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Principal Instructional Leadership Practices that Improve Middle School Student Academic Achievement

Delarius Marshall
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Delarius Markize Marshall

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Mary Kropiewnicki, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty

Dr. Kathleen Kingston, Committee Member, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2024

Abstract

Principal Instructional Leadership Practices that Improve Middle School Student

Academic Achievement

by

Delarius Markize Marshall

MA, Central Michigan University, 2014

BS, Alabama State University, 2004

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

May 2024

Abstract

The problem that was addressed in this study was that six of twelve middle schools that were formerly rated as unsuccessful by the Georgia Department of Education in English language arts and mathematics performance continued to perform poorly, while the other six improved performance in these areas. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore instructional leadership practices of school leaders who transformed unsuccessful middle schools to achieve successful ratings. Hallinger's instructional leadership model served as the conceptual framework for this study to inform analysis and data collection. Research questions were focused on middle school leaders' perceptions of instructional leadership practices that were implemented to increase student achievement and challenges while implementing those practices. Purposive sampling was used to identify six principals and seven assistant principals. The study revealed several themes: building relationships and modeling expectations, use of data and collaboration to improve student achievement, and use of data to support resource allocation and create positive learning environments. Challenges included resource and funding issues, system and policy constraints, instructional challenges, and the need for leadership and staff development. Study findings were used to develop a professional development curriculum for principals and assistant principals through instructional leadership development that can contribute to increased student academic achievement at schools that were rated as unsuccessful through this project study.

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Dedication

During this process, I often reflect on my faith in God, why education is essential to my family, and how they prayed for my success and whatever I decide to become.

Unfortunately, I had some losses along the way, but I persevered and completed the task that was embedded within me. Although many of my family members are no longer on Earth but have transitioned to be with our ancestors, their core values, dreams, and vision has been completed.

This study is dedicated to my guardian angels and pioneers who have been influential in my education career: Dorothy Mae Griggs-Marshall, Dorothy Marshall Paige-Fryer, Gasdon Lee Marshall, Garry Marshall, Robbie Brown, Rena Waters, and Emma Weathington.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

The problem that was addressed in the study was that six of 12 middle schools that were formerly rated as unsuccessful by the Georgia Department of Education in English language arts and math performance continued to perform poorly while the other six improved performance in these areas. This study was focused on instructional leadership practices middle school leaders used to improve student academic achievement in English language arts and mathematics on annual state assessments. There are many instructional leadership practices contributing to student achievement, which include supervision of teaching, facilitating professional learning communities (PLCs), and collaborating with teachers to model instructional strategies (Achimugu, 2016; Adilman et al., 2019; Celoria & Roberson, 2015).

Quality of leadership impacts both teachers and students. Corcoran (2017) found students whose principals were knowledgeable regarding instructional practices scored higher on achievement assessments compared to principals who were not as knowledgeable about these practices. Understanding instructional leadership practices to improve cultures of schools may help schools improve overall accountability ratings (Cozzens & Ross, 2016). According to the United States Department of Education (USDOE, 2018), all public schools in the United States are required to administer end-of-year assessments to students, allowing the state department of education to determine school accountability ratings.

The GADOE uses the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) as the accountability system to measure success levels of public schools, districts, and overall state public education systems in terms of achieving student academic growth. The CCRPI has four components: achievement, progress, achievement gap, and challenge points (GADOE, 2021). Each component has multiple indicators with an overall score ranging from zero to 100, with a possibility of 10 additional points. This statewide accountability system is used to indicate whether students are achieving at college and career ready levels. Students in elementary, middle, and high school take the CCRPI each year, and subsequently districts and schools are assigned an accountability rating based on the CCRPI (GADOE, 2021). Economically disadvantaged (ED), English learners (ELs), and students with disabilities (SWDs) are combined as a subcategory in the CCRPI. Another subcategory is exceeding the bar; this subcategory provides extra points based on schools exceeding specific target scores on content mastery and closing achievement gaps. When schools have scores that are higher than target scores, they are classified as exceeding the bar and are awarded additional points (see Figure 1).

Figure 1*CCRPI Accountability Model*

CCRPI Three Main Components		
1. Achievement (3 subsections: Content Mastery Post Readiness, Graduation Rate) 50 points	2. Progress (Academic growth of all students relative to similar schools in the state) 40 points	3. Achievement Gap (Gap progress of lowest 25% of achievers based on prior scores) 10 points
a. Content Mastery (English language arts, mathematics, Science, Social Studies) 40% of Achievement 20 points	100 Points Total	Additional Challenge Points (2 subsections: ED/EL/SWD Performance, ETB) 10 points
b. Post Readiness (Preparation for the next educational level) 30% of Achievement 15 points		a. Performance of Economically Disadvantaged (ED)/English Learners (EL)/ Students with Disabilities (SWD)
c. Graduation Rate (4-year and 5-year high school graduation rates) 30% of Achievement 15 points		b. Exceeding the Bar (ETB)

Note. This accountability model shows components of the CCRPI, points for each component, and their percentage of the total score (GADOE, 2021).

The CCRPI was established by the GADOE to inform schools and districts about strengths as well as needs. Scores are used in comparison to other schools and districts in the target state to identify successful and unsuccessful schools. Each public school in the target state's school system receives an accountability rating for the school year through a

report provided by the GADOE. Schools are identified by performance and given a letter grade of A-F, with A as the highest score and F as the lowest. The purpose of the report is to inform parents, students, educators, and communities about school and district performance in comparison to other schools. The report is intended to provide stakeholders with information about areas needing improvement related to student academic achievement for the upcoming school year. Multiple factors play a role in schools receiving unsuccessful ratings. These factors include high teacher turnover, curriculum used for instruction, progress monitoring, and student absenteeism. District leadership and principal turnover may also play a role in the success of districts and schools (GADOE, 2021).

Rationale

During the 2017-2018 academic year, 12 middle schools in an urban school district in Georgia were rated as unsuccessful by the GADOE based on their academic performance in English/language arts and mathematics on the state's annual academic achievement assessment at the end of the school year (see Table 1).

Table 1*2017-2018 School District Report Card Data*

Schools	Middle Schools Scored at and above 70 in mathematics	Middle Schools Scored at and above 70 in English/langu age arts	Overall School Score	Middle School Performance Rate Unsuccessful	Middle School Performance Rate Successful
Middle School A	68	61	64.9	Unsuccessful	
Middle School B	55	64	58.6	Unsuccessful	
Middle School C	75	68	67.9	Unsuccessful	
Middle School D	68	73	69.8	Unsuccessful	
Middle School E	63	61	59.8	Unsuccessful	
Middle School F	58	62	61.7	Unsuccessful	
Middle School G	52	61	58.6	Unsuccessful	
Middle School H	67	71	60.2	Unsuccessful	
Middle School I	70	68	67.9	Unsuccessful	
Middle School J	68	72	68.3	Unsuccessful	
Middle School K	48	57	53.2	Unsuccessful	
Middle School L	52	63	64.6	Unsuccessful	
Total	17%	25%		12	0

Note. The table displays school district reporting data for each school grade during the 2017-2018 end-of-year annual assessment. Data show all 12 schools performing below target scores for mathematics and English/Language arts, followed by the overall school score.

During the 2018-2019 academic year, below basic levels of academic achievement in English/language arts and mathematics persisted in six of the 12 middle schools, while the remaining six showed increased academic achievement. The GADOE school district report card designated six middle schools performing below basic academically as unsuccessful, while the other six middle schools increased academic

performance in terms of both English/language arts and mathematics to a level of academically basic or above, resulting in a successful school rating (see Table 2).

Table 2

2018-2019 School District Report Card Data

Middle Schools	Middle Schools Scored at and above 70 in mathematics	Middle Schools Scored at and above 70 in English/language arts	Overall School Score	Middle School Performance Rate Unsuccessful	Middle School Performance Rate Successful
Middle School A	73	80	77.2		Successful
Middle School B	68	62	63.1	Unsuccessful	
Middle School C	80	92	83.4		Successful
Middle School D	85	84	90.5		Successful
Middle School E	57	65	58.1	Unsuccessful	
Middle School F	61	59	60.8	Unsuccessful	
Middle School G	47	64	57.9	Unsuccessful	
Middle School H	86	77	81.9		Successful
Middle School I	78	83	79.4		Successful
Middle School J	78	75	81.2		Successful
Middle School K	51	62	47.2	Unsuccessful	
Middle School L	49	58	53.7	Unsuccessful	
Total	50%	50%		6	6

Note. The table displays school district reporting data for each school grade during the 2018-2019 end-of-year annual assessment. Data show six schools performing at proficient or higher, and the remaining six schools performing below target scores for mathematics and English/language arts, followed by the overall school score.

During the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 academic years, school data were not reported to the GADOE due to the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States. The GADOE suspended annual assessments of all students, resulting in a gap in collection of

student performance data during two academic years. As a result, schools and districts were not able to measure growth of student academic achievement, contributing to ongoing problems for some schools and districts in terms of teacher and administrator turnover, funding related to supplemental materials, student motivation, and attendance issues (GADOE, 2021).

Middle schools in the study school district have high enrollment numbers for students of color as well as high numbers of students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Schools with higher numbers of students who receive free or reduced lunch and have higher numbers of students of color often have low student achievement (Callaway, 2017; Larson et al., 2018). Lew and Nelson (2017) found schools with higher numbers of students of color had higher teacher and administrator turnover rates, resulting in problems with student academic achievement, and the same schools had lower assessment scores in English language arts and mathematics. Callaway (2017) found schools with higher numbers of students of color required teachers who possessed high levels of teacher efficacy and could engage students through culturally responsive teaching and employ instructional strategies and classroom management valuing cultural diversity. Callaway (2017) recommended further studies related to administrative support to develop teachers' abilities in these areas to engage culturally diverse students in learning. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore instructional leadership practices of school leaders who transformed previously unsuccessful middle schools to achieve successful ratings based on improved student achievement on annual mathematics and English language arts state assessments in Georgia. Instructional

leadership practices of principals and assistant principals in terms of English language arts and mathematics at successful schools was the focus of this study.

Definitions of Terms

Definitions of key terms used in the study are as follows:

Academic performance: Students' overall academic progress at all educational levels, which is typically measured using either a standardized or performance assessment (Alrasidi et al., 2016).

Instructional leadership: The role played by principals to focus on instructional conditions of school environments that cultivate teachers' beliefs that all students can achieve, learn, and succeed in terms of their educational endeavors (Nadelson et al., 2020).

Instructional practices: Strategies and behaviors used by school principals to cultivate teaching and learning in educational environments (Nadelson et al., 2020).

Middle school: For this study, middle school includes sixth through eighth grade, which is the grade level configuration of middle schools in the study district.

Middle school leaders: For purposes of this study, middle school leaders include principals and assistant principals serving at the middle school level.

Professional learning communities (PLCs): Collaborative and collegial groups of people with a common concern or passion for student achievement (Abbot et al., 2018).

Student growth: Criterion-based metrics to identify the amount of progress students make on particular state assessments (Watson, 2019).

Successful school: A school receiving a score of 70 or above on the CCPRI, which is a C (GADOE, 2021).

Unsuccessful school: A school receiving a score of 69 or below on the CCPRI, which is a D or F (GADOE, 2021).

Significance of the Study

By exploring middle school leaders' perceptions of instructional practices improving middle school students' academic achievement in one Georgia district, this study addressed the gap in practice in the target district.

Instructional leaders can transform instructional practices of teachers, contributing directly to increased student academic achievement (Thompson, 2017). Identifying effective instructional leadership practices that are used by middle school leaders to improve student achievement and transform previously unsuccessful middle schools into successful middle schools in the study district is intended to contribute to increased student academic achievement at schools that are rated as unsuccessful through this project study.

Research Questions

Research questions for this qualitative study were as follows:

RQ1: What are middle school leaders' perceptions of instructional leadership practices to increase student achievement in English language arts and mathematics?

RQ2: What are middle school leaders' perceptions of challenges while implementing instructional leadership practices to increase student achievement in English language arts and mathematics?

Review of the Literature

This section includes information about literature regarding instructional leadership practices related to this qualitative study. I address instructional leadership guiding the research project. This study was focused on instructional leadership practices middle school leaders used to improve student academic achievement in English language arts and mathematics on annual state assessments. To set the foundation for this, definitions and histories of instructional leadership were addressed. I also address characteristics of instructional leaders.

In this study, I used the following databases: EBSCOHost, SAGE Journals, Google Scholar, ProQuest Central, and Thoreau Multi-Database. The following keywords were used: *administrator practices*, *Hallinger's framework*, *instructional leadership*, *student academic achievement*, *administration instructional practices*, and *student academic achievement*.

Students enrolled in middle school educational programs have diverse needs in terms of subjects such as mathematics and English. In terms of academic performance of students, there is an integral role played by principals. Principals serving as leaders of middle schools provide necessary instructions to teachers when needed and also track progress of students. Instructional leadership practices are used to to ensure equality, excellence, and continuous learning among students.

Traditionally, principals participate in the instructional process through direct interaction and discussion sessions with teachers. These discussion sessions involve sharing general observations regarding class environments and academic performance of

students with teachers. Interaction of principals with teachers regularly ensures teachers are fully aware of teaching styles and practices they should follow to meet academic progress requirements. Instructional leadership practices involve developing missions and goals, managing education production functions, promoting climates of learning and growth, and developing a supportive work environment for teachers so duties may be effectively performed. Instructional leadership practices of principals have far-reaching impacts on academic performance of students, especially in challenging subjects such as English and mathematics.

Instructional leadership practices of middle school principals play a fundamental role in offering academic support to students in mathematics and English, developing healthy standards of excellence, and maintaining positive environments which lead to growth and progress in schools. I aimed to highlight the impact of instructional leadership practices of middle school principals on academic performance of students in mathematics and English.

Conceptual Framework

Hallinger's instructional leadership model was used as the conceptual framework for this study and consists of three constructs: defining the mission of the school, leading the instructional program, and establishing a climate that is conducive for school learning. Instructional leadership has been applied to coordinating, developing, and supervising curriculum and instruction for transforming schools.

Prior to the 1980s, researchers had not developed a coherent model or validated instruments solely for the purpose of better understanding instructional leadership.

Hallinger developed the instructional leadership model encompassing three dimensions of instructional leadership. While there are a number of leadership models in the field of organizational management and leadership, instructional leadership is distinguished because it is specifically designed for the education field (Ozdemir & Ozturk, 2020). Instructional leadership continues to be widely applied in educational institutions throughout the United States, applying practice-based as opposed to theory-driven constructs (Hallinger & Wang, 2015).

Hallinger's constructs of defining the mission of the school, leading the instructional program, and establishing a climate that is conducive to school learning were used as a lens to explore principal roles and assistant principals who oversee curriculum and instruction in English language arts and mathematics to ensure there is collaboration among stakeholders in establishing the school's mission. Instructional leaders must be goal-oriented and focus on how to improve student achievement (Plaatjies, 2019).

Defining the school's mission and vision means principals have the responsibility of collaborating with teachers to frame and communicate measurable goals in order to help students make academic progress. Alkutich (2017) found leaders who established a clear mission and vision and focused on student achievement had higher assessment scores as opposed to those who had no clear mission or vision. Concoran (2017) revealed strong instructional leaders establish measurable academic goals and communicate goals, missions, and visions to all stakeholders.

Leading instructional programs involves supervising and evaluating instruction through observations, tracking student achievement data, and ensuring schools and classrooms have a climate that is conducive for students to successfully learn. Hallinger (2003) stated hands-on principals are immersed in curriculum and instruction while collaborating with teachers to continually improve teaching and learning.

Trust et al. (2018) recommended learning environments which promote student academic achievement in order for teachers and administrators to incorporate instructional strategies that involve engaging students in rigorous learning. Cozzens and Ross (2016) found student success was greater when instructional leaders restricted disruptions in the learning environment; when classroom disruptions were kept to a minimum, instructional time was maximized. Cozzens and Ross concluded principals who focused on teaching influenced student learning and achievement.

Hallinger's instructional leadership model was used as the conceptual framework to develop the approach to the problem, research questions, and interview guides. The interview protocol was aligned with constructs of Hallinger's instructional leadership framework. Hallinger's framework also served as the lens to analyze data in order to identify specific instructional leadership practices middle school principals and assistant principals have used to increase student academic achievement.

Review of the Broader Problem

School leaders are responsible for various roles affecting students, parents, and communities. One role school leaders must focus on is acting as instructional leaders.

Alkutich (2017) found there was a connection between quality of school leadership and school performance. Therefore, effective school leadership is essential for students' academic progress. Corcoran (2017) found when K-12 principals were knowledgeable about instructional practices, students showed more progress as compared to principals who were not as knowledgeable. In terms of roles that school leaders play, it is critical to understand specific domains of instructional leadership, characteristics of instructional leaders, and how leaders improve student academic achievement. This section contains a review of current literature related to the topic. I address domains of instructional leadership, characteristics of instructional leaders, school leadership, and student achievement.

Education plays an indispensable role in transmission of skills and knowledge among students. During the educational process, there is an integral role played by principals. Instructional leadership facilitates high-quality teaching practices and leaders supervise instructional programs. Instructional leaders also ensure overall effectiveness of instruction is enhanced and is analyzed in terms of attainment of educational goals and objectives. Mohair et al. (2021) asserted the main function of principals is to formulate diversified curricula for students and effective instructional programs which are designed for attainment of goals set by schools.

Results of instructional leadership of principals include improved interactions among teachers, principals, and students. Instructional leaders accurately monitor quality of task performance by teachers that leads to successful achievement of academic goals for students. Yavuz and Robinson (2018) found instructional leadership of principals

involved framing and communicating school goals, supervision of instruction, provision of incentives to teachers, and promotion of professional development incentives for students. Criteria for optimal teaching and learning are also met through efforts of instructional leaders.

Webster and Litchka (2020) asserted instructional leaders play an important role in terms of checking, watching, and observing activities of students. Instructional leaders are offered continuous coaching and mentoring to ensure academic goals that are set for students are met successfully. Assistance offered by principals for professional development is important to improve quality of educational facilities. Wallin et al. (2019) argued instructional leaders are fully dedicated to offering conducive atmospheres for teachers so they may perform their duties under constant leadership and mentoring of school principals. I addressed the gap in empirical literature by highlighting how instructional leadership of middle school principals may lead to better performance outcomes among students in mathematics and English.

Domains of Instructional Leadership

Five leadership domains are establishing goals and expectations, planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and curricula, promoting and participating in teacher learning, strategic planning of resources, and maintaining environments that are conducive for teaching and learning (Robinson et al., 2008; Wallin et al., 2019). Similarly, Yavuz and Robinson (2018) said four leadership domains were instructional leadership, talent management, organizational systems, and culture and climate. Robinson et al. identified five leadership domains, while Yavuz and Robinson identified

four leadership domains. In comparing these domains, the five leadership domains identified by Robinson et al. and researched further by Wallin et al. were found to be more comprehensive of instructional leadership activities in which school principals engage.

The first domain was establishing goals and expectations (Robinson et al., 2008). It is critical for instructional leaders to understand the significance of establishing goals that are focused on improving student academic achievement and setting high expectations. Instructional leaders must begin by establishing academic outcomes that are specifically focused on academic improvement in key areas (Wallin et al., 2019).

The second domain involves teaching and learning whereby instructional leaders should effectively plan, coordinate, and evaluate teaching and curricula delivered by teachers (Robinson et al., 2008; Wallin et al., 2019). Jenkins et al. (2018) found instructional leaders are held accountable for ensuring teachers understand the curriculum and identifying the curriculum and instruction that is best for students. Jenkins et al. (2018) recommended instructional leaders have a team of experts in various content areas who consistently help to evaluate the curriculum and train teachers. Fullan and Pinchot (2018) recommended instructional leaders evaluate curricula as well as level of rigor in terms of delivery of curricula. Fullan and Pinchot proposed instructional leaders should implement and maintain instructional rounds to collect and evaluate data on an ongoing basis regarding teaching practices.

The third domain is instructional leaders' participation in teacher learning (Robinson et al., 2008; Wallin et al., 2019). Jenkins et al. (2018) found teachers support

new instructional strategies to increase student engagement and achievement when instructional leaders participate in professional development with teachers. Wallin et al. (2019) recommended five strategies instructional leaders should adopt related to teacher learning: provide teachers with autonomy to learn in self-directed ways with instructional leaders providing resources to support teacher learning, creating opportunities for teacher collaboration or team teaching, using flexible scheduling or provisions for substitute teachers to encourage teacher collaboration, creating learning projects for teachers based on established school goals, deploying staff strategically, involving changing grade levels or curricula to explore new ideas and establish cultures of learning, and modeling and actively engaging in their own professional growth.

Instructional Leadership in Practice

As illustrated in the domains of instructional leadership, the practice of instructional leadership calls for the principal to focus on various aspects of the school such as curriculum, instructional, organizational goals, and student achievement. Sisman (2016) identified classifications of instructional leadership in a meta-analysis of the literature on instructional leadership and student achievement. Sisman concluded the classifications of instructional leadership practices range from defining the school's vision, providing resources for teaching, evaluating teachers and staff, building team collaboration, establishing a teaching-learning environment, and serving as a role model.

McBayer et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study surveying 100 principals and assistant principals in the southeastern United States. Participants for this study spanned 18 school districts and 180 schools. This study sought to understand instructional

leadership practices and the degree to which those practices would predict leadership self-efficacy. Researchers wanted to identify if these practices would lead to school improvement. Based on the findings from McBrayer et al. (2020), supervising and evaluating instruction along with monitoring student progress were identified as positive predictors of leadership self-efficacy. The researchers concluded instructional leaders put into practice various components of leadership such as decision-making, engaging in instructional and managerial processes, and building relationships to impact the direction of the school.

Davis and Boudreaux (2019) conducted a qualitative study to identify the instructional role high school principals play in ensuring student achievement and the perceptions teachers had of instructional leadership. One finding of this study was the principals played a vital role in ensuring the curriculum and instruction were specifically geared toward helping all students show academic growth and successfully matriculate throughout the year (Davis & Boudreaux, 2019). Another finding from Davis and Boudreaux was the importance of the instructional leader in establishing a school climate that allows teachers to maximize instructional time with a heavy focus on the learning environment (2019). This finding reflects the third construct of Hallinger's (2003) model that was used in this study to explore the instructional leader establishing a climate conducive to school learning.

School Leadership and Student Achievement

School leaders are responsible for students' academic achievement and school outcomes. Uysal and Sarier (2018) conducted a meta-analysis of 31 research studies to

investigate the effects of school leaders on student achievement. The findings from the analysis revealed that school leaders were found to have a strong influence on students' academic achievement when the leaders helped to create a learning environment that was conducive for teaching and learning to effectively occur. In that same study, Uysal and Sarier found that when school leaders set high expectations for student learning and teacher accountability, the result was higher student academic achievement. Uysal and Sarier also found that the behaviors of school leaders guided the climate and the instructional organization of the school; therefore, indirectly affecting student academic achievement.

In related studies on the role that school leaders play in student achievement, Handford and Leithwood (2019) conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with 37 school administrators, while Schrick and Wasonga (2019) conducted a quantitative study to investigate the principal's impact on student achievement. In both studies, it was found that school leaders who had a strong knowledge of instructional strategies and focused time and attention to ensure that teachers were equipped with various instructional strategies increased student engagement in learning resulting in greater student achievement (Hanford & Leithwood, 2019; Schrick & Wasonga, 2019).

When acting as an instructional leader, a principal places teaching and learning as a priority. Celoria and Roberson (2015) conducted a qualitative study in which six new principals, under the direction of six principal coaches, were trained in collaborating with teachers to model instructional leadership practices, conduct effective observations, and lead professional development. Findings from this study suggested that new principals

needed coaching in the areas of instructional leadership. Specifically, new principals needed support in decision-making as it relates to curriculum and instruction. In comparison, Day and Sammons (2016) conducted a qualitative study with new and veteran principals to evaluate effective school leadership. Day and Sammons concluded that influential school leaders, regardless of experience, prioritized instructional leadership in various ways to continuously shape the school culture for student achievement. Day and Sammons indicated that effective school leadership is the second most significant factor in student achievement and is second only to the direct impact of teachers. In concurrence with Day and Sammons (2016), Shariff (2020) concurred that the most critical responsibility of the school leader is promoting student academic achievement.

Findings from Shariff's (2020) semi-systematic literature review reported, when acting as an instructional leader, the principal is leading teaching and learning. Shariff's analysis revealed principals facilitate teaching and learning through professional development, classroom observations, teacher coaching, and actively monitoring teachers' implementation of training from professional development in the classroom. Shariff (2020) also concluded effective principals developed instructional leadership teams, which Corcoran (2017) previously found to be an important practice of instructional leaders. Corcoran found students in schools with principals who were knowledgeable in instructional practices scored higher on the end of the year mathematics and English state assessments than students in schools where principals did not receive training in instructional practices.

Similarly, Gurley et al. (2016) focused on the instructional leadership behaviors of secondary principals in a wide range of successful and unsuccessful schools in a mid-size district located in the southeastern United States. Gurley et al. administered a 50-question survey to principals and teachers based on Hallinger and Murphy's (2003) framework of instructional leadership. Gurley et al. found principals need a strong background and support in instructional leadership to support teachers and increase student academic achievement. In a subsequent study, Smith et al. (2017) surveyed instructional leaders regarding the support needed by the district administration to be successful. The researchers' findings led them to recommend the need for continuous professional development on research-based, best practices focused on students' academic needs.

Also addressing students' academic needs were Webster and Litcka's (2020) qualitative study conducted in a Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Webster and Litcka found a principal's leadership had a greater effect on students from disadvantaged backgrounds than any other group of students and that instructional leadership practices had the largest effect on disadvantaged students. The researcher reported that when principals were provided with leadership support designed toward improving disadvantaged students, principals were then more intentional about collaborating with teachers and leading professional development to target disadvantaged students. The researchers recommended school districts need to ensure new and experienced principals have the professional development and support to understand current practices of school leadership in the context of improving student achievement for disadvantaged students.

Ertem (2021) revealed instructional leadership styles were highly related to student achievement. Ertem recommended principals lead by using instructional leadership practices that support teachers' use of teaching strategies improving students' critical and analytical thinking skills.

Day et al. (2016) focused on the use of both transformational and instructional leadership practices with 20 elementary principals to improve student academic achievement. Day et al. purposely selected successful elementary principals to determine the leadership strategies they had used to improve student achievement. The findings led Day et al. to recommend that instructional leaders should adopt transformational leadership traits to support efforts to achieve and sustain improvement by diagnosing the school's curriculum and instructional needs and establishing goals to improve student academic achievement.

Findings from Peddell et al. (2020) suggested principals play a vital role in providing guidance and coaching for teachers to improve their performance. Peddell et al. (2020) conducted a study with 16 secondary principals of high-performing schools who participated in semi-structured interviews to investigate their practices improving student academic performance. Improving teacher performance was found to have a relationship with improving student academic outcomes and improving teacher performance resulted from the instructional leadership of the principals. By focusing on building positive relationships, creating a shared vision, establishing goals based on data, and building school-wide collaboration, the principals were able to improve student achievement (Peddell et al., 2020).

School Leadership and Principals

Principals are charged with growing teachers to improve student academic achievement; however, it is just as important for the principal to grow as a leader and educator. Vogel (2018) concluded that principals who were strong instructional leaders had a greater impact on student achievement compared to those who were not as knowledgeable in instructional practices. Vogel conducted a qualitative study, involving 50 practicing principals in a Rocky Mountain state. The study sought to identify what experiences were beneficial in preparing them to assume the role of instructional leader. This study specifically focused on the areas of teacher supervision and evaluation, the integration of technology to support student academic achievement, and the use of data to drive decisions. Findings from this study suggested that the primary responsibility of the principal as an instructional leader was to focus on teacher supervision and coaching. The second most important role of the instructional leader was data analysis to improve teacher practices and student achievement (Vogel, 2018).

Leaf and Odhiambo (2017) used multiple perspective case studies to identify the perceptions of secondary principals' instructional leadership roles and practices. These studies included semistructured interviews and analysis of school documents. Findings from the study suggested that principals perform a wide range of tasks throughout the instructional day. Researchers placed a heavy emphasis on instructional leaders focusing on vision setting and pedagogy to improve student academic achievement (Leaf & Odhiambo, 2017).

School Leadership and Teachers' Professional Development

Considering the findings of Pedell et al. (2020), the meta-analysis conducted by Sisman (2016) also established those instructional leaders need to emphasize supporting and developing teachers through continuous professional development opportunities. Based on Sisman's research, principals should focus their practice on ensuring teachers understand effective instructional strategies and implement these strategies into their instruction.

Tonich (2021) also made a similar recommendation in a quantitative study with a sample of 350 school principals to investigate principals' leadership abilities to improve student achievement. Principals attended various trainings focused on implementing engaging and effective instructional strategies in the instruction. Tonich found that the principals who took a direct role in returning to their schools and implementing continuous professional development for teachers focusing on improving instructional practices improved student achievement.

In a qualitative study conducted by Baker et al. (2020), the researchers surveyed 275 K-12 principals, teachers, and librarians and found that the demeanor of the principal promoted or hindered teachers' enthusiasm to participate in professional learning facilitated by the principal. When principals had a positive attitude toward professional development and developed a set schedule, teachers were more engaged in the professional development and transferred the instructional strategies in their classrooms. Baker et al. also found the opposite and principals who did not have a calendar for professional development or did not actively participate in the professional development

resulted in teachers less likely to transfer the information and strategies into their instruction (2020). Instructional leaders not developing a set calendar leads to the conclusion that principals must not only take an active role in professional development but also convey a positive attitude toward professional development.

Vogel, (2018) in a qualitative study asserted school leadership and the professional development of teachers are two closely related factors. School leaders offered guidance to teachers, and also arranged requisite training sessions to remain updated about changing teaching demands and students' needs. Leaders design the type of training sessions to be provided to teachers, enabling the transformation of existing curriculum to remain updated and more aligned with the surrounding educational institutions in the community. This practice is quite effective, especially for schools suffering from issues of poor leadership and poor performance in the last few years. Good quality teachers will be capable to transfer knowledge to future generations. The success of future generations strongly relies on the quality of education imparted to them. Therefore, a good leader remains fully focused on the professional development approaches to be followed for teachers to be followed by teachers to enable competent staff members to be retained in educational institutions on long term basis.

Implications

Student academic achievement is correlated with effective instructional leadership practices. Effective instructional leadership practices require the principal to be knowledgeable in instructional strategies with an intentional focus on student growth and achievement (Corcoran, 2017). Based on the findings from this study, principals of

unsuccessful middle schools can use the information to implement instructional practices that support student academic achievement. Implications from this study's findings were used to develop a project designed to strengthen principals' instructional leadership practices to improve student academic achievement.

A professional development summary was provided to the district administration. District administration can use the professional development summary to create a plan of action and calendar to build capacity. This may assist the study districts in ensuring new principals or principals of unsuccessful schools have a foundation in instructional leadership aligned specifically toward increasing student academic achievement.

Summary

Instructional leadership practices require principals to focus on teaching and learning that support student academic achievement. Section 1 includes an overview of the local problem, rationale, research questions, review of literature, and key definitions. I explained Hallinger's instructional leadership model which served as the conceptual framework for the study. I reviewed instructional leadership practices. Principals play a vital role in focusing on curriculum and instruction by ensuring time is provided for collaboration, team planning, and modeling. Data supported that school leaders must place a heavy focus on school outcomes that are aligned with student achievement. Section 2 includes information about the methodology, participants, and data collection methods and analysis that were used to achieve the purpose of the study in addressing the gap in practice.

Section 2: The Methodology

The purpose of this basic qualitative was to explore instructional leadership practices of school leaders who transformed previously unsuccessful middle schools to achieve successful ratings based on improved student achievement on annual mathematics and English language arts state assessments in Georgia. Instructional leadership practices of principals and assistant principals involving curriculum and instruction in English language arts and mathematics at successful schools were the focus of this study. There were two research questions:

RQ1: What are middle school leaders' perceptions of instructional leadership practices that were implemented to increase student achievement in English language arts and mathematics?

RQ2: What are middle school leaders' perceptions of challenges while implementing instructional leadership practices to increase student achievement in English language arts and mathematics?

Section 2 includes information about the research design and approach, participants, data collection, data analysis methods, and limitations of the study. The section concludes with data analysis results and a summary.

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

Qualitative research involves exploring natural environments of participants to investigate a problem (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2016). When conducting qualitative research, researchers collect, analyze, and interpret nonnumerical data, unlike a quantitative study (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research is used to explore how participants perceive

specific topics and analyze information grounded in theory and current literature (Creswell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Yin, 2016). I used a qualitative research design to interview various middle school principals and assistant principals and obtain data that were analyzed and categorized into themes.

Quantitative research involves using quantifiable data to process and analyze information (Benzing et al., 2020). According to Benzing et al. (2020), this type of research does not provide answers to what, how, or why questions. Therefore, the quantitative design best fits this study.

Qualitative research involves understanding a research subject as opposed to predicting outcomes (Tomaszewski, 2020). This type of research values participants' personal experiences. Five approaches for qualitative studies are ethnography, narrative inquiry, phenomenology, case study, and the basic qualitative design (see Tomaszewski, 2020). Ethnography involves understanding cultures of groups of people and includes social interactions, beliefs, and behaviors (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Narrative inquiry involves studying the meaning individuals attach to particular experiences. Narrative inquiry is usually done through storytelling (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tomaszewski, 2020). Case studies involve investigating a particular phenomenon in a bounded setting using multiple data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Tomaszewski, 2020).

To achieve the purpose of this study, a basic qualitative design was selected because it includes collection, organization, and analysis of data to describe events based on participants' descriptions and meanings applied to events. Basic qualitative research is useful to learn about events related to a central phenomenon (Sandelowski, 2000). A

basic qualitative approach was used for participants to describe their views and perceptions to better understand actions that resulted in the district's six middle schools achieving a successful rating.

Participants

The setting for the study site was various middle schools in the same district located in southeastern Georgia. To gather necessary data for the study, I used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling involves gathering from various participant groups who were aware of the phenomenon being studied (Ames et al., 2019, Yin, 2016). Participants for this study were selected based on specific criteria. All participants were principals of middle schools that were previously designated as unsuccessful and achieved a successful rating or (assistant middle school principals of curriculum and instruction in English language arts or mathematics from each of the six schools now designated as successful based on improvements in English language arts and mathematics on annual state assessments.

Criteria for Selection of Participants

Participants for the study were purposively selected based on specific criteria after receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) and site approval. They were recruited based on the school's designation of a successful rating by the GADOE. Information from the GADOE and district website was gathered to first identify successful middle schools and then obtain email addresses of all principals and assistant principals at these schools. Principals and assistant principals were contacted via their work email addresses.

There was a total of 13 potential individuals who met criteria and could be selected from the potential pool of participants.

A sample of 13 participants was purposely selected. Participants were selected from among a total pool of 18 middle school principals and assistant principals. Assistant principals oversaw curriculum and instruction in mathematics and/or English language arts at the study site. Only principals and assistant principals who were leading schools that were designated as successful were included in the study.

For the purpose of this study, participants were required to be either principals or assistant principals of successful middle schools in the southeastern school district. Based on accountability ratings, a school receiving a score of 70 or above on the CCPRI, which is a C or higher, is considered a successful school (GADOE, 2021). I sought to explore perceptions of six principals and six assistant principals regarding instructional leadership practices which helped to improve student academic achievement at the middle school level.

Access to Participants

Before research could be conducted, there were procedures for gaining access to participants. First, I gained IRB approval from Walden University. To gain access to participants, the partner organization agreement (see Appendix A) was provided to the sponsoring school district along with IRB approval. The partner organization agreement granted access to obtain information from potential participants. The superintendent of the study site was asked to grant access to begin recruiting potential participants.

I obtained information from the district's web site pertaining to middle school administrators that included full names, job titles, and contact information. The recruitment email contained the district's approval letter, signed partner organization agreement, and leader interview consent form (see Appendix B). Information pertaining to the intent of the study, methodology, length of time for interviews, and qualifications to participate were included as part of recruitment information. Prospective participants were assured that each participant's identity and data would remain safe and confidential, and all study information was secured in a password-protected location, accessible only to myself, and destroyed after 4 years. All participants were asked to respond to the email within 5 days.

Researcher-Participant Working Relationship

As a researcher and an employee in the site district, I served as an assistant principal of curriculum and instruction for science and social studies at one of the middle schools, which was excluded from the study; however, I had no supervisory or evaluative functions over the principals or assistant principals or the curricular areas of English language arts or mathematics. To monitor and control any researcher bias, reflective journaling, as described by Ortliipp (2008), was used to be transparent and bracket out any biases throughout the research process. Ortliipp identified reflective journaling as a means for researchers to provide experiences or presumptions about the research study as it progresses to add trustworthiness to the research process and subsequent findings and to control any potential bias that may emerge from an engagement with participants.

Protection of Participants' Rights

Ethical procedures were outlined to ensure I upheld integrity throughout the research, the participant's confidentiality was protected, and the information obtained was used solely for the purpose of this research. I had the responsibility to ensure all ethical procedures were upheld from the beginning until the end of the research project (Ngozwana, 2015). Similarly, Ferguson et al. (2004) concluded that participants have a right to confidentiality.

The consent form provided information about the study to the participants prior to the individual deciding whether to participate. The consent form that was sent contained information about the interview procedures, the voluntary nature of the study, potential risks and benefits of participation in the study, protection of privacy, contact information, and the opportunity to ask questions or express concerns.

I ensured that all participants reviewed and completed the informed consent if agreeing to participate. Participants were made aware of the purpose of the research as well as the steps to the research and that participation was completely voluntary, with no compensation provided for participation. Participants were informed that interviews would last approximately 45 to 60 minutes, so they understood the time commitment required for participation.

I also ensured confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants and their schools, the schools' names and any identifying information were masked. Each participant was assigned a numeric identifier

that corresponds with their interview data to protect the identities of the participants.

Confidential information was not revealed throughout the research project.

The principals and assistant principals who wished to participate responded to the email by stating “I agree.” After the principals and assistant principals consented to participate in the study, a virtual meeting was scheduled. All interviews with the participants were conducted using a virtual meeting platform. Interviews were scheduled based on the participant’s availability.

Data Collection

Principal perceptions were explored to address the research questions. One-on-one semi-structured interviews provided insight into the challenges facing middle school principals and assistant principals while implementing instructional strategies to improve student academic achievement. Qualitative interviews allowed the researcher to have an open-ended discussion with the participants who had evidence relating to the problem being studied (Roberts, 2020). Data from the Georgia DOE state assessment was also included from previous years to document how the study school sites have improved in the areas of English language arts and mathematics state assessment. In the qualitative study, different data collection methods may be used; however, considering the requirements of the study and the research limitations the most suitable data collection method was interviews. The data from the Georgia DOE assessment were used to confirm that these schools demonstrated improvement in English language arts and mathematics under the leadership and practices of the participating interviewees. Interviews were arranged with principals and assistant principals to get their responses

and real-time feedback. Interviews responses and different ideas and concepts were shared by the interviewed persons to reach the final results and conclusion of the study. The principals and assistant principals to be interviewed were kept fully informed and updated about research requirements and what was going to be expected from the study.

This study followed ethical guidelines by prioritizing the principles of informed consent, privacy protection, and ethical conduct in its implementation. These practices are essential for maintaining the trust and well-being of research participants and ensuring that the study's results are both valid and ethically sound. The entire activity went quite smoothly, and the desired outcomes of the study were met. The qualitative study helped to use the most effective and suitable approach for conducting interviews and gathering pertaining information.

Data Collection Instrument

An interview protocol served as a means for collecting consistent information from the participants for the study (see Appendix C). To gain trust and rapport with the participants, each interview began by making general conversation pertaining to instructional practices. It helped to offer a comfortable and convenient atmosphere to principals so they could better share views and ideas with the interviewer without facing any barriers. Interview questions were also carefully designed to ensure that principals do not feel reluctant while sharing their responses with the interviewer. The interview questions allowed the participants to provide extended, explicit responses to address the purpose of the study. During the interview, I asked probing questions, as needed, related to the interview questions, to ensure complete and detailed responses were obtained from

the participants. The provision of detailed answers by principals proved to be quite effective at the data analysis stage. It ensured that necessary and required information pertaining to instructional leadership was provided to the interviewer. Participants also did not show any reluctance or hesitation while answering the questions, owing to the trustworthy atmosphere that the interview environment offered to them.

For the interviews, there were predetermined questions all participants were asked (Yin, 2016). When a researcher is seeking to understand what is known about a particular situation, open-ended questions for the interviews are recommended (Chenail, 2011). Chenail concluded that researchers create open-ended questions to provide an avenue for which the interviewees can contribute personal perspectives with little or no limitations; it offers a variety of options to the person being interviewed. Open-ended questions provided an open discourse to the persons being interviewed to share their ideas that can offer better clarity of ideas and thoughts to the researcher. All these factors played a major role in the development of the open-ended interview questions.

To ascertain the credibility of the researcher-designed interview protocol, the researcher had a principal who was not participating in the study review the questions and provide feedback for clarity, as recommended by Chenail (2011). Chenail identified testing of the research instrument before its use, which in this case was the interview protocol, to determine if the planned data collection instrument performs as the researcher believes. The advantage of conducting pre-testing was that it provided an advance warning in regard to where the protocol may not be followed or where questions may need revision (Chenail, 2011). The idea of getting responses from a principal not

participating in the study assisted in creating transparency and validity in the research work. The principals who reviewed the interview protocol identified key areas that could be further improved and updated to ensure the authenticity of the final research work. It is always a good strategy to get valuable feedback from neutral parties and to carefully add that feedback to the research process.

The interview protocol was self-designed and reviewed by a principal not participating in the study to assure content validity. Interview questions were grounded by the instructional leadership model proposed by Hallinger (2003), which served as the conceptual framework for the study and aligned to the research questions and the conceptual framework, as recommended by Baxter and Jack (2008), to ensure the interview protocol was sufficient to address the purpose of the study.

Each interview was scheduled and conducted through a virtual conferencing platform so that the interview could be recorded and transcribed by a software program. The recordings were then uploaded to a web-based transcription service. The interview transcripts were first analyzed and then sent to the participant to review for accuracy. It was assured that interview timings are carefully followed to avoid resentment and lack of motivation among the people being interviewed. The effectiveness of interviews was increased by following the time schedule as it gave individuals a feeling that the researcher was focused on conducting quality and value-added information. This type of approach also facilitated getting the most relevant and detailed information from the participants. Therefore, these details were consistently followed to ensure that the quality

of final results was not compromised, and only authentic information was made part of the research work.

Reflective journaling allowed the researcher to track data and emerging understandings throughout the process (Ortlipp, 2008). This process involved the researcher recording information such as notes, observations, or data points from the start of the process until the end (Ortlipp, 2008). According to Ortlipp, reflective journaling includes the thoughts, feelings, bracketing of personal biases, and actions of I while analyzing the data. Throughout the process, presuppositions, rationales, and experiences that the researcher encountered in the research process were noted in the reflective journal. It is quite important to record and note down the information during the interview phase to ensure that important information is not missed. The practice of noting down information during interviews also helped to avoid any suppositions and personal assumptions in the study. The feelings and actions of the researcher can have a long-lasting impact on the final study. It is quite important for the interviewer and the person being interviewed to stay neutral during their responses. It helps to deliver only relevant information to the audience and chances of biases are reduced to a significant extent (Ortlipp, 2008).

The Georgia Department of Education (GDE) state assessment data was a vital resource because these data showed the trends of the middle schools with similar demographics and how students performed academically among their peers across the state, in their local districts, and schools similar to each other, which guides the study to focus on the practices of the leadership in middle schools. The GDE also provided

longitudinal information on low-economically disadvantaged schools turning from failing schools to successful schools. The data analysis predicted that economically disadvantaged schools fail to meet targets set for teacher development and instructional leadership. The leadership of the school does not have enough finances to keep organizational matters running in a smooth flow. It also leads to the outcome that the quality of education delivered to students is compromised and these schools eventually become the list of lowest-performing schools of the community. The GDE accountability, credibility, and validity gave an accurate grade of A-C (successful schools) and D-F (unsuccessful schools), supporting the research and gap in practice. The GDE was the best source of data on the study problem because these data reports were unbiased, held the data for all K-12 public schools in the state, and provided accountability, credibility, validity, and accuracy for information that was needed for this study.

Procedures for Gaining Access

Specific measures were in place to recruit and invite principals and assistant principals to the study site to participate in the research study. After receiving approval from Walden University's IRB, I identified potential participants based on the school's accountability rating from the GDE. Contact information for potential participants was collected from the study district's website.

I sent a recruitment email to all potential participants and provided an overview of the study, the eligibility criteria, and the procedures for scheduling an interview. Participants who agreed to participate and met the eligibility criteria were emailed the

consent form. After I obtained informed consent from the participants, interviews were scheduled with the participants.

Role of the Researcher

I acted as an instrument in qualitative research. Ross suggested that analysis and interpretation derive from the researcher who uses professional as well as personal knowledge, skills, and training as an instrument to establish an overall coherent picture of the information being studied. In qualitative research, positionality refers to the position the researcher has chosen to take in correlation to the social and political context of the study (Holmes, 2020; Lloyd & Hopkins, 2015). According to Holmes (2020), the individual's context of the world is shaped by three assumptions, which are ontological and epistemological assumptions about human nature. Ontological assumptions focus on the individual's beliefs about the nature of reality and what is known about the world. Epistemological assumptions focus on the individual's beliefs about the nature of knowledge (Holmes, 2020).

As the researcher, while I served as an assistant principal and supervised the science and social studies departments for Grades six through eight at one of the middle schools for the district that served as the study site, I did not serve as a supervisor or evaluator for any of the participants in the study nor did the researcher have any oversight over mathematics or English language arts programming. The middle school in which I currently serve as a principal was excluded from this study.

Data Analysis

Lester et al. (2020) identified qualitative data analysis as a nonlinear, iterative process. The data analysis occurred concurrently and at the completion of the data collection by inductive reasoning (Yin, 2016), which was aligned with the data analysis approach used. I compiled and organized the data in preparation for the data analysis process. Data analysis took place at the completion of the data collection using an inductive approach to complete the data analysis, which was aligned with thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis is the method for identifying, evaluating, organizing, recounting, and detailing themes found in a data set (Nowell et al., 2017). Following the procedures guiding thematic analysis results in trustworthy findings (Nowell et al., 2017).

Nowell et al. (2017) described thematic analysis as a linear, six-step process; however, it requires the researcher to constantly move back and forward between the six steps. Figure 2 reflects the six phases of thematic analysis and the practices followed to achieve trustworthiness.

Figure 2*Six Phases of Thematic Analysis and Establishing Trustworthiness*

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Process</i>	<i>Establishing Trustworthiness</i>
Phase 1	Becoming acquainted with the data	Triangulation of various data sources Reflective journaling Maintenance of all notes and transcripts
Phase 2	Creating initial codes	Reflective journaling Development of a coding framework
Phase 3	Analyzing for themes	Graphic organizers to identify themes Detailed notes regarding development of themes
Phase 4	Reviewing themes	Tests for referential adequacy
Phase 5	Defining and naming themes	Documentation of theme naming
Phase 6	Establishing the findings	Elaboration on the process of coding and analysis in a descriptive manner Thick descriptions using excerpts from interview transcripts Justification of theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices throughout the process

In qualitative research, thematic coding is used to analyze qualitative data (Moral et al., 2015). Moral et al. identified a code as a word or phrase established by the researcher representing a portion of language-based data. Coding can be used with journals, interview transcripts, artifacts, or surveys (Moral et al., 2015.). Coding began by reviewing the transcript data and generating initial codes from the data contained in the interview transcripts. As the researcher coded, I triangulated data from the interview transcripts with prior research and the conceptual framework to increase the probability that the findings and interpretations were credible (Nowell et al., 2017).

Because data were collected from the Georgia Department of Education's school accountability rating, the researcher had prior knowledge of school data prior to

interviewing the participants. Therefore, I documented any initial thoughts, impressions, and questions during data collection and analysis, which marked the beginning of data analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Nowell et al. recommended a researcher read through the entire data set prior to coding. To achieve this end, I fully immersed myself in the data by searching for meanings and themes while coding. I then noted my processes and theoretical and reflective thoughts as they emerged.

Trustworthiness of Findings

Qualitative research methods require proof of validity and reliability that have led to the process of trustworthiness, consisting of four components in qualitative research. These components include credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). Focusing on the language of trustworthiness and the steps of reliability add to the comprehensiveness, quality, and validity of the proposed study (Amankwaa, 2016; Connelly, 2016). Anney (2014) discussed five concerns the researcher must address to ensure trustworthiness. These concerns, as outlined, were addressed by specific strategies used in this study: (a) What are middle school leaders' perceptions of the instructional leadership practices implemented to increase student achievement in English language arts and mathematics? (b) What are middle school leaders' perceptions of the challenges faced while implementing instructional leadership practice to increase student achievement in English language arts and mathematics? (Anney, 2014). To address these concerns, Anney (2014) outlined strategies related to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to establish trustworthiness.

Credibility. Certain measures were put into practice to ensure I obtained credibility for the research study. Credibility, or the confidence that the findings of the research are true, is considered the most vital criterion (Anney, 2014; Connelly, 2016). Amankwaa (2016) suggested that sustained engagement, participant-checking, peer-debriefing, journaling, and triangulation are techniques to help ensure credibility. In comparison, Anney (2014) concurred these strategies help the researcher to establish the rigor of the inquiry. Furthermore, credibility in the study was established with the help of building themes, assigning names to each theme, reviewing and analyzing the themes, and finally establishing the findings. All these steps helped to meet the desired standards and targets set for the study and the credibility of the findings was increased to the significant extent.

For this study, I used reflective journaling to ensure credibility. Reflective journaling occurred throughout the study, specifically after each significant activity of the study, allowing me to track data and emerging understandings (Ortlipp, 2008). This process involved recording notes, observations, or data points and included journaling my thoughts, feelings, and actions (Ortlipp, 2008). Thus, I used reflective journaling after each interview and throughout the data analysis process. I included dates, times, and places when journaling using an electronic format.

Confirmability. Confirmability is the degree to which the findings of the research can be authenticated by other researchers (Anney, 2014). Measures to ensure confirmability may consist of triangulation, audit trail, and reflexivity (Amankwaa, 2016; Connell, 2016). According to Amankwaa (2016), an audit trail is identified as a

transparent description of the steps throughout the research study beginning at the start of the research study and ending at the conclusion of the study. An audit trail is considered a recording kept by the researcher about what was done in the investigation (Connell, 2016). I kept daily audio recordings about the process used to collect and analyze data along with my thoughts, interpretations, and questions regarding the investigation. I later reviewed the audit trail to review the research steps.

Triangulation is the process of the researcher using multiple data sources to enhance understanding and ensure confirmability (Amankwaa, 2016; Anney, 2014; Connell, 2016). Amankwaa (2016) identified the four types of triangulations as method triangulation, source triangulation, analyst triangulation, and theory triangulation. For this study, the researcher used source triangulation because the information was obtained from multiple sources, including principals and assistant principals from different middle schools as well as data from the GDE on school performance. These data were compared with the participants' interviews across the study sites.

To ensure confirmability in this study, the researcher used an audit trail and source triangulation. I kept in-depth records from the beginning of the research study through its conclusion. These records included dates, timeframes, notes related to the research processes, and my thoughts throughout the process.

Dependability. Another criterion to be met is the dependability of the research. According to Anney (2014) and Connelly (2016), dependability refers to the stability of the study over time, so the data and the interpretation are supported by the participants' data. Anney (2014) asserted that dependability can be established by the researcher using

an audit trail, a code-recode strategy, step-by-step replication, or triangulation. For this research, the researcher recorded all the research decisions and processes to reflect how the data were collected, recorded, and analyzed, which was identified as an audit trail (Anney, 2014). Raw data, interview notes, and documents collected throughout the process were maintained for the audit trail, as well as source triangulation addressing both confirmability and dependability.

Transferability. Thick description, a technique used for achieving external validity, is a component of transferability (Amankwaa, 2016; Kornbluh, 2015). When a researcher explains the phenomenon in explicit detail, others can evaluate the extent the results and conclusions of the study can be transferred to other settings, situations, or environments (Amankwaa, 2016; Kornbluh, 2015). To ensure transferability, the researcher must incorporate abundant amounts of information about the process of the research study. Measures to ensure transferability involve the researcher providing detailed information regarding settings, participants, attitudes of participants, reactions during the interview, and the feelings of the participants (Connelly, 2016). To increase transferability a thorough detailing of the research context and excerpts from the participants' interviews provided thick descriptions to enable the reader to determine if the findings are applicable in other contexts.

Throughout the data analysis process, discrepant data were identified and included as part of the study. I included all discrepant cases in the data analysis and final report. Reporting the discrepant cases provided a holistic perspective of the practices used by the participants to address the purpose of the study.

Limitations

The limitations of this study were a direct result of the qualitative approach (Queirós et al., 2017; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This study had two limitations: (a) a small sample of participants that limits the transferability of the findings and (b) the potential for researcher biases due to my role at the study site. This small sample created limitations to the transferability of the findings to schools dissimilar the study site; however, using thick descriptions would increase transferability for readers (Connelly, 2016). As an administrator in the study district, the researcher took specific steps to mitigate any researcher bias by monitoring and controlling for bias using reflective journaling as described by Ortlipp (2008) and employing the strategies described to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings.

Data Analysis Results

The study explored principals' instructional leadership practices implemented to improve middle school student achievement. After the proposal was approved by Walden University, the IRB approval number was issued, 12-12-22-0072860. I interviewed middle school principals and assistant principals regarding their instructional leadership practices implemented to increase student academic achievement in English language arts and mathematics. As such, a basic qualitative study was conducted by interviewing six principals and seven assistant principals.

The schools selected as study sites met the inclusion criteria. I conducted interviews with 13 participants. Each semistructured interview lasted a minimum of 45 minutes and was conducted using virtual video conferencing so that interviews could be

recorded and transcribed by NVivo. Throughout the data collection process, I maintained a journal to ensure reflexivity was used to monitor any biases that emerged given my background and experience to increase the trustworthiness of the results (Ortlipp, 2008). All data were stored in Google documents that were only accessible to me and stored on a password-protected personal computer in my home office.

After the data were transcribed, I then began the data analysis process using an inductive approach that was aligned with thematic analysis (Clark & Braun, 2013; Nowell et al., 2017). I followed the six phases of thematic analysis to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. The phases included becoming acquainted with the data, creating initial codes, evaluating for themes, reviewing themes, refining and naming the themes and establishing the findings (Clark & Braun, 2013; Nowell et al., 2017).

In qualitative analysis, the first step was becoming acquainted with the data. During this step, I read and reread the transcripts from all of the interviews. I reviewed the data from the interviews and the accountability data three times. During the first and second readings, I noted early impressions and thoughts. The third time reading the data, I began to organize the data in a meaningful and systematic way. Coding allowed me to minimize a substantial amount of raw data into smaller chunks of meaning (Nowell et al., 2017). Being concerned about addressing the specific research questions, I analyzed the data with this continually in mind using theoretical thematic analysis. I coded portions of responses that captured meaningful information related to the research questions. Coded information was organized into categories and then fell under one of the following themes: using data for academic success, characterizing instructional leadership practices,

setting the climate for teaching and learning, and overcoming challenges and resistance to change. An inductive coding scheme was used, and the process began by allowing codes to emerge from the data that were then themed. The initial codes that emerged, how related codes were grouped to form emergent themes, and how the finalized themes aligned with the research questions are found in Appendix D.

After the data were transcribed, I then began the data analysis process using an inductive approach that was aligned with thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Nowell et al., 2017). I followed the six phases of thematic analysis to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. The phases included becoming acquainted with the data, creating initial codes, evaluating for themes, reviewing themes, refining and naming the themes and establishing the findings (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Nowell et al., 2017).

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After coding, I grouped the codes into categories that lead to the eight themes. The next stage involved reviewing the themes and modifying the preliminary themes. Questions I considered were: does the data support the themes; do the themes make

sense; are there other themes within the data? From this, I refined and began to name the themes. The purpose of this process was to identify the foundation of what each theme meant. Finally, I was able to establish the final eight themes of the study that comprise the findings.

Setting

The project site for the study was a public-school district located in the southern region of Georgia. The school district consists of a total of 12 middle schools. Of the 12 middle schools, six were previously rated as unsuccessful (D or below rating) and are now successful (C or above rating), which aligns with the school climate rating to indicate the study schools' cultures and climate were above average. Table 3 contains the enrollment and demographics for the six successful middle schools included in the study. Each of the middle schools is considered a Title I school with free and reduced lunch rates ranging from 46% to 65% of the total student population in the schools. The demographic data shows that all the schools identified were ranked unsuccessful and have a similar student population.

Table 3

Middle School Demographic Data

	Enrollment	Free/ Reduced Lunch Rates	African American	Caucasian	Hispanic	Other
School A	900	93%	52%	30%	17%	1%
School B	879	94.2%	61%	15%	23.5%	.5%
School C	1,000	83.6%	42%	10%	30%	18%
School D	952	96.4%	72%	5%	22%	1%
School E	979	78.5%	57%	1%	41%	1%
School F	1,100	79.3%	43%	36%	11%	10%

Participants

There were nine participants who responded to the initial recruitment email. A second email was sent to potential participants who did not respond to the initial email, and four additional principals agreed to participate in the study. Each principal and assistant principal were assigned a participant code to ensure the participants' confidentiality. Principals were labeled with a "P," and the assistant principals were labeled as "AP" followed by a number that represented their order of response. The assistant principals were also identified by the content area they oversaw, either English language arts (ELA) or mathematics (MATH). To maintain confidentiality during the interview process, all interviews were conducted virtually. Table 4 contains information pertaining to the participants' years of experience at the current school and the school's accountability rating for the 2018-2019 academic year.

Table 4

Principal and Assistant Principal Participant Data

Participants	Supervision Area	Years in Middle School	School Rating
Principal 1	Entire School	7 years	4.0 out of 5
Principal 2	Entire School	8 years	3.5 out of 5
Principal 3	Entire School	9 years	3.7 out of 5
Principal 4	Entire School	7 years	3.0 out of 5
Assistant Principal 5	ELA	7 years	4.1 out of 5
Assistant Principal 6	MATH	9 years	3.5 out of 5
Assistant Principal 7	ELA	5 years	3.7 out of 5
Assistant Principal 8	ELA	5 years	3.0 out of 5
Assistant Principal 9	MATH	8 years	3.7 out of 5
Principal 10	Entire School	7 years	3.6 out of 5
Principal 11	Entire School	6 years	4.1 out of 5
Assistant Principal 12	ELA	9 years	4.1 out of 5
Assistant Principal 13	MATH	8 years	4.1 out of 5

All participants were veteran administrators who served in their current roles as middle school principals or assistant principals for more than three years. There were two assistant principals who served five years in the middle school setting. One principal served six years; three principals and one assistant principal served seven years; one principal and two assistant principals served eight years; and one principal and two assistant principals served nine years in the middle school setting. All participants in this study currently serve in schools that was previously rated as unsuccessful based on the state's accountability rating system. Each principal and assistant principal in this study played a role in transforming their middle school to a successful rating.

Principal 1 started in education as a substitute teacher and then served as an assistant teacher, elementary teacher, and assistant principal prior to their role as a middle school principal. Principal 1 has a doctoral degree in the field of education and also participated in different leadership courses to further develop leadership expertise. Principal's 1 educational background combined with experience and certification helped the participant to excel in the field and in the education career.

Principal 2 worked in education for 40 years, the longest of all the participants and served as a teacher and assistant principal prior to assuming the role of principal. Principal 2 earned a Master of Philosophy in the field of education and later enrolled in a doctoral degree program. Principal 3 had 25 years in education in the role of teacher and elementary coach prior to attaining their current principal position. Principal 3 had a master's degree in the field of education and gained additional experience by

participating in leadership-related research work and international certifications related to education.

Unlike the other principals, Principal 4 served as an administrator at the district and state levels before becoming a principal with equivalent qualifications to Principal 1. While Assistant Principal 5 has substantial experience as an Assistant Principal and a master's in education and science, Assistant Principal 5 is planning to pursue a post-doctorate degree for increased experience and expertise in the field.

Assistant Principal 6 served in the elementary, middle, and high school levels and has 28 years of experience and a doctoral degree in education. Assistant principal 6 has also participated in different seminars and conferences at both local and international levels. Assistant Principal 7 has held the assistant middle school principal position for 3 years and has a master's degree in computer science. Assistant Principal 7 came to this role owing to an interest in teaching and the education field. Assistant Principal 8 served 16 years in education with the majority of time spent at the elementary level. Assistant Principal 8 has a master's degree in education and also completed short courses for self-improvement to perform the job of assistant principal more effectively. Similarly, Assistant Principal 9 also spent nine years in the elementary setting before moving to the middle school level. After moving to middle school, Assistant Principal 9 pursued higher education and completed a post-doctoral degree and research work.

Principal 10 has worked in education for 15 years with four years spent at the district level. Principal 10 has a bachelor's level degree in education but was considered the right fit for the job due to a high level of experience and expertise. Principal 11 has

worked in education for 34 years at three different schools and has two masters' degrees in Instructional Technology and education and worked hard to reach this position.

Assistant Principal 12 also worked in the elementary, middle, and high school settings before becoming an assistant principal at a middle school. Assistant Principal 13 had the qualification of a post-doctorate and a high level of experience eventually helping Assistant Principal 13 to secure a job at the middle school level.

Themes and Descriptions

Principals' and assistant principals' instructional leadership practices that improved middle school academic achievement were the focus of the study. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data from the participants' interviews to identify the emerging themes (see Table 5).

Table 5*Themes of the Study*

Theme Number	Description
RQ 1	What are middle school leaders' perceptions of the instructional leadership practices that were implemented to increase student achievement in English language arts and mathematics?
1	Establishing Relationships and Modeling Expectations
2	Using Data and Collaboration to Improve Student Achievement
3	Using Data to Support Strategic Resource Allocation and Supportive Infrastructure
4	Using Data to Cultivate a Positive Learning Environment
RQ 2	What are middle school leaders' perceptions of the challenges faced while implementing instructional leadership practice to increase student achievement in in English language arts and mathematics?
5	Resource and Funding Issues
6	Navigating System and Policy Constraints
7	Instructional Challenges
8	Leadership and Staff Development

RQ1

After an in-depth analysis of the 13 participants transcripts, the themes for research question one emerged, "What are middle school leaders' perceptions of the instructional leadership practices implemented to increase student achievement in English language arts and mathematics?" In the context of research question one, the focus is on leadership practices aimed at enhancing student achievement in English language arts and mathematics within middle schools. The role of data and collaboration is vital in

promoting student success through teaching and learning, as reported by both principals and assistant principals.

Theme 1: Establishing Relationships and Modeling Expectations

The participants reported establishing, communicating, encouraging, and modeling clear expectations through strong relationships to be critical in improving student academic achievement in English language arts and mathematics. Nine of the 13 participants identified specific attributes and practices of instructional leadership as pertinent to improve student academic achievement.

A pivotal role of instructional leaders is in shaping the school's mission. This task is not undertaken in isolation but involves collaborative efforts with teachers and parents. As Principal 2 emphasized, "It is my responsibility to select a group of teachers and parents to draft a mission statement for the school," highlighting the inclusive nature of this process. Effectively communicating the school's mission to teachers is crucial. This is often achieved through multiple channels, including faculty meetings, emails, and strategic displays in the building. As Principal 3 shared, "The mission statement is communicated through faculty meetings, emails, and teacher handbook as well as displayed in strategic locations in the building." Such strategies ensure that the mission is consistently reinforced and remains at the forefront of the school's activities and educational practices in the classroom that are directly aligned to promoting students' academic success.

Assistant Principal 5 and Principal 1 highlighted the significance of establishing clear expectations for all adults throughout the school. Assistant Principal 5 emphasized

that "all adults having the same clear expectations schoolwide" contributes to consistency and a harmonious learning environment. Principal 1 echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of a "structured, orderly environment" and "clear expectations." The external pressures significantly impact how leaders approach the teaching and learning process. Assistant Principal 6 explained, "We set high expectations for our students but also provide them with the necessary resources and support to meet these expectations." This balanced approach is key in motivating students and helping them achieve their full potential.

As Assistant Principal 5 stated, "It is my job to find ways to satisfy the demands that are required," highlighting the adaptive nature of their role. Leaders consistently focus on strategies to boost student achievement. Setting high expectations and maintaining visibility are key. Assistant Principal 6 mentioned, "Always communicating the expectation throughout the school with all stakeholders," illustrating the emphasis on clear, consistent communication.

Visibility and active involvement were central to the leadership practices of all instructional leaders. Principal 1 shared this approach, emphasizing the role of leadership in being "visible and involved" in the school community. Acknowledging students' successes and interacting with them on a personal level were valued by assistant principals and principals. Assistant Principal 5 stated that "acknowledging students' successes" was pivotal in their leadership approach, fostering a positive atmosphere. Principal 1 similarly recognized the importance of "interacting with students as a person and not just a student." Positive feedback and encouragement were considered essential

tools in shaping instructional leadership by administrators. Assistant Principal 5 noted the significance of "using positive feedback and encouragement" to motivate and inspire students and staff. Principal 1 also stressed the importance of "positive feedback and encouragement" as a means of creating a culture of support and motivation. Assistant Principal 7 and Principal 11 emphasized the development of strong relationships with students as a cornerstone of effective leadership. Assistant Principal 7 stated that the "most effective" approach was "developing a relationship with the student," recognizing the transformative power of personal connections. Principal 11 echoed this sentiment, stressing the importance of "genuine concern for all students" and "interacting with students as a person."

Four principals and one assistant principal indicated that one of their leadership practices for establishing and communicating expectations was modeling or leading by example. Principal 11 said of the importance of modeling expectations, "As a successful practitioner and theoretician, an instructional leader should continuously and consistently model these qualities for all faculty members and students." Principal 2 agreed, stating that modeling should begin in professional learning centers and at teacher training, "We should attend teacher trainings and professional learning centers to model our expectations." Principal 4 described training teachers by modeling expectations to promote student success:

Influencing instructional practices has been most successful for me when I am able to assist a teacher in modeling the practice they seek to implement. I believe that

being able to walk them through has been extremely influential in helping teachers fine tune their instruction.

Assistant Principal 8 affirmed, “Teachers, like students, learn by watching. I ensure that I do the things that I expect them to do.” These participants, therefore, perceived modeling as a practice that they could use to lead and train their teachers, who, in turn, would apply the practices in the classroom to promote student success.

In conclusion, the insights from these assistant principals and principals collectively emphasized the critical components of effective instructional leadership. These components include creating a structured and conducive learning environment, establishing clear expectations, maintaining visibility and active involvement, acknowledging students' successes, providing positive feedback and encouragement, and, most importantly, developing genuine relationships with students. Their shared perspectives offer valuable guidance for those aspiring to excel in instructional leadership within Title 1 middle schools.

Theme 2: Using Data and Collaboration to Improve Student Achievement

The participants reported using data to be critical in improving student academic achievement in English language arts and mathematics. Specifically, all 13 participants identified using data and having data conversations as an important practice that instructional leaders must incorporate to improve student success. In the ever-evolving landscape of educational leadership, data-informed decision-making has emerged as a cornerstone for effective school administration. Theme 2 captured the insights and

experiences of principals and assistant principals regarding the use of data in guiding leadership decisions and strategies.

Data plays a pivotal role in modern educational leadership. Principal 1 articulated, "Data is not just numbers; it's a story about our students' learning journey." This perspective underscored the significance of data as a tool for understanding and improving student performance and overall school effectiveness. Effective leaders use data to set realistic and achievable goals for their schools. Principal 2 explained, "We analyze past performance data to set clear, measurable goals for the academic year."

Instructional leaders play a crucial role in ensuring that a systematic process is in place, which, in turn, helps to ground the goals in reality and tailor them to the specific needs of the school. Goal setting in educational leadership is significantly enhanced through data utilization. Leaders analyzed historical performance and trends to set achievable, yet ambitious goals. Assistant Principal 12 described this process: "We look at years of data to identify patterns and set goals that are both challenging and attainable." This method ensured that goals are not only aspirational but are also grounded in the realities of the school's performance history.

Data is increasingly recognized as a vital tool in educational leadership, serving as the foundation for informed decision-making. Leaders used data to collaborate. Assistant Principal 7 stated, "Data helps us prioritize initiatives and allocate resources where they are most needed." This involves analyzing student performance data to guide instructional practices and interventions. Principal 1 emphasized, "Data gives us the power to make decisions based on evidence, not just intuition." This approach allows

leaders to move beyond anecdotal evidence, providing a solid foundation for their strategies and actions. In data-driven decision-making, leaders use data to inform all aspects of school management, from resource allocation to curriculum design. "Data guides us in making decisions that are best for our students and teachers," Principal 3 noted, indicating how data shapes even the minutest decisions in a school setting.

Data plays a crucial role in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. By closely analyzing student performance data, instructional leaders can identify areas where teaching methods can be improved or where specific interventions are needed. Assistant Principal 8 stated, "We use data to pinpoint where our teaching strategies need to be adjusted to better serve our student population," underscoring the role of data in customizing teaching approaches. Data-informed leadership significantly impacts teaching and learning. Assistant Principal 5 noted, "By analyzing student performance data, we can tailor our instructional strategies to better meet student needs." Continuous monitoring and evaluation are key components of data-informed leadership. Principal 4 shared, "We use data to track our progress towards goals and make adjustments as needed." This process allows for responsive and flexible management.

Data is also crucial in guiding professional development for teachers. Principal 11 explained, "We use data to identify areas where our teachers need more support and training," emphasizing the role of data in enhancing teaching quality. Professional development for teachers is also guided by data. Leaders identify skill gaps and areas for growth in their teaching staff based on data analysis. Professional development under data-informed leadership becomes a targeted endeavor, focusing on actual needs rather

than generic solutions. "Our professional development initiatives are directly shaped by insights gleaned from data, ensuring that they address the specific areas where our teachers can grow the most," explained Principal 10. This approach ensures that professional development is relevant, practical, and directly linked to improving student outcomes in English language arts and mathematics. Therefore, professional development is not a one-size-fits-all approach but rather a tailored strategy that addresses the unique needs of each educator.

Collaboration is crucial in data-informed leadership. Principals and assistant principals work with teachers to create individualized plans for students, ensuring all facets of a child's needs are met. Collaboration in data analysis is a common practice. Leaders often engage teachers and staff in analyzing data. Principal 5 stated, "We hold regular meetings with teachers to discuss data and share insights." Assistant Principal 5 further elaborated, "Illustrating the collaborative nature of this process, regular student assessments and feedback mechanisms are integral to data-informed leadership during collaboration, which guides the planning for teaching and learning in the classrooms." Assistant Principal 7 explained, "We use various assessment tools to gather data on student learning, which helps us adjust our teaching methods accordingly." By closely monitoring student performance data, leaders can identify not only areas that require improvement but also recognize and reinforce effective teaching practices. Assistant Principal 8 commented, "We use data to celebrate our successes and to pinpoint areas for growth, fostering a culture of continuous improvement. This balanced approach helps in nurturing an environment where both teachers and students are encouraged to excel."

In the context of monitoring and evaluating progress, data offered a real-time snapshot of a school's performance, allowing leaders to make informed decisions quickly. Assistant Principal 6 illustrated this point when saying, "We regularly review our progress against our goals, using data as a compass to guide our journey and recalibrate our strategies as necessary." This ongoing process of assessment ensured that schools could adapt to changing circumstances and maintain their trajectory towards achieving their goals.

Data-informed leadership is an essential aspect of modern educational administration, playing a critical role in decision-making, goal setting, and enhancing educational outcomes. The insights from principals and assistant principals highlighted the nuanced application of data in various aspects of school leadership, underscoring its importance in fostering an environment of continuous improvement in student achievement in English language arts and mathematics.

Theme 3: Using Data to Support Strategic Resource Allocation and Supportive Infrastructure

Strategic resource allocation and the development of supportive infrastructure are critical components of effective school leadership. This theme represented the approaches of principals and assistant principals with a specific focus on how data informed their strategies and decisions in the area of English language arts and mathematics in Title 1 schools. Six of the 13 participants in this study experiences offered responses related to optimizing resources and infrastructure to enhance student academic achievement in middle schools.

Data were not just used as a tool for assessment; it was a guiding light for resource allocation in schools. Leaders analyzed various data sets--from student performance metrics to facility usage statistics--to make informed decisions. "Data helps us see beyond the immediate needs and plan for long-term resource allocation," Principal 1 explained. This forward-looking approach ensured that resources were allocated not just for immediate gains but for sustainable improvement. The alignment of resources with educational goals was a strategic exercise that goes beyond mere budgeting. Assistant Principal 6 stated, "Every resource we allocate, be it financial or human, is a strategic choice aimed at achieving our educational objectives." This strategic alignment ensured that every resource invested contributed directly to the school's mission and vision.

Leaders used data to map out a comprehensive picture of their school's needs, encompassing academic performance, student well-being, and operational efficiency. Principal 1 elaborated. "Data isn't just about academics; it informs us about every facet of our school's functioning, from student wellness to the effectiveness of our facilities." This comprehensive approach ensured a holistic understanding, leading to more informed and impactful resource allocation for improving teaching and learning in Title 1 schools. Principal 3 explained, "We meticulously analyze classroom utilization patterns, technology integration levels, and even student movement within the school to design an infrastructure that truly supports our educational mission." Infrastructure development, guided by data, became a key factor in enhancing the learning environment.

Resource alignment involved a delicate balance between immediate needs and long-term aspirations. Assistant Principal 6 stated, "We look at immediate academic needs while also considering our long-term goals like student well-being and community engagement." This dual focus ensured that while immediate academic targets were met, the school also progressed towards broader, holistic goals. Infrastructure development based on data went beyond physical spaces, encompassing digital infrastructure and learning tools. "Our data analysis extends to digital platforms and online resources, ensuring our students have a holistic learning environment," Principal 3 stated. This comprehensive view of infrastructure acknowledged the growing importance of digital spaces in education. Technology integration, a critical aspect of modern education, was thoughtfully planned using data insights. "We analyze student engagement and learning outcomes to identify which technologies truly enhance the educational experience," Assistant Principal 5 noted. This careful, data-informed approach ensured that technology investments are directly linked to improving student learning outcomes in English language arts and mathematics.

Community involvement in resource allocation decisions enriched the decision-making process with diverse viewpoints and fostered a sense of shared ownership. "We actively seek community input, recognizing that our students' families and community members offer invaluable insights that data alone cannot provide," Assistant Principal 7 stated. This community-centric approach added a layer of socio-cultural understanding to resource allocation decisions. The evaluation of resource allocation was an ongoing, dynamic process to understand both the quantitative and qualitative impacts of resource

use. "We look beyond the numbers to understand the story they tell about our resource use, its effectiveness, and its impact on our school community," Assistant Principal 8 explained. This deep evaluation approach ensured that the school continually learned from its experiences and adapted its resource allocation strategies for optimal impact.

Strategic resource allocation and supportive infrastructure development are essential for the success of any educational institution. The insights from the interviewed principals and assistant principals revealed a thoughtful, data-driven approach to these aspects of school leadership. Their strategies and decision-making processes highlighted the importance of aligning resources with educational goals, and continuously evaluating the impact of their decisions on teaching and learning in Title 1 middle schools.

Theme 4: Using Data to Cultivate Positive Learning Environments

Establishing a climate conducive to teaching and learning involves more than just creating opportunities for professional development or collaborative planning. A conducive climate for teaching and learning helps to improve student achievement. A conducive climate includes involving stakeholders and creating a mission statement that focuses on continuously improving student academic achievement. Nine of the 13 participants, who were mainly principals, shared the importance of involving stakeholders in creating a mission for the school and stated that this practice was helpful to meet targets set for instructional leadership, and it also helped to overcome barriers to implementing instructional leaderships. The cultivation of a positive learning environment is a critical aspect of effective school leadership. This theme addressed how

principals and assistant principals used data to shape their strategies and practices towards creating a positive environment conducive to learning.

Data played a crucial role in helping leaders understand the diverse needs of their students. In understanding student needs, data analysis extended to encompass a wide range of factors, including learning preferences, socio-economic backgrounds, mental health, and even out-of-school factors that might influence learning. By examining these diverse data points, educational leaders crafted a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. "By analyzing data from student assessments and surveys, we gain insights into their learning styles, challenges, and preferences," Principal 1 shared. This information was essential in tailoring the learning environment to suit the needs of all student's academic achievement in English Language Arts and mathematics.

Understanding student needs through data extended beyond academic performance. Leaders analyzed data on various aspects, including students' social-emotional well-being, extracurricular interests, and family backgrounds. "We delve into a variety of data points to really understand the whole child, which in turn informs how we tailor our educational environment to meet their diverse needs," Principal 1 elaborated. This holistic approach ensured that the learning environment addressed all aspects of student development.

Effective classroom management is key to a positive learning environment. "We use data to identify patterns in classroom behavior and to develop strategies that promote a constructive and inclusive classroom atmosphere," Assistant Principal 6 explained. Classroom management strategies were refined using detailed behavioral and learning

data. Classroom management multifaceted approach allowed for the creation of dynamic learning environments that adapt to the changing needs of students. Educational leaders used this data to implement strategies that not only maintained discipline but also fostered an inclusive and engaging classroom atmosphere. Effective classroom management, as informed by data, involved analyzing classroom interactions, student feedback, and even the physical layout of the classroom. Assistant Principal 6 stated, "Our classroom management isn't just about maintaining order. It's about creating a responsive environment, where strategies are continuously adapted based on a range of data inputs, from student engagement metrics to teacher feedback."

The optimization of the physical learning environment was based on comprehensive data analysis that included student preferences, spatial utilization, and environmental psychology principles. Leaders used this data to create spaces that are not only functional but also inspiring and conducive to learning. Assistant Principal 8 explained, "Our recent changes in classroom design were directly influenced by student feedback and utilization data. We've seen a notable improvement in student engagement since we reconfigured our learning spaces."

The pursuit of continuous improvement in the learning environment was driven by regular data analysis and reflective practices. Principal 11 stated, "Our commitment to continuous improvement is rooted in data. We regularly review and assess our environment and teaching practices, using data to guide our improvements and to adapt to our students' evolving needs." Leaders used this data to assess the effectiveness of current

strategies and to identify areas for enhancement. This iterative process ensured that the school environment remained adaptive, inclusive, and supportive.

Data was crucial in developing and refining emotional and social support systems within schools. Leaders looked at indicators from various sources, including counseling sessions, behavioral reports, and student self-assessments, to create support mechanisms that are both proactive and responsive to student needs. Assistant Principal 5 stated, "Our approach to providing emotional and social support is deeply informed by data. We analyze trends from our counseling sessions and student surveys to ensure our support systems are effective and comprehensive." Emotional and social support systems were carefully crafted based on diverse data sources. This data-driven approach enabled educators to create classrooms that were not only orderly but also adaptive to the unique dynamics of each student group.

The cultivation of a positive learning environment is a complex and dynamic process, deeply informed by data. The insights from principals and assistant principals highlighted a comprehensive approach that included understanding student needs, enhancing teacher-student relationships, optimizing the physical environment, providing emotional and social support, and involving the community. These strategies, underpinned by data, underscore the commitment of educational leaders to creating and sustaining environments where students can thrive.

RQ2

Research Question 2 was, "What are middle school leaders' perceptions of the challenges faced while implementing instructional leadership practices to increase

student achievement in mathematics and English language arts?” The themes addressed instructional leaders challenges they faced while implementing transformation of their schools to improve academic achievement in their middle schools.

Theme 5: Resource and Funding Issues

Four out of six principals and three out of seven assistant principals cited resource and funding issues as significant challenges they faced while implementing instructional leadership practices to increase student achievement in mathematics and English Language Arts. Principal 10 said that a significant challenge was “just the funding to be creative to do what we need to do for our students.” Principal 11 cited as one of the main challenges faced in their school as, “acquiring positive supports from the district, to include funding for consistent and continuous improvements to enhance and maintain student achievement processes and programs.” Thus, for Principal 11, funding was needed but challenging to obtain for improvements to ensure student achievement in mathematics and ELA. Principal 3 cited, “challenges such as funding for staffing” because the absence of funding for staffing led to larger class sizes, which could be detrimental to student success.

Assistant Principal 13 said that obtaining funding was a challenge and indicated that funding was important to obtain to address learning deficits among Title I population students: “Title 1 students are typically behind their peers not living in poverty, so there are many learning gaps to address before progress can be made. It seems as if you are always playing catch up.” Assistant Principal 5 said of the funds that were needed but that had been challenging to obtain to address learning deficits: “The local schools need

access to funds to hire qualified math and reading specialists. The funds should be provided from the state and federal government. Student achievement will improve once our local, state, and federal government invest in education.” Thus, learning deficits were associated with the poverty in which the student population lived, and resources were needed to address those deficits. Obtaining funding to address those deficits to increase student success has been challenging, according to four of the principals and three of the assistant principals.

Theme 6: Navigating System and Policy Constraints

In the ever-evolving landscape of educational leadership, middle school principals and assistant principals faced the daunting task of navigating complex systems and policy constraints. These challenges were particularly evident in their efforts to enhance student achievement in critical areas like mathematics and English language arts. This theme represented those challenges and how five of the 13 middle school leaders perceived and addressed challenges within the confines of their roles.

One of the primary challenges involved reconciling the demands of district-level mandates with state educational standards. Leaders often found themselves caught between the specific needs of their schools and the broader expectations set by state education departments. Principal 2 stated, “Diverging from the state curriculum and pacing leads to additional workload, illustrating the friction between localized educational objectives and broader state-level expectations.” Such constraints often limited the autonomy of school leaders, forcing them to balance their educational objectives with the mandates imposed upon them. Assistant Principal 6 stated,

“Balancing instructional leadership with compliance demands is the challenge of meeting administrative demands while focusing on student achievement.” The recent shifts in educational policies, particularly in the post-pandemic era, added another layer of complexity. Principal 4 felt “the need for flexibility and responsiveness to these shifts, emphasizing the dynamic nature of educational policies.” Leaders were required to be adaptable and responsive to these changes, often necessitating quick adjustments in teaching methods and school operations.

Resource management in high-need middle schools, particularly Title I schools, resulted in principals and assistant principals facing the intricate task of resource allocation. They must ensure that students, often from underprivileged backgrounds, received adequate educational support and opportunities, despite the constraints of limited resources. As explained by Assistant Principal 5, “Being in a Title I school, the demands are escalated due to other high needs to ensure that students who are living in poverty are supported.” This situation demanded a deep understanding of the students’ diverse backgrounds and needs, along with a strategic approach to resource management.

Navigating system and policy constraints in middle school leadership was a multifaceted and dynamic challenge. Middle school leaders employed a range of strategies to balance these constraints with the goal of enhancing student achievement. These leaders played a pivotal role in shaping educational environments that were both compliant with policy requirements and conducive to effective learning, demonstrating the complexity and importance of their role in the educational system.

Theme 7: Instructional Challenges

This theme captured the curriculum and instructional challenges faced by middle school leaders, particularly in Title 1 schools. Drawing on the experiences of six of the 13 instructional leadership, instructional challenges contained the complexities these leaders navigated, including battling stereotypes, addressing diverse learning needs, fostering student engagement, understanding cultural dynamics, and managing staff mindsets. Through their narratives, a comprehensive picture of the challenges and innovative strategies employed in these educational settings is presented.

Instructional leaders often grappled with societal labels and low expectations associated with students in Title 1 schools. Assistant Principal 5 stated, "The biggest challenge is dispelling the labels and the lack of expectations of students in Title 1 schools." Assistant Principal 5 thus highlighted the importance of recognizing the potential in all students and the need to shift away from prejudiced perspectives that limit student growth in mathematics and English Language Arts.

Another significant issue faced by these leaders was the educational disparity evident in Title 1 schools. Students from underprivileged backgrounds often lag behind their peers, resulting in a pressing need to bridge these learning gaps. Principal 4 and Assistant Principal 2 stated, "Title 1 students are typically behind their peers not living in poverty so there are many learning gaps to address before progress can be made."

Leaders also highlighted the correlation between student engagement and academic success. Engaging students in relevant and relatable instruction is key to minimizing disruptions and enhancing the learning experience. Assistant Principal 6

stated, "When students are engaged in relevant instruction there is less student disruptions/discipline matters." This involved not only tailoring the curriculum to the students' interests and experiences but also adopting innovative teaching methods that fostered active participation and enthusiasm for learning. Engaging instruction not only enhanced academic performance but also reduces disciplinary issues, according to Assistant Principal 6.

Another significant challenge was managing the mindset and attitudes of the school staff. A single negative attitude could have a ripple effect, impacting the entire school's culture. Principal 3 stated, "The biggest challenge is mindset. One 'bad apple' with a negative mindset can affect the whole group." Leaders navigated these dynamics carefully, fostering a positive and collaborative staff culture that supports the school's educational goals. The climate and culture of a school played a significant role in student achievement. Middle school leaders in Title 1 schools often faced the challenge of creating and maintaining a positive school climate.

Middle school leaders were tasked with recognizing a broad spectrum of student needs. This included understanding the various backgrounds, learning styles, and socio-economic conditions that students came from. Leaders emphasized the importance of this recognition as the foundation for providing tailored support and resources. A significant challenge identified by these leaders was bridging academic gaps, particularly in Title 1 schools. Principal 2 stated, "Working in a Title I school gives the opportunity to level the playing field for students who do not come from [advantaged backgrounds]." The dynamic nature of student needs, especially in the face of societal changes and challenges

such as the COVID-19 pandemic, was a recurring theme. Principal 3 stated, "As we begin to focus on the needs of students after the pandemic, it has become [clear] that [leaders must be] responsive." Thus, Principal 3 discussed the necessity of being responsive to evolving needs, ensuring that their approaches remain relevant and effective.

Middle school leaders played a crucial role in understanding and addressing the varied needs of their students. Their insights revealed a multifaceted approach that went beyond academics, encompassing emotional, social, cultural, and community aspects. The strategies employed by these leaders, from targeted academic interventions to fostering inclusive environments and engaging with families, demonstrated a comprehensive and dynamic approach to student support. Their experiences and perspectives offered valuable lessons in creating effective educational settings that cater to the diverse needs of all students in mathematics and English Language Arts. Middle school leaders, particularly in Title 1 schools, faced a range of curriculum and instructional challenges. From dispelling stereotypes to bridging learning gaps, engaging students in meaningful instruction, shaping the school's climate and culture, to managing staff mindsets, these challenges required a multifaceted approach. The insights from principals and assistant principals highlighted the complexity of their roles and the innovative strategies they employed to navigate these challenges.

Theme 8: Leadership and Staff Development

Middle school leadership is a multifaceted and dynamic endeavor, particularly in the realms of leadership and staff development. Ten out of 13 principals and assistant principals in middle schools stated that they are tasked with not only managing the daily

operations of the school but also fostering an environment conducive to both student and staff growth. This theme revealed deeper into the nuances of leadership and staff development as articulated by middle school leaders, highlighting their approaches, challenges, and strategies.

Effective leadership in middle schools involved a blend of visionary, instructional, and transformational styles. Leaders like Principal 1 emphasized the necessity of meeting district demands while also addressing the unique needs of their school. Principal 1 noted, "It's essential to balance the requirements from the district with our specific school goals and culture." This balance required a deep understanding of the school's context and the flexibility to adapt leadership styles accordingly.

A critical component of leadership was the development and empowerment of staff in the area of mathematics and English language arts to improve academic achievement. Assistant Principal 6 spoke to the importance of professional growth opportunities when stating, "Our focus on continuous teacher training and development is key to our success." This focus on staff development ensured that teachers and support staff are equipped with the latest educational strategies and techniques, enhancing their ability to support student learning effectively.

The ever-changing setting of education demanded leaders to be responsive and proactive. Principal 3 discussed the importance of adaptability, "With the rapid changes in educational standards and practices, being adaptable and forward-thinking is crucial." This adaptability was particularly important in the face of new challenges such as digital learning and changing student demographics. Creating a positive and inclusive school

culture was vital. Principal 4 emphasized the role of culture in staff development, "A positive school culture not only benefits our students but also empowers our staff to perform at their best." This culture fostered a sense of belonging and motivation among staff, which in turn positively impacts student achievement.

Leadership in middle schools is not without challenges. Principal 10 addressed the difficulty of combating stereotypes in Title 1 schools as "challenging the preconceived notions about our students and staff in a Title 1 school is a continuous effort." This challenge involved breaking down barriers and changing perceptions, both within and outside the school community.

Leadership and staff development in middle schools require a thoughtful and nuanced approach. The insights from principals and assistant principals highlighted the complexity of their roles, encompassing visionary leadership, staff empowerment, adaptability, positive culture building, and overcoming stereotypes. Through their efforts, these leaders not only enhanced the educational experiences of their students leading to increased achievement in mathematics and English language arts but also contributed to the professional growth and satisfaction of their staff.

Summary

This section included information about the research method and procedures to conduct the study. A basic qualitative design was used to explore instructional leadership practices of school leaders who transformed previously unsuccessful middle schools to achieve successful ratings based on improved student achievement on annual mathematics and English language arts state assessments in Georgia. A researcher-

designed semistructured interview protocol was developed and tested as recommended by Chenail to serve as the data collection instrument to obtain information related to the problem among participants who met inclusion criteria and consented to participate. I followed procedures of Braun and Clarke and Nowell et al. in order to use thematic analyses.

I addressed perceptions of middle school leaders regarding instructional leadership practices to increase students' achievement in English language arts and mathematics, as well as perceptions of middle school leaders regarding challenges while implementing instructional leadership practices to increase student achievement. Research questions were addressed via eight themes. Identified themes for RQ1 were establishing relationships and modeling expectations and using data and collaboration to improve student achievement, support resource allocation and supportive infrastructure, and cultivate positive learning environments, addressing resource and funding issues. Resource and funding issues, navigating system and policy constraints, addressing instructional challenges, and leadership and staff development were themes to address RQ2. These results highlighted challenges and constraints that limit effectiveness of instructional leadership. These issues could be addressed by managing resources and streamlining processes to maximize collaboration among stakeholders. Obstacles in terms of instructional leadership were addressed by participants. Analysis of data indicated instructional leadership played an integral role in yielding better performance outcomes in mathematics and English language arts. Section 3 includes an introduction, rationale,

and review of literature, followed by project descriptions, project evaluation, and implications of the project.

Section 3: The Project

A professional development curriculum was developed incorporating instructional leadership practices to assist middle school principals and assistant principals in improving student academic achievement based on findings. As part of training materials, the study site district administration and middle school principals and assistant principals will receive a curriculum map, pacing guide with learning targets and objectives, and professional development that can be used to further their development as instructional leaders.

The purpose of the professional development project is to equip instructional leaders with knowledge, skills, and strategies to create and sustain a conducive climate for teaching and learning, particularly in the areas of English language arts and mathematics. This program aims to empower instructional leaders to improve student achievement, foster a culture of continuous improvement, and promote effective teaching practices within their schools. To achieve that purpose, a professional development program has been created to be delivered to the target audience of instructional leaders, middle school principals, and middle school assistant principals.

The professional development experience will take place over 3 complete days of learning. Each day has a unique set of goals (see Appendix E). The overarching goals for Day 1 are to develop a deep understanding of the importance of data-driven decision-making in education, enhance participants' proficiency in terms of data collection, analysis, and interpretation, and equip instructional leaders with strategies to effectively communicate and implement data-driven initiatives.

At the end of Day 1, participants should achieve learning outcomes related to the project. The first learning outcome is that participants will be able to analyze and interpret data to identify trends and areas for improvement in English language arts and mathematics. The second outcome is that participants will be able to develop actionable strategies based on data analysis to enhance teaching and learning in these subject areas. The third learning outcome is that participants will have strategies to effectively communicate and implement data-driven initiatives to improve student achievement in English language arts and mathematics through data-informed interventions.

Learning from Day 1 will continue on Day 2. During Day 2, goals for participants are as follows: understand the role of instructional leadership in terms of enhancing teaching and learning environments, develop skills to assess the current climate for teaching and learning in English language arts and mathematics, 3create action plans for improving the teaching and learning climate for English language arts and mathematics, 4provide strategies for effective professional development and support for educators in English language arts and mathematics, and 5measure the impact of changes through evaluation and data analysis. At the end of Day 2, participants will achieve the following learning outcomes: identify components of conducive climates for teaching and learning, assess the current state of teaching and learning in English language arts and mathematics in their schools, develop action plans to improve teaching and learning climates, implement strategies for effective professional development and support. and evaluate the impact of changes on student achievement in English language arts and mathematics.

The professional development program will conclude on Day 3. The goals of Day 3 are as follows: develop a deep understanding of challenges related to implementing new initiatives in English language arts and mathematics, provide strategies and tools for instructional leaders to effectively address these challenges, and foster a collaborative and supportive environment among instructional leaders to share best practices and resources. At the end of Day 3, participants will achieve the following learning outcomes: identify common challenges in implementing new initiatives in English language arts and mathematics, develop strategies to overcome these challenges, and build a network of peers for ongoing support and collaboration.

Activities include a combination of classes and presentations that are delivered by subject matter experts as well as group activities. Activities for Day 1 include: attending presentations on using data to drive decision making, identifying areas of improvement using data, and creating data-driven improvement plans. On Day 2, participants will be divided into three small groups to have in-depth discussions about the roles of instructional leaders. The first group will discuss the role of instructional leaders in educational settings. The second group will discuss what contributes to positive learning and working environments. The third group will discuss coaching and support. Participants rotate through all groups. On Day 3, participants will participate in presentations on strategies for overcoming challenges, collaboration and support network building, and instructional leadership strategies. The final day also includes a trainer-led question and answer period to incorporate participants' questions and feedback.

The professional development curriculum includes presentations delivered by experts, small group activities, and a question-and-answer period. curriculum includes videos, PowerPoint presentations, group discussions, and role-playing activities. Additionally, markers, whiteboards, post-it notes, and handouts will be used.

The project involves incorporating analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation (ADDIE) as a guide for developing instructional materials and training protocols. The professional development curriculum was developed following the ADDIE model. The ADDIE model is a systematic approach to instructional design using a structured framework to ensure effectiveness and efficiency of learning experiences. Each phase of the framework serves a purpose to achieve a holistic approach to curriculum development (Carey, 2018; Quigley, 2018). The ADDIE model involved gathering data through interviews to gain a thorough understanding of specific needs of school leaders in the study. An analysis of interview data was used to inform development of the professional development curriculum. Participants, the time allotted for professional development, and how to effectively convey information were all taken into consideration. After reviewing data, the professional development training was developed.

Rationale

For this project, a professional development curriculum was chosen to help school districts establish a strong foundation for middle school principals and assistant principals who serve as instructional leaders and oversee curriculum and student learning outcomes related to their assigned curricular areas. The aim is to equip principals and assistant

principals with necessary instructional leadership skills and practices that will ultimately enhance student academic achievement. Drawing from Hallinger's instructional leadership model, the professional development curriculum includes a comprehensive understanding of effective instructional leadership as well as defining the school's mission through data, managing instructional programs using data-driven decision-making, and promoting positive learning environments. These themes emerged during data analysis, further supporting and justifying Hallinger's instructional leadership model.

RQ1 was about middle school leaders' perceptions of instructional leadership practices that were implemented to increase student achievement in English language arts and mathematics. Participants discussed topics such as guiding and communicating the school's mission as being important function of instructional leadership. Additionally, they discussed challenges leaders face when striving to meet both student and stakeholder needs, while also following federal standards.

Participants discussed using data to continuously monitor student evaluations, using data to guide teacher professional development, and making classroom decisions based on the results of various data analyses. Participants discussed the need to engage in data analysis to understand student and classroom needs, and the learning gaps that prevented teachers from successfully using data to drive decisions in all situations.

Finally, Hallinger (2004) highlighted the need to create positive learning and working environments. Participants discussed creating a structured and conducive learning environment using data to understand techniques that work and do not work for

students. Data were also useful in understanding student and employee emotional social support needs, rather than relying on personal feelings or anecdotal evidence about what students and teachers need to thrive. Data can be a useful tool in understanding classroom management techniques, which can help to create a better learning environment for students and a better working environment for teachers.

Implementing the professional development curriculum will enable new and current administrators in struggling schools receive professional development related to instructional leadership practices that were found to be effective in this study. Some of the practices include: acknowledging student successes, developing genuine relationships with students, teachers engaging in data analysis actively, setting an open-door policy for students and teachers to ask questions of experienced teachers and administrators, and balancing immediate needs with long-term school goals. Additionally, the deliverable also focuses on addressing challenges faced by administrators in successful schools, specifically related to instructional leadership and how those administrators addressed those challenges to lead to increased student achievement. A plan will be put into action to ensure that these challenges are addressed during the professional development process.

Review of Literature

A review of scholarly literature was conducted to determine if a professional development curriculum was an appropriate methodology for addressing the primary study problem. The problem addressed in the study was that six of 12 middle schools, formerly rated as unsuccessful by the state Department of Education in ELA and

mathematics performance, continued to perform poorly while the other six middle schools improved performance in these areas in a southeastern state. To conduct the literature review, electronic databases were searched for literature published within the last five years. A small number of older sources were included if they provided foundational knowledge on the topic. The following search terms were used: *professional development curriculum, instructional leadership, education, resource allocation, continuous improvement, and middle schools*.

Chabala and Naidoo (2021) explained that a professional development curriculum can prove to be quite effective for leaders dealing with issues of instructional leadership. Leaders can use a detailed curriculum to streamline the educational outcomes of students and to overcome barriers in the way of improved student performance in some subjects (Battersby, 2019). The professional development curriculum can be formulated after careful analysis and considering the approaches used by successful schools in the district. Therefore, leaders can adopt a multipronged approach to deal with challenges related to instructional leadership and the academic performance of students (Jethro et al., 2022).

Instructional leadership, as defined by contemporary educational theory, encompasses a wide range of activities that principals and school leaders engage in to improve teaching and learning (Sharif et al., 2020). Sharif et al. (2020) explained that these activities include setting clear educational goals, managing the curriculum, monitoring lesson plans, and fostering professional growth among staff. A well-designed professional development curriculum is not just supplementary but central to enhancing these instructional leadership capacities (Skaalvik, 2020).

A professional development curriculum aimed at instructional leaders is designed to deepen their understanding of effective teaching practices and strategies for fostering high-quality instruction (Ozdemir et al., 2020). This is particularly significant in the context of ELA and mathematics, where evidence-based instructional techniques and a deep understanding of content are essential for student success. Professional development provides leaders with the latest research and pedagogy, enabling them to lead their teachers in implementing best practices that drive student achievement (Ozdemir et al., 2020).

A professional development curriculum supports instructional leaders in cultivating a positive and productive school culture that prioritizes learning (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021). Through professional development, leaders learn how to effectively communicate expectations, motivate staff, and create an environment that is conducive to learning. This involves training on interpersonal skills, conflict resolution, and strategies for building relationships with students, staff, and the community (Carpenter et al., 2022). By enhancing these skills, leaders are better equipped to manage the instructional program and promote a positive learning environment, as emphasized in Hallinger's (2003) model.

Data-driven decision making is another crucial aspect of instructional leadership that is significantly bolstered by a targeted professional development curriculum (Serrao et al., 2020). Leaders learn how to collect, analyze, and use data to inform instructional decisions, set goals, and monitor progress. This competency is vital for identifying areas of need, evaluating the effectiveness of instructional strategies, and making informed

decisions about resource allocation. Professional development sessions that focus on data literacy equip leaders with the tools necessary to use data as a roadmap for instructional improvement and student success (Qadach et al., 2020).

The professional development curriculum also plays a crucial role in the strategic allocation of resources and the development of supportive infrastructure (Lambrecht et al., 2022). Through professional learning opportunities, instructional leaders gain insights into how to effectively manage resources—be it time, personnel, or materials—to support teaching and learning. This includes training on budgeting, scheduling, and leveraging technology to enhance instruction. By understanding how to align resources with instructional goals, leaders can create an environment where teachers have the support they need to succeed (Lambrecht et al., 2022).

Recent studies continue to underscore the significance of professional development that is ongoing, collaborative, and tailored to the specific needs of schools and districts (Love, 2022). For example, Walker (2021) discussed the role of teacher leadership in professional development experiences, emphasizing the importance of ongoing and collaborative efforts for effective professional growth. School leadership is pivotal to driving a culture of continuous improvement among teachers and leadership staff, which can be facilitated by professional development curriculum (Pregner et al., 2021). Furthermore, when teachers are in leadership positions there is a greater chance of schools implementing professional development curriculum and driving continuous improvement.

Technology and data play a greater role in education than in previous generations (Gamrat & Zimmerman, 2021). Professional development curriculum can help teachers stay up to date with technological advances and help them to understand how data can improve classroom outcomes (Dahri et al., 2021). According to Gamrat and Zimmerman (2021), effective professional development now incorporates digital learning tools and platforms to facilitate more flexible, personalized learning experiences for educational leaders and teachers. This evolution in professional development delivery methods demonstrates a commitment to meeting educators where they are, both geographically and in their professional learning journeys.

Furthermore, professional development curriculum can be useful in updating the skills of more experienced teachers as technological advances and data use-cases adapt. For instance, He and Bagwell (2023) emphasized the significance of collaborative learning through online professional development, highlighting how digital platforms can facilitate the continuous upskilling of teachers in response to new technological trends. Similarly, Dahri et al. (2021) explored the acceptance of mobile collaborative learning for continuous professional development, underscoring the potential of mobile technologies to support educators in adapting to innovative teaching methods and data analytics applications. These studies illustrate the critical need for professional development programs to include components that address the latest technological advancements and data use-cases, ensuring that all teachers, regardless of their experience level, can effectively incorporate these tools into their teaching practices (He & Bagwell, 2023; Dahri et al., 2021).

The critical role of data in instructional leadership has gained further emphasis in recent literature. Caduff et al. (2023) highlighted the growing importance of data literacy among school leaders, not just as a means of tracking student progress, but as a tool for driving systemic change within schools. This body of work aligns with the themes identified in the data analysis, advocating for a data-informed approach to decision-making that encompasses not only academic achievement but also resource allocation, policy implementation, and the creation of supportive learning environments.

Addressing resource limitations, policy constraints, and instructional challenges remains a central focus of professional development curricula. The research by Jethro et al. (2022) provided insights into how professional development can equip school leaders with the strategies needed to navigate these challenges effectively. By fostering an understanding of how to leverage limited resources creatively, navigate complex policy landscapes, and adopt evidence-based instructional practices, professional development curricula can empower school leaders to make informed decisions that positively impact student learning outcomes.

The emphasis on building and sustaining collaborative learning communities has intensified, with researchers like Hagenah et al. (2022) documenting the benefits of professional learning networks that extend beyond individual schools to encompass district-wide and even national communities of practice. Such networks facilitate the sharing of best practices, challenges, and successes, thereby enhancing the collective capacity of educational leaders to drive improvement in student achievement (Seglem et al., 2017).

A professional development curriculum, when thoughtfully designed and implemented, is an effective strategy for addressing the persistent underperformance in middle schools (Caduff et al., 2023). By integrating advances in technology, deepening the focus on data literacy, addressing systemic challenges, and fostering collaborative learning communities, professional development can serve as a catalyst for transformative change, ultimately leading to enhanced outcomes in English language arts and mathematics (Faeth, 2020). This builds upon the foundational principles of effective instructional leadership but also adapts to the changing needs of modern education, which often have a data driven focus (Serrao et al., 2020).

A theme uncovered through the study's data analysis was establishing relationships and communicating and modeling expectations as a critical role of instructional leaders. The project addresses the concerns of instructional leaders who need professional development to develop the instructional leadership skills to revise their instructional program to promote growth in academic achievement within their schools. Vogel (2018) concluded that school leaders who are good at classroom instruction have a greater impact on student performance than school leaders who are less familiar with classroom practices. This relates to the findings on instructional leadership as it suggested that leaders who are able to model classroom expectations are more effective than those who are unable to do so. Additionally, leaders who are familiar with classroom instruction are able to provide feedback and encouragement to teachers, as well as establish clear expectations. The project study offers middle school principals in struggling schools specific training through a professional development curriculum.

Another theme uncovered during the data analysis in the study was using data and collaboration to improve student achievement. The second outcome in the project addresses this theme whereby middle school principals and assistant principals need to understand their decision-making power to implement teaching methods that promote academic achievement among students. McBrayer et al. (2020) found that supervision and evaluation of instruction, as well as the monitoring of student development, were predictive factors of leadership making decision for success. Decision-making can be achieved by effectively using data to guide instructional strategies.

Another theme addressed in the project relates to the use of data to guide instructional leaders in setting a positive climate for teaching and learning to enhance teacher effectiveness. This can be achieved by techniques such as observation, modeling, and coaching. An analysis by Shariff (2020) showed that principals support teaching and learning with professional development activities, classroom visits, teacher training, and active monitoring of teachers' completion of professional development activities in the classroom. The final theme embedded in the project pinpoint and address any obstacles that may impede instructional practices that were uncovered in the data. In a study of secondary school principals Alkutich (2017) found a correlation between school leadership quality and school challenges in performance faced by principals who sought to improve student outcomes. The study's findings were the driving force in developing the professional development curriculum for principals and assistant principals' instructional leadership development to promote academic growth and achievement within their schools.

Project Description

New administrators and administrators who are facing challenges require ongoing support that is based on effective instructional leadership strategies. This support can be provided through resources by coaching from experienced administrators with records of improving student academic performance using instructional leadership. Through follow-up monthly professional development sessions and active coaching, administrators can receive comprehensive support. To further assist new and struggling administrators, they can be mentored by current administrators from successful middle schools. It is important to recognize that each district and school is unique, and factors such as school demographics, expert administrator availability, and teacher turnover all influence instructional leadership practices.

Professional development initiatives are projected to be introduced in the 2024-2025 school term. Administrator contracts commence on July 1 of each school term, ensuring that all administrators are assigned to their respective schools by that time. The professional development will begin after July 1 to serve as a platform for administrators to gain a foundational understanding of instructional leadership practices. Through engaging content such as in-depth information, video and in-person presentations, and interactive activities and simulations, administrators will be better equipped with the necessary skills to implement effective instructional leadership practices. Monthly administrator meetings will focus specifically on follow-up professional development for new administrators and current administrators who may be struggling. Additionally, evaluations of the professional development program will be conducted in late fall,

winter, and early spring. The program is designed to evaluate school performance and the effectiveness of principals, but the evaluations will focus on the program, rather than the principals themselves. Principals will be offered coaching where needed and school administrators will be kept updated and well-informed regarding new school performance problems uncovered through the evaluation program that they might come across in the subsequent years. In this way, the project is aimed to develop problem-solving and analytical skills among school administrators as well as sustainability.

During the professional development, classroom observations will be conducted, but there will be no direct interactions with the students. Administrators will also use student achievement data to pinpoint areas that require improvement or that highlight strengths. Throughout this process, administrators will closely collaborate with teachers. Reviewing student academic performance metrics, in addition to classroom observations, should be sufficient to determine the key areas where students need additional instruction and support. It is also possible to track the performance of students using their report cards for three to four years. Tracking student performance can be helpful to determine the trajectory of student performance. A collaborative effort can then be made through the analysis of longitudinal data to ensure that challenges and obstacles in the way of improved academic performance of students can be overcome.

Professional Development Curriculum

The audience for the professional development project is middle school principals and assistant principals. Its scope and sequence are outlined by the day and topics. During the professional development curriculum training for middle school principals and

assistant principals, the facilitator will present the information through presentations, case studies, or hands-on activities related to each daily topic. The professional development facilitator will provide the middle school principals and assistant principals with time to discuss with other administrators. All middle school leaders participating in this professional development will report their school data checkpoint set by the district for each of the nine-domains covered through the training to the district coordinator to monitor the performance trends of the unsuccessful schools. A composite score, at the end of the school year, will determine how the unsuccessful middle schools have performed as a result of the professional development curriculum training (see Appendix E).

The curriculum of the professional development training is carefully designed to improve the instructional leadership skills of principals and assistant principals to meet their professional growth targets with teachers. This professional development training is designed to empower instructional leaders to lead data-driven school improvement efforts in ELA and mathematics, ultimately benefiting students and fostering a culture of continuous improvement in their schools.

Project Evaluation Plan

The project evaluation plan consists of the use of the analysis and evaluation stages of ADDIE model. The ADDIE model served as the basis for creating the project and its evaluation plan. This evaluation plan focuses on creating effective training resources and providing practical learning experiences for participants to achieve desired outcomes (see Branch, 2009; Dick & Carey, 1996;). To begin, a needs assessment will be

conducted to analyze the issues faced by the administrators participating in the training regarding instructional leadership practices. Various data sources, such as the administrator's professional development calendar and previous benchmark scores, will be examined to identify leadership issues and establish relevant objectives to meet the needs of participants. A final, comprehensive draft of the needs assessment will then be designed and developed, incorporating learning target questions and expected outcomes. The curriculum development phase includes creating a calendar of events, supplemental resources, and handouts. After the curriculum is developed, the implementation stage begins, involving all participants.

After the implementation of the professional development curriculum, the final stage is the project evaluation. This evaluation assesses the overall effectiveness of the professional development conducted throughout the academic term and will include an evaluation of administrator knowledge, following the program. Additionally, benchmark data for English language arts and mathematics, and observations will be collected. Figure 3 provides an overview of the program evaluation plan, which encompasses targeted questions, expected outcomes, and data collection methods. Additionally, the evaluation plan includes an assessment of the professional development process, which involves targeted questions, expected outcomes, and data collection methods. The following assessment is intended to evaluate the success of the development program, rather than the skills of the individual participants themselves.

Figure 3*Professional Development Program Evaluation Plan*

Professional Development Evaluation		
Targeted Questions	Outcomes/ Indicators	Data Collection Methods/Timeframe
Did the program provide administrators with a comprehensive understanding of instructional leadership approaches that prioritize academic success for students?	a) All administrators are consistently practicing instructional leadership techniques 2-3 times every week. b) Every professional development session includes a component of instructional leadership.	Observations Participant feedback Surveys regarding the sessions <i>*Data collected regularly.</i>
Is the instructional leadership professional development program integrated with best practices?		
Professional Development Process Evaluation		
Targeted Questions	Outcomes/ Indicators	Data Collection Methods/Timeframe
Was the professional development carried out with accuracy and adherence to program objectives?	a) The implementation of instructional leadership begins in July. b) All the sessions and materials for participants are prepared and ready by the end of July.	Materials given during each session Handouts and engaging activities for participants <i>*Data collected regularly.</i>
Were the strategies modified to enhance accessibility for the concentrated population?		
Professional Development Outcome Evaluation		
Targeted Questions	Outcomes/ Indicators	Data Collection Methods/Timeframe
How did the training impact the practices of the administrator participants?	a) Administrators using data to evaluate student skills	Calendar for professional development Assessment data

	and areas for improvement. b) Improvement in student academic achievement. c) Instructional leadership best practices are being used 2-3 times per week.	Daily observations
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Project Implications

Addressing the perceptions of instructional leadership practices that enhance student academic achievement is crucial in educational leadership and management. Effective instructional leadership plays a pivotal role in the success of school leaders and their ability to lead a school in a positive direction. To improve student academic achievement, district leaders should review and implement the professional development curriculum based on this study's results. It is important for district leaders to be motivated and driven to support all administrators in advancing the district's success.

Studies have consistently shown that specific instructional leadership practices are vital for improving student academic achievement (Achimugu, 2016; Adilman et al., 2019; Trust et al., 2018). The results obtained from the study also highlighted that instructional leaders play the role of transformational leaders (Trust et al., 2018). Instructional leadership practices have long-lasting impacts not only on the academic performance of students but also on the professional development of teachers. Instructional leaders offer support to teachers when needed and they also provide teachers with suggestions which can increase their teaching performance. Curriculum should also be carefully updated and revamped to address evidence-based practices and techniques to enhance learning emerging in the field of education to increase the performance of

students in key content areas such as ELA and mathematics. As a result, an instructional leader can bring relevant reforms and changes in teaching practices by focusing on the needs of teachers and students (Uysal & Sarier, 2018).

The results gathered from research also highlight that the adoption of instructional leadership practices can pose certain challenges for school principals (Achimugu, 2016). Teachers may not be willing to follow the direction provided by principals nor want to accept change within their classrooms or the existing school culture. Instructional leadership also requires the use of resources that should be available for principals and teachers so that timely training and coaching sessions are arranged when needed. In certain cases, there may be obstacles in the form of reluctance to change on the part of the parents of students (Ayeni, 2020).

A proficient leader should adopt visionary practices and be capable of overcoming challenges coming in the way of school reform to increase student achievement. The best approach for the visionary leader is to follow the Hallinger's (2003) model. Hallinger recommended that a mission should be clearly communicated by the school leader. The formation of the mission will help teachers to stay directed toward the achievement of final goals (Thompson, 2017). Teachers will not feel directionless and through communication from the school leader teachers will be provided with clarity of ideas and thoughts at every step (Leaf & Obhiambo, 2017). A conducive environment of learning can be maintained when teachers are offered opportunities for growth and career development. Teachers should be made part of the decision-making process so that they feel valued and respected. The decision-making process inculcates high morale and

motivation among teachers, and they can work collaboratively in the form of teams (Jen-Ning, 2020).

The implementation of instructional leadership will need to be sustained to maintain a conducive and successful environment in the schools. The administrators of low-performing schools can provide on-going guidance and coaching from administrators of high-performing school (Tremont & Templeton, 2019). Therefore, this is a multi-dimensional project to address leadership, teaching, and student-related challenges that affect the academic achievement of students in ELA and mathematics at the middle school level.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Section 3 included an outline of the project. Section 4 includes my reflections and conclusions related to completion of the study. In this section, strengths and limitations of the project are discussed, along with recommendations for different approaches, scholarship, and project development. The significance of the work is also addressed, along with guidance for future researchers.

Project Strengths and Limitations

Findings of this study included information regarding how successful middle school principals perceived their instructional leadership practices. Participants addressed specific instructional leadership practices that contributed to improving student academic achievement and led to successful ratings of their schools. As a result, the project deliverable provides evidence-based information that can be implemented by principals and assistant principals in underperforming schools through professional development, regardless of their specific context. This is one of the strengths of the project.

The final study was free from bias on my part and reflected opinions and responses from participants. I adhered to ethical standards in order to ensure confidentiality of principals who shared information and opinions. Participants were asked to share their firsthand experiences, and at the same time, they were also ensured that personal details were kept confidential. Real-time and practical applications of instructional leadership were shared and reported, which can be applied to schools through instructional leadership practices of principals and assistant principals.

To enhance reliability and credibility of the study, principals were interviewed using open-ended questions so their views and approaches could be analyzed and identified. Principals and assistant principals for the study were from both successful as well as unsuccessful schools in the district. Leadership practices adopted by participants working in successful schools informed professional development and guidance provided for principals in low-performing schools. The premise of the study was to develop understanding among leaders regarding the importance of instructional leadership and its impacts on professional development of teachers and academic performance of students.

A limitation of the study was that I focused on subject-specific areas of English language arts and mathematics. I also used both primary and secondary data sources for evaluations and results. A limitation of this was that the primary data collection method was interviews. This prevented use of unbiased primary data. However, all participants had sufficient experience in the field so they could address their practical expertise and experiences.

Despite these limitations, I addressed gaps involving practice at the study site. Findings from this research project yielded information to guide district-level leaders when developing strategies for new principals and assistant principals who are assigned to struggling middle schools. The plan can help leaders of unsuccessful schools identify areas of weakness and develop instructional leadership practices that can help to overcome these areas.

It is important to consider certain limitations when implementing this plan. The project was focused solely on successful middle schools in a specific school district in a

southeastern state. None of the principals and assistant principals were leaders of urban schools, so results may only be transferable to schools with similar demographics. There can be differences in terms of leadership approaches among schools in rural regions. In urban areas, there may be a wide range of professional development and leadership courses that are available for principals. School leaders may be able to attend these training programs when needed, while availability of such opportunities may be comparatively different for leaders working in rural regions.

The setting of this study was a school district in a southern region of Georgia, which is relatively rural. The professional development program was designed for this specific study setting. Demographics of an area impact student needs. In schools, student demographics are culturally diverse, and a large portion of students participate in school lunch programs, which suggests a less wealthy population. As this program was designed for principals and assistant principals working with a specific population in a specific area, results of the study may not be transferable to other areas.

Limitations of the study also informed recommendations for future research. It is recommended to conduct future studies highlighting how instructional leadership practices of principals and school administrators may have a beneficial impact on performance outcomes of teachers and students in urban settings.

This study included only 13 principals and assistant principals; typically, qualitative studies require 12 to 15 middle school leaders as participants to ensure data saturation (Anney, 2014). As a result, there was confidence that data saturation was achieved based on participants' responses. Despite reaching data saturation, future studies

could include more participants from elementary and high schools and include more districts as study sites. Despite limitations, quality of final work was not compromised, and the purpose of the study was achieved. The study can be used as a source of guidance for school principals and administrators at the study site and in similar contexts.

Recommendation for Alternative Approaches

I investigated instructional leadership practices of middle school principals that led to improved student academic achievement. The main objective was to gain a deeper understanding of how successful middle school principals and assistant principals implemented instructional leadership practices. One possible solution would be for principals to prioritize the establishment and maintenance of professional development programs for teachers to enhance curriculum and instructional practices. This alternative approach could include use of PLCs for teachers as well as school leaders, specifically focused on increasing student engagement through use of instructional strategies such as differentiated instruction and cooperative learning. This acknowledges the complexity of student needs and dynamic classroom environments, emphasizing the necessity for teachers to be adept in terms of tailoring instruction to diverse learning styles and fostering collaborative learning among students. Rather than focusing on giving principals the skills they need to effectively lead teachers, the program could be focused on instructional strategies for both teachers and school leaders who need additional knowledge on these strategies.

Professional development programs that specialize in differentiated instruction equip teachers with skills to create and implement lesson plans that meet varied learning

needs and paces of all students (Nooruddin & Bhamani, 2019). This approach could enhance inclusivity and accessibility of the curriculum and increase student engagement and achievement in core subjects like English and mathematics (Nooruddin & Bhamani, 2019). By focusing professional development on these strategies, teachers could become more effective in terms of recognizing and addressing the potential of each student, which could improve their overall learning experiences and outcomes.

Additionally, fostering PLCs centered on cooperative learning strategies can significantly impact student performance (Park et al., 2019). PLCs provide a platform for teachers to share insights, resources, and best practices for implementing cooperative learning in their classrooms (Trust et al., 2018). Cooperative learning has been shown to improve not just academic achievement but also interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and the ability to work effectively in teams. Through PLC participation, teachers can collaboratively refine their instructional approaches, ensuring that students benefit from a supportive and interactive learning environment (Park et al., 2019).

Both PD and PLCs focused specifically on instructional strategies that increase student engagement can foster the professional growth of teachers and the academic achievement of students (Battersby, 2019). This approach could address the immediate need for enhanced curriculum and instructional practices and build a model of educational excellence through continuous teacher development and collaboration (Caroebter et al., 2022).

Scholarship, Project Development, Leadership and Change

The project study has proven to be effective to determine different dimensions of instructional leadership needed at the study site. The project led to insights as to how instructional leadership approaches could be helpful to overcome barriers faced by students in terms of their academic performance. The role of a school leader is quite broad and diversified. School leaders should be fully aware of the transformative leadership approaches that could be practiced to meet the desired educational outcomes for students (Smith et al., 2017). The study highlighted that there is a need for consistent instructional leadership practices in schools at the middle level. Some schools in the study district were performing well while others failed to meet the desired outcomes. The leaders of low-performing schools could seek guidance and coaching from leaders of high-performing schools that can be beneficial for both teachers and students. The project also led me to a deeper understanding of the importance of instructional leadership and how instructional leaders also practice transformational leadership. Transformational leaders boost the morale and motivation of their staff members. They also stimulate staff intellectually and support them to adopt creative approaches to address challenging situations (Simmons, 2020). Therefore, the project increased my understanding of how transformational leadership approaches could be used for improving the academic performance of students. Furthermore, the study helped me, as a school leader, to address the challenges that can impede the performance of students in my schools and provided me with a greater depth of knowledge as to how I can support teachers and other school leaders.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

Instructional leaders play a crucial role in the success of the school and the academic achievement of students. The role of the school principal goes beyond simply overseeing professional development, distributing funds, designing strategic plans, or handling disciplinary matters. Based on the data gathered from this project, being a principal means building a community of educators to strengthen the school's foundation. Effective instructional leaders should focus on the three components outlined in Hallinger's (2003) instructional leadership model to enhance student academic achievement. Hallinger (2003) asserted that a school leader has to perform a diverse set of duties and responsibilities. There should be collaboration among teachers, students, and parents and the effective use of data and school resources to meet the educational outcomes and learning targets set for students. A principal should not merely focus on data, resource allocation, and curriculum planning, but also on community building. The benefits of these strategies can result in a multifaceted and inclusive problem-solving approach that can increase the performance of teachers and students if followed by an instructional leader.

Instructional leadership practices can have far-reaching and positive impacts on student performance. The study also identified the need for, and the importance of professional development courses and programs offered to school administrators as well obtaining guidance from successful and experienced school principals working in a district. In this way inculcating the strategies of successful schools can be increase academic performance and educational effectiveness among students.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Before this research study, it was unclear which instructional leadership practices were effective in improving academic achievement in middle schools. This study addressed this significant question and revealed that middle school principals use various components, if not all, of Hallinger's (2003) instructional leadership model. These three components included establishing the school's mission, leading the instructional program, and creating a positive learning environment (Hallinger, 2003). The study's findings revealed how instructional leadership practices and the academic performance of students are directly related factors. An instructional leader establishes and communicates the mission for the school and uses data to guide decision making and develop teachers (Chabalala & Naidoo, 2021). Successful school leaders are fully aware of steps and approaches that should be followed to meet institutional targets (Jen-Ning, 2020). The process of setting up a mission also facilitates teachers as their motivation level is increased and they continuously work towards better outcomes and results. Moreover, the study highlighted how a positive and productive environment can be established in schools through the use of instructional leadership practices. Instructional leaders are ready to help and support their team members when needed (Leaf & Obhiambo, 2017). They manage the allocation of resources in an effective way that yields results, and they collaborate with parents and teachers to overcome educational barriers encountered by students.

The study also helped to identify the important components of professional development programs that can be offered to school leaders. There is a need to arrange

training sessions for leaders of underperforming schools so that the school leaders can develop and practice instructional leadership skills. These programs can keep school leaders motivated and focused on the achievement of their school's mission and goals. Professional development can also help school leaders to explore areas that can be improved upon through the analysis of data and the identification of requisite instructional leadership approaches that are needed. The study provided the information needed to develop a professional development program that can be helpful to mitigate performance barriers faced by school principals.

The findings of this study serve as a basis and guide for middle school leaders in the study district and in similar contexts to improve student academic achievement by ensuring that principals and assistant principals possess a deep understanding of instructional leadership practices. By adopting these practices, leaders of underperforming middle schools can address the consequences resulting from a lack of focus on instructional leadership practices.

The results of the study indicated that instructional leaders offer consistent support to staff members. Consistent support and efforts to model and communicate clear expectations from principals can improve the quality of task performance among teachers to keep the achievement of students as a top priority.

The findings of the study also provided direction for future research to address areas needing future research related to gaps in instructional leadership practice. A leader with instructional leadership capabilities could be the focus of a case study or an ethnographic study as to how they provided the leadership and guidance for teachers and

students to succeed. Hence, in this way, the performance of teachers and the achievement of students can be increased through additional study. It is recommended to study additional instructional leadership practices of school principals at other levels and in other contexts. These types of future research will be helpful to develop a broader understanding among school principals regarding the outcomes of instructional leadership.

Conclusion

Instructional leadership practices employed by school principals and administrators can positively impact student achievement (Lang, 2019). However, implementing such practices can be challenging and administrators can benefit from professional development and education around data-driven decision making (Battersby, 2019). Through the lens of Hallinger's (2003) instructional leadership model, the study explored middle school leaders' instructional leadership practices to develop a professional development program focusing on defining the school's mission, leading the instructional program, and nurturing a conducive learning environment. Professional development programs designed to address these components can equip educational leaders with the necessary tools and insights to elevate teaching practices and student achievement through instructional leadership. This study emphasized the importance of the use of data and collaboration as well as professional development to support leaders that is both reflective and responsive to the dynamic needs of a school leadership. Collaboration emerged as a fundamental theme, highlighting the need for a united approach among leaders, teachers, parents, and students to foster a culture of academic

excellence and innovation. Despite the challenges that instructional leadership may present, through targeted professional development, a commitment to shared goals through instructional leadership can help school leaders navigate the challenges they may face to enhance teacher performance and increase student achievement. The findings highlight the potential for broader application and further investigation into professional development on instructional leadership and educational success.

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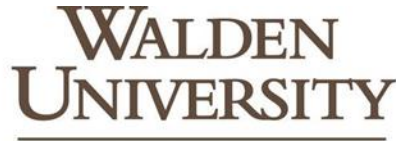
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Appendix A: Partner Organization Agreement



A higher degree. A higher purpose.

Partner Organization Agreement
for AEAL Dissertation

October 21, 2022

The doctoral student, **Delarius Marshall**, will be conducting a dissertation study as part of the AEAL (Education Administration and Leadership for experienced administrators) EdD program. The student will be completing Walden IRB requirements and our organization's research approval processes.

I understand that Walden's IRB has given the student tentative approval to interview leaders (supervisors, board members, PTA leaders, community partners, state department personnel, and similar decision-makers) with whom the student has no power relationship. Details will be created for the final proposal, and the informed consent letter attached will be used. Depending upon the details of the student's study, deidentified organization data* may be requested.

**At the discretion of the organization's leadership, the student may analyze deidentified records including: aggregate personnel or student records that have been deidentified before being provided to the doctoral student, other deidentified operational records, teaching materials, deidentified lesson plans, meeting minutes, digital/audio/video recordings created by the organization for its own purposes, training materials, manuals, reports, partnership agreements, questionnaires that were collected under auspices of the partner organization as part of continuous improvement efforts (SIPs, for example), and other internal documents.*

I understand that, as per doctoral program requirements, the student will publish a dissertation in ProQuest as a doctoral capstone (withholding the names of the organization and participating individuals), as per the following ethical standards:

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

- b. The student will be responsible for complying with policies and requirements regarding data collection (*including the need for the organization's internal ethics/regulatory approval as applicable*).
- c. Via the Interview Consent Form, the student will describe to interviewees how the data will be used in the dissertation study and how all interviewees' privacy will be protected.

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

Signed,

This template has been designed by Walden University for the purpose of creating a partnership agreement between an education agency or district/division and a Walden doctoral student in support of that student's dissertation. Walden University will take responsibility for overseeing the data collection and analysis activities described above for the purpose of the student's doctoral dissertation.

Appendix B: Leader Interview Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a leader interview for my doctoral dissertation conducted as part of my EdD in Education Administration and Leadership.

Interview Procedures:

If you agree to be part of this study, you will be invited to take part in audio-recorded interviews about the organization's operations and problem-solving needs. Transcriptions of leader interviews will be analyzed as part of the study, along with any archival data, reports, and documents that the organization's leadership deems fit to share. A copy of your interview recording is available upon request. Opportunities for clarifying your statements will be available through processes of transcript review and member checking. Interviews may take an hour, and each review process may take up to 30 minutes.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is voluntary. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. The researcher seeks approximately 8-10 volunteers for this study.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this study would not pose any risks beyond those of typical daily life. My aim is to provide data and insights that could be valuable to this organization and others like it.

Privacy:

I am required to protect your privacy. Interview recordings and full transcripts will be shared with each interviewee, upon request. Transcripts with identifiers redacted may be shared with my university faculty and my peers in class. Any reports, presentations, or publications related to this study will share general patterns from the data, without sharing the identities of individual participants or their employer(s). The interview transcripts will be kept for at least 5 years, as required by my university.

Contacts and Questions:

I am happy to answer any questions you might have about the study's purpose and steps. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210. Walden University's ethics approval number for this study is **12-12-22-0072860**.

If you agree to be interviewed as described above, please reply to this email with the words, "I consent."

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol and Alignment with RQs and Conceptual Framework

RQ1: What are middle school leaders' perceptions of the instructional leadership practices that were implemented to increase student achievement in English language arts and mathematics?

RQ2: What are middle school leaders' perceptions of the challenges faced while implementing instructional leadership practices to increase student achievement?

Conceptual Framework: Hallinger's Instructional Leadership Model (a) defining the mission of the school, (b) leading the instructional program, and (c) establishing a climate conducive for school learning

Introduction: Hello, my name is Delarius Marshall, a doctoral student at Walden University conducting a research study in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Education, in Educational Administration and Leadership. Thank you for participating in this interview. I am interested in understanding how middle school principals and assistant principals have provided instructional leadership to increase the academic success of students in math and English language arts in their schools. This interview will be audio recorded for transcription purposes and will last approximately 40-60 minutes. Any identifying information such as your name or school will be masked to maintain confidentiality. Your participation in this interview is voluntary and at any point during the interview you can choose to not answer a question or to stop the session. Are there any questions before we begin? I will begin with some introductory questions.

Interview Questions	RQ1	RQ2	CF A	CF B	CF C
Introductory Questions					
Can you tell me about your background in the field of education? Probes: How long have you been a principal/assistant principal at this school? What is your background in the teaching of math/ELA or in math/ELA programming?	x				
Perceptions of Instructional Leadership					
Mission					
What role do you have in setting the mission of the school?	x		x		
How do you communicate the mission of the school to teachers?	x		x		
What is your perspective about demands from your district to address student achievement as a leader? Probes: from the state Department of Education? from the federal government? How have these demands affected your role related to leading the teaching and learning process?	x	x	x	x	x
What has changed about the mission of the school or your role while you have served as a principal/assistant principal?	x		x		
Leading the Instructional Program					
What do you think are the most important qualities of an effective instructional leader?	x			x	
What role and responsibilities do you perceive to be most important in your role as instructional leader in your school?	x			x	
Can you tell me about your role and practices in improving student achievement in your school? Probes: What do you perceive has been most effective? What has been most challenging?	x	x		x	

What information do you use or consider when developing an effective instructional program in math or ELA in your school?	x			x	
What instructional leadership practices have you used to make a difference in student achievement? Probes: What do you perceive has been the most effective? What has been least effective?	x	x		x	
Setting the Climate for Teaching and Learning					
What do you think are most important practices for a leader to use to establish a school climate for learning?	x				x
How do you perceive your influence on student learning to improve academic achievement in math/ELA? Probe: What had been most challenging?	x	x			x
How do you perceive your ability to influence teachers' instructional practices? Probes: What has been most successful? What has been most challenging?	x	x			x
What are the strategies that you consistently reinforce in your school to address student achievement? Probe: How do you communicate or share these strategies?	x		x		x
What are your challenges to maintain a positive climate and culture as a leader to address student achievement?		x	x		x
What opportunities do you see as a principal or assistant principal while working in a Title 1 school? Probe: What challenges do you see in your role as an instructional leader in a Title 1 school?	x	x		x	x
Is there anything else you would like to add?					

Thank you for your responses and for taking the time to participate in this interview.

Your responses will help me gain an understanding of how middle school principals and assistant principals have provided instructional leadership to increase the academic success of students in math and English language arts in their schools. As a participant in this interview, you will have an opportunity to review your responses to ensure your responses were transcribed accurately. If you have any questions after our time together today, please feel free to contact me by email at Delarius.Marshall@waldenu.edu or phone (334) 391-3598. I appreciate your time.

Appendix D: Initial Codes Categorized to Form Final Themes

Initial Codes Categorized to Form Final Themes Aligned to Research Questions

Research question	Themes aligned with research question	Initial codes categorized to form themes
RQ1. What are middle school leaders' perceptions of the instructional leadership practices that were implemented to increase student achievement in English language arts and mathematics?	Theme 1. Establishing Relationships and Modeling Expectations	1. Acknowledging students' successes
		2. Developing genuine relationships with students
		3. Establishing clear expectations
		4. Guiding and communicating mission of school
		5. Maintaining visibility and active involvement
		6. Modeling expectations
		7. Providing feedback and encouragement
	Theme 2. Using Data and Collaboration to Improve Student Achievement	8. Analyzing data with students
		9. Continuous monitoring and evaluation
		10. Data as guide for teacher PD
		11. Data driven decision making
		12. Engaging teachers in data analysis
		13. Open door policy
		14. Using data to set goals
	Theme 3. Using Data to Support Strategic Resource Allocation and Supportive Infrastructure	15. Alignment of resources with educational goals
		16. Balance between immediate needs and long-term goals
		17. Community involvement
	Theme 4. Using Data to Cultivate a Positive Learning Environment	18. Creating a structured and conducive learning environment
		19. Data and classroom design
		20. Data driven instruction
		21. Data informed emotional and social support
		22. Data use to understand student needs
		23. Effective classroom management
		24. Following protocol in teacher observation and feedback
		25. Importance of involving stakeholders

Research question	Themes aligned with research question	Initial codes categorized to form themes
RQ2. What are middle school leaders' perceptions of the challenges faced while implementing instructional leadership practice to increase student achievement in in English language arts and mathematics?	Theme 5. Resource and Funding Issues	26. Bridging student learning gaps
		27. Budget management autonomy
		28. Need for increased access to funding
		29. Obtaining resources for students
		30. Resource allocation
	Theme 6. Navigating System and Policy Constraints	31. Using resources for positive atmosphere
		32. Balancing school needs and district-federal policies
		33. County not using state curriculum and pacing
		34. Demands to meet student needs
		35. Need for flexibility
		36. Negative impact from frequency of initiative changes
		37. Too much focus on testing
		38. Unrealistic goals at district and federal levels
	Theme 7. Instructional Challenges	39. Addressing diverse learning needs
		40. Battling stereotypes
		41. Building trust between teacher and students
		42. Fostering student engagement
		43. Managing staff mindsets
		44. Support of student social emotional needs
	Theme 8. Leadership and Staff Development	45. Teacher understanding of data
		46. Teacher understanding of student population
		47. Balancing school needs and district requirements
		48. Continuous staff-teacher development
		49. Leader willingness to learn
		50. Negative reactions to teacher evaluations
		51. Role of culture

Appendix E: Professional Development Curriculum

Professional Development Curriculum

Module 1	<p>Title: Using Data to Drive School Improvement in English Language Arts and Mathematics</p> <p>Target Audience: Instructional Leaders, Middle School Principals, and Middle School Assistant Principals</p> <p>Purpose: The purpose of this professional development program is to equip instructional leaders with the knowledge, skills, and tools necessary to effectively use data to drive school improvement in the areas of English language arts and mathematics. Participants will learn how to collect, analyze, and leverage data to make data-informed decisions that positively impact student learning outcomes.</p> <p>Goals: Develop a deep understanding of the importance of data-driven decision-making in education. Enhance participants' proficiency in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Equip instructional leaders with strategies to effectively communicate and implement data-driven initiatives. Improve student achievement in English language arts and mathematics through data-informed interventions.</p> <p>Learning Outcomes: By the end of this professional development, participants will be able to: Analyze and interpret data to identify trends and areas for improvement in English language arts and mathematics. Develop actionable strategies based on data analysis to enhance teaching and learning in these subject areas. Effectively communicate data findings and recommendations to teachers and staff. Create a data-driven improvement plan for their school.</p>
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Day 1 Agenda**8:30 AM - 9:00 AM Registration and Welcome****9:00 AM - 10:30 AM “Introduction to Data-Driven Decision-Making”**

Objective: Purpose and importance of data in education.

Types of data: qualitative, quantitative, formative, and summative.

Ethical considerations in data usage.
 Analyzing data trends and patterns.
 Identifying outliers and anomalies

10:30 AM - 10:45 AM Morning Break

10:45 AM - 12:30 PM “Using Data to Identify Areas for Improvement”

Objective: Identifying areas for improvement in English language arts and mathematics.
 Establishing performance benchmarks and goals.
 Creating actionable recommendations based on data.

12:30 PM - 1:30 PM Lunch

1:30 PM - 3:30 PM “Implementing Data-Informed Strategies”

Objective: Strategies for integrating data into instructional practices.
 Effective communication of data findings to staff and teachers.
 Using data to set priorities and allocate resources.

3:30 PM - 3:45 PM Afternoon Break

3:45 PM - 4:30 PM “Developing Data-Driven Improvement Plans”

Objective: Discussing the successes and challenges of data-driven plans.
 How to create a school improvement plan based on data analysis.
 How to develop a monitoring progress tool for the plan.

4:30 PM- 4:35 PM Closing Remarks

Trainers/Speakers should have expertise in data analysis, education, and leadership.
 Encourage active participation, group discussions, and provide additional resources for participants to explore further.

Module 2	<p>Title: Professional Development on Setting a Conducive Climate for Teaching and Learning Improvement in English Language Arts and Mathematics in Schools</p> <p>Target Audience: Instructional Leaders, Middle School Principals, and Middle School Assistant Principals</p>
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Purpose:

The purpose of this professional development is to equip instructional leaders with the knowledge, skills, and strategies to create and sustain a conducive climate for teaching and learning, particularly in the areas of English language arts and mathematics. This program aims to empower instructional leaders to improve student achievement, foster a culture of continuous improvement, and promote effective teaching practices within their schools.

Goals:

To understand the role of instructional leadership in enhancing the teaching and learning environment.

To develop skills in assessing the current climate for teaching and learning in ELA and Mathematics.

To create action plans for improving the teaching and learning climate in ELA and Mathematics.

To provide strategies for effective professional development and support for educators in ELA and Mathematics.

To measure the impact of the changes implemented through evaluation and data analysis.

Learning Outcomes:

Participants will be able to identify the components of a conducive climate for teaching and learning.

Assess the current state of teaching and learning in ELA and Mathematics in their schools.

Develop action plans to improve the teaching and learning climate.

Implement strategies for effective professional development and support.

Evaluate the impact of changes on student achievement in ELA and Mathematics.

Day 2 Agenda**8:30 AM - 9:00 AM Introduction and Module 2 Overview****Creating a Vision for Conducive Teaching and Learning and Establishing Expectations**

Participants will be broken into small groups and rotate in and out of each session for one hour and half. All groups will be taught simultaneously. Each session will be running by a different facilitator who specializes in these concentrated areas.

Group A “The Role of Instructional Leaders”

Objective: This group will explore and understand the key responsibilities, establishing expectations, and attributes of instructional leaders in an educational setting. This session involves discussing leadership styles, communication, and strategies for promoting effective teaching and learning.

Materials Needed:

Videos

Flipchart or whiteboard

Markers

Instructions:**Introduction (10 minutes):**

Begin by welcoming the participants and explaining the purpose of the activity. Share the objectives and make it clear that the activity is meant to encourage reflection and discussion on their roles as instructional leaders.

Roles and Responsibilities (20 minutes):

Divide the participants into small groups and provide each group with a list of potential roles and responsibilities of instructional leaders. Ask them to discuss and prioritize these roles based on their importance and impact on the school's instructional quality. After 20 minutes, reconvene and have each group share their top three roles.

Group Discussion (20 minutes):

Open the floor for a larger group discussion. Ask participants to reflect on the roles and responsibilities they discussed in their small groups. Encourage them to share their insights, experiences, and any challenges they face in fulfilling these roles.

Case Studies (20 minutes):

Provide the participants with a few real or hypothetical scenarios related to instructional leadership. These scenarios should depict common challenges or situations that principals and assistant principals might encounter.

Video link of Solving complex problems: https://youtu.be/Ak-MP_0UVEw

Sample Scenarios for challenges for assistant principals and/or principals: [Using the leadership dilemmas.docx](#)

Ask participants to analyze the scenarios, discuss how they would approach them, and share their strategies for effective leadership in each case.

Action Planning (15 minutes):

In small groups, ask the participants to identify one area or role they would like to improve or focus on in their instructional leadership. Have them outline a specific action plan with goals and steps for improvement. Encourage them to consider how they will measure their success in this area.

Share and Reflect (10 minutes):

Have each group share their action plans or key takeaways from the activity. Encourage them to reflect on what they've learned and how they plan to apply it in their roles as instructional leaders.

Closing (5 minutes):

Summarize the key points discussed during the activity and express your appreciation for their participation. Encourage ongoing collaboration and professional development in their instructional leadership roles.

Group B “Components of a Conducive Climate”

Objective: This group aim to identify and discuss the various elements that contribute to a positive and conducive learning or working environment. These components can include factors like physical facilities, relationships, safety, and emotional well-being.

Materials Needed:

Markers and whiteboard or flip chart paper

Sticky notes and markers for participants

Handouts with relevant information

Workshop Outline:

Introduction (10 minutes)

Welcome and icebreaker activity to foster a positive atmosphere.

Define the purpose and objectives of the workshop.

Understanding the Components (20 minutes)

Present and discuss the key components of a conducive climate:

Trust and Respect

Communication and Collaboration

Supportive Leadership

Inclusivity and Diversity

Safety and Well-being

Provide examples and case studies of schools that have successfully implemented these components.

Sample case study link: [Sample Case Studies](#)

Group Activity: Component Brainstorming (20 minutes)

Divide participants into groups.

Have them brainstorm specific strategies and initiatives to promote their assigned component within their school.

Ask each group to present their ideas.

Building a Climate Action Plan (20 minutes)

Provide participants with a template for creating a climate action plan.

Encourage them to use the ideas generated in the previous activity to formulate concrete plans for improving their school's climate.

Discuss potential challenges and solutions.

Sample action plan link: [Sample Action Plan Document](#)

Sharing and Feedback (15 minutes)

Each group shares a summary of their action plan.

Encourage constructive feedback and suggestions from other participants.

Closing (5 minutes)

Summarize the key takeaways from the workshop.

Provide resources and references for further reading and support.

Express gratitude to the participants for their engagement.

Group C “Coaching and Support”

Objective: The objective of this group might revolve around strategies and techniques for providing coaching and support to teachers, staff, or individuals within an educational context. This could include discussing effective feedback, professional development, and mentorship programs.

Material Needed:

Video

Group Discussion

Role-Playing

Introduction (20 minutes)

Welcome and introduction to the coaching role in instructional leadership

Show a video example of coaching and feedback.

Group Activity: Component Brainstorming (30 minutes)

Divide participants into groups (role of a coach and role of a teacher).

Have them brainstorm specific strategies and initiatives to provide constructive feedback and coaching to teachers for improvement of teaching and learning.

Participants will be given prompts.

Samples of the prompts will be provided.

Sample of the video: <https://youtu.be/EBBlhoFfqwk>

Sharing and Feedback (30 minutes)

Each group shares a summary of their perspective.

Encourage constructive feedback and suggestions from other participants.

Closing (10 minutes)

Summarize the key takeaways from the workshop.

Express gratitude to the participants for their engagement.

9:00 AM - 10:30 AM – Session 1 Group A (Team 1), Group B (Team 2), and Group C (Team3)

10:30 AM -11:00 AM -Break

11:00 AM- 12:30 AM- Session 2 Group A (Team 2), Group B (Team 3), and Group C (Team1)

12:30 PM- 1:30 PM- Lunch

1:30 PM- 2:00 PM -Break

2:00 PM- 3:30 PM -Session 3 Group A (Team 3), Group B (Team 1), and Group C (Team 2)

3:30 PM - 3:45 PM Break

3:45 PM -4:00 PM Closing Remarks

Module II professional development training will empower instructional leaders to create a conducive climate for teaching and learning, ultimately leading to improved student achievement in English language arts and mathematics. It includes a comprehensive plan for training, ongoing support, and evaluation to ensure success.

Module 3 **Title: Instructional Leaders Understanding Challenges with Implementation of New Initiatives to Improve English Language Arts and Mathematics in Middle Schools**

Target Audience:

Instructional Leaders, Middle School Principals, and Middle School Assistant Principals

Purpose:

The purpose of this professional development program is to equip instructional leaders in middle schools with the knowledge and skills necessary to understand and effectively address the challenges associated with implementing new initiatives in English language arts and mathematics. By the end of this training, instructional

leaders will be better prepared to support teachers and students in achieving success in these subjects.

Goals:

Develop a deep understanding of the challenges related to implementing new initiatives in English language arts and mathematics. Provide strategies and tools for instructional leaders to effectively address these challenges. Foster a collaborative and supportive environment among instructional leaders to share best practices and resources.

Learning Outcomes:

Participants will be able to identify common challenges in implementing new initiatives in English language arts and mathematics. Develop strategies to overcome these challenges. Build a network of peers for ongoing support and collaboration.

Day 3 Agenda

8:30 AM-10:00 AM “Strategies for Overcoming Challenges”

Objective: Common challenges in implementation. Understanding to maximize resource and funding, while operating within the policy of education.

Steps for creating an implementation plan.

Be flexible in adapting to the specific needs and challenges of participants.

10:00 AM- 10:30 Break

10:30 AM -12:00 Noon “Collaboration and Building a Support Network”

Objective: Strategies for effective communication and buy-in.

Monitoring of the implementation plans developed by participants.

Participant surveys to gather feedback on the program.

Pre-training and post-training assessments to measure knowledge gain.

12:00 Noon – 1:00 PM Lunch

1:00 PM- 3:00 PM “Instructional Leadership Strategies”

Objective: Identify specific instructional challenges, areas for improvement, and root causes. Equip instructional leaders with skills for resolving conflicts among staff and stakeholders and implementing effective teaching methods.

3:00 PM- 4:00 PM -Trainer-led Q&A/Feedback (Survey of the 3-day Training)/Dismissal

See link for sample survey question: [Professional Development Leadership Survey.docx](#)