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Perceptions of Principal Leadership Skills in High-Achieving Elementary Schools

Sonya Lasyon Jackson
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Sonya Lasyon Jackson

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Walden University

2018

Abstract

Perceptions of Principal Leadership Skills in High-Achieving Elementary Schools

by

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MEd, University of North Florida, 1995

MA, University of North Florida, 1992

BA, Florida Agriculture & Mechanical University, 1988

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Administrative Leadership for Teaching and Learning

Walden University

June 2018

Abstract

The problem addressed in this study was the inability of certain schools in a rural school district in Florida to achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP) in comparison to a neighboring school district where students consistently made AYP. Research has shown a positive relationship between student achievement and principal leadership skills. The purpose of this study was to identify patterns in elementary teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership skills related to student achievement and elementary principals' perceptions of their own leadership practices and compare those perceptions. The conceptual framework for this qualitative case study design was instructional leadership. Twelve teachers of Kindergarten to Grade 5 from 3 high-achieving elementary schools volunteered to participate and provided data through 2 focus groups with 6 primary grade teachers and 6 intermediate grade teachers respectively. Principals at the same 3 high-achieving elementary schools provided data through semistructured interviews. Open coding and thematic analysis yielded 4 themes from the principals' responses, including instructional leadership, hands-on leadership, communication and collaboration, and management by visibility. The teachers' responses resulted in the themes of high expectations for student achievement, a supportive learning environment, consistent collection and review of student achievement data, and an overall positive school climate to promote exemplary instructional practices and student success. A positive social change that can stem from this study is implementing principal leadership practices related to the findings in low-achieving schools. This may result in gains in student achievement, leading to increased academic and economic opportunities.

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Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to my husband, Michael Jackson; my son, Mario Jackson; and my grandson, Kendall Jackson, all of whom supported me from the very beginning and understood the commitment needed to complete this process. I would like to thank my parents, Herschell Rolax, and my late mother, Ruby Rolax, who taught me how to work hard and not give up on anything, knowing that some things do not always come easy. I want to thank my sisters, Helenthia Stephens and Kimberly Hinson, for supporting me, despite questioning why we could not go on any “sister retreats” during the process. I also thank my friends, Dr. Marcia Austin, Dr. Melissa Harts, and Betty Harper, who continued to support and pray for me the whole time. I thank God for my praying family. I know that the prayers of Pastor Mason and the church also were a great support. Finally, I want to thank God, who is the head of my life. I know that without You, Lord, this would not be impossible. According to Your word, all things are possible to those who believe, and I do.

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As I look back at this long and demanding journey, I have come to appreciate how extremely difficult and challenging it was. I would have not been successful in completing this study without the supervision and guidance of several important individuals. First, I would like to thank Dr. Pamela Harrison, my committee chair, for her time, patience, guidance, and wisdom. Dr. Harrison's continued and unwavering support and encouragement kept me going. I would like to thank Dr. Elsie Szecsy, my second committee member, who provided insight and helpful suggestions as the study progressed. I also want to thank Dr. Paul Englesberg, university research reviewer, for his support in helping to make my study the best quality of research possible.

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Section 1: Introduction to the Study

The role of a 21st-century campus principal requires an increasingly refined set of skills. No longer can principals be judged solely on how well they manage their administrative duties. As the result of increased accountability and demands, all principals need to be all things to all people, so their job responsibilities have changed drastically (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Principals are now held accountable not only for school improvement but also for the academic achievement of all students (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014). Finnigan (2010) and Shen et al. (2012) made several key findings suggesting that successful leaders influence student achievement by engaging in practices that include setting directions, increasing the knowledge of staff, encouraging leadership within the organization, providing a positive environment for students and staff, and providing supervision to the organization. Lunenburg and Irby (2014) described principalship as changing from a managerial position to a role, first and foremost, attentive to student learning. The focus of this study was the influence of principal leadership skills on student achievement as measured by state and federal accountability standards in two local school districts in Florida.

Background

In 1999, Florida implemented a new school improvement and accountability system to reform education in its public schools (Florida Department of Education [FLDOE], 1999). The new accountability system was designed to ensure that every student would have the opportunity to acquire skills necessary to succeed in the information age (FLDOE, 2010). To this end, the FLDOE (2010) created two sets of

high-level academic standards, the Sunshine State Standards and the 2007 Next Generation Sunshine State Standards.

In conjunction with these standards, the FLDOE (2010) implemented the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) to assess students' academic skills in the subjects of reading, writing, mathematics, and science. Based on the FCAT fact sheet, the primary purpose of this test was to (a) assess student achievement related to the higher order cognitive skills represented in the 2007 Next Generation Sunshine State Standards and (b) assess grade schools based on how well their students demonstrated mastery of the standards (FLDOE, 2010). The test had five levels: Levels 1 and 2 represented achievement levels below grade expectations, and Levels 3, 4, and 5 represented achievement at or above grade level (FLDOE, 2010). Knowledge gained from each school's report card has assisted districts in identifying and promoting practices to improve student achievement.

Another component of the state's accountability system is the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2003). Enacted in 2002, the NCLB provided the foundation for school reform by focusing on student achievement (USDOE, 2003). The NCLB sought to hold schools accountable for increasing student learning and closing the achievement gaps between the different racial and ethnics groups as well as students with disabilities, English language learners, and students who were economically disadvantaged (USDOE, 2003).

The NCLB required states to evaluate student achievement in relation to the states' academic standards and to determine whether public school districts were making

adequate yearly progress (AYP), which measures the progress of various subgroups such as race, socioeconomic status (SES), student ethnicity, and disability, toward achieving the goal of 100% English proficiency by 2014, as mandated by the NCLB (FLDOE, 2011). Moreover, the language of the NCLB expanded the role of principals and added substantially to their responsibilities and accountability for student achievement (Nason, 2011). Based on this mandate, principal leadership can no longer be focused solely on managing schools but rather on increasing student academic achievement. Section 2 of the study will include a review of research related to the influence of the principal's leadership role and skills on student achievement in schools that are meeting AYP and closing the achievement gap.

Problem Statement

The problem I addressed in this study was the inability of certain schools in a rural school district in Florida (District P, a pseudonym) to achieve AYP in comparison to a neighboring rural school district (District S, a pseudonym). In District S, students consistently made AYP, as measured by the NCLB (see FLDOE, 2011). Despite District P's commitment to maintaining a stable environment in the schools by keeping the school administrative team consistent and providing additional resources for schools to implement programs and hire personnel to support targeted subgroups, the district continued to fall short of meeting AYP (FLDOE, 2011).

Research has indicated that next to classroom instruction, principal leadership is the most critical factor to increase student learning and achieve AYP (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014). Research has shown that even though teachers have a direct and immediate impact

on student success, principals have the authority and responsibility to be certain that teaching and learning occur (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014). Ultimately, the responsibility of principals is to create a positive learning environment and to ensure that resources are available to support curriculum and instruction (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014). Meyer (2012) explained that effective principals have the skills to create a school environment in which all learners are empowered and motivated to succeed. Meyer also noted that leadership style, authority, accountability, and communication are key contributing factors allowing leaders to equip others to create a climate of success.

Table 1 illustrates a 5-year span of AYP performance in District P, the local problem, and District S, the study district. The data indicate that less than 50% of the schools in the districts achieved AYP over a 5-year period. During the 2011–2012 school year, the state transitioned to a new accountability system with new requirements that were more challenging and rigorous (FLDOE, 2012). These new requirements impacted the ways that the schools were graded. Consequently, District P did not meet the AYP requirements for the 2011–2012 and 2012–2013 school years. However, for the 2011–2012 school year, 3 of the 11 elementary schools in District S met the requirements in one subject area, and for the 2012–2013 school year, seven schools met the requirements in one or all areas.

Table 1

AYP of Elementary Schools in Two Rural School Districts in Florida

School district	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
District P	33%	0%	11%	0%	0%
District S	18%	36%	45%	27%	64%

Note. District P, local problem in 2008–2013, $N = 9$. District S, study site in 2008–2013, $N = 11$.

Several factors potentially contributed to the schools not making AYP: (a) The principals behaved as managers, not instructional leaders (Yarbrough, 2011); (b) the principals did not understand the NCLB accountability structure (Pepper, 2010); and (c) the principals failed to understand the data (Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Rogers, 2011; Shouppe & Pate, 2010). According to Pepper (2010), successful principals have multiple skills that combine the characteristics of transformational and transactional leadership styles. Pepper also stated that principals and teachers need to be trained properly to foster student growth. Effective principals support teacher collaboration, provide proper training and teacher development, and create an environment in which students can succeed (Suber, 2012; Wallace Foundation, 2012). Leone, Warnimont, and Zimmerman (2009) stated that successful principals are effective school managers and strong instructional leaders who are innovative and creative in building and maintaining valuable learning communities.

Accountability demanded by mandates at the federal and state levels, including the NCLB and AYP, has amplified the pressure on principals to increase student performance. School leaders have had to transition from a more administrative role to a role involving assessments, instruction, and data analysis (Rogers, 2011). Consequently, the roles of principals and teachers have been impacted dramatically by the NCLB. Working in this new atmosphere of heightened accountability effectively has required energy, creativity, and commitment from teachers and administrators. Those in leadership positions were suddenly required to possess professional skills not expected of school leaders a generation ago (Louis et al., 2010). Administrators needed to demonstrate

mastery in supporting highly complex job expectations and competencies (Leone et al., 2009).

The NCLB altered the face of public education by placing the emphasis on increasing academic standards and accountability for all students. Principals were obligated to provide learning environments that would raise the academic achievement of all students, regardless of cultural or linguistic background (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; Suber, 2012). Under the NCLB, the principal's job became much more challenging and required school leaders to set annual goals and meet AYP in reading and math, leading to achievement of the proficiency standards set forth in the NCLB (FLDOE, 2010).

Suber (2012) asserted that achieving the math and reading goals made principals the focal point of accountability. Principals had to be able to accumulate and analyze student data, supervise the staff, manage the school building, provide the necessary materials, and interact with community members (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014). Having some knowledge of student data helped principals and staff to select effective programs to support areas of weakness in students' academic performance (Chenoweth, 2010).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to identify patterns in the teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership skills and the principals' perceptions of their own leadership practices. The case study was conducted in three high-achieving elementary schools in a rural school district in Florida (District S), which was demographically similar to District P, where achievement was lower. I gathered the principals' perceptions

via interviews (see Appendix A) and the teachers' perceptions through focus groups (see Appendix B).

I did not collect data in District P for two reasons. First, I focused the case study on the principals of schools that had consistently met AYP and had demonstrated high achievement. District S met the criteria, but District P did not. Second, when I proposed the study, I worked in District P as an assistant superintendent and supervised the principals and teachers who would have been the participants, putting them at risk of researcher bias and possibly invalidating the findings.

In the current age of increased school accountability; principal responsibility; and state, local, and federal demands, principals are responsible for instruction and student learning. Principals also should have a thorough understanding of the classroom practices that support student success (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; Suber, 2012). Moreover, principals need to be able to help teachers to analyze and implement quality instruction (Ash, Hodge, & Connell, 2013).

The results of the study provided a greater understanding of which elementary principal leadership skills, practices, and/or behaviors were influential in student achievement, as perceived by the participating elementary principals and teachers. The information gained through this study addressed the local problem of low student achievement in elementary schools by identifying the leadership skills that promoted student achievement in the high-achieving elementary schools in District S. The results could be valuable to principals interested in improving their instructional leadership related to increasing student achievement.

Research Questions

I used a case study approach to answer the following research questions (RQs) in this study:

1. What are the perceptions of principals regarding the influence of their leadership skills on student achievement?
2. What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the influence of their principals' leadership skills on student achievement?
3. How are teachers' perceptions regarding principal leadership skills and principals' perceptions regarding their own leadership skills similar and dissimilar?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of instructional leadership was appropriate for this investigation of the perceptions of principals' leadership skills vital in improving student achievement. The framework supported the identification of instructional leadership skills that were essential for leaders accountable for increasing student performance. In the first decade of the 21st century, primarily because of the mandates expressed in the NCLB, the framework of instructional leadership has emerged as the result of higher standards and heightened accountability related to student achievement (FLDOE, 2011; Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; Suber, 2012). Ediger (2014) asserted that instructional leaders, such as principals, must support the growth of all students through the belief that all students are capable of learning while also preserving the integrity of the learning environment.

From the 1990s to the present, the role of the school principal has been the subject of a wide range of studies (e.g., Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Huff et al., 2011; Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Rice, 2010; Suber, 2012; Tucker, Higgins, & Salmonowicz, 2010). Conclusions have been diverse. Wood, Finch, and Mirecki (2013) concluded that the role of the principal has been associated with that of building administrator, supervisor, manager, change agent, and curriculum leader. Lunenburg and Irby (2014) found that researchers have greatly emphasized the significance of the instructional leader on school success and student achievement. Yet, school leaders are now held to a much higher standard in increasing student achievement while maintaining the organizational operations of schools, suggesting that principals must be able to manage both roles of building administrator and instructional leader (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014). Suber (2012) added that the principal's primary role as instructional leader includes promoting personal growth, understanding classroom practices that contribute to student success, and demonstrating the ability to work with teachers in analyzing and implementing quality instruction. Instructional leadership requires leaders who can help teachers to engage in learning and take a more active role focusing on instructional practices (Ash et al., 2013; Pepper, 2010).

Suber (2012) maintained that successful schools possess quality instructional leaders who have clear strategies for student achievement and who place a high priority on the success of all students. According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (2008), the business of schools has changed in a way that principals

can no longer focus solely on managerial functions of operating a school. Principals now must also demonstrate leadership skills and prioritize student and adult learning.

Marzano and Waters (2009) concluded that the principal is the most significant and influential person in any school setting and plays a critical role in establishing the school environment and school culture, and building the future for students. They stated:

There are twenty-one leadership responsibilities that have significant correlations between student achievement and principal leadership: (a) culture; (b) order; (c) discipline; (d) resources; (e) curriculum, instruction, and assessments; (f) focus; (g) knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessments; (h) visibility; (i) contingent rewards; (j) communications; (k) outreach; (l) input; (m) affirmation; (n) relationship; (o) change agent; (p) optimizer; (q) ideas/beliefs; (r) monitors/evaluates; (s) flexibility; (t) situational awareness; and (u) intellectual stimulation. (pp. 91–93)

Louis et al. (2010) identified several key findings indicating that successful instructional leaders influence student achievement through core practices such as: (a) establishing the direction of the school, (b) supporting staff development, and (c) developing the organization. To establish the direction of the school, the principal must clearly articulate the school's vision by having a common understanding, creating opportunities for teacher and student success, establishing and promoting group goal achievement, overseeing the progress of the organization, and effectively communicating with all stakeholders (Suber, 2012). The principal must also provide staff development opportunities that are intellectually challenging while modeling and providing individual

support (Wallace Foundation, 2012). Finally, it is the principal's responsibility to define the school's culture, structure the organization through the establishment of collaborative processes, and consistently monitor organizational progress (Suber, 2012). Marzano and Waters (2009) agreed and stated that educational leaders at the school and district levels must support student education in many indirect yet significant areas.

As instructional leaders, principals encourage teachers and community members to engage in school-level management, play an active role in decision making, and make changes and adaptations to the ways children are taught (Cray & Weiler, 2011). Principal leadership is crucial to significant school reform and has become an integral component in improving public education. It remains the primary responsibility of school leaders to ensure student learning, so it is imperative that principals develop instructional leadership skills resulting from the increased accountability to improve student performance (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; Suber, 2012).

Nature of the Study

Research is conducted to meet the need for greater understanding of a phenomenon under investigation; consequently, I used a qualitative, case study design to investigate the perceptions of teachers and principals about the principals' leadership skills in high-achieving elementary schools, particularly in regard to facilitating student achievement. The district identified in the problem statement, District P, had experienced difficulty meeting AYP as part of the NCLB accountability standards. District P and District S are neighboring rural districts with similar demographics. District S, which served as the study site, had been successful in making AYP at its elementary schools.

Using District S as the study site, the case study design allowed me to capture the participants' perceptions of the principals' leadership at three elementary schools that had successfully met AYP. Data collected from the interviews with the principals and the focus groups with the teachers proved advantageous to better understand the research problem. As the researcher, I sought the best way to collect data about a concern within the school district where I worked as assistant superintendent without any influence of bias. District S, the neighboring rural school district, provided data to help me address the concerns in District P. Both school districts have similar demographics and student populations, but elementary schools in District S, unlike those in District P, had performed very well on the state exam (FCAT) and had made AYP. Table 2 provides data showing the number of District S elementary schools that had achieved the grade of A over the 5-year period so could be classified as high-achieving schools. According to the FLDOE (2014), high-achieving elementary schools are schools that received a letter grade of A based on the accumulation of percentage points on the FCAT.

Table 2

District P and District S Elementary School Grades From the FLDOE

District/School	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
District P1	549(A)	509(B)	519(B)	528(A)	495(B)
District P2	642(A)	561(A)	576(A)	546(A)	553(A)
District P3	506(B)	512(B)	492(C)	406(D)	482(C)
District P4	527(A)	486(C)	485(C)	402(D)	384(F)
District P5	542(A)	552(A)	513(B)	512(B)	521(B)
District P6	552(A)	521(B)	496(B)	597(A)	482(C)
District P7	516(B)	506(B)	467(C)	469(C)	453(C)
District P8	545(A)	533(A)	513(B)	499(B)	435(C)
District P9	502(B)	562(A)	502(B)	497(B)	435(C)
District S1	579(A)	617(A)	669(A)	622(A)	556(A)
District S2	610(A)	579(A)	594(A)	554(A)	540(A)
District S3	640(A)	603(A)	578(A)	546(A)	495(B)
District S4	508(A)	589(A)	669(A)	541(A)	495(B)
District S5	647(A)	591(A)	616(A)	548(A)	495(B)
District S6	591(A)	549(A)	547(A)	526(A)	495(B)
District S7	607(A)	571(A)	567(A)	599(A)	495(B)
District S8	536(A)	563(A)	620(A)	599(A)	501(B)
District S9	613(A)	581(A)	580(A)	550(A)	495(B)
District S10	564(A)	527(A)	553(A)	572(A)	495(B)
District S11	610(A)	580(A)	571(A)	578(A)	516(B)

Note. FLDOE school grade: A = at least 525 points, B = 495-524 points, C = 435-494 points, D = 395-434 points, F = < 395 points. District S = Study site and District P = Local problem

Collecting data from principals and teachers was an attempt to confirm and cross-validate the findings within a single study (see Creswell, 2009; Hays & Singh, 2012). The results of this study provided data to further understand the perceived influence of principals' leadership skills on students' academic achievement. After completing this study, conducted in three high-achieving elementary schools in District S, I provided recommendations to address the problem of low student achievement in District P.

The decline in the number of District S elementary schools with A ratings to only two schools in 2013 was the result of a change in the state's school grading system. A similar decline was found in the grades of District P's elementary schools. Florida experienced an anomaly with school grades in 2013 because of a change in the grading

system (FLDOE, 2014). The other nine elementary schools in District S received a school grade of B in 2013, but District P's elementary schools continued to perform at a comparatively lower level, with only one school receiving an A rating. The other eight elementary schools in District P received a rating of B, C, or F. Table 3 illustrates a 5-year span of elementary schools in District S and District P receiving a school grade of A.

Table 3

District P and District S Schools Receiving a Grade of A From the FLDOE

School district	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
District S	100%	100%	100%	100%	18%
District P	67%	44%	11%	33%	11%

Note. FLDOE school grade: A = at least 525 points, B = 495-524 points, C = 435-494 points, D = 395-434 points, F = < 395 points. District S = Study site and District P = Local problem

I used interviews and focus groups to collect and validate data on the principals' leadership skills related to promoting students' academic achievement from the perspectives of the teachers and the principals themselves. In this study, I integrated the data from the teachers' responses to the focus group questions and principals' responses to interview questions. I analyzed the collected data to identify themes, categories, and patterns. To participate in the sample, the principals had to have been in the role for at least 2 years, and their schools had to have achieved AYP for 2 or more consecutive years. The teachers taught students in Kindergarten to Grade 5 and had to have been teaching at the same schools as the principals during the same time frame.

I used the inclusion criterion of 2 or more years of experience in the school to ensure that the principals I interviewed had some element of influence over students' achievement at the schools. In this study, categories and themes generated from the data were analyzed and investigated to gain a better understanding of the leadership skills that

supported students' achievement. I gathered and transcribed the interview and focus groups responses to facilitate the analysis. Then, the data were reviewed and coded to identify reoccurring categories, themes, and patterns (see Creswell, 2009). I will provide more details on the methodology used in Section 3.

Operational Definitions

I used the following terms in the study:

Adequate yearly progress (AYP): The accountability component of the NCLB that requires schools, school districts, and states to meet performance standards and improvements (FLDOE, 2011).

High-achieving elementary school: An elementary school receiving a letter grade of A on the FCAT with an accumulation of points on an 800-point scale. An A score is achieved after accumulating 525 or more points in elementary schools (FLDOE, 2014).

Instructional leader: An individual actively involved in all aspects of the instructional program at a school (Lunenburg, 2010).

Provisional AYP: A designation awarded to a high-performing school that received an A or B school grade under the A+ Plan but failed to meet 1 of the 39 criteria. These schools are reported as not meeting AYP and are subject to the same regulations as other schools not making AYP (FLDOE, 2011).

Assumptions

I made several assumptions that supported this study. First, I assumed the principals' and teachers' perceptions collected from the high-achieving schools in District S not only provided the data to answer the RQs but also provided the knowledge needed

to address the local problem of low-achieving schools in District P. This key assumption was based on the fact that the schools were located in the same rural area of Florida and had similar student demographics. I also assumed that the principals who were interviewed understood the purpose of the study and answered the interview questions honestly and to the best of their ability. My third assumption was that the teachers responded objectively and honestly to the focus group questions to the best of their ability. Another assumption was that the participating principals and teachers understood the skills needed to increase student performance and the leadership skills well enough to articulate their perceptions. I also assumed that a principal who has been in the role for at least 2 years had some impact on student achievement. Finally, I assumed that the data collected accurately reflected the opinions and perceptions of the respondents.

Limitations

According to Creswell (2007), limitations are inherent in all studies and must be identified to point out possible weaknesses. This study was limited by my use of 1 academic school year from which to derive the results. The study also was limited to the interview data obtained from the principals and the focus group data obtained from the teachers. Specific to the case study design, the perceptions of the principals and teachers about leadership skills that influenced student achievement had to be acknowledged as opinions that might not have been accurate depictions of the principals' leadership skills present at the three high-achieving elementary schools in District S. Although other leaders at the schools might have shared the responsibility of curriculum and student achievement, the literature has pointed to principals as the individuals solely held

accountable for student achievement (Balyer, 2014; Suber, 2012). The findings of this study might not be generalizable to middle school or high school principals. However, the findings could be relevant to other elementary schools in District S. Because the findings are specific only to District S, caution should be taken in applying them to other demographically similar elementary schools in Florida, including those low-achieving elementary schools identified in District P.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of the study provided information on leadership skills linked to student performance. The qualitative design for this study captured data from focus groups with teachers and interviews with principals (see Creswell, 2009; Hays & Singh, 2012) from three high-achieving elementary schools in a rural school district in Florida over 1 month.

The study was limited to the selection of elementary schools in a rural school district in Florida. I selected 12 teachers of students in Kindergarten to Grade 5 and principals with 2 or more years of experience at three high-achieving elementary schools as the sample.

Significance of the Study

The study was significant for three reasons. It addressed the local problem of elementary schools not making AYP as related to principal leadership skills. The results of this study provided beneficial information to a variety of educators and could potentially identify specific leadership skills associated with student achievement. The findings have the potential to generate social change in the educational community and society by providing information to principals and teachers on the leadership skills that might foster the academic success of all students.

Addressing the Local Problem

In this study, I examined the leadership skills of the principals of three high-achieving elementary schools in a rural school district in Florida. The schools have successfully met AYP for the past 5 years in accordance with NCLB standards. The study district was geographically and demographically similar to the district of low-achieving elementary schools identified in the local problem. Investigating the problem in demographically similar high-achieving schools created the potential to generalize effective leadership practices from the high-achieving schools to the low-achieving schools identified in the local problem.

Researchers have supported a significant relationship between principals' leadership skills and student achievement (Balyer, 2014; Huff et al., 2011; Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Velasco, Edmonson, & Slate, 2012). I examined the perceptions of principals and teachers in a rural school district in Florida and identified which leadership skills directly promoted student achievement. This information is worth sharing with principals and other school districts to increase current understanding of principals' perceived leadership skills that directly influence student achievement. Over the course of the study, I gathered data not only on the ways the elementary teachers perceived the leadership skills of their principals but also on the principals' perceptions of their own leadership skills. Moreover, teachers' perceptions of principal leadership skills in the study generated information that might be useful to principals as they seek professional development to improve their leadership skills.

Educational Benefits

As principals are being held more accountable for student achievement, it is critical that school districts, principals, and universities become aware of the leadership skills necessary to create an academic environment that promotes student success. Because of current NCLB requirements, this investigation is valuable to school districts as they work with principals to identify key leadership skills perceived to be associated with student achievement. The results also might help school districts as they work with aspiring principals to sharpen their instructional leadership skills and support those who supervise and assess practicing principals. According to Huff et al. (2011) and Louis et al. (2010), school districts must provide principals with progressive professional development to hone their leadership skills. School districts must help principals to investigate how their leadership skills impact student learning and provide opportunities for them to evaluate their own professional growth.

Principals also might benefit from this study as they begin to understand how teachers perceive their leadership skills and how they perceive their own understanding of the leadership skills necessary to promote student achievement. Principals' behaviors are considered the most important component of the operation of a school as it relates to student achievement (Louis et al., 2010). Having the opportunity to collaborate with teachers about the leadership skills that they perceive as supporting student achievement can foster a sense of shared leadership and shared responsibilities within the organization can help to establish effective schools (Huff et al., 2011; Suber, 2012).

Finally, universities might improve their principal preparation programs by learning about principals' perceptions of leadership skills that can improve student achievement. Developers of these programs might become better prepared to train future leaders with best practices that are reflective of current research. The school systems will benefit by getting better prepared principals to lead schools.

Social Change

This study holds significance as a mechanism for social change and is relevant to the local and the global educational communities. Identifying potential patterns in the teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership skills and the principals' perceptions of their own leadership practices in high-achieving elementary schools, as measured by FLDOE (2011) school grade, provides data to support efforts to close the achievement gap, lower student dropout rates, and increase graduation rates. Increased student achievement will mean more educated and informed citizens, higher wage earners, and a healthier economy. Moreover, results of the study will provide the educational community with knowledge and investigative research on effective approaches toward school improvement that can equip schools with knowledge to develop students into lifelong learners.

Summary

The problem I addressed in this study was the inability of certain schools in District P, a rural school district in Florida, to achieve AYP in comparison to District S, a neighboring rural school district where students have consistently made AYP, as measured by the NCLB (see FLDOE, 2011). These standards of accountability have

required principals to possess leadership and managerial skills. More importantly, the NCLB holds principals responsible for ensuring that all students achieve a year of academic growth for a year of schooling (FLDOE, 2011). Instructional leadership provided the conceptual framework for this study.

The purpose of the study was to identify patterns in the teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership skills and the principals' perceptions of their own leadership practices in three high-achieving elementary schools in District S, which is demographically similar to District P, where achievement is lower. I collected the data from District S, where teachers and principals met the criterion of working in high-achieving elementary schools. Focus groups were used to collect qualitative data from the teachers about their perceptions of their principals' leadership skills. Other qualitative data were gathered through interviews with the principals about their perceptions of their own leadership skills that promoted student achievement. This case study was significant in that it addressed a local problem and will help to inform educators about the leadership skills that principals must possess to increase student achievement. The results of this study could positively influence social change by providing principals with information that could increase student success, decrease elementary grade retention, and encourage lifelong learning. Moreover, the results will add to the research on principals' leadership skills and behaviors that support student achievement.

In Section 2, I will present a comprehensive review of the literature on leadership and educational leadership skills related to student achievement. In Section 3, I will describe the methodology and detail the RQs, population and sample, and the methods of

data collection and data analysis of the focus group and interview questions. Section 4 will include an examination and analysis of the results. In Section 5, I will highlight the major findings of this research and offer recommendations for future research.

Section 2: Literature Review

The problem I addressed in the study was the inability of certain schools within a rural school district in Florida (District P) to achieve AYP in comparison to a neighboring rural school district (District S) where students had consistently made AYP, as measured by the NCLB (see FLDOE, 2011). The purpose was to both identify and compare patterns in teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership skills and principals' perceptions of their own leadership practices in three high-achieving elementary schools in District S, which was demographically similar to District P. This literature review will begin with a thorough examination of the leadership literature, including a discussion of leadership styles. These styles include trait theory, situational leadership, ethical leadership, servant leadership, transactional leadership, and transformational leadership. Next, my discussion will narrow to instructional leadership and the topics of principals' perspectives, instructional leadership standards, and instructional leadership strategies. In the next part of the section, I will focus on effective principal leadership and the topics of shared vision, empowerment, school climate and culture, and student achievement. Section 2 will conclude with a discussion of various methodologies as related to the design of the study.

To guide this study, I conducted a systematic search of the literature by accessing a number of electronic online databases through the Walden University Library, including ERIC, EBSCO, ProQuest, Sage, and Google Scholar. Key words guiding the literature search were *school leadership*, *principal leadership skills*, *leadership skills*, *student achievement*, *student performance*, *effective schools*, *leadership responsibilities*,

and *instructional leadership*. I also employed additional strategies including reviewing abstracts; searching for references cited in dissertations and journal articles; and reading educational books, journal articles, and other recent and relevant publications from the last 5 to 7 years.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of instructional leadership was proper for this investigation of the perceptions of principals' leadership skills necessary in promoting student achievement. The framework supported the identification of instructional leadership skills that were essential for leaders accountable for increasing student performance. The mandates of higher standards and accountability have forced instructional leaders to focus on instructional practices in the school setting, school leaders must be able to demonstrate the skills that support teaching and learning as their main focus (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; Suber, 2012).

The role of the principal has evolved from one with a managerial approach to one with an instructional approach. An instructional leader is knowledgeable in pedagogy and curriculum (Wallace Foundation, 2012). Principal leadership is crucial to significant school reform and has become an integral component in improving public education (Suber, 2012; Wallace Foundation, 2012). It remains the primary responsibility of school leaders to ensure student learning, so it is imperative that principals develop instructional leadership skills resulting from the increased accountability to improve student performance (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; Suber, 2012).

Overview of Leadership

Leadership has multiple definitions that might be explained from various perspectives (Provost, Boscardin & Wells, 2010). For example, leadership has been defined as fostering accomplishment, obtaining agreement, providing direction, giving guidance, and establishing processes (Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Maxwell, 2011; Northouse, 2007; Suber, 2012; Ward, 2013). Central to each perspective, however, has been the notion that leaders provide organizational direction and exercise influence over others to achieve goals (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). Hoy and Miskel (2008) also suggested that even though leadership takes many forms, there appears to be no unique set of traits that can explain how leadership skills are developed. This assertion would imply that some leaders are born with more leadership traits than others.

Leadership is a progression by which individuals influence others to achieve objectives and direct organizations in ways that make the organizations more unified and consistent (Northouse, 2007). This statement by Northouse (2007) suggests that an interdependent relationship between leaders and subordinates is crucial. Likewise, Hoy and Miskel (2008) defined leadership as a positive connection among people that results in organizational efficacy and stability for the benefit of stakeholders.

Effective leadership skills are imperative to establishing and sustaining organizational culture, climate, and overall success (Suber, 2012). Leaders must form and shape cultures in order to perpetuate and foster communication among members of organizations (Shoupe & Pate, 2010). Influential leaders also must possess a variety of strengths and traits that are crucial to enhancing and promoting the growth and integrity

of organizations (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014). One of these strengths requires leaders to impart viable visions signifying the shared objectives and goals of its constituents (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014).

According to Maxwell (2011), there are five levels of leadership. At the lowest level, the leader begins to grow by learning the system, the guiding principles of the organization, and ways to lead (Maxwell, 2011). At Maxwell's second level of leadership, the leader creates an atmosphere that encourages a strong bond among team members. The third level of leadership is the true beginning for the leader because they know the system and the guiding principles, have developed a working relationship with employees, and now have proven leadership abilities (Maxwell, 2011). At the fourth level, growth occurs in the leader, and the leader becomes a better leader because of the leaders whom that leader has developed (Maxwell, 2011). According to Maxwell, the fifth level of leadership is the most complex because at this level, the leader continues to grow; establishes relationships; trains others; and continues to be responsible for everything at Levels 1, 2, 3, and 4. This leader is now also responsible for increasing and developing leaders in the company to grow to be Level 4 leaders (Maxwell, 2011). A leader's role is to develop others in the organization; by doing so, the organization continues to grow and move forward as requirements change (Maxwell, 2011).

Provost et al. (2010) conducted a mixed methods study with 30 leaders, including principals, assistant principals, and other educational administrators, to obtain and understand the perceptions of principals and other school leaders about the role of the principal in an era of significant educational reform and marked by high-stakes testing.

Their results provided insight into the role of the principal and suggested that principal leadership aligns with site-based management and instructional leadership. The participants in their study explained effective principal leadership as engagement with teachers to promote the cohesive delivery of curriculum and instruction. Participants also stated that the following abilities were effective behaviors of principals: (a) to articulate and communicate goals, (b) to coordinate and supervise curriculum and instruction, (c) to hold and communicate high standards, (d) to provide professional development for teachers, (e) to maintain high visibility, and (f) to motivate staff (Provost et al, 2010). The participants in the study showed a strong dislike of principals leaving teachers alone to teach and implement curriculum content without guidance (Provost et al., 2010).

Provost et al. (2010) highlighted various leadership theories that have evolved throughout the years and have influenced educational leadership. Early leadership theories focused on distinguishing characteristics of leaders and followers, but subsequent theories have examined other variables, such as situational factors and skill levels (Northouse, 2007). To understand the instructional leadership model, it is important to examine and discuss previous leadership theories.

Trait Theory

Early leadership research was based on the examination of great leaders who were typically from the aristocracy or the ruling class. The opportunity to lead was never given to the lower classes. Sometimes referred to as the great man theory, the trait theory suggested that great leaders were born with certain innate leadership qualities that made people want to naturally follow them (Northouse, 2007). The theory was based on the

assumption that great leaders were predisposed and born to be leaders and that when the need arose for these leaders to lead, they would be present, regardless of the cause or the situation (Northouse, 2007). The trait theory focused on qualities such as personality, physical appearance, social background, intelligence, and ability (Northouse, 2007). Since the 20th century, leadership characteristics have evolved to fit certain types of leaders in certain types of situations (Northouse, 2007).

The influence of principal leadership on student achievement continues to be investigated. Supovitz, Sirinides, and May (2009) investigated school leadership behaviors and instructional practices using a quantitative approach. They collected data through surveys and student achievement documents from 2006 to 2007. The participants for their study were 721 teachers from 38 elementary and middle schools from an urban school district in the southeastern United States. The researchers focused on seven areas of principal involvement with student performance: (a) vision and objectives, (b) leadership trust, (c) emphasis on teaching and learning, (d) instructional discussions, (e) collaboration about teaching and learning, (f) instructional assistance networks, and (g) teacher modification in instruction. The findings of their study suggested that principals had a measurable effect on student performance. Principals with the assistance of teachers and other school site employees and district administrators supported student growth in the classroom (Supovitz et al., 2009). Principals that exhibited leadership behaviors that supported teaching and classroom instruction created an environment that supported learning and student progress (Supovitz et al., 2009). The teachers in their study stated that principals maintained school's vision and objectives, created an

atmosphere of trust, and protected the instructional focus, which had a subtle organizational influence. A study conducted by Wood et al. (2013) that involved retaining effective leadership arrived at some of the same findings, that principals: (a) share the same vision, (b) create an atmosphere of change, (c) authorize others to lead, (d) encourage members of the team and develop from within, and (e) develop and maintain relationships. The results of Wood et al.'s study confirmed the results of Supovitz et al. that effective leaders possess and display these qualities in an effort to promote a positive school culture.

Situational Leadership

The situational approach theory of leadership, championed by Hersey and Blanchard (1996), became the model of choice for many researchers and practitioners. According to Northouse (2007), this theory embraces the notion that different situations and circumstances demand distinct forms of leadership. The premise of this theory is based on the relationship that is established between the style of leadership and the developmental levels of the followers (Northouse, 2007).

Hersey and Blanchard (1996) stated that managers need to use the leadership style that is the most appropriate for a particular situation. For example, depending on the employees' competencies and commitment to their tasks, the leadership style might have to change from one individual to another. Hersey and Blanchard developed a battery of assessments determining high and low willingness and the ability of employees to perform tasks.

Hersey and Blanchard's (1996) battery examined four leadership styles that were matched to the adaptation of leadership behaviors. The high task-low relationship, or telling style, focuses solely on goal achievement, where employees are given directions regarding what to do and how to do it (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996). Little time is spent on developing relationships or receiving input from employees (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996). The high task-high relationship, or selling style, implies that leaders concern themselves with aspects of job completion and employee encouragement (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996). The low task-low relationship, or delegating, includes the leaders identifying the tasks and believing that the followers are capable of completing the tasks on their own (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996). The low task-high relationship, or participating style, focuses on providing support and giving input regarding task completion (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996). Depending upon the state and circumstances in particular organizations, the leaders might adjust their approaches to meet the needs of the constituents (Hersey & Blanchard, 1996).

Ethical and Servant Leadership

Ethical leadership focuses on doing the right thing, regardless of the circumstances (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Similarly, servant leadership is built on the core foundation of ethical and moral behaviors (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Leaders who are focused on moral and ethical behaviors will seek to serve others first and put aside the desire for personal gain; consequently, they are viewed by their followers as trustworthy people who will do the right thing for the right reasons (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

In a climate of change and new demands, the current view of leadership behavior also is changing. The emerging view is more aligned to the servant leadership theory, which focuses on ethics and people-centered behaviors (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Setting the needs of others as a high priority, servant leaders empower others and involve them in the problem-solving process (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Thus, servant leaders work with others to create and improve areas of need within organizations (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Kouzes and Posner (2007) posited that leadership practices used to help organizations to accomplish goals can be amplified by including the ability to challenge, inspire, encourage, and enable others as well as the willingness and ability to model what is expected. Spears (2010) identified 10 characteristics of critical importance to the development of servant leaders: active listening, empathy, healing, organizational awareness, ability to influence others, ability to grasp concepts, ability to look ahead, stewardship, willingness to help others to grow, and community building. Servant leaders demonstrate ethical and caring behaviors, and they actively seek the input of others in the decision-making process to enhance the growth of individuals while maintaining an organizational focus (Spears, 2010).

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership has been described as a collaborative effort: Leaders and followers work together, and they encourage each other to reach successful levels of achievement (Pepper, 2010; Velasco et al., 2012). The primary characteristic of transformational leaders is their ability to inspire workers to complete tasks focused on the goals of the organization by believing in their own abilities (Pepper, 2010; Velasco et

al., 2012). These leaders aim for change, with the goal of improving the productivity and efficacy of workers (Pepper, 2010). Thus, transformational leaders share the importance and value of organizational goals while increasing the level of employee motivation needed to exceed expectations (Pepper, 2010; Velasco et al., 2012). Moreover, they inspire followers to focus on the team and the organization rather than their own interests. Pepper (2010) and Suber (2012) asserted that such leadership expands the followers' need levels to the highest order, which is self-actualization.

Transformational leadership encompasses four characteristics: idealized authority, encouraging inspiration, academic encouragement, and individualized deliberation (Velasco et al., 2012). Idealized authority implies that followers imitate the leaders' behavior and assume similar values because of their level of trust and respect for the leaders. Encouraging inspiration suggests that the leaders create and stimulate similar visions in the followers. Academic encouragement refers to leaders who encourage innovation and creativity in the followers. Individualized deliberation refers to the ability of leaders to consider the maturity of the followers to determine their need for further development (Velasco et al., 2012).

According to Kouzes and Posner (2007), five practices support transformational leaders as commendable leaders: model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart. Modeling the way includes leading by example. Commendable leaders motivate others to follow by participating and being involved in the organizational mission. Leaders inspire a shared vision when they can clearly communicate the organizational vision. Leaders challenge the process by creating

new ways to improve the organizations. Their ability to empower others to act is shown through efforts to work as team players while encouraging other organizational members to operate as a unit to meet organizational goals. Lastly, the leaders encourage the heart when they motivate and encourage followers through difficult times of change.

Transformational leadership is intensely focused on the followers' levels of dedication to organizational goals (Blasé & Kirby, 2009). According to Blasé and Kirby (2009), it is important for transformational leaders to communicate their thoughts clearly about the organizations that they lead. They also must be viewed as trustworthy leaders and a credible source of information (Blasé & Kirby, 2009).

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leaders build relationships with their followers through the exchange of rewards and punishments related to work performance (Northouse, 2007). These leaders give instructions and set the organizational goals and expectations; in return, the supporters are rewarded for accomplishing the goals or punished if the goals are not achieved. In this model, the leaders have ultimate authority and control (Northouse, 2007).

Transactional leaders are not interested in improving the workplace environment or changing employees' behaviors. Rather, they typically make changes only in response to problems or issues that arise (Pepper, 2010). The result of transactional leadership is management and organizational progress because the focus is on day-to-day operations (Pepper, 2010). In transactional leadership, timely task completion becomes the sole responsibility of the subordinates, who are punished if they do not complete assigned

tasks in a timely manner or if projects are not completed according to specifications or fall below expectations (Riaz & Haider, 2010). Transactional leaders often must take action to ensure that work performance improves. Conversely, Riaz and Haider (2010) pointed out that employees also are rewarded for meeting expectations and project goals.

The transactional leadership model works under the assumption that leaders have the ability to articulate directions and expectations to the workers clearly (Riaz & Haider, 2010). Also referred to as a true leadership style, transactional leadership focuses on short-term, not long-term, goals (Riaz & Haider, 2010). It is more of a telling style of leadership that relies on subordinates being told what the organizational objectives are in order to gain rewards or avoid punishment (Northouse, 2007). Many organizations continue to use the transactional leadership model, but researchers have emphasized that it has limitations (Northouse, 2007). Despite the drawbacks of transactional leadership, many companies are implementing this type of leadership style to increase the production and performance of employees (Riaz & Haider, 2010).

Instructional Leadership

Also known as educational leadership, instructional leadership was popularized during the effective schools movement and has been defined as the ability of leaders to initiate school improvement, create a climate of learning, and stimulate and supervise instruction in such a way that teachers provide instruction as effectively as possible (Shoupp & Pate, 2010). Over the last 30 years, the study of instructional leadership has resulted in many definitions and models. However, effective instructional leadership has had several traits that have remained consistent: set goals and high expectations, monitor

progress, provide staff development opportunities, and expect high academic achievement (Ash et al., 2013; Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Brockmeier, Starr, Green, Pate, & Leech, 2013; Paredes Scribner, Crow, Lopez, & Murtadha, 2011; Ward, 2013). Finnigan (2010) and Shen et al. (2012) defined instructional leadership as actions necessary for principals to take in order to increase student achievement. Sergiovanni (2009) defined instructional leadership as leadership that focuses on specific content areas, discipline, and subject matter. Similarly, Suber (2012) defined instructional leadership as all behaviors and activities that promote student performance. Blasé and Blasé (1999) identified two other key components of instructional leadership: promoting professional growth and talking with teachers to promote reflection. Through instructional conferencing with teachers, a form of dialoguing, principals are facilitating professional growth and reflection. Principals provide feedback and modeling while encouraging teachers to use inquiry to solicit advice or opinions.

Aligned with these definitions, Hallinger and Murphy (1985) developed a leadership model with three dimensions, namely, creating and communicating the mission of the school, supervising and evaluating instructional programs, and promoting a climate of learning throughout the school environment. Hallinger and Murphy divided these dimensions into specific functions of instructional leadership: setting and discussing school-based goals, monitoring and evaluating teacher and student performance, developing curriculum and setting academic standards, preserving time for instruction, providing incentives and professional development, and maintaining high visibility during the day. The leadership model developed by Hallinger and Murphy was later

expanded to include making and implementing decisions, engaging the community, using appropriate data, understanding effective management practices, and communicating effectively with all school stakeholders (Brockmeier et al., 2013; Pepper, 2010; Suber, 2012; Velasco et al., 2012).

Instructional leadership is perhaps the most significant factor of an effective learning environment (Cray & Weiler, 2011; Huff et al., 2011; Shoupp & Pate, 2010; Suber, 2012). Sergiovanni (2009) asserted that schools require competent and knowledgeable management in order to function. Lunenburg and Irby (2014) argued that the current focus on and demands inherent in instructional leadership have fundamentally altered the responsibilities of principals. Depending on the needs of schools, principals might use different approaches to address areas of concern. For example, even if the principals' intent is to increase student achievement, one principal might focus on improving student learning, increasing collaboration among teachers, and using student data (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014), whereas other principals in different school settings might focus on using student data to drive classroom instruction (Wayman, Cho, Jimerson, & Spikes, 2012). The implication of these assertions is that leadership practices should include the ability to determine the different needs of school sites accurately. As a result, most research on instructional leadership has focused on the thoughts and the ability of individual school principals to manage their schools.

Perspectives of Principals

Warner (2010) conducted a qualitative study of elementary school principals in Minneapolis and St. Paul suburban districts who had a maximum of 5 years of principal

experience. Warner specifically focused on their role as instructional leaders to obtain and understand their perceptions of instructional leadership. Twenty principals were interviewed and asked open-ended questions about their views of the principal's job duties, the type of leaders they thought they were, and their views of the link between their instructional leadership styles and the realities of the job.

The results generated four key findings. First, the principals expressed that they had received very little training, thus making the job very difficult. Second, they stated that it takes more than just the principal to lead a school. Third, they believed that accountability helped them to achieve their goals and that the many demands placed on them detracted from their efforts to improve instruction. Finally, they commented that school leadership was highly dependent on building and maintaining relationships (Warner, 2010). These results were corroborated by other researchers such as Balyer (2014), whose findings in the Turkish school system, while taken with caution because of possible differences in roles and responsibilities between U.S. and Turkish schools, provided additional perspectives of principals.

Balyer (2014) interviewed 20 principals at the elementary and secondary levels in the Turkish school system. The study focused on school supervision characteristics that promoted instructional practices and student growth. School management included such characteristics as (a) directing the educational organization, (b) preparing their schools' outlooks, (c) training teachers and administrators, (d) focusing on the atmosphere of the school while creating a learning environment for all students, and (e) developing the community and school culture. Balyer sought to identify the principals' daily

responsibilities related to expected characteristics of school management. Results revealed that the elementary and secondary principals in the Turkish education system focused on only one of the five supervision characteristics directing the educational organization. Much of the principals' time was spent managing the daily routine of the office while working with faculty and staff. The Turkish principals did not focus on important school supervision characteristics such as developing the community and school culture, supporting the mission of the school, supporting student success, and preparing their schools' outlooks because they found it difficult to manage all of these characteristics; instead, they focused most of their time on one management characteristic (Balyer, 2014).

Packard (2011) conducted a qualitative study to examine the effects of school size on the instructional leadership of principals in 10 elementary schools in upstate New York. Principals were interviewed to determine how school size impacted their instructional leadership. The study generated three themes on instructional leadership related to school size: (a) Principals must establish a relationship of trust and collaboration with staff members; (b) teachers must be held accountable for student learning; and (c) instructional barriers existed, such as teacher resistance to guidance, lack of time to complete job duties, and overinvolvement of district office personnel in the school setting. Results found that school size impacted the ability of the principals to develop and maintain the relationships with staff necessary to monitor student achievement adequately. Principals also indicated that at larger schools, principals spent

more time on student discipline, parent-teacher complaints, and visibility within the school (Packard, 2011).

Instructional Leadership Strategies

Principals in effective schools act as instructional leaders by communicating the mission of the school clearly to staff, parents, and students (Provost et al., 2010). They also understand and practice the characteristics of effective instructional delivery demonstrated through the supervision of the instructional program (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014). Effective instructional leadership begins with recruiting and hiring the best staff to ensure students' academic success (Yarbrough, 2011). Teachers are required to know the subject content as well as deliver the content effectively to students to guarantee that learning is occurring (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; Suber, 2012). Instructional leadership also includes evaluating and improving instruction. Provost et al. (2010) cautioned that principals must look for not only good instructional practices but also for student learning when monitoring and observing teachers.

Researchers have long been interested in the impact of educational leaders on students' academic performance. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of 69 studies involving 2,802 schools over a 30-year time span and discovered a significant correlation between principals' leadership styles and students' academic success. Buttram (2008) noticed similar results in a mixed methods study designed to investigate effective leadership strategies in four elementary schools in Delaware, where schools were outperforming expectations on state exams. Results of Buttram's study identified eight strategies that the school leaders had implemented that

led to increased student performance: (a) setting grade-level goals for student performance on the state test, (b) building a common language and framework for instruction, (c) requiring quarterly assessments across all schools, (d) conducting quarterly promotion and review meetings with teachers, (e) expecting principals to conduct weekly walk-throughs in all classrooms, (f) supporting professional learning communities at each grade, (g) providing instructional interventions to support struggling students, and (h) scheduling a “Data Day” at the end of each school year. The four schools were different in the intensity or level of commitment to each strategy, and some schools invested more resources in one particular strategy than others, reflecting differences in the mix of personnel, students, priorities, and resources assigned to each school. Although the relative importance of each strategy could not be determined from the collected data, it is likely that the success of the schools was the result of a combination of strategies, not just one strategy (Buttram, 2008; Marzano et al., 2005). Buttram concluded that strong instructional leadership at the school sites was key to the success of these schools.

Instructional leadership is critical to student success (Yarbrough, 2011), and 21st-century schools require a new kind of leadership. Principals need to be able to demonstrate effective instructional leadership, be community leaders, and have a vision to increase student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Nason, 2011). As instructional leaders, principals must focus on curriculum and instruction, staff training, student data to enhance instruction, and goals and expected outcomes. As community leaders, principals must bring awareness of school performance to the community by

sharing leadership responsibilities with educators, community partners, and residents, and by advocating for school capacity building and resources. As visionary leaders, principals must exhibit energy, commitment, an entrepreneurial spirit, and values; possess the confidence that all children will exceed performance expectations; and inspire all stakeholders to believe in their vision (Balyer, 2014; Cray & Weiler, 2011; Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; Nason, 2011; Suber, 2012; Ward, 2013).

Effective Principal Leadership

Demonstrating effective principal leadership is imperative for principals to move their respective schools forward. If principals want to increase student performance, they must develop the right learning environment (Velasco et al., 2012). Principals should be able to share their educational visions, empower and encourage others to display their leadership skills, and support a climate and culture that foster students' academic achievement (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014).

Meyer (2012) surveyed six principals to identify five key areas of effective principal leadership that supported the success of schools in making gains with their populations of exceptional students. The first key area was the ability of the principals to create a strong school community by encouraging collaboration and teamwork through the establishment of a culture of collective responsibility and accountability, and the development and maintenance of cooperative relationships. Second was that the principals focused on the district's mission statement of inclusive practices. Third was that the principals applied their efforts to improving the culture of the campus and the environment. Fourth was that the principals placed the right staff in the right positions

and constantly observed and evaluated the staff. Fifth was that the principals designated time for collaboration in creating a master schedule that supported the data and the achievement of students in special education (Meyer, 2012).

Shared Vision

Warner (2010) stated that the role of the principal has changed drastically since 2000, becoming more complex and overloaded with responsibilities. Marzano et al. (2005) asserted that principals must have a clear mission and goals, promote a positive school climate, and provide opportunities for students to learn and organize the curriculum while simultaneously continuing to supervise and monitor teachers. According to Cray and Weiler (2011), principals also must focus on planning and facilitating professional development, inspiring and encouraging teachers to implement research-based innovations in the classroom, allocating resources to support efforts, and encouraging supportive relationships between staff and parents to ensure that students meet their academic goals. They also mentioned that principals must support and enable teacher success by formulating a shared vision, recognize student and teacher achievement, facilitate services to students directly and indirectly, observe classrooms, and promote student achievement.

Nason (2011) supported the belief that principals make a difference because they influence the educational programs, climate, and workplace norms that develop on every campus. As stewards, principals need to be able to broaden the purpose and direction of the schools; they are the ones to carry a vision and strengthen the drive of students to be successful (Suber, 2012). Consequently, principals are accountable for all school-based

decisions, are responsible for raising staff awareness of objectives that impact the whole school community, and are expected to provide guidance and leadership toward the achievement of goals (Balyer, 2014; Suber, 2012; Velasco et al., 2012).

Empowerment

One of the most important leadership skills that principals must possess is the ability to empower staff (Suber, 2012; Velasco et al., 2012). The educational environment is complex, so principals cannot be expected to be experts in all areas. Principal leadership is an essential element of the ways that schools are organized (Paredes Scribner et al., 2011; Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Ward, 2013). The effectiveness of schools is strongly associated with the effectiveness of the leadership, and schools that lack strong leadership have little chance of addressing the increasing number of challenges successfully (Cray & Weiler, 2011; Leone et al., 2009). The complexity of the role of the principal is demanding and dynamic. Grigsby, Schumacher, Decman, and Simieou (2010) delivered the message that the role of the principal has never been easy and that it is becoming more diverse and complex as the needs and demands of society change.

Principals are required to provide leadership that fosters constant school improvement (Cray & Weiler, 2011). The responsibility of ensuring that students achieve higher test scores rests largely on the shoulders of the leadership (Huff et al., 2011; Suber, 2012). As principals feel the pressure to improve students' academic achievement, the most effective ones lead by example while sharing their knowledge and instructional expertise with teachers (Lunenburg, 2010; Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Ward, 2013). Hoerr

(2008) acknowledged that teachers' "know-how" does not release principals from their responsibility as instructional leaders. Leadership is strengthened through the distribution of leadership responsibilities among staff members (Hoerr, 2008). District leaders are change agents and effective communicators, and they pave the instructional pathway by monitoring students' progress and supporting staff while encouraging an environment of collaboration (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Supovitz et al., 2009).

Suber (2012) conducted a mixed methods study with two principals from two elementary schools in South Carolina. The principals were from rural, high-poverty, high-performing, and low-SES schools. One school was a Title 1 award winner in a rural area; the other school was an urban school and a Gold and Silver winner for its performance on the Palmetto Achievement Test. The study was designed to investigate the behaviors and distinguishing attributes of high-poverty, high-performing schools in South Carolina. Results suggested that empowering teachers, building rapport with staff, and creating an atmosphere that fostered collaboration and shared responsibility positively impacted student achievement. Results also showed that other important leadership behaviors, such as creating a vision, setting high expectations, providing staff development that emphasized teaching and learning, and modeling professionalism, provided students with optimal learning opportunities (Suber, 2012).

Creating Climate and Culture

School culture permeates all aspects of the school setting and influences students' academic achievement (Velasco et al., 2012). According to Velasco et al. (2012), school culture refers to the shared experiences in and out of school that create a sense of

community, family, and team. Principals are tasked with addressing many challenges, including developing curriculum standards, establishing and achieving benchmark goals, setting programmatic requirements, and instituting school policies while taking directives from various sources (Shouppe & Pate, 2010). As leaders of their schools, principals also deal with multiple cultural dynamics within the community and school settings. These challenges have impacted the complexity of the principal's role in creating a positive climate and culture. It is the job of the principal to ensure that the climate and environment of the school campus and community foster a positive, encouraging, and stable atmosphere conducive to student learning (Shouppe & Pate, 2010).

The role of the principal is vital to the organization of the school as well as to the establishment and maintenance of a positive school climate (Suber, 2012; Velasco et al., 2012). In addition, school administrators are expected to establish high expectations for all stakeholders, supervise academic instruction, disseminate the curriculum, and monitor students' progress (Suber, 2012). Moreover, effective school principals are required to build and maintain positive relationships among school staff, students, and community members by fostering collaborative partnerships in the school (Suber, 2012).

Herrera (2010) conducted a study involving 4,842 districts comprising 9,893 principals and 56,354 teachers to examine the extent of engagement of principals in seven leadership practices. These practices had been investigated by previous researchers and had been identified as enhancing students' achievement and levels of engagement associated with the success of schools in meeting accountability measures. The leadership

practices examined by Herrera included culture, order, focus, resources, discipline, intellectual stimulation, and input.

Results indicated that the principals perceived that they had a high level of engagement in leadership practices connected with order, discipline, resources, and input, but a low level of engagement in culture, focus, and intellectual stimulation. The teachers perceived that their principals had a high level of engagement in intellectual stimulation and input, and a low level of engagement in culture, order, discipline, resources, and focus. Logistic regression analyses suggested that the principals' fulfillment of the leadership responsibilities, both from the principals' and the teachers' perspectives, can be used to predict the likelihood that schools will meet state accountability measures. From the principals' perspectives, resources, focus, and culture were statistically significant predictors of school success. Conversely, the teachers' perspectives indicated that resources and culture were statistically significant predictors of school success (Herrera, 2010).

According to Herrera (2010), no principal can acquire all of the knowledge and skills necessary to concentrate successfully on all aspects of the school. Principals' lack of focus could potentially impact student growth and school improvement. School leaders need to be able to address areas of weakness in their schools and focus on the needs of students, as well as allot the time necessary to review and share data with teachers in an effort to meet the needs of all students (Herrera, 2010).

Sergiovanni (2009) collected survey data to obtain teachers' opinions about principals' most important tasks. Results identified the most important role as providing a

safe and organized school environment while encouraging teachers and students to do their best. The teachers also indicated that building relationships with community partners, getting to know all of the students, and creating a community of cooperation were other essential skills that principals must possess (Sergiovanni, 2009).

Shouppe and Pate (2010) conducted a study with 370 teachers from 10 middle schools in Georgia. The teachers completed a 54-item survey designed to gather data related to the teachers' perceptions of the principals' leadership techniques, school environment, and student performance. Results revealed that school leadership style and school environment had either no significant or a weak correlation with student performance (Shouppe & Pate, 2010).

Gaines (2011) conducted a quantitative study with 336 teachers and principals to determine the possible existence of a relationship between elementary principals' leadership styles and school climate in an urban school district in the southeastern region of the United States. Gaines found that principal leadership styles played an important role in establishing the school climate and culture. More importantly, the results also indicated that the collaborative interactions between principals and teachers to achieve a common goal promote a more stable and positive learning environment.

Student Achievement

The key role of principals as instructional leaders is to provide students with a positive learning environment (Brockmeier et al., 2013; Huff et al., 2011; Lunenburg, 2010). The Wallace Foundation (2012) found that the principal is the most important person on campus and is responsible for student performance. In the first decade of the

21st century, the foundation conducted research to identify effective strategies to support principals becoming the change agents for student growth. Results identified five specific tasks that instructional leaders employed to build a climate that strives to achieve academic success. The first task involved establishing the belief and vision that all students can have academic success. Second, the classroom environment was a positive learning environment where students were given multiple opportunities to learn. Third, collaborative leadership and teamwork were established and encouraged. Next, the principal provided teachers with feedback about their instructional practices through observation and communication. Finally, data collection and monitoring progress drove schools' instructional improvement (Wallace Foundation, 2012).

Suber (2012) added to the Wallace Foundation (2012) study by asserting that principals must establish a climate of learning by setting and sharing goals that define high expectations for students. Principals also must offer professional development opportunities that align with teachers' needs and school goals. Research on the impact of principals on students' achievement has indicated that school leaders who are knowledgeable and actively engaged in the instructional programs achieve higher student test scores than principals who place less emphasis on the instruction (Suber, 2012).

Brockmeier et al. (2013) conducted an ex post facto correlational and group comparison study with 1,023 elementary school principals from Georgia. The researchers sought to determine whether the number of years of principal practice in education, principal permanent status, and principal constancy in public education affected elementary school students' achievement. The researchers also wanted to know whether

there were differences in the level of principal practice in education, the level of principal permanent status, and the level of principal constancy in relation to elementary students' achievement. Results showed that the longer the individuals had been principals, the greater was students' performance. Additional results revealed that the educational experience of principals had less of an impact on student performance than did principals' permanent status and principals' constancy. Brockmeier et al. concluded that when working toward improving or maintaining student achievement, principals should establish thorough plans as well as empower and develop staff. When the district office seeks to hire principals to operate schools, it is imperative to hire principals who will support the educational system for a period of time because of its significant impact on students' achievement (Brockmeier et al., 2013).

Rogers (2011) conducted a study to gain the perceptions of rural school principals about the use of data and their impact on students' academic achievement. Rogers used a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to study the principals' perceptions at a single point in time. The target population comprised principals of rural schools across Texas with less than 1,500 students in Kindergarten to Grade 12.

Results revealed that the principals consistently used data to improve students' achievement and design professional development sessions (Rogers, 2011). In addition, the principals demonstrated the necessary data analysis skills and knowledge to impact students' academic achievement. Although the majority of principals stated that they had a data-driven system in place and used data to make decisions to increase students' achievement, a discrepancy clearly existed between perception and reality because there

was a lack of knowledge and ability to analyze data and implement change. In contrast to the principals' responses on the rating scale, the open-ended responses indicated that the principals lacked adequate familiarity and understanding of data-driven decision making (Rogers, 2011). In order for principals to successfully and proficiently impact student achievement, persons involved in making decisions regarding the implementation process must have the knowledge and skills necessary to analyze current data in a collaborative manner and to understand how to implement instructional changes based on the available data (Rogers, 2011).

Another study that supported the relationship between principals' leadership behaviors and student achievement was conducted by Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003). They examined 30 years of research on the effects of leadership behaviors on student achievement. Waters et al. identified multiple leadership tasks that were significantly linked to student achievement. Results indicated that as leadership behaviors improved, so, too, did students' achievement. The positive or negative impact on students' academic achievement was based on whether the focus of change was a first-order change or a second-order change. First-order change was defined as an incremental, a marginal, or a focused change consistent with prevailing norms. Second-order change was defined as a break from the past that conflicted with prevailing norms, was emerging or unfocused, and required new knowledge and skills to implement. The principals understood that when change is instituted, a first-order change for one person could mean a second-order change for another.

Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) conducted a dimensional analysis on the impact of leadership on students' academic achievement. The meta-analysis involved 27 studies published between 1978 and 2006. The leadership dimension that was the most strongly associated with positive student outcomes was teacher learning and development. Leaders involved in teaching and learning have a deep understanding of what is required to promote staff to improve overall student achievement. The dimensional analysis yielded five areas deemed relevant to support effective leadership and student growth: (a) ascertaining objectives and expectations from everyone with clarity, (b) ensuring that classroom curriculum and instruction are aligned with teaching objectives, (c) evaluating teaching objectives by planning and coordinating classroom visits with formative and summative feedback, (d) involving teachers in professional training, and (e) establishing guidelines for protecting classroom instruction.

Methodologies

The reviewed studies followed qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods designs. Two examples of qualitative research on the problem were the studies conducted by Cook (2011) and Yarbrough (2011). Cook examined the construct of leadership styles as perceived by the participating principals and teachers. This qualitative study focused on 10 elementary schools in the south suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. Five of the elementary schools had achieved AYP for 3 consecutive years, but the other five had not. The selected schools were identified according to their SES. The principal and three teachers from each of the 10 schools were asked 11 open-ended interview questions designed to gather information about perceived leadership styles and practices in their current school.

Similar to this study, the criterion for participant selection was the school's success in achieving AYP.

Yarbrough (2011) also conducted a qualitative study on the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding the leadership behaviors essential to the success of school principals. Yarbrough used two data sources at each school level (elementary, middle, and high school). Six principals and six teachers, two from each level representing the same schools, were interviewed. The methodology of the current study reflected a similar data collection strategy.

Nason (2011) and Parsons (2008) examined the problem using quantitative methodologies and employing the Instructional Leadership Behaviors of Principals Survey. Parsons used the 21-question survey to obtain data from principals and teachers at the high school level; Nason focused on middle school and high school principals. Parsons' primary purpose was to identify possible differences in the leadership behaviors of principals at traditional comprehensive high schools and those of high schools that had restructured into small learning communities. Nason's primary purpose was to identify the relationship between principal-perceived instructional leadership practices and student achievement. Both researchers looked at the instructional leadership behaviors of principals.

Summary and Conclusions

K–12 schools in the United States are faced with numerous critical challenges as the role of the principal continues to shift from that of school manager to instructional leader. School principals used to perform a variety of managerial tasks, not daily

instructional leadership duties. However, contemporary principals are required to focus on state assessments, data-driven decision making, accountability, professional development, and tasks that focus on students' academic achievement.

The review of the literature began with a discussion of leadership theories. The discussion then focused on the importance of instructional leadership related to principals as instructional leaders and their impact on a shared vision, empowerment, climate and culture, and students' achievement. Consequently, principals who exhibit strong leadership behaviors are able to move schools forward and improve students' academic achievement.

Principals are the driving force behind the effective implementation of standards that hold educators accountable for sustainable improvement. Educational leaders are responsible for setting the core values of schools and determining through focused actions what is essential to promote students' academic success. Principals who have plans in place can maximize the opportunities to improve students' achievement.

Successful school leaders have a vision of what their schools should be and a clear understanding of curriculum and instruction. Effective educational leaders communicate clearly to all stakeholders and build the capacity to work toward shared goals to meet the academic and learning needs of all students. School leaders who provide opportunities for meaningful staff development to sustain the dedication and commitment to the school's vision also maximize students' opportunities for success.

In Section 3, I will focus on the methodology that I used to identify patterns in the teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership skills and the principals' perceptions

of their own leadership practices in high-achieving elementary schools. The Setting and Sample section will provide information about and the participants, their schools, and the study sites. The Instrumentation section will detail the interview and focus group questions. Finally, I will discuss the data collection that defines the RQs and provide details of the data analysis.

Section 3: Research Method

The problem addressed in this study was the inability of certain schools in a rural school district in Florida (District P) to achieve AYP, as measured by the NCLB (see FLDOE, 2011). I made a comparison to District S, which had achieved AYP. This failure to meet AYP had occurred in spite of District P's commitment to (a) maintain a stable environment at the schools by keeping the school administrative team consistent and (b) provide additional resources for schools to implement programs and personnel to support targeted subgroups in the schools (FLDOE, 2011).

The purpose of the case study was to identify patterns in the teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership skills and the principals' perceptions of their own leadership practices in three high-achieving elementary schools in District S, which is demographically similar to District P, where achievement is lower. I used a qualitative design to give the participants the opportunity to express what they perceived as essential leadership skills of principals to promote student achievement. I collected data from individual, in-depth interviews with the principals and focus groups with the teachers to obtain the perceptions of the participants and gain knowledge about certain experiences of individuals or groups (see Creswell, 2009; Hays & Singh, 2012). Data from both sources were integrated and analyzed to identify patterns and themes.

I addressed the following three RQs in this study:

1. What are the perceptions of principals regarding the influence of their leadership skills on student achievement?

2. What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the influence of their principals' leadership skills on student achievement?
3. How are teachers' perceptions regarding principal leadership skills and principals' perceptions regarding their own leadership skills similar and dissimilar?

This section will also include a discussion of the qualitative research design, descriptions of the setting and sample, a justification of the research design, an in-depth review of the qualitative design, and a review of the data collection and analysis protocols.

Research Design and Rationale

I chose a qualitative case study design for this study because it allowed me to search for and gather data by exploring the research setting to obtain a comprehensive understanding about how the schools operated and how the participants in the context perceived them. According to Yin (2009), case studies are the preferred method when researchers ask *how* or *why* questions. Yin also stated that a case study design is appropriate when researchers have very little power over procedures and/or the focus is a naturally occurring phenomenon. Qualitative research is what separates case study from other types of social science research. I used this design to understand the perceptions of the principals and the teachers on the leadership skills of principals that supported students' academic achievement in the high-achieving District S.

Creswell (2009) defined qualitative research as a method of investigating and understanding the meaning of experiences, problems, or issues in a natural setting from the perspective of the participants. Qualitative studies are conducted when researchers are

seeking more personal and in-depth details that cannot be obtained through quantitative methods (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research also is conducted when little is known about certain experiences of individuals or groups (Creswell, 2009). Typically, qualitative research involves asking open-ended questions to study participants in their environment and analyses involve searching for patterns and themes in the data (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research is the preferred model when researchers are studying topics and are seeking greater knowledge from particular groups, individuals, or organizations (Creswell, 2009).

Creswell (2007) described narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study as the common qualitative approaches used by researchers. I considered each of these five qualitative approaches but decided the case study design was the most appropriate to examine the topic under investigation. Because the purpose of this study was to identify patterns in the teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership skills and the principals' perceptions of their own leadership practices in three high-achieving elementary schools, I did not use a narrative research design because its purpose is to tell a story through written or spoken word, usually in the form of a biography or life history (see Hays & Singh, 2012). A grounded theory approach was not appropriate because this approach is used to generate a theory (see Creswell, 2007; Hays & Singh, 2012). Likewise, an ethnographic approach was not appropriate because it is used when researchers want to study groups that share ethnicity, background, and culture (see Hays & Singh, 2012). I did not select a quantitative method because I wanted to focus on the participants' perceptions, and statistically analyzable quantitative data

involve relationships between and among variables. I also rejected a mixed methods approach and focused only on the participants' perceptions.

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher involved intensive participation in this study. Qualitative researchers assemble data themselves by examining documents and conducting surveys, observations, focus groups, and interviews (Creswell, 2007). As the researcher and primary data collection instrument, I was careful not to let biases resulting from personal values, ethics, and assumptions influence the study (see Creswell, 2007). I made the purpose for doing this study fully known to each principal and teacher. In addition, I established a good relationship with the participants by defining the RQs; determining the appropriate strategy for gathering and analyzing the data; and preparing an in-depth, rich, detailed, and unbiased narrative.

Past and Present Roles and Relationships

At the time of the study, I was the assistant superintendent of District P, where a number of schools had been experiencing difficulty achieving and maintaining AYP. I had been in the district for 11 years and had been the assistant superintendent for 6 years, having previously served as the interim superintendent for 7 months as the district sought to fill the superintendent position. As the assistant superintendent, I provided support to principals at the primary and secondary levels. The curriculum department and I provided strategies to principals and teachers as the district executed the state and district initiatives. Prior to moving to District P, I served as a teacher, the dean of students at a

high school, and the assistant principal and principal in a school district in northcentral Florida. Currently, I am serving as principal at a school in North Florida.

Researcher-Participant Relationship

As a qualitative researcher, I developed a relationship with the participants to gather data pertinent to the topic being studied. Researchers are responsible for communicating to participants the plans and processes of the study as well as allowing the participants to become familiar and comfortable with the researcher (Hays & Singh, 2012). Qualitative researchers also must respect the rights of the participants, address their needs, and ensure confidentiality (Creswell, 2007; Hays & Singh, 2012). My position in District P at the time of the study was a position of support and supervision. I had no direct working relationship and/or supervisory capacity with the teachers and principals in the study district (District S). The participants reported only to the superintendent of District S.

I made every effort to ensure that the privacy and confidentiality rights of all participants were protected at all times. Data from the interviews and focus groups were used only for the purpose of this study. I kept all documents, including letters of consent, focus group transcriptions, interview transcriptions, and digital recordings, in a locked file cabinet in my office.

Methodology

Participant Selection

The participants were three principals and 12 elementary teachers from three elementary schools in District S. The principals had been at their respective school sites

and had achieved AYP for at least 2 successive years. The 12 teachers had taught at the same schools for the same amount of time. Creswell (2007) argued that when fewer cases and individuals are studied, researchers can obtain more depth and knowledge. Therefore, the sample was small to guarantee a greater degree of depth and gain more meaningful perceptions.

I purposefully selected the principals because their schools had made AYP for 2 or more consecutive years. The teachers were selected from the same three elementary schools, with the goal of having four teachers from each school participate in the focus groups. The objective was a total of 12 teachers, with six participating in the primary focus group and six participating in the intermediate teacher focus group. Each principal submitted a list of teachers of primary grades and a list of teachers of intermediate grades. I selected two teachers from the primary list and two teachers from the intermediate list to obtain a total of four teachers per school. This process was repeated for all three elementary schools, generating 12 teacher participants.

Ethical Protection

I submitted the study to Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and received approval (IRB Approval #09-02-15-0059549) prior to initiating contact with any of the participants or collecting any data. Ensuring the security of the individuals who volunteered to join the study was crucial to the ethical conduct of the research. All research participants should expect their rights to privacy and confidentiality to be protected.

I obtained a letter of cooperation from the superintendent's office of the participating study school district (District S). Once permission was granted, I selected the participants from a list of teachers from each school. The selected participants' names were not used on any data-gathering tools or saved in any password-protected folder on my computer. Next, to request their participation in the study, I e-mailed a cover letter and consent form to three principals and 12 teachers of students in Kindergarten to Grade 5. I made contact with each participant via e-mail and scheduled individual meetings before the interviews and focus groups to gain their consent. This conversation allowed me to build rapport with the participants prior to conducting the interviews and focus groups (see Hays & Singh, 2012).

Upon receiving their signed consent, I gave the principals instructions and a schedule of days to complete the interview, along with a makeup schedule if necessary. Participants were informed of their right to confidentiality and that their participation was voluntary. Participants also were informed that the interviews and focus groups would be digitally recorded and transcribed. They were reminded that all information would remain confidential and that they would receive copies of their own transcriptions for review. Participants also had the right to withdraw from the study for any reason at any time without penalty.

Study Site

The context of this study was a high-achieving rural Florida school district (District S) that is demographically similar to District P, a neighboring district with low-achieving schools. District S has 22 schools serving approximately 15,000 students. The

district has four high schools (Grades 9–12), four middle schools (Grades 6–8), 11 elementary schools (K–Grade 5), two schools serving students in Grades 6 to 12, one school serving students in Pre-K to Grade 12, and a technical institute serving students in Grades 9 to 12. Of the 22 schools in District S, seven of the elementary schools and three of the middle schools are Title I schools. Title I schools receive federal funding to provide assistance to schools with high numbers or high percentages of students in the lower SES to ensure that all students are granted the same educational opportunities (USDOE, 2010).

The criterion for selecting the three elementary schools in District S was the consistent ability to achieve AYP over 2 consecutive years. The purposive sample comprised three principals and 12 K–Grade 5 teachers (see Hays & Singh, 2012). Each principal was serving as the campus administrator and had been in the leadership position for at least 2 years. I obtained qualitative data from the teachers' responses to the focus group questions and the principals' responses to the interview questions.

Schools in District S that made AYP consecutively for 2 or more years over the 5 year span are indicated in Table 4. During the 2011–2012 school year, the state transitioned to a new accountability system that had more rigorous requirements that impacted how the schools were graded (FLDOE, 2012). Consequently, the three study sites did not meet the AYP requirements for the 2011–2012 or 2012–2013 school years. However, for the 2011–2012 school year, 3 of the 11 elementary schools in District S met the requirements in one subject area, and for the 2012–2013 school year, seven schools

met the requirements in one or all areas. In District P, no elementary schools met the requirements for the 2011–2012 and 2012–2013 school years.

Table 4

Elementary Schools in District S Making AYP Consecutively for 2 or More Years

School	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
School S1		Y	Y		
School S2	Y	Y			
School S3		Y	Y		

Note. Y indicates that AYP was met for the study school that school year.

Table 5 illustrates the 5-year span of FLDOE school grade performance at the three elementary schools in District S that were the research sites.

Table 5

District S School Grades From the FLDOE for the Elementary Study Sites

School	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
School S1	579 (A)	617 (A)	669 (A)	622 (A)	556 (A)
School S2	610 (A)	579 (A)	594 (A)	554 (A)	540 (A)
School S3	640 (A)	603 (A)	578 (A)	546 (A)	495 (B)

Note. FLDOE school grade: A = at least 525 points, B = 495-524 points, C = 435-494 points, D = 395-434 points, F = < 395 points.

The district school grades for District S and District P are identified in Table 6. District S maintained the letter grade of A. District P's grade fluctuated from A to C.

Table 6

District S and District P Grades From the FLDOE

District	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
District S	A	A	A	A	A
District P	B	A	B	C	C

Note. FLDOE school grade: A = at least 525 points, B = 495-524 points, C = 435-494 points, D = 395-434 points, F = < 395 points. District S = Study site and District P = Local problem

The school performance data of the District S elementary schools were identified in Table 2 in Section 1. The table displayed the grades received by all elementary schools

in District S and District P. Eleven elementary schools in District S received grades of A and B, and nine elementary schools in District P received grades of A to F over the 5-year span.

The student population in District S was predominately European American, with an increasing percentage of students identified as economically disadvantaged (see Table 7). It also should be noted that although the population of ELLs remained stable over the 5 years, the percentage of identified students with disabilities decreased.

Table 7

Demographic Percentages for District S: 2008-2013

Demographic	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
European American	84	82	82	82	82
African American	5	5	5	5	5
Hispanic American	5	7	7	7	7
Asian American	2	2	2	2	2
American Indian	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.4
Two or more races	5	4	4	4	4
Students with disabilities	16	15	14	13	12
Economically disadvantaged	47	52	55	59	63
ELLs	1	2	2	1	1
Female	48	48	48	48	49
Male	52	52	52	52	52

Note. Data obtained from the FLDOE

The demographics of District P are represented in Table 8. Similar to District S, District P was predominantly European American, although the Hispanic American population was approximately double that of District S. The number of students identified as economically disadvantaged was increasing, but the number of students with disabilities was decreasing. These data mirrored those of District S.

Table 8

Demographic Percentages for District P: 2008-2013

Demographic	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
European American	73	73	73	72	71
African American	7	7	7	7	7
Hispanic American	13	14	15	15	16
Asian American	1	2	2	2	2
American Indian	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4
Two or more races	5	3	3	3	4
Students with disabilities	14	15	14	12	11
Economically disadvantaged	51	55	56	58	60
ELLs	3	3	4	4	4
Female	49	49	49	49	49
Male	51	51	51	51	51

Note. Data obtained from the FLDOE

The data in Table 9 reflect the demographics of the elementary schools in District S elementary schools over the 5-year span. These data reflected an increase in the number of economically disadvantaged students and a decrease in the number of ELLs. The data also reflected a decrease in the number of students with disabilities.

Table 9

Demographic Percentages for District S Elementary Schools: 2008-2013

Demographic	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
European American	82.3	80.3	80.5	81.6	81.5
African American	4.2	4.9	4.7	4	3.7
Hispanic American	5.4	7.9	8.5	8	8
Asian American	1.7	1.9	1.9	1.8	0.9
Others	6.2	4.9	4.4	4.5	3.4
Students with disabilities	15.8	15.3	13.9	12.1	11.1
Economically disadvantaged	53.7	59	62.7	65.5	69.6
ELLs	1.6	2.8	2.5	2.1	1
Female	48.4	49.7	48.6	48.9	48.8
Male	51.5	50.6	51.4	51.1	51.2
Total enrollment	7,075	7,088	6,927	6,969	6,977

Note. Data obtained from the FLDOE

The data in Table 10 reflect the demographics of the elementary schools in District P during the 5-year span. These data reflected a small but steady increase in the

number of African American, Hispanic American, and Asian American students. A comparison of Tables 9 and 10 indicated that more than 50% of the student population in both districts was economically disadvantaged.

Table 10

Demographic Percentages for District P Elementary Schools: 2008-2013

Demographic	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
White	72.6	72.3	71	69.5	68.4
Black	7.4	7.8	8	8.2	8.5
Hispanic	3.1	13.6	15.2	15.8	16
Asian	1.2	1.4	1.6	1.5	2.3
Others	5.6	0.4	5	4.9	4.7
Students with disabilities	15	15.7	15.1	13	12
Economically disadvantaged	58.2	63	64	66.2	64.5
ELLs	4.5	3.8	4	4.5	4
Female	49.9	49.3	49	49	50.6
Male	50	50.6	50.7	51	49.4
Total enrollment	7,549	7,494	7,383	6,522	6,331

Note. Data obtained from the FLDOE

Data Collection

I collected the data from two discrete focus groups with the teachers and interviews with the three principals in an attempt to confirm, cross-validate, or corroborate the findings within a single study. Data were gathered sequentially, meaning that I collected data from the principals' interviews first and then from the teachers' focus groups. All participants were reminded that their responses and any other shared information would remain confidential and would be used only for the sole purpose of this study. Each principal was interviewed privately. The interviews followed a face-to-face format. I asked eight questions, and each interview lasted approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes. The focus group discussions lasted for approximately 1 hour. I asked five

questions. Each interview and focus group was digitally recorded, and I took written notes as they were occurring.

Qualitative research provided a way to accumulate a wealth of descriptive information difficult to collect through quantitative survey methods. Conducting interviews and focus groups gave me the opportunity to ask probing and follow-up questions that allowed the participants to explain or reflect on their responses (Creswell, 2009; Hays & Singh, 2012). Each conversation was different and gave me the opportunity to discover the depth of each participant's knowledge (Hays & Singh, 2012). The information gathered through conversations provided the basis for understanding and analysis (Hays & Singh, 2012). According to Hays and Singh (2012), interviews are used to uncover how participants interpret their world. Consistent with this view, Janesick (2004) defined interviewing as several individuals collaborating and sharing their views about a particular subject.

I decided to interview the three principals individually because RQ1 focused specifically on the principals' perceptions of their own leadership skills. I chose primary and intermediate focus groups to gather data from the teachers to answer RQ2. Focus groups provide a comfortable setting that allows study individuals to have an open group discussion about a particular topic (Barbour, 2007; Hays & Singh, 2012). Focus groups can be useful in exploring and examining the participants' thought processes about issues of significance without the pressure or need to make decisions and/or reach agreement (Barbour, 2007; Hays & Singh, 2012). According to Hays and Singh (2012), the main

reason for using a focus group is to gain insight from individuals with similar experiences and to interpret their perceptions related to the issue being investigated.

In this study, the teachers in each focus group had similar teaching responsibilities but worked under different principals. The focus group was valuable because the participants could interact with each other, thus allowing similarities and differences in their perceptions and experiences to enhance the data collected. Individual interviews with the teachers would not have provided this same opportunity (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Although focus groups can be effective, focus groups also can make the participants uneasy and reluctant to participate in the discussion if the focus group is not organized properly in a comfortable setting (Hays & Singh, 2012). I minimized this concern because I had experience facilitating and conducting groups. My experience as a classroom teacher, principal, and district administrator supported my understanding of working with group dynamics.

I asked open-ended questions during the interviews with the three principals that allowed me to gather their individual comments and gain insight into how they made sense of their own instructional leadership styles and practices. The interview process was a three-part structure (Hays & Singh, 2012) comprising three phases. Phase 1 lasted 15 minutes and focused on the participants' personal backgrounds. Phase 2 also lasted 15 minutes and focused on the participants' educational careers. Phase 3 lasted 1 hour and focused on their answering the interview questions related to instructional leadership and practices. The private interviews were conducted in settings that the participants selected. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

The focus group questions provided insight into the teachers' perceptions of the principals' leadership styles and practices. Data from the focus groups was used to address RQ2 and RQ3. The data collection process started by establishing an atmosphere in which the participants felt comfortable to speak openly and honestly. During the focus groups, I explained the purpose of the qualitative study and purpose of each focus group as a part of the research design, set the agenda for the focus group sessions, discussed the roles of the focus group members, reiterated the participants' rights and responsibilities, and developed ground rules for behavior during the focus group sessions.

Each participant in the primary and intermediate focus group received the five focus group questions. I asked the members of each focus group the questions and then waited for their responses. I also asked probing questions to encourage participation and solicit additional, more in-depth information as needed. When the participants responded to the questions, I took notes and asked clarifying questions. I documented the participants' responses to the questions with codes to identify the responses. I also took notes on the comments by the participants and recorded the focus group sessions. Each focus group was approximately 1-hour long. The notes and audio recordings were transcribed immediately to decrease errors in the transcription process. After I had transcribed the notes and audio recordings, I gave the participants the opportunity to review the transcriptions to ensure that I had captured their thoughts and contributions accurately (Barbour, 2007; Hays & Singh, 2012). The summation of data was used to examine the phenomenon of principals' leadership skills and their influence on student

achievement as perceived by the teachers and principals of the same three elementary schools making AYP in District S, a rural school district in Florida.

Permission to conduct research in a rural school district in Florida was granted by the superintendent. Consent forms were signed by participating principals and teachers prior to data collection. Data collection occurred during the 2015-2016 school year.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was a way to make sense of the data, communicate the findings in the form of themes and patterns, and formulate interpretations (Creswell, 2007). Shortly after the conclusion of each interview and focus group, I typed up the written notes and transcribed the digital recordings from each session (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Hays & Singh, 2012). I then e-mailed the participants a copy of their interview and the focus groups a copy of their discussion through e-mail to request that they review the accuracy of the transcriptions. The participants reviewed their transcriptions electronically, and after reviewing them, the participants e-mailed to inform me that they had not found any discrepancies and that the transcriptions accurately reflected their statements. Next, I reviewed the data that I had collected from the interviews and focus groups. I then reviewed the data several times as I categorized them into themes and patterns to gain knowledge about the participants' perceptions. After I analyzed the data into themes and patterns, member check was used again with the participants. I e-mailed the participants to request that they review the findings of themes and patterns from the data analyzed to check for accuracy and consistency. Member checking ensured the accuracy of the transcriptions and analyzed data. I used a descriptive code approach to code the text data

as a single word, a sentence, or a short phrase that captured the participants' responses. In vivo coding was used to capture the actual language of the participants and to ensure accuracy of the statements while remaining true to their intended meaning (Saldana, 2009).

The third step involved organizing the coded data into categories. I coded the data obtained from each interview and focus group to look for patterns and the emergence of themes. During the fourth step, themes and patterns from the interviews with the principals, the primary teachers' focus group, and the intermediate teachers' focus group were discussed in a narrative that included a comparison of the data collected from all interviews and focus groups. A comprehensive list outlined the themes and patterns identified during the coding procedure. The final step involved interpreting the information and preparing a detailed summary of the findings.

Trustworthiness

Transactional validity refers to the degree to which researchers capture the realities of their study participants (Hays & Singh, 2012). A qualitative research design allows researchers to capture the perceptions of individuals based on their perspectives (Hays & Singh, 2012). In a qualitative study, strict standards must be followed, data collection methods must be consistent, and objectivity must be sustained (Miller & Fredericks, 2010). In this study, collecting the data from principals and teachers strengthened and added validity to the findings. Synthesizing the three data sources gave me a deeper understanding of the perceptions of the principals and the teachers about the

leadership skills of the principals that supported students' academic achievement (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Hays & Singh, 2012).

To minimize researcher bias in the design of the interview and focus group protocols, I submitted the questions to a panel of experts who provided feedback about the questions. The four individuals on the panel held the positions of principal, curriculum supervisor, manager of professional development, and director of exceptional student education, respectively, in my local school district. The purpose of the panel was to determine whether the principals and teachers would understand the questions and concepts used in the instrument, would understand the directions, and would find the questions to be representative of their experiences as instructional leaders. The panel members suggested revising and clarifying the interview and focus group questions. The panel allowed me to ascertain whether the interview and focus group questions would elicit the data necessary to address the RQs.

Trustworthiness of the findings was verified through member checking (Creswell, 2009; Hays & Singh, 2012). This process of checking allowed all of the participants to verify the accuracy of their transcriptions and review the preliminary analysis of the data. In each case, member checking gave the participants the opportunity to make corrections and/or to clarify their initial responses.

The responses to the interview questions were transcribed as soon as possible after the interviews and were submitted to the participants to verify their accuracy. The interviewed principals received a member check form to verify the transcribed narratives. Likewise, the teachers who participated in the focus groups received a member check

form to verify the transcription of the entire group's discussion. Having the participants review the transcriptions immediately after the interviews and the focus groups ensured the accuracy of the transcribed documents, allowed them to make any corrections, and decreased recall errors (Barbour, 2007; Hays & Singh, 2012). Member checking was used again after the data were analyzed. I contacted the participants through e-mail to request that they review the findings for accuracy and consistency before including them in the final report of the study.

Ethical Procedures

All research guidelines and ethical considerations were strictly enforced as presented through Walden University's IRB. Every effort was made to ensure that the rights of the participants were protected at all times. I provided the interview participants with assurances of confidentiality and that I would be using pseudonyms in the final study. Although the identities of the participants in the focus groups were known to each other, they were encouraged to maintain the confidentiality of each other's responses. No personal or school identifiers were associated with this study. Each participant's data were given a numeric code not associated with any other identifiers. Data from the interviews and focus groups were kept in a locked file cabinet and will be destroyed 5 years after publication of this study. I used all data solely for the purpose of this study.

Summary

The problem addressed in the study was the inability of certain schools within District P, a rural school district in Florida, to achieve AYP in comparison to District S, a neighboring rural school district where students have consistently made AYP as

measured by NCLB (FLDOE, 2011). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify patterns in the teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership skills and the principals' perceptions of their own leadership practices related to students' academic achievement in three high-achieving elementary schools in District S. I collected data for this qualitative case study from interviews with the principals and focus groups with primary and intermediate teachers. I synthesized the data from the two focus groups of teachers with data from the three principal interviews to identify patterns, categories, and themes to address the three RQs. In Section 4 I will provide an exploration of how data were organized, analyzed, and interpreted into emergent themes. In Section 5, I will discuss a summary of the findings, recommendations for action, recommendations for further study, and implications for social change.

Section 4: Results

The problem I addressed with this case study was the inability of certain schools in a rural school district in Florida (i.e., District P) to achieve AYP in comparison to a neighboring rural school district (District S) where students had consistently made AYP, as measured by the NCLB (see FLDOE, 2011). In this study, I employed a case study design, which is recommended when researchers are attempting to describe the perceptions of the participants (Creswell, 2009). The purpose of this study was to find patterns in the teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership skills and the principals' perceptions of their own leadership practices in three high-achieving elementary schools in District S that was demographically similar to District P, where achievement was lower. I received permission to conduct the study from the superintendent of schools in District S in Florida and from Walden University's IRB.

Setting

In this study, I documented the perceptions of leadership skills that promoted student achievement. The setting of this study was a high-achieving rural school district in Florida. The elementary schools in the district were successful in making AYP in student performance. I provided insight into the practices of principals and teachers at three elementary schools and the teachers' perceptions about the principals' leadership skills in facilitating student achievement by interviewing three elementary school principals and holding two focus groups of 12 teachers total, six participating in the primary focus group and six participating in the intermediate focus group.

Data Collection

After speaking with the principals and the teachers, I obtained their signed consent forms agreeing to join the study as participants. I collected my data from individual interviews with three principals and two focus groups with 12 teachers total from District S. Six teachers represented the primary group (Grades K–2), and six teachers represented the intermediate group (Grades 3–5). I collected the data consecutively, meaning that I collected data from three principals during their interviews by asking them eight questions and from the 12 teachers in the focus groups by asking them five questions. Each principal interview was conducted in person and lasted for approximately 1.5 hours. Each focus group was approximately 1-hour long. I digitally recorded the interviews and focus groups, and I took notes on the conversations as they occurred.

Data Analysis

Following each interview and each focus group session, I typed up my written notes and transcribed the digital recordings (see Creswell, 2007, 2009; Hays & Singh, 2012). I then e-mailed the participants a copy of their interview and the focus groups a copy of their discussion to request that they review the accuracy of the transcriptions. The participants reviewed their transcriptions electronically, and after reviewing them, e-mailed to inform me that they had not found any discrepancies and that the transcriptions accurately reflected their statements. Next, I reviewed the data that I had collected from the interviews and focus groups. I used a descriptive code approach to code the text data as a single word, a sentence, or a short phrase that captured the participants' responses. In

Vivo coding was used to capture the actual language of the participants and to ensure accuracy of the statements while remaining true to their intended meaning (see Saldana, 2009). I then organized the coded data into categories to find emergent themes and patterns. After I analyzed the data and coded them into themes and patterns, I performed another round of member checking with the participants. I e-mailed the participants to request that they review the themes and patterns I derived from my analysis of the data to check for accuracy and consistency.

In the next step, I compared the themes and patterns that emerged from the principals' interviews and the two focus groups. Data from the interviews addressed RQ1 (What are the perceptions of principals regarding the influence of their leadership skills on student achievement?), data from the focus groups addressed RQ2 (What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the influence of their principals' leadership skills on student achievement?), and combined data from both the interviews and the focus groups addressed RQ3 (How are teachers' perceptions regarding principal leadership skills and principals' perceptions regarding their own leadership skills similar and dissimilar?).

Results

The findings for this study are based on my analysis of the data. The data were gathered from the interviews and focus groups. The principals and teachers gave their perceptions of the leadership skills that promote student performance.

Research Question 1

All three principals (P1, P2, and P3) expressed similar responses to Interview Questions 2, 3, and 7 that answered RQ1. Four themes emerged from the principals'

responses: instructional leadership, hands-on leadership, communication and collaboration, and management by visibility. The themes are discussed in detail below.

Theme 1: Instructional leadership. All three principals identified instructional leaders as those who focus on building a society of learners, believe in their students, create a vision, establish shared leadership, focus on leading a learning community, review data, and monitor curriculum and instruction in the classroom. P2 stated, “Being the instructional leader, I am visible to the students and parents and because of this I can be found anywhere on campus.” Expanding on this concept, P3 said, “I am in the classrooms every day, when it comes to classroom instruction I must visit the classrooms daily to make sure instruction is moving forward.” P1 summarized by saying, “I spend most of my time in the classroom.” P3 also added to P1’s statement by noting, “My most important job is to keep the school safe and my second most important job is that of being the instructional leader, where I visit classrooms daily and support teachers and student learning.” P1 added, “As the instructional leader, I take teachers’ concerns and research them because I am the voice for the teachers.”

The principals’ responses suggested that several activities that they performed were an important part of their daily routine in promoting student performance. These activities consisted of: visiting classrooms daily; conducting walkthroughs; reviewing student data; and inspecting what they expected, meaning that they expected teachers to be teaching the standards to all students in the classroom. Two of these activities, namely, visiting classrooms daily and inspecting what they expected, were mentioned by the participants in the study.

All three principals stressed the importance of visiting classrooms. P3 stated, “Visiting the classrooms is important because I am able to view instruction that is taking place in the classrooms.” These activities provided the principals with valuable and essential information about what was occurring in the classroom. It also gave them the opportunity to become knowledgeable about the curriculum and the teachers’ instructional practices.

P3 stated that in a training session years ago, she heard the presenter say, “You have to inspect what you expect for it to be effective.” P3 added, “If it is important enough for me to inspect what takes place in my classrooms daily, I also must expect that teaching is happening; if it is not inspected it does not occur.” The principals agreed that they must visit the classrooms to know if learning is taking place.

The principals stated that their instructional leadership skills and activities were constructive strategies that supported improvements in teaching and increased student achievement. They also stated that creating an atmosphere for learning to take place was important. Creating this type of environment allowed the principals to be in control of student learning.

Theme 2: Hands-on leadership. The principals viewed their job as ensuring that effective instruction was being provided to every student in every classroom. These school leaders involved teachers in the instructional process and held them accountable for the success of their students. P3 commented, “Hands-on involvement is the way I make sure the curriculum is the focal point of learning and ensured every teacher is on board.” P1 added:

My teachers know what intervention or strategy I am looking for when I visited their classroom. As the principal I monitor what is being taught in the classroom. If it is not working, I work with the teacher to try something different.

The principals were instrumental in providing professional development; conducting classroom walkthroughs; reviewing student performance data; providing instructional interventions to support student learning; and holding weekly and monthly meetings with faculty, staff, and community members. These meetings kept the principals abreast of activities occurring on campus and in the community. The principals also stated that being knowledgeable of the standards and state requirements was imperative to students' success. P3 noted:

You must be in the trenches with your teachers, it doesn't mean you have to know everything, but you must lead instruction and be aware of the latest research. The most successful efforts of the school are grass roots. As the principal, it is my job to find the resources for the teachers.

P2 added, "It is my job to make sure teachers have a good understanding of what the expectations are from the state, district, and school." P2 also stated, "I must make sure the teachers know the standards for their content area. I must also make sure I am aware of all the state standards and district mandates." P2 stated, "Keeping everybody on the same page and making sure that there is quality instruction in every single classroom is my focus."

Teachers must have the opportunity to read and analyze the data to understand what needs to be worked on in the classroom and school settings. When principals can

give teachers the time that they need to analyze the data and allow teachers time to collaborate, they will find solutions. Principals and teachers working together as a team creates the best opportunity for student learning to take place.

Theme 3: Communication and collaboration. The three principals recognized the importance of communication and viewed communicating with parents and students, conducting faculty and staff meetings, and addressing the community as necessary functions of principals. P1 said, “As the leader of the school, I must be able to communicate and collaborate with all stakeholder groups.” P2 responded similarly, “I operate as an inclusive leader. I rely on, I value, and I respect the opinions and talents of my staff and leadership team.” Likewise, P3 stated, “As a school, we are able to communicate and support each other daily through communication.”

The three principals considered collaboration an important part of working with their teachers and staff in making decisions. Schools will not operate smoothly if the leaders do not collaborate with staff. P2 stated, “Collaboration is a must as a principal because you have others working with you as a team to find solutions and solve problems.” All three principals understood that allowing teachers to discuss and make decisions about the variety of curriculum to be used increased student performance. The principals also stated that collaboration among administrators, teachers, and noninstructional staff supported building relationships with everyone on campus. P1 said, “I do not operate top down. I like to think that I help my teachers through our conversations. I provide teachers more time to collaborate and discuss classroom concerns about students’ performance on state standards.” The interview responses also

indicated that most collaboration took place during faculty and staff meetings, grade-level meetings, data meetings, leadership team meetings, and discussions about professional development training.

Theme 4: Management by visibility. The three principals agreed that being in the classrooms was an important daily function. Visiting classrooms and conducting walkthroughs gave them valuable insight into what was happening in their schools. Walking around helped them to know the students better, identify areas where teachers needed improvement, and set the tone for school-wide practices.

P1 stated, “As the instructional leader, I do many walkthroughs. I let my teachers know what I am looking for prior to the walkthroughs.” The principals spent a lot of time talking to teachers, students, and noninstructional staff on a daily basis as they walked the school corridors. P2 noted, “Walking my campus gives me an opportunity to see what is happening in the classrooms. Being visible on the campus and in and out of the classrooms every day is crucial.” P1 and P3 concurred and stated that it allowed them to become knowledgeable about the curriculum and the teachers’ instructional practices. P2 stated, “[I believe] in being visible to the students and parents and because of this, [I] can be found anywhere on campus. I spend most of my time in the classrooms checking on instruction.” All three principals perceived that being visible supported improvements in teaching and learning, improved students’ behavior, and increased student achievement.

Research Question 2

The six primary teachers were identified as PT1, PT2, PT3, PT4, PT5, and PT6. The six intermediate teachers were identified as IT1, IT2, IT3, IT4, IT5, and IT6. The

elementary and intermediate teachers provided similar responses to Focus Group Questions 2, 3, and 4.

The teachers in the primary and intermediate group were very vocal as they made statements addressing the focus group questions. The teachers expressed that the principals were very clear about their vision for the school. Primary and intermediate teachers stated their principal set high expectations for the school. The teachers stated the principals want all students to be successful and show student growth. Four teachers from the primary group and three teachers from the intermediate group described how their principals set high expectations for the school and supported the teachers and students to reach the schools' goal that were set in their yearly school plan.

The majority of the teachers from both the primary and intermediate group expressed they were very comfortable with visits from the administrative team. Teachers who taught grades 3 through 5 stated they knew they were sure to have visits to their classrooms by the principals because their grade levels were taking the state exams. Primary teachers stated they had classroom visits as well.

Teachers from both groups discussed how important it was to review student data. In particular, the teachers from the intermediate group discussed the importance of knowing the areas in which students were not making progress. The primary teachers stated that although their students did not have to take a state exam, they were still responsible for reviewing student data to chart student growth.

The majority of the primary teachers and four teachers from the intermediate focus group reported how their principal supported their school in having a positive

climate on campus. Three teachers from the primary group indicated how the principal supported the students by eating lunch with them and calling their names over the intercom. Teachers from both focus groups stated their principal made parents and the community feel welcome when they were present on campus. After analyzing and coding the data from the participants of the two focus groups, I identified four themes from the teacher responses to address RQ2: high expectations for student achievement, classroom presence and support, student data review, and positive school climate for teachers and students.

Theme 1: High expectations for student achievement. Teachers in both focus groups saw their principals as leaders with visions for their schools and expectations to promote student performance. The principals were very clear about student performance and assisted teachers in making sure they understood the plan to reach their goal. The teachers asserted that their principals believed that all children could learn. Teachers in both focus groups stated that their principals expected students to learn and school grades to increase or be maintained. IT1 stated:

The principal is a coach with a vision and high expectations. She has a keen awareness of everything that goes on at this school and has an eye for details. She has an unwavering philosophy of “paddle with us or put your paddle up” and/or get off at the next island.

Two teachers from the primary focus group and one teacher from the intermediate focus group indicated that they had school advisory committee meetings and that all parents, students, and staff were part of these meetings. The principals used student data

to make decisions that were always shared with staff. The teachers in both focus groups noted that the principals shared the school improvement plan with staff and discussed the previous year's data. This key information helped the teachers to know what had to change to increase students' academic performance.

The teachers also stated their principals made sure that the instructional day was protected by providing them with a schedule that allowed them to instruct daily without major interruptions. IT2 explained:

The procedures align perfectly, we feel that there is no time in the day to waste we must follow the schedule as set. We follow the master schedule that is developed at the beginning of the school year based on what the student needs are. We teach the students bell to bell, wasting no time.

IT4 stated:

The principal works to complete the schedule before we leave for the summer so [that] we as teachers are able to plan accordingly over the summer. Receiving the schedule before the summer break also allows the teachers to plan together. We work on projects and plan as a grade-level team.

PT2 added, "The principal creates a master schedule that covers everything they need to accomplish to support student achievement and it is based on students' scores from the past year."

The teachers agreed that the principals worked to create learning environments that supported student achievement. The teachers stated principals provided them with everything that they needed by setting high expectations for teachers and students. The

teachers also stated that the principals supported them as well as the students by creating a positive campus atmosphere that supported student growth.

According to 7 of the 12 teachers, their principals used the whole school day of instructional time to deliver curriculum. As PT1 explained, “It is the #1 goal that school begins as soon as the bell rings and instruction does not end until the bell rings at the end of the school day.” IT2 concurred with this statement. The teachers viewed office staff as a great buffer for the school. They did not allow anything to interrupt or distract with instructional time. IT3 stated, “The principal does not allow anything to distract the instructional day for teachers and students.” The five other teachers stated that their principals also supported using the whole school day for instruction but allowed part of the instructional day to reward and celebrate students.

Theme 2: Classroom presence and support. The teachers in the primary and intermediate focus groups felt supported by their principals, whom they said were visible in their classrooms and across the whole school setting, visiting and doing walkthroughs. The teachers were supported by the principals, who provided them with essential modeling behaviors of learning and information about current instructional strategies. The primary and intermediate teachers stated that when principals visit classrooms they can positively impact student achievement because they are monitoring what is happening in the classroom.

Teachers in both focus groups were comfortable with their principal visiting their classroom. The teachers stated that each visit became easier with each time the principal visited the classroom. IT3 stated, “The principal is active and involved. She visits the

classroom every day. She is proactive and provides a great deal of assistance.” IT5 added, “The students also enjoy when the principal visits the classroom.”

PT3 said, “It is great to see the principal and talk to her about a concern or [an] issue you are having I feel she cares about the staff and students. She is available on the campus daily.” P3 said, “The principal talked with everyone on campus and made them feel comfortable.” IT5 expanded on this point:

The principal is active and involved in everything that takes place on campus. She visits the classroom every day and provides support to experienced and new teachers and she is proactive with feedback to us after visiting the classrooms daily. Detailing changes that need to take place with instructions in the classroom or instructional strategies.

PT4 added:

The principal makes sure new teachers to the building get proper training and pair them with a mentor. It is important that new teachers get the support they need from their mentor and the principal. New teachers have an abundance of new information to learn and teach.

The teachers stated that proper support from the principal makes it easier for a new teacher to be successful during the beginning stages of teaching. Regular classroom visits by the principal ensure that teachers are providing the proper instruction to enhance student performance. Ongoing classroom visits by the principal can also create a culture of comfort for teachers and students in the learning environment.

Theme 3: Student data review. The teachers understood the importance of reviewing data and supported their principals' questioning and following up with them as they reviewed the data of students in their classroom and grade levels. The principals helped the teachers to understand the areas that they needed to focus on for the year pertaining to student performance after reviewing the data. The teachers were better prepared to teach their students after understanding the areas of weakness in their classroom.

The teachers stressed the significance of reviewing data, considering it an activity that allowed them to focus on areas of concern from classroom school perspectives. Data review helped them to more easily identify which students needed assistance. PT5 stated, "Each week we meet in the administration conference room to discuss why student data is [*sic*] low. The principal wants us to tell her how the students are progressing in class."

According to all 12 teachers, the principals wanted to ensure that they were using tools and strategies supported by the district. Principals monitored the progress of students so that they could hold teachers accountable for classroom instruction. By doing so, teachers continued to review student performance and look at their data. PT6 explained, "The principal monitors student success. The principal attends data meetings; she attends data quarterly meetings; and, she attends grade level meetings. The principal also reviews the data matrix that we have for every student and looks at the quarterly grades."

The teachers also indicated that the principals constantly examined the performance of students to find areas of weakness and areas that needed improvement.

The principals assessed students' academic performance during walkthroughs, data meetings, parent meetings, school advisory meetings, and faculty meetings. Reviewing the data was imperative when focusing on what to do next concerning student improvement. As IT4 explained, "The principal visits every single classroom every single day, observations are three times a year for new teachers with the first one being announced and the latter two no announcement." IT5 added, "The principal addresses test results of students during our meetings that are successful and not so successful. She even talks about the data during the morning show."

Other teachers focused on the commitment of their principals to the success of all students. PT1 commented:

The principal meets with every single teacher a few times a year and discuss student data and other generalities of the student. She really wants to know about each student and talks to them during her walkthroughs. She cares about the students and their success in school.

IT6 noted:

The principal in our school really takes the time to know the students on a personal level by reviewing their data, talking to them, and meeting with their parents. If a new child comes to the school, she is in the classroom welcoming the student and making him or her feel comfortable. The principals knows that if a student is to be successful, they [*sic*] must feel welcomed and a part of the classroom.

Principals can emphasize the importance of data review by modeling effective data review strategies with teachers. Reviewing student data with teachers is one tool principals can use to increase student performance. As principals and teachers review student growth together, they can note both areas of concern for students and areas of strength.

Theme 4: Positive school climate for teachers and students. The teachers felt appreciated by their principals and described their collaboration as a form of teamwork that promoted a positive climate between school administration and teachers. The teachers in both the primary and intermediate focus groups stated that a positive school climate is the creation of administration, teachers, and students working together to foster a safe and orderly campus. A safe and orderly campus is a positive place that supports student learning. The teachers stated that the principal is the one who should promote a positive school climate on campus so that every person who walks on campus and enters the buildings on the school site feels welcomed. PT2 stated, “I have been teaching for over 30 plus years, and one of the key factors of my principal is that she has the ability to listen. She also involves teachers in decision making and gives feedback.” PT2 added, “The principal also includes the community in decision making.”

The teachers emphasized that principals must maintain a positive school climate for teachers and students that is conducive to learning. The teachers were supportive of their principals keep the campus calm. Teachers also stated that students were happy with the campus environment. PT5 remarked:

It is great to feel respected as an individual and as a professional. As teachers we

are not judged by her, and she allows us to speak about how we feel. The atmosphere on the campus is great, and teachers as well as students enjoy the positive school climate.

IT3 stated:

The principal writes thank you notes, which make you feel valued. She creates a positive culture at our school and tries to keep it positive and focused. She also does fun and exciting activities for the students at the school.

Both the primary and intermediate teachers perceived the role of the principal as important to the climate of the school. Principal behaviors such as listening and writing thank-you notes contributed to the positive climate perceived by the teachers. Teachers attributed the positive learning environment at the school to the principals' efforts in this area.

Research Question 3

Four themes emerged from the interviews with the three principals: instructional leadership, hands-on leadership, communication and collaboration, and management by visibility. Four themes emerged from the two teacher focus groups: high expectations for student achievement, classroom presence and support, student data review, and positive school climate for teachers and students. From these eight emergent themes, similarities and differences were identified.

Themes that were similar. The similar themes that emerged from the interviews with the principals and the focus groups with the teachers were instructional leadership, hands-on leadership, management by visibility, high expectations for student

achievement, classroom presence and support, and student data review. It should be noted that although the themes that emerged from the interviews and focus groups were not identical, they did share commonalities. For example, the principals stated that instructional leaders must possess the skills of hands-on leadership, constant involvement in the day-to-day activities, and visibility on the job. The teachers described similar leaders through the themes of setting high expectations and standards for teachers, supporting teachers and students in the instructional environment, and continually reviewing the progress of students. The principals echoed the teachers' themes in describing instructional leaders as principals who support not only teachers and staff but also students. Principals make sure that learning takes place in the classroom, support student engagement, facilitate teacher training, and are committed to improving student performance.

Principals in effective schools involve the community, parents, and stakeholders. They are involved in daily activities such as staff development, curriculum and instruction, supervising and evaluating the instructional programs in their schools and using the data to drive instruction. As principals, it is essential that they communicate the visions and missions of their schools to teachers, students, neighborhoods, and communities.

The principals stated that principals in effective schools hire teachers who know the instructional content and have a love for educating students. These principals know how to support new teachers by providing them with instructional strategies through formal and informal observations and being visible on the campus and in classrooms

consistently. These effective principals set high standards for student achievement. They use student data to determine the curricular needs and types of training that support the needs of the teachers.

The principals expressed their perceptions of their being instructional leaders who support student achievement. P1 stated, “An instructional leader is one who concentrates on producing a society of learners and making sure parents, teachers, faculty, and staff know and understand the vision and mission.” P2 added, “As a leader, I believe in the students. I know they are capable of learning if they are taught.” P3 commented, “A leader that has a vision that involve all stakeholders while focusing on student achievement creates a community of learners.” The principals added that schools are sure to be successful when principals focus on student accountability, along with the visions and missions necessary to move schools forward; support teachers with professional development; and provide teachers, students, and parents with action plans geared to increasing student achievement.

Themes that were different. The dissimilar themes were communication and collaboration, as well as positive school climate for teachers and students. Principals indicated that communication and collaboration were important to students’ academic achievement. As P1 explained, “Kids don’t care what you know until they know you care.”

Principals communicate to students and staff daily. They send newsletters, announcements, reminders, and notes home in students’ planners. P2 stated, “Every

student in our school know they will be greeted with a morning message and we expect that there is a morning message in every classroom.”

Principals must be able to speak to faculty and staff when it is time to focus on resolving problems and ensuring that their schools are moving in the right direction. P3 explained, “As the principal I must know when to talk and when to be quiet, when to listen, and when to draw the line. These are all the parts of being a principal.”

Although the principals indicated that communication and collaboration were factors in increasing students’ academic achievement, the teachers specified that a positive school climate played an important role in student success at their schools. In order for learning to take place, students must have an environment that is comfortable and safe. The teachers stated that the atmosphere in their respective schools was “great” for teachers and students. Principals made the students feel welcome and comfortable. IT1 stated, “The principal has lunch with the students and calls the students’ names out on the morning show. She makes the students feel good about themselves.”

The students and staff knew that they were loved by the principals. IT3 stated, “My principal makes you feel valued, she asks questions about your family and really tries to get to know you. She treats the students the same.” PT3 added to the conversation by noting, “I am not afraid to talk to the principal or cry in front of her.”

Although the theme of communication and collaboration was identified from the principals’ responses and the theme of positive school climate evolved from the teachers’ responses, both themes connect to student achievement. Thus, while different aspects of effective principal behaviors, both themes were perceived as effective principal practices.

Together, they support the idea that principal and teacher communication and collaboration can lead to a positive school climate, supporting increased student success.

Discrepant Cases

Discrepant cases are counter to the themes identified during the data analysis (Creswell, 2009). Although the data from the principals and the teachers led to different themes, as discussed above, there were no discrepant cases within the principals' responses or within the teachers' responses. The principals' responses consistently led to the themes that address RQ1, and the teachers' responses consistently led to the themes that address RQ2. No discrepant cases were noted during the data analysis.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Creswell (2009) stressed the significance of member checking to ensure the validity of the findings. Validity determines whether the findings are accurate from the viewpoints of researchers and participants. Hays and Singh (2012) stated that qualitative researchers serve as the data collection and analysis instrument. Consequently, researchers' interpretations of reality are obtained primarily through interviews and observations.

To validate the results of the research, I triangulated the findings by comparing the interview responses given by the three principals and completed the same process with the two focus groups, which were represented by six teachers in the primary group and six teachers in the intermediate group. Teachers from the primary and intermediate focus groups expressed their perceptions of the leadership skill of their principals that promoted student achievement. The themes that emerged from the data were: high

expectations for student achievement, classroom presence and support, student data review, and positive school climate for teachers and students.

High expectations of student achievement was an apparent theme after triangulation of the data from the focus groups. Teachers stated that high expectations were set by the principals, who expected only the best instruction from teachers. Teachers from both the primary and intermediate focus groups stated that principals set high standards at the beginning of the year for student growth. PT1, PT4, PT5, IT1, IT2, and IT4 agreed that their principals shared their vision for student performance and how they would involve the family and the community to support the goals of the school.

Classroom presence and support was the second theme that emerged from the data of the focus groups. Intermediate and primary teachers agreed that classroom visits from the principals were helpful to them as they provided important instructional information they observed through classroom visits and walkthroughs. The primary teachers expressed how important it was to see the principals on campus and the support they provided to the teachers and the students. PT2 added, “Students were also excited about seeing the principal on campus.” The data supported the primary and intermediate teachers being comfortable with visits from the principals on a regular basis and seeing the principals on campus during the school day.

Student data review was the third theme that emerged from the focus group data. The teachers stated that principals were knowledgeable about reviewing student data and the information gained from reviewing student data. Teachers from the primary and intermediate groups reviewed student data frequently with their principal to discuss areas

of weakness in student performance. The primary and intermediate teachers understood the significance of student growth and performance and stated their principals knew how to review the data and work toward increasing student achievement.

The fourth theme that emerged from triangulation of the primary and intermediate focus group data was positive school climate for teachers and students. The primary teachers stated that their principals were good at making teachers and students feel welcome on campus. The intermediate teachers stated that the visits from the principals to their classrooms reduced the number of discipline problems in their classroom. Both groups of teachers described a positive climate that was created by the principal on campus. They stated that the principals and teachers worked as a team to establish an environment that was supportive of student growth.

Triangulation of the collected data facilitated the establishment of common themes among the principals and within and across the focus groups. In qualitative research, the identification of common themes both within and across data sources establishes validity of the research. The process of triangulation, along with the use of member checking, provides evidence of trustworthiness of the current study,

Summary

In Section 4, I summarized the findings gleaned from the analysis of the responses to the interview and focus group questions. The purpose of the study was to identify patterns in the teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership skills and the principals' perceptions of their own leadership practices in three high-achieving elementary schools in a rural school district in Florida (District S), which was

demographically similar to District P, where achievement was lower. Four themes emerged from the analysis of the interview responses: instructional leadership, hands-on leadership, communication and collaboration, and management by visibility. Four themes emerged from the analysis of the focus group responses: high expectations for student achievement, classroom presence and support, student data review, and positive school climate for teachers and students. No discrepant cases were identified. Through member checking, all participants validated that the themes identified correctly represented their responses. Included in Section 5 will be an interpretation of the findings, a discussion of the implications for social change, and recommendations for action and further research.

Section 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The problem I addressed in this case study was the inability of certain schools in a rural school district in Florida (District P) to achieve AYP in comparison to a neighboring rural school district (District S) where students had consistently made AYP, as measured by the NCLB (see FLDOE, 2011). In this study, I used a case study design, which is recommended when researchers are attempting to describe the perceptions of the participants (see Creswell, 2009). The purpose of this study was to find patterns in the teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership skills and the principals' perceptions of their own leadership practices in three high-achieving elementary schools in District S that was demographically similar to District P, where achievement was lower.

The conceptual framework of instructional leadership was appropriate for the current study, because this investigation of the perceptions of principals' leadership skills focused on principal behaviors that influence student academic achievement. Principal leadership is crucial to significant school reform and has become an integral component in improving public education (Wallace Foundation, 2012). The principal must work with teachers to ensure student learning is occurring. Principals need to improve and develop their instructional leadership skills resulting from the increased accountability to increase student performance (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; Suber, 2012). The chosen framework supported the identification of instructional leadership skills that were essential for leaders accountable for increasing student performance.

I gathered the principals' perceptions via interviews and the teachers' perceptions through focus groups. The interview and focus group questions were developed to obtain answers to the following three RQs:

1. What are the perceptions of principals regarding the influence of their leadership skills on student achievement?
2. What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the influence of their principals' leadership skills on student achievement?
3. How are teachers' perceptions regarding principal leadership skills and principals' perceptions regarding their own leadership skills similar and dissimilar?

Several themes emerged regarding the teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership skills and the principals' perceptions of their own leadership practices in three high-achieving elementary schools that support student achievement.

Interpretation of the Findings

I discussed and presented the major findings in Section 4. Four themes emerged from the interviews with the three principals to address RQ1: instructional leadership, hands-on leadership, communication and collaboration, and management by visibility. Four themes also emerged from the two focus groups with the 12 teachers to address RQ2: high expectations for student achievement, classroom presence and support, student data review, and positive school climate for teachers and students. Several similarities and differences in the responses from both the interviews and focus groups were noted to

address RQ3. It was clear from their responses that the principals and the teachers had perceptions of what they thought would improve student performance.

The evolving role of the school principal has been the subject of a range of studies, and the researchers' conclusions have been varied (Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Huff et al., 2011; Renihan & Noonan, 2012; Rice, 2010; Suber, 2012; Tucker et al., 2010). Wood et al. (2013) concluded that the role of the principal has been associated with that of overseer, administrator, manager, and facilitator. Principal leadership is imperative to support and sustain an effective organization's overall success and student growth (Suber, 2012).

My findings in this study provided insight into the principals' own perceptions of their influence on student achievement and the teachers' perceptions of their principals' influence on student achievement. The principals in this study stated that they were instructional leaders and that instructional leadership was significant in understanding curriculum and supporting teachers in their provision of effective instruction. The principals also stated that involvement in the day-to-day operations of the schools was important and that this involvement allowed them to communicate with staff and the community and be visible to all stakeholders.

Suber (2012) defined instructional leaders as individuals exhibiting characteristics that promote student performance. Lunenburg and Irby (2014) found that researchers have greatly emphasized the significance of instructional leaders on school success and student improvement. Suber reported that the primary role of principals as instructional leaders includes promoting personal growth, understanding classroom practices that

contribute to student success, and demonstrating the ability to work with teachers in analyzing and implementing quality instruction (Ash et al., 2013; Pepper, 2010).

Instructional leaders understand the importance of reviewing and analyzing student data (Suber, 2012). The process of supporting effective data analysis is important in promoting conversations and collaboration with teachers (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014). Principals who communicate with teachers about student performance develop an atmosphere where teachers are knowledgeable about student achievement and principals facilitate professional development to promote teachers' professional growth (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014).

The principals in this study identified communication and collaboration as the way to inform staff and community members about their visions for their schools. Communicating with teachers, other employees on campus, parents, and students gave clarity to their visions and foci on how to increase student performance and their roles in making it happen. Principals must communicate and demonstrate zeal, bring awareness to all stakeholders, and convey the confidence that all children will exceed and accomplish performance expectations (Balyer, 2014; Cray & Weiler, 2011; Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; Nason, 2011; Ward, 2013).

Marzano and Waters (2009) completed a study that outlined the 21 leadership responsibilities of principals. Visibility was one of the responsibilities the researchers discussed in the study that had a significant correlation between student achievement and principal leadership. Visibility in the classroom is key to principal influence on student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009). When principals visit classrooms, they support

teachers' instructional strategies and student growth. Principals who visit classrooms regularly foster a positive learning environment that ensures student learning (Mayer, 2012).

The principals in this study reported that visiting classrooms was a daily activity. Visiting classrooms allowed them to observe daily instruction and engage with students. With student achievement being the focus for all three principals, visiting classrooms was imperative because it gave them the opportunity as instructional leaders to identify areas of weakness and improvement in teachers' instructional strategies. Areas of weakness were corrected, and areas of strength were celebrated and replicated (Lunenburg & Irby, 2014; Suber, 2012).

The six primary and six intermediate teachers expounded on their perceptions of their principals' leadership skill on student achievement through focus groups. The 12 teachers had similar responses about the leaders of their schools. The teachers were supportive of the principal leadership in their buildings.

The Wallace Foundation (2012) stated that principals are the most important people on the school campus who are accountable for student achievement. Teachers' instructional strategies also are important, but teachers need the support of school leadership to address areas of concern. The key role of principals is to support the professional growth of teachers and provide students with an environment conducive to learning (Brockmeier et al., 2013; Huff et al., 2011; Lunenburg & Irby, 2014).

The teachers in this study asserted that their principals were supportive in shielding the interruptions of the day so that instruction flowed continuously. The

teachers also stated that principals who believe that all students can learn are engaged in the welfare of their students. It is necessary that principals understand the pedagogy and instructional strategies required for students to learn and be successful academically (Ash et al., 2013). Principals with high expectations for student learning stay abreast of the current trends to help teachers to implement quality instruction that supports student growth (Ash et al., 2013).

The teachers also stated that their principals supported student achievement through their classroom presence and encouragement. It was important to the teachers in the focus group that their principals were visible throughout the day. The teachers also stated that new teachers on staff were supported by the principals in that the principals gave immediate feedback to new teachers about instructional support if needed during their classroom visits. Classroom visitations provided discipline support to teachers, and students were less likely to be disruptive in class and more likely to be engaged as the result of visits from the principals. The teachers stated that students wanted to show their principals they were learning and participating in class activities (see Wallace Foundation, 2012).

Student data review was another theme that emerged from the teacher focus groups. Teachers who received support from principals in the area of student data were able to provide their students with better instruction (see Lunenburg & Irby, 2014). Principals who understand how to analyze student data can provide teachers with the academic knowledge needed to create an atmosphere where learning occurs (Suber, 2012).

The teachers in this study were supported by their principals' knowledge and understanding of analyzing and reviewing student data. Teachers stated that their performance in the classroom improved because they were aware of areas of weakness and knew what to change in their instructional plans. Principals who communicate with teachers about student data and student performance can help the teachers to change their instructional strategies to increase student achievement (Ash et al., 2013; Brockmeier et al., 2013; Paredes Scribner et al., 2011; Ward, 2013).

Positive school climate for teachers and students was the last theme. A positive environment is important to the organization and the employees. Principals are expected to lead their respective schools, provide support to teachers, encourage students, and communicate their visions to all stakeholders (Suber, 2012). Principals also need to establish and maintain a positive school climate; set high expectations; monitor student success; and develop relationships with teachers, students, and parents (Suber, 2012; Velasco et al., 2012).

The teachers in this study felt supported by their principals. They all agreed that their principals created a school climate and culture that allowed them to be themselves. Students were supported by the principals, and they also were comfortable around their principals. Teachers sensed that the climate on campus promoted an environment conducive to student learning. Gaines (2011) asserted that principal relationships and campus climate promote student learning.

Similar themes that emerged from both principals and teachers were instructional leadership, hands-on leadership, management by visibility, high expectations for student

achievement, classroom presence and support, and student data review. As I noted in Section 4, these themes, although not identical, did share similarities and were reflective of the conceptual framework of instructional leadership (see Ash et al., 2013; Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Brockmeier et al, 2013; Paredes et al, 2011; Ward, 2013). The theme that emerged from both the principals and the teachers involved their perceptions of principals' leadership skills that promoted student performance. Principals and teachers felt they needed to work together as a team to provide the best educational experience for students. Principals as instructional leaders set high expectations and provide the best learning experiences for teachers as well as students (Balyer, 2014). Principals involved in the daily operations of their schools ensure that the schools operate smoothly and efficiently (Brockmeier et al., 2013). The teachers stated principals' visibility on campus provides stability and support to teachers and students. The teachers also stated that student data are important to having principals and teachers focus on increasing student performance.

Dissimilar themes that emerged from principals and teachers were communication and collaboration and positive school climate for teachers and students. Although both themes are consistent with Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) three-dimensional model of instructional leadership, principals and teachers in this study perceived them differently in terms of importance to student success. The principals stated that communication and collaboration were key to student achievement. They saw their role as communicating the visions of the schools clearly. This behavior, in combination with collaborating with teachers, students, and parents, creates a positive environment conducive to increased

student performance. Teachers agreed that a positive school climate increased student performance but credited it to feelings of comfort and support from their principals rather than communication and collaboration. These findings, along with my other findings from this study, build upon previous research on the principal's influence on student achievement and are consistent with the conceptual framework of instructional leadership discussed in Section 2.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by my use of 1 academic school year from which to derive the results. The study was also limited to the interview data obtained from the principals and the focus group data obtained from the teachers. Specific to the case study design, the perceptions of the principals and teachers about leadership skills that influenced student achievement had to be acknowledged as opinions that might not have been accurate depictions of the principals' leadership skills present at the three high-achieving elementary schools in District S. Although other leaders at the schools might have shared the responsibility of curriculum and student achievement, the literature has pointed to principals as the individuals solely held accountable for student achievement (Balyer, 2014; Suber, 2012).

The results of this study might not be generalizable to middle school or high school principals. However, the findings could be relevant to other elementary schools in District S. Although an elementary school in another school district might match the demographics of District S, the findings are specific only to District S. Caution should be

taken in applying them to other demographically similar elementary schools in Florida, including the low-achieving elementary schools identified in District P.

Recommendations for Action

The results identified specific skills of principals who promote student achievement. The primary recommendation for action is a researcher-developed presentation of the findings of the current study to principals, assistant principals, aspiring principals, and instructional district staff in school districts with low student achievement. Lunenburg and Irby (2014) found that principals as instructional leaders play a major role in school success and student achievement. Therefore, it is valuable to understand teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership and principals' own understanding of their leadership related to student achievement.

A second recommendation is for superintendents to develop a follow-up presentation based on the current study specifically for rural elementary principals in their school districts. The presentation would share and disseminate the findings of this study and create an opportunity for elementary principals to discuss and brainstorm areas of need in their schools. The focus of the presentation would be the themes that emerged from the study. As part of the presentation, principals would discuss how the themes are used in their schools. The surveys also would be discussed so that the principals would be able to collect data at their own schools about their perceptions and their teachers' perceptions of their leadership skills.

A third recommendation is a presentation of the study to superintendents, instructional district staff, and principals at the Florida Organization of Instructional

Leaders. The presentation would share the findings and give school districts the opportunity to discuss whether the skills are present in their schools and how to implement if they are not present. This presentation would give instructional leaders insight into skills required to support student achievement.

Recommendations for Further Study

Three recommendations for future research could extend the inquiry initiated in this study: (a) repeat this study at the elementary level using 3 years of data, (b) study the principals' perceptions of their leadership skills and teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership skills at the secondary level, and (c) study elementary and secondary school results to determine whether principals' leadership skills at the elementary level are the same as those at the secondary level. The first recommendation to use 3 years of data collected from principals' perceptions of their own leadership skills and teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership skills might facilitate the identification of additional similarities and differences in skills that promote student achievement. Results also might indicate that principals and teachers have more similarities than differences in perceptions.

The second recommendation is to conduct a study similar in design and methodology to the current study but using secondary level schools. Secondary level schools consist of middle schools and high schools. This research would follow the same methodology, research questions, interview questions, and focus group questions to identify similarities and differences between principals' perceptions and teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership skills at the secondary level.

The last recommendation is to conduct research at the elementary school level and the middle school or high school level. The data would be disaggregated to indicate elementary or secondary level. The findings could help to determine whether elementary principals' leadership skills are different from or similar to those of secondary principals in supporting student achievement.

Implications for Social Change

This study holds significance as a mechanism for social change and is relevant to local and global educational communities. Identifying potential patterns in the teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership skills and the principals' perceptions of their own leadership practices in high-achieving elementary schools, as measured by FLDOE (2011) school grade, provides data to support efforts to close the achievement gap, lower student dropout rates, and increase graduation rates. Increased student achievement supports a more educated and informed citizenry and a healthier economy. Moreover, the results of the study provide the educational community with knowledge and investigative research on effective approaches toward school improvement that can help to develop students into lifelong learners.

This exploration of the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding what is needed to increase student performance adds to the current body of knowledge on increasing student performance. Local application of the results also could help to improve principals' instructional leadership practices to the instructional team members who support student achievement. Lastly, superintendents could develop a mentoring program for principals who have not been successful in maximizing student performance

on state exams, increasing graduation rates, and improving their instructional leadership skills.

Conclusion

As the world continues to change, students need to be provided with the tools to be successful and competitive in a global environment. Future research in educational leadership is essential as school principals continue to be held accountable for the success of their schools and students. School improvement should include strategies to improve principals' skills as instructional leaders, teachers' knowledge of curriculum content and instructional strategies, and students' academic achievement to meet the needs of the global economy.

The roles of and demands placed upon school principals have changed and have been refined over many years of practice, research, and reflection. With the changes in the academic environment, the individuals serving as principals in school leadership are faced with a multitude of challenges. Principals should implement a variety of leadership practices to create learning environments that support the success of all stakeholders and focus on the academic achievement of students. The findings of the current study suggest practices employed by effective elementary principals in supporting student achievement, including building and distributing leadership capacity; working collaboratively toward shared visions; and listening to all stakeholders, even in the face of external threats or political pressures.

Two of the greatest challenges in education are effective leadership and continuous improvement in student achievement. Results of the current study add to the

body of research on principal leadership. Providing an educational environment where all students can achieve increases the potential for positive and beneficial social change to occur in the classroom, the school, the neighborhood, the community, the district, and the state.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol for the Principals

Principal #1 #2 #3

Ethnicity_____

Date _____

years of experience at current school_____

years in the field of education_____

Phase 1

Share your life history.

Phase II

Share your life as an educator.

Phase III

1. Define your role as the instructional leader.
2. How would you describe your leadership style?
3. What leadership skills do you exhibit that you feel promote student performance?
4. What are some practices that you use to supervise and evaluate instruction?
5. Describe the role the staff plays in making decisions that affect student achievement.
6. How do you structure the following within your school: a) time, b) resources, and c) professional development trainings?
7. Describe how you promote a culture of continuous learning in your building.

8. Is there any other information you would like to share that would provide insight relevant to the leadership skills that promote student achievement?

Appendix B: Focus Group Questions

Primary Teacher Focus Group and Intermediate Teacher Focus Group

1. How would you describe your principal's leadership style?
2. Describe practices exhibited by your principal that impact student achievement and promote a culture of continuous learning in the school.
3. Describe the procedures that your principal uses to monitor student progress and supervise and evaluate instruction.
4. How does the principal include faculty and others in making decisions related to student achievement on this campus?
5. Reflecting on the school day, how do building practices and procedures align with established academic goals?