as leaders for literacy to deepen their fundamental understanding of their role and the practices employed.

Rationale for Chosen Research Design

A basic qualitative study with semi-structured interviews was selected based on the purpose of the study and the stated research questions. The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of elementary principals from one large suburban school district in the eastern part of the United States on their role and practices as leaders in their students' literacy achievement. A basic qualitative design is flexible and practical and aligns well with this purpose since it is constructivist in nature and can be applied in the most naturalistic setting. Since the research questions specifically seek to understand the perspectives of elementary principals, a basic qualitative approach was appropriate. Other qualitative approaches such as case study or phenomenological approach would not have been as appropriate for this study since the purpose was not to examine a bounded context from multiple perspectives or intensely study a phenomenon to develop a theory from the results.

Role of the Researcher

As the sole researcher for this study, my role was that of an observer as I conducted semi-structured interviews with each principal individually and subsequently analyzed the data. I recorded each interview and then, immediately following the interview, created a verbatim transcript. To ensure the rigor of the study and strengthen trustworthiness, I shared the transcript of the interview with participants to confirm the contents. This approach of using participant validation strategies can ensure credibility (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

As an employee of the district of study, I have professional relationships with the majority of principals who elected to participate in this study; however, I do not have any supervisory or evaluative role for principals. While I maintained positive working relationships with each participant, my role was clearly articulated as that of a researcher and not a participant. It is important to acknowledge that qualitative research is subjective by design and that the researcher is the primary instrument (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge the bias that exists and to intentionally include strategies to manage that bias and mitigate its impact on the study. To manage this bias, I engaged in reflexivity both in maintaining neutral body language and voice during the interview process as well as maintaining a reflective journal throughout the research process.

Methodology

Participant Selection

The participants for this study included 10 elementary principals from the district of study. The district of study currently employs 108 elementary principals, so purposive sampling was utilized to select participants. Purposive (or purposeful) sampling is used to allow the researcher to intentionally select participants who are best suited to provide the information needed for the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For this study, I used purposive sampling to ensure that principal participants had a diverse range of experiences including novice to experienced principals, serving Title I and non-Title I communities, leading large and small schools, and so forth. To achieve this sampling, I identified 25–30 potential principal participants using directory information from the

district of study. After receiving Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct the study and subsequently receiving district IRB approval, I sent an email invitation to each potential participant outlining the purpose of the study, explaining the details of participation including time commitment, and requesting their voluntary participation. I included information regarding confidentiality as well as their right to decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any point. I included my contact information and an invitation for potential participants to contact me with any questions regarding the study, and I required that interested participants return a signed informed consent document confirming their agreement to participate in the study. Based on participant responses, I identified 10 eligible participants who met the participation criteria for the study, ensuring a range of diverse experiences among participants, sent them confirmation of their participation, and then scheduled the interviews.

When conducting qualitative research, it is not necessary to engage a specific sample size since the intent of the study is not to generalize but rather to deepen understanding (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Instead, the purpose of qualitative research is to extensively examine the research questions, ensure a thorough examination of the study topic, and achieve a multi-perspective exploration of the specific research questions. The use of purposeful sampling ensures the deliberate selection of individuals due to their unique perspectives and ability to answer the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). When conducting the interviews, it was critically important to note when saturation was reached, and participant responses yielded no new information.

Instrumentation

The data collection instrument for this study was a researcher-developed protocol (see Appendix) consisting of an initial set of questions aligned to the research questions for the study. The interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and were semi-structured, allowing for probing for detailed responses and asking follow-up questions as needed based on participant responses. The initial questions identified in the instrument protocol were flexible, yet clearly aligned with the research questions for the study and reflective of the conceptual framework of instructional leadership on which this study is based.

After the interview, I allowed each participant to review and clarify any responses, ask any follow-up questions about the research study itself, or add any relevant information not yet provided. Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed the interviews verbatim and shared them with participants for their review and confirmation of content validity. This process is known as *member checks* and is an appropriate participant validation strategy used to strengthen credibility. Allowing the participants this opportunity strengthened the study by allowing for the validation to occur at multiple stages in the study and can help inform further analysis and ongoing data collection as needed (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Once approval was received from the Walden University IRB and subsequently from the district IRB, I sent an email to a purposeful sampling of 25–30 elementary principals based on directory information from the district of study. This was to ensure that participants included a diverse range of perspectives as leaders including years of

experience, the type of school community in which they lead, and any other factors. The initial email included a basic outline of the study including the purpose and the research questions and asked for interested volunteers to respond. Once I received responses from interested participants, I selected individuals based on the criteria of the diversity of leadership experiences noted above including a range of years of experience and the diversity of the student population in the school in which they serve as principal. I then sent a more detailed description of the research study design including details about their requested commitment.

In the confirmation email, I included specific information about their participation including the expected duration of 45–60 minutes and the nature of the semi-structured interview. I also included a sampling of the type of questions addressed, aligned to the research question and the conceptual framework. I outlined the process for ensuring the confidentiality of their participation and the data collected and included a consent form. This consent form included information about their right to decline to answer any of the questions and to request to exit from the study at any time.

Data Analysis Plan

A basic qualitative study has the potential to generate large amounts of data to be analyzed and therefore it is critical to have a plan to organize and analyze the data as it is collected (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Each interview was recorded and then transcribed verbatim and stored on my password-protected computer. Although verbatim transcripts do not necessarily ensure rigor, they are a critical part of the qualitative researcher's

responsibility to center the participants' experience and perspective (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

To effectively analyze the data from these semi-structured interviews, I used a method of thematic analysis including the following steps: (a) familiarizing myself with the data, (b) assigning preliminary codes to describe the content, (c) searching for patterns and themes across the data, (d) reviewing the themes, and (e) defining and naming the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I used a precoding process for an initial review of each transcript, highlighting words or phrases, and began to identify patterns in the data. Precoding was a useful first step in making meaning from the vast amounts of data and assisting in organizing the data across themes. I then used a two-cycle approach reexamining the data using open coding. The first round of open coding was used to identify words or phrases that stood out or that were repeated across multiple participant interviews. Subsequent rounds of coding focused specifically on aspects of the research questions such as the literacy leadership practices employed. Then I used axial coding to determine how the highlighted phrases might be clustered across categories and themes. This included not only identifying similarities and differences but also an analysis of how the codes may connect or relate to one another (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This process allowed me to identify themes in the data and group data together in a meaningful way.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the validity, or trustworthiness of my qualitative study, I had to intentionally focus on the constructs of credibility, transferability, dependability, and

confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). These efforts also helped to ensure the rigor of the research study.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research design reflects the researcher's ability to design a study that is aligned and likely to yield meaningful data aligned to the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2021.) My study design and the instrumentation I used had to be aligned with the purpose of the study so that the data generated would be meaningful. To strengthen the credibility of the study, I utilized participation validation strategies, including sharing verbatim transcripts of interviews with participants and asking them to check for accuracy. I also used member checks throughout the process by sharing the data analysis and themes emerging and seeking input and feedback from a peer reviewer at multiple points in the study.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of my study may be applied to other contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). It is important to note that the purpose of qualitative research is not to create generalizations or seek a single truth, but rather to deepen understanding of a phenomenon through the lived experiences and perspectives of the individual participants. However, the results of my study may apply to other districts, provided the results are reflective of the context in which they are collected. A strategy I employed to increase transferability was to use thick or detailed descriptions when describing the participants, setting, and context for my study so that a future audience might use the context to determine applicability to their unique context.

Dependability

Dependability in a qualitative study refers to the degree to which the data from the study can be considered stable or reliable (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Research design is a critical strategy for supporting dependability. As a researcher, it was important to ensure that my research design and the methods I selected for data collection were suitable for my study and that I could provide a clear rationale of alignment between the study design and the stated purpose. As I began the process of conducting semi-structured interviews and collecting data, it was critically important to have a clear data collection plan supported by the research questions.

Confirmability

By its very nature, qualitative research design does not seek to be objective. Yet, qualitative researchers must design their study in a way that it is likely that another researcher conducting a similar study would reach the same conclusions and therefore confirm the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I had to acknowledge and interrogate the potential bias I brought as the researcher and ensure I could mitigate the impact my role as the researcher may have on the data collected. A strategy I employed to strengthen confirmability was to rely on expert colleagues to review my study design and to challenge my thinking in the data analysis. I also utilized a reflective journal to separate my own opinions about the data being collected to maintain neutrality and allow the experiences and perspectives of participants to be centered instead.

Ethical Procedures

It is critically important to protect the integrity of the research study by adhering to ethical procedures. First, the safety and welfare of participants must be protected. Participants must be clear on their rights to refuse to answer any questions or to disengage from the study at any time. In the invitation to participants, I provided a clear, detailed description of the interview process and provided consent forms for each participant describing their role and the expectations for the interview as well as the transcript review. I also clearly articulated to participants the nature of the study, including the strategies for maintaining confidentiality both in their participation and in the data collected. I also sought IRB permission from both Walden and the district of study before conducting the study.

As noted above, participants were informed about the procedures I used to maintain the confidentiality of their participation as well as the confidentiality of any data collected. All interview recordings and transcripts were stored on my password-protected laptop. Further, I did not use names for interview transcripts but rather identified a confidential marker for each participant's interview and stored the password-protected file on my computer. All printed copies of data transcripts were kept in a locked file cabinet in my home office and stored securely in alignment with the university standards for confidentiality.

Summary

To examine elementary principals' literacy leadership perspectives and practices, I employed a basic qualitative design. I conducted 45- to 60-minute semi-structured

interviews with 10 participants and utilized questions that supported the purpose of the study, aligned with Murphy's Instructional Leadership Framework (Murphy et al., 1983) and the research questions. In this chapter, I gave a detailed description of the research design and the rationale for this study and clearly defined my role as a researcher. I outlined the methodology to be used for this study including participant selection and instrumentation. I provided a detailed description of the recruitment strategies I used and the information I provided to potential participants including information about confidentiality, participation expectations, and follow-up member checks to ensure trustworthiness.

Data collection and analysis is an important part of the basic qualitative research design, and as such I outlined the specific strategies I used to gather the necessary data and to analyze the patterns and themes that arose from the data. In addition, in this chapter, I included information about the strategies I used to ensure all aspects of trustworthiness were addressed by design including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Finally, I outlined the ethical procedures that I followed including specific strategies to ensure appropriate treatment of participants and the treatment of data collected including storage and confidentiality. In Chapter 4, I will describe in detail the findings of my study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of elementary principals from one large suburban school district in the eastern part of the United States on their role and practices as leaders in their students' literacy achievement. The problem addressed in this study was the need for increased literacy achievement among elementary students in a large suburban school district in the eastern part of the United States. This study was grounded in the conceptual framework of instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2005; Murphy et al., 1983), which identified the processes, functions, and activities that define instructional leadership and reflect their interconnectedness and impact on student achievement. To accomplish the goals of this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 elementary principals from the district of study to understand their perspective on their role as leaders for literacy and the specific instructional leadership practices they employ that support student achievement in literacy. The research questions for this study were as follows:

- What are elementary principals' perspectives on their role as leaders in their students' literacy achievement?
- What are elementary principals' perspectives on the instructional leadership practices they apply to address student achievement in literacy?

Chapter 4 is organized into five major sections: Setting, Data Collection, Data Analysis, Results, and Evidence of Trustworthiness.

Setting

The setting for this study was one large suburban school district in the eastern part of the United States. There are 108 elementary schools in this district, which is divided into three geographic zones: east, central, and west. The district has just hired a new superintendent and as a result, is experiencing changes in system leadership and the current organizational structure. As is the case with many districts across the country, student enrollment in the district of study has decreased since the pandemic, with achievement results still reflecting low levels of literacy achievement. In addition, the district is anticipating a significant fiscal cliff as Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds end, which will likely impact staffing allocations and resources for the 2024–2025 school year. Purposive sampling was used to identify principals with a range of experiences, including years in leadership, demographics of the student population served (i.e., Title I, English learners, etc.), and school size. After receiving IRB approval from both Walden and the district of study, I sent an invitation to participate to 15 principals using the system directory to achieve a balance of school size and demographics. Ten principals participated in semi-structured interviews using a videoconferencing platform to record audio only. The relevant demographics and characteristics of each participant are captured in Table 2.

Table 2*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Years of principal experience	Zone	Title I status	School size
Principal #1	8	East	Yes	461
Principal #2	4	West	No	801
Principal #3	11	West	Yes	311
Principal #4	10	East	Yes	527
Principal #5	14	East	Yes	538
Principal #6	16	Central	No	511
Principal #7	9	West	Yes	500
Principal #8	4	Central	Yes	572
Principal #9	3	East	Yes	288
Principal #10	<1	Central	Yes	445

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews using a researcher-developed questionnaire and conducted via videoconferencing software using only audio recording and verbatim transcription. Before conducting these interviews, I received approval from the Walden University IRB (approval # 09-08-23-1067283) and the IRB from the district of study. In this study, I collected data from 10 elementary principals who volunteered to participate. The principal participants had experiences ranging from a first-year principal (Principal #10) to a principal in his 16th year (Principal #6). Purposive sampling was also used to select participants leading in different zones of the county (east, central, and west) and serving different populations of students (Title I,

non-Title I) and in different-sized schools. The rationale for including demographics and school size in the sampling selection was to determine whether additional resources impacted the role of the principal and the instructional leadership practices employed to improve student achievement in literacy.

I conducted each interview virtually using a videoconferencing platform with audio recording only. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and used the researcher-developed interview protocol included in the Appendix. Following the interview, I sent verbatim transcripts to participants for their review. This is consistent with the participant validation strategy identified in Chapter 3 as an important step taken to strengthen the credibility of the study. In addition to the audio recording and verbatim transcripts, I kept a reflective journal to highlight specific details relevant to the research questions and the purpose of the study, as well as to separate my reactions to the qualitative data being shared. This was an intentional strategy used to manage my bias and mitigate any impact on the study. All of the recordings and transcripts are stored on a password-protected file on the cloud and print copies of transcripts are kept in a locked file cabinet in my home office. There were no variations in the data collection methods outlined in Chapter 3, and I did not encounter any unusual circumstances in my data collection.

Data Analysis

After conducting the first interview, I shared the verbatim transcript of the interview with my chair for review and feedback. Since the self-generated questionnaire yielded valuable information related to the research questions, I proceeded with the remaining nine interviews using the same questionnaire. Once all of the interviews were

conducted and the data were collected, I used a multifaceted inductive approach to analyze the data, moving from coding to categories and ultimately to themes. To effectively analyze the data from these semi-structured interviews, I used a method of thematic analysis including the following steps: (a) familiarizing myself with the data, (b) assigning preliminary codes to describe the content, (c) searching for patterns and themes across the data, (d) reviewing the themes, and (e) defining and naming the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). First, I reviewed the verbatim transcript of each interview while listening to the recording to familiarize myself with the data. The transcripts were created using an artificial intelligence (AI) audio transcript feature available in the videoconferencing platform. By reviewing the transcripts while listening to the recording, I was able to adjust the transcript to accurately capture participant responses that may have been impacted due to sound quality. Participants then received a copy of the verbatim transcript to review for accuracy, and no edits or corrections were noted.

I then printed copies of the transcripts and used open coding to describe the content by highlighting keywords or phrases that were recurring and those directly related to the research questions. Coding is a process that enables the researcher to begin to assign meaning to chunks of data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This process resulted in nine codes for the first research question and eight for the second research question. Next, I organized these codes by creating an Excel spreadsheet to summarize participant responses to each question by capturing specific phrases and quotes from the response. I then conducted a more focused second cycle of coding by using color-coded highlighting in the Excel document to look for patterns in the data and identify categories related to

the conceptual framework of Instructional Leadership and the two research questions.

This process resulted in three categories for the first research question and three for the second research question. Finally, I used axial coding to review the data and identify emerging themes (see Table 3). This process revealed a total of six themes, with three themes for each research question. I found no discrepant cases within the data and based on the common themes that consistently emerged in the interviews, saturation was met.

Table 3

Codes, Categories, and Themes

Codes	Categories	Themes
RQ 1: What are elementary principals' perspectives on their role as leaders in their students' literacy achievement?		
Literacy is critical to overall achievement. Key to success in all other content areas All teachers are literacy teachers.	Literacy development is the primary role of elementary school	Importance of elementary literacy
Establish vision and sense of urgency Principal establishes high expectations; sets the tone Models knowledge of literacy standards and evidence-based strategies	Framing goals and promoting expectations and standards	Importance of elementary literacy leadership
Grow teacher capacity through feedback Build an expert literacy leadership team Protect time for literacy instruction	Promoting and supporting instructional improvement	Importance of building capacity
RQ 2: What are elementary principals' perspectives on the instructional leadership practices they apply to address student achievement in literacy?		
Learning Walks Lesson study Informal observations	Promoting and supporting instructional improvement	Importance of time spent in classrooms observing instruction
Data analysis meetings Individual data conversations	Assessing and monitoring student performance	Importance of progress monitoring
Collaborative planning Grade level meetings Monthly ILT meetings	Creating a productive work environment	Importance of structures for collaboration

Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of elementary principals from one large suburban school district in the eastern part of the United States on their role and practices as leaders in their students' literacy achievement. As instructional leaders, elementary principals have a responsibility to ensure student achievement in literacy. This study aimed to gain deeper insight into the elementary principals' perspective on their role in accomplishing this goal, and the specific instructional leadership practices they employ to increase student achievement in literacy.

RQ 1: What are elementary principals' perspectives on their role as leaders in their students' literacy achievement?

The following themes emerged from the first research question:

- Importance of early literacy
- Importance of elementary literacy leadership
- Importance of building capacity

All of the principals interviewed identified their role as critical to student achievement in literacy, and 7 out of 10 referenced their role in establishing literacy as a priority for their work. First, principals acknowledged the critical nature of literacy in elementary school achievement. Principal 3 went further, declaring literacy as “probably the number one factor that is going to help a student be successful. When they struggle with their core literacy skills, it tends to impact everything they do throughout the day.” Many other principals commented on the foundational role of literacy in student achievement, with Principal 9 describing it as “the foundation of everything that we do in

elementary school.” Research has documented the critical importance of literacy in student achievement (Silverman et al., 2020) and recently there have been strides in ensuring literacy instruction is aligned with the body of evidence known as the science of reading. Many of the principals interviewed noted the critical role foundational literacy plays in elementary school success overall, as described in the research, with Principal 8 even going as far as to deem literacy “the key to all achievement.” Principal 6 captured this relationship between literacy and leadership at the elementary level, stating, “I believe our main charge as elementary schools is to ensure that our students are literate in reading, writing, and mathematics as they leave us to progress to their secondary education.”

When asked to explain their perspective on their role as a leader for student achievement in literacy, 9 out of 10 principals focused on their responsibility to establish a clear vision and set expectations, aligned with Murphy’s model of instructional leadership (Murphy et al., 1983). Studies demonstrate that a principal’s efforts to establish organizational structures needed to sustain a focus on student achievement, including setting clear and ambitious goals, scheduling opportunities for monitoring progress, and trusting and empowering teachers through distributed leadership opportunities are critical to student achievement overall (Gordon & Hart, 2022).

According to Principal 1, “I need to establish a sense of urgency and protect my students’ right to read.” This was echoed by both Principal 2 who stated, “I believe that I am the role model—I set the precedent” and Principal 5 who stated “The principal sets the tone—they set the rate for the pack. That means if the principal is not adept or

knowledgeable about reading strategies, then the staff is not going to value that.” Many of the principals echoed this responsibility of a school leader to positively impact a culture of learning, detailing the influence their behavior has as a model of expectations for teaching and learning. Principal 4 explained her role in connecting the importance of literacy to the culture of the building explaining, “If I’m not speaking about literacy instruction and if I am not having those conversations daily with teachers, students, and parents focused on student learning, then it becomes I guess less pervasive in the culture of the school.”

Five out of 10 principals identified the need to serve as lead learners in understanding standards and the evidence-based research behind the science of reading. Research has demonstrated that when teachers believe their principal to be knowledgeable about reading instruction, it has a positive impact on the teachers’ willingness to accept feedback and grow their instructional practice (Plaatjies, 2020). Principal 10 stated,

I think that I need to have a strong understanding of how to teach reading, and how to address deficits when students aren’t reading to be a strong reading teacher and to know how to observe, coach, and support teachers who teach reading.

Principal 8 stated, “Number one to know what the standards are in the content areas and to ensure that my whole leadership team is on the same page.”

A third theme that emerged when discussing their perspective on their role as leaders for literacy achievement was the importance of building the instructional capacity

of teachers and their instructional leadership team. Seven out of 10 principals described the importance of their role in providing meaningful feedback on literacy instruction to improve the capacity of their teachers to support student achievement in literacy.

Principal 2 shared “I often provide instant coaching the morning when I am in a classroom to show that I am not afraid to teach.” Principal 7 described using data and connecting it to instruction by “giving feedback on instruction and engaging in conversation through student work and teacher practice.” This type of coaching and feedback may look different for different teachers but has a consistent impact on student achievement and underscores the importance of principals spending time in classrooms observing instruction to know their teachers’ strengths and needs as teachers of literacy, with Principal 6 explaining that “Just as with students, I need to meet staff where they are and grow teachers and build their capacity using some of the same scaffolding strategies we use with students.”

Seven out of 10 principals also described the need to have a strong leadership team supporting literacy and identified their role in developing the leadership capacity of that team including reading specialists, assistant principals, and resource teachers. Principal 5 explained, “As a leader, you have to surround yourself with your resource team and ILT with specific roles and functions, all of us need to focus on reading.” This requires deliberate effort on the part of principals to ensure they have dedicated time for this work. Time is often cited as a barrier to instructional leadership and thus requires principals intent on being strong instructional leaders to be deliberate in establishing sustainable systems and structures to ensure this work is prioritized. Principal 9 described

the focus on developing these systems explaining, “Right now I am just focused on the foundation. I am trying to build other leaders in the building and try to build connections between all the people.” Principal 3 explained how her perspective on this role has changed:

I used to think I had to know everything but now I keep the focus on implementation and fidelity to best practices and rely on my team of leaders to ensure fidelity. I am personally hesitant to do much direct coaching around strategies now because it has changed so now, I focus on making sure I have the right people in place to support teachers.

The second research question sought to understand the specific practices elementary principals utilize in this work.

RQ 2: What are elementary principals’ perspectives on the instructional leadership practices they apply to address student achievement in literacy?

Several themes emerged when examining principal responses detailing the practices they utilize for literacy achievement:

- Importance of time spent in classrooms observing instruction.
- Importance of progress monitoring
- Importance of structures for collaboration

Principals described several different instructional practices focused on promoting and supporting instructional improvement by spending time observing instruction in classrooms. Many of these opportunities include teachers to create opportunities for dialogue. This directly aligns with the research on instructional leadership which

describes specifically the principal's ability to influence teacher practice by setting high expectations for literacy instruction and providing meaningful feedback supported by content and pedagogical knowledge (N. Özdemir et al., 2022). Principal 1 described this process by explaining, "We schedule learning walks across grade levels and then debrief what we observed, focused on the standards." In this way, the time spent in classrooms not only allows the principal to observe instruction and provide feedback but also to build the capacity of other teachers by connecting instructional practice to standards and planning. Principal 2 also provides time for learning walks and includes follow-up opportunities for "tag outs" to provide coverage and allow teachers time to see another teacher's instruction focused on a specific component of literacy instruction. These efforts not only increase time spent in classrooms for individual teachers but also help to create a climate of collaboration in which all teachers are active participants in a professional learning community committed to strengthening literacy instruction. Principal 10 identified her commitment to being in classrooms every day, stating, "It helps me to understand what my teachers' strengths and needs are. It also helps me identify topics for our Instructional Support Team."

A second theme that emerged when describing the specific practices principals employ to promote student literacy achievement was the importance of monitoring literacy progress with data. Eight of the 10 principals interviewed identified data analysis meetings as a practice they consistently utilized to support literacy achievement. These data analysis meetings happened with varying degrees of frequency, ranging from weekly to monthly, and used different data sources with some using formative assessment and

student work samples while others focused primarily on summative unit assessment data. Principal 4 and Principal 8 described a unique approach to data analysis in which they had moved from grade-level meetings to individual data conversations with Principal 4 explaining, “One thing that is very time-consuming but always has a big impact is having individual data conversations and really analyzing student work with teachers.” In schools that have demonstrated growth in literacy achievement over time, teachers were often given opportunities for authentic collaboration to include monitoring student progress on measures of literacy achievement (Georgiou et al., 2020). Principal 8 framed these data meetings as coaching sessions and used “data analysis to plan responsive small group instruction.” This practice helps to ensure teachers can see the relationship between student data and shifts in instructional practice, an important part of continuous improvement. Two other principals identified individual data meetings as a practice they were interested in exploring in the future. Principal 10 described data analysis meetings that happen at the school level with the Instructional Support Team looking at teacher data as well as explaining, “I use the data from classroom visits and student data to provide a lens for what our PD and our faculty meetings should focus on.”

Similarly, a third theme that emerged from the study related to instructional leadership practices that support literacy achievement related to the importance of establishing structures for collaboration. These structures align with Murphy’s framework for Instructional Leadership (Murphy et al., 1983) and the need to create a productive work environment while promoting curricular coordination. Seven out of 10 principals identified collaborative planning or grade-level team meetings as an instructional

leadership practice utilized to promote student achievement. Principal 9 described these structures by stating, “I have consistent practices and schedules; weekly grade level meetings focused on formative assessment.” Several principals talked about the challenge of protecting this time despite conflicting scheduling needs but identified it as a critical structure for supporting student achievement. As Principal 6 described, “We meet formally with grade-level teams four times a year, and then our resource team meets with teachers weekly. It was the best way we could fit in all the priorities.” Principal 3 described the need to combine the meeting purposes with “extended planning with teachers every six weeks which includes a data review and then planning and PD in the afternoon.” Similarly, principals often cited the need to have regular meetings with their instructional leadership team to ensure consistency with instructional expectations and feedback and to plan for the support of teachers. Principal 10 described this effort to shift the role of the team from evaluating to supporting instruction:

I call them the Instructional Support Team instead of the leadership team because I want it to feel like a support for teachers. We meet twice a month and now we are starting our coaching cycles with teachers and letting the data lead the coaching expectations.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

According to Rubin & Rubin (2021), credibility can be achieved in part by assuring that the participants involved in a qualitative study have the necessary experience to provide data relevant to address the research questions and the purpose of

the study. I interviewed ten elementary principals in a large suburban district in the eastern part of the country. Each principal interviewed had extensive experience with instructional leadership for literacy and perspectives on those practices that best support student achievement. For participation validation, I sent participants a copy of the verbatim transcript for their review as outlined in my data collection plan and received no revisions or corrections.

Transferability

In Chapter 3, I outlined the strategy I would use to increase the transferability of my study by using thick or detailed descriptions when describing the participants, setting, and context for my study. Transferability refers to the extent to which study results may apply to other contexts while still preserving the specifics of the context of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The participant demographics included information about the participant's years of experience as a principal as well as information about the geographic area, school demographics, and size of the school they lead. This will enable other principals and instructional leaders to see potential similarities to the context in which they serve, which may increase the applicability of the results of the study.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the degree to which the data collected answers the research question and is collected using a consistent, rational approach. Since the purpose of my study was to understand the perspectives of elementary principals on their role as leaders for literacy and the specific instructional leadership practices they use to improve student achievement in literacy, a basic qualitative approach was appropriate. The

interview protocol utilized was aligned to the purpose of the study and the research questions, and each participant was asked the same questions allowing for consistency yet individual perspectives to be captured. The process for collecting data was detailed and consistent, and audio recordings and verbatim transcripts were used to capture the data.

Confirmability

By its very nature, qualitative research supports the idea that truth is subjective and therefore does not seek to prove an objective outcome (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). However, qualitative researchers should seek to have their data confirmable by acknowledging the potential for bias and making intentional efforts to mitigate the impacts of this bias on the interpretation of the data. I accomplished this by keeping a reflective journal in which I could separate my reactions to the interview responses from the data collection. In addition, I have shared my data collection and data analysis with a peer reviewer for feedback as outlined in my research design to strengthen the confirmability of the results.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I briefly reviewed the purpose of this study, including the research questions, and then gave a detailed description of the study, including thick descriptions of the participants and the schools in which they serve as principals. I outlined the specific data collection procedures utilized in alignment with those detailed in Chapter 3 and then explained the process of thematic analysis used to move inductively from coded units to larger categories and themes. I then described the specific codes and categories

used in my analysis and provided a detailed description of the results addressing each research question and noting the specific themes that emerged with each. For research question one included the importance of literacy in elementary school, the importance of literacy leadership, and the importance of building capacity. For research question two, the following themes emerged: the importance of time spent in classrooms observing instruction, the importance of progress monitoring, and the importance of establishing structures for collaboration.

In Chapter 5, I will summarize and interpret key findings from this study and align them to the literature, while describing the limitations of the research. Finally, in Chapter 5 I will describe opportunities for further research and the potential impact for positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of elementary principals from one large suburban school district in the eastern part of the United States on their role and practices as leaders in their students' literacy achievement. Literacy achievement is critical to student success overall and research supports the impact of instructional leadership on student achievement overall. However, less is known about the specific instructional leadership practices utilized to impact literacy achievement. Therefore, this study was conducted to understand the perspectives of elementary principals related to student achievement in literacy, and the specific practices they apply for literacy achievement. To fully understand elementary principals' perspectives and practices, the following research questions served as the focus of the study:

- What are elementary principals' perspectives on their role as leaders in their students' literacy achievement?
- What are elementary principals' perspectives on the instructional leadership practices they apply to address student achievement in literacy?

To address the research questions for this study, a basic qualitative design was employed. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), the focus of qualitative research is on individuals' experiences and perspectives as sources of knowledge. Since the purpose of this study was to understand the perspective of the elementary principals in the district of study related to their role as leaders for literacy and the instructional leadership practices they apply to address student achievement in literacy, a basic qualitative study was

appropriate. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews of 10 elementary principals using a researcher-developed responsive interview protocol. Key findings revealed that elementary principals believe they have a critical role in promoting student achievement in literacy and in ensuring high-quality literacy instruction is consistently occurring. Six themes emerged from this study: (a) the importance of early literacy, (b) the importance of elementary literacy leadership, (c) the importance of building capacity, (d) the importance of time spent in classrooms, (e) the importance of progress monitoring, and (f) the importance of structures for collaboration.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this study reveal that the elementary principals' perspectives on their role as leaders for literacy align with the current literature and with the conceptual framework for the study. In addition, the specific literacy practices they apply to increase student achievement in literacy are consistent with those practices identified in the literature and as part of Murphy's Instructional Leadership Framework.

Studies from the literature reviewed and detailed in Chapter 2 demonstrate a strong relationship between the principal's commitment to literacy and overall literacy achievement (Merga et al., 2021). A key theme that emerged in this study is the importance of elementary literacy leadership. Nine out of 10 principals interviewed for this study identified the need to establish a clear vision for literacy achievement and to establish specific goals for literacy achievement for students and teachers. This is in alignment with Murphy's Instructional Leadership Framework expectations for (a) framing school goals and objectives and (b) developing and promoting expectations. Key

findings from this study indicate that principals recognize the importance of modeling high expectations for literacy instruction aligned with a theme of building capacity with Principal 4 stating, “My role is to keep the focus on instruction,” and Principal 2 stating, “I believe that I am the role model—I set the precedent.” This aligns with the literature, which demonstrated the impact of principals on student achievement specifically through their ability to influence teacher practice by setting high expectations for literacy instruction (N. Özdemir et al., 2022).

Similarly, findings from this study revealed a common theme of the importance of time spent in classrooms observing instruction. This is in alignment with current literature which suggests that principals can impact achievement by providing meaningful feedback supported by content and pedagogical knowledge (Georgiou et al., 2020; Hindman et al., 2020.) This finding is also in alignment with Murphy’s Instructional Leadership framework, which underscores the importance of principals (a) promoting and supporting instructional improvement and (b) supervising and evaluating instruction. Principals in the study often cited the importance of spending time in classrooms observing instruction and providing job-embedded coaching for teachers. These instructional conversations that principals shared as part of their practice for improving literacy instruction are even more impactful when they are centered on content knowledge and demonstrate the use of knowledge of curriculum and instruction as indicated in Murphy’s Framework. Studies in the literature indicate that a principal’s strong literacy knowledge improves their ability to establish high expectations for literacy instruction (Merga et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2019) and further underscore that when

teachers perceive their principals have high content knowledge in literacy instruction, they are more likely to transfer professional learning into classroom practice (Plaatjies, 2020).

To develop this content knowledge, the literature suggests that it is important for principals to invest time in engaging in professional learning alongside their teachers (Wilson et al., 2020). All of the principals in this study identified the need to engage in continuous professional learning, such as serving as a model of a “lead learner” (Principal 1) and described the need to “have a strong foundation of what good literacy instruction looks like” (Principal 4). In addition, 4 out of 10 principals interviewed expressed the need for additional training in literacy, specifically related to the body of research known as the Science of Reading. As Principal 8 stated, “I need more extensive training about literacy because the way we teach literacy is changing and I don’t want to get left behind and then I won’t have credibility with teachers.” This aligns with Murphy’s Instructional Leadership Framework, which asserts that using knowledge of curriculum and instruction is a key aspect of instructional leadership practice that impacts student achievement. It is also supported by the literature, which describes that engaging in job-embedded continuous professional learning can increase the leadership capacity of principals (Levin et al., 2020).

Finally, a key theme that emerged from this study is the importance of structures for collaboration. Seven out of the 10 principals surveyed expressed the need to ensure there is protected time for collaborative planning and data analysis with teacher teams. Further, 6 out of 10 principals identified time as a barrier to instructional leadership

because of competing priorities. Murphy et al. (1983) described this paradox by explaining that although the focus on the role of the principal as an instructional leader was increasing, the time devoted to it—both in preparation and in practice—did not. This is aligned with the literature that describes the importance of instructional leaders establishing structures for authentic collaboration for planning, progress monitoring, and examining student work with teachers (Georgiou et al., 2020).

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to further understand the perspective of elementary principals on their role as leaders for literacy and to understand the specific instructional leadership practices they apply to increase student achievement in literacy. Based on the findings of this study, principals identified key themes of the importance of their role as leaders for literacy and practices such as time spent in classrooms observing instruction, providing meaningful feedback aligned to content, and developing structures for collaboration that correspond to both the conceptual framework and the supporting literature.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge potential limitations in research to identify possible areas of weakness (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In Chapter 1, I identified the potential limitations for this study including limiting participants to one district for the study and identifying only ten participants. Recognizing these limitations, and to increase transferability, I selected participants using purposive sampling to ensure a wide range of principal experiences was reflected in the data including gender, years of experience, and type of school in which the participant serves as principal (i.e., Title I, non-Title I, large

school, etc.). Another potential limitation identified was my familiarity with participants since I am employed in the district of study, which could impact participant responses. I was able to successfully mitigate this limitation to trustworthiness by utilizing active listening techniques to reflect participant responses and to seek clarity using their language. Further, I shared verbatim transcripts with each participant individually to verify accuracy and received no changes or feedback from participants.

Recommendations

Recommendations for further research are grounded in the strengths and limitations of the current study as well as the current literature. The focus of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of principals' perspectives on their role as leaders for literacy and the specific instructional leadership practices they apply for student achievement in literacy. A recommendation for further research would be to do a quantitative research study to compare the instructional leadership practices applied in each school with student literacy achievement scores to measure what, if any, impact different instructional leadership practices have on student outcomes. This type of research is supported by literature that identifies the positive impact of instructional leadership overall on measures of student achievement but would add to the literature by connecting specific leadership practices used for literacy.

I would also recommend that future research be conducted at the secondary level to include principals at the middle and high school levels. While the literature for this study clearly supports the importance of early literacy and therefore relates to the elementary principal's role, the research also underscores the significant impact of

literacy failure on school success beyond the elementary level. It would be interesting to examine the perspective of secondary principals on their role as instructional leaders for literacy and to determine what, if any, different leadership practices they apply for adolescent literacy achievement.

Implications

This study has the potential to impact positive social change at the local level since the instructional leadership practices that principals identify may be applied to increase student achievement in literacy. Increases in literacy achievement will have a positive impact on social change by increasing the positive outcomes associated with strong literacy development including readiness for college and career while also decreasing the likelihood of the negative social impacts associated with illiteracy including school drop-out rates, underemployment, and incarceration.

This study also has the potential for positive social change by improving opportunities for professional learning within the district of study since the practices identified by principal participants could be shared with other elementary colleagues within the district. This could result in increased collaboration for instructional leaders with a specific focus on literacy, thereby improving instruction for teachers and outcomes for students in literacy.

Conclusion

Research has demonstrated the critical importance of strong literacy development for student success in school and life. Literacy development is arguably the most important factor impacting student success and positive social outcomes, including

readiness for college and career and earning potential, while also decreasing the likelihood of the negative outcomes associated with illiteracy. Similarly, a growing body of research has supported the positive impacts of instructional leadership on student achievement overall. Yet there is a gap in practice connecting these priorities and more information is needed to understand the role of the elementary instructional leader related to literacy achievement. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to fill this gap by seeking to understand the perspective of elementary principals on their role as leaders for literacy and to identify the specific instructional leadership practices applied to positively impact student achievement in literacy. Key findings in this study reveal themes related to the role of elementary principals in establishing a sense of urgency for literacy achievement and setting clear expectations for high-quality literacy teaching. Results of this study also provide information about the specific instructional leadership practices applied to increase literacy achievement including spending time in classrooms observing instruction and providing feedback, while establishing structures for collaboration including planning and data analysis. Finally, this study provides insight into the needs of elementary principals to support their role as leaders for literacy, which can inform critical professional learning and support resulting in increased levels of student achievement in literacy.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. Please describe your current position and your instructional leadership background. (i.e., years of experience, schools in which you have served.)
2. What is your perspective on student achievement in literacy?
3. What is your perspective on your role as a leader for student achievement in literacy?
4. What is your perspective on what you need as an elementary principal to fulfill this role in supporting student achievement in literacy?
5. What is your perspective on instructional leadership?
6. What instructional leadership practices do you currently utilize that specifically support student achievement in literacy?
7. What, if any, additional instructional leadership practices do you plan to use in the future to support student achievement in literacy?
8. What, if any, instructional leadership practices have you found that do not specifically support student achievement in literacy that you will no longer use?
9. What is your perspective on what you need as an elementary principal to support your instructional leadership?
10. What else would you like to share regarding your perspective on instructional leadership practices in support of student achievement in literacy?