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The Principal Pipeline: How Elementary School Principals Perceive Student-Centered Leadership to Impact Teaching Practice

By

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ABSTRACT

Student-centered leadership, as defined by Viviane Robinson, is an approach to instructional leadership that puts student outcomes at the center of school leadership work. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate how elementary school principals perceived they enacted four aspects of student-centered leadership and how these actions were perceived to impact teaching practices in their schools. Through semi-structured interviews with three principals, data was generated about leadership actions perceived to facilitate professional learning and impact teaching practice. Focus group interviews with teachers from each of the three principal's schools and documents contributed by all participants were also examined. Analysis of the data from all three sources revealed eleven common leadership actions that are illustrated through deeper, richer descriptions of the instructional leadership provided by the three principals. The study's illumination of eleven specific student-centered leadership actions and their perceived impact on teaching practice will contribute to professional knowledge and offer transferable insights to other school leaders as they enact leadership practices to facilitate professional learning and quality teaching within their buildings.

Keywords: instructional leadership, shared vision, quality teaching, leading professional learning, relational trust

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DEDICATION

This is for you, Gram! Thank you for always being there for me and for believing that I could do this. You passed on your strength and your stubbornness, both of which helped me to set off on this journey and complete this work.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Teaching quality matters. In fact, as many educational researchers have noted, the quality of teaching is the most important school-related factor influencing student achievement (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Leithwood & Louis, 2012: Robinson, 2011; Wiliam, 2016). Ongoing professional learning that involves reflecting on and fine-tuning teaching practice in pursuit of increased student success is an essential aspect of the teaching profession. As teachers increase professional knowledge, skills and expertise, the ability to positively affect the students they work with is also increased. This understanding has elevated pressure on the teaching profession for continuous learning and responsiveness to increasingly diverse student populations within complex educational contexts. In addition, changing provincial and district policies and expectations, in keeping with new knowledge about learners and learning, require teachers to reflect on and change practice (Alberta Education, 2018b).

The idea that school leaders indirectly impact student outcomes by creating conditions for quality teaching practice (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Timperley, 2011) has elevated pressure on school-based leaders to develop a reflective understanding of their leadership within their educational contexts. Alberta's *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a)[1] outlines the new professional standard and related competencies for all school-based leaders, with a strong emphasis on instructional leadership focused on quality teaching and optimum learning for all students.

Traditionally, educational research theories and approaches to leadership have been examined through veins similar to those of leadership within other organizations, and much has

[1] At the time of writing, Alberta's *Leadership Quality Standard* and *Teaching Quality Standard* documents were in draft form. These standards have since been formally signed off on by the Alberta Minister of Education in February 2018, with no significant changes from the drafts used for this study.

been written about leadership types, characteristics and innate qualities (Lynch, 2012). More recently, however, there has been a call for an increased focus on educational or pedagogical knowledge and expertise within school leadership approaches (Robinson, 2006; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008), leading to a significant renewed emphasis on instructional leadership theory. Robinson's (2011) student-centered leadership approach positions student outcomes at the center of leadership work and identifies capabilities focusing on teaching and learning that indirectly impact student achievement, engagement and wellbeing.

I begin this chapter with an overview of the context and background that lead to this study, and then outline the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the over-arching research questions. I then explain the research approach taken, as well as my personal perspectives, chosen research methods and methodology, and my researcher assumptions. This chapter is concluded with an explanation of the rationale and significance of this research study, as well as definitions of some of the key terminology used within.

Background and Context of the Study

Since 2012, one of the seven administrative areas within our large urban school board has been examining student-centered leadership (Robinson, 2011) as the guiding approach to our work to improve teaching and learning within our schools. As an elementary school principal, my peers and I have had the opportunity to explore this research-based leadership approach and how it relates to and supports our collective goals of strong teaching practice and improved student outcomes. The approach describes related sets of leadership practices, categorized into five specific leadership dimensions and three related capabilities (Robinson, 2011) that research demonstrates can indirectly impact student outcomes when applied (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008). Although this student-centered leadership approach has been

the focus of our district principal professional learning, the application of these practices, specifically the day-to-day actions that school-based leaders take to positively impact teaching and learning, varied from school to school. As a principal within this diverse area of the city, this professional learning and my observations that the work was being taken up in various ways in different schools, caused me to question my own leadership practice and led in part to this practical research study.

Interestingly, the administrative area in which this study is rooted is noted as being the most demographically diverse[2] area within the district, and has a historical reputation of lower student achievement compared to the other areas. Indeed, there continue to be many people who have lesser expectations for students in this area, believing that demographic factors negatively impact engagement and achievement. One intended outcome of the professional learning work within the area, with the principal learning series being one aspect of this work, was changing perception of students' abilities and achievement, an outcome which spoke directly to my personal belief that all children can be successful when held capable and supported as required.

The three participating schools are all located within this administrative area of the district. Regardless of their school's diverse student populations, the three principals discussed their commitment to student success and all believed that the professional learning series had positively impacted their leadership within their specific schools.

Mountain Lake School[3] is a Kindergarten to Grade Four school of almost 700 students, with significant cultural and linguistic diversity. Over 80% of their students are designated as

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[2] According to Statistics Canada, the communities within this geographic area of the school district, when compared to the overall city information, can be characterized as having higher number of single parents, immigrants, visible minorities, and first languages, combined with lower household income and level of parental education. (Statistics Canada, 2016).

[3] This is a pseudonym. In this dissertation, all names and details that may identify the schools and the participants of this study have been changed to ensure anonymity.

English Language Learners, with approximately thirty different home languages. Additionally, both the principal and teachers involved in the focus group conversations described that this school year had seen an increase in students diagnosed with autism, which participants all identified as impacting their professional learning needs as they wanted to learn how best to support all students to be successful.

East Hills School is a Kindergarten to Grade Six school of almost three hundred students. Fifty-seven percent of students are English Language Learners, with approximately twenty-six different languages spoken. An additional 19% of students are identified as having special education needs. The school is also home to an early intervention preschool program for children identified with exceptional needs, providing programming and support to prepare children for Kindergarten and beyond.

Sunny Park School is also a Kindergarten to Grade six school. There are over five hundred students enrolled at the school, with more than 65% of the students identified as English Language Learners with over thirty-five home languages. Many of these students are new Canadians; a significant number of these children are refugees with limited previous school experiences. Additionally, almost 15% of the students are identified as having special education needs requiring a variety of supports and modifications in their classrooms.

While many of the practices described within the student-centered leadership approach (Robinson, 2011), such as recognizing the importance of individual school contexts and responding to contextual variables is essential, have also been advocated in various other instructional leadership models, based on my observations and conversations with other school leaders these practices were not being commonly enacted. The gap between understanding this research-based approach and the application of the respective leadership practices in different

elementary school contexts underlies my research problem. This is important because, if, according to research literature, every child should have the best possible teachers, so too should every teacher have the best possible leader, one who is focused on positively impacting teaching and learning.

Statement of the Research Problem

Educational research indicates that school-based leadership has a significant impact on student success, second only to the quality of teaching (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011), and school leaders, in particular principals, are responsible to ensure quality teaching practice within their buildings. Broad descriptions of leadership work that impacts teaching and learning exist in educational literature (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011), yet specific leadership actions that forward teaching and learning within schools are not as easily identifiable in practice. Therefore, despite guidance about general capabilities, knowledge and skills that leaders should build in order to strengthen professional capital in service of student success, questions arise about the day-to-day actions that will have this effect, and indeed, how these actions are perceived by teachers as impacting their work.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to explore, in three elementary schools, principal perceptions of how they enacted student-centered leadership capabilities in their daily work, as well as teacher perceptions of how these actions influenced their practice. It was anticipated that, through obtaining a deeper understanding of the actions of school principals and their perceived impact on teachers and teaching practice, ideas about specific leadership strategies would

emerge. This understanding will support current and prospective school-based leaders to enact leadership that directly impacts teaching practice and indirectly, student outcomes.

Research Questions

To explore these daily student-centered leadership actions and the impact of these actions on teaching practice, two over-arching research questions were addressed:

1. How do school principals perceive they enact student-centered leadership practices?
2. What do school leaders and teachers perceive the impact of these student-centered leadership practices to be on teaching practice?

Research Approach

For this profession-oriented research, I explored how three different elementary school principals perceived they enacted student-centered leadership practices (Robinson, 2011), and how these practices were perceived by principals and teachers to impact teaching and learning. This qualitative study was examined through a case study of three elementary schools within a common geographic area where principals had been collaboratively engaged in professional learning with Robinson's *Student-Centered Leadership* as a primary resource for improving teaching practice and student learning opportunities.

Interviews with the school principals and with volunteering teachers from each school were the primary method of data collection, with participants discussing their perceptions of leadership actions and the related impact of these actions on teaching practice. All responses remain confidential, with all participants identified with a pseudonym. With permission from participants, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, with individual comments or noted commonalities at times included, again anonymously, in the final research review.

The triangulation of data was considered, with information from participant interviews and researcher observations included, as were any supplementary artifacts contributed by participants (e.g., School Development Plans, teacher inquiry plans, teacher reflective journals, etc.). Participants' descriptive evidence of leadership practices and impact on teaching practice and student learning opportunities was the emphasis of this work.

Researcher Perspectives

At the time of this research I was in my seventh year as principal of an inner-city elementary school, and within this role, had been part of a principal professional learning community focused on improved teaching and learning outcomes within our schools, using Robinson (2011) as a guiding resource. My personal philosophy of teaching and learning is that every child deserves the best educational opportunities possible, and that it is the responsibility of every teacher to provide these opportunities every day so that each child can be successful. Through my experiences, I have developed a theory that the actions of the principal, specific to creating conditions for optimal teaching, have a significant impact on student learning, and I have been able to find my perspective reflected in the writing of authors such as Robinson and Timperley (2011). Thus, as a researcher I brought to this study my understanding of certain research-based leadership practices, and some insight into how I enact them within my school.

It was important, then, to recognize this personal investment in the work, and also to acknowledge that this could bias my research. It was essential to objectively gather perceptions from participants and to ensure that description, rather than judgment, was the emphasis of the inquiry. Indeed, I expected that, with such a strong professional connection to this research, I would be afforded opportunities to gain insight into practices of the schools of my study that I would be able to apply within my own context. Central to this work was adherence to the

guidelines of case study research, including the acknowledgement of multiple realities, and differentiating between my perspective and the perspectives of participants, which may or may not converge (Yin, 2014). This was even more important considering that, as a researcher, I may have been considered as both an insider working within the larger district context, and as an outsider to each specific school context.

Researcher Assumptions

Several important assumptions were made in relation to this case study research. Firstly, I assumed that principals and teachers within the area schools would be willing to participate in this study, and that all participants would answer the interview questions in an open and honest manner. Secondly, because sites chosen involved principals who had been part of the same ongoing principal professional learning community, I assumed that all participants would have experienced the leadership practices being examined. This meant that a similar understanding of four areas of leadership practice - building a shared vision, ensuring quality teaching, leading professional learning, and developing relational trust – were held in common by me and the participants. Indeed, based on Robinson's (2011) research and her acknowledgment of effect sizes, I assumed that these four areas of leadership would have an impact on teaching practice. Finally, I assumed that case study methodology and data collection methods, including interviews, observations and collection of related artifacts, were appropriate to the purpose of this study.

Rationale and Significance

The rationale for this study originated from my desire to better understand the specific day-to-day leadership actions that elementary school principals take to improve teaching and learning in their buildings. As an individual, I hoped that this research would help me refine my

leadership skills and provide me with actionable ideas that I might be able to implement in a school where I have to be that principal who cultivates a culture of learning for all. In addition to refining my own personal leadership knowledge and understanding, I hoped that some of my ideas would contribute to the scholarship of educational leadership, with the aim that highlighting principal actions that may cultivate a safe, reflective culture of learning for all would support colleagues and aspiring leaders by providing a possible starting point for conversations as, ideally, conclusions from this study may be relevant for elementary school leaders interested in applying these practices in their own settings.

Based on my observations and conversations with other principals prior to this study, there was a gap between what is known about student-centered leadership actions and what was practiced. The knowledge resulting from this inquiry will contribute to what currently exists in educational leadership literature, as well as inform leadership practice in schools. This study will thus contribute to the research and literature, and will also have practical applications for school-based leaders. An increased understanding about and enactments of the specific day-to-day leadership actions that positively impact teaching for optimal student learning will be significant for all engaged in the pursuit of continuous school and educational improvement.

Definition of Key Terminology

A number of key terms were defined specifically for the purposes of this inquiry, including:

- **Case study –** A qualitative case study is "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit" (Merriam, 1998, p. xiii). A case can be a person, a program, a group, a specific policy. As long as the researcher can identify phenomenon of interest and draw

its boundaries of what they are going to inquire into, can be seen as a case (Merriam, 1998).

- **Effect size --** In an educational setting, effect size is one way to measure the effectiveness of a particular intervention, by measuring both the improvement (gain) in achievement for a group of students and the variation of student performances expressed on a standardized scale, with research of hundreds of educational interventions and data identifying that attention should be paid to those interventions with an effect size of 0.40 or greater (Hattie, 2012).
- **Professional learning --** Professional learning can be defined as teachers' ongoing learning to improve the way they teach. It is an ongoing cycle of teachers engaging in self-reflection, deepening their knowledge and refining their skills in pursuit of improving their practice to support learning for all students (Robinson, 2011; Timperley, 2011; Wiliam, 2016).
- **Quality teaching --** Within the context of this work, quality teaching is based on the standard set out in the *Quality Teaching Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018b), which states: "Quality teaching occurs when the teacher's ongoing analysis of the context, and the teacher's decisions about which pedagogical knowledge and abilities to apply, result in optimum learning by students" (p. 3).
- **Relational trust --** A dynamic concept, relational trust refers to the trust built into relationships that is built on many factors including respect, personal regard, competence and personal integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Cranston, 2011; Robinson, 2011)
- **Shared vision --** A shared vision is an essential component of a learning organization because it provides the focus and energy for learning. Developing a shared vision

involves "deciding what goals to set, gaining the commitment of those responsible for achieving them, and communicating them to all those with an interest in their achievement" (Robinson, 2011, p. 45).

- **Student-centered leadership --** Robinson (2011) outlined five leadership dimensions and three leadership capabilities, broad categories of research-informed practices that have a demonstrated impact on student success (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). For the purpose of this study, student-centered leadership is considered a specific approach or model within instructional leadership theory, with this approach widespread within the case context being investigated.
- **Student success --** Within the context of this study, student success considers engagement, wellbeing, and achievement (Robinson, 2011; Timperley, 2011).

Organization of the Dissertation

There are six chapters within this research dissertation, organized as described as follows:

This first chapter outlined the research problem, the purpose of the study, and the overarching research questions to be explored. As well, a general overview of the context and background framing the research was described. The research approach, researcher perspective and study assumptions were explained, with the chapter concluding with the rationale and significance of the study, as well as definitions of some of the key terminology to be used within the context of this work.

The next two chapters continue to set up the study and create the background and framework of the research. Chapter Two is comprised of a critical review of literature related to the study's conceptual framework. Chapter Three outlines the research methodology of this

inquiry, explains intended data collection and analysis methods, addresses study limitations and delimitations, and examines issues of trustworthiness.

Chapter Four presents the findings of this case study organized according to the themes within the research questions and conceptual framework. Based on the analysis of data, a total of eleven findings, or patterns of common leadership actions, emerged within the four areas examined -- building shared vision, ensuring quality teaching, leading professional learning, and developing relational trust. Findings are presented based on these patterns and actions in these areas in narrative form using direct quotations from the participants to better present participant perspectives.

In Chapter Five the findings are analyzed, interpreted, synthesized, and presented in comparison to the literature reviewed. The purpose of this chapter is to build a more holistic understanding of how principals perceive the enact aspects of student-centered leadership and how these actions are perceived by both principals and teachers to impact teaching and learning.

Finally, Chapter Six presents a discussion of the major findings and conclusions drawn from this research. This discussion is followed by my recommendations for both elementary school leaders and for future researchers, as well as a final reflection on the study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter offers a critical review of literature drawn from current resources, materials and research pertaining to student-centered instructional leadership. I started this literature review with a consideration of the authors and resources being examined within our school district, and expanded my reading based on ERIC searches of the key terms identified within my conceptual framework. The purpose of this review was to address and explore a student-centered approach to instructional leadership, as well as four common leadership practices central to this approach.

In this review, I initially investigated the concept of student-centered leadership and how this notion was rooted within theoretical constructs of educational leadership. Specifically, I drew from research into instructional leadership theory, pertinent to the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a) to which I am held within my current role as an elementary school principal in Alberta. In order to address and inform student-centered instructional leadership practices in more detail, I then drew on three dimensions of school leadership, proposed by Robinson (2011) as having the most significant impact on student outcomes, that I encountered throughout my reading (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Louis, 2012).

I used these dimensions as the initial framework of the review of the literature from research and practice in the area of school-based leadership. I extended this framework to include the concept of relational trust, again proposed by Robinson (2011), and identified through research as an essential capability within school leadership (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Cranston, 2011; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Throughout the literature review it was my intention

to highlight how and why attending to these areas positively impacts teaching and learning in schools.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is a significant element within qualitative case study research, framing the inquiry in several ways. First, the conceptual framework

> provides a theoretical clarification of what researchers intend to investigate, and enables readers to be clear about what the research seeks to achieve and how that will be achieved. Second, the conceptual framework forms the theoretical and methodological bases for development of the study and analysis of the findings. (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 89)

Indeed, the conceptual framework frames the inquiry, establishing a guide for the study and impacting all aspects of the design, the literature review, and the research process including data generation, analysis, and interpretation of the findings (Merriam, 2009; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

"Developing a conceptual framework compels researchers to be explicit about what they think they are doing, and also helps them to be selective" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 89) about all elements of research design. Within this inquiry, the conceptual framework (see Figure 2.1) was developed based on my research problem and questions, as well as my assumptions and beliefs informing the study. It scaffolded my research and it guided my literature review.

Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework

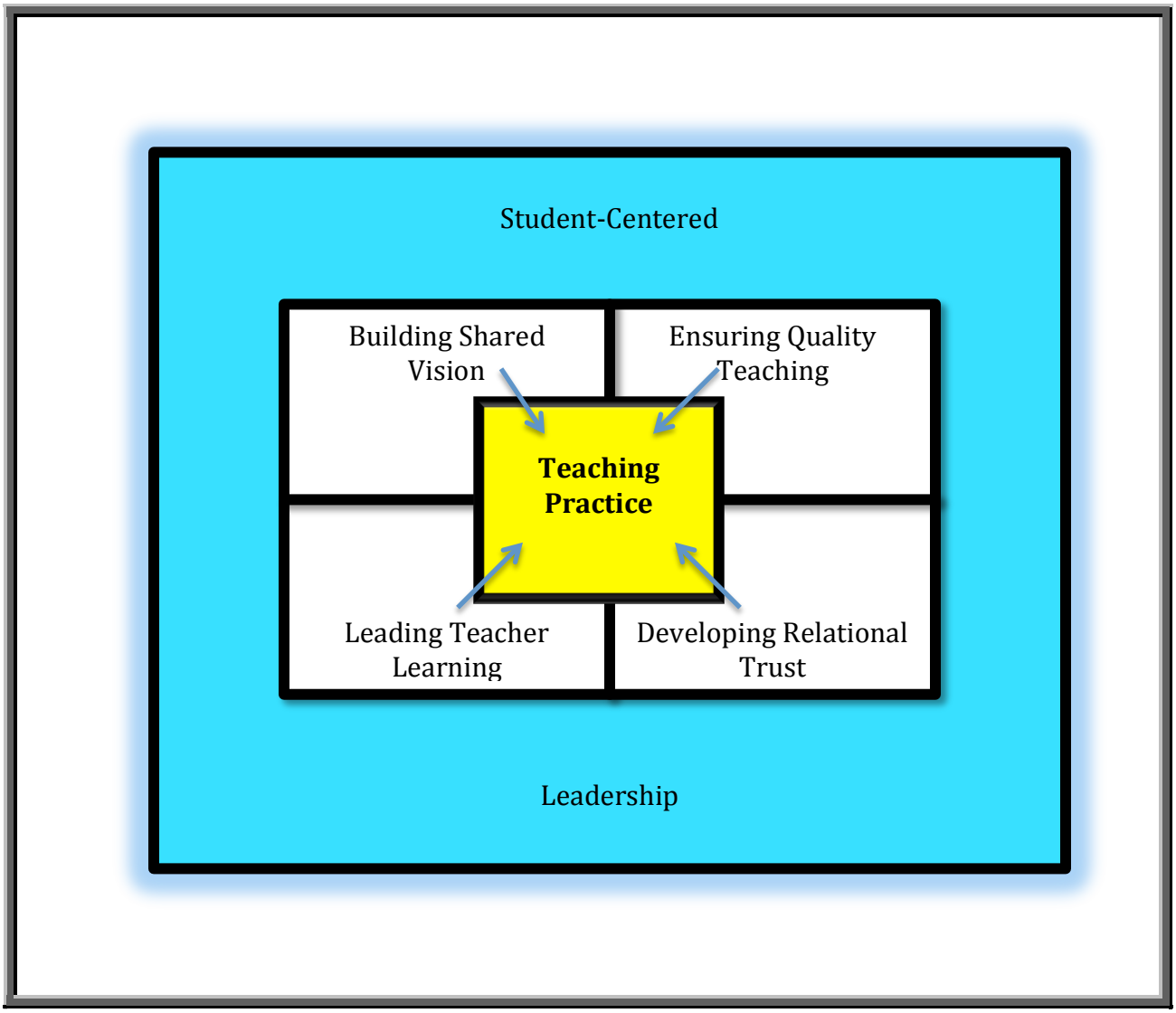

Figure 2.1 provided a visual guide to my conceptualization of the review of the literature. The positioning of teaching practice at the center of the framework reflected the belief that enacting these four dimensions identified in the literature of both student-centered and instructional leadership impacts teaching practice. The next level of the figure represented the leadership dimensions, or actions, that school-based leaders should attend to in their work to impact teacher practice. All of these elements are to be reflected within the context of student-

centered leadership, as when school leaders focus on strengthening teacher practice, student outcomes are also improved (Robinson, 2011).

Alberta's Leadership Quality Standard

Education, often described as the great social equalizer for its intended positive outcomes for all children, is under incredible public scrutiny and pressure around the world, including in Canada and, indeed, Alberta. With national research concluding that our current model of schooling no longer meets the needs of students in our contemporary Canadian society (Friesen, 2009), combined with *Inspiring Education*'s (Alberta Education, 2010) public demand for individual student success for each and every student, teachers and school leaders in Alberta are facing increased requirement for school and professional improvement that results in positive student outcomes.

With this increased public demand for accountability, the role of the school principal has continued to evolve, with responsibilities increasing in both number and complexity. Alberta Education, the government department responsible for provincial educational policies and standards, has worked with public stakeholders through an ongoing process of developing a framework for quality school leadership. Although the framework has changed and taken various forms over recent years, each iteration has identified responsibilities of principals and the related competencies deemed necessary to ensure that the principal's decisions about what leadership knowledge and abilities to apply result in quality teaching and optimum learning for all students in the school (Alberta Education, 2018a). Principal practice competencies, with supporting descriptors, emphasize the importance of school leadership in ensuring optimal student learning, for,

> as part of an accountable and open educational system, the school principal is required to focus more than ever on the core purpose of school – providing all students with the best possible opportunities to learn. Consequently, school principals must have a deep and thorough knowledge of teaching and learning so that they are able to serve as instructional, educational and organizational leaders focused on the school's core purpose. (Alberta Education, 2015, p.5)

Currently the most recent Alberta guiding document, the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a), identifies the importance of school leaders creating the conditions within which quality teaching and optimum learning can occur (p. 2), with the identified professional leadership standard as follows:

> Quality school leadership occurs when the leader's ongoing analysis of the context, and decisions about what leadership knowledge and abilities to apply, result in quality teaching and optimum learning for all school students.
>
> (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3)

This is the one standard to which all school leaders in Alberta are held accountable, with nine related competencies[4] identified as well:

- Competency 1 -- Fostering effective relationships
- Competency 2 -- Modeling commitment to professional learning
- Competency 3 -- Embodying visionary leadership
- Competency 4 -- Leading a learning community
- Competency 5 -- Supporting the application of foundational knowledge about First Nations, Metis and Inuit

[4] Competency is defined in the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a) as an "interrelated set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes developed over time and drawn upon and applied to a particular leadership context in order to support quality leadership, teaching and optimum learning" (p. 2).

- Competency 6 -- Providing instructional leadership
- Competency 7 -- Developing leadership capacity
- Competency 8 -- Managing school operations and resources
- Competency 9 -- Understanding and responding to the larger societal context

These required competencies describe leadership practices identified in Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe's (2008) meta-analysis as positively impacting student outcomes and can be found within broader instructional leadership theory. As an elementary school principal in Alberta, I continue to be accountable for applying these competencies. This requires me to understand each of these dimensions and reflect on actions that will fulfill my leadership responsibilities to ensure that conditions for quality teaching and optimal student learning exist for every student in my school.

Instructional Leadership

There have been numerous studies that have linked high quality leadership with positive school outcomes, and a variety of educational leadership theories have been promoted, each seeking to identify and describe principal behaviors and actions that contribute to these positive outcomes. One such theory, that of instructional leadership, emerged and developed in the United States within the effective school movement of the 1970s and 1980s (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985), as school leadership became more directed at the improvement of teaching and learning through involvement in the instructional program. Research resulting from this movement identified the role of the principal as critical to student learning success, evidenced within poor urban elementary schools (Hallinger, 2009), and from this research, models of instructional leadership were developed and widespread through the 1990s. However, critical of the emphasis on the exclusive role of the principal (Hallinger, 2009), scholars began to explore

other leadership models that were considered more inclusive, including distributed leadership, transformational leadership and constructivist leadership (Lynch, 2012). While these theories have contributed knowledge and strategies to the field of educational leadership, few have been as prevalent as instructional leadership. Indeed, there has recently been renewed interest in instructional leadership theory because of the increasing demands for school leaders to be held accountable for student performance (Hallinger, 2005). However, while there is broad agreement about the importance of instructional leadership **(**Hallinger, 2009; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011), there is less consensus about what instructional leadership actually is.

Traditional instructional leadership literature emphasized teaching and learning as essential aspects of school leadership, with this early research concluding that a strong, directive principal, focused on curriculum and instruction, was essential for an effective school (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Successful instructional leadership was characterized as hands-on, with leaders actively engaged with curricular and instructional issues, working with teachers and often in classrooms where they could mentor staff by observing practice, providing feedback and modeling instruction when necessary (Hallinger, 2009; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2012). However, this model was not well-suited to the reality of many schools, especially in large high schools where principals were unlikely to have the content knowledge or relevant experience in all curricular areas, nor the time to regularly observe and participate with all teachers in their classrooms.

An alternative view of instructional leadership examined the impact of organizational management on instructional improvement, with many studies demonstrating that the principal's effects on classroom instruction operate more through the school's culture and by modeling rather than through direct supervision and evaluation of teachers (Reeves, 2008). Recognizing

that classroom teaching practices do not occur in isolation and that classroom teachers are part of the larger school context, many instructional leadership models came to include both instructional and non-instructional elements. For example, Hallinger and Heck's (1999) instructional leadership model classified leadership actions as relating to purpose, people and structure. Along similar lines, Leithwood (2012) categorized leadership practices into four broad areas – setting directions, developing people, refining and aligning the school organization, and improving the instructional program. These categories also combined both instructional and non-instructional elements based on the understanding that "successful instructional leadership includes careful attention to classroom instructional practices, but also includes careful attention to many other issues that are critical to ongoing health and welfare of the school" (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 67). Similarly, Wahlstrom (in Leithwood & Louis, 2012) identified two characteristics of instructional leadership. The first, attending to instructional ethos, involves setting a tone or culture that supports professional learning while the second, attending to instructional actions, involves explicitly engaging with and supporting teachers' practice, all in an effort to impact student learning.

Student-Centered Instructional Leadership

Robinson (2011) also generated a set of categories that are quite compatible with those identified in various instructional leadership models, although from a different perspective. Arguing that school leadership should be judged based on the impact that leadership has on student learning and achievement, Robinson's (2011) student-centered leadership model is based on Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe's (2008) meta-analysis of over thirty studies of different leadership practices, and it synthesizes her ideas into five leadership dimensions and identifying three capabilities that facilitate success within each dimension. Collectively, the five dimensions

and three capabilities outlined in *Student-Centered Leadership* describe an evidence-based leadership approach intended to explicitly focus on and impact student learning.

Describing student-centered leadership, Robinson (2006) emphasized that school leaders "should not only run efficient, safe and caring learning environments – they should also be leaders of teaching and learning" (p. 62), and she argued that the "ruler for judging the effectiveness of educational leadership is its impact on the learning and achievement of students for whom the leader is responsible" (Robinson, 2011, p. 4). Within each of the five leadership dimensions -- establishing goals and expectations, resourcing strategically, ensuring quality teaching, leading teacher learning and development, and ensuring an orderly and safe environment -- Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe's (2008) meta-analysis identified specific leadership actions that make a positive difference to the quality of teaching and learning. The impact of these actions on student learning were qualitatively analyzed and for each dimension, or category of actions, an effect size, or measure of impact, was assigned, as summarized here:

Table 1

Leadership Dimensions and Effect Sizes

Leadership Dimensions	Effect Size
Dimension 1 – Establishing goals and expectations	0.42
Dimension 2 – Resourcing strategically	0.31
Dimension 3 – Ensuring quality teaching	0.42
Dimension 4 – Leading teacher learning and development	0.84
Dimension 5 – Establishing an orderly and safe learning environment	0.27

Table 1 lists the five leadership dimensions and their average affect size, or impact, on student outcomes, as described by Robinson (2011). These five dimensions identify broad categories of leadership practices evidenced as impacting student outcomes in research conducted by Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008.

In relation to understanding effect size, Robinson (2011) cited: "Although there are no hard and fast rules about how to interpret this statistic in educational research, an effect of 0.20 is usually considered small, 0.40 a moderate effect, and 0.60 and above a large effect" (Hattie, 2009, as cited by Robinson, 2011, p. 10).

This student-centered leadership model recognizes the indirect impact of leadership on student success, as leaders work directly with teachers to create the conditions that support teaching and learning. As Robinson (2011) stated, "the expectation is that school leaders can work positively with their teachers to improve instruction" (p. 149). With this expectation that leadership is directed at improving teaching and learning, and with the similarities between the dimensions and categories identified in other models, it can be argued that Robinson's student-centered leadership model is grounded in instructional leadership theory. I took this perspective in my research as I examined the three dimensions with the most significant effect size, as well as one of Robinson's leadership capabilities, building relational trust, noting that these four leadership categories are common to other instructional leadership models and are also directly related to Alberta's *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018b).

Building a Shared Vision

Research literature suggests that setting school goals and expectations is central to the role of school leadership (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008), with the development of shared values and vision essential to building a professional learning community (Leithwood, 2012). This is the first leadership dimension that Robinson (2011) proposed, identifying that goal setting includes "deciding what goals to set, gaining the commitment of those responsible for achieving them, and communicating them to all those with an interest in their achievement" (p. 45). Leithwood (2012) similarly identified setting directions as a core

leadership component, within which are specific practices including building a shared vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, creating high performance expectations, and communicating the direction. Fullan (2003) also noted that it is the role of principals to create high performance expectations, communicate those goals, and foster group acceptance of these ends.

The importance of building a shared vision is that it gives explicit focus to what should be given priority within the school context, which is a central way in which "leaders can reduce fragmentation and promote coherence" (Robinson, 2011, p. 45) in schools. While Leithwood (2012) wrote that leadership was all about organizational improvement, "about establishing agreed-upon and worthwhile directions for the organization in question and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in these directions" (p. 4), the importance of relationships within this goal-setting dimension cannot be overlooked. Robinson (2007) found that leaders in higher-performing schools are reported as "giving more emphasis to communicating goals and expectations and informing the community of academic accomplishments and recognizing academic achievement" (p. 10). It is important to have staff consensus about goals in order to increase buy-in and commitment, meaning that these goals should not simply be determined and imposed by a school leader. Instead, effective leaders should work with all members of the school community to establish collective goals focused on improving student outcomes (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2014). It is not enough, for example, for principals to simply articulate a vision of high-quality instruction and high expectations. School leaders need to ensure that instructional actions complement the instructional vision, and must engage with individual teachers to ensure that the vision is realized (Latham & Locke, 2006; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2012). Goals focus the attention of all staff on

what the school community considers as most important, and when staff have the capacity and commitment to meet these specific and unambiguous goals, this has "positive psychological consequences by providing a sense of priority and purpose" (Robinson, 2007, p. 11) and, in turn, this "increased focus and sense of purpose increases enjoyment of tasks and willingness to take on challenges" (p. 11).

Robinson (2007) identified that goal setting has indirect effects on students by focusing and coordinating the work of the school community, noting that "academic goal focus is both a property of leadership and a quality of school organization" (p. 9) as the principal makes student achievement the school's top goal and school-wide objectives are the focal point of instruction in the school. The meta-analysis of the importance of building a shared vision demonstrated that, on average, Robinson's (2011) dimension of establishing goals and expectations has a 0.42 effect size, or moderate impact, on student outcomes. As Robinson wrote, "one of the lessons of goal setting is that you achieve what you focus on" (p. 58), and when people within the school share in creating the goals, are committed to those goals, and believe that they have the capacity to achieve those goals, student outcomes can be positively impacted (Fullan, 2014; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011). As an elementary principal, it is my responsibility, then, to take actions within my school context to engage collaboratively in setting and working toward specific student-focused goals.

Link with the Alberta Leadership Quality Standard

Robinson's (2011) dimension of establishing goals and expectations relates to the professional practices of developing common goals and vision, and gaining commitment of working towards these goals. This dimension is reflected in "Competency 3 -- Embodying visionary leadership" (Alberta Education, 2018a).

Quality Teaching

With increasingly diverse student populations and growing public scrutiny, there is an elevated pressure on the teaching profession for continuous learning and school improvement in relation to enhanced outcomes for all students. As many educational researchers have noted, the quality of teaching is the most important school-related factor influencing improved student outcomes, in particular, student achievement (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Wiliam, 2016). Thus, considering this "incontestable fact in the research on schooling that student achievement in classes with highly skilled teachers is better than student achievement in classes with less skilled teachers" (Marzano, Frontier, & Livingston, 2011, p. 2), there is an ethical and moral imperative for all school leaders to ensure that every child has access every day to high quality teaching. Recognizing that "nothing is more fundamentally important to improving our schools than improving the teaching that occurs every day in every classroom" (Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011, p. 351), it may be argued that an essential responsibility of the school principal is to attend to and ensure the conditions for quality teaching and, in turn, ensure optimal learning for every student.

Teacher Quality

Classroom instruction is the focal point upon which the quest for continuous improvement in student outcomes revolves, as instruction is the most direct link to student achievement (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008, p. 468). The quality of teaching, though difficult, must be understood and examined separately from individual *teacher quality*. However, as Wiliam (2016) noted, teacher and teaching are inextricably connected:

> While there is certainly value in looking at both *teacher* quality and *teaching* quality, it does seem clear that a significant proportion of the difference in the quality of

> instructional experiences received by students is attributable to the individual qualities of the teachers in the class. (p. 34)

Teacher quality may be thought of as the personal traits, skills, and understandings that an individual teacher brings to teaching (Darling-Hammond & Ducommun, 2010), with some desired traits commonly identified, including passion for teaching and learning, enthusiasm, intelligence, compassion, kindness, empathy, and relational strength (Darling-Hammond & Ducommun, 2010; Government of Alberta, 2014; Wiliam, 2016). While such traits may help teachers enter the classroom with greater knowledge and skills that will support them in the profession, Hattie (2012) argues that good teachers come in all kinds of personality types, and that effective teaching can be learned. Thus, teacher quality is only one part of the equation, and instructional strategies and practices must also be examined, for even a high-quality teacher "may not be able to offer high-quality instruction in a context where there is a mismatch between the demands of the situation and his or her knowledge and skills" (Darling-Hammond & Ducommun, 2010, p. 4).

Teaching Quality

Although teachers each bring personal attributes to their work, this alone does not account for the disparate learning opportunities that students experience in different classrooms and schools. What are more important to understand and attend to are the strategies and practice that teachers engage in daily with students, for it is well-documented that, if school improvement is about meeting the needs of all children, then more focus needs to be on the practice of teaching (Black & William, 1998; Levin, 2008). *Teaching quality* refers to instruction that enables all students to learn, with such instruction required to meet the "demands of the discipline, the goals of instruction, and the needs of students in a particular context" (Darling-

Hammond & Ducommun, 2010, p. 3). Fullan and Langworthy (2014) describe the foundation of teaching quality as a teacher's "pedagogical capacity – their repertoire of teaching strategies and their ability to form partnerships with students in mastering the process of learning" (p. 3). There is an emphasis here on instructional practice, and on reflective, responsive teaching, examining whether specific teaching practices are supporting children's learning. Ultimately it is the classroom instructional practices that impact student achievement, and while many teachers are willing to innovate and try new things, adding to their pedagogical 'bag of tricks', what is important is to focus on the purpose and intentionality of the strategies implemented and their impact on learning. Although it is also important that we recognize the significance of time, materials, resources, and collegial and leadership support when considering the quality of teaching and how to strengthen it (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Wiliam, 2016), as Elmore (2005) noted:

> The schools that succeed in changing practice are those that start with the practice and modify school structures to accommodate to it, often making more modest changes in structure than the advocates of school reform would recommend… what our research seems to be saying was that it is pointless to work on structures until you know specifically what kind of practice you are trying to engender. (p. 4)

In other words, if we are to improve schools, as measured by student performance, we must craft improvement strategies that directly impact what happens in the teaching and learning environment, linking the understanding or definition of quality teaching to whether a teacher's daily instructional strategies and teaching practices are supporting children's learning.

Determining Quality Teaching – Frameworks and Professional Standards

With this connection and oft-blurred distinction between teacher and teaching quality, caution is required when attempting to specifically measure and identify tenets of quality teaching. Teaching quality is about relating the things that teachers do in their classrooms to outcomes for their students (Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011; Wiliam, 2016), but who determines what quality practice looks like? "Just as students need to know what success looks like and why, so do teachers" (Timperley, 2011, p. 128), and many frameworks and standards have been developed characterizing quality teaching in North America.

Frameworks. A review of literature related to teaching quality reveals that there are a number of sources that outline frameworks of effective teaching. Marzano's (2007) framework, for example, is a well-known resource that is often used in teacher education and development programs for discussing and examining teaching practice and instructional strategies. Marzano (2007) presents a model of quality teaching practices, identifying research-informed instructional strategies focusing on methodical instructional design and articulated around ten reflective planning questions. Charts and rubrics are included, intended to support teachers' ongoing development of practical knowledge and skills.

Similarly, Danielson (2007) developed a teaching framework intended to enhance professional practice, which describes "those aspects of a teacher's responsibilities that have been documented through empirical studies and theoretical research as promoting improved student learning" (p. 1). Within this framework, teaching is divided into 22 components organized into four domains of responsibility: planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities. Each of these 22 components is further broken down, with each component having between two and five related aspects within, for a total of 76 elements describing teaching practice. The framework also defines four levels of performance –

unsatisfactory, basic, proficient, and distinguished -- within the 22-page rubric, which can be used for a variety of purposes including teacher self-reflection, for administrative evaluation of individual teachers, or to guide ongoing professional learning.

Both of these frameworks list various teaching behaviors and include instruments designed to measure teaching effectiveness based on these lists. While not intended simply for evaluative purposes, in our educational era of public accountability, the temptation exists to use such a framework as a 'laundry list' of specific teaching behaviors to look for and with which to rate teachers on their demonstration of specific practices. In the event that certain behaviors are not demonstrated during an observation, it is possible that there may be career-limiting consequences as the teacher may be deemed as not meeting quality expectations. Additionally, the rubrics contained in each of these common resources can have an evaluative feel, especially with performance level labels such as 'unsatisfactory'. Therefore, one should be cautious when considering the use of such lists and frameworks to define quality teaching, as they can be overwhelming, with teachers potentially trying to fit all aspects of them into their practice just to increase their score rather than intentionally choosing those that will positively impact student learning.

Research may be able to provide lists of what strategies may work well, but when recognizing the complexity of teaching and considering teaching as an art (Marzano, 2007), teachers must determine which strategies work best with which students, meaning that not all listed instructional strategies will, or should, be observable at any given time. Indeed, Danielson (2008) noted that every teaching situation is distinctive, as "personalities of teachers and students interacting with one another and with content create unique environments" (p. 21), and because of this, "there can be no generic framework that defines teaching" (p. 21). What is required, then,

is that teachers have a repertoire of strategies from which they can select those most suitable in particular situations (Danielson, 2007, 2008; Fullan & Langworthy, 2014; Marzano, 2007), as they work toward a set standard of teaching and learning.

Standards. Teaching is a complex activity, requiring teachers to perhaps make hundreds of decisions on any given day. The value of professional frameworks, as described above, is that they can provide research-informed strategies and practices that teachers may choose from and apply in given situations, and they can be used to guide professional learning. Such autonomy is required, yet guidelines are necessary for accountability and ensuring consistency of learning opportunities for all students. Professional standards are well-established definitions of expertise and expectations that provide a "public guarantee that members hold themselves and colleagues to high standards of practice" (Danielson, 2007, p. 2). Standards are used to identify the level of quality in many professions, and may also be considered in teaching. As Levin (2008) stated:

> Think of teaching practice as analogous to other professional practices such as medicine or engineering or nursing. Surgeons doubtless have their own styles and preferences, but they also have agreed routines and standards of practice…. Nurses work differently with each patient, but they also have standard routines for many practices…. Yet none of these professionals sees these standard practices as impinging on their autonomy or taking away their professionalism. Quite the opposite – standard practices help them do their jobs well by improving the likelihood of quality work and reducing the need to make an impossible number of individual judgments in one's work. (p. 103)

Many educational districts and organizations have worked to identify professional standards that set a consistent expectation that defines quality teaching, yet also allow autonomy for teachers to

choose and apply instructional strategies and practices that best meet the needs of students within their particular contexts.

Alberta's Educational Context

In Alberta, Early Childhood to Grade 12 education is governed under the School Act, which places the responsibility of organizing and overseeing school jurisdictions with the Ministry known as Alberta Education. This Ministry is responsible for setting the curriculum, officially referred to as the Programs of Study, which outlines the learning outcomes by grade for each student. Alberta Education is also responsible for defining and ensuring the quality of teaching that students receive. Alberta Education has developed several documents that guide teaching and learning in the province, including the curricular Programs of Study, as well as the *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018b), which outlines the required competencies and indicators for teachers. More recently, provincially and within our school district, we have also been examining practice through the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* (Friesen, 2009), which identifies five principles of effective teaching. It is these guiding documents, particularly the *Teaching Quality Standard*, that identify the standard of quality teaching to which teachers across the province are held accountable.

Alberta Teaching Quality Standard. Since 1997, there has been one unified standard that all teachers in Alberta are expected to meet throughout their careers, with the most current standard identifying that "quality teaching occurs when the teacher's ongoing analysis of the context, and the teacher's decisions about which pedagogical knowledge and abilities to apply result in optimum learning for all students" (Alberta Education, 2018b, p. 1).

The *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018b) document further describes broad competencies that teachers are responsible to demonstrate in their work. These

competencies outline the professional responsibilities that teachers are required to meet, and include expectations such as understanding the contextual diversity across Alberta, being a career-long learner, focusing on relationships, and demonstrating expertise in subject disciplines, pedagogy, planning and assessment (Alberta Education, 2018b). The *Teaching Quality Standard* is subject to review to ensure that standards remain meaningful to the profession and current with what we come to know and understand about quality teaching and learning in an ever-changing world. This evolution is evident as the 2018 document reflects new competencies that call for building teacher capacity in inclusive education and in First Nations, Metis and Inuit education, identified now by education stakeholders as essential indicators of quality teaching.

Although there is an identified standard of quality, it is recognized within the standard that "teaching practices will vary because each teaching situation is different and in constant change" (Alberta Education, 2018b, p. 1). This provides flexibility and autonomy as teachers choose strategies and practices most applicable in their context, in response to the learning needs of their students. The *Teaching Quality Standard* also highlights the importance of using the standard and its descriptors as a reflective tool to guide ongoing professional learning opportunities, conversations, and development of new instructional strategies, possibly even found in various published frameworks of teaching practices.

Teaching Effectiveness Framework. One such published framework that is being recognized as a complementary resource to support quality teaching is the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* (Friesen, 2009). A multi-year Canadian research inquiry examining adolescent learning opportunities identified that the current model of schooling was no longer meeting the needs of students in our contemporary Canadian society, with ideas about teaching effectiveness still largely connected to educational movements from the early 20th century

(Friesen, 2009). In a complex and changing world, the understanding of teaching and learning must change and evolve to meet the learning needs of all students, which means:

> Preparing teachers for the 21st century requires a close look at what it means to teach and learn in increasingly networked, technology-rich, digital classrooms. Schools and teachers need to thoughtfully and intentionally design learning environments and tasks in which teachers can explore issues that are relevant and develop pedagogies that are effective for a new knowledge era. They need to develop new images and acquire new expertise to design and facilitate meaningful learning with technology. Given this shift in our world, and the new research from the learning sciences, one can see the complexity that teachers face in working with learners in the 21st century.
>
> (Friesen, 2009, p. 3)

Through a review of selected research literature, five principles of effective teaching were identified, reflecting an understanding of the changing role of teachers as we work to engage all students as active partners in their learning. The five principles identify the importance of designing worthwhile, authentic learning opportunities guided by assessment, as well as the importance of relationships and teachers collaboratively working and learning together. Although labeled as a rubric, the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* presents more as a continuum of teaching practices connected to each of the principles, with no evaluative labeling or scoring mechanism identified.

Within Alberta, the principles of the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* are being examined in relation to describing and applying quality teaching practices, providing teachers with a reflective and suggestive guide to evolve practice within a constantly changing world.

There is value in recognizing the variety of frameworks and standards outlining quality teaching, as teachers may identify and select ideas from within them that allow them to better meet the needs of students in their classrooms. However, for the purpose of this research, it is the Alberta *Teaching Quality Standard* and the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* that were identified as the primary documents to examine and discuss teaching quality, as these are recognized and used within the jurisdiction where the research took place, and, respectively, they set and support the standard that all teachers in the province are responsible to meet.

Ensuring Quality Teaching

Good teaching is at the heart of student achievement, and ensuring quality teaching is one of the core responsibilities of school leaders (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011). To understand how leadership contributes to student learning, then, we must understand how leadership affects instruction (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Within instructional leadership theory, teaching practices are enhanced when principals guide and support teaching in their schools. Through an instructional leadership focus, Robinson's (2011) third dimension involves ensuring quality teaching within three broad areas: coordinating the instructional program, providing ongoing feedback to teachers about practice, and using student data to improve the instructional program. Within each of these three interrelated sub-dimensions, Robinson (2007) identified specific leadership practices that can directly impact teaching practice: active oversight and coordination of the instructional programs as leaders and staff work together to review and improve teaching; providing ongoing feedback to teachers about practice through the development of clear performance standards, regular classroom observations, and conversations about practice; and using student data to monitor instructional

programs, evaluate student progress, and responsively adjust teaching practice based on this evidence (pp. 13-14).

Building upon shared vision and values, Robinson (2011) asserted that an essential aspect of ensuring quality teaching is having a coherent instructional program, which can be achieved by ensuring that teachers have a common approach to teaching and learning that is shared and understood by all staff. Robinson (2011) argued that effective teaching is about providing all students with opportunities to learn – "high-quality teaching maximizes the time that learners are engaged with and successful in the learning of important outcomes" (p. 90).

When school leaders provide professional guidance and support teachers to achieve the standards and expectations to which they are held, collaboratively they can engage in reflection and work towards continuous improvements in practice. Strengthening the quality of teaching is essential as we strive to ensure optimal learning opportunities for all students, particularly in consideration that,

> while all children benefit from more effective teachers, the gains are greater for the lowest achievers, and therefore, increasing the number of effective teachers in our schools will raise the achievement of all students but will also close the gaps in achievement between different groups of students. (Wiliam, 2016, p. 35)

Robinson's (2011) third dimension, ensuring quality teaching, has been demonstrated to have a moderate effect size (0.42) or impact on student outcomes, and so must be attended to. Teachers "vary considerably in their effectiveness in promoting growth in student achievement, so improving the quality of teachers is essential to improving student achievement" (Wiliam, 2016, p. 62), and "unless we can improve the effectiveness of the teachers already working in our schools, we can expect that the improvements in student achievement will be marginal at best"

(p. 62). Therefore, although perhaps difficult, school leaders have the moral imperative to engage in those conversations and actions that will impact teaching practice in pursuit of improved student outcomes, and in Alberta, this responsibility is outlined in policy.

Teacher Supervision

Since 1998, Alberta Education has had a policy on teacher supervision, growth and evaluation intended to assess and support the performance of all individual teachers and the quality of teaching practices across the province. While the term *evaluation* refers to a formal process resulting in a judgment in determining whether or not the teaching of an individual teacher meets the *Teaching Quality Standard*, *supervision* is presented more as a formative assessment of these standards within an iterative cycle of continuous learning, defined as "the ongoing process by which a principal or superintendent exercises instructional leadership and carries out his/her duties with respect to teachers and their teaching, as required under section 20 of the *School Act*" (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2017, p. 2). This process emphasizes the responsibility of the principal to provide guidance and support to improve the teacher's quality of instruction through ongoing observations and feedback, and it requires principals to provide ongoing supervision for all teachers in the school. It is essential, then, that leaders facilitate teacher understanding of the purpose of supervision, ensuring that the formative nature of supervision is highlighted. Presenting supervision through such a formative assessment lens, with teachers recognizing that the purpose of supervision is to support ongoing professional learning to positively impact student success is important in order to lessen the evaluative perception. Once teachers are aware of the intended learning outcomes and the criteria being assess, supervision can become a strong leadership practice supporting Robinson's (2011) third dimension of ensuring quality teaching.

Supervision responsibilities require "direct involvement with teachers in the business of improving teaching and learning" (Robinson, 2011, p. 22), meaning leaders must be actively involved in the teaching and learning tasks across the school. This requires that school leaders have a strong pedagogical knowledge of teaching and learning (Robinson, 2011; Wahlstrom, 2012), with their observations focused on how the application of these shared understandings engages and supports students. Supervision is not simply a matter of classroom visits, however. An intentional commitment to being in classrooms regularly to support teachers and students through focused observations and feedback is required. As Wahlstrom (2012) concluded from a study of numerous high-performing schools, in relation to classroom visits, there is a difference between principals who "provided supported to teachers by 'popping in' and 'being visible' as compared with principals who were very intentional about each classroom visit and conversation, with the explicit purpose of engaging teachers about well-defined instructional ideas and issues" (p. 83). Principals need to be organized and systematic with supervision responsibilities, ensuring that they are getting into all classrooms on a regular basis and intentionally focusing on teaching quality, providing feedback on what is working well and what can be improved to increase student success. Classroom observations and feedback conversations provide evidence of both individual and school-wide practices, and to make effective teaching strategies visible while also supporting common areas for growth, it is advantageous to embed information gleaned through supervision into professional learning opportunities.

Link with the Alberta Principal Quality Standard

Robinson's (2011) dimension of ensuring quality teaching relates to the professional practices of continually reflecting and improving on professional practice, which directly correlates with Alberta's *Leadership Quality Standard* statement: "Quality school leadership

occurs when the school leader's ongoing analysis of the context, and the school leader's decisions about what leadership knowledge and abilities to apply, result in quality teaching and optimum learning for all students in the school" (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3), and is also reflected in the following leader competencies:

- Competency 2 -- Modeling commitment to professional learning
- Competency 6 -- Providing instructional leadership

Leading Teacher Learning

To ensure continuous professional growth and development, adult learning in schools must be given the same priority as student learning so teachers can build professional knowledge and refine professional skills. Teachers are obliged to continually hone their craft and demonstrate lifelong learning (Alberta Education, 2018b), requiring access, then, to new ideas and expertise. Timperley (2011) noted: "If teacher inquiry is to make a substantial difference to student outcomes, teachers need to be operating within new frameworks and accessing different kinds of knowledge that will push their thinking and challenge their practice" (p. 10). This requires a fundamental shift in thinking, away from traditional professional development opportunities towards a focus on ongoing professional learning centered on improving student outcomes. (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Timperley, 2011). While the concept of professional development often connotes a one-time 'learn something new' session, professional learning is more ongoing, embedded in teachers' daily work, and is about "focusing on students, attending to requisite knowledge and skills, engaging in systematic inquiry into the effectiveness of practice, being explicit about underpinning theories of professionalism and engaging everyone in the system of learning" (Timperley, 2011, p. 4). Improvements in student outcomes are the central purpose of professional learning, compelling teachers to be reflective, actively engaged in

their learning, and working collaboratively to reflect on student work and adopt pedagogical practices that enhance student learning opportunities (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). "Through engaging in ongoing cycles of inquiry and building knowledge, teachers develop the adaptive expertise required to retrieve, organize and apply professional knowledge when old problems persist or new problems arise" (Timperley, 2011, pp. 11-12), with the goal of such learning experiences to build both collective teaching capacity and the efficacy of individual teachers.

Teachers are obviously key players in their own learning, but to achieve systemic change and build collective capacity, leaders need to support all teachers to learn, reflect on and improve practice to meet the needs of all students (Timperley, 2011). Robinson's (2011) fourth dimension, leading teacher learning and development, has been identified as having a significant impact (0.84 effect size) on student outcomes, with this leadership dimension described as both promoting and participating in teacher learning and development. More than just providing opportunities for professional development, leaders must participate with staff as learners (Robinson, 2007), and be involved in teachers' professional learning so that they know what they should do to challenge and support their teachers (Timperley, 2011) while learning alongside them about what works and what doesn't (Fullan, 2014). As leaders promote and participate in teacher professional learning, they reflect their focus on the quality of teaching, and also learn more about what staff encounter in their daily work. This enables principals to shape the conditions for all to learn as they are then able to "provide more real support in making required changes to embed learning in daily practice" (Robinson, 2007, p. 16).

The idea of school leaders being involved in professional learning is not new, but this involvement has often been with whole-school professional development sessions aimed at advancing current practices or introducing new district initiatives. Such sessions generally

involve school leaders sharing information, either bringing in an expert or acting as the expert imparting knowledge that teachers are then expected to implement. Such sporadic opportunities, disconnected from classroom practice and needs of teachers and students, rarely result in any significant or lasting impact to teacher practice or student outcomes. Putnam and Borko (2000) argue that, "professional learning is not a process of learning new things and then learning how to implement them. Implementation is part of how something is learned and more deeply understood" (p. 14).

Robinson (2011) claimed that school leaders can "build capacity in their schools by *integrating doing the work with learning how to improve the work*" (p. 103), and she advocated that leadership involvement in professional learning must extend beyond simply organizing and resourcing professional development opportunities to active participation in professional learning, with "leaders themselves participating in the learning in the role of leader, learner, or both" (p. 104). In Robinson's opinion, such active participation does more than demonstrate and model the importance of being a continuous learner, but also, "leaders who participate with their staff are able to join in their professional discussions because they understand the concepts and the vocabulary associated with new learning" (p. 105). This is a critical support to creating a collaborative learning culture, as leaders can not only contribute their ideas during these conversations, but also can also collegially learn with and from others and share in building of new ideas and knowledge with teachers. Most importantly, "direct involvement in professional learning enables leaders to learn in detail about the challenges the learning presents and the conditions teachers require to succeed. The leader can then take responsibility for ensuring these conditions are in place" (pp. 105-106).

Enhancing Professional Capital. Leading teacher learning to enhance teaching and ensure optimal learning opportunities for all students improves the quality of teaching not only at the individual teacher level, but also collectively across the school, increasing the professional capital within the building. Professional capital is

> about what you know and can do individually, with whom you know it and do it collectively, and how long you have known and done it and deliberately gotten better at doing it over time. Professional capital is vital for the future of the teaching profession and of society. (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 102)

Professional capital is a necessary component of educational excellence and continuous improvement across the school, and it supports career-long professional learning within a society that is continually changing. As the world around us changes and new knowledge and understandings are built, it is evident that what teachers learned about teaching and learning in our training programs is not enough, and that teaching practice must continually evolve. Leading professional learning with the intent to build professional capital with quality teaching evidenced by both individuals and the collective, will directly impact student outcomes. From a growth mindset perspective, all teachers can improve and build pedagogical and practical knowledge, which will impact their own learning as well as the learning of their students, for

> when the vast majority of teachers come to exemplify the power of professional capital, they become smart and talented, committed and collegial, thoughtful and wise. Their moral purpose is expressed in their relentless, expert-driven pursuit of serving their students and their communities, and in learning, always learning, how to do that better. (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 5)

Teaching quality matters, but so does the quality of leadership and the overall professional learning environment. Leading teacher learning within a culture of inquiry and continuous learning and improvement gets to the heart of improving the quality of educational opportunities for all, including students, and strengthens the overall profession. As Wiliam (2016) wrote, "when all teachers embrace the idea that they can improve, not because they are not good enough, but because they can be even better, this creates a natural collegiality that supports all teachers in embracing the need for continuous improvement" (p. 239). Building such a culture of continuous improvement and collegiality, however, requires high levels of professional trust, and in order to lead learning and ensure quality teaching, school leaders must attend to and build relationships at the same time as attending to the required work in the school (Robinson, 2011).

Link with the Alberta Leadership Quality Standard

Robinson's (2011) dimension of leading teacher learning and development is reflected in the following leader competencies:

- Competency 2 -- Modeling commitment to professional learning
- Competency 4 -- Leading a learning community

Developing Relational Trust

In essence, effective school leadership requires creating an effective, high-functioning professional learning community focused on continuous learning for both students and teachers. This requires building collective vision and values focused on quality teaching and optimal student learning opportunities, with leaders creating high expectations for all learners, staff and student, and providing support for teacher learning in pursuit of improved student outcomes (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). For this to occur, school leaders need to build a culture of trust in schools so that teachers can honestly open their practice to one another and can learn

with and from their peers (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). Relationships are essential to success in schools, and it is necessary for leaders to attend to building these relationships through daily collaborative work. Robinson (2011) asserted that leadership involves "building the type of trust that is essential for doing the hard work of improving teaching and learning" (p. 17). As noted, "effective educational leadership is not about getting the relationships right and then tackling the difficult work challenges. It is about doing both simultaneously so that relationships are strengthened through doing the hard, collective work of teaching and learning" (p. 16).

Collaboratively reflecting on, discussing and critiquing personal teaching practices is a significant challenge, not only to provide the structures and expectations that promote such collegial work, but also because traditionally, teaching has been isolated work and often any professional who sought advice or asked questions about practice was perceived as deficient or less-skilled in some way. As many authors have written, what is essential for this difficult work to occur is a significant amount of trust among the adults in the building (Timperley, 2011; Bryk & Schneider, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). Indeed, Cranston (2011) stated that "principals' professional knowledge, expertise, and determination to nurture their teaching staff as professional learning communities will fall flat if relational trust among the faculty is missing" (p. 70), and Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) concur, arguing the following: "So there's no use hurling teachers into meetings to compare their students' work or discuss disturbing data together unless a basic platform of secure relationships has been established that will open these teachers up rather than shut them down" (p. 113).

Trust is fundamental to collaboration and professional dialogue as it allows people to feel comfortable with each other, and to work and learn more effectively together. Teachers need to

feel comfortable with each other before there is effort and commitment to the vulnerability and risk-taking inherent in such critical inquiry (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). Cranston (2011) described the importance of relational trust to sustaining professional learning communities and conversations, describing the "need to form and nurture trusting relationships that allow them to go beneath the surface matters typically discussed amongst teachers and engage them in conversations at deeper emotional levels about student achievement school wide" (p. 69). The quality of relationships in schools matters, and leaders play a key role in nurturing trusting relationships with and among staff members. Open and honest communication, collective decision-making, establishing expectations and norms for collegial interactions, collaboratively determining shared school vision and goals, engaging with and supporting teachers in the work – these are all daily practices required of leaders to support building trust with and amongst the adults in the building (Robinson, 2007; Timperley, 2011; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Such intentional leadership actions promote a sense of comfort and security with the adults in the school, and "allows teachers to open up and share, which in turn leads them to begin to question their work more effectively" (Cranston, 2011, p. 65). By working with colleagues and discussing how collective work impacts student achievement, leaders can establish and nurture the trusting relationships necessary to engage in the critical teacher inquiry into problems of practice through professional learning community conversations and actions.

Trust in school leaders is significantly related to student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), and Robinson (2011) identifies relational trust as a leadership capability that is required within each of the student-centered leadership dimensions. Increased relational trust benefits students through changes in school culture and organization, as teachers in schools with higher levels of trust are more willing to take risks, reflect on practice, and attempt new strategies or

ideas to support student outcomes (Robinson, 2007). Cultivating a trusting culture with and amongst colleagues is crucial for student success, as trust among teachers, which happens within professional learning communities, "may be more significant in stimulating changes in practice than does having a trusting relationship with the principal" (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008, p. 482).

Link with the Alberta Leadership Quality Standard

Robinson's (2011) capability of building relational trust is reflected in "Competency 1 -- Fostering effective relationships" (Alberta Education, 2018a).

Summary

Many educational leadership theories have been espoused and practiced, but instructional leadership has always remained central to ongoing research and professional conversations, for, although instructional leadership is not the only role of the principal, "the influence of the instructional leadership role of principals must be acknowledged" (Hallinger, 2003, p. 334), and it "is accepted that a school must practice some level of instructional leadership" (Lynch, 2012, p. 33). Indeed, many school leadership standards continue to identify instructional leadership as a core leadership responsibility, as is evident in Alberta's *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a).

Robinson's (2011) student-centered leadership model describes an instructional leadership approach focused on the impact of leadership practices on student outcomes. This research-based model outlines five capabilities and three dimensions comprising student-center leadership, with each of these eight categories summarizing a variety of leadership practices identified as effectively impacting student outcomes of achievement, engagement and wellbeing (Robinson, 2006; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Within the context of my literature review and my research, I chose to focus on four of these eight categories, choosing those that were

identified in various other instructional leadership models and also presented as having the largest effect size, or impact on student outcomes (Robinson, 2011). These four categories also directly connected to the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a) competencies to which I am held accountable as a principal.

A critical review of literature about these topics uncovered innumerable resources from multiple perspectives, indicating the level of historical and ongoing research about these leadership practices, which emphasized the importance of these four categories for improved teaching and learning outcomes for all. The research is boundless, and the evidence is clear – when school leaders collaboratively create shared vision and values, ensure quality teaching, lead teacher learning and development, and build relational trust in their buildings, they create the conditions for teachers to develop adaptive expertise and to offer optimal learning opportunities to every student. Not only is this a principal's professional responsibility (Alberta Education, 2018a), but this is also a moral responsibility because every student in every classroom every day deserves quality teaching and the best opportunities to learn. This understanding, deepened by reviewing the literature and, combined with Robinson's (2011) claim that "*the more leaders focus their relationships, their work, and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater will be their influence on student outcomes"* (p. 15), strengthened my resolve to explore how elementary principals perceived and enacted these student-centered leadership practices each day within their particular contexts, and to understand how these actions were seen as impacting teaching and learning.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Public input into Alberta's *Inspiring Education* (Alberta Education, 2010) vision for public education demands school success for each and every student. Recognizing that student needs are increasingly diverse and that teachers are working within more complex contexts, change in pedagogical understanding, methods and instructional strategies are required to meet this public expectation. All school leaders are tasked with school improvement that focuses on teaching quality and student outcomes, yet many leaders are without the knowledge and understanding of precisely how to move forward toward these lofty goals. As part of a Principal Professional Learning Community, my work with peers led me to wonder how principals, as instructional leaders within their schools, created the conditions to ensure quality teaching and optimum student learning through a student-centered leadership (Robinson, 2011) approach.

The purpose of this case study was to explore, with a sample of elementary school principals and teachers from a large urban school district, perceptions of how they enacted aspects of student-centered leadership (Robinson, 2011) to impact teaching practice in their schools. I started with the assumption that a better understanding of Robinson's approach would strengthen not only my own leadership, but would also allow other school leaders to identify specific leadership actions that supported quality teaching and student success. In seeking to understand how this approach was enacted and perceived by principals and teachers to impact teaching practice, the study addressed two questions: (a) How do elementary school principals perceive they enact student-centered leadership practices? (b) What do school leaders and teachers perceive the impact of these student-centered leadership practices to be on teaching practice?

This chapter describes my study's research methodology and includes a discussion of the rationale for my selected methodological approach. I include a description of the research context and participants, and explain the methods that were used. Data analysis processes that I used are then described. Additionally, my measures to establish trustworthiness will be discussed, as will the limitations and delimitations of this study. Finally, the ethical considerations of this qualitative research study are presented.

Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

A significant amount of educational research has been based upon a quantitative research design approach, which is limited to finding new knowledge about problems or issues that can be quantitatively or objectively evaluated. Not all educational concerns, however, are composed of variables that can be measured with numbers and analyzed through statistical procedures in order to make generalizations about a theory. Some problems may only be evaluated subjectively, such as appraising the value or worth of a process or program. At the same time, educational researchers may not only seek to understand the 'why' of something, but also the 'how' and 'what'. Such subjective research was the purpose of the qualitative research design.

Qualitative research focuses on the study of issues in depth and detail, and emphasizes the way that people make sense of their world and their experiences, with qualitative researchers studying objects and people in their natural setting, attempting to understand or interpret phenomenon in terms of the meanings that people bring to them (Crotty, 2003; Merriam, 1998, 2009). Important to qualitative research is gaining an understanding of participants' perspectives about a phenomenon, with the underlying understanding that individuals construct this meaning based on their individual contexts, experiences, and interpretations. Thus, central to some qualitative research is the philosophical stance of constructivism, the view that knowledge is

constructed as individuals experience and interpret a phenomenon within a particular context at a particular point in time. Qualitative research, then, is not about searching for a positivist truth; instead it is about recognizing that there are multiple interpretations of reality and seeking to understand participants' experiences and meanings from their perspectives (Crotty, 2003; Merriam, 1998, 2009). As an emerging educational researcher, epistemologically, I subscribed closely to this constructivist paradigm. I conceive knowledge as being socially constructed through people's social experiences and I see social reality as constructed by people and existing largely within each individual. Within this proposed research inquiry, as I sought to gain an understanding of the principals' and teachers' perspectives about leadership actions and the impact on teaching practice within their specific school contexts in order to create a descriptive account of this phenomenon (Merriam, 1998, 2009), a constructivist, qualitative approach was essential.

Merriam (1998) identified several essential characteristics of qualitative research that aligned with this proposed study. First, she identified that the goal of qualitative research is eliciting understanding and meaning, which was reflected in this inquiry as I examined participant actions and perceptions around a specific leadership model, Robinson's (2011) student-centered leadership. Secondly, within qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, which was reflected in this study through my use of semi-structured interviews which allowed me to be responsive to the participants and the context, and to further clarify and explore perspectives or ideas as required. The third characteristic of qualitative research is that it usually involves fieldwork. In this case, I went to the schools or met with participants, meaning that I was embedded in the study context throughout the project. Fourth, qualitative research is generally inductive, as it "builds abstractions, concepts,

hypotheses, or theories rather than tests existing theory" (Merriam, 1998, p. 7), which existed in this inquiry as the intent was to build understanding and to examine findings through looking for themes or categories. Finally, as the research focus was on "process, meaning, and understanding, *the product of a qualitative study is richly descriptive*" (Merriam, 1998, p. 8). Findings of this inquiry are reported descriptively in relation to the concepts identified in my conceptual framework, and include participants' own words, direct citations from documents, and my descriptions of the process.

My research connected to an interpretive framework, emphasizing the construction, interpretation and understanding of meaning. As noted by Crotty (2003), an interpretive-constructivist approach "looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (p.67). This study enabled interpretation of the events and data from multiple perspectives, allowing me to explore and understand the meaning that participants attached to specific leadership actions. Thus, a constructive, qualitative approach was essential to this research inquiry, as I sought to gain an understanding of the principals' and teachers' perspectives about leadership actions and the impact on teaching practice within their specific school contexts in order to create a descriptive account of this phenomenon (Merriam, 1998, 2009). Therefore, my personal orientation and my doctoral case study research were consistent with a constructivist epistemology and an interpretive theoretical framework, making this inquiry well suited to a qualitative case study design.

Rationale for Case Study Methodology

Researchers have used case study research for many years as an effective methodology to investigate and understand complex issues in real world settings. Case study research enables a researcher to closely examine an idea or problem within a specific context, providing a holistic

and in-depth understanding of the social behavior or issue being investigated. This methodology emphasizes multi-faced exploration and rich descriptions, allowing for this deeper understanding of the issue or idea investigated. What is essential within this methodology is identifying the case as a bounded system, wherein the case is "a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries. I can 'fence in' what I am going to study" (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). With this definition, a case can then be a person, a program, a group, a policy, or a program (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Given that my research questions focused on the experiences and perceptions of principals and teachers as they were asked to consider how specific leadership actions were enacted and impacted teaching practice within their schools, I believe that case study methodology aligned well with this inquiry as I was able to closely examine these perceptions directly within participants' contexts to gain a more in-depth understanding of the specific leadership actions and the impact on teaching practice in their schools.

Examining the work of Merriam (1998, 2009), Stake (1995), and Yin (2014), three of the main authors in the area of case study research, strengthened my belief that this inquiry was well aligned with this methodology. Each of these authors, however, offered a distinctive perspective on case study, describing different methodological suggestions and procedures. Central to these variations is the underlying epistemological orientations of these researchers, impacting their approaches to preparing, planning, and conducting case study research. Recognizing that these epistemological differences impact research design and decision-making, it was essential to determine which of these approaches would best suit this study and my constructivist perspective, and I found myself most closely aligned with Merriam's approach to case study methodology. Her approach is interpretive, as she emphasizes understanding the perspectives of participants within their personal contexts. Her case study design process is quite structured,

which appealed to me as a novice researcher seeking to understand how different principals interpret and enact aspects of a student-centered leadership model. She is also an educator with an educational background, with her work providing many examples of how case study methodology can be applied in education.

In following Merriam's (1998) approach I was mindful of her criteria for embarking on qualitative case study research. The first criterion is the nature of the question, as she identified that how and why questions can be the basis for case study research. Secondly, she identified that the less control a researcher has, the more non-experimental the design, and she also asked the researcher to consider the desired end product. Finally, she identified an important fourth consideration as well, that the system is bounded. With regards to these considerations, I believe that my research was congruent with her case study methodology as I investigated a 'how' question, and examined multiple perspectives of participants within their specific contexts. Also, considering the end product, my hope was that my research would support elementary school leaders to identify specific leadership actions that can be enacted to impact student outcomes. Finally, with regard to boundedness, I believe that my research met this most important case study criterion because I was examining a specific leadership model and how three elementary school principals enacted it; thus, the case was discreet and well defined. Merriam (1998) further stresses three distinct attributes of case study research that resonated with the intended outcomes of this study, as she described how case studies are particularistic (focusing on a specific situation, event, program or phenomenon), descriptive (resulting in rich understanding of the phenomenon under study), and heuristic (advancing the reader's understanding of the phenomenon being investigated). As Merriam (1998) noted,

> case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in the process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research (p. 19).

With this in mind, and considering that this study aimed to more deeply understand leadership actions and impact within a specific context, I chose case study methodology, specifically Merriam's (1998, 2009) methodological approach, for this investigation.

Research Design and Methods

Within any study there exists numerous people who could be involved, sites that could be explored, activities that could be observed, and documents that could be examined. It is the responsibility of the researcher, then, to determine the research sites, participants, and tasks as part of design decisions. As previously described, Merriam's (1998, 2009) qualitative case study methodology approaches guided the design of this investigation, including identifying the context and participants, planning and conducting the case study, methods chosen for data generation and analysis, and ensuring that the inquiry was trustworthy and ethical.

Research Setting

This research occurred within a large urban school district in the province of Alberta. The district has a diverse population including students with varied English language proficiencies, cultural backgrounds, socio-economic status, and learning needs. Three elementary schools in the northeast quadrant of the city were involved, as professional learning opportunities for principals and assistant principals within this area, specifically focusing on Robinson's (2011) student-centered leadership approach, had been ongoing since 2012.

Research Participants

A purposeful sampling strategy was utilized for this inquiry, as I sought to gain insight and understanding from individuals in elementary schools who had similar professional learning experiences related to student-centered instructional leadership. The process and criteria for selecting the interview sample of three principals was quite straightforward. Suitable participants were elementary principals who had engaged in the area Professional Learning Community work for a minimum of three years, and who perceived that they enacted a student-centered approach to instructional leadership in their schools. To begin with, I met with the Area Director to determine which principals met the criteria for participation, and I then sent an email (Appendix A) to all eligible principals describing the criteria, timeline, and process of the study. A copy of Appendix K: Study Description for Participants was included with this email. Interested principals were asked to respond by email to express interest or to ask clarifying questions. As more than three elementary principals meeting all criteria expressed interest, participants were chosen through random selection, as personal characteristics such as gender or number of years of experience did not impact the study. Selected participants were then informed of the specific purpose and design of the interviews through email with a Letter of Invitation (See Appendix B). An Informed Consent form (Appendix C) was included with this second email, and participants returned the signed consent form personally to me prior to the start of the interview. Through email, individual interviews with each principal were arranged to occur in their schools at a time requested by each individual. Guiding interview questions and prompts were provided electronically in advance (see Appendix E), offering time for reflection and for collection of relevant artifacts and documents that participants were asked to bring to the interview. These

individual interviews generated data about leadership actions that facilitated professional learning and impacted teaching practice in each of the participants' schools.

Additionally, within each of the selected elementary schools, teachers interested in discussing how professional learning and quality teaching are discussed and facilitated in their schools were invited to participate in focus group interviews. Participating principals were asked to forward an email invitation to all teachers in their schools (See Appendix F), and interested teachers were asked to contact me directly to indicate interest or for additional information. Focus group participants were selected based on representation of grade level, assignment, and experience, and on availability. Between two and four teachers from each school participated in the focus group interviews. A Letter of Invitation (Appendix G) and the Informed Consent form (Appendix H) were sent by email to the selected participants, and participants returned the signed consent form to me electronically by email or submitted them to me prior to the start of the focus group interview. Teacher focus groups were organized at a time and location, including a location away from the school as requested by some participants, suitable for participants. Guiding questions and prompts were provided in advance (see Appendix J), offering participants time for reflection and to collect relevant artifacts and documents to be brought to the focus group. Focus group interviews generated data about teaching practice and professional learning within each school.

Planning and Conducting the Case Study

This inquiry was conducted during the 2017/2018 school year. With Ethics approval from both the University of Calgary and the school district received in June 2017, school-based research began in October 2017. This start time was intentionally chosen to ensure non-interference with school start-up, both to enable each school to set its rhythm for the year and to

accommodate the time constraints of my work schedule. I was immersed within the work for two days with each site, requiring, then, six field days for initial data generation. Emergent insights or questions resulted in slightly longer interview times than originally anticipated, but no subsequent follow-up interviews or conversations were required although additional time for data generation was built into the timeframe. As anticipated, all interviews, focus groups, and collection of documents and artifacts were completed in full by December 15, 2017, with rigorous data analysis beginning in January 2018. As intended, this investigation, including data analysis and written findings, was completed in its entirety prior to June 2018.

Data Collection Methods

Case study methodology does not claim any particular data collection methods, as researchers are required to choose methods that will be most appropriate to answer inquiry questions or help them gain understanding of the phenomena being studied (Merriam, 1998, 2009). However, multiple methods of data collection are encouraged (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014), and this inquiry employed several different methods of data generation and analysis in an effort to strengthen trustworthiness, and increase breadth and depth of understanding. The following methods were incorporated for generating data: individual semi-structured interviews with the school principals, focus group interviews with teachers from each of the schools, researcher field notes, and an examination of various documents related to each of the participating schools.

Interviews. Individual interviews with the three elementary school principals were the primary method of data generation, as the purpose of the inquiry was to examine how principals perceived they enacted aspects of a student-centered leadership approach. As Creswell (2012)

indicated, interviews are one of the "ways to capture best the experiences of the participants in their own words" (p. 33).

Specifically, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with participating principals, providing a mix of guiding questions and prompts that resulted in flexible, open-ended conversations. This type of interview offered flexibility to the process, enabling the researcher to probe during the interview for additional information or for clarification (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This was important in this inquiry, as it provided me with the opportunity to ask clarifying questions throughout conversations about student-centered instructional leadership. A list of guiding questions and prompts (see Appendix D) was provided to participating principals, to be used as a conversation guide, and participants were invited to add relevant contributions as appropriate. Interviews followed a protocol (see Appendix C), and lasted approximately 60 minutes once Informed Consent (see Appendix B) was obtained.

With permission of participants, interviews were audio-recorded, allowing me to focus on the conversation and not be distracted by trying to write all responses. Digital recordings were transcribed in their entirety by myself or an online transcription service (Trint.com), and a copy of the individual transcript was offered through email to each participant for review. Participants were able to make additions, corrections, or deletions to the emailed transcripts if they chose, and they were asked to return any revisions to me through email within fourteen days of receipt. Additionally, I took notes using the interview protocol (see Appendix C) during each interview, ensuring that information was accurately recorded in the event of mechanical failure of the audio recording device. A copy of these notes was emailed to each participant within 24 hours of the interview as well.

Focus group interviews. From each participating school, two to four teachers participated in focus group interviews to discuss teaching practices and professional learning opportunities. The purpose of focus group interviews was to "collect shared understanding from several individuals as well as to get views from specific people" (Creswell, 2012, p. 217), and within this investigation, various perspectives about teaching practice and professional learning were intentionally sought. Discussions followed a focus group protocol (see Appendix G), with participants provided with guiding questions and prompts (see Appendix H) in advance for reflection and time to collect any relevant documents or artifacts to be shared. Focus group interviews were also audio-recorded with permission of participants, with recordings transcribed using an online transcription service (Trint.com) and then reviewed by participants for accuracy. As well, notes were recorded on the Focus Group Interview Protocol (see Appendix G), protecting against loss of data should audio equipment fail. These notes were also provided to participants through email within 24 hours of the focus group interview. Once Informed Consent (see Appendix F) was obtained, focus group discussions lasted approximately 60--75 minutes each.

Reflective field notes. This on-site case study involved me interacting directly with participants within each school context and observing what is happening during interviews and focus group conversations. Personal thoughts related to questions, insights, or broad ideas or themes (Creswell, 2012, p. 2015) were recorded in a reflective research journal during and following each visit to the schools. As the researcher is the primary instrument of data generation, the essential component of these field notes was what Merriam (1998, 2009) describes as observer commentary – comments including "the researcher's feelings, reactions, hunches, initial interpretations, and working hypotheses" (1998, p. 106). Beyond recording of

basic information such as time, place, and names of participants, my journal included reflections such as key words and ideas regarding my conceptual framework, direct participant quotes, and my comments and questions. Following each interview or group discussion, I also recorded my personal reflective notes, including emerging insights, common key words or ideas, and some general thoughts or questions that I would need to consider during data analysis.

Document and artifact collection. In qualitative research, documents and artifacts can be a valuable source of information (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 1998, 2009). For this investigation, copies of various documents and artifacts about principal leadership and teaching practice were collected from each site and analyzed. Participating principals were asked to provide artifacts including copies of their individual School Development Plans, working documents from professional learning opportunities, and any other documents that they identified as reflective of aspects of their student-centered leadership. These artifacts provided information about each school's vision and professional learning goals, as well as other relevant contextual information and any evidence of perceived student-centered leadership actions. Additionally, focus group participants were asked to provide copies of any lesson plans, inquiry designs, or any other documents that they identified as reflective of evolving practice or high-quality teaching. These documents and artifacts provided supplemental evidence about leadership and teaching practices. As Merriam (1998) suggested, it is "particularly important to seek out the paper trail for what it can reveal about the program – 'things that cannot be observed, 'things' that have taken place before the evaluation began" (p. 114). These copied documents and artifacts were collected and maintained by me as a data source, with the permission of contributing participants.

Similar to other sources of data, documents and physical artifacts have limitations to be considered. For example, authenticity may be difficult to determine, and indeed, documents and artifacts contributed as relevant by participants may not necessarily match the conceptual framework of the investigation. With these limitations in mind, documents and artifacts that were considered study data were those that, in both the researcher and participants' opinions, reflected student-centered instructional leadership actions, professional learning that supports teacher learning, and evolving teaching practice, including the School Development Plans, teacher inquiry designs, and some teacher reflective journals that were shared with me.

Data Management

Data management is the process of ensuring that research data are stored, archived, and disposed of in a safe and secure manner during and after the conclusion of the research project. Proper planning for data handling is important to ensuring the integrity of the research as it addresses concerns related to confidentiality, security, and retention of research data. A thoughtful plan includes ideas for safe storage of data, as well as the disposal of data at the end of the inquiry, and must consider both electronic and non-electronic data sources. This planning should occur at the outset of the study so that issues related to data integrity can be anticipated and addressed early in the research project.

Specific to my study, to begin with, all data generated through individual and focus group interviews were handled with anonymity, as participants were able to use a chosen pseudonym as part of the Informed Consent process. Personal information connecting pseudonym information to actual participants is stored in a binder separate from transcripts and documents, with all personal information available only to me. Audiotaped recordings of individual and focus group interviews were transcribed personally by me or by an online transcription service (Trint. Com),

and no identifying information was provided to the service. All recordings, transcriptions and other generated data are stored in a locked cabinet accessible only to me, and to ensure the integrity of any electronic data, my computer is encrypted and password-protected. All participant personal information, including pseudonym information, will be kept for five years, at which time it will be destroyed in a manner that safeguards privacy and confidentiality.

Analyzing Case Study Evidence

Merriam (1998) defined data analysis as "the process of making sense of the data. And making sense out of data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read – it is the process of making meaning" (p. 178). Further, Merriam (1998, 2009) suggested that data analysis is a process, not an event, meaning that data analysis does not wait until all data is generated. Rather, data generation and data analysis occurs together, as data "collection and analysis is a *simultaneous* (emphasis in original quotation) activity in qualitative research" (1998, p. 151). For example, even while generating data, the researcher is already beginning to analyze, noting ideas to be followed up on. Therefore, as data was generated throughout the study, it was coded and organized in relation to the key words and concepts within this study's conceptual framework. Themes, recurring patterns, or gaps in data related to conceptual framework topics were examined throughout the data generation phase of the study, they guided subsequent or follow-up questions with participants throughout the interview, and they were also used to develop a meaningful and manageable system through which to identify and easily retrieve data once more rigorous analysis began.

The initial step in analysis was recording the interviews and focus group discussions, writing my reflective field notes, and collecting relevant documents and artifacts as stated above.

Transcriptions were read and reviewed to get a good sense of the participant contributions and, simultaneously, I began to organize and document the generated data in relation to this study's conceptual framework, research questions, and research problem. Coding of the data involved assigning labels and key words to various aspects of the data to categorize information that was later interpreted and examined for key themes. Throughout this process, by analyzing and coding participant responses relative to the concepts within my literature review, I worked to ensure that data generated was pertinent to this study and reflected the purpose of the research (Merriam, 1998, 2009). In this way I was also able to confirm that there were no gaps in data that could perhaps be addressed through follow-up interviews with participants.

Once the data generation phase of the study was completed by December 15, 2017, more rigorous analysis began. Data from all sources was examined and analyzed relative to my conceptual framework, as I attempted to draw out any findings that provided insight or understanding into student-centered instructional leadership actions and the impact of these actions on teaching practice in the schools investigated. Although I had considered using a computer software program, Dedoose, which is an encrypted internet-based application that can be used for analyzing text data, I ended up creating my own database organized in relation to categories of my conceptual framework. I grouped participant responses, key words, and themes within each category, creating a visual support that helped me interpret information and draw possible conclusions. To ensure that findings were in fact supported by the data and truly reflected participant voice, I completed a data check with participants, comparing data and findings.

Trustworthiness

The standard for evaluating qualitative research is the trustworthiness of the study, considering "how well the researcher has provided evidence that his or her descriptions and analysis represent the reality of the situations and persons studied" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 112). Readers, then, must feel that the qualitative study is believable, accurate, and plausible. Therefore, intentional attention to the rigor and design of this research project was essential. To ensure the trustworthiness of this research project, considerations about the inquiry's credibility, dependability, and transferability were attended to as follows.

Credibility. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) described credibility in terms of the extent to which the researcher has accurately represented what the participants think, feel, and do (p. 112). Within this study, credibility was considered throughout the design, ensuring first that research questions were carefully and intentionally linked with the study purpose and my conceptual framework. Data was generated through multiple sources, including individual and focus group interviews, document analysis, and the use of reflective field notes, as triangulation of data collection methods add to the credibility of the work (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Merriam, 1998, 2009). Multiple perspectives were reported through the inclusion of participant narratives and quotes following participants' review of transcripts and key words to ensure accuracy. Identifying these factors through project design, and attending to them throughout the project, helped to ensure study credibility and enhance the trustworthiness of the research.

Dependability. Dependability in qualitative research parallels the idea of reliability in quantitative research, and refers to "whether one can track the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 113). This does not mean that others will get the same results through similar study, but instead, as Merriam (1998) explained:

> a researcher wishes outsiders to concur that, given the data collected, the results make sense – they are consistent and dependable. The question then is not whether findings will be found again but *whether the results are consistent with the data collected.* (p. 206)

Dependability was attended to during the design of this study, with detailed plans for data generation and analysis described above. Throughout the study, all aspects of data collection and analysis described in the project design were closely adhered to, thus ensuring integrity in the process and, subsequently, dependable results reported that are consistent with the data generated.

Transferability. Although it is not expected that qualitative research findings be generalizable to other settings, "it is likely that the lessons learned in one setting might be useful to others" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 113). This idea of transferability makes it possible for readers to decide whether or not similar research processes are applicable within their own contexts based on their depth of understanding about the application within the research site. Transferability is assessed through the richness of descriptions included in the study to communicate a holistic and realistic picture of the research process, as well as the amount of detailed information that the researcher provides about the research context and background (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Within this study, the intent was to understand how elementary school principals enacted student-centered instructional leadership within their specific contexts, so an understanding and detailed description of the school contexts was a critical aspect of the research findings. As well, rich description of themes or recurring patterns across the data were included in findings. Through this specificity and depth of contextual and data descriptions, it is hoped that readers will see relevance of this study to their own work, and be able to transfer similar processes to their own particular contexts.

Limitations

Limitations in research are the external conditions that restrict or constrain the scope of a study, or that may affect its outcome (Creswell, 2012). These are influences that the researcher cannot control, and it is essential to identify any such shortcomings, conditions or influences that might potentially impact or restrict research methodology or conclusions. Within this case study there were a number of possible weaknesses or limitations to be considered. For example, by selecting only a small number of focus group participants from each site, not all teachers within the selected schools participated in focus group conversations, meaning that not all possible voices or perspectives were included within this study. Secondly, as I am a principal within the same organization within which this research was conducted, the concept of positional power may have impacted the honesty of responses, as participants may have felt the need to answer in a certain way so as not to be judged. Although I tried to mitigate this by reminding participants, at the beginning of each focus group interview as part of the Informed Consent, of the study's purpose to seek multiple perspectives, and of my commitment to anonymity and confidentiality, the perception of my 'leader' positional power over teachers may have resulted in inaccuracies with data generation and results obtained. Finally, constraints of time may have impacted the breadth and depth of individual and focus group conversations, possibly impacting the amount and detail of data generated.

Delimitations

Delimitations describe the choices made and boundaries determined by the researcher in order to specify the parameters of the investigation, including ideas such as sample population, chosen settings, data collection and interpretation. I intended to investigate how elementary school leaders perceived and enacted aspects of student-centered instructional leadership, and the

perceived impact of these actions on teaching practice in their schools. The first delimiting step in this research was the choice of the research purpose and problem itself, as I chose to focus specifically on Robinson's (2011) student-centered instructional leadership as the approach to be investigated, rather than any of the other numerous instructional leadership approaches. Even within this student-centered leadership approach, only certain aspects of the model were included in the conceptual framework and were investigated. As well, only leadership actions were being investigated for their influence on teaching practice, although there are many other factors that also impact teaching practices in schools. The choice to conduct this research within only three area schools with principals that have been part of a district area professional learning series was another delimiting factor. Additionally, the choice to restrict the literature review to current resources only, beginning with research being explored within the context of the organization was delimiting. Focusing on literature that all participants would be familiar with was intentional, as it allowed me to examine the questions with participants who have shared theoretical understanding of this literature. Finally, the timeframe was a delimiting factor, specifically developed to meet my research timelines.

Ethical Considerations

In a research study of any kind, there is always the possibility of negative impacts on the individuals engaged in the study, or on others who may be described in or impacted by the study. Ethical considerations in research are critical, and should be contemplated at all stages of the process, from problem formulation through to interpretation and sharing of findings. Therefore it was my responsibility as a researcher to consider how to mitigate the possibility of negative consequences impacting study participants or others connected with the study. This involved, as Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) explained, "focus[ing] on establishing safeguards that will protect

the rights of participants and include informed consent, protecting participants from harm, and ensuring confidentiality" (p. 111).

Researcher position. One ethical consideration to be attended to was the researcher position within this study, as I was a principal within the organization where the research took place. Although I was not the direct supervisor of any participants, the concept of positional power may have impacted participation, with teachers perhaps perceiving that responses were judged or shared with their principal. This perception may have also impacted the responses of participating teachers, as they may have felt uncomfortable and then responded with what they thought I wanted to hear rather than providing an open and honest response. Efforts to lessen such discomfort included conversations with participants prior to interviews about the importance of accurately describing their school situations, emphasizing that the intent of the study is to gain insight into leadership actions, professional learning, and teaching practice through multiple perspectives. Additionally, as part of the Informed Consent process, I reviewed my commitment to anonymity and confidentiality, and focused on my role as a researcher, not a principal.

Within qualitative research, the researcher is seen as a primary instrument of data generation and analysis, requiring the researcher to be aware of their own biases. As this study focused specifically on a student-centered leadership approach, chosen intentionally for personal and professional interest, I had to ensure my own neutrality when generating and analyzing data within this study. To do this, semi-structured interview questions were developed, allowing respondents to discuss their experiences and understandings, with my role to be an active listener and to probe for participant perspectives rather than to voice my thoughts and ideas. Data coding was completed in relation to the concepts identified in my conceptual framework, and when

findings were reported, I included multiple perspectives, including those that may have been contrary to my thinking.

Recruitment procedures. All participation in this study was voluntary, and at no time was participant involvement coerced or compensated. The Area Director was initially asked to identify elementary school principals who met study criteria, and then an email invitation, with an attached Letter of Invitation outlining the research purpose and process (Appendix A), was sent to potential participants. Interested principals were invited to contact me directly, and participants were chosen through a randomized method, as participant personal attributes such as gender or years of leadership experience were not required for this inquiry. Once the three school principals were confirmed, they were asked to forward an email invitation for focus group interviews (Appendix E) to all of the teachers at their schools. Principals were not required to approach teachers or to encourage participation, and teachers interested in the focus groups were asked to contact me directly, so school principals did not know which teachers expressed interest or participated in the study.

Informed consent. For this study, informed consent described the nature of the inquiry as well as the level of involvement of the participants. Informed written consent was obtained from each participant before individual or focus group interviews were conducted. Samples of the consent forms are included in this study as Appendix B – Informed Consent for Individual Principal Interviews, and Appendix E – Informed Consent for Teacher Focus Group Interviews. All participants were informed of the purpose the study, and the importance of the researcher gaining insight through multiple perspectives was highlighted. All participants were identified only through the use of a pseudonym, and all personal information is being maintained separately from data. A copy of all interview transcripts was shared with participants through

email within 24 hours of me receiving them from the transcriber, and participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts. Participants were able to make changes including additions and deletions as necessary, and had fourteen days to return modified transcripts to me electronically, by email. Additionally, as part of the informed consent process all participants were notified that they had the right, without consequence, to not answer any question(s), or to withdraw their participation at any time during the study with all data generated removed from the study, up to December 15, 2017 when rigorous data analysis began.

Privacy and confidentiality. I have made every effort to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of participants and their responses. Participants were identified only through the use of pseudonyms, with all personal information stored in a binder separate from data, and locked in a cabinet that only I have access to. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted at a time and location that was comfortable for participants, with focus groups meeting outside of work hours at or away from the school as requested by participants. Privacy and confidentiality were more easily assured with individual interviews, and although focus group participants were notified that anonymity cannot be guaranteed within a group protocol, all participants were asked to maintain the confidentiality of the group conversation and the collegial responses included in interview transcripts and research findings.

Potential risk or benefits to participants. This study was not considered high risk. While participation in this study offered no direct benefits to the participants, the possible benefits to the field of educational leadership, and specifically to deeper understanding of how student-centered instructional leadership actions impact teaching practice in elementary schools, outweighed any potential risk to participants. Principals and teachers participating were not

asked to do anything outside the scope of their daily work, as in the daily work of teaching, educators regularly have conversations with peers about their practice.

Ethics approval. This study was approved through the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board of the University of Calgary in May 2017, as well as through the Research and Innovation Department of the school district (June 2017) within which the research took place. As a requirement of ethics approval, I had previously completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE) on January 2, 2017.

Summary

This chapter described my methodology and the rationale for the research approach and participant selection. My methods were explained, including a description and justification for data collection methods, describing how, when, where, and by whom data was collected. Data analysis methods and tools were then described, including a rationale for how data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously to ensure a thorough inquiry of participant perceptions. Issues of trustworthiness and measures taken to ensure trustworthiness were then discussed, as were limitations and delimitations, and ethical considerations of the study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this case study was to explore, with three urban elementary school principals and their teachers, their perceptions of how principals enact aspects of student-centered leadership (Robinson, 2011) to impact teaching practice in their schools. My rationale for examining this topic was to better understand the specific day-to-day leadership actions that elementary principals perceive they take to improve teaching and learning. A better understanding of this work would not only strengthen my personal leadership, but would also allow other school leaders to identify specific leadership actions that may support quality teaching and student success. To explore these daily leadership actions and the impact of these actions on teaching practice, two over-arching questions framed this inquiry: (1) How do school principals perceive they enact student-centered leadership practices? (2) What do school leaders and teachers perceive the impact of these student-centered leadership practices to be on teaching practice? For this case study, I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with three elementary school principals who had been engaged in a professional learning series examining Robinson's (2011) *Student-Centered Leadership* as a primary resource for improving teaching practice and student learning. Focus group conversations were also held with volunteering teachers from each of these schools. Additionally I collected each school's annual School Development Plan as supplemental evidence, viewed teacher inquiry plans and reflective journals shared by participants, and kept a researcher journal. Through the individual and focus group interviews, I attempted to gather descriptive evidence of leadership practices and impact on teaching practice from the perspectives of participating principals and teachers.

This chapter begins with an overview of the case, followed by a presentation of the findings organized according to the themes that emerged in relation to the study's research questions and conceptual framework. Based on the analysis of data, several patterns or common actions emerged within each of the themes, and findings are presented based on these patterns and actions. Where appropriate, inconsistent or unexpected data are also noted and discussed.

The Case

A case study enables a researcher to closely examine an idea or problem within a specific context, providing a holistic and deep understanding of the idea or problem being investigated. A case study is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., activity, event, or process) based on extensive data collection from multiple sources (Cresswell, 2007). "*Bounded* means that the case is separated for research in terms of time, place or some physical boundaries" (Cresswell, 2012, p. 465). The overriding purpose of this case study was to investigate how principals perceived they enacted aspects of a student-centered leadership model, and how these actions were perceived as impacting teaching within three elementary schools. This inquiry was designed in keeping with the principles and assumptions of qualitative case study research (Cresswell, 2012; Merriam, 1998, 2009). A case study is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system based on extensive data collection (Cresswell, 2012). "*Bounded* means that the case is separated for research in terms of time, place or some physical boundaries" (Cresswell, 2012, p. 465). The issue under investigation within the bounded system of a specific leadership model being enacted in three elementary schools was *the perceived enactment of four aspects of leadership and how these actions were perceived to impact teaching practice*.

While the specific student demographics of each of the three schools are assumed to have little bearing on the results of this inquiry into leadership actions, as mentioned, all of the schools

were located in the same geographic area of a large city, and all had higher than the system average number of English Language Learners, students identified with special education learning needs, and more than average teacher turn-over. The principals at these schools had been part of a specific professional learning series for a minimum of three years, with this learning series focusing on leading a learning community. They described their commitment to elevating the success of all students regardless of ability, need, or demographic factors. Robinson's (2011) *Student-Centered Leadership* was a primary resource guiding this learning, and participating principals were tasked with understanding and implementing the identified leadership dimensions and capabilities within Robinson's (2011) leadership model. The three principal participants all noted that they appreciated the professional learning with, for example, the most experienced principal stating that, "focusing on the five dimensions and the three capabilities has impacted my own learning and my own leadership". As well, they all felt that they were implementing this leadership model, with one principal noting: "Student centered leadership, I think, is who I am", and another principal reflecting that she was "specifically concentrating on the three capabilities and five dimensions in my own practice and looking at how I bring them to life in my practice". Within this research inquiry, as it was the specific actions that principals perceived that they implemented within this leadership model that were being examined, these volunteering principals met study criteria and openly discussed their leadership practices in our individual face-to-face interviews in their schools.

Additionally, within each of these principal's schools, teachers interested in discussing how professional learning and quality teaching were discussed and facilitated in their schools were invited to participate in focus group interviews. In total, eight teachers from the three elementary schools volunteered to participate in focus group conversations. At participant

requests, two groups met after school within their own schools, while one group met at my school over their lunch hour. Although all focus groups were led by specific questions, they all became conversations with participants talking openly about professional learning, school structures, and their practice. All participants appeared to be eager to participate and comfortable discussing their work, which made conversations flow easily.

With permission of participants, the individual interviews and focus group conversations were audiotaped and then transcribed by myself or through an online transcription service (Trint.com). Transcripts were sent to all participants for their review within two weeks of our meeting, and then returned to me with their clarifications. Copies of the three School Development Plans were also received, and a reflective field journal of my personal thoughts related to presented ideas and emerging themes was maintained. These data sources – transcripts, School Development Plans, and field notes – were then analyzed for patterns in identified leadership actions and their perceived impacts.

Presentation of Findings

The following is a discussion of the common actions found, with details to support and explain each finding. The findings are built from the problem, research questions, and research design. The data analysis strategies for both the individual principal interviews and the teacher focus group interviews were guided in part by the first cycle and second cycle coding processes described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014). Interview questions were already organized using the study's conceptual framework (Figure 1), which was based on four leadership aspects from Robinson's (2011) student-centered leadership model:

1. Building a shared vision
2. Ensuring quality teaching

3. Leading teacher learning
4. Developing relational trust

Within each of these structured categories, data were then examined for key themes or patterns of action. As data was coded for themes without the use of a computer program, an additional data check was completed to ensure that findings were indeed supported by the data and truly reflected participant voice. Findings are presented in each of these areas in narrative form using direct quotations where appropriate to better describe and understand participant perspectives. In describing each theme, participant voices must be heard, but narrative data are also connected and synthesized through explanatory text. Each research area, or theme, and its related findings (common actions) are presented separately.

Theme One: Building A Shared Vision

Setting goals and expectations is central to the role of school leadership (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011), and this dimension was identified by Robinson (2011) as having a moderate impact (0.42 effect size) on student outcomes. The importance of building a shared vision is that it makes explicit what should be given priority within a complex context with many competing values and responsibilities, providing a roadmap for the school's direction and a framework for offering students the best possible education. Research participants were invited to describe the shared vision for teaching and learning at their schools, to discuss how this vision was developed, and to explain their role within developing, implementing and assessing this vision. Based on the analysis of data, three common actions emerged: involving teachers in building the shared vision; using student data to inform the vision; and developing shared strategies and expectations.

Finding 1.1: Involving Teachers in Building the Shared Vision. As Robinson (2011) noted, "leaders can set goals, but they will remain empty words unless they motivate those whose efforts are required to achieve them" (p. 45). If stakeholders are to work together and support the school's development, they need to be involved in understanding, developing, and assessing the school's vision. Involving stakeholders promotes ownership and creates commitment to implementation and success, so building a shared vision should be an inclusive activity where everyone feels consulted and involved.

All participants, the three principals and eight teachers, identified the importance of having a shared vision to guide their work, and all articulated the achievement and instructional goals from their current year School Development Plan, which is an annual requirement within this school district. In all three schools both the principals and their teachers articulated that the School Development Plan goals had been developed through a process of conversation and consensus building about what was currently important to intentionally attend within their specific contexts. For example, one principal commented that the school staff "did some consensus building work around what our School Development Plan should look like (and that) teachers basically designed our School Development Plan…the goals and the theory of action were theirs". This perception was supported by comments from teachers in this school who identified that "we as a teaching staff share a vision of what learners look like at our school" as they had come to a "consensus around some of the issues that we all felt, as a whole group of teachers, that our students faced". The other two principals also discussed how the process of building the vision within the School Development Plan was a collaborative effort, noting that the work was "shared by the whole staff" and that goals were developed through "a lot of really honest conversations about what they saw and what they hoped and what they believed".

Teachers in these two schools reiterated these perceptions as well, with one focus group describing their involvement in "round table discussions [to] see where we thought the most improvement was needed. It was very much a process of conversation among all of the staff and coming to a common consensus which I think flowed very easily". The importance of involving teachers in building the shared vision of the school was perhaps best iterated by a teacher who suggested the following:

> As a school and staff, we're much more focused…our vision is more closely defined. I feel like we're all in the same boat and we're paddling in the same directions. I think we have a shared common vision as to what we need to do.

Finding 1.2: Using Student Data to Inform the Vision. All participants also spoke about the importance of building their School Development Plan goals based on the needs of students within each particular context, and all identified how looking at student data from achievement tests, report card outcomes, and other sources both guided their conversations and informed their decisions. A principal, for example, discussed how "taking a step back and starting with our evidence" was an essential part of the vision-building process, noting that she had shared all the data from the report card stems with staff and that it became "pretty clear, then, you know, where we need to go". Another principal noted this as well, mentioning that "when we started to analyze the data there was still that gap, so we decided to continue with our focus on writing". One principal also discussed how staff "looking at the data, looking at the evidence of longitudinal information about reading scores" helped them all recognize "the fact that there was definitely some work that needed to be done around reading and teaching reading". Teachers in the focus groups also talked about how principals used student data to guide conversations about the School Development Plan. As one teacher explained,

> We looked at the data of the PATs (provincial achievement tests) and report card data as a group and then just looked at the stems to see where we thought the most improvement was needed. And on this day we compared math and literacy trying to decide whether or not we would have a math goal or a writing one.

Teachers discussed how beginning with student data helped them see their work as connected and responsive to student need:

> It's that whole process of we're adapting and adjusting. We didn't know what this year was going to look like. We've got new students that we weren't expecting and new students coming all the time. So we're adjusting what we're doing in our building. It's our recognition of what our building and our teachers and our students actually need.

Finding 1.3: Developing Shared Strategies and Expectations. With any goal-setting work it is not enough to simply articulate the intended outcome; it is also important to identify the progressive steps and strategies required for working towards and achieving the goal, as well as the expectations or measures of success. This is true of the School Development Plan work as well, as a significant portion of the process and the document itself is dedicated to identifying the strategies and measures within each goal. Considering how the goal will be achieved may be even more important than articulating the goal, as these strategies are the "daily work that teachers will undertake to improve the learning of children" according to a principal. It is essential, then, that these strategies be carefully considered, discussed, and chosen so that everyone is "paddling in the same direction" as one teacher commented. As another principal noted, it was the common strategies "we're going to be very intentional about" this year because it was, in her opinion, a lack of shared strategies and expectations that limited school progress

last year – "reflecting on last year, part of the issue was that everyone was evaluating differently".

Without some common strategies and expectations, as one teacher stated, "we were all in different boats, and we all had different ideas, and we were all paddling in different directions at different times and just sort of bobbing around aimlessly". Teachers in the three focus groups identified their interest in having some common instructional strategies and expectations toward the shared vision, recognizing that this would be "helping to build coherence (when) we all have a similar approach". One teacher identified the instructional and assessment strategies and expectations that staff were collaborating on to improve student writing:

> We're all doing school wide 'writes' and as grade teams we have been tasked to meet and create the 'I can' statements for the writing. And we're creating a rubric that is common. So we started off with coming up with 'I can' statements and moved it into rubric pieces and so now all of the different 'I can' and rubric ideas have been shared out to the staff so that we can see the different grade team ideas and things like that. So my responsibility as a classroom teacher then is to look at the specifics from the 'I can' and talk about them and use them with students.

Teachers also described that attending to these shared strategies and expectations was a responsibility that they "take very seriously as contributing to our shared vision (of) developing students' literacy and numeracy skills".

However, while coming to a consensus about goals is easier because this is clearly guided by student data, identifying shared strategies and expectations is often more difficult because, as one teacher noted, figuring out *how* the goal will be achieved is "more challenging because everyone comes from different backgrounds and comes with different thoughts, theories and

things like that". Similarly, when asked if there was a shared understanding of specific methods or instructional strategies that would be implemented toward forwarding the school goal in her school, another teacher commented:

> As far as teaching goes, I think we can all be a bit divided on that shared vision, so some of that is a work in progress. I think there are some of us who share a vision, and there are some of us who share a different vision of what teaching might look like in the school.

Participating principals also recognized the increased complexity of building shared strategies and expectations, with one principal stating the following:

> And so that part (setting goals) is pretty straightforward. This (considering common strategies) was much more of a conversation with everyone about whether we wanted to incorporate or focus in on 'these' strategies. So that was a much longer conversation with staff because again there was a lot more flexibility of where we could go.

Despite the recognized complexity of agreeing upon common teaching practices within the School Development Plan, principals and teachers both noted the importance of identifying "those good supportive strategies" (principal) so that everyone had a "shared common vision as to what we need to do" (teacher) to improve student learning.

Theme Two: Ensuring Quality Teaching

Good teaching is at the heart of student achievement, and ensuring quality teaching is one of the core responsibilities of school leaders (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011). Focusing on this dimension of ensuring teaching quality also has a moderate impact (0.42 effect size) on student outcomes (Robinson, 2011), and it is essential that the focus of this work is on reflecting on and improving instructional strategies and teaching

practices that support student learning. Interview questions asked participants to consider how teaching practices were understood, shared and changing in their schools, as well as to identify structures and supports in place to ensure and improve teaching quality. Three common leadership actions emerged through data analysis: developing a common understanding of quality teaching; visiting classrooms and providing feedback to teachers; and working in the company of peers.

Finding 2.1: Developing a Common Understanding of Quality Teaching. Quality teaching is about relating the things that teachers do in their classrooms to improved student outcomes (Robinson, 2011; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011; Wiliam, 2016), and as one principal stated, "to me teacher progress is best seen through student progress". As previously noted, identifying common instructional methods and strategies that all teachers will implement in pursuit of School Development Plan goals is an important aspect of building a shared vision, for "just as students need to know what success looks like and why, so do teachers" (Timperley, 2011, p. 128). Principal conversations combined with an examination of the three School Development Plans revealed that all three schools were actively using the principles of the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* (Friesen, 2009) to guide the work to achieve identified goals. Each of the principals spoke about the school instructional focus on designing learning for student engagement (principle 1) and all had identified teachers using ongoing formative assessment (principle 4) as an integral strategy to forward student learning within their development plans. All three principals also cited that supporting teachers to understand and use this framework to guide their practice --one of the responsibilities that these principals were tasked with as part of their professional learning sessions -- was having a positive impact on teaching and learning in their schools. For example, a principal described how staff at her school

used the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework*, as a "guiding document in our School Development Plan work", describing how she had teachers "zero in on the Teaching Effectiveness Framework" to start reflecting on their own practice and consider how the different principles were "going to come to life in their practice and live in their classrooms". Another principal also spoke about the use of the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* as school staff collaborated to build shared vision and common strategies through a focus on designing curricular tasks and being responsive to student needs. About teachers, she asserted:

> a lot of times they know the kinds of things that I'm looking for when our focus is on the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework*. My lens was often, "so how is this a bigger picture task, and how is it being made more meaningful to the kids?"

The third principal further described how understanding and implementing the principles within the framework had changed teaching practices in the school:

> So, the growth that I saw in teachers over time was thinking less about delivery of curriculum…because the places that they allowed themselves to go really broadened. They initially were very lockstep with the curriculum and you could tell by the month what they were going to be doing…and now there is a huge difference in the way that children are perceived and how learning is designed for them.

All participating teachers, when asked about the role of the of the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* in their practice, described how impactful this framework had been in their work of intentionally designing meaningful, academically-rigorous tasks and using ongoing formative assessment to be responsive to student needs, abilities, and interests. Teachers also spoke about the importance of the principal bringing forward the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* as a

guiding document, and to support them to explore and embed the principles of effective teaching in their practice. This was highlighted by one teacher who claimed that the framework had

> changed the way I think about what I teach, more than anything, becoming more discipline based in all tasks. With this principal I had so much leeway to try so many things within the curriculum, and having the principal be a part of that, allowing me to do and try anything, that's exciting. I was doing Science and Social Studies and just went with it. There was so much freedom in task design.

One teacher described the impact of using the framework as follows:

> It would be profound. For me that would be profound…. I think it means to me personally, that it's a recipe for success…. I see it as a series of practices (and) those five things changed the way that I see and view education, and how I work with kids in general. And the way I want to work moving forward.

Another teacher further described how the framework was used in her practice of designing tasks and how it supported student engagement and learning, noting that

> how you design your learning is obviously going to affect classroom learning. Instructional practice should lead to an outcome that is going to further students' knowledge, not just be busy work or rows and rows of repetitive work if they already know it and it's not connected to anything. So designing tasks should be intentional to engage students and have them understand why they are doing this [work].

Another teacher also cited the significant impact of using the framework to guide practice, identifying that her practice had changed from a focus on covering curriculum to a focus on teaching the children in front of her:

> My teaching has changed so much. I'm definitely much more focused on the assessment piece and using assessment for learning to inform where my kids needs to go. I have a Program of Studies to follow, and in times past I probably would have checked back and then added to my plan and then checked back again and added more to my plan. Now it's a guide. I've glanced at it a few times but I'm starting from where my little learners are…there is that formative assessment piece as opposed to being driven by the Program of Studies. Yes, it informs my work and legally I'm obligated to teach it, but that's not where they're at. My approach is much more personalized I would say. The *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* is something that I've just come to live, breathe, eat, dream and sleep because it's become so ingrained that these are the things that make for effective teaching.

Finding 2.2: Visiting Classrooms and Providing Feedback to Teachers. Having a common understanding of the principles of effective teaching and instructional practices that will support student learning is one aspect of a principal's responsibility to ensure quality teaching, but knowing how these come to life in each classroom is perhaps more important. When asked to consider how they learn about the teaching practices in their schools, each of the three principals discussed the importance of spending time in classrooms, asking questions and providing feedback to teachers about what they observed happening. For example, one principal participant shared the following:

> Observations and conversations. I mean obviously we can do things like surveys and that sort of thing, but I think surveys are so contrived. You get much more information from conversation. And if you hear between the lines, you hear much more. I had a principal who told me once that it was his job to irritate me, to be the grain of sand in my oyster

> shell and I have to turn it into a pearl. And that's with me every day and that's what I like to do. I ask a lot of questions that I don't give answers to. And it drives some people crazy because they are looking for answers but they know the answer and I give them credit for knowing the answers. I hold them capable. I believe they're professionals.

One principal discussed how her presence in the classroom is becoming more 'normal' for teachers:

> [I'm] trying to be visible in the classrooms. Most teachers don't even notice me in there. They don't stop what they're doing and ask if I want something. I mean, I've had some teachers who've come to me and say, "you know, it's really weird having you come visit my classroom because I've never had a principal who visited my room and it weirds me out." And it's like, just get over it because I'm going to be here. And the rest of them carry on and I've made it very clear that if I want something I will let them know; otherwise I'm just watching and I'm just here with the kids.

A second principal reiterated that teacher practice was best seen through student learning, and that being present in the classroom was necessary to understand teaching and learning. She identified that she was experimenting with capturing student voice about their learning during her classroom visits, then sharing and discussing student thoughts with teachers.

> We're (principal and assistant principal) trying just to pop in and say to a student, "What are you learning about and why?" And then just capturing their comments on a label and sticking it in (teacher's reflective journal) so the teachers know what is said.

She goes on to discuss the importance of using these classroom visits and conversations to support teaching practice:

> For teachers' practice to change they need feedback. So how do I give teachers feedback effectively and often, not just through the teacher evaluation process? I think it's about observations and the feedback and the conversations, which is the feedback. They need that and they want to hear it and they appreciate it. How does it get embedded in practice? Well, only if you're living it and talking about it and trying it out and giving them feedback.

Although principals described that they valued their opportunities to be present in classrooms and provide feedback to teachers, they also identified the challenges of doing this work on a regular basis, outside of the teacher evaluation process. For example:

> I've been visiting the classrooms and I've sat in on a few of the team meetings. Not many. A couple I've sat in on I've irritated, asked questions, and seen some really cool results. It's (being in classrooms) not as much as I want. I'm trying to get out more. I mean, we have five full evaluations and I get to be in those classrooms regularly, but I still don't feel like I'm in other classrooms enough.

Similarly, one of the principals identified that providing teachers with feedback is a personal goal:

> One area for me personally that I want to improve at is, although I am quite aware of what goes on around the building, I would like to improve how I provide teachers with feedback about what I am seeing, and to become more consistent with and at it because as you well know, your days get going and it's all you can do to get out there for a while.

Regardless of the challenges, all of the principals recognized the importance of being present in classrooms and providing feedback to teachers as an essential component of their leadership responsibility to ensure quality teaching and optimum learning for all students.

Teachers from two of the schools also spoke positively about their principals being present in their classrooms and receiving feedback about their work, and described that they felt that having opportunities to discuss and reflect upon the feedback received was having a positive impact on their teaching practice. Interestingly, in both of these schools, the principals spoke about teachers having personal journals in which they would reflect on principal feedback and professional learning, and they also identified that time was regularly set aside for this reflection. Also, it is important to note that the principal of the third school, where teachers didn't mention principal visits and feedback, was the principal who identified that this was a personal area of professional growth. Teachers in the two schools discussed, in positive terms, their principals visiting their classrooms, providing feedback, and ensuring opportunity for follow-up reflection or conversation:

> Our admin team will visit our classrooms and sit down and chat with students about what they're learning and why it is important…they'll add their comments, reflections, and insights…so the visual journal is just a beautiful place where you get acknowledged for your good work and you feel appreciated and it's a nice reminder too that someone else is recognizing the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* in your work.

Another teacher from this same school added:

> Our admin team sat down and talked with everyone on our staff and had kind of a meeting to discuss what we had reflected on. And it wasn't a formal meeting or anything else like that, but an opportunity to have a conversation and share.

They both agreed that this process of observation, feedback and reflection

> helps establish that tone and that there is that expectation in our building. Really, it's no different than a teacher for his or her own students and our administration always says

> that…"our teachers are our students". So it would be the same if you had kids do all these activities or all these essays or whatever, and then never read their work or followed through. The kids in time would learn that, "no, that's not important, it doesn't matter so why put the effort in?" So, the administrators, when they take the time to read your comments and take time to sit down and chat with you, then you know it's important.

This teacher summarized the value of principal observations, feedback, and conversations in this way:

> So you're focusing on how admin support teachers to support students. Coming from several different backgrounds I just want to say that the admin support and the admin taking an interest in what you're doing makes a difference for me. And also, if there's something that you feel you can work on, you feel the safety that you can go to your admin and say, "hey, let's work together on this. Do you have some suggestions?"

Finding 2.3: Providing Opportunities to Work in the Company of Peers. Principle five of the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* (Friesen, 2009) describes the importance of teachers working and learning collaboratively with colleagues:

> It is critical for teachers to have a familiarity with one another's work that comes with frequent conversations of a professional nature centered on the work, access to each other's classrooms, and collaborative planning time. It is also clear that as self-reflective as a teacher may be, receiving constructive feedback from one's peers is imperative in order to improve teaching.

Each of the principals talked about how they were "capitalizing on the professional learning work the system is doing with the new teacher inductees and the Learning Leaders" through strategic partnering for mentorship and through assignment of non-classroom based teachers,

usually Learning Leaders, to work with teachers or teaching teams in specific ways such as peer coaching. When asked to consider how teaching teams were intentionally structured to both mentor new teachers and bring new ideas to more experienced teachers, a principal commented that she partnered together "a teacher who had a very, very strong literacy background and two newbies". She also commented that she had had noticed that "some of the strongest growth was in this team and the newbies, as well as the veterans, in spite of being in a triple class, all took on the challenge and the kids benefitted". As another principal noted, these strategic staffing decisions provided opportunities for all teachers to examine practice as they were "being pushed and challenged and knowing that everybody is feeling the same way". The principals all spoke about how they were leveraging the role of school Learning Leaders as well to work alongside teachers to support design and instruction in specific areas. For example:

> We're just looking at sustainable practice as our goal, you know, changing practice so that it is sustainable. So we're creating this position of a point five teacher who will work alongside teachers. Just sort of a lead teacher who can lead us through the professional learning and resources around the Indigenous Learners strategy. I have another teacher, a Learning Leader, who works alongside teachers with reading and designing reading instruction because our focus is on improving student reading achievement.

The principals described that the teachers or Learning Leaders not assigned to classrooms were purposefully chosen based on their strengths. One principal stated, for example, that she

> strategically selected the Learning Leader that was attending our ASD work with the area…. looking at that person and thinking, "you have strength here and I need you to have credibility with your colleagues in this area to move the work forward"…. have two other Learning Leaders, one is working with the Learning Commons model and one who

> is doing the Design the Shift work. We are leveraging everyone I can think of, focusing on learning.

Similarly, another principal said:

> We have people not assigned to classes, such as the Learning Leader and I said, "I need you to move teacher practice" and so they'll be part of the planning and they'll be bringing inquiry in through that design.

The principals also described that working in the company of peers is new and uncomfortable, as many teachers are used to working alone, and that "it's a hard culture to shift" according to one principal. They discussed that there was some resistance from some teachers to this collaborative approach, as one principal described: "I know that you can never get 100% buy-in, but you can sure get close, so that's the goal, to capitalize on the energy and the willingness of those teachers who want to move". Another principal explained that she had at first been frustrated with how teachers were not utilizing the Learning Leader as had been intended until she recognized that

> the teachers don't know how to call her in. And so she's not utilized the way that she would be if we were further into inquiry. My hope was that by doing that and releasing another teacher in the afternoon who has a different skill set and relates better to the littler people (division one students), that between those two people they would be invited into classrooms more and that hasn't happened as much. They're pushing their way in. But my hope was that, being that they knew the people and they knew the curriculum and what they had to offer was valuable, that they would be sought after. And they have been by a couple of teachers.

She further reflected that change takes time and that she needed to recognize that shifting practice is a "journey, not an event. So, I'm constantly forcing myself to think "ok, they don't

know that yet. They don't know that yet. They will know that, but they just don't know it yet. So just slow down."

Interestingly, when asked about the structures and supports available in their schools to further their work, all participating teachers identified the importance and value of having opportunities to work collaboratively with peers. One teacher, for example, described how her practice had evolved because she was working with

> a wonderful team partner who was much more inquiry-based and we just had a great partnership and I just went with some of the stuff that she said to "leave, back off, just let go." I mean, I was more the stand and deliver, focused on what would happen next. And then I took that step back like she said and just found a whole new world of teaching that I loved.

Further, when discussing the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* (Friesen, 2009), this teacher specifically identified "it's the last principle, where you can learn in the company of peers, that I just wish that we as a teaching community could be more on board with".

One teacher described how she had just capitalized on an opportunity to work collaboratively with the new Learning Leader in her school:

> What's recently happened in the school is we have had a teacher been released for a couple of hours in the afternoon every day to become a liaison for those kinds of supports…. She can look at how we're planning our projects, she can work with us to pull in information that we may not have access to or not know where to get, so that's her role, to support us in those kinds of things and that's new. So I just met with her the other day. She's going to start coming in and work with my students.

Another teacher iterated how much learning occurs when working as a member of a team:

> I find that I'm learning lots from my new team. We have a lot of different teaching styles, so in conversations it's like, "oh, I've never thought of that" or "that's a totally different angle than I would have taken". So, I find that I'm receiving lots of support by sharing of ideas. And also in working in a team situation I'm able to see how my other team partner works and looking at how we can collaborate to build a better environment in our classroom space and yet allow for each other's teaching styles to come through…. That's been challenging in some cases, but I think we're working on compromise and those things are learning opportunities for everybody. I think we learn equally from each other.

The value of working in the company of peers was also evident in other conversations, such as in this exchange between two members of a focus group:

> I think there definitely exists a culture of learning but also a culture of curiosity because people are generating new ideas and are willing to put themselves, their classrooms and their practice out to the rest of the group, whether it's at a professional development session or by opening up their classrooms and inviting colleagues to come in. I think our work is much more transparent and open, and so not only do we have these opportunities to work with other people in our building, but we can see what other teachers are doing. I think it provokes curiosity and interest.

> I agree, and we were talking a little bit about that today, as instructional leaders how we could start guiding some of those things. You know, an informal instructional leader could be anyone in our school in how they're supporting other teachers and we're starting to feel more comfortable with that, showing teachers other ways to do things in the classroom.

> I feel a tremendous sense of responsibility as a classroom teacher. I have a responsibility to the system, to my school, to my students to be an instructional leader and to help grow teachers' practice and my own. As an informal leader I can still coach and offer suggestions and ideas and ask questions. We all bring different strengths and ideas.

This idea that we each have different strengths and ideas to share, and that we have the responsibility to both support others' practice and grow our own, was eloquently described in this teacher's metaphorical statement:

> I always think of that quote that it takes a village to raise a child. But I genuinely believe it takes a village to raise a teacher as well because I think without giving feedback to my peers or asking for their feedback, I'm nothing. Like, I need that, I need to hear what they have to say because 14 or 15 minds are a lot better than one…. I'm like a puzzle piece in the big greater puzzle, we're all connected and contributing.

Theme Three: Leading Teacher Learning

To ensure continuous professional growth and development, adult learning in schools must be given the same priority as student learning so teachers can continually build professional knowledge and refine professional skills. Research demonstrates that leading teacher learning and development has a significant impact (0.84 effect size) on student outcomes (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008) when teachers and leaders work collaboratively to build professional knowledge. Participants were asked to consider how professional learning was facilitated in their schools, as well as to describe the impact of professional learning on teaching practice. Based on

data analysis, three common actions were found: building professional capital; sharing leadership of professional learning; and providing school-based professional learning opportunities.

Finding 3.1: Building Professional Capital. Leading teacher learning to enhance teaching and ensure optimal learning opportunities for all students improves the quality of teaching not only at the individual teacher level, but also collectively across the school. This increases the professional capital within the building, which is a necessary component of continuous improvement across the school, the impetus of the school development planning process. To build professional capital in pursuit of school goals, as one principal remarked, it is "important to be zeroing in. We have to stick to our School Development Plan goals when thinking about professional learning". Teachers also appreciated when professional learning was connected to the work that was being expected. For example:

> [the] way we've set up our model is starting to have more clarity…having that overall vision and coming back to it regularly…. has helped tie in what people are seeing and I think there's more buy in from teachers. The learning already is amazing and I think it's just helping to build coherence among our staff. We all have a similar approach.

Indeed, one teacher noted that, when professional learning was not connected to the goals and strategies within the School Development Plan, "staff often feels like professional development is a one-off…. and that doesn't help people to get on board with some of those things".

All three principals recognized not only that professional learning must be linked to School Development Plan goals and strategies, but that it should also connect to and impact teaching practice. According to one principal:

> No longer are we doing little 'parachute in' professional development. We want to do this ongoing professional learning. Because you know otherwise you're in a session in the

> Learning Commons, professional learning, and then you're back to the reality of the classroom. But if this becomes part of the classroom, the professional learning lives in the classroom, then I think you're on your way to change.

Another principal, considering the importance of connected professional learning, shared that "the thing that stresses me out the most is ensuring that what I design for *them* is meaningful, makes a difference and most of all impacts what happens with the kids".

Finding 3.2: Sharing Leadership of Professional Learning. Robinson (2011) advocated that leadership involvement in professional learning must extend beyond simply organizing, resourcing and delivering professional development sessions, and that leaders themselves must be active learners as well, collegially learning with and from teachers. Principals, although they are often present in classrooms, are generally somewhat removed from the day-to-day issues, questions, and problems of practice that arise, which means that they may also "not have the answers to these questions or a practical understanding of the newest instructional methods or strategies". This means, according to another principal, that leading professional learning is "a shared responsibility. Sometimes I lead professional development, sometimes we bring in an expert, sometimes it is Learning Leaders or teachers". One of the teachers also commented on the different people who had lead professional learning sessions in the school this year:

> We have had the literacy cohort team in and we have had a Learning Commons person in to show us how to integrate more Maker Space stuff into our tasks to increase engagement. We have also had PD lead by the Learning Leaders and the admin this year.

One of the principals noted that the shared responsibility extends also to the planning of professional learning:

> One of the big shifts here is that I don't think I should be planning all of the professional learning. I think teachers deserve to look after their own learning. So, we developed a PD committee and teachers took it on as leaders. They have lead sessions and sought out their own sources.

One principal felt that teachers were more engaged in professional development when sessions were led by colleagues, noting that the "level of respect is sky-high when it's their own colleagues". This principal also stated:

> What I'm finding most valuable is just incorporating all teachers formal and informal who can lead this learning for everyone. We've got teachers and learning leaders who are leading the work and learning in our school. We've got all these teachers involved in this (system) learning and they can come back to the school and lead it, share it, live it. It's fantastic.

Even new teachers are involved in leading professional learning, sharing what they have learned at the district induction sessions:

> Teachers go off and learn but bring it back and share. For example, there are three or four new teachers who are part of the new teacher CBE learning initiative. They have opportunities to learn alongside other new teachers from experienced teachers. They might not lead a whole PD day, but they are given time at a staff meeting to talk about what they are learning and what they're doing and to share new ideas and strategies. Same with our Learning Leaders who attend system and independent professional development sessions. It's always worked into PD days or staff conversations, so everybody has an opportunity to benefit from their learning and professional development.

Teachers further identified their appreciation of colleagues leading professional development:

> We are all starting to see that we are all experts on something and we all bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to this school. Everyone has a chance to be the expert on a particular topic. We're all leaders.

Finding 3.3: Providing School-Based Professional Learning Opportunities.

Interestingly, while three of the eight teachers briefly mentioned that they enjoyed pursuing external professional development opportunities personally, all teachers identified the importance of school-based professional learning opportunities as these "support our whole school approach" according to one of the teachers. One principal noted the responsibility of providing time for professional learning within the school, recognizing that it's "important that I ensure I'm giving time at school for you to grow your professional practice and to support your kids". Although participants briefly mentioned professional development sessions, much of the conversation about professional learning in their buildings focused on Professional Learning Community (PLC) conversations, which had been a focus within the principal professional learning series as a process to examine problems of practice.

Participants discussed the evolution of the PLC process in their schools, and identified how these conversations were supporting their practice. For example, one principal discussed how recognizing that "having them [PLCs] be grade teams tended to turn into planning meetings", prompted the staff to explore different models, finding that "one of the most successful models for PLCs was driven by teachers. They brought up a problem of practice and it wasn't built around a particular learning. It was built around the kids". Teachers highlighted the value of focusing on a 'problem of practice' and described how the PLC processes in their schools were supporting their professional learning, with two teachers commenting:

> PLCs provide me an opportunity to work through my problems of practice with people that are kind of in the same mindset and that are working on the same goal. By having that PLC that's focused on those people we're kind of working together and coaching each other on what we can change.

> They have become much more cyclical in the way that they are intended where you bring together work samples or problems of practice and you sort of hash it out, get some ideas and go back and try it, come back and share more ideas. It's much more collaborative and interactive. I think people are also starting to feel more comfortable in their PLCs to bring forward work that is not their best. I think people have really started to realize the benefits they can take out of a PLC and they're starting to feel comfortable saying, "this is where I'm at, work with me."

While participants noted that professional learning opportunities such as PLC conversations contributed to continuous practical learning and school improvement, there was acknowledgment that this work was strengthened when trusting collegial relationships were in place.

Theme Four: Developing Relational Trust

Underlying all leadership work is the need for school leaders to build a culture of trust in their schools so that teachers can honestly open their practice to one another and can learn with and from their peers (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). Trust is fundamental to collaboration and professional dialogue as it allows people to feel comfortable with each other, and to work and learn more effectively with together. Relationships are at the heart of this work. Within this study participants were asked to consider the adult relationships in their schools, to describe how these relationships were intentionally built, and

how these trusting relationships supported professional conversations of support and challenge with colleagues. Data analysis emerged two common actions: intentionally building professional relationships; and engaging in challenging conversations.

Finding 4.1: Intentionally Building Professional Relationships. All participants identified the importance of intentionally building professional relationships, perhaps best summarized by this principal:

> Relationships are key, key, key, and I always identify them as working relationships. It's relationships through the work. But in order to do this kind of work, they [teachers] do become very vulnerable. You know, you're wandering into their classrooms and it's unscheduled, unplanned. I can't schedule these because you just can't. And so we're flying in whenever. We see the relationships are key to the work to build the trust to make the work visible. It's all about transparency. If that relational trust is there, then they will feel strong enough for their practice to be visible. And from there this practice is shared and changed. It can't change if it's not shared and if it's not talked about and it's not visible…. We have to put ourselves on the table first and be willing to share and be willing for our practice to be visible. If they don't know what you're thinking, people become very nervous. But if you're in there and you're sharing your thoughts then they know exactly what you're thinking and then they're more comfortable.

The other two principals also shared how they have worked to intentionally build relationships. One principal stated that "the door is always open, without judgment" and that together "there is lots of laughter. And sometimes tears. You cry together, you laugh together. Let them know I'm a person too". She further discussed the importance of being respectful, treating staff members like professionals, and recognizing their hard work. She also shared that

"if I make a mistake, I own it, and when there are difficulties I work really hard to be respectful about addressing those difficulties". Similarly, another principal identified that relationships were built on getting to "know what's happening with you, not just about work", and described how she set aside time to meet with each staff member, how she encouraged them to ask her questions and share ideas, and how she encouraged staff to have fun together. She commented that she has heard "many times how easy I am to talk to, and staff are coming, closing the door and talking to me in ways that they say they haven't done with the principal before". She also talked about letting herself be vulnerable and that she wanted staff to see her as an equal, stating that "you can't expect people to have a relationship with you if you think you're better than them. And I'm not better than them. It's just the title of the job".

Teachers also talked about the importance of trusting professional relationships in their work, with one teacher commenting that "I think that all meaningful change happens within a relationship. And I think that's just a life thing. I don't think that anybody does anything unless they think that somebody actually cares". She further described that, in her role as a Learning Leader, she is intentional about building relationships by working alongside teachers, being empathetic, and supporting them however she can:

> So sometimes just showing empathy and being alongside them for better or for worse seems to have really worked for me. I have a chair in my office and it's like, 'You can come in and cry. If you just need a moment you can come on it, and I can continue to do my work if that will make you happy, or we can sit here and chat about it'…. And I'll often, any feedback that is good, I'll email the teacher and cc the admin so that there is always that piece that 'your good work hasn't gone unnoticed'. Remembering that they're human too.

Another teacher described how she tries to sit with different people during staff meetings and professional learning sessions, and how she talks with the principal and assistant principal, "making sure that if I have a question I will ask it, I guess, instead of just trying to assume things". She also described the importance of being social with colleagues and "attend the things that aren't necessarily work, like coming to the family dance or whatever, and hanging out with the other teachers with their families".

One group of teachers discussed how they felt that their principal was very intentional about setting up opportunities for staff to build relationships, identifying that teachers new to the school were connected with other teachers who could support and mentor them, "so they have someone to turn to and ask questions, beyond their grade team partners". They also talked about how the administrative team would assign different groupings for PD days, and how they encouraged staff to come together as a community to celebrate birthdays or to have lunch together. As one teacher commented,

> I think our admin team is very intentional in their importance of how they view relationships and I think it's just their approach. They sort of establish a culture, a tone, that relationships are important, and we might disagree, we might not be the best of friends, but we're all professionals. We're all adults. You know, we're here for one common purpose and so we're going to work together with that in mind. And just care and trust and honesty, it's just modeled.

Finding 4.2: Engaging in Challenging Conversations. All participants were asked to describe how, within these trusting relationships, they engaged in professional conversations that both supported and challenged colleagues. Principals recognize that challenging and questioning practice is difficult, but part of their work. As one principal reflected,

> I think we can go back to *Student Centered Leadership* on that one with those open-to-learning conversations because yes, we have to have those conversations over time. So, I think that when that trust is there, that relational trust is there, people are just more willing for that open-to-learning conversation. Otherwise they're just very defensive and closed, and then there's no learning. But if they're open to the learning that comes from the relational trust, then you can get to practice changing.

One of the other principals shared that how these conversations are engaged in

> depends on the people. I've irritated a lot of people, people that are really open to it. The people that are willing to be challenged and pushed. I've also pushed a few people who their practice needed to be shaken up a little bit…. I challenge the wall that goes up when they're asked to try something new.

Interestingly, all of the teacher participants commented that they appreciated feedback and questioning about their practice from others, but also talked about how difficult it was for them to engage in difficult conversations with colleagues. One of the teachers, a Learning Leader at her school, talked about it being

> hard to build those relationships where you can have those more difficult conversations. And it's difficult in the Learning Leader role to have those conversations as well, you know, it's not really my job to adjudicate teachers…. I find that when people are talking to me about failing or feeling like something is going on, it's a very emotional piece and it's not really where we can weave through "What could you try differently?" I find it either becomes teacher blame or student blame and neither one puts us in this beautiful place to have a nice reflective practice conversation.

Another teacher talked about how engaging in these conversations had been an area of personal reflection and learning.

> I learned to take my time with those conversations. I've learned to slow down and spend more time having those conversations. And then I've also spent a lot of time focused on meeting with those teachers and letting them share their concerns and discuss what their challenges are and what they think is working and what they think isn't working. And even when it comes down to planning each individual project we have a conversation and we talk about what worked for this and what worked for that. And I also have just tried really hard not to defend. I'm just trying to take that feedback and go with it.

Similarly, one teacher described her work in having those challenging conversations:

> I think for myself those questions are hard, and I've had to work through my own personal quirks and professional challenges and whatnot, but I've learned to start with questions and guide a whole difficult conversation through the use of questions because it puts the thinking or the responsibility on the other person as opposed to myself. It comes across as less condescending and judgmental and it takes the evaluative factor out of it, and I find when I ask questions I can learn a whole lot about the situation and the person's perspective. And hopefully, through my questions, the other person will work through the problem on their own without even really needing my input or my suggestions…. Sometimes I find that I have to rehearse a difficult conversation. This enables me to anticipate or have in mind what it is that I want to bring to the conversation. I find if I have those reactive conversations because something just bothered me, I do the same thing. I need to give myself time to think it through, come at it in a different time and different space.

Asking hard questions and discussing teaching practices with colleagues can be challenging, as identified by participants, but they also identified that these conversations were an important part of their daily collaborative work to improve student learning.

Summary

This chapter began with a review of the purpose and rationale for this research inquiry, and an overview of the case. I explained how, in order to understand perceived leadership actions and the impact of these actions on teaching practice and professional learning, data from the three individual interviews and the three focus group conversations was coded. Additionally, I related how the School Development Plans of the three schools and my reflective journal notes were examined in an effort to develop a holistic triangulated picture of the case. The findings were presented in clear narrative form using verbatim quotes to provide an opportunity to better understand the reality of the research participants. Narrative data were synthesized and connected through explanatory text. Where possible, the emphasis was on allowing participants to speak for themselves, and as such, quotations were taken directly from participant transcripts in an attempt to provide multiple perspectives of principals and teachers from the three schools.

The research findings were organized following the study's conceptual framework, with data analysis surfacing eleven common actions connected to the four aspects of leadership being examined. Within the first leadership aspect investigated, building a shared vision, three common actions emerged as findings: involving teachers in building the shared vision; using student data to inform the vision; and developing shared strategies and expectations. The second leadership aspect examined, ensuring quality teaching, found three common actions as well: developing a common understanding of quality teaching; visiting classrooms and providing feedback to teachers; and providing opportunities to work in the company of peers. Considering

how teacher learning is lead resulted in three findings: building professional capital, sharing leadership of professional learning; and providing school-based professional learning opportunities. Finally, examining how relational trust develops identified two leadership actions: intentionally building professional relationships; and, engaging in challenging conversations.

While this chapter presented the findings of this case study by organizing data from the study into a descriptive narrative, the purpose of the next chapter is to analyze, interpret, and synthesize these findings to build a more holistic understanding of how principals perceive they enact aspects of a Student-Centered Leadership model (Robinson, 2011), and how these actions are perceived by both principals and teachers as impacting teaching practice and professional learning.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, AND SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this case study was to explore, with a sample of elementary school principals and teachers from a large urban school district, their perceptions of how principals enact aspects of student-centered leadership (Robinson, 2011) to impact teaching practice in their schools. My rationale for examining this topic was to better understand the specific concrete leadership actions that elementary principals take to improve teaching and learning in their buildings. A better understanding of this work would not only strengthen my personal leadership, but would also allow other school leaders to identify specific leadership actions that may support quality teaching and student success. To explore these daily leadership actions and the impact of these actions on teaching practice, two over-arching questions framed this inquiry: (1) How do school principals perceive they enact student-centered leadership practices? (2) What do school leaders and teachers perceive the impact of these student-centered leadership practices to be on teaching practice? For this case study I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with three elementary school principals who had been engaged in a professional learning series examining Robinson's (2011) *Student-Centered Leadership* as a primary resource for improving teaching practice and student learning. Focus group conversations were also held with volunteering teachers from each of these schools. Additionally, I collected each school's annual School Development Plan as supplemental evidence and kept a researcher journal. Through the individual and focus group interviews I attempted to gather descriptive evidence of leadership practices and impact on teaching practice.

Specific research questions focused on how principals enacted aspects of Robinson's (2011) student-centered leadership model, as well as how these actions were perceived by both

principals and teachers as impacting teaching practice and professional learning in their schools. Within each of these aspects, several common actions emerged as noted here:

1. Building a shared vision
    - Finding 1.1: Involving Teachers in Building the Shared Vision
    - Finding 1.2: Using Student Data to Inform the Vision
    - Finding 1.3: Developing Shared Strategies and Expectations
2. Ensuring quality teaching
    - Finding 2.1: Developing a Common Understanding of Quality Teaching
    - Finding 2.2: Visiting Classrooms and Providing Feedback to Teachers
    - Finding 2.3: Providing Opportunities to Work in the Company of Peers
3. Leading teacher learning
    - Finding 3.1: Building Professional Capital
    - Finding 3.2: Sharing Leadership of Professional Learning
    - Finding 3.3: Providing School-Based Professional Learning Opportunities
4. Developing relational trust
    - Finding 4.1: Intentionally Building Professional Relationships
    - Finding 4.2: Engaging in Challenging Conversations

Chapter four presented the findings of this case study by organizing data from various sources into the above categories to create a descriptive narrative of participant perceptions and understandings. The purpose of this chapter is to provide interpretive insights into these findings, and here I attempt to analyze, synthesize and build a more holistic understanding of the case study. This chapter concludes by considering the impact of potential researcher bias on the analysis and interpretation of findings.

Analysis, Interpretation, and Synthesis

This section contains an analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of the findings, and is grounded in the study's research purpose and questions. In analysis a researcher seeks out connecting patterns and themes that may emerge from the findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Merriam, 1998, 2009). As a secondary level of analysis, the relevant theory and research is brought in, as these themes are compared and contrasted to issues raised by the literature. Throughout this process, five elements framed the data analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). First, I was seeking to understand the connections among the experiences of the research participants, including myself as an elementary school principal tasked with instructional leadership. Second, I aspired to see the ways in which I as researcher and principal understood and could explain these connections. Third, I sought out unexpected as well as anticipated relationships and connections. Fourth, I looked for consistency or inconsistency within educational research literature and across interviewee responses. Finally, I explored the ways in which the data went beyond the literature. The discussion takes into account research literature on instructional leadership, focusing on four aspects Robinson's (2011) student-centered leadership model: building a shared vision, ensuring quality teaching, leading teacher learning, and developing relational trust. The implications of these findings are intended to augment the understanding of how principals might enact these aspects of instructional leadership into their daily work and how such actions may impact teaching quality and professional learning in elementary schools. As I chose to structure my findings by theme in Chapter Four, it made sense to continue this structure in this chapter.

Building a Shared Vision. The importance of building a shared school vision focused on improved student outcomes is well documented in educational research (e.g., Fullan, 2014;

Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011). Schools are complex organizations, with school leaders and teachers faced with multiple pressures, agendas, and competing ideas daily. In Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe's (2008) seminal work, it is noted that building a shared vision is an essential leadership action because

> goals provide a sense of purpose and priority in an environment where a multitude of tasks can seem equally important and overwhelming. Clear goals focus attention and effort and enable individuals, groups, and organizations to use feedback to regulate their performance. (p. 661)

These authors also argue that "without clear goals, staff effort and initiatives can be dissipated in multiple agendas and conflicting priorities, which, over time, can produce burnout, cynicism, and disengagement" (p. 666). Indeed, "more can be accomplished when education stakeholders work together toward a shared purpose rather than working on their own agenda" (Hughes & Pickeral, 2013, p. 3).

Robinson (2011) described the importance of *establishing goals and expectations* and identified that building a shared vision involved "deciding on what goals to set, gaining the commitment of those responsible for achieving them, and communicating them to all those with an interest in their achievement" (p. 45). Additionally, Leithwood (2012) suggested the importance of *setting directions*, identifying four specific leadership practices necessary to do so: "building a shared vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, creating high performance expectations, and communicating the direction" (p. 59). In this study, participants were asked not only about the shared vision of their schools, but also about their role and responsibility within developing, implementing, and assessing this vision. Based on the analysis of data, three common actions, somewhat similar to those described by Robinson (2011) and Leithwood

(2012), emerged: involving teachers in building the shared vision; using student data to inform the vision; and developing shared strategies and expectations.

Finding 1.1: Involving Teachers in Building the Shared Vision. "When teachers are included throughout the decision-making process, they are more likely to implement and sustain change with fidelity to quality practice" (Hughes & Pickeral, 2013, p. 2). Thus, school leaders should not independently determine and then impose goals on the teachers in the school. Instead, it is important to ensure that staff members are active participants in building the shared vision and in shaping the practices necessary for achieving the goals (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Within the organizational context of this study, each school principal has the responsibility to develop an annual plan for improved student outcomes, identifying specific goals and strategies for the year. What was apparent from this study's data was principal recognition of the importance of collaboratively determining the goals that would be focused on in each school's Development Plan, as all three principals described teacher involvement in discussion and decision-making. Indeed, teachers also described their active roles and responsibilities within building school goals, noting that they saw themselves "as contributing to our shared vision" and expressing appreciation that there was a shared vision, recognizing that, without such, teachers may "feel overwhelmed by the amount we cover and it can feel scattered".

The starting point for change and improvement in any organization is a clear vision, and school goals should lead to improved student outcomes. Within this study, all eleven participants (three principals and eight teachers) identified the importance of having a shared vision to guide their work, and all articulated the shared school goals for the current school year. Further, all participants described that goals had been developed through a process of conversation and consensus building about what was important to intentionally focus on this school year to

improve student outcomes. This process of conversation and consensus building of a shared vision was most evident in discussions with participants from one of the schools, where both the principal and the teachers identified that there was initially some competing ideas about whether math or writing should be the focus of the School Development Plan. Through an intentional examination of student achievement indicators in these two subject areas, evidenced through report card marks and Provincial Achievement Test (PAT) results, consensus was reached that writing was a greater area of need.

The new *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a), signed by Alberta's Education Minister on February 7, 2018, requires all principals to demonstrate seven competencies. One of the competencies, "Competency 3 – Embodying visionary leadership", requires leaders to work collaboratively "with the school community to create and implement a shared vision for student success, engagement, learning, and wellbeing" (p. 5). This competency, combined with the recognition that "there was also some evidence that the degree of staff consensus about school goals was a significant discriminator between otherwise similar high- and low-performing schools" (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008, p. 66), makes the work of developing a shared vision a professional expectation. As a school principal, then, working collaboratively with teachers to build a shared vision is an integral part of my work as it is recognized by teachers as creating a "culture of learning but also a culture of (professional) curiosity because people are generating new ideas and are willing to put themselves, their classrooms and their practice out to the rest of the group", a necessary component of creating a school culture of continuous learning and improvement.

Finding 1.2: Using Student Data to Inform the Vision. In order to build a shared vision and develop a culture of continuous learning and improvement, areas of growth must first be

identified. Understanding where students *are* within these areas of growth forms the basis for goal setting, and this understanding is developed through an intentional examination of student data. As Robinson (2011) wrote, "leaders make an impact by setting goals on the basis of the curriculum, community priorities, and evidence about student learning needs" (p. 10), and participants in this study all spoke about how student data was used to inform the shared vision and goals within their School Development Plans. Whether it was one of the principals sharing the examination of report card data during discussion with staff regarding math or writing becoming the focused area, or another principal sharing how she led staff through different forms of standardized and school-based evidence asking where it made sense to focus goals, it was obvious in this study that all of the principals recognized the importance of using student achievement data to identify student learning needs as the basis for school goals. One principal commented, for example, that as a staff they examined longitudinal information about reading scores and collaboratively realized that there was "definitely some work that needed to be done around reading and the teaching of reading".

Student data is important not only to identify areas for growth and provide a baseline for school goals, but is also necessary to monitor growth and advancement towards the goal. Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008), in their meta-analysis examination of leadership impact on student outcomes, identified that there was a "greater emphasis in higher performing schools on ensuring that staff systematically monitored student progress and that test results were used for the purpose of program improvement" (p. 662). Identified in each studied school's plans were measures that would be used throughout the year to monitor student growth and advancement towards their goals. For example, the Development Plans of two of the schools both identified that standardized reading assessments would be used throughout the year, and the third school's

plan identified that writing growth would be assessed and monitored through collaborative assessment of school-wide writing prompts and analysis of report card marks in January and June, 2018. Participating teachers discussed how these intentional assessments were expected throughout the year and noted that assessment results would be shared and collaboratively discussed to determine progress toward set outcomes. One teacher identified that teachers in the school appreciated "coming back to our overall vision again and again, doing that reflection about how our work connects to our School Development Plan", with a colleague noting that this ongoing intentional whole-staff revisiting of the shared vision provided an opportunity for her to reflect on and adjust her practice as necessary to better support her students' learning and achievement towards the school goal.

While the value of using student data to inform the school vision is evident, student data must be chosen carefully and used with caution. There are, for example, different kinds of data including achievement data, demographic data, program data, and perception data (Bernhardt, 2017), each with a multitude of sources. This inundation of data can be overwhelming, and determining which data is most appropriate to examine in relation to identifying school goals may be difficult. Considering achievement data, for example, what is the best source to determine student learning needs and patterns? Alberta Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) may provide standardized test information, but only reflect a small portion of a child's learning on a particular day. Furthermore, not all grades write PATs each year, so this kind achievement data is not consistently available and, therefore, other sources of student achievement data must be sought. All students have report cards, but even within an organization that has common report card stems and indicators, there is always an element of subjectivity and professional judgment in assessment, so there is likely variance from school to school, or even from teacher to

teacher within a school. Additionally, how do you examine data with colleagues such that they don't feel judged or take areas of difficulty personally? These are some considerations to be made when choosing and using data to inform school decisions and goals. Most importantly, however, to foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement, we must look at how we can use school-wide data from a *formative assessment* perspective to ensure that chosen practices and strategies are moving learning forward.

Finding 1.3: Developing Shared Strategies and Expectations. Building a shared vision not only requires school staff to determine direction and set goals, but also requires the development of shared strategies and expectations that are understood and employed by all in pursuit of desired student outcomes. This may be, perhaps, the most difficult aspect of building shared vision because here we are speaking specifically about teaching practice, as it is generally classroom teachers who are tasked with enacting the vision. As Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) noted, "if goals are to function as influential coordinating mechanisms, they need to be embedded in school and classroom routines and procedures" (p. 659). Teachers need to commit to these routines and procedures, which requires that teachers have voice and choice in determining and owning shared strategies and expectations. As Pink (2009) stated:

> We need less prodding and more choice in *how* to satisfactorily meet our vision and goals. We need to let our teachers *own* it, rather than determining a course of action and then somehow trying to convince, bribe, or cajole teachers into 'buying in'. This is the difference between *compliance* and *commitment*. (p. 88)

The teachers participating in this study all spoke of their responsibility to enact the shared vision, and all described the strategies and expectations they were committed to. For example, teachers from one of the schools where improving reading was the school goal explained that the

strategies that they had agreed to implement this year were using reading checklists and running records with their students, while teachers from the school where writing was the focus had committed to implementing school-wide writing prompts and developing common writing assessments. Additionally, all teachers described that these strategies had been determined through conversations about *best practices* facilitated by the system literacy strategists with whom each of the schools was working throughout this year. As one teacher commented, collaboratively discussing and committing to a small number of shared strategies felt manageable, especially since these strategies were new to most colleagues and they were all working and learning together to improve their teaching practice in reading.

Considering the research literature and the perspectives of study participants, it is evident that, although it is the responsibility of the school principal to complete and submit the annual improvement plan, the colleagues who are responsible for the daily work of teaching and learning own the vision goals and strategies. Ensuring time for collaborative conversation about goals and strategies is essential, as are frequent check-ins to determine the effectiveness of strategies for forwarding student learning. It is the responsibility of the principal, however, to provide time for and facilitate these reflective conversations about the shared vision, data, and strategies, as well as to ensure that teachers are supported in their practice and ongoing professional learning.

Ensuring Quality Teaching. Quality teaching is the number one determinant of student success, and ensuring quality teaching must be a focus for school leaders, particularly with the increasing emphasis on success for each and every individual student (Hall & Simeral, 2017). Indeed, ensuring quality teaching lies at the heart of instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2005, 2009; Robinson, 2006; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2012), as leaders encourage reflective, responsive

teaching and work alongside teachers to examine whether specific teaching practices are supporting children's learning. In this study, participating principals were asked to reflect on how teaching practices were changing in their schools, ways in which they learned about teaching practices in classrooms, and the structures and supports that were in place to ensure and improve teaching quality. Similarly, teacher participants were asked to reflect on how their individual teaching practices had changed, what had guided these changes, and the structures and supports that were in place to help them reflect on and elevate their practice. Data analysis identified three common leadership actions through participant responses: developing a common understanding of quality teaching, visiting classrooms and providing feedback to teachers, and providing opportunities to work in the company of peers.

Finding 2.1: Developing a Common Understanding of Quality Teaching. It is important to have a consistent definition of good teaching, and one of the systems used to define good teaching discussed by all research participants was the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* (Friesen, 2009). As discussed in chapter two, the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* (TEF) identifies five principles of effective teaching that highlight the importance of designing worthwhile, authentic learning tasks guided by assessment, as well as the importance of relationships and teachers collaboratively working and learning together. The three principals in this study all described that they had, over the previous several years, intentionally focused professional learning opportunities on the principles within the TEF, included certain principles within the strategies of their School Development Plans, and supported teachers to use the TEF to reflect on and guide their planning and instruction. Further, all eight teachers asserted that working with the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* had significantly changed their practice, describing their understanding of the TEF as a guide for effective teaching, a "marker of what

your practice is and what you're striving for…. We always want to improve our practice somehow, and that's the whole point of the TEF, to keep improving and getting stronger and going forward". All participants, principals and teachers, agreed that the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* was used in their school to develop a common understanding of the principles of effective, or quality, teaching.

Consistent with this finding, educational literature identifies that having a shared understanding of quality teaching is integral to instructional leadership focused on supporting teacher practice for improved student outcomes. Danielson (2012) stated that "everyone – teachers, mentors, coaches, and supervisors – must possess a shared understanding of this definition. Having a common language to describe practice increases the value of the conversations that ensue from classroom observations" (p. 23). Further, as LeFevre and Robinson (2015) commented, "if increased instructional leadership is to make a difference to student outcomes, leaders' practices need to be informed by defensible and evidence-based understandings of how to improve teaching and learning" (p. 60).

In Alberta, all teachers are required to meet the *Teaching Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018b) throughout their careers. It asserts: "Quality teaching occurs when the teacher's ongoing analysis of the context, and the teacher's decisions about which pedagogical knowledge and abilities to apply, result in optimum learning for all students" (p. 3). Interestingly, none of the participants in this study mentioned the *Teaching Quality Standard* (TQS) as a guiding document, and instead focused their conversations and their work on the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework*. Perhaps this is because the TEF identifies specific actions that can be taken within each of the principles, providing more of a *how to* guide for effective teaching, whereas the TQS focuses more on the *what* as it identifies competencies and lists indicators for

each. All eight teachers within this study perceived that using the TEF had significantly changed their practice because it was seen "as a series of practices" or a "target, something to aspire to" when planning for and delivering instruction. Teachers further described how the TEF had been examined and discussed during ongoing professional learning conversations, and noted that it was central to their daily work. Additionally, both teachers and principals identified that it was these principles and, according to one principal, how the TEF was "going to come to life in their practice and live in their classrooms" that formed the basis of classroom observations and follow-up conversations. As one teacher noted, understanding that it was the TEF principles that were being looked for, and recognizing that this was a continuum approach rather than an achieved or not achieved approach, removed the evaluative feel from principal visits to the classroom. Instead, it was recognized that classroom visits and subsequent conversations were about supporting practice and, under such conditions, indeed, teachers reported that they felt acknowledged and appreciated: "It's a nice reminder too that someone else is recognizing the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* in your work".

Finding 2.2: Visiting Classrooms and Providing Feedback to Teachers. As described above, participating principals and teachers all noted the value of leaders visiting classrooms and providing feedback about those visits to teachers. While each of the three principals indicated that time challenges impacted their ability to be in classrooms as frequently as they wanted, they all recognized that visiting classrooms was the best way to truly know what was happening with teaching and learning in their schools. One principal commented, for example: "teacher progress is best seen through student progress. I visit classrooms quite regularly so I have a really good sense of what the kids are doing". All three principals also spoke about the importance of providing quality feedback following classroom visits, but all three identified that this was a self-

identified area of growth. As one principal reported, “for teachers’ practice to change they need feedback. So how do I give teachers feedback effectively?”. Another principal also commented on this, stating that “I would like to improve how I provide teachers with feedback about what I am seeing, and to become more consistent with it”.

Six of the eight participating teachers also spoke positively about principals visiting their classrooms and providing feedback. (It is important to note that the other two teachers did not have classroom assignments, and instead described their teaching roles as working alongside colleagues in their classrooms.) Not only did teachers report that they felt appreciated and acknowledged, as described earlier, but also that they felt supported and that the “admin [was] taking an interest in what I’m doing and that makes a difference for me”. Teachers acknowledged that they believed that their principals understood their work better because they had been in the classroom “chat[ting] with students about what they’re learning and why it is important”.

In describing this process of supervision, the responsibility of the principal to provide guidance and support to improve each teacher’s quality of instruction through ongoing observations and feedback is emphasized, and principals are required to provide ongoing supervision for all teachers in the school (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2017, p. 2). Participant comments and this research finding are consistent with educational literature espousing the value of instructional leadership and developing processes of teacher supervision (e.g., Danielson, 2007, 2008, 2012; Darling-Hammond & Ducommun, 2010; Marzano, 2007). Supporting teachers through classroom observations and constructive feedback is an impactful leadership practice, as Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) concluded:

> the degree of leader involvement in classroom observation and subsequent feedback was also associated with higher performing schools. Teachers in such schools reported that their leaders set and adhered to clear performance standards for teaching and made regular classroom observations that helped them improve their teaching. (p. 662)

Danielson (2012), further asserted:

> if we want to design teacher evaluation systems that teachers find meaningful, we must use processes that not only are rigorous, valid, and reliable, but also engage teachers in activities that promote learning: self-assessment, reflection on practice, and professional conversation. (p. 24)

Recognizing, then, that "we cannot make major headway in raising student performance and closing the achievement gap until we make progress in closing the teaching gap" (Darling-Hammond, 2014, p. 18), it is essential that school leaders are in classrooms observing and providing feedback about teaching and learning to ensure that every student has access to quality teaching each day. Developing a process of ongoing observation and feedback (supervision) within a culture of continuous learning and improvement may be one strategy to critically reflect on and improve practice and positively impact teaching quality in pursuit of optimum student learning which is, after all, the heart of our work.

Finding 2.3: Providing Opportunities to Work in the Company of Peers. As previously described, one challenge identified by participating principals is the time and opportunity to observe regularly in classrooms to support teachers to reflect on and improve practice. While this challenge was recognized, so was the value of collaboration, having teachers work and learn with their peers. To this end, the participating principals spoke about how they intentionally provided opportunities for teachers to work in the company of peers through various strategies, including:

"strategically selecting the Learning Leaders who are working with teachers", intentionally setting team-teaching partners and collegial mentors, developing the role of instructional coaches, and having expectations that all teachers will design and plan collaboratively with grade team members.

All participating teachers spoke positively of these opportunities to work and learn with colleagues, identifying how these opportunities had impacted their work and practice. One teacher credited, for example, "a wonderful teaching partner who was much more inquiry-based…. and I just found a whole new world of teaching that I loved". Another teacher discussed that there was an expectation in the school to work collaboratively through the task design process with grade team members, and that this had "changed my teaching so much (with) opportunities to work with other people and looking at other ways to do things in the classroom". One of the teachers also highlighted how the Learning Leader was available to "look at how we're planning our projects, she can work with us to pull in information that we may not have access to or not know where to get" and she indicated that she was looking forward to working alongside the Learning Leader the next week after they met to have students build electronic profiles.

This finding is consistent with research literature about the importance of collaboration (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes, & Kyndt, 2015; Wiliam, 2016), most evident as one of the principles within the research-based *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* (Friesen, 2009), which identifies that "research is clear…. that teachers improve their practice and hence, their effectiveness, in the company of their peers" (p. 6). True collaboration takes time, however, which leaders must then consider when scheduling instructional and non-instructional time, and when developing expectations.

Ensuring quality teaching relates to the professional practices of continually reflecting and improving on professional practice, which directly correlates with Alberta's *Leader Quality Standard* statement: "Quality leadership occurs when the leader's ongoing analysis of the context, and the decisions about what leadership knowledge and abilities to apply, result in quality teaching and optimum learning for all school students" (Alberta Education, 2018a, p. 3). Attention to this aspect of leadership provides an opportunity for principals to demonstrate the following required competencies within the standard, modeling commitment to professional learning and providing instructional leadership, as they work alongside teachers to discuss and improve teaching practice.

Leading Teacher Learning. The leadership dimension that is most strongly associated with positive student outcomes is that of promoting and participating in teacher learning and development, and perhaps recognizing this was the reason that one participating principal commented that "the thing that stresses me out the most is ensuring that what I design for *them* (teacher professional learning) is meaningful, makes a difference, and most of all impacts what happens with the kids". To ensure continuous professional growth and development, attention to professional learning is essential to support teachers to build ongoing knowledge and refine practical skills. Leaders' involvement in teacher learning "provides them with a deep understanding of the conditions required to enable staff to make and sustain the changes required for improved outcomes" (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008, p. 667), and once these conditions are understood, then leaders can ensure they are in place and facilitate professional learning. Within this study, principals were asked how they facilitated professional learning and how they knew that this professional learning was impacting teaching practice, while teachers were asked to describe professional learning opportunities and how these impacted their teaching practice.

Through an analysis of participant data, three findings were identified relative to leading professional learning: building professional capital; sharing leadership of professional learning; and providing school-based professional learning opportunities.

Finding 3.1: Building Professional Capital. As described in the section about shared vision, teachers and principals face numerous competing theories and ideas, not only in what to focus on for student learning, but also in what to focus on for teacher learning. Because the agenda for teacher professional learning can be endless, the school vision should play an important part in determining the teacher learning agenda. This mean that, as much as possible, professional learning should support teachers' work towards the achievement of the identified school goal, otherwise teachers become "too full to try something different all the time" according to one of the participating teachers. Focusing professional learning around strategies and practices that will support attainment of the school goal strengthens commitment to the school vision, and, particularly when examining ideas or strategies that might be new to many, a sense of camaraderie is built as everyone, according to one of the principals, "is being pushed and challenged, and knows that everybody else is feeling the same way". In this way, as teachers work and learn together, professional capital is strengthened as everyone is developing their practice to support the learning of all students.

Teachers in the focus groups also identified that much of their professional learning time was connected to the development plan vision. As a teacher summarized, "everything that we're doing (professional learning) is so connected to our school vision…. We talk about a through-line to our School Development Plan and our achievement and instructional goals". This connectivity was appreciated, with teachers noting that experiences with 'one-off' sessions often left them feeling scattered and overwhelmed, and that such sessions had little impact on their

practice. If, as one of the principals mentioned in conversation, our professional goal is sustainable best practice, then teachers need time to discuss new ideas and strategies, try them out, and then debrief with colleagues. For teachers, then, professional learning becomes "exciting and energizing…. I can't wait to get back into the classroom to try new ideas", and this excitement becomes contagious amongst colleagues and professional capital grows.

This finding is consistent with educational literature about professional learning (Fullan, 2014; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Timperley, 2011), as the goal of such learning experiences is to build both the self-efficacy of individual teachers and the collective capacity of the teaching staff. Professional capital is about "communities of teachers using best and next practices together (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 51), and to increase the impact of professional learning, principals need to direct their energies to developing the capacity of the group (Fullan, 2014). This requires a shift in our thinking about professional learning, moving away from individual professional development sessions to ongoing professional learning for "focusing on students, attending to requisite knowledge and skills, engaging in systematic inquiry in the effectiveness of practice, being explicit about underpinning theories of professionalism, and engaging everyone in the system of learning" (Timperley, 2011, p. 4). School leaders need to support teachers to learn and change to meet the needs of their students, and embrace professional learning, for, as Wiliam (2016) asserted,

> when all teachers embrace the idea that they can improve, not because they are not good enough, but because they can be even better, this creates a natural collegiality that supports all teachers in embracing the need for continuous improvement. (p. 239)

Finding 3.2: Sharing Leadership of Professional Learning. Within Robinson's (2011) dimension of *leading teacher learning and development*, the importance of school leaders both

promoting and participating in professional learning as a leader and a learner is discussed. In fact, she noted that, “effective professional development is a collective rather than individual endeavor because the work of teaching all students to succeed is a collective endeavor”. The principals interviewed all recognized the value of sharing the leadership of professional learning, and participating as both a leader and learner within conversations and learning sessions. All three schools were part of the organization’s literacy learning cohort, and the three principals each discussed how system strategists connected to this cohort had facilitated some professional learning opportunities at times in the year. They also identified that they had led sessions, as had the Assistant Principals, Learning Leaders, and some teachers. As one principal suggested, the principal is not always the best person to lead a learning session and may indeed not have the practical knowledge or experience necessary. Instead she described how she carefully considered who would be the best person to lead a certain session, explaining that she would be “looking at that person and thinking that they have strength here and credibility with their colleagues in this area”. Another principal agreed, identifying that what she was finding most valuable to support professional learning was including everyone, formally or informally, who could lead learning for staff. In some ways she was expanding a ‘train the trainer’ process as she would have teachers and Learning Leaders attend various system sessions that would then lead the rest of the staff through the work. She commented on the value of colleagues leading colleagues, stating that “the level of respect is sky-high when it’s their own colleagues leading the learning”. Teachers further noted the value of colleagues other than the principal leading professional learning, noting that, “we’re starting to see that we are all experts and we all bring a wealth of knowledge and experience…and everyone has a chance to shine and be the expert on a particular topic”.

This shared leadership of professional learning is reflected in the literature describing distributed leadership (Leithwood, 2012; Levin, 2008; Timperley, 2011; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008, 2012). Hughes and Pickeral (2013) note the value of sharing professional learning leadership, arguing that "leaders willing and able to tap the wealth of knowledge and skill sets of everyone in the school develop an engaging school climate" (p. 2). When leaders commit to participating as a learner in professional learning and recognize colleagues are capable of leading or facilitating learning opportunities, they signal their commitment to working and learning alongside peers to build professional capital and develop leadership capacity in others.

Finding 3.3: Providing School-Based Professional Learning Opportunities. Research participants all identified the importance of school-based professional learning opportunities as an essential element of building whole-school capacity and supporting their collective work of improved student outcomes. While there was discussion by all participants about the importance of professional learning days and staff conversations, all eight teachers identified that the professional learning most impactful to their practice was their involvement within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Whether PLCs were based on School Development Plan work or participant learning interests, whether they were organized as grade teams or cross-grade teams, teachers identified that PLCs provided an opportunity for teachers to be "working together and coaching each other on what we can try or change". Six of the teachers specifically identified that Professional Learning Communities were a strong framework for looking at student work and reflecting on their practice. One teacher described how the PLC protocol in the school "provides me with an opportunity to work through my problems of practice with people that are kind of in the same mindset and that are working on the same things".

Professional Learning Communities, as a structure for school-based professional learning, have been discussed in literature (e.g., DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Timperley, 2011). More recently, Fullan (2014), describing that professional learning should be school-based, school-managed, and focused on improving teacher practice, argued that schools need to become learning communities in which professional learning is focused on everyday work and enables teachers to become more effective practitioners. Timperley (2011) further contends that "if teacher inquiry is to make a substantive difference to student outcomes, teachers need to be operating within new frameworks and accessing different kinds of knowledge that will push their thinking and challenge their practice" (p. 10), and with principal facilitation and expectations, PLCs can provide such a framework for continuous improvement and professional learning.

Leading teacher learning and development through active participation as both a leader and a learner, distribution of leadership of learning opportunities, and facilitation of job-embedded professional learning opportunities including collegial coaching, peer mentoring, intentional partnering, teaming, expectations for collaborative planning and design, and the development of structured Professional Learning Communities, were identified in this study as important work. Each of these actions connect directly to Alberta's leadership competencies of modeling a commitment to professional learning and leading a learning community.

Developing Relational Trust. Underlying all leadership work is the need for school leaders to facilitate and build a culture of trust in their schools so that teachers feel safe to open their practice to colleagues and learn with and from peers (Cranston, 2011; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Robsinson, 2011; Timperley, 2011; Wiliam, 2016). Relationships are essential to success in schools, and it is necessary, as Robinson (2011) asserted, that leadership involves "building

the type of trust that is essential for doing the hard work of improving teaching and learning" (p. 17). She further noted that "effective leadership is not about getting the relationships right and then tackling the difficult work challenges. It is about doing both simultaneously so that relationships are strengthened through doing the hard, collective work of teaching and learning" (p. 16). In this research study, when principal and teacher participants were asked about the adult relationships in their schools and how they engaged in conversations that both supported and challenged colleagues through these relationships, two findings that are consistent with Robinson's (2011) assertions emerged: intentionally building professional relationships; and, engaging in challenging conversations.

Finding 4.1: Intentionally Building Professional Relationships. All participants in this study articulated the importance of building professional relationships within their work, with all principals describing how trust was forged through being open and transparent, listening to and valuing the ideas and contributions of others, believing that colleagues were knowledgeable and capable, being willing to engage in the work alongside teachers, and having high expectations for themselves and others. They also spoke about sharing in the successes as well as the challenges, and having an open door to discuss any professional or personal issues. All of the teachers revealed that they felt that they had strong relationships with their principals, and felt supported in their work. Additionally, teachers interviewed felt that they had forged equally strong relationships with most of their colleagues and felt comfortable working collaboratively with others.

Trust in schools is significantly related to teacher engagement and student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Cranston, 2011), with principals playing a critical role by contributing to a context in which trusting relationships and collaborative work can flourish (Coleman, 2012).

Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) emphasize that professional relationships should be built in support of student learning, asserting that "educational leadership involves not only building collegial teams, a loyal and cohesive staff, and sharing an inspirational vision. It also involves focusing such relationships on some very specific pedagogical work" (p. 665). They further contend that the focus should be on building professional relationships:

> the extent to which teachers identified principals as close personal friends…was not significantly related to school performance. The authors suggest that leaders who are perceived as sources of instructional advice and expertise gain greater respect from their staff and hence have greater influence over how they teach. (pp. 663-664)

Such professional relationships are built when principals are

> visibly involved in instruction work (which will) create a sense of trust such that teachers are willing to discuss instructional issues with them during formal and informal supervision, and because they cannot be everyone and be expert in all aspects of instructional practice, they must share responsibility with others in the school. (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008, p. 479)

In other words, instructional leaders build these relationships by doing the work discussed above, fostering a positive learning environment focused on continuous learning and improvement.

Finding 4.2: Engaging in Challenging Conversations. Although acknowledging that engaging in challenging conversations is difficult, each of the principals recognized that questioning and pushing practice was part of their work and integral to improving teaching and learning. One principal identified that she was grateful for the work done in the Principal Professional Learning sessions using Robinson's (2011) *Open-to-Learning* conversation process,

as it gave her a framework for engaging in challenging conversations. Two of the principals spoke about how they tried to approach challenging conversations about practice from a strengths-based or growth-mindset perspective, noting that they often began conversations with open-ended questions, such as, “Help me understand…” or “Have you considered…?”, and that they really tried to listen and understand others’ perspectives. All three principals, however, also self-identified that providing critical feedback and having challenging conversations were areas of their professional growth.

Teacher participants all identified that they appreciated the feedback and professional conversations initiated by their principals, although none of the teachers themselves described engaging in challenging conversations with colleagues. Each of the teachers, even those tasked with mentoring and forwarding the learning of colleagues, spoke about how difficult it was for them to engage in difficult conversations, noting that they felt uncomfortable, were worried about seeming judgmental, or were concerned that such a conversation would negatively impact their relationships. One teacher described a recent conversation with a colleague about some different design and instructional ideas, and noted that, after listening and trying “really hard not to defend”, she asked open-ended questions, believing that, “through my questions the other person will work though the problem on their own without even really needing my input or my suggestions”. Additional strategies that teachers identified for having these difficult conversations included: not having conversations in the heat of the moment, instead setting a time to meet or coming back to a conversation at another time; giving themselves time to think and “rehearse a difficult conversation to anticipate what I want to bring to the conversation”; trying not to make it personal; and focusing on solutions or what could be changed. What was

evident from the responses of both principals and teachers was concern for the other participant and desire to maintain a positive working relationship.

Research literature is consistent with this finding that, although challenge, difficult conversations about teaching and learning are impactful (Danielson, 2009; Robinson, 2011; Scott, 2004; Selkrig & Keamy, 2015). As Danielson (2009) asserted:

> Of all the approaches available to educators to promote teacher learning, the most powerful (and embedded in virtually all others) is that of the professional conversation. Reflective conversations about practice require teachers to understand and analyze events in the classroom. In these conversations, teachers must consider the instructional decisions they have made and examine student learning in light of these decisions. (p. 5)

When professional conversations are artfully conducted, participants can collegially challenge current practices and examine the assumptions behind each individual's beliefs about quality teaching, unearthing what Robinson (2011) identifies as their *theory of action*. Through conversations that emerge these theories and challenge current practices, improvement and growth can be fostered as participants are able to provide feedback that is focused on improving student outcomes, as well as to listen to and act on such feedback. Leaders who have both the skills and the willingness to engage in these critical professional conversations -- whether one-on-one with individual teachers, in small groups, or with entire staff -- have a powerful tool that can be used to drive teacher learning toward improved student outcomes. Equally as important as leaders engaging in these conversations with teachers, however, is the ability for teachers to engage with colleagues in such reflective dialogue. Selkrig and Keamy (2015) emphasized the need for teachers to move to collegial conversations that involve more honest talk about practice and ideas, describing that it is "during (these) interactions with others when our ideas, beliefs and

feelings are made explicit and available for exploration and knowledge, created through a conversation or dialogue" (p. 426), that teachers are more able to reflect on and adjust their practices and ideas in relation to peer feedback.

Attention to developing relational trust supports Alberta principals to demonstrate competency in both fostering effective relationships and providing instructional leadership. This is strongly connected to Robinson's assertion that leadership involves "building the type of trust that is essential for doing the hard work of improving teaching and learning" (p. 17).

Perceived Impacts

Beyond identifying specific student-centered leadership actions principals believed they enacted, this study sought to understand how principal and teacher participants perceived these leadership actions impacted their work. While these perceptions about impact are embedded throughout the findings and analysis, I felt it was prudent to also discuss them separately. What follows, then, is a summary of the perceived impacts of the identified leadership actions – building shared vision, ensuring quality teaching, leading professional learning, and developing relational trust – on the principal and teacher participants, as well as on the students with whom they work.

Impact on Principals. All three of the principals expressed that their work within the area Principal Professional Learning series with Robinson's (2011) *Student-Centered Leadership* as a guiding resource had significantly impacted their leadership practice. One principal commented, for example, that this was the most impactful professional learning in her twenty-year leadership career:

> I am just so grateful for those professional learning opportunities…. because it just gives that time to think about and reflect on my own practice. I just value that so much. And

> that's basically how I've been using the work we did in the area, specifically concentrating on the three capabilities and the five dimensions in my own practice and looking at how I bring that to life in my practice. And it's research-based rather than, a long time ago with principal colleagues we would get together and talk and reflect, but it was just coming from us, like "What are you working on?" and trying to figure it out together. And some of that is ok, but you need this. You need the depth of this research and learning and then figure out your own practice from there.

Another principal also spoke about the impact of this professional learning on her leadership practice, noting that "some of the journeys we have taken our staff on have resulted specifically from the work that we've done as an area, like working with the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework*…. From a learning standpoint for me it has helped me push practice". One of the principals, who had recently moved to a school in a new area, described how she planned to continue to bring what she had learned to the new school, even though the demographics of the new school were not as challenging and diverse as the previous one. She stated that "student-centered leadership, I think, is who I am". She further commented that moving to a new school not only provided an opportunity to "bring this work somewhere that it hasn't been", but also to reflect on how much teaching practice had changed in a relatively short time at the previous school. She described how, on one hand she was "excited to start the journey with new colleagues", but on the other hand she was feeling some frustration:

> I've seen some really cool results (at the previous school). It's challenging when you come to a new building and you know what's possible. And having lived through a lot of what you're now living through all over again, it's like going back in time and you just want to rocket forward. And so I'm constantly forcing myself to consider, "Ok, they

don't know *that* yet. They don't know that yet. They will know that but they don't know it yet, so just slow down".

Impact on Teachers. Not only did principals speak about the impact of this learning on their leadership practice, but they also identified significant changes in teaching practice and teachers through this work. A principal spoke about the increased confidence with which teachers in her school were speaking about what they were doing with students and how she was "increasingly seeing a responsiveness to the kids" as teachers designed tasks that were authentic, meaningful, and connected to real disciplines such as archeology. She also discussed how she was observing increased academic rigor, and commented that teachers had higher expectations for students, no longer excusing student ability to work and achieve because of external circumstances. Indeed, all three principals commented that they felt that this work and their expectations had increased teacher ownership over designing tasks to ensure that all students could access identified learning intentions, and that there was "less focus on regurgitation and compliance versus true understanding and engagement". Another principal also spoke about the increase in teacher engagement in her school, not only in the design process and work with students, but also in their own professional growth and development. Describing the reflective journals that teachers were given time to work in throughout the year, she identified that it was in these written reflections where she saw the depth of their understanding, commenting "so that's where you see it. That's where you see the change in their thinking, the change in their knowledge. Because if that exists, then it will be change in practice".

Participating teachers also felt that the focused work on teaching and learning in their schools had been impactful to their practice, with one teacher describing that working with the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* had made a profound impact on the way she designed and

delivered learning opportunities, commenting "it changed the way I did things, in a way that I wouldn't change back". She further described how professional learning and conversations had

> changed the way I think about what I teach, more than anything else, and making it discipline based. And not only in big inquiries or big tasks, but in all tasks. And I don't do a lot that I can't defend. Ya, that (professional learning around the TEF) forever changed my practice.

Another teacher, speaking about the work and learning with the TEF, commented, "those five things (TEF principles) changed the way that I see and view education, and how I work with kids in general. And it is the way that I want to work moving forward". As described in the findings chapter, several of the teachers echoed this significant impact of working with the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework*, identifying that their work had shifted away from mere curriculum coverage to providing more personalized learning opportunities based on formative assessment, and helping each student take the next right step in their learning. As one teacher eloquently stated:

> Instructional practice should lead to an outcome that is going to further students' knowledge, not just be busy work or rows and rows of repetitive work not connected to anything. So designing tasks must be intentional (with) different entry points so that, for instance my student with Down's Syndrome is learning, with that learning specific to her needs, yet still feeling part of the group and being engaged in what we're doing. So that's my work, designing learning so that every student is successful.

It is important to note, however, that principals identified that not all teachers were engaged in this work at the same level and there was still significant leadership work to be done to engage

teachers. However, as a principal commented, “there are some practices that need to shift, but everybody here is here for the right reasons. They care about kids”.

Impact on Students. Although the purpose of this research was to understand how principals and teachers perceived how these leadership practices impacted teaching practice and professional learning in their schools, I believe it would be remiss not to include their perceptions about the impact that this work had on their students.

Anecdotally, both the principals and the teachers felt that students were more engaged in learning, and were most excited about projects that were connected to real-life disciplines. Indeed, one principal commented that she saw this engagement and excitement, for example, “when you walk into a room where young children are doing engineering and they’re just lit up like a thousand watt bulb and they can’t come tell you fast enough all the stuff they’ve tried”. Two of the principals also commented on students’ abilities to articulate what they were learning and why, and that they were using more content vocabulary, a significant achievement in a school with such a large population of English Language Learners. As one principal stated:

> Sometimes the coolest thing is watching, seeing a kid or some of these kids and just going, “Man, have you come a long way.” It’s so wonderful. You just want to hug them, and you just want to celebrate with them. When a grade two comes and tells you about the iterate process they used to create such and such a thing, and why it didn’t work the first time, and what they did then to make it better, and they’re using scientific terms. I mean, your heart is just singing songs because wow, they’re seven.

Teachers further commented that students were making more connections ‘beyond the school’ and recognizing how what they were learning was applicable to the real world. For example, one teacher spoke of how grade five and six students were now wanting to volunteer in the

community because of class discussions about cancer and the Children's Hospital that started because of a novel that several students were reading. Another teacher noted that students demonstrated more choice and independence in their learning, describing that she was seeing higher level work and projects from students because they knew what to do to make it better because of the rubrics and exemplars that had been created together.

Beyond this observational data, participants also spoke about more standardized data, much of which they were examining in relation to School Development Plan goals. For example, two principals, with both of their schools focusing on increasing reading achievement, highlighted that most students were making good progress in reading, as measured through a standardized reading assessment tool. Also, all three principals commented that they were seeing increased student achievement reflected in report card marks, and the two principals with grade six students further reported that their grade six Provincial Achievement Test (PAT) results had improved for the last three years.

Considering the Analysis

The analysis of the findings revealed must be presented with caution. First, the case in this inquiry was a specific leadership model examined and implemented in three elementary schools where principals had been part of an ongoing professional learning series to support their leadership work. By concentrating on a single phenomenon, I was aiming to uncover specific actions that principals perceived they were enacting within this model, and to understand the perceived impact that these actions had on teachers and teaching practice. In this inquiry, then, the research sample was small, including data from eleven interviews (three principals and eight volunteering teachers), as well as the three School Development Plans and a researcher journal as supplemental evidence.

Further, this study used purposeful sampling. Participating principals were required to have been part of a professional learning series for a minimum of three years that took place in one geographic area of a large urban organization. The three principals involved in this study all appreciated the professional learning, identified that they had embraced the student-centered leadership model, and had shared the area work and learning with their teachers. Teachers who volunteered for the focus groups were interested in discussing their work and identified that there had been positive changes to their practice through this professional learning and expectations. Thus, all participants were knowledgeable about the leadership model and described positive impacts. This means that the perceptions of teachers at these schools who did not participate were not represented, and therefore, it must be stressed that the implications drawn in this study are specific to the experiences of the sample group within this case study and may not be applicable to all settings.

Finally, as Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) note, "there are no formulas for determining the significance of findings or for interpreting them" (p. 172), meaning that analysis, synthesis, and interpretation of qualitative findings are based on the judgment of each individual researcher. Considering this, I recognize that others may have approached this work and data differently. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that this chapter reflects how I understood and made sense of the data in relation to chosen literature, research, and practice.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to build a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study, specifically how principals perceived they enacted aspects of a student-centered instructional leadership model and how these actions were perceived to impact teaching practice and professional learning in elementary schools. Providing analysis, synthesis,

and interpretative insights into the eleven research findings developed a more holistic understanding. While adhering to this study's conceptual framework, the challenge was to make sense of the data to identify and understand emerged patterns and themes when compared to research literature. The implications of these findings were intended to enrich understanding of specific leadership actions that elementary school principals may take to improve teaching and learning in their buildings.

Based on the analysis of the theory that emerged from this research study, and consistent with Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe's (2008) seminal research, it is evident that leadership actions can impact teaching and learning in elementary schools. Participating principals described how they believed that they intentionally practiced student-centered leadership (Robinson, 2011) and articulated their perception of how they enacted the four aspects of this model being examined – building shared vision, ensuring quality teaching, leading teacher learning, and developing relational trust. Further, teachers spoke about their work and responsibilities within each of these areas, and each participating teacher expressed that their teaching practice had changed through professional learning, working collaboratively with colleagues, critical reflection, and the support of their principals. Perhaps most importantly, participants identified that changes in teaching practice were positively impacting student outcomes, a significant success story within these diverse, complex schools.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this case study was to explore principal perceptions of how they enacted aspects of a student-centered instructional leadership model in their daily work, as well as teacher perceptions of how these actions influenced their practice in the three elementary schools involved. It was anticipated that obtaining a deeper understanding of the actions of school principals and their perceived impact on teachers and teaching practice would identify ideas about specific leadership strategies that elementary school leaders may use to directly impact teaching practice and indirectly, student outcomes.

Two over-arching research questions were addressed: 1) How do school principals perceive they enact student-centered leadership practices? 2) What do school leaders and teachers perceive the impact of these student-centered leadership practices to be on teaching practice? The conclusions from this study have arisen out of these primary research questions considered through my conceptual framework, research literature, and the data generated through this study along with my analysis and interpretation of the data.

This inquiry examined specific leadership dimensions of Robinson's (2011) student-centered leadership model, which grew out of earlier research about leadership practices that impacted student outcomes (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). This inquiry sought to understand the practical application of these broad leadership dimensions, an attempt to bridge theory and practice to support elementary principals who may be interested in applying these practices in their own settings. This is important for, as Robinson (2011) asserted:

> The pressure has never been greater on school leaders at all levels to improve outcomes for students…. Given the overall impact of leadership on student outcomes, it is

> important to ask, "What do leaders need to do to improve outcomes?" and "How do they do it?" (pp. 8-9)

Emerging an understanding of the practical application of these research-based leadership dimensions was of interest to me in my role as an elementary school principal tasked with improving student outcomes.

In this chapter, a discussion of the major findings and conclusions drawn from the research are first presented. Then, my recommendations and final reflections conclude this dissertation.

Findings

The findings of this inquiry provide greater insight and understanding into how principals believed they enacted four aspects of the student-centered leadership model (Robinson, 2011), and how principals and teachers perceived these actions impacted teaching practice in the three elementary schools involved. Eleven findings emerged from the data, and were presented around the four leadership aspects being investigated – building shared vision, ensuring quality teaching, leading teacher learning, and developing relational trust. These findings were consistent with research literature, as participants perceived that the identified leadership actions directly impacted teaching practice and indirectly, student outcomes in their schools. The conclusions I now present are reflective of the findings from this inquiry and supplement the understanding of the identified leadership actions and their impact.

Conclusions

This inquiry addressed a significant leadership trend of practical importance to me as an elementary school principal and researcher as I sought to understand specific leadership actions and how they might impact teaching and learning. The eleven findings discussed in this inquiry

confirmed that understanding of and attention to four specific aspects of Robinson's (2011) student-centered leadership model can positively impact teachers and teaching practice, which then impacts student learning and outcomes. The conclusions I now present are reflective of the findings from this inquiry and are intended to enhance the understanding of how principals applied their professional learning to enact these leadership dimensions to positively impact teachers and teaching practice within their specific contexts.

Shared Goals and Expectations. A conclusion I draw from the findings of this research is that having shared instructional goals and expectations significantly impacts teacher engagement and professional commitment. Engagement and commitment are positively impacted, based on findings about building shared vision, when school leaders worked collaboratively alongside staff to discuss and determine instructional goals, strategies, and expectations focused on improved student outcomes. Intentionally choosing and examining student data to determine instructional goals grounded the vision in evidence, and frequently revisiting the plan to assess and adjust targets and strategies ensured ongoing commitment and consistency. Indeed, evidence from participants highlighted the importance of this shared vision in ensuring an intentional concentration on specific areas for student growth, helping to maintain consistent focus and lessen distraction in the face of constant competing demands and expectations. Further, having a shared vision focused teaching practices and professional learning, providing continuity and connecting all aspects of teacher work to improved student outcomes.

Enacting a Shared Supervision Plan. Based on the findings it may be concluded that developing and enacting a teacher supervision process, where leaders actively observe teaching and provide feedback about practice, significantly impacts teachers and teaching practice. This

process begins with the understanding that the purpose of supervision is to support and guide teaching practice from a formative perspective, and is different from evaluation. Further, the development of a shared understanding of what constitutes quality teaching is essential, such as the principles within the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* (Friesen, 2009) that was used in these schools. Once a shared understanding of quality teaching exists, classroom observations and subsequent feedback conversations focus on strengthening these principles, encouraging teachers to become reflective and continually hone their practice.

Not only are teachers involved in developing this shared understanding of quality teaching, they are also active participants in conversations about practice. It is through these conversations that individual understandings and assumptions, or theories of action, can be uncovered and multiple perspectives considered. Further, these observations and conversations go beyond principal and teacher, and occur between colleagues as well through coaching, peer mentoring, and teaming. Theses opportunities to work and learn in the company of peers enable professional learning, and teachers value feedback about their work.

Essential to this conclusion is the assertion that, although challenges of time, misunderstanding of the process of supervision, or fear of challenging conversations negatively impacting relationships exist, leaders must engage in this work in the pursuit of improving student outcomes. Building this process alongside of teachers with shared responsibility for the quality of teaching in the school builds capacity and strengthens professional capital across the school.

Leading and Learning Together. Another conclusion drawn from the findings is that principal involvement in professional learning, both as a leader and as a learner, positively impacts teachers and teaching practice. Such active participation on the part of the principal

demonstrates and models the importance of being a continuous learner, and also enables principals to understand new ideas, strategies, and methods, as well as the challenges faced by teachers and the conditions teachers require to succeed. Distributing leadership for professional learning through collegial coaching, peer mentoring, intentional partnering, and expectations for collaborative planning and design further supports teacher learning based on evidence from teacher participants describing benefits perceived through working and learning in the company of peers. This distributed leadership, when others lead staff meetings and professional learning opportunities, also provided principals with a chance to work and learn alongside teachers, fostering a sense of collegiality and collaboration. Further, ensuring time, structures, and expectations for ongoing professional learning in pursuit of student outcomes supported teacher reflection and learning and emphasized the importance of continuous professional improvement. Developing intentional professional learning communities of teacher inquiry and professional learning focused on student outcomes provided teachers opportunity to examine problems of practice with peers. This intentional focus on professional learning, as opposed to more traditional one-shot professional development or information-based staff meetings, encouraged collaborative conversations where questions were explored together, where assumptions and instructional practices were respectfully discussed and challenged, where new learning or improvement on ideas was publically created through public discourse, all of which lead to increased knowledge and professional capital throughout the schools.

Cultivating a Culture of Respect and Professional Trust. Perhaps the most important conclusion drawn from these findings is that principals should facilitate and cultivate a culture of respect and professional trust so that all staff feel respected, valued, and supported in their practice and professional learning. Within such a culture teachers recognized that the ongoing

push for reflecting on and improving practice was not evaluative and required because of deficiencies, but instead in pursuit of ongoing excellence to support student success within a complex and ever-changing society. Culture-building was not a one-time venture; instead, principals focused on intentionally building and maintaining positive professional relationships through all of their work. Open and honest communication, collective decision-making, establishing expectations and norms for collegial interactions, collaboratively determining shared school vision and goals, engaging with and supporting teachers in their work – these are all daily practices leaders engaged in to build trust with and amongst the adults in the school.

Recommendations

I offer recommendations based on the findings, analysis, and conclusions of this study. My recommendations are first for elementary school principals, and then for future researchers.

My rationale for examining this topic was to better understand the specific day-to-day leadership actions that elementary school principals can take to improve teaching and learning in their schools. Personally, I had hoped that this research would help me refine my own leadership skills, knowledge, and understanding, and provide me with actionable ideas that I might be able to implement in my work to cultivate a culture of learning and success for all. In addition, I hoped that identifying these specific actions may support colleagues and aspiring leaders who may be interested in applying these practices in their own settings. I recommend the following to other elementary school principals:

1. Based on the conclusion that collaboratively building shared vision impacts teacher engagement and commitment to working together towards improved student outcomes, I recommend principals intentionally ensure develop processes whereby staff can have voice and input into annual improvement plan goals and strategies.

Voice promotes a sense of ownership and responsibility, strengthening everyone's commitment to working towards collective goals.

2. Founded on the conclusion that attending to teacher supervision policies and expectations, whereby principals actively observe and provide ongoing feedback about teaching, both supports and strengthens practice, I recommend that principals work collaboratively with teachers to develop and enact a shared supervision plan. This plan should be founded on a shared definition of quality teaching that focuses each observation and subsequent feedback. Further, principals are encouraged to engage in these feedback conversations, even when challenging, to support teacher reflection and continuous practical improvement.
3. Based on the conclusion that leading professional learning together impacts collective knowledge and capacity, I recommend that principals become actively involved in professional learning opportunities, both as a leader and as a learner. Engaging others in the leadership of these opportunities, and facilitating job-embedded professional learning opportunities such as coaching, mentoring, intentional partnering, expectations for collaborative planning and design, and professional learning communities focused on teacher inquiry and improved student outcomes, are important considerations.
4. Finally, established in the conclusion that cultivating a culture of respect and professional trust is paramount, I recommend that principals carefully consider and intentionally build professional relationships founded on respect, trust, open and honest communication, collaboration, and support. Within such a culture, teachers will be more willing and able to make their practice visible, and to open themselves

and their practice up to reflection and critique. Additionally, cultivating a respectful, trusting culture will support teachers to view continuous improvement as an essential element of their work, not because current practice isn't good, but because it can always be better.

Further, as the researcher I recommend additional studies be conducted to further contribute to the educational knowledge and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of specific actions that principals may enact within Robinson's (2011) student-centered leadership dimensions to impact teaching and learning. The following should be considered:

1. As the sample size of this current study was small, research should be conducted to assess the extent to which the same or similar findings would be uncovered in other schools where principals enacted aspects of this student-centered leadership model.
2. In this inquiry, purposeful sampling was utilized, with schools chosen based on principal participation in a professional learning series examining Robinson's (2011) leadership model. Volunteering principals had embraced this leadership model, and teacher participants were interested in sharing their work and believed that changes in their practice were positive. Thus, the perceptions of other principals and teachers in other schools and other administrative areas of the organization and beyond were not included. Additional research should be undertaken to uncover similarities and/or differences in the perspectives of others in other areas and school districts to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how these leadership dimensions may be enacted and how they may impact teachers and teaching practice.
3. Finally, while this inquiry's rationale was to better understand student-centered leadership actions and their impact on teachers and teaching practice, perceptions of

students were purposefully excluded. The insights of students regarding how teaching and learning may have changed in their classrooms over the last few years that leaders have been intentionally examining their practice, should be examined to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between leadership actions, teaching practice, and student outcomes.

Final Thoughts

Reflecting on these research findings, analyses, and conclusions, a final thought occurred to me: When leaders have an understanding of and attend to the four aspects of Robinson's (2011) student-centered instructional leadership model (building shared vision, ensuring quality teaching, leading teacher learning, and developing relational trust), teachers and teaching practice should be positively impacted which, in turn, should positively impact student outcomes. Participating principals embraced this model and perceived that they enacted this model through their daily leadership practices. Indeed, they identified that they had used Robinson's (2011) *Student-Centered Leadership* as a resource to guide their work, and reported that the Principal Learning series for which they had used this resource had been integral to their current leadership practice.

The Principal Learning series began in the geographic area that encompasses the schools of this study, an area wherein student populations are more culturally, linguistically, socially, economically, and behaviorally diverse overall in comparison to the other areas of the larger school district. While this research found that there were positive perceptions of this student-centered leadership model and its impacts on teachers and teaching, principals did not simply pick up the book and adopt the model. Indeed, it is important to note that all of the principals credited their understanding of and attention to aspects of this leadership model to knowledge

gained through their participation in the ongoing sessions of the Principal Learning series. In light of this, I would argue the need for ongoing principal learning and development to deepen professional understanding about leadership actions that impact teaching and learning. Indeed, with ongoing professional learning for more principals focusing on the leadership actions examined in this case study, perhaps it is possible to significantly impact and strengthen collective leadership capacity throughout the profession. This, however, requires system leaders to consider their responsibilities to be leaders of learning for principals as well, for not only does every student deserve high-quality teaching, they also deserve high-quality leadership.

Researcher Reflections

As I neared the completion of my work, it was important to me to reflect upon the experience of completing this research dissertation, with many thoughts and some questions emerging about the process, findings, and my conclusions. First I have to say that I thoroughly enjoyed all aspects of the learning and the work, and I was excited for the opportunity to focus on a research problem that was personal, based on my experiences, and that would have practical applications to my work. Although I recognize that school leadership is messy and multi-faceted, with principals faced with many different actions and responsibilities, I intentionally chose to focus on four aspects of leadership that had been closely examined within the principal professional learning series in our administrative area. These four areas were identified through research (Hallinger, 2003, 2005, 2009; Robinson, 2011; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008) as having the most significant impact on student outcomes, which was the focus of this learning series as principals collaboratively examined how we could positively impact teaching practice and student outcomes within our diverse schools. For many of us involved in this work, we were excited about how we might be able to change the discourse and expectations for student

outcomes in our schools. It is important to note that my choice to examine only four aspects of leadership meant that the other dimensions and capabilities described by Robinson (2011) were less important, but we had not taken them up in as great detail within our learning series, and it was important that all participants had a common understanding of this model and specific pieces within.

Because I was interested in better understanding experiences and perspectives of other principals and their teachers relative to this specific student-centered instructional leadership model, I also purposely chose case methodology, as well as interviews and focus groups as the methods to generate data. I do recognize that, because I was intentionally examining certain leadership aspects within a specific model, with my entire research process framed around these specific aspects of leadership, and knowing that volunteering participants would likely be principals and teachers who believed they understood and embraced this model, findings would likely demonstrate consensus of ideas and actions rather than fully identify the complexity, or messiness, of the work in schools. It was also important to recognize that, as a principal within the organization, my role may have impacted both participation as well as participant responses. However, as I was interested in understanding the concrete actions of principals who perceived they were enacting this model, I believe that the findings present an illustrative example of how these much researched aspects of leadership were being lived in the participating schools, which was the underlying intent of this practical dissertation

Indeed, from the outset of this work I had hoped that conclusions from this study could be relevant not only for my own leadership practice, but also for other principals who may want to apply these practices in their own contexts. Within my own work I was looking for research evidence and practical ideas that would support my work to build a school culture of continuous

learning and improvement in which all teachers actively reflected on and strengthened practice to support success for each student. As the researcher in this study, I suggest that the knowledge generated from this inquiry provides insight into possible concrete leadership actions that may do so. This research confirmed what exists in educational literature, further identified specific leadership actions within each of Robinson's (2011) four dimensions examined, and discussed how these actions may impact teachers and teaching practice. As well, because of my personal belief that all students can be successful and are capable of learning at a high level regardless of circumstances, it was exciting to hear all participants sharing student success stories that they attributed to changes within both leadership and teaching practice. Thus, this inquiry contributes to the theory of student-centered instructional leadership, and has practical applications for school leaders. Indeed, enacting this student-centered instructional leadership model can support principals to demonstrate many of the required competencies within Alberta's *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018a), as described throughout chapter five.

Finally, it is my hope that this inquiry will provide a starting point for conversations about the vital role that leadership can play in improving teaching and learning, and I want to thank all research participants for their insights into how student-centered leadership is alive and impacting teaching and learning in their schools.

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Appendix A.

Information Email for Principals

Dear Area Principals,

My name is Tracy Drefko. I am a doctoral student in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary. For my dissertation I am studying how principals perceive they enact student-centered leadership and how these actions impact teaching practice in elementary schools. I am inviting elementary principals who have been part of the area Principal Professional Learning Community sessions for at least the last three years to participate in a short interview. This interview will take approximately 60 minutes to complete.

I will also be inviting teachers from your school to participate in a focus group interview discussing professional learning opportunities and changing teaching practice. Interview and focus group questions will be similar and will be focused on practices that support professional learning and teaching practice in your school.

Attached is a Letter of Invitation describing the study in more detail. This research has been approved through the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board of the University of Calgary, as well as the Research and Innovation Department of the school district.

If you are interested in participating in this study, or if you have further questions about this study, please email me at tracy.drefko2@ucalgary.ca.

Thank you for your time and attention.
Tracy

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Appendix B.

Letter of Invitation – Individual Interview

Date

Xxxx
Xxxx
Xxxx
Xxxx
Xxxx

Re: The Principal Pipeline: How Elementary School Principals Perceive Student-Centered Leadership to Impact Teaching Practice

Dear Mx. Xxxx:

I am writing to you today to request your participation in a university research project on the topic of Student-Centered Leadership and its impact on teaching practice. I am conducting this project as part of the dissertation requirements for completion of an Ed.D. Degree in the Department of Graduate Studies, Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary. The purpose of this proposed case study is to investigate the relationship between instructional leadership and teaching practice when aspects of a student-centered leadership model are enacted in elementary schools. My rationale for examining this topic is to better understand how elementary school principals enact aspects of student-centered instructional leadership and the impact of these actions on teaching practice. For this investigation I am seeking three elementary school principals who have been part of the Calgary Board of Education Area III professional learning sessions for a minimum of three years.

Specifically, I would like to have the opportunity to engage you in an individual interview. There will be one interview, with the possibility of a short follow-up interview should further information or clarification be required. I will be taking notes and using a digital audio recorder to capture the interview. We would meet for approximately 60 minutes to discuss your instructional leadership actions and the impact of these actions on teaching practice in your school. If you are interested in participating, I will send more detailed information about the project and we can then set up an interview time and location that will be convenient for you.

You are under no obligation to participate and, if you do consent to participate, you may without consequence, decide not to continue your involvement or to refuse to answer any question. If you decide to withdraw your participation after the interview, any data collected from you will be withdrawn from the study prior to December 15, 2017. Additionally, once interviews have been completed and transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and, if you choose, make additions, corrections, or deletions to the record of the things you have said.

Please note that I will also be inviting teachers from your school to participate in a focus group interview discussing professional learning opportunities and changing teaching practice. Interview and focus group questions will be similar and will be focused on practices that support professional learning and teaching practice in your school.

Further, at any point you are free to ask questions about the research and your involvement with it. Most importantly, at no time will you be judged or evaluated, and you will at no time be at risk of harm.

Additionally, the data gathered in this study will be kept in strict confidence, and will be stored at a secure location, to which only I will have access. I will retain the interview notes and transcripts locked in a secure cabinet for a period of five years after which time they will be destroyed in a manner that safeguards privacy and confidentiality. A final copy of the dissertation can be made available to you if requested.

This study received approval through the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board of the University of Calgary. Please feel free to contact me at 403-818-3772 or email me at tracy.drefko2@ucalgary.ca if you have any questions. You may also contact my research supervisor, Dr. Jim Brandon, at 403-220-3048. Please complete the attached consent form to indicate your decision and return the form to me.

Thank you for considering this request. I am very excited about the possibility of learning more from your perspective. Thank you in advance for your interest, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Tracy Drefko
Ed.D. Candidate

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Appendix C.

Participant Consent Form – Individual Interview

Name of Researcher: Tracy Drefko
Faculty of Graduate Studies, Education
(403) 818-3772, tracy.drefko2@ucalgary.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Jim Brandon

Title of Project: The Principal Pipeline: How Elementary School Principals Perceive Student-Centered Leadership to Impact Teaching Practice

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This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study is to investigate the relationship between instructional leadership and teaching practice when aspects of a student-centered leadership model are enacted in elementary schools. My rationale for examining this topic is to better understand how elementary school principals enact aspects of student-centered instructional leadership and the impact of these actions on teaching practice.

The researcher, Tracy Drefko, is specifically interested in discussing student-centered instructional leadership actions and the perceived impact of these actions on teaching practice.

What Will I Be Asked To Do?

The researcher would like to have the opportunity to engage you in an individual interview. There will be one interview, with a possibility of a shorter follow-up interview for any additional questions or for clarification. Participation in the follow-up is completely voluntary.

The researcher, Tracy Drefko, will be taking notes and using a digital audio recorder to capture the interview. We would meet for approximately 60 minutes to discuss your instructional leadership actions and the impact of these actions on teaching practice in your school.

Please note that the researcher, Tracy Drefko, will also be inviting teachers from your school to participate in a focus group interview discussing professional learning opportunities and changing teaching practice. Principal interview and teacher focus group questions will be similar and will be focused on practices that support professional learning and teaching practice in your school.

Only the investigator, Tracy Drefko, and a professional transcriber will have access to the interview notes and the recordings. The information provided will be kept anonymous. Participants will be provided a copy of the interview transcripts and interpretations to check them for accuracy and edits, and to provide feedback.

You are under no obligation to participate and, if you do consent to participate, you may, at any time and without consequences, decide not to continue your involvement or to refuse to answer any questions(s). If you decide to withdraw your participation after the interview, any data collected from you will be withdrawn from the study prior to December 15, 2017. Additionally, once interviews have been completed and transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and, if you choose, make additions, corrections, or deletions to the record of the things you have said. Further, at any point, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it. Most importantly, at no time will you be judged or evaluated, and you will at no time be at risk of harm.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide your name, length of time in your current school, length of time as a participant in the Area III principal learning sessions, and email contact information so that transcripts can be sent to you for review. All personal information collected will be for use by the researcher only.

The data, once collected, will be transcribed. Other than the researcher, a professional transcriber will have access to the recordings. He or she will be required to complete a confidentiality agreement before transcription may begin. The transcripts will never be shown in public.

There are several options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. You can choose all, some, or none of them. Please review each of these options and choose Yes or No:

I grant permission to be audio taped: Yes: ___ No: ___

I wish to remain anonymous: Yes: ___ No: ___

I wish to remain anonymous, but you may refer to me by a pseudonym: Yes: ___ No: ___

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: _____

You may quote me and use my pseudonym name: Yes: ___ No: ___

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?

There is no anticipated harm or predictable risks associated with participating in this research project. This study is not considered "high-risk".

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

Only the investigator, Tracy Drefko, and a professional transcriber will have access to the interview notes and the recordings. The information provided will be kept anonymous. Participants will be provided a copy of the interview transcripts and interpretations to check them for accuracy and edits, and to provide feedback.

You are under no obligation to participate and, if you do consent to participate, you may, and without consequence, decide not to continue your involvement or to refuse to answer any question. If you decide to withdraw your participation after the interview, any data collected from you will be withdrawn from the study. Additionally, once interviews have been completed and transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and, if you choose, make additions, corrections, or deletions to the record of the things you said. You will have the right to withdraw data no later than December 15, 2017, the beginning of the analysis of the data collection. Further, at any point, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it.

The data gathered in this study will be kept in strict confidence, and will be stored at a secure location, to which only Tracy Drefko will have access. Further, she will retain the interview notes and digital recordings locked in a secure cabinet for the required five year period, after which time they will be destroyed in a manner that safeguards privacy and confidentiality. A final copy of the dissertation can be made available to you if requested.

Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Mrs. Tracy Drefko
Faculty of Graduate Studies, Education
(403) 818-3772, tracy.drefko2@ucalgary.ca
or
Dr. Jim Brandon (Supervisor)
403-220-3048

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 210-9863; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca.

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

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Appendix D.

Individual Interview Protocol

The Principal Pipeline: How Elementary School Principals Perceive Student-Centered Leadership to Impact Teaching Practice

Participant: _____

Date of Interview: _____ Location: _____

Start time: _____ End time: _____ Researcher: _____

Research Purpose

The purpose of this case study is to investigate the relationship between instructional leadership and teaching practice when aspects of a student-centered leadership model are enacted in elementary schools. My rationale for examining this topic is to better understand how elementary school principals enact aspects of student-centered instructional leadership and the impact of these actions on teaching practice.

Individual Interview Procedures

The following questions and discussion prompts have been designed to guide our scheduled one-hour audio-recorded conversation about *student-centered instructional leadership actions and teaching practice in your school.* You may ask for the recording to be stopped at any time or replayed for clarification and to ensure accuracy. I will also be taking notes during the interview, and you may have a copy of these notes at the conclusion of the interview if you wish. A summary of audio-recorded notes will be sent to you as soon as they have been transcribed for your review so you can make corrections, additions or deletions. Please review the summary and return to me any changes within 14 days of receiving the information.

Please feel free to share documents and/or artifacts that may be helpful in this inquiry, for example, the School Development Plan, professional learning plans, etc.

Informed Consent

Before we begin the actual interview, I want to make sure you've had a chance to read the informed consent form that I emailed to you some time ago. It's important to me that you understand exactly what your participation in the study involves, and the steps I will take to protect your anonymity and privacy. Do you have any questions for me about the informed consent process, or about your participation? [Pause for questions.]

[Collect signed informed consent form from participant.] _____ Signed and Received

Begin audio recording.

Interview – Use the Principal Interview Questions as guide

Next Steps:

Over the next week or so, I will use the audio recording from our interview today to create a written transcript of our conversation. As soon as it's ready, I will email a copy to you. If you would, please take a few minutes when you receive it to read it through and let me know if it looks accurate, or mark any required changes on it and return it to me by email. You're also welcome to send me additional information you'd like to include if you think of details or information you'd like to add as you read it.

I will also spend some time reading through the transcript and thinking about all that you have shared during our discussion today. As I continue to collect more data for the study, it may be the case that I contact you to see if you would be willing to answer just a few more questions. Would that be ok? [Pause to note participant's willingness to participate in a secondary interview.]

Closing

Again, thank you very much for spending time with me today and answering my questions. Your perspectives are very helpful, and I appreciate your sharing with me. Please don't hesitate to call or email me if you have any questions about today's session or about the research itself. I will be happy to answer them for you.

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Appendix E.

Principal Interview Questions

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study. This information, including questions and discussion prompts that will guide our one-hour conversation about *your thoughts about student-centered instructional leadership actions and teaching practice in your school*, is being provided in advance for consideration and reflection.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this case study is to investigate the relationship between instructional leadership and teaching practice when aspects of a student-centered leadership model are enacted in elementary schools. My rationale for examining this topic is to better understand how elementary school principals enact aspects of student-centered instructional leadership and the impact of these actions on teaching practice.

Individual Interview Questions

The following questions and discussion prompts have been designed to guide our scheduled one-hour audio-recorded interview about *student-centered instructional leadership actions and teaching practice in your school.* You may ask for the recording to be stopped at any time or replayed for clarification and to ensure accuracy. I will also be taking notes during the interview, and you may have a copy of these notes at the conclusion of the interview if you wish. A summary of audio-recorded notes will be sent to you as soon as they have been transcribed for your review so you can make corrections, additions or deletions. Please review the summary and return to me any changes within 14 days of receiving the information.

Please feel free to share documents and/or artifacts that may be helpful in this inquiry, for example, the School Development Plan, professional learning plans, etc.

Student-Centered Instructional Leadership

1. For the past few years in Area III, principals have been involved in professional learning using Robinson's (2011) *Student-Centered Leadership* book as one resource to examine leadership actions. Describe how this work has impacted your instructional leadership within your school.

Shared Vision

1. Please describe the shared vision for teaching and learning at your school, and how this vision was developed.
2. What evidence is used to determine teacher engagement, progress and next steps within this shared vision?

Ensuring Teaching Quality

1. In what ways are teaching practices changing in your school?
2. Please describe a few of the specific ways in which you learn about the teaching practices in your school.
3. What structures and supports are in place in your school to ensure and improve teaching quality?

Leading Professional Learning

1. Please describe a few of the specific ways in which you facilitate professional learning in your school.
2. Describe how professional learning in your school impacts teaching practice. What evidence is collected to determine this impact?

Relational Trust

1. Please describe the importance of adult relationships in your school, and discuss how these relationships are intentionally built.
2. Please describe how you engage in professional conversations through relationships of support and challenge with teachers in your school.

Further Comments

Please feel free to share any additional thoughts about student-centered instructional leadership in your school.

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Appendix F.

Information Email for Teachers

(This email will be sent to the three participating principals who will be asked to forward to all of their teachers.)

Dear Teachers,

My name is Tracy Drefko. I am a doctoral student in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary. For my dissertation I am studying how principals perceive they enact student-centered leadership and how these actions impact teaching practice in elementary schools. I have asked your school principal to forward this email to all teachers on my behalf. I am inviting teachers in your school to participate in a focus group interview of teachers to discuss professional learning and teaching practice in your school. This focus group interview will take approximately 60 minutes to complete, and will be held at a location agreed upon by participants.

Please note that I will also be interviewing the principal from your school discussing leadership actions that focus on professional learning opportunities and changing teaching practice. Interview and focus group questions will be similar and will be focused on practices that support professional learning and teaching practice in your school.

Attached is a Letter of Invitation describing the study in more detail. This research has been approved through the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board of the University of Calgary, as well as the Research and Innovation Department of the school district.

Participation is voluntary, and there is no requirement to inform your principal of your choice to participate or not. If you are interested in participating in this study, or if you have further questions about this study, please email me at tracy.drefko2@ucalgary.ca.

Thank you for your time and attention.
Tracy

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Appendix G.

Letter of Invitation – Focus Group

Date

Xxxx
Xxxx
Xxxx
Xxxx
Xxxx

Re: The Principal Pipeline: How Elementary School Principals Perceive Student-Centered Leadership to Impact Teaching Practice

Dear Mx. Xxxx:

I am writing to you today to request your participation in a university research project on the topic of Student-Centered Leadership and its impact on teaching practice. I am conducting this project as part of the dissertation requirements for completion of an Ed.D. Degree in the Department of Graduate Studies, Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary. The purpose of this proposed case study is to investigate the relationship between instructional leadership and teaching practice when aspects of a student-centered leadership model are enacted in elementary schools. My rationale for examining this topic is to better understand how elementary school principals enact aspects of student-centered instructional leadership and the impact of these actions on teaching practice. For this investigation I am seeking teachers from your school to be part of a focus group conversation about teaching and professional learning at your school.

Please note that I will also be interviewing the principal from your school to discuss professional learning opportunities and changing teaching practice. Principal interview and teacher focus group questions will be similar and will be focused on practices that support professional learning and teaching practice in your school. The decision to participate in this focus group will have no bearing on your standing with the school, and the principal will not be informed about which teachers choose to participate.

Specifically, I would like to have the opportunity to engage you in a focus group interview with your colleagues. There will be one interview. I will be taking notes and using a digital audio recorder to capture the conversation. We would meet for approximately 60 minutes to discuss teaching practice and professional learning in your school. If you are interested in participating, please email me and we can then set up a conversation time and location that will be convenient for the group. Please note that anonymity and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus

groups. However, the researchers request that participants in the focus group keep comments confidential, and refrain from discussing individual responses.

You are under no obligation to participate and, if you do consent to participate, you may without consequence, decide not to continue your involvement or to refuse to answer any question. If you decide to withdraw your participation after the interview, any data collected from you will be withdrawn from the study. Additionally, once interviews have been completed and transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and, if you choose, make additions, corrections, or deletions to the record of the things you have said. You will then have the right to withdraw no later than December 15, 2017, at the beginning of the analysis of the data collected. Further, at any point you are free to ask questions about the research and your involvement with it. Most importantly, at no time will you be judged or evaluated, and you will at no time be at risk of harm.

Additionally, the data gathered in this study will be kept in strict confidence, and will be stored at a secure location, to which only I will have access. I will retain the focus group notes and transcripts locked in a secure cabinet for the required five years after which time they will be destroyed in a manner that safeguards privacy and confidentiality. A final copy of the dissertation can be made available to you if requested.

This study received approval through the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board of the University of Calgary. Please feel free to contact me at 403-818-3772 or email me at tracy.drefko2@ucalgary.ca if you have any questions. You may also contact my research supervisor, Dr. Jim Brandon, at 403-220-3048. Please complete the attached consent form to indicate your decision and return the form to me.

Thank you for considering this request. I am very excited about the possibility of learning more from your perspective. Thank you in advance for your interest, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Tracy Drefko
Ed.D. Candidate

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Appendix H.

Informed Consent Form – Focus Group

Name of Researcher: Tracy Drefko
Faculty of Graduate Studies, Education
(403) 818-3772, tracy.drefko2@ucalgary.ca
Supervisor: Dr. Jim Brandon

Title of Project: The Principal Pipeline: How Elementary School Principals Perceive Student-Centered Leadership to Impact Teaching Practice.

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study is to investigate the relationship between instructional leadership and teaching practice when aspects of a student-centered leadership model are enacted in elementary schools. My rationale for examining this topic is to better understand how elementary school principals enact aspects of student-centered instructional leadership and the impact of these actions on teaching practice.

The researcher, Tracy Drefko, is specifically interested in discussing teaching practice and professional learning at your school.

What Will I Be Asked To Do?

The researcher would like to have the opportunity to engage you in a focus group discussion. Please note that anonymity and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus groups. However, the researcher requests that participants in the focus group keep comments confidential.

The researcher, Tracy Drefko, will be taking notes and using a digital audio recorder to capture the interview. We would meet for approximately 60 minutes to discuss teaching practice and professional learning in your school.

Only the investigator, Tracy Drefko, and a professional transcriber will have access to the focus group notes and the recordings. The information provided will be kept anonymous. Participants will be provided a copy of the transcripts and interpretations to check them for accuracy and edits, and to provide feedback.

You are under no obligation to participate and, if you do consent to participate, you may, at any time and without consequences, decide not to continue your involvement or to refuse to answer any questions(s). Additionally, once focus group interviews have been completed and transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and, if you choose, make additions, corrections, or deletions to the record of the things you have said. Further, at any point, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it. Most importantly, at no time will you be judged or evaluated, and you will at no time be at risk of harm.

Please note that I will also be interviewing the principal from your school to discuss professional learning opportunities and changing teaching practice. Principal interview and teacher focus group questions will be similar and will be focused on practices that support professional learning and teaching practice in your school. The decision to participate in this focus group will have no bearing on your standing with the school, and the principal will not be informed about which teachers choose to participate.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide your name, primary teaching assignment, number of years you have been teaching, and email contact information so that transcripts can be sent to you for review. All personal information collected will be for use by the researcher only.

The data, once collected, will be transcribed. Other than the researcher, a professional transcriber will have access to the recordings. He or she will be required to complete a confidentiality agreement before transcription may begin. The transcripts will never be shown in public.

There are several options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. You can choose all, some, or none of them. Please review each of these options and choose Yes or No:

I grant permission to be audio taped: Yes: ___ No: ___

I wish to remain anonymous: Yes: ___ No: ___

I wish to remain anonymous, but you may refer to me by a pseudonym: Yes: ___ No: ___

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: _____

You may quote me and use my pseudonym name: Yes: ___ No: __

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?

There is no anticipated harm or predictable risk associated with participating in this research project. This study is not considered "high-risk'.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

Only the investigator, Tracy Drefko, and a professional transcriber will have access to the discussion notes and the recordings. The information provided will be kept anonymous. Participants will be provided a copy of the transcripts and interpretations to check them for accuracy and edits, and to provide feedback.

You are under no obligation to participate and, if you do consent to participate, you may, and without consequence, decide not to continue your involvement or to refuse to answer any question. Additionally, once focus groups have been completed and transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review the transcripts and, if you choose, make additions, corrections, or deletions to the record of the things you said. Further, at any point, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it.

The data gathered in this study will be kept in strict confidence, and will be stored at a secure location, to which only Tracy Drefko will have access. Further, she will retain the discussion notes and digital recordings locked in a secure cabinet for five years after which time they will be destroyed in a manner that safeguards privacy and confidentiality. A final copy of the dissertation can be made available to you if requested.

Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Mrs. Tracy Drefko
Faculty of Graduate Studies, Education
(403) 818-3772, tracy.drefko2@ucalgary.ca
or
Dr. Jim Brandon (Supervisor)
403-220-3048

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 210-9863; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca.

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

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Appendix I.

Teacher Focus Group Interview Protocol

The Principal Pipeline: How Elementary School Principals Perceive Student-Centered Leadership to Impact Teaching Practice

Participants: _____

_____

Date of Interview: _____ Location: _____

Start time: _____ End time: _____ Researcher: _____

Research Purpose

The purpose of this case study is to investigate the relationship between instructional leadership and teaching practice when aspects of a student-centered leadership model are enacted in elementary schools. My rationale for examining this topic is to better understand how elementary school principals enact aspects of student-centered instructional leadership and the impact of these actions on teaching practice.

Focus Group Interview Procedures

The following questions and discussion prompts have been designed to guide our scheduled one-hour audio-recorded focus group conversation about *teaching practice and professional learning in your school.* You may ask for the recording to be stopped at any time or replayed for clarification and to ensure accuracy. I will also be taking notes during the interview, and you may have a copy of these notes at the conclusion of the interview if you wish. A summary of audio-recorded notes will be sent to you as soon as they have been transcribed for your review so you can make corrections, additions or deletions. Please review the summary and return to me any changes within 14 days of receiving the information.

Please feel free to share documents and/or artifacts that may be helpful in this inquiry, for example, professional learning notes, planning documents, etc.

Informed Consent

Before we begin the actual focus group conversation, I want to make sure everyone has had a chance to read the informed consent form that I emailed to you some time ago. It's important to me that you understand exactly what your participation in the study involves, and the steps I will take to protect your privacy. Please note that anonymity and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus groups, but I do ask that we all as participants keep comments confidential and that we refrain from discussing any particular individual's response. Do you have any questions for me about the informed consent process, or about your participation? [Pause for questions.]

[Collect signed informed consent form from participants.] _____ Signed and Received

Begin audio recording.

Focus Group Interview – Use the Teacher Focus Group Questions to guide

Next Steps:

Over the next week or so, I will use the audio recording from our discussion today to create a written transcript of our conversation. As soon as it's ready, I will email a copy to you. If you would, please take a few minutes when you receive it to read it through and let me know if it looks accurate, or mark any required changes on it and return it to me by email. You're also welcome to send me additional information you'd like to include if you think of details or information you'd like to add as you read it.

I will also spend some time reading through the transcript and thinking about all that you have shared during our discussion today. As I continue to collect more data for the study, it may be the case that I contact you to see if you would be willing to answer just a few more questions. Would that be ok? [Pause to note participant's willingness to participate in a secondary interview.]

Closing

Again, thank you very much for spending time with me today and answering my questions. Your perspectives are very helpful, and I appreciate your sharing with me. Please don't hesitate to call or email me if you have any questions about today's session or about the research itself. I will be happy to answer them for you.

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Appendix J.

Teacher Focus Group Questions

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study. This information, including questions and discussion prompts that will guide our one-hour focus group conversation about *your thoughts about teaching practice and professional learning at your school*, is being provided in advance for consideration and reflection.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this case study is to investigate the relationship between instructional leadership and teaching practice when aspects of a student-centered leadership model are enacted in elementary schools. My rationale for examining this topic is to better understand how elementary school principals enact aspects of student-centered instructional leadership and the impact of these actions on teaching practice.

Focus Group Conversation Questions

The following questions and discussion prompts have been designed to guide our scheduled one-hour audio-recorded focus group conversation about *teaching practice and professional learning in your school.* You may ask for the recording to be stopped at any time or replayed for clarification and to ensure accuracy. I will also be taking notes during the interview, and you may have a copy of these notes at the conclusion of the interview if you wish. A summary of audio-recorded notes will be sent to you as soon as they have been transcribed for your review so you can make corrections, additions or deletions. Please review the summary and return to me any changes within 14 days of receiving the information.

Please note that anonymity and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus groups. However, the researcher requests that participants in the focus group keep comments confidential and that we refrain from discussing any particular individual's responses.

Please feel free to share documents and/or artifacts that may be helpful in this inquiry, for example, professional learning notes, planning documents, etc.

Shared Vision

1. Please describe the extent to which you and your colleagues have a shared vision of teaching and learning in your school.
2. Describe your role and responsibility within this shared vision.

Teaching Practice

1. Please discuss how your teaching practice has evolved in the last few years.

2. Please describe how the *Teaching Effectiveness Framework* is used and any impact it has made in your practice.
3. Please talk about the structures and supports available in your school that help you to reflect on and elevate your practice.

Professional Learning

1. Please describe professional learning in your school.
2. Please describe a few of the ways that school-based professional learning opportunities have impacted your teaching practice.

Trusting Relationships

1. Please describe the importance of adult relationships in your school, and discuss how these relationships are intentionally built.
2. Please describe how you engage in collegial conversations through relationships of support and challenge with your peers in your school.

Further Comments

Please feel free to share any additional thoughts about professional learning and teaching practice in your school.

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Appendix K.

Study Description for Participants

The Principal Pipeline: How Elementary School Principals Perceive Student-Centered Leadership to Impact Teaching Practice

Background and Rationale

Educational research indicates that school-based leadership has a significant impact on student success, second only to the quality of teaching (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011), and school leaders, in particular principals, are responsible to ensure quality teaching practice within their buildings. Broad descriptions of leadership work that impacts teaching and learning exist in educational literature (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011), yet specific leadership actions that forward teaching and learning within schools are not easily identifiable. Therefore, despite guidance about general capabilities, knowledge and skills that leaders should build in order to strengthen professional capital in service of student success, questions arise about the day-to-day actions that will have this effect, and indeed, how these actions are perceived by teachers as impacting their work.

Since 2012, Area III school principals within the Calgary Board of Education have participated in professional learning sessions examining how leadership impacts quality teaching and optimal learning opportunities for all students. Robinson's (2011) leadership dimensions and capabilities have been discussed in relation to the instructional leadership responsibilities of principals in Alberta. The focus of this investigation is on how elementary school principals have enacted aspects of these dimensions and capabilities within their own schools, as well as the perceived impacts of these specific actions on teaching practice.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this case study is to explore in three elementary schools, principal perceptions of how they enact aspects of student-centered leadership capabilities in their daily work, as well as teacher perceptions of how these actions influence their practice. It is anticipated that, through obtaining a deeper understanding of the actions of school principals and their perceived impact on teachers and teaching practice, ideas about specific leadership strategies will emerge. This understanding will support current and prospective school-based leaders to enact leadership that directly impacts teaching practice and indirectly, student outcomes.

Research Questions

To explore these daily leadership actions and the impact of these actions on teaching practice, two over-arching research questions will be addressed:

1. How do school principals perceive they enact student-centered leadership practices?
2. What do school leaders and teachers perceive the impact of these student-centered leadership practices to be on teaching practice?

Case Study Research Design

Case study research is often used within educational investigations that focus on understanding processes of events, projects and programs within a particular context (Merriam, 1998). Case study research explores a bounded system – an activity, event, process, program, etc. that has been separated for research usually in terms of time, place, or activity. The nature of this research design focuses on a particular phenomenon within several schools, with the researcher's intent to gather data, interpret and theorize about the impact of specific leadership actions on teaching practice.

This single-case, multi-site study will focus on three elementary schools as instrumental cases (Creswell, 2012) to investigate ways in which principals enact aspects of student-centered instructional leadership and how these actions impact teaching practice in these schools. The identification of a specific phenomenon (student-centered instructional leadership actions) within particular contexts (three elementary schools within the Calgary Board of Education, Area III, in which principals have participated in a minimum of three years of professional learning sessions) bounds this research, making case study methodology an appropriate choice.

Methods

Within case study methodology, using multiple sources of evidence is recommended (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). In keeping with this research, data within this case study will be generated from the following sources:

- Audiotaped individual interviews with three elementary school principals who have been engaged in the Calgary Board of Education Area III professional learning sessions for a minimum of three years
- Audiotaped focus group conversations with 5-6 teachers from each of these schools
- Field notes during interviews and focus group conversations
- Documents and artifacts related to leadership, professional learning and teaching practice, as contributed by participants

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