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Senior Leaders' Perceptions about Preparing and Developing Alberta's Principals as Instructional and Learning Leaders

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Senior Leaders' Perceptions about Preparing and Developing Alberta's Principals as
Instructional and Learning Leaders

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study is to gain a deeper understanding of senior, district-level leaders' perceptions regarding school and district-level leadership practices that prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders in Alberta urban school districts. Recognizing a heightened focus on system and school leadership directed by Alberta's practice standard and linked to student outcomes, this inquiry explores how senior leaders prepare, develop, and support principals as instructional and learning leaders, and in what ways senior leaders themselves are supported and challenged in this work. In this case study, data were generated through policy document reviews and semi-structured interviews with seven senior leaders in three Alberta urban school authorities. Through a qualitative coding process, six themes emerged indicating that system leaders (a) understand their shifting role in supporting principals as instructional and learning leaders; (b) build principal capacity through mentoring, modelling, supervising, and evaluating; (c) align practices, policies, and procedures with system wide district learning priorities; (d) promote district-led principal preparation and development programs; (e) equip themselves and each other as instructional-learning leaders to prepare and develop principals; and (f) ensure successes and navigate challenges in preparing and developing principal instructional-learning leaders. With limited research on how system leaders prepare, develop, and support principals as instructional and learning leaders, this study makes a much needed contribution. Knowledge gained from this research may support system and school instructional and learning leadership practices through sustained, effective principal preparation and development. Included are recommendations to educational leaders, post-secondary institutions, and policy makers for the practical implementation of principal preparation and development that has the potential to improve quality teaching and student learning.

Keywords: school district leadership, instructional leadership, learning leadership,
principal preparation, professional learning

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Dedication

To my beloved mother and father

Alice Veronica Némethi (1942-2014) and Steve (István) Némethi (1938-1990)

For instilling the love of learning

And

My three beloved sons

Matthew Steve Mazurek, Zachary Lawrence Mazurek, and Joseph Thomas Mazurek

For their unwavering support, encouragement, and love

I am so very proud of the men that they are

And their continued impetus to pursue their love of life-long learning

And

My beloved husband

George Caraganis

For his inspiring conversations, words of encouragement, and selfless giving

Thank you for loving me so much and making my dreams a reality.

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List of Abbreviations

AERR	Annual Education Results Report
AISCA	Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta
ATA	Alberta Teacher’s Association
CAP	Canadian Association of Principals
CASS	College of Alberta School Superintendents
CCSSA	Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta
CFREB	Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board
IEL	Institute for Educational Leadership
LQS	Leadership Quality Standard
NASSP	National Association of Secondary School Principals
NAESP	National Association of Elementary School Principals
PLC	Professional Learning Community
SLQS	Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard
SEL	Social-Emotional Learning
TCPS	Tri-Council Policy Statement
TQS	Teaching Quality Standard

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Undeniably, district and school-level leadership make a difference when it comes to student learning (Brandon et al., 2015; Hopkins, 2011; Leithwood 2008, 2010, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Robinson, 2006, 2011; Wahlstrom et al., 2010). Senior leaders build principal capacity (Leithwood 2008, 2010, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2004), and subsequently, principals influence quality teaching, and indirectly but significantly, impact student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Louis et al., 2010; Robinson, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008; Wahlstrom et al., 2010). The principal's role as an instructional and learning leader is pivotal to promoting school-wide development focused on teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; DuFour, 2002; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Louis et al., 2010; Robinson, 2006, 2011; Wallace Foundation, 2012). Therefore, it is crucial for principals to implement learning-focused practices associated with instructional and learning leadership, making student learning a priority (Institute for Educational Leadership [IEL], 2000; DuFour, 2002; Southworth, 2011); however, various barriers exist that influence the quality of leadership, teaching, and student learning. Many principals, feeling isolated and inadequately prepared for leadership (Lashway, 2003b; Wallace Foundation, 2012), are confronted with insurmountable work demands, rising societal challenges, time consuming mandated standardized tests (Canadian Association of Principals [CAP], 2014; Hallinger, 2003), and high principal turnover (Hargreaves, 2009; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). It is essential that educational leaders keep learning at the forefront and mitigate managerial diversions (LaPointe Terosky, 2014). With a heightened accountability for principals to yield high performing schools, preparation and development for aspiring and novice principals

are paramount (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). Unfortunately, in many jurisdictions in the US, “principal development remains a low priority in most education policy agendas” (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP] & National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 2013, p. 1), compounded by the reality of existing traditional principal programs that are incongruent with instructional demands (Hess & Kelly, 2007; LaPointe Terosky, 2014). More specifically, current formal and informal leadership preparation and development programs demonstrate very few links to daily leadership practices, failing to bridge theory with practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Wallace Foundation, 2012).

In Alberta, however, to support principals in the development of competencies aligned with instructional and learning leadership practices, senior leaders hold a shared responsibility for student and school success, as evidenced in the *Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard* (SLQS) (Alberta Education, 2020b). Senior leaders support and develop novice principals by “providing learning opportunities, based on research-informed principles of effective teaching, learning and leadership,” to build principal capacity as an instructional and learning leader (Alberta Education, 2020b, p. 4). My research inquiry explores senior leaders’ perceptions about their role in preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders in Alberta urban school districts. Senior leaders’ insights about the research problem and key research questions may influence district and school-level leadership practices, principal preparation and development, and policies, and thus potentially impact student and teacher learning.

This chapter highlights the background and context of the research inquiry and outlines the problem, purpose, key research questions, and research design. I explain my professional and

personal background, which influences my role and assumptions as a researcher. Finally, I provide my rationale for the research and an explanation of the significance of the study, followed by a glossary of key terminology and a chapter summary.

Background and Context

Instructional leadership is central to student and teacher learning (Robinson, 2006, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008). According to the report commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, leadership matters second only to teaching when it comes to impacting student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004). With augmented expectations to improve teacher quality and student outcomes, principal accountability is heightened (NASSP & NAESP, 2013). The principal's role shifts from a prior emphasis on management to a focus on instruction.

An urgency exists for improvements in preparing educational leaders to lead learning (Murphy, 2005; Schleicher, 2015) and a call to “assume the role of instructional leader” (LaPointe Terosky, 2014, p. 6), prioritizing instruction over task management (see also Blasé & Blasé, 2000; Hale & Moorman, 2003; Robinson et al., 2008; Wallace Foundation, 2013). To support principals in their primary role as instructional leaders and to prepare them to lead a learning community, pre-service training and continued professional development are essential. Researchers contest whether traditional principal preparation and in-service programs effectively prepare principals as instructional leaders (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; LaPointe Terosky, 2014; Shelton, 2010; Wallace Foundation, 2012), indicating that “traditional coursework in principal preparation and development programs often fail to link theory with practice” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, p. 5).

Since the quality of leadership profoundly impacts teaching and student learning (Leithwood, 2008, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano & Waters, 2009), senior and school leadership research-informed practices are significant. With the support of district-level senior leaders, effective principal leadership practices can be cultivated, contributing to a dynamic and coherent school system that develops individual and collective capacity towards effective principal pathways. Enacting system-wide instructional and learning leadership practices places student learning at the center of all district, school, and classroom decisions and in alignment with research-informed practices and policies. The literature indicates that system leader support to prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders is necessary for making a significant impact on quality teaching and student learning (Barber et al., 2010; Leithwood, 2008). Drawing on the perceptions of senior leaders, linkages can be made between theoretical conceptualizations, effective principal practices, and professional practice standards. By employing research-informed practices aligned with professional practice standards, senior leaders can support and enact an effective and sustainable pipeline to principalship in a manner that avoids “trial and error” (LaPointe Terosky, 2014, p. 28) and minimizes “just in time” leadership efforts.

Statement of the Research Problem

The principal’s role is not only complex and multifarious, but critical for school-wide development focused on teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Louis et al., 2010; Robinson, 2006; Robinson, 2011; Wallace Foundation, 2012). Principals, however, may not be prepared as instructional and learning leaders, yet are vehemently urged to assume this role (Blasé & Blasé, 2000; LaPointe Terosky, 2014; Wallace

Foundation, 2012). Ideally, effective and consistent formal and informal principal preparation and development, realistic managerial workload demands, and appropriate succession planning assist principals as school leaders. In Alberta, senior leaders, such as the school superintendent, chief deputy superintendent, and system education leaders are responsible for supporting effective school leadership, ensuring quality teaching, and achieving student learning outcomes. In accordance, the Alberta SLQS (Alberta Education, 2020b) indicates that the superintendent and chief deputy superintendent (under the direction of the superintendent) are accountable for employing leadership competencies that yield quality school leadership, teaching, and student learning. This means that the superintendent is responsible for determining an educational vision that builds staff capacity focused on instructional leadership, and for using research-informed practices while leading learning to impact student achievement (Alberta Education, 2020b). The superintendent fosters a shared responsibility for student and school success but is answerable for “building principals’ . . . capacities and holding them accountable for providing instructional leadership through effective support, supervision, and evaluation practices” (Alberta Education, 2020b, p. 4). Thus, the SLQS is aligned with the Alberta *Leadership Quality Standard* (LQS) to direct how senior leaders support school leaders in meeting the objectives of the LQS.

With the *SLQS* and *LQS* commencement on September 1, 2019, the Ministry of Education developed multiple pathways to leadership certification:

- grandparenting principals and superintendents currently in the position as of June 2019 through the completion of an online Leadership Certification application (Pathways to Leadership Certification, 2018);

- completing a 2-day in-service program for assistant principals, deputy superintendents, associate and assistant superintendents, and jurisdiction leaders offered in partnership by Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS), and Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta (AISCA) (Pathways to Leadership Certification, 2018) prior to June 2019;
- attending a week-long, in-class Continuing Education Leadership Certification pilot program and 2 months of online coursework for leaders with a permanent teaching certificate, but not employed by an Alberta school district in June 2019; and
- completing approved credentialing courses offered at a Minister-approved institution to interested Alberta certified teachers, aspiring leaders, and both senior and school leaders who were not employed by an Alberta school in June 2019. (Government of Alberta, 2019a)

Ministry expectations for improving school system accountability in Alberta have resulted in this formalization of professional practice standards and credentialing programs through the *Education Amendment Act, 2019*, which received royal assent on July 18, 2019. Research that takes into consideration these recent developments is necessary. That is, we cannot assume the extent to which and how these formalized directives and practices will be relied upon by senior leaders as a means to support, prepare, and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders; nor can we assume the extent to which and how senior leaders will continue to promote *informal* learning opportunities to prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders now that the formalized professional practice standards and accompanying

credentialing programs exist. Thus, because, beginning in 2019, senior leaders were to be at the helm of the developing system leadership under a new set of policies, I began planning this study with the idea that key insights into current understandings of and practices for preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders could be best provided by senior leaders themselves. And by embarking on this research, my ultimate objective was to contribute to a larger body of knowledge aimed at improving system instructional and learning leadership practices.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research was to explore senior leaders' perceptions about how they prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders. Doing research in an under-investigated and current area of educational leadership, the goal of my study was to link theory to specific practices that senior leaders believe will improve instructional and learning leadership. I am thus able to make some recommendations to educational leaders, post-secondary institutions, and policy makers for the practical implementation of principal preparation and development that may have the potential to improve teacher quality and student achievement.

Key Research Questions

1. What are senior leaders' perceptions about how they prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders in Alberta urban schools?
2. What supports exist in Alberta for senior leaders to prepare and develop school principals as instructional and learning leaders?
3. What are some of the successes and challenges in preparing and developing school principals as instructional and learning leaders?

Research Design Overview

Working within a constructivist paradigm, in this study I explored the bounded social phenomenon of senior leaders' perceptions about their practices for preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders. By implementing a qualitative research approach, I searched for a holistic understanding of this complex phenomenon through the multiple perspectives of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) who are employed by Alberta urban public and Catholic school districts. I used case study methodology (Merriam, 1998) and data collection methods of interviews and document reviews to connect research-informed theory (literature) and research findings to the research questions. By selecting a research approach and methodology congruent with my constructivist stance, the research problem, purpose, and questions, and the research process ensured trustworthiness of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ultimately, I gained insights into participants' understanding and interpretation of their "lived experiences" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6) in preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders.

Researcher

Qualitative research engages people, including the researcher, to examine how "knowledge shapes their sense of identity and agency" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007, p. 282). I realize that my perspectives are influenced by my own assumptions, values, knowledge, and realities, based on my personal experiences and background, and thus impact my research study. As an educational leader, my worldview continues to be transformed as I attempt to make sense of my lived experiences. For 27 years, I have served the educational needs of students, parents,

and colleagues in the capacity of a teacher, assistant principal, and principal within K-9 schools, while embracing educational partnerships to promote student and staff leadership. The opportunity to build rapport and establish a culture of trust with staff and colleagues is primarily grounded in efforts to support, coach, mentor, and empower others to develop individual and collective capacity. The knowledge, experiences, and values with which I have been imbued assisted me in conceptualizing a theoretical framework for my research proposal.

Researcher Assumptions

As a nascent researcher, I had many assumptions regarding this research inquiry. First, I assumed that senior leaders would be eager to participate in a study with the potential to improve school and district-level leadership practices and possibly impact student and teacher learning. Secondly, I assumed that senior leaders had recent opportunities to work directly and indirectly with principals and were able to share their perceptions openly and honestly. Thirdly, I assumed that no external impediments, such as the catastrophic COVID-19 pandemic, would occur and impact the research approval and participant recruitment of my study. Fourthly, I assumed that educational researchers and educators were interested in the findings of this research inquiry and motivated to implement the recommendations. In addition, as I was not in a direct reporting relationship, nor did any conflict of interest exist with any senior leaders being interviewed, I assumed I could maintain my independence as a researcher. As well, I assumed that the theoretical and methodological framework of the research design would cohere with the research problem, purpose, questions, and my own epistemological stance. Finally, I acknowledge that my background and professional leadership experiences influenced my assumptions. These assumptions were disclosed in the self-reflexive notes I made in memos and in my researcher

journal throughout the study. For example, I noted where my experiences as a leader and educator were similar and different from those shared by participants. These similarities and differences helped shape my thinking about the participants' described experiences. My self-reflexive notes served as an audit trail for contributing to the trustworthiness of the study.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

The rationale for this research inquiry was to provide practical information to participants and senior leaders to improve principal preparation and development aligned with research-informed practices that impact teacher quality and student outcomes (Louis et al., 2010; Robinson, 2011). As well, this study aimed to contribute to their awareness of the significance of school system coherence for developing a pathway to principalship. It is undisputable that “learning has to be the number one priority” for educational leaders, as “effective school leadership is about improving pupil outcomes” (Southworth, 2011, p. 71). The knowledge that bridges theory and leadership practices underscores the critical role of senior leaders in preparing principals as instructional and learning leaders; “leaders are learners” (Robertson & Timperley, 2011, p. 8) and are held accountable for developing and improving core leadership practices to collaboratively lead learning in a school community (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2006).

The significance of this research is in how it stands to provide educational insights that will support senior leaders and organizations in implementing principal preparation and development. The knowledge gained through this study may inform interactive practices of mentoring, modelling, supervising, and evaluating principals, in accordance with the SLQS and LQS practice standards, to enhance a principal's professional learning experiences focused on

instructional and learning leadership. Senior leaders will hopefully gain insights on how to support principals, particularly novice principals whose confidence in areas of curriculum and instruction may be lacking (Shoho & Barnett, 2010). Furthermore, as a result of this research, I am able to make some recommendations to educational leaders, post-secondary institutions, and policy makers for the practical implementation of principal preparation and development that may have the potential to improve teacher quality and student achievement, rendering this research significant.

Definitions of Key Terminology

To enhance reader clarity and provide a convergence of understanding of the terms, I rely on the definitions developed by key scholars of the field, whom I have cited in what follows.

Student learning outcomes, student achievement, and student success are similar terms in that they emphasize a learner's growth, but they diverge in meaning; *student learning outcomes* are described as the knowledge or skills a student should acquire by the end of a particular assignment, class, course, or program. *Student achievement* is a measure of student performance on standardized tests and teacher-reported summative assessments of student learning. *Student success* may be defined as "student engagement, learning, and well-being" (Brandon et al., 2015, p.1).

A *senior leader* refers to a district-level leader, including the school superintendent, chief deputy superintendent, associate superintendent (assistant superintendent), and school jurisdiction leaders or system education leaders. These individuals are responsible for supporting effective school leadership, ensuring quality teaching, and achieving student learning outcomes. *Senior leaders, system leaders, district leaders, district-level leaders* will be used throughout

this dissertation synonymously to represent the superintendent, chief deputy superintendent, associate superintendent, assistant superintendent, and middle-level or central office leaders. *Superintendency team* includes senior leaders, except for middle-level/central office leaders. *System education leaders* and *school jurisdiction leaders* represent senior leaders, except for the superintendent and chief deputy superintendent.

Educational leadership may be described as the leader's actions and attributes, or the behaviours of the leaders and the outcomes within their circumstances or context (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Leadership is "all about the organizational improvement" (Louis et al., 2010, p. 9), consisting of two central functions: to provide direction and to exercise influence (see also Leithwood & Louis, 2012; DuFour & Marzano, 2011). It is about "learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively . . . to create actions that grow out of these new understandings" (Harris & Lambert, 2003, p. 4).

Instructional leadership (leadership of learning) is "often defined more narrowly in the literature . . . focus[ing] on actions by principals that directly impact instruction" (Brandon et al., 2015). Instructional leadership highlights school leadership practices that have a direct effect on learning and teaching, such as implementing curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Hallinger, 2005; Robinson et al., 2008; Wahlstrom et al., 2010). The emphasis is placed on the principal's knowledge about teaching and learning, role in leading instruction, and relationship with staff to promote effective teaching. This narrow conceptualization of instructional leadership is described as *direct* instructional leadership (Fullan, 2014). On the other hand, *indirect* instructional leadership practices suggest the improvement of teaching and learning through such means as "staffing the program, providing instructional support, monitoring school activity,

buffering staff from distractions to their work, and aligning resources” (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, pp. 60–61). Instructional leadership also includes indirect practices concerned with the larger organizational context of schools, such as the “purposes and goals,” “people,” “organizational culture,” and “structure and social networks” that promote quality instruction (Hallinger & Heck, 1998, p. 171).

Learning leadership (leadership for learning) encompasses a more expansive conceptualization that incorporates both the enactment of leadership practices that influence student learning, albeit indirectly (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood et al., 2006; Robinson et al., 2008) and a “wider range of leadership sources” (Hallinger, 2011, p. 126) that is not limited to the principal (Robertson & Timperley, 2011). Namely, the teacher, teacher leaders, or other sources lead learning with the emphasis on teacher professionalism (Hallinger, 2009; Lambert 2000; Marks & Printy, 2003). According to Robertson and Timperley (2011), senior leaders also lead learning by organizing the “distribution of leadership to middle leaders who through their excellence as teachers and their skills as leaders lead by example, [as they] monitor pedagogy, learning and the development of colleagues,” and share best practices through coaching, mentoring, and dialogue (p. 82-83). I understand the terms *instructional leadership* and *learning leadership* to be compatible, but I do not see them as synonymous. Perceiving the principal as an “instructional and learning leader” distinguishes the instructional leader’s priority to focus on student learning and quality teaching, while, in addition, the concept of learning leader highlights the building of staff capacity through distributing leadership practices more widely, underscoring teaching and learning.

Leading learning means “focusing on teaching and learning, and in particular, developing pedagogy” (Robertson & Timperley, 2011, p. 83). The definition of a *lead learner* redefines the role of principal from an “instructional leader with a focus on teaching to a leader of a professional community with a focus on learning” (DuFour, 2002, p. 15).

In the literature, the terms *learning leadership, leadership for learning, and leaders of learning* are associated with the concepts of both leadership and learning. *Learning leadership*, also referred to as *leadership for learning* (Hallinger, 2011), or as related to *leaders of learning* (DuFour & Marzano, 2011), emphasizes the approaches employed by the educational leader to achieve school priorities connected to student learning outcomes through instructional leadership practices (Day et al., 2010; Hallinger, 2003, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2008).

As a result of my literature review, I developed the terms *learning-focused leadership* and *instructional-learning leadership*. Both terms encompass instructional, student-centered, transformational, and learning leadership, as these leadership theories emphasize learning. Learning-focused leadership emphasizes a particular *focus* on learning. Instructional-learning leadership encompasses instructional (student-centered) and learning (transformational and instructional) leadership practices. Instructional-learning leadership emphasizes setting instructional and transformational educational goals focused on student, teacher, and leader learning, directly leveraging collective capacity (teacher, school leader, community, and district leaders) through collaborative learning communities that significantly maximize student learning. I use these two terms interchangeably throughout the dissertation as they are synonymous.

Leadership capacity means the “broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership and a way of understanding sustainable school improvement” (Lambert, 2006, p. 239; see also Harris & Lambert, 2003). Building capacity “focuses not only on the organization but also people” (Hallinger, 2011, p. 133), emphasizing the disposition, knowledge, and skills of the individual to achieve school goals (Wahlstrom et al., 2010).

Efficacy is defined as the belief in one’s own ability to attain a desired result (Bandura, 1982). Wahlstrom et al. (2010) state that efficacy is “a belief about one’s own ability (self-efficacy) or the ability of one’s colleagues (collective efficacy) to perform a task or achieve a goal” (p. 15).

Professional development entails a continual, purposeful, systematic delivery of concepts that influence professional practices. Professional development is indicative of a learning process whereby knowledge is acquired by or imparted to the learner (Timperley, 2011).

Although **professional learning** is also ongoing and intentional, it implies an “internal process in which individuals create professional knowledge through interaction with . . . information in a way that challenges previous assumptions and creates new meanings” (Timperley, 2011, p. 5). Professional learning suggests that the learner engages in a constructive internal learning process that is facilitated by a professional who works alongside the learner (Huber, 2004; Timperley, 2011). Huber (2004) indicates that “knowledge cannot simply be imparted but it has to be created and developed” in order for the learning to be applied to the school context (p. 90). Professional learning incorporates a student outcome focus, active inquiry, reflective practices, and learning at all levels of the educational system (Timperley,

2011). According to Timperley (2011), professional learning is “an active process of systematic inquiry into the effectiveness of practice for student engagement, learning and well-being” (p. 7).

For this study, the term *professional development* encompasses the understood significance of professional learning as a constructive and engaging learning process conducted in partnership in the interest of student learning. *Formal and informal professional learning* have distinguishing qualities. Richter et al. (2011) describes the former as “structured learning environments with a specified curriculum, such as graduate courses or mandated staff development . . . generally full-or half-day activities . . . that can be applied to the workplace” (p. 117), while the later are often job-embedded learning opportunities such as classroom observation, professional reading, and collaborative practices including mentoring and networking, that are usually self-initiated.

A *professional learning community (PLC)* is defined as “educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 469). There is an assumption that this work involving educators is an ongoing job-embedded learning practice (DuFour et al., 2008).

Formal and informal principal preparation programs have distinctive characteristics. According to Leithwood et al. (2004), the former refers to programs provided through the university or accredited organizations, while the latter is defined as “in-house” (p. 43), context situated professional learning, focused on problem-solving that involves “non-routine professional activity embedded in a supportive organizational culture” (p. 68).

A *pipeline* to principalship, also referred to as a pathway, is the means by which a continuum of leadership candidates are engaged in career development through processes of “recruitment and selection, preparation, licensure, mentoring, evaluation, and ongoing professional development” (Shelton, 2012, p. 4).

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the background and context of the inquiry. I identified the research gap, or research problem to be explored: principals may not be prepared as instructional and learning leaders. Thus, the chapter emphasized the important role of senior leaders in the preparation and development of Alberta principals as instructional learning leaders. It therefore introduced how my research focused on senior leaders’ perceptions about this work. I also established how my inquiry follows scholarship that identifies research-informed practices as a means to bridge theory and practice through formal and informal principal preparation and development. Research questions were included. As well, a brief overview of the research design, my positionality as the researcher, and researcher assumptions were discussed. Finally, the rationale and significance of the study were highlighted, closing with key terminology. The next two chapters of the dissertation present the literature review and the methodology and methods of the inquiry.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This qualitative case study explored the perceptions of senior leaders about preparing and developing Alberta urban principals as instructional and learning leaders. Never before have senior leaders, also referred to as system leaders, district leaders, or district-level leaders, been so significant in building principal capacity than now with the newly formalized professional practice standards highlighting leadership importance and with the shift in leadership role from a management to a learning imperative. I recognize that Alberta's educational policies and leadership practices do not occur in isolation, but rather exist in a larger context, informed by global education and political trends. In what follows, I have attempted to offer a literature review that is robust, offering a comprehensive explanation of the topic, and illuminating key issues and concepts (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

To develop a clear understanding of the role of Alberta senior leaders in preparing, developing, supporting, and leading principals, I reviewed three research areas: school and system leadership, principal preparation and development, and system leaders' supports and challenges in building principal capacity. These areas of research highlight a set of key concepts that have allowed me to frame my study. First, I explore the recent shift in the principal's and system leader's leadership role, and the learning-focused leadership theories that highlight core leadership practices linking school and system leadership to student learning. Secondly, I examine system leader accountability in preparing and developing principal instructional and learning leaders, system leaders' role in designing, implementing, and leading Alberta district-led leadership programs and learning continuum, and district-university partnerships. Lastly, I

explore system leader supports and challenges related to building principal capacity. I conclude with the conceptual framework of the study.

School and System Leadership

Evolving Role of School Leaders

In order to fully understand a system leader's responsibility in preparing, developing, and supporting principals, we need to recognize that the role of the principal has evolved. With a shift in focus from management and operations to that of an instructional leader having expertise in curriculum, instruction, and assessment, principals are responsible for prioritizing teaching and student learning (Elmore, 2004; Firestone & Riehl, 2005; Robinson, 2006). Being held accountable as an instructional leader (Alberta Education, 2009; Government of Alberta, 2019b, 2019c), principals experience a heightened responsibility to employ pedagogical practices and leadership competencies (Alberta Education, 2009) that improve teaching and student learning. In leading learning, the principal is required to create a culture of learning, collaboration, innovation, trust, support, and reflection that emphasizes collective capacity (Ash et al., 2013) by distributing leadership (Barb et al., 2010), sharing expertise, and co-constructing knowledge. Furthermore, social, political, and financial demands have increased the complexity of the principalship (CAP, 2014; LaPointe Terosky, 2014; Shelton, 2010), impacting principal efficacy linked to student learning and school improvement (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson, 2006).

With a shift in the principal leadership role towards a learning imperative, senior leaders' roles too have evolved. Senior leaders are being held accountable for ensuring that principals develop the competencies that are meant to build principal capacity as instructional and learning

leaders. That is, this shift requires senior leaders to pivot, learning alongside principals who are actively involved in leading and instructing teachers. To effectively support principals, system leaders need to be equipped with pedagogical knowledge and research-informed instructional leadership practices. Examining this educational shift more closely through a historical lens will assist in grounding the phenomenon and provide clarity and purpose for system leaders' practices in preparing and developing principals.

Due to educational reform initiative over the past century, the definition of leadership has evolved from a common theme of control and domination to an emphasis on the following aspects: leadership traits, behavior, and capabilities; power relationships; shared goals and effectiveness; motivation and transformation; and group processes (Northouse, 2016; Rost, 1991). The term *leadership* is defined as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2016, p. 6). In this study, leadership is described as encompassing two main functions: “providing direction and exercising influence” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 20). Moreover, I believe that school and system leadership may be explicitly defined as co-constructing knowledge and understanding collectively as a learning community, with a shared responsibility and purpose that emphasizes a collaborative learning environment—“leadership is about learning together” (Harris & Lambert, 2003, p. 5).

From the effective school movement of the 1980s emerged the conceptualization of instructional leadership, which recognized the importance of a principal's role in school effectiveness (Edmonds, 1979; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982). The principal's role had emphasized a strong, direct, top-down management approach, with “the principal as the centre of expertise, power and authority” (Hallinger, 2003, p. 330); however, the attention was now to be

directed to curriculum and instruction, usually under the guidance of a charismatic leader who influenced student learning (Edmonds, 1979; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982). With critics' skepticism of principals' efficacy as instructional leaders (Cuban, 1988; Hallinger, 2009), transformational leadership emerged in the 1990s, encouraging a collaborative school culture and shared responsibility for student learning and school improvement (Leithwood, 1994).

With the growing accountability movement of the turn of the 21st century, educational policy makers heightened academic standards, initiating mandated government reform efforts to increase principal responsibility for student achievement (Day et al., 2016; LaPointe Terosky, 2014). With the decentralization of districts, principals gained greater autonomy and were compelled to be change agents (Marks & Printy, 2003) as those in senior management, working in central office, were removed from daily instructional practices, and therefore unequipped to make school instructional decisions (Levey & Acker-Hocevar, 1998). Although physically absent at the school site, system leaders, in their complex role, were still required to supervise, support, and evaluate principals according to the professional practice standards, to ensure principal accountability for continued student achievement and school improvement. However, principal site-based decision making (David, 1995/96) was not a panacea for solving all educational challenges, as school leaders were not sufficiently prepared to make the needed school improvements (Hallinger, 2005; Noel et al., 2008, Tomlinson, 2003).

With an increased emphasis on student learning, a resurgence of interest in instructional leadership occurred. A contemporary model of instructional leadership evolved, promoting an "academic press" with high expectations for teachers, students, and school improvement, building a school academic culture (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). Next to

effective teaching, researchers indicated unequivocally that educational leadership significantly contributes to student learning, particularly instructional leadership (Leithwood et al., 2004, 2010; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Wahlstrom et al., 2010; Waters et al., 2003).

High performing districts today underscore the shift in educational leadership, urging system leaders, as they prepare and develop principals, to have a vision and set a direction towards a learning imperative that will support principals. To gain a greater understanding of the importance of system leaders' work in preparing and developing principals, the following studies provide insights and evidence claims related to school and system leadership practices that influence student learning.

Evidence Linking School Leadership to Student Learning

There is a substantial body of knowledge that links school leadership and student learning. Two key studies that provide this salient evidence are conducted by Leithwood et al. (2008) and Leithwood and Louis (2012); these are supported by the works of Hallinger and Heck (1998), Robinson et al. (2008), and Robinson (2011). The purpose of selecting these two key studies is to demonstrate that school leaders in high performing districts implement similar leadership practices to build teacher capacity and impact student learning.

The first study, a significant piece of research conducted by researchers Leithwood et al. (2008), rendered strong claims linking school leadership to student learning. With summarized findings of a substantive review of literature for a large-scale empirical study, assertions regarding successful school leadership were proposed:

- School leadership matters as it indirectly impacts student learning.
- Successful leaders use similar leadership practices.

- Successful leaders are responsive to the school context.
- School leaders indirectly influence teaching and learning through staff and working conditions.
- Widely distributed leadership has a greater influence on student learning.

The authors suggested that by enacting these leadership practices, school leaders can develop teacher capacity through a supportive and empowering environment, thus influencing student learning. Leithwood et al. (2008) indicated that leaders need to actively and intentionally build staff capacities. The authors also claimed that the following four categories of core practices “provide a powerful new source of guidance for practicing leaders, as well as a framework for initial and continuing leadership development” (p. 31):

- building vision and setting directions
- understanding and developing people
- redesigning the organization
- managing the teaching and learning programme (p. 31)

The second key study, Leithwood and Louis’s (2012) 6-year mixed methodology research project, consisting of 43 school districts, covering 9 states, and encompassing 180 schools, examined critical connections between school leadership practices and student learning. The researchers claimed that many effective instructional leadership practices were “enactments of these core practices,” (p. 57), and indicated slight variations from the earlier findings of Leithwood et al. (2008):

- setting directions—shaping a vision and expectations for student achievement
- developing people—providing support and building capacity

- redesigning the organization—establishing organizational structures that promote collaboration for teaching and learning
- improving the instructional program—improving teaching, learning, and aligning resources (Leithwood et al., 2008; Leithwood & Louis, 2012)

Leithwood and Louis (2012) emphasized that school instructional leaders have the greatest impact on student learning when focused on improving instruction (teacher competencies and motivation) through collaborative working conditions.

The claims of these two key studies are supported by other researchers. Hallinger and Heck (1998) also identified corresponding core leadership practices, categorizing them as “purposes,” “people,” and “structures and social networks” (pp. 171–175). In a related study, Robinson et al. (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of over 30 research studies implementing a comparative approach to determine the impact of various leadership practices on student learning. Drawing from the analysis and synthesis of the study, Robinson (2011) constructed a conceptual framework for a research-based student-centered leadership approach that emphasized the use of knowledge, skills, and dispositions to enact five leadership dimensions/core leadership practices:

- establishing goals and expectations
- resourcing strategically
- ensuring quality teaching
- leading teacher learning and development
- ensuring an orderly and safe environment (p. 9)

The findings indicated that the impact of instructional leadership is significant and revealed “strong average effects for the leadership dimension involving promoting and participating in teacher learning and development and moderate effect for the dimensions concerned with goal setting and planning, coordination, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum” (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 635).

Evolving Role of System Leaders towards Building Principal Capacity

With the evolving role of the principal, system leaders’ role too, has had to shift to meet the needs of principal instructional and learning leaders. System leaders’ responsibilities in building principal capacity is important when it comes to developing quality teaching and ensuring student learning (Brandon, 2015; Leithwood, 2008). Traditionally, school districts were created in response to a growing student population and the need to manage tasks, staff, and school operations (Honig, 2012; Leithwood, 2013). Thus, the role of district or system leaders was initially thought to be unrelated to the development of high performing schools (Lezotte, 2008). However, researchers determined that system leadership practices focused on learning were critical to school system improvement (Barber et al., 2010; Louis et al., 2010) and student learning (Brandon, et al., 2015; Leithwood 2013; Leithwood et al., 2004; Lezotte, 2008; Marzano & Waters, 2009). As a result, system leaders’ central role of managing has shifted to an instructional and learning leadership to support and equip school leaders in their evolving role as instructional and learning leaders. That is, system leaders employ leadership practices that prepare, support, and shape school instructional leaders, which signifies a progressive movement for educational leadership (Brandon et al., 2015; Honig, 2012; Leithwood, 2013). Evidence indicates that “when district leaders are carrying out their leadership responsibilities effectively,

student achievement across the district is positively affected” (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 5).

System instructional and learning leaders directly impact principal instructional and learning leaders who in turn influence quality teaching and student learning.

Evidence Linking System Leadership to Student Learning

Similar to the impact school leaders have on student learning, it is important to understand that system leaders play a critical role in directly shaping principal instructional leaders and indirectly impacting student learning. Following, I review two key research studies to provide evidence of district leadership impact on student learning, namely through learning-focused work with school-level leaders.

In the first key study, Leithwood (2008) researched the attributes of successful school districts, narrowing the literature scope to 31 peer-reviewed studies on district performance in relation to student achievement. All but one of the 31 studies were based in the United States, with Maguire’s (2003) research on *District Practices and Student Achievement: Lessons from Alberta*, situated in a Canadian context. Leithwood’s (2008) findings suggested that system leaders in high performing districts maintained a learning imperative by directing time, attention, and resources to:

- district-wide student achievement,
- approaches to curriculum and instruction,
- use of evidence for planning, organizational learning, and accountability,
- building and maintaining good communications and relations, learning communities, and district culture,
- investing in instructional leadership,

- district-wide, job-embedded PD for leaders and teachers, and
- infrastructure alignment [alignment of financial allocations, policies, procedures, and organizational structures for selection, recruitment, and evaluation]. (p. 6)

The district leadership actions affecting student achievement that were most readily found in the 31 studies included district-wide, job-embedded professional development, and more prominently, investment in instructional leadership. This is congruent with Robinson's (2011) findings on core student-centered or instructional leadership practices: leading learning and development to build staff capacity is most significant, followed by leadership practices that focus on "quality teaching," therefore, instruction and curriculum, or generally termed instructional leadership practices.

In the second key study, Brandon et al.'s (2015) collective case study involved 114 educational leaders (principals, system education leaders, chief deputy superintendents, and superintendents) and provided insights to the overall or broader range of instructional leadership practices of system leaders within six highly successful school jurisdictions. Using both qualitative and quantitative approaches to attain robust data, Brandon et al. identified nine cross-case themes and generated five main assertions or lessons to guide superintendency teams in leading learning in school jurisdictions:

- framing leadership research in action (enacting leadership practices that are research-informed and action-oriented),
- leading learning through superintendency teams (establishing collaborative and learning-focused teams),

- building purposeful professional relationships (influencing others to focus on student learning by building relational trust and respect),
- accessing external and internal expertise (building responsive professional capacity system wide), and
- travelling the pathways of collaborative leadership learning [building capacity using complementary research-informed leadership practices situated in professional leadership learning communities]. (pp. 81–83)

Similar to Leithwood (2008), Brandon et al. (2015) identified significant instructional leadership practices of superintendency teams leading learning that result in highly successful school systems with a focus on professional development. Brandon et al. also asserted the importance of implementing research-informed instructional and distributed leadership practices to build collective adaptive capacity at all system levels, using collaborative networks rooted in relational trust and respect. Each of these research studies directly or indirectly stressed the significance of capacity building across all levels of the system and the enactment of infrastructure alignment to ensure strong succession planning. As well, the findings of these studies indicated the importance of senior leaders' instructional leadership practices that promote collaboration, communication, and professional relationships that contribute to improved system-wide leadership capacity and student learning.

Evidence linking school and system leadership to student learning is clear in these two key studies. This research affirms that system leadership does matter, influencing school leadership, quality teaching, and student learning.

Learning-Focused Leadership Theories

To make sense of system leaders' role in supporting school leaders as instructional and learning leaders, it is important to understand the significance of learning-focused leadership theories. Gaining a greater understanding of learning-focused leadership theories helps explain the shift in school and system leaders' roles, particularly by identifying key leadership practices that ensure quality leading, teaching, and student learning. Highlighting these key leadership practices that link leadership to student learning, system leaders' evolving role in building principal capacity can be elucidated. A brief review of educational leadership theories follows.

Lee et al. (2012) claimed that educational leadership theories have evolved over the past 30 years and categorized them according to three developments: leadership and learning (DuFour, 2002; Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood, et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Robertson & Timperley, 2011), the distribution of leadership practices amongst other staff members (Gronn 2003; Harris 2013; Robinson, 2008; Spillane, 2005, 2006), and distributed instructional leadership representing a convergence of the two prior trends (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011). Claims made by Lee et al. imply that learning leadership and instructional leadership that is distributed are significant in system leaders' shifting role of supporting principal instructional and learning leaders. For my study, two central theoretical leadership practices are highlighted, instructional and learning leadership, alongside three associated or complementary leadership theories, student-centered, transformational, and distributed leadership theories. As research evidence suggests, instructional and learning leadership have the greatest impact on teaching, learning, and school improvement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Robinson, 2011). Since research on student-centered leadership has been strongly associated

with and builds upon instructional leadership (Robinson, 2011), I also included literature on student-centered leadership. Similarly, because learning leadership theory, also referred to as leadership for learning theory (Hallinger, 2011), is considered to be a hybrid of instructional and transformational leadership (Hallinger, 2009), I have also reviewed the body of work on transformational leadership. Key leadership practices identified in both student-centered and transformational leadership theories, similar to instructional and learning leadership theories, significantly contribute to the link between leadership and student learning, and to senior leaders' evolving role in building principal capacity. Thus, what I refer to as "learning-focused leadership" encompasses instructional, student-centered, transformational, and learning leadership. I also briefly attend to distributed leadership, as principal efficacy is dependent upon a repertoire of leadership practices (Brandon et al., 2015; Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marks & Printy, 2003). More specifically, identifying the benefits of these leadership practices along with their impact on student learning acknowledges how theory informs practice, providing direction for principal preparation that is the responsibility of senior, system leaders.

Instructional Leadership

A conceptualization of instructional leadership theory provides insight into essential leadership practices that impact leading, teaching, and student learning, ultimately helping to make sense of the phenomenon of senior leaders' role in building principal capacity. In contrast to the traditional hierarchical model of instructional leadership of the 1980s, a more progressive conceptualization of instructional leadership may be defined as a process of mutual influence by educational leaders to align the school mission, vision, instructional program, and learning culture for the purpose of attaining student learning outcomes (Hallinger, 2005). Instructional

leadership focuses on improving practices in relation to instruction, curriculum, and assessment (Leithwood et al., 2004). The Wallace Foundation (2013) identified key practices of effective instructional leaders:

- Shaping a vision of academic success for all students
- Cultivating leadership in others, improving instruction
- Managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement
- Creating a climate hospitable to education. (p. 4)

Similarly, Wahlstrom (2012) stated that instructional leaders influence instruction by establishing a culture of professional learning or “instructional ethos” and engaging with teachers in their professional growth or “instructional actions” (p. 68). Markedly, “learning is the core business of schools and therefore it is the primary focus of school leaders” (Southworth, 2011, p. 71), thus emphasizing the principal’s central responsibility as an instructional leader (Blasé & Blasé, 2000; Cobb et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2008; Wallace Foundation, 2013).

Throughout the past two decades, scholars have debated which leadership practices provide the most significant effect on school improvement. Instructional leadership is significant for improving student and teacher learning, corroborated by years of research (Hallinger, 2005; Hoerr, 2008; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson, 2008, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008). As Schleicher (2015) stated, “Instructional leadership . . . is the most important of all principals’ tasks” (p. 35). Therefore, directing time and effort to developing instructional leadership practices is paramount for building a culture of learning. Leithwood and Louis (2012) indicated that “the effects of leadership on student learning are largely indirect” (p. 14), as the principal rarely interacts directly with student learning; however, the educational

leader models learning by being a “hands-on principal, hip-deep in the curriculum and instruction . . . working directly with teachers on the improvement of teaching and learning” (Hallinger, 2005, p. 224). The principal needs to be part of the learning process (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011), demonstrating and partaking in collaborative practices (Lambert, 2002). Hoerr (2008) contended that the principal should not be the “resident instructional expert” (p. 84), as teacher pedagogy in instruction and curriculum continues to grow exponentially, making it impossible for the principal to demonstrate expertise in all disciplines. Since education is about teaching and learning, then educational leaders must develop their core leadership practices as an instructional leader (CAP, 2015). Being accountable for and enacting targeted instructional leadership actions or core leadership practices focused on student learning are the principal’s responsibility: setting directions, developing people, refining and aligning the school organization, and improving the instructional program (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, pp. 59–60).

Student-Centered Leadership

Student-centered leadership is associated or rooted in the constructs of instructional leadership, which focus on student learning. In today’s context, it is difficult to delve into instructional leadership literature without also recognizing Robinson’s (2011) work on student-centered leadership, as her contribution has influenced current school and system leadership role shifts as alluded to earlier. Although numerous research studies have been conducted linking leadership and learning, Robinson (2011) emphasized the direct and indirect links that leadership has on student outcomes, placing student learning at the core of school leadership (Robinson, 2011). Robinson et al. (2008) asserted that “the more educational leaders focus their

relationships, their work, and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their influence on student outcomes” (p. 636).

Robinson (2011) identified five leadership dimensions (core practices), with three of these dimensions having the greatest indirect impact on student learning. These three dimensions highlighted in the following three paragraphs are compatible with the core leadership practices previously identified in instructional leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2008).

Establishing Goals and Expectations. It is critical for principals to collaboratively devise shared goals to cultivate an environment that emphasizes an academic focus (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). Goal setting is a ubiquitous element of leadership and a “powerful leadership tool in the quest for improving valued student outcomes” (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 666). Setting clear goals for the school requires careful, meticulous, and purposeful work. When educational leaders use informed core leadership practices such as establishing goals and expectations, student learning has the potential to be at the heart of education.

Ensuring Quality Teaching. Educational leaders indirectly affect student learning through their direct actions to support and guide teachers to ensure quality teaching (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008). Here the “principal is an instructional leader and a leader of instructional leaders” (Robinson, 2011, p. 82)—this is a shared instructional leadership role. Effective principals are highly involved in curriculum and instruction, working alongside teachers (Hallinger, 2005) and recognize the importance of teacher networking and collaboration that is focused on pedagogy (Blasé & Blasé, 2000). Collaboration results in “increased teacher motivation, self-esteem, efficacy, and reflective

behaviour” (p. 135). Promoting teachers to engage in self-reflective practices in conjunction with teacher feedback on curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices, principals can ensure quality teaching. By using “open-to-learning conversation” (Robinson, 2011, p. 38) to build relational trust, as well as “applying relevant knowledge, and solving complex problems” (p. 21), the educational leader can also influence quality teaching and student learning.

Leading Teacher Learning and Development. When educational leaders involve teachers in high-quality professional learning opportunities, student learning goals may be attained more readily (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011). By “sliding in beside” the teacher and being a “guide at the elbow” to model effective instructional practices, school leaders can support teachers and encourage them to take risks to improve their teaching skills. Rather than the principal being visible in the classroom, Wahlstrom et al. (2010) attest that the principal be “intentional about each classroom visit and conversation, with the purpose of engaging with teachers about well-defined instructional ideas and issues” (p. 13). To be effective in providing *instructional actions* (Wahlstrom et al., 2010, p. 13), principals must not only have the necessary instructional skills and pedagogical knowledge to demonstrate credibility, but also the trust of the teacher. Leithwood and Louis (2012) purport that principals who are trusted as effective instructional leaders are more likely to participate in the learning and constructive conversations for instructional improvement. Being directly involved in professional learning, educational leaders engage in new instructional strategies alongside teachers, so that they can experience “the challenges the learning presents, and the conditions teachers require to succeed” (Robinson, 2011, p. 105). Most significant, leading teacher learning is a collective endeavor where principal and teachers learn together (Fullan, 2014; Robinson, 2011). Understanding that

there are key leadership practices associated with student-centered leadership and that they are rooted in instructional leadership, helps to clarify the shifting role of system leaders' work alongside and in partnership with principals. System leaders work to support principals in leading teacher learning and development to ensure that quality teaching corresponds with school and district priorities.

Learning Leadership

A conceptualization of learning leadership theory highlights important leadership practices that impact leading, teaching, and student learning, helping to understand senior leaders' role in equipping principals as instructional and learning leaders. Senior leaders prepare principals as lead learners or to lead for learning, impacting student and teacher learning (Ash et al., 2013; DuFour, 2002; Robertson & Timperley, 2011). Learning leadership, also referred to as leadership for learning (Hallinger, 2011), or as related to leaders of learning (DuFour & Marzano, 2011), emphasizes the approaches employed by the educational leader to achieve school priorities pertaining to student learning outcomes through instructional leadership practices (Day et al., 2010; Hallinger, 2003, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2008). Specifically, Hallinger (2009) stated that learning leadership is “an organizing construct for school leadership . . . that has evolved out of earlier research and practice grounded in the concept of instructional leadership” (p. 16). Namely, traditional instructional leadership has been transformed and “reincarnated” in the form of learning leadership (Hallinger, 2009, p. 1). Contributing to the conceptualization of instructional leadership, Hallinger (2009) identified the following discerning key concepts of learning leadership:

- supports a shared instructional leadership

- emphasizes a mutual influence of leadership
- represents a combination of instructional and transformational leadership
- employs modified instructional leadership practices to address the diverse needs within the school context (p. 16)

The principal's role is being redefined from "instructional leader with a focus on teaching to leader of a professional community with a focus on learning" (DuFour, 2002, p. 15).

Furthermore, a learning leader is "one who models learning, but also shapes the conditions for all to learn on a continuous basis" (Fullan, 2014, p. 9). The principal directly influences teacher effectiveness (Hallinger, 2005; Lambert, 2002; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005, 2006; Robinson, 2011) and teacher opportunities for collaborative professional learning. As a learning leader, the principal participates in the learning, prioritizing the joint learning of both the teacher and the principal (Fullan, 2014). By leading teacher-leaders, the principal leverages the learning generated within teacher professional learning communities (Timperley, 2011), maximizing the impact on student learning (Fullan, 2014). This recent leadership shift with a focus on learning (Robertson & Timperley, 2011), particularly learning in professional learning communities, is significant for improving teaching and learning and sustained school improvement (Fullan, 2014).

Although a disparity may exist between the high expectations of student achievement and the capacity of the staff to effectively meet student outcomes (Elmore, 2003; Townsend, 2012), learning leadership creates "powerful, equitable learning for all students" (Knapp et al., 2003, p. 5), teachers, and educational leaders system wide. Hallinger (2003) and Hallinger and Heck (2009) conceptualized learning leadership as an amalgamation of instructional and

transformational leadership, with the potential to narrow the gap between student achievement expectations and staff capacity development. Principals are now called to be lead learners, making student and adult learning a focus (DuFour, 2002; Robertson & Timperley, 2011). By leading one's "self, others and the organization for learning," capacity building of individuals and the school organization occurs (Townsend, 2012, p. 219; see also Hallinger, 2010), significantly influencing student learning outcomes (Robinson, 2011). Gaining a greater understanding of learning leadership theory with leadership practices that build individual and collective capacity and emphasize learning, helps explain the shift in school and system leaders' roles from a focus on management to that of learning. These school and system learning leadership practices also help explicate the link between quality leadership and increased student learning.

Transformational Leadership

As transformational leadership is considered to be a component of learning leadership (Hallinger, 2009), an understanding of this leadership theory highlights particular school and system leadership practices that have deliberately transformed school and system leadership roles and are seen to empower school and system leaders to engage in practices that reform school environments and promote school, staff, and student improvement. Transformational leadership "draws attention to a broader array of school and classroom conditions that may need to be changed if learning is to improve" (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 6). It is defined as "developing the organization's capacity to innovate" (Hallinger, 2003, p. 330). Setting a direction for and facilitating teaching and learning, transformational leaders emphasize a "form of power manifested through other people, not over other people" (Leithwood & Poplin, 1992, p.

9). Extending Burn's (1987) original theory of transformational leadership, Bass and Riggio (2006) highlighted three prominent factors: motivation, empowerment, and the delegation of responsibility. Members are motivated and engaged to work collaboratively to solve challenging problems (Burns, 1978; Leithwood & Poplin, 1992; Robinson et al., 2008). When members are empowered, they become committed to the purpose of an organization and demonstrate the impetus to achieve the organization's goals and objectives—increased self-efficacy often leads to increased collective capability (Bandura, 1986; Bass & Avolio, 1990; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Moreover, system and school leaders who inspire staff with the responsibility to reach organizational goals through a shared vision, heighten commitment, energy levels, and moral purpose (Burns, 1978). In addition, transformational leadership emphasizes the significance of building relationships and cultivating a culture of trust between the leader and followers—a combination of “head and heart” to simultaneously influence and connect with others (Lynch, 2012, p. 15). Change is encouraged and supported to improve teaching and learning through building an organization's capacity (Hallinger, 2003). Research shows that the benefits of implementing transformational leadership are numerous. This includes increased teacher capacity, confidence, self-worth, collective efficacy, professional goal setting, and a positive school culture to improve problem solving through collaboration (Leithwood & Poplin, 1992; Lynch, 2012). Understanding key transformational leadership practices is important as these are meant to reform school and system environments for the purpose of instructional improvement. Transformational leadership theory helps explain school and system leaders' shift in focus from management to ongoing instructional improvement that builds collective capacity through relational trust.

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership is suggested as a complementary leadership theory in this study, as leadership practices associated with this theory contribute to the work of school and system leaders by way of how instruction and learning are distributed. For school and system leaders to build staff capacity that impacts student learning, they implement distributed leadership practices. More specifically, system leaders, cultivating individual and collective principal capacity, employ distributed instructional and learning leadership practices to effectively carry out their complex roles in preparing and developing principals. Since system and school leaders do not independently lead districts and schools to success but require the involvement of many individuals with a variety of skills and knowledge (Lambert, 2002; Spillane, 2005), it is important to recognize distributed leadership practices as contributing to the understanding and conceptualization of both instructional and learning leadership that senior leaders are preparing principals to undertake. Distributed leadership practices emphasize the distribution of leadership amongst a network of people in various situations (Spillane, 2005). Both the school and system leader are seen as a “leader of instructional leaders” (Glickman, 1989, p. 6); hence, “leadership is by its very nature distributed” (Robinson, 2011, p. 8). Leithwood et al. (2007) attested that distributed leadership practices are effective when cultivated through collaborative structures; employed through a lens of expertise rather than the influence of positional power; provided with opportunities of capacity building, time, and autonomy; and established through direction setting. It is then the responsibility of the principal to intentionally provide an environment and opportunities to build school staff confidence and capacity, coordinate tasks effectively, monitor teacher enactment of leadership practices, and give feedback (Leithwood et al., 2007).

Distributed leadership practices increase individual and collective capacity with practitioners sharing their expertise as a result of observing, interacting, and learning from fellow colleagues (Leithwood et al., 2007). With an increased staff participation level and strengthened interdependence, a heightened propensity of commitment to organization goals, augmented on-the-job leadership development, and enhanced opportunities to collaboratively devise solutions to organizational problems develops (Leithwood & Mascall, 2008). In their review of literature, Leithwood et al. (2008) claimed that school leadership that is broadly distributed has a greater influence on school improvement and student learning. Building leadership capacity at all levels of the system is significant for sustained educational reform (Fullan, 2001).

Summary of School and System Leadership

In summary, the literature highlights the evolution of the principal's role that transitions from a managerial press to a learning imperative, which helps practitioners to understand system leaders' responsibility in preparing, developing, and supporting principals. Also, a growing body of evidence-based research has emerged over the past four decades indicating that school and system leadership are significant to school improvement and student achievement (Brandon et al., 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood, 2008; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005, 2006; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters et al., 2003) namely, through practices of instructional, student-centered, learning, transformational, and distributed leadership. System leaders can indirectly influence teaching, learning, and school improvement by supporting school leaders and building principal capacity (Firestone & Martinez, 2007; Leithwood, 2013). In turn, school leaders indirectly influence student outcomes by directly influencing teacher capacity (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson 2011;

Robinson et al., 2008; Wahlstrom et al., 2010; Waters et al., 2003), motivation, and organizational conditions (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000, 2005, 2006). Specific core leadership practices implemented by school and system leaders contribute to effective school leadership. Research-based evidence claims that effective school and system leaders, focused on learning, “draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices” (Leithwood et al., 2008, p. 27) to impact teaching and learning. These three core leadership practices, corroborated by many researchers, are profoundly but indirectly linked to student learning: setting a direction for learning and establishing a vision, expectations, and goals; focusing on recruitment, instruction, and development of teachers; and redesigning the organization to create positive conditions and processes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Robinson, 2011; Wahlstrom et al., 2010).

Principal Preparation and Development

With system leaders’ role reframed as instructional and learning leaders, they are held accountable for ensuring principal access to programs, expertise, and resources that effectively build principal efficacy (Alberta Education, 2020b) to address the principals’ evolving role. This suggests that system leaders are answerable for supporting principal instructional and learning leaders by designing, implementing, and leading district-led preparation and development programs to impact quality leadership and ultimately student learning. Specifically, superintendents lead learning by “providing learning opportunities, based on research-informed principles of effective teaching, learning, and leadership. . . . building principals’ and school jurisdiction leaders’ capacity and holding them accountable for providing instructional leadership

through effective support, supervision, and evaluation practices” (Alberta Education, 2020b, p. 4).

Although there are various pathways to school leadership including district-led, university-based, and non-profit programs with variability “ranging from prescriptive mandatory programmes . . . to ad hoc ‘on the job’ learning” (Bush, 2018, p. 70), district-led programs afford system leaders with the unique opportunity to support, shape, and grow their own leaders (Orr et al., 2010). System leaders design district-led programs to meet principal individual needs and build principal competencies to respond to the diverse learning priorities of students, staff, and the district. That is, system leaders build principal instructional and learning leadership capacity to address the larger societal context—“political, social, economic, legal, and cultural contexts and trends” impacting schools and the school authority (Alberta Education, 2020b, p. 5).

Historically, universities were the sole provider of leadership preparation and districts relied on these institutions to formally prepare and develop potential district recruited leaders. Traditional preparation programs were inadequate in terms of the content relevancy, program quality and rigor, and recruitment process (Davis et al., 2005; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Wallace Foundation 2016), leaving principals unprepared as instructional and learning leaders (Davis et al., 2005; Sun, 2011; Usdan et al., 2000) and system leaders unsatisfied (Wallace Foundation, 2016). With a renewed sentiment for improvement, preparation programs were redesigned to meet the evolving role of principal instructional and learning leaders. However, with a shortage of aspiring school leaders equipped with competencies to meet district needs within their unique school context (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Orr et al., 2010), and to address the needs of school leaders in their changing role, some school jurisdictions inaugurated district-

led principal preparation programs that complement redesigned preparation programs. Preparing school leaders as instructional and learning leaders, system leaders provided district-led leadership programs ensuring intentional, timely, and relevant preparation “for aspiring principals to develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions they need to be effective school leaders” (Wallace Foundation, 2016, p. 6). To fully understand system leaders’ evolving role in supporting, preparing, and developing principal instructional and learning leaders who implement core leadership practices linked to student learning, I reviewed the literature on system leader accountability, Alberta district-led leadership programs, and quality leadership program features employed by system leaders when designing, implementing, and leading principal programs.

Alberta System Leaders’ Accountability in Preparing and Developing Principals

System leaders’ evolving role emphasizes their responsibility of preparing and developing principal instructional and learning leaders by providing accessible quality principal preparation and development programs, alongside mentoring, modelling, supervising, and evaluating aspiring leaders and principals. System leaders are held accountable at a provincial and district level for carrying out their responsibilities of building principal capacity.

Provincially, the Chief Superintendent is accountable for implementing Ministry established education policies of students meeting Ministry set education standards (Government of Alberta, 2019b) and teachers and school/system leaders meeting professional practice standards (Alberta Education, 2020a, 2020b), reinforcing the link between quality leadership, quality teaching, and student learning (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008). In observance of the Education Act (2019b), the Chief Superintendent is answerable for all duties

assigned by the district's Board, with the Board establishing policies that direct the Chief Superintendent to supervise school operations and provide district educational programs aligned with the Education Act, Alberta Education regulations, Board policies, and Education Plan priorities. Furthermore, the Chief Superintendent is held accountable for supervising system leaders who directly prepare and develop principal instructional and learning leaders. To ensure compliance, all system leaders undergo an evaluation process and ongoing monitoring, linking evidence of effective leadership practices that are aligned with the professional practice standard, Board policies, and priorities (Alberta Education, 2020b).

With increased accountability to be operationalized through the government-mandated SLQS and the expanding role of senior-level instructional and learning leaders, system leaders recognize the significance of having highly qualified, well-prepared principal instructional and learning leaders (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robertson & Timperley, 2011; Robinson, 2011). It is important to acknowledge that exemplary principals develop as a result of first being quality teachers and, second, being well supported, prepared, and developed by system leaders. As principals begin their educational careers as teachers, skills and knowledge about instruction, curriculum, and assessment are critical but inadequate qualifications to prepare educational leaders to fulfill the complex role of the principal (Alberta Education, 2020a; Bush, 2018; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986), emphasizing the significance of system leaders' reframed role of supporting, preparing, and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders (Brandon et al., 2015). To build principal capacity and ensure accountability, system leaders support, supervise, and evaluate principals (Alberta Education, 2020b). System leaders, mainly system education leaders, work directly with school leaders to collaboratively set principal professional

growth plan goals and school goals aligned with district initiatives (Barber et al., 2010). Ideally, ongoing support and feedback is provided throughout the year to improve leadership practices and monitor goal attainment. But system leader effectiveness in mentoring and evaluating principals varies (Barber et al., 2010), along with the provision of effective leadership programs. Striving to improve system instructional and learning leadership competencies to effectively support principals is instrumental as empirical evidence validates the impact of principal leadership on student and teacher learning (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008) and supports the development and enactment of effective leadership practices through principal preparation and development (Brandon et al., 2015; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000, 2005; Orr, 2011), holding system leaders accountable as effective practitioners.

Alberta's District-led Principal Preparation and Development Programs

Principal preparation and development need to be made a priority when instituting educational procedures and policies (Davis et al., 2005, Wallace Foundation, 2016). Spurred by a paucity of effectively prepared principals in the past (Davis et al., 2005; Knapp et al., 2003; Peterson, 2002; Usdan et al., 2000), system leaders are compelled to equip principals with a deep knowledge of teaching, learning, and leading (Alberta Education, 2009) through purposeful preparation and intentional professional development linked to informed leadership practices (Robinson, 2006, 2011; Schleicher, 2015) by providing district-led preparation and development programs. Quality leadership matters, and correspondingly, so should its development (Piggot-Irvine & Youngs, 2011; Wallace Foundation, 2016). Since “school leadership is an important aspect of school success and student learning, it follows that the preparation of principals would

also indirectly influence student outcomes, albeit more indirectly” (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015, p. 195).

Core leadership practices identified in the research not only indirectly influence student outcomes and directly impact teacher capacity (Robinson, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008; Leithwood et al., 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wahlstrom et al., 2010; Waters et al., 2003), but are also more effectively developed through exemplary principal preparation and development programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Orr, 2011; Wallace Foundation, 2016). System leaders’ objective to build principal core leadership practices through district-led leadership programs is clear; however, determining the next steps on how to build principal instructional and learning leadership capacity centered on these core leadership practices linked to quality leadership, teaching, and student learning becomes challenging when “existing knowledge on the best ways to develop these effective leaders is insufficient” (Davis et al., 2005, p. 1). Examining the research literature on Alberta’s district-led leadership programs can provide further insights as to how system leaders, in their evolving role, build principal capacity.

In Alberta, leadership preparation and development programs for aspiring leaders, school leaders, and system leaders exist in over 50 of the 61 school authorities (CASS, 2018). According to the CASS (2018) *Review of Leadership Development Programs for Alberta School Authorities System Leaders 2017-2018*, five district-led principal preparation programs, 14 district-led novice principal development programs, and numerous district-led general programs to build leadership capacity exist across Alberta. These programs are “designed to support specific jurisdictional needs,” primarily led by system leaders, school leaders, central office staff,

retired system leaders and school leaders, or outside experts (CASS, 2018, p. 6). The leadership programs vary in length, frequency, curriculum delivery, curriculum content (emergent topics and competencies), as well as opportunities for job shadowing, reflecting, problem-based learning (case studies/scenarios), and innovative research-based project work. The frequency and process of coaching and mentoring for aspiring and new principals differs in each district, with some districts providing more intensive support. Many of Alberta's district leadership programs for aspiring leaders and novice principals are based on the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2020a), taking an intentional approach to providing relevant, job-embedded learning experiences.

System leaders are entrusted with tremendous responsibility to support principals in developing core leadership practices which has become pivotal to reforming education and improving student achievement (Orr, 2011). This appears to be achieved through the learning opportunities provided by system leaders as they design, implement, and lead district-led principal preparation and development programs centered on instructional and learning leadership (Brandon et al., 2015).

System Leaders' Role in Designing, Implementing, and Leading School Leadership Programs

Fullan and Rincón-Gallardo (2018) stated that Alberta has “tremendous exemplary practices and programs underway” that share expertise through collaboration, networking, and problem-solving “to create a powerful force for system transformation” (p. 2). System leaders continue to reform education through improved principal professional practices: reshaping principal selection, recruitment, and retention process; making principal preparation programs accessible; providing professional development during a novice principals' first two years; and

ensuring purposeful principal monitoring and evaluation. Alberta's educational leaders are "focused on the learning agenda like never before . . . [with] a relentless focus on improving student learning" (Fullan & Rincón-Gallardo, 2018, p. 1). Though there are some clear disparities in the rigor and robustness of existing district-led principal preparation and development programs, with leadership programs inaccessible in some districts, system leaders embrace opportunities for continued program improvement to respond to principals' reframed needs as instructional and learning leaders. Continuing to refine research-informed practices to prepare and develop Alberta's principals with an unremitting focus on student learning, system leaders make it possible to transform education system wide.

With a dearth of research on district-led principal preparation programs, reviewing the growing body of literature that links specific features to exemplary university-led preparation programs (Anderson et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2005) and to effective principal instructional leaders (Orr, 2011) helps conceptualize system leaders' evolving role in making research-informed decisions to provide district-led principal preparation programs with effective program features that build principal capacity. To support principal instructional and learning leaders, system leaders play a role in designing, implementing, and leading effective principal leadership programs by first responding to principals' individual needs and purposely developing competencies that meet school and district priorities within various contexts (Crow & Whiteman, 2016). Second, system leaders need to prepare principals for principals' shifting role as learning leaders of instruction, curriculum, and assessment by emphasizing instructional leadership content within the program in accordance with exemplary preparation programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Getty et al., 2010;

Schleicher, 2015; Wallace 2016). In addition, research provides evidence of significant program features or components of exemplary principal preparation programs that provide clear direction for program structure, content, and process (Anderson et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Davis et al., 2005; Orr et al., 2010; Schleicher, 2015; Shelton, 2012; Young & Perrone, 2016; Wallace Foundation, 2008, 2016) and that highly impact aspiring leaders' efficacy as instructional leaders (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Orr, 2011). According to this research literature, exemplary principal program criteria include a strong district-university partnership to support recruitment and selection of candidates. This program structure emphasizes a financially sustained program that integrates coursework and field-based internships, linking theory and praxis. Program content criteria focuses on instructional and learning leadership to meet school and district needs emphasizing research-informed core leadership practices, coherently grounded in the professional practice standard. The program process includes criteria of experiential learning or adult learning principles using case studies or scenarios within cohort groups alongside mentors and coaches. Included in the exemplary program criteria and central to instructional improvement is the ongoing supervision and feedback of these principal preparation and development programs. Identifying important program features associated with exemplary university-led principal preparation programs creates a framework for senior leaders to conceptualize their district-led principal programs.

System leaders from high performing districts design, implement, and lead district-led principal programs, intentionally shifting the program delivery towards a process of learning which emphasizes pedagogical practices and collaborative structures. These learning processes impacting principal efficacy highlight the use of experiential learning or adult learning principles

that occur in learning experiences for individuals or within collaborative cohorts (Darling Hammond et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2005). Davis et al. (2005) suggested that “most adults learn best when exposed to situations requiring the application of acquired skills, knowledge, and problem-solving strategies within authentic settings, and when guided by critical self-reflection” (p. 9). That is, system leaders leading district-led preparation programs utilize scenario-based learning or case studies related directly to authentic job experiences to engage aspiring leaders and principals in collaborative problem solving and reflective practices that will build their capacity (CASS, 2018). As well, leadership preparation requires aspiring principals in many school systems to initiate and lead an authentic leadership project within the school context, undertake greater school leadership responsibilities (Barber et al., 2010), and shadow mentor principals. Adult learning theory (Knowles et al., 2015) verifies the importance of experiential learning that is reflected in specific features of exemplary principal preparation programs such as field-based internships, problem-based learning, self-reflection, mentoring, and collaborative cohort groups. Reviewing the literature on exemplary preparation program features linked to effective principal instructional and learning leadership provides a deeper understanding of system leaders’ evolving role, which encompasses making research-informed decisions about the curriculum content, pedagogical processes, and collaborative structures required to design, implement, and lead district-led leadership programs. It is through system leader decision-making and purposeful actions that principal competencies, focused on the core leadership practices, can be cultivated ensuring quality principal preparation and development.

System Leaders Supporting the Principal Professional Learning Continuum

System and school leaders acknowledge the need for principals to experience a career of sustained, relevant professional learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Lashway, 2003a; Shelton, 2012). To ensure coherent programming is provided to aspiring leaders as they make a career transition to novice and experienced principals, system leaders not only deliver principal development programs based on core leadership practices and exemplary program features linked to effective instructional leadership, but also provide ongoing professional learning focused on instructional and learning leadership through district meetings, networking, collaborative cohorts, mentoring, coaching, modelling, supervising, and evaluating. Specifically, system leaders who continue to develop principal instructional and learning leadership practices impact teaching and learning (Orr, 2011; Schleicher, 2015; Wallace Foundation, 2008).

In their evolving role as instructional and learning leaders, system leaders recognize that greater support for first- and second-year principals is required, which includes quality mentoring and professional development (Sun, 2011) to address competency gaps, set goals to target areas for growth, strategically allocate resources for professional learning, provide feedback, and follow-up with next steps. Unfortunately, some system leaders find it difficult to provide “a coherent professional development system for principals” or strategic collaborative support particularly to school leaders in struggling schools (Wahlstrom et al., 2010, p. 20). This may be due to a lack of confidence in their own abilities to monitor and coach principal leadership practices or uncertainty related to procuring and allocating pertinent professional development resources that are aligned with instructional priorities to support principals (Wahlstrom et al., 2010).

It is evident that sustained, coherent, and relevant professional learning for principals is needed—the “ongoing training and preparation of school leaders matters a great deal” (Wallace Foundation, 2007, p. 3). System leaders acknowledge that principal professional learning continues even after the initial principal preparation is completed, transitioning from pre-service training and certification to licensure and induction and potential ongoing career development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). This includes providing experiential-learning opportunities for novice principals, such as “leadership learning communities of practice,” which engages practitioners in instructional leadership to transform learning as principals visit peer schools, share experiences, and observe instructional and learning leadership practices (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 95). With system leaders implementing sustained peer network and cohort-based learning opportunities to discuss successes and challenges, problem solve, co-construct knowledge, and engage in reflection, novice and experienced principals are able to learn from their peers and mentors (Sun, 2011). Reviewing the research literature on principals’ professional learning continuum provides a deeper understanding of system leaders’ complex and evolving role in building principal instructional and learning capacity. This literature helps elucidate system leaders’ decisions in conducting a principal’s individualized needs assessment, jointly devising principal professional goals, implementing strategies to build core leadership practices, determining resources and professional learning to target areas for principal growth, and cultivating collaborative practices through cohorts focused on experiential learning. The body of literature reveals the important and evolving role of system leaders as they take action to design, implement, and lead professional learning to impact quality school leadership, teaching, and student learning.

System Leaders' Extended Role in District-University Partnerships

With district-led principal preparation and development programs occurring alongside the delivery of university-based preparation programs, it is essential to understand that, in supporting principals, system leaders' role extends beyond the district, specifically in developing strong district-university partnerships. With the responsibility of growing their own leaders, system leaders are urged to collaborate with universities to design improved preparation programs (Wallace Foundation, 2012). Specifically, to ensure sustained, cohesive, high-quality principal preparation "it will require more universities and districts willing to collaborate in adopting practices that better prepare future school leaders for their changed roles and responsibilities" (Wallace Foundation, 2012). System leaders are beginning to realize the significance of district-university partnerships as they forge opportunities for targeted recruitment and lead to an "effective hiring pipeline, affordable internships, and strong clinical preparation" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010, p. 19).

In Alberta, some system leaders have inaugurated strong district-university partnerships to prepare principals for school leadership and promote networking and collaboration through action research projects. Commissioned by CASS, the *Leadership Learning* (Oulton, 2018) report studied 3-year, committed partnerships between seven school districts and two universities, Calgary and Lethbridge. System and school leadership teams were connected to university facilitators to establish collaborative processes and a professional learning culture within the formal district-university leadership programs. They met regularly with facilitators to focus on the principal professional growth plan, with specific goals, strategies, timelines, and indicators of success rooted in the quality leadership standard. Over 20 formalized visits,

meetings, and workshops were scheduled at the school site, based on a commitment to support the school-based leadership teams in meeting their goals to transform professional leadership practices. University faculty modeled instructional and learning leadership strategies by asking powerful guiding questions, engaging in observations and dialogue, listening attentively, and participating in reflective conversations central to professional practice standards. Faculty-modeled practices provided system leaders with effective strategies to support principals.

For example, a University of Calgary Werklund School of Education research initiative, The Partner Research Schools, “facilitates collaboration between university researchers, communities and school authority practitioners to design and conduct research focused on complex problems of practice” (Oulton, 2018, p. 27). The *Leadership Learning* (Oulton, 2018) report on district-university based programs presented findings generated through interviews, documents, and artifacts. Many positive outcomes were identified:

- increased participant trust and confidence due to partnerships rooted in research-based evidence,
- established mutually beneficial partnerships (the district received research-informed guidance and the university secured internship placements),
- developed deeper understandings of the LQS in connection to professional practices,
- acknowledged expertise of the facilitators in collaboratively guiding instructional school leadership teams,
- increased support experienced by system leaders due to faculty experts modeling instructional and learning leadership practices, and
- shared accountability for leadership development. (Oulton, 2018)

The research findings also revealed opportunities for system and school leaders to bridge theory and practice, experience adult learning practices, and understand that trust requires vulnerability (Oulton, 2018). To establish and maintain successful district-university partnerships, Oulton emphasized the importance of system leaders communicating regularly with university partners and cultivating trust through “transparent communication, collaborative agenda setting, shared vulnerability in the learning process, and honouring the time commitments in the partnership process” (p. 10). Reviewing the literature on district-university partnerships provides a greater understanding of the system leaders’ reframed role in supporting principal preparation that goes beyond the district boundaries, emphasizing collaborative communities of practice focused on instructional leadership that impacts quality leadership, teaching, and student learning.

System Leaders’ Supports and Challenges in Building Principal Capacity

The research literature on system leaders’ supports and challenges in building principal capacity sheds light on the complex role of making research-informed decisions about preparing and developing effective principal instructional and learning leaders. Supports for system leaders are critical in their work to build principal efficacy. There are two primary means of supporting system leaders in their evolving role as instructional and learning leaders to build principal capacity. These supports take the form of professional practice standards and collaborative organizational structures. First, the SLQS (Alberta Education, 2020b) provides a framework for system and school leadership, allowing system leaders to carry out their responsibilities as instructional and learning leaders, guided by indicators under specific leadership dimensions or competencies. System leaders are held accountable for developing principal competencies

according to the LQS and employing research-informed practices reflected in the SLQS that prepare and develop principals (Alberta Education, 2020a; Alberta Education, 2020b). Professional practice standards are specific, relevant, and spiraled, allowing system leaders to rely on these competencies to build principal capacity. Second, system leaders are supported through district established structures that emphasize “team leadership and team learning,” producing school and system leader networks to achieve school/district goals focused on developing leadership, building teacher capacity, and impacting student learning (Brandon et al., 2015, p. 73). Superintendency teams and system leader cohorts or professional learning communities work in partnership with school leadership teams, fostering collective efficacy (Leithwood et al., 2012). As well, superintendents and system education leaders work together to provide “coherent, coordinated, and focused leadership” that establishes “clear expectations for school leadership practice . . . and targeted professional learning” (Brandon et al., 2015, pp. 73–74). These networks emphasize collaboration, collegiality, co-construction of ideas, and problem solving that provide supports for system leaders in their work with principals towards pointed professional learning. System leaders, supported through the leveraging of collective capacity, provide instructional and learning leadership that prepares and develops principals, impacting quality teaching and student learning.

By reviewing research literature that highlights the challenges experienced by system leaders, a deeper understanding of system leaders’ evolving role and actions taken to prepare and develop principals can be achieved in relation to four main obstacles: principal mobility, inconsistencies of principal preparation program completion, incoherent supports, and inconsistency in enacting professional practice standards (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010;

Hargreaves, 2009; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). As system leaders are confronted with these obstacles, core leadership practices aid in providing a framework for their work as instructional and learning leaders, keeping principal preparation and development at the forefront of their efforts (Leithwood et al., 2008; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011):

- setting directions—shaping a vision and expectations for student achievement
- developing people—providing support and building capacity
- leading teacher learning and development
- redesigning the organization—establishing organizational structures that promote collaboration for teaching and learning
- improving the instructional program—improving teaching, learning, and aligning resources (Leithwood et al., 2008; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011)

System leaders utilize these “essential” core leadership practices as they are “considered instructionally helpful” (Leithwood, 2012, p. 57). That is, research indicates these core leadership practices underpin the work of successful instructional and learning system and school leaders, highlighting the link between leadership and student learning (Leithwood, 2012).

Although system leaders may be “constrained and enabled in some measure by the actions of others, including other leaders, and by the consequences of those actions” (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. xxvi), they are held accountable to prepare and develop principals (Alberta Education, 2020b) guided by core leadership practices, even under challenging circumstances of ongoing principal mobility. Natural attrition due to retirement, new school constructions, and principal burnout are just a few conditions that lead to high principal mobility. Frequent principal turnover diminishes system leaders’ efficacy by disrupting meaningful school leader

partnerships, ensuing inconsistent principal support that impacts system coherence.

Subsequently, high principal mobility impedes a school leader's ability to build staff capacity, foster school and community relations, and develop a collaborative school culture, presenting challenges for sustainable school improvement. System leaders, in their shifting role as instructional and learning leaders, encompass barriers of "unplanned principal succession" (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 3) that influence student achievement by impacting school culture (Wahlstrom et al., 2010) and the inability to sustain new school and district initiatives (Fink & Brayman, 2006; Macmillan, 2000).

Second, the literature suggests that system leaders may experience challenges in building principal capacity due to the inconsistencies of principal preparation program completion prior to recruitment. Ideally, principals should have leadership training prior to their recruitment; however, "one in five (22%) principals reported that they had never participated in instructional training, and 31% reported that they had participated in such training only after they became a principal" (Schleicher, 2015, p. 35). Surprisingly, in many cases, preparation completion is not a condition for hiring new principals (Bush, 2018) as high principal mobility necessitates that open principal positions be filled. As well, one of the most agreed-upon shortcomings of principal training is the lack of opportunity for quality experiential-learning internships—possibly the most valuable learning opportunity for educational leaders (Wallace Foundation, 2016).

A third obstacle for system leaders in building principal capacity exists. Some districts provide incoherent supports to principals whereby system leaders who supervise and evaluate them are rarely present at the school site while district curriculum consultants, for example, are more visible (Louis et al., 2010). This may be a result of limited organizational supports, time,

and/or financial resources. These fragmented principal supports challenge system and school leaders' relational trust, hindering system leaders' ability to build principal efficacy as an instructional and learning leader. To effectively prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders, system leaders need to provide frequency and quality of differentiated support (Leithwood et al., 2012, p. 119).

Research suggests that system leaders “likely struggle to help principals improve their instructional leadership” seeing that the system leaders' role has been inherently focused on management (Honig, 2012, p. 738). Therefore, highlighting the significance of system leaders' role shift from an emphasis on management to a strong focus on instruction is critical. Similar to principals, system leaders need to be prepared as instructional and learning leaders, which requires preparation, ongoing professional learning, and mentoring. System leaders may also be challenged in building principal capacity due to difficulties in locating pertinent external human resources, such as expert guest speakers, to provide targeted principal professional learning opportunities (Wahlstrom et al., 2010). As well, some system leaders are “less likely to provide strategic help or professional development for principals in struggling schools,” attributing the low performance of a school to the socio-economic status of the community rather than the school's leadership practices (Wahlstrom et al., 2010, p. 21). There is also an assumption that, as former teachers, principals have the tools to lead curriculum and instruction (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986), which may result in system leaders making fewer visits to schools to support principals. However, several Alberta school authorities recognized that “teaching qualifications and successful teaching experience alone were insufficient to prepare individuals to serve as school principals” (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 3). This suggests that, in order to be considered

an effective instructional leader in Alberta, not only should senior leaders be implementing practices aligned with the professional practice standards, but they should, in the first instance, also understand that the depth of pedagogical knowledge and skills required of principals is significant in their evolving role as school leaders (Leithwood & Louis, 2012).

A final barrier for system leaders in providing principal preparation and development is the inconsistency in enacting professional practice standards. Alberta's *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2020a) requires all principals to demonstrate nine specific competencies, including instructional and learning leadership. According to the comprehensive national research study conducted by CAP (2014), "instructional leadership is the focus of numerous government and board initiatives and policies and is valued by school administrators; yet, principals' engagement in it is lower than desired" (p. 22). Numerous managerial tasks can consume and monopolize a principal's agenda, undermining the enactment of instructional leadership. Davis et al. (2005) agree that "the role of the principal has swelled to include a staggering array of professional tasks and competencies" (p. 3). Research indicates that principals are not fully engaged in instructional leadership practices due to workload demands (CAP, 2014; Davis et al., 2005) and therefore not effectively demonstrating evidence of instructional leadership as measured by the LQS. This suggests that system leaders experience inconsistencies in enacting professional practice standards, particularly those associated with instructional leadership. Attempting to balance the priority of teaching and learning with the management of time sensitive demands becomes a challenging task for system leaders working collaboratively with school leaders.

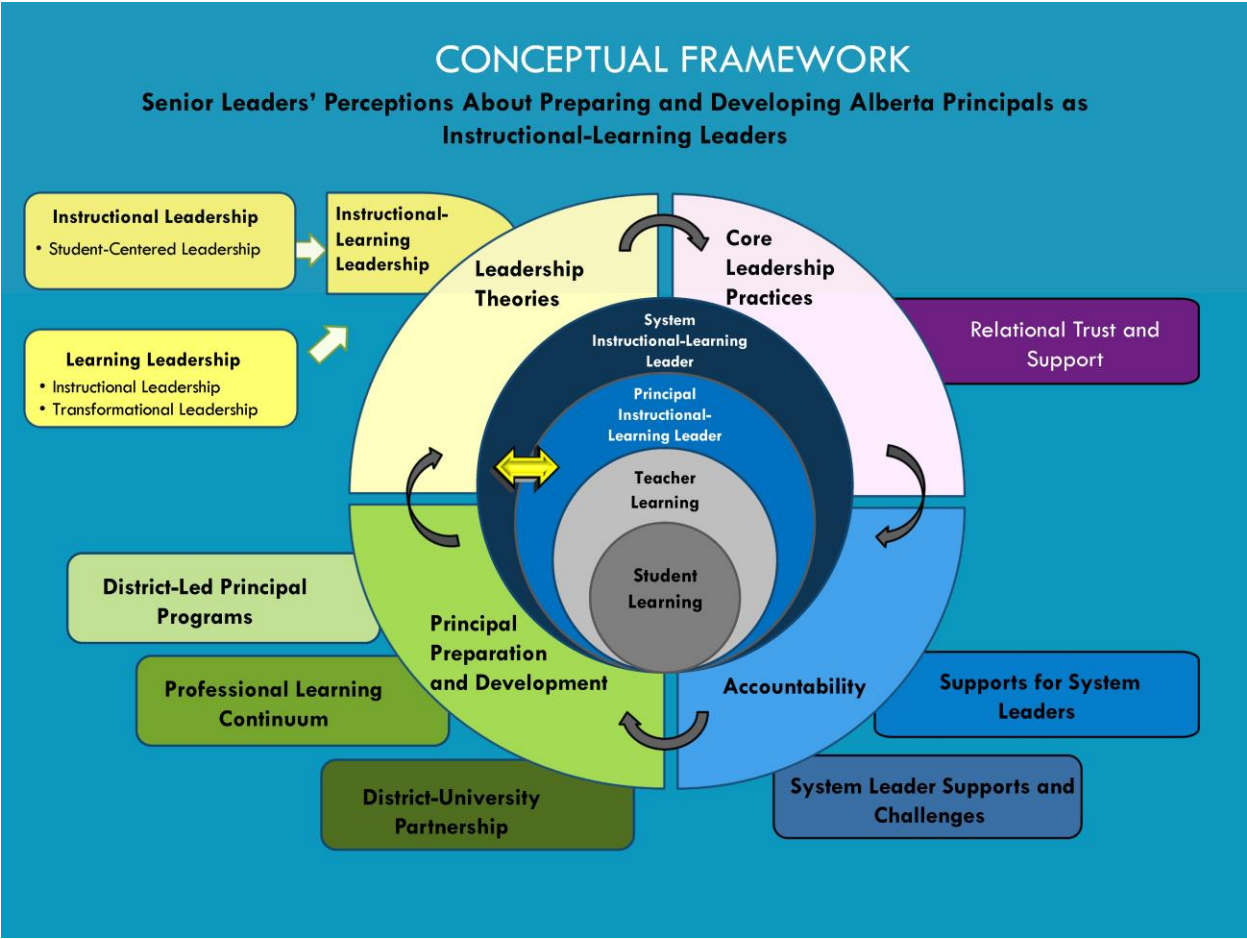
In summary, the research literature indicates that system leaders encounter supports and challenges in preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders. Relying upon professional practice standards to carry out their responsibilities and creating collaborative organizational structures to bolster system leader efficacy supports system leaders in building principal capacity. Also, system leaders are confronted with numerous challenges that inhibit their efforts to prepare and develop principals such as principal mobility, inconsistencies of principal preparation program completion, disparity in leadership programs and professional learning opportunities, and inconsistency in enacting professional practice standards. These challenges help to explain system leaders' complex, demanding, and shifting role in preparing and developing principals.

Conceptual Framework

A review of the literature and research is reflected in my conceptual framework for the study of senior leaders' perceptions about preparing and developing Alberta urban principals as instructional and learning leaders (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Overview of Key Concepts from the Literature Review



Grounded in theory and research, the conceptual framework framed my inquiry with key concepts and constructs from the literature to demonstrate an interconnection among ideas (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). This visual depiction allowed me, from the outset, to be explicit about my intentions and the process of the research. It informed “the theoretical and methodological bases for development of the study” and guided the design, data collection methods, and analysis towards a coherent inquiry (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 128). The theories and literature gave insight to the phenomenon studied, allowing me to interpret, analyse, synthesize, and make meaning of the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

Central to this study are two leadership theories, instructional and learning leadership, in the relationship of senior leaders and principals (see Figure 1 top left quadrant). Rooted in the theoretical constructs of instructional leadership is student-centered leadership. Learning leadership, on the other hand, comprises core leadership practices that are representative of both instructional and transformational leadership (Hallinger, 2009). There is an interdependence between instructional and transformational leadership respectively—the core leadership practices that develop teacher capacity and those that promote organizational conditions to foster teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond, 2010). This provides evidence for the significance of instructional and transformational leadership practices, components of learning leadership. There is a substantial body of literature and research to support claims that link instructional leadership to student achievement (Louis et al., 2010; Robinson, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008, Wahlstrom, 2010; Wahlstrom et al., 2012) and transformational leadership to student achievement, albeit indirectly through the direct leadership influence on teacher instructional practices (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005, 2006). Therefore, I deduced that the theories of learning leadership (instructional and transformational leadership) would be significant to my study. The assumption, then, was that learning leadership directly impacts teaching and learning, which indirectly affects student learning; thus, instructional and learning leadership practices are pivotal to the role of an effective school leader and to system leaders who support them. System and school leaders, working collaboratively, have complex, evolving roles that emphasize instructional and learning leadership—a focus on instruction, curriculum, assessment, and the development of people, independently and collectively. Shifting to a focus on teaching and learning, respectively system

and school leaders together indirectly and directly impact teaching and indirectly impact student learning.

For this study, the term *instructional-learning leadership* encompasses instructional and transformational leadership practices. Instructional-learning leadership emphasizes the setting of transformational educational goals focused on student, teacher, and leader learning, directly leveraging collective capacity (teacher, school leader, community, and district leaders) through collaborative learning communities that significantly maximize student learning.

A complementary leadership theory, distributed leadership, supports the conceptualization of the school leader's role in influencing teaching and learning and is an essential component of the conceptual framework. Effective school leaders draw from a repertoire of leadership practices (Hallinger, 2003, 2005) that are rooted in instruction (Gronn, 2002; Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Marks & Printy, 2003). As well, research indicates that a common repertoire of core leadership practices derived from instructional and learning leadership influence quality leadership, teaching, and student learning (Brandon et al., 2015; Leithwood, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2008; Robinson 2011) (see Figure 1, top right quadrant).

System leaders in Alberta are held accountable at a provincial and district level for preparing and developing principals according to the professional practice standards. Education in Alberta demonstrates coherence of professional practice standards across all levels of the school system—quality standards for superintendent leadership, system education leadership, school leadership, and teachers (see Figure 1, bottom right quadrant). Aligned with the leadership quality standards, principal preparation program standards set clear expectations and a direction for preparing and developing principals, using program design features representative

of exemplary preparation programs. System leaders design, implement, and lead district-led principal preparation and development programs to support principals in meeting individual needs within their unique school context and district needs. With a shift in leadership role from a focus on management to that of instruction, system leaders work to support principals through district meetings, networking, collaborative cohorts, mentoring, coaching, modelling, supervising, and evaluating, all of which indirectly affect student learning. As well, system leaders contribute to principals' ongoing professional learning continuum. In addition, system leaders' role extends beyond the district, specifically in developing district-university partnerships (see Figure 1, bottom left quadrant).

Most significant in this study, preparation and development occur at the intersection of teaching learning and leading learning. For me, the premise, then, was that instructional leadership (teaching learning) and learning leadership (leading learning) are significant to the juncture at which senior leaders support, prepare, and develop principals.

At this juncture, system instructional-learning leaders, alongside principal instructional-learning leaders, employ core leadership practices to prepare and develop school leaders, impacting quality leadership, teaching, and student learning (Brandon et al., 2015; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004). These research-informed core leadership practices emanate from foundational instructional and learning leadership theories, and constitute the basis of professional practice standards (Brandon et al., 2013, 2015). With a laser focus on student learning and quality teaching, system leaders design, implement, and lead district-led principal preparation and development programs, and ongoing professional learning, which are “systematically aligned” with theory, practices, and policies (Leithwood, et al., 2004, p. 26).

Partnering with universities, system leaders further build principal capacity. To ensure system leaders are equipped to effectively prepare and develop principals and overcome challenges, supports are provided. Receiving targeted professional learning through informal mentors, alongside purposefully created collaborative structures such as superintendency teams and system leader cohorts, strong system instructional-learning leaders ensue with the expectations of being prepared to support principals.

Each of the leadership theories foregrounds some key principle of adult learning: (a) the learner's need to know, (b) self-concept of the learner, (c) prior experience of the learner, (d) readiness to learn, (e) orientation to learning, and (f) motivation to learn (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 4-5). Adult learning principles are reinforced using instructional strategies such as problem-based learning, simulations, case studies, critical reflection, critical discourse, and cohort network communities (Byrne-Jimenez et al., 2017). For my study, I understand that the principles of adult learning are important to note, but the focus will remain on the research phenomenon of the system leaders' role in preparing and developing principal instructional and learning leaders.

This conceptual framework framed the interview questions of my study and guided data collection, data analysis, interpretation, and presentation of the research. The primary research question bridges theory to practice. My conceptual framework was "a guide and a ballast" for the

research, organizing concepts and aligning the research topic, questions, and methods, and evolving to incorporate new findings, questions, and literature (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 149).

Literature Review Summary

System and school level leadership profoundly matter, impacting teaching and student learning (Leithwood, 2008, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano & Waters, 2009). With an evolving role that has pivoted from a focus on management to that of instruction, system leaders are held accountable for supporting principals by providing targeted development through district-led leadership programs, ongoing professional learning, and district-university partnerships. System leaders are responsible for designing, implementing, and leading coherent principal leadership programs that are not only data-driven and “aligned with district improvement targets . . . but they must also consistently emphasize the improvement of instruction as a primary goal and means for improving student performance” (Anderson & Louis, 2012, cited in Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 190). Employing research-informed core leadership practices that are rooted in instructional and learning leadership theory and aligned with professional practice standards, system leaders build principal competencies as instructional-learning leaders. This junction at which senior leaders support principals as practitioners emphasizes a zone of teaching and learning. Using collaborative and constructive processes of mentoring, modelling, supervising, evaluating, employing collaborative learning practices, and fostering relational trust, system leaders actively engage principals in job-embedded, authentic, problem-based learning experiences. By creating collaborative organizational structures, system leaders, alongside school leaders, bolster intentional and frequent support for principals. In strong districts, system leaders, focused on a learning imperative, improve professional

leadership practices system-wide by actively supporting, preparing, and developing principals who in turn impact quality teaching and student learning—“leadership matters at all levels” (Louis et al., 2010, p. 283). Alberta’s system leaders, like principals, need not only be exceptional teachers grounded in curriculum, instruction, and assessment, but instructional-learning leaders with the competencies to transform districts and schools respectively by building individual and collective capacity, to ensure “quality school leadership, quality teaching and optimum learning for all school students” (Alberta Education, 2020b, p. 2). For effective educational leadership reform that prioritizes student learning, all educators system wide need to be continually learning (Timperley, 2011).

Multiple supports and barriers exist for system leaders when preparing and developing principals. Professional practice standards and collaborative organizational structures provide supports for system leaders in their complex, evolving role of building principal capacity. Moreover, for quality system and school instructional-learning leadership to occur that is pivotal to Alberta’s school system success, “deeply interconnected networks of school and system leaders working together on achieving system goals” are required (Brandon et al., 2013, p. 92). Barriers that impact system leaders’ efficacy of principals includes principal mobility, inconsistencies of principal preparation program completion, incoherent supports to principals, and inconsistency in enacting professional practice standards.

The topic of system and school leader’s partnership as instructional-learning leaders is an under researched area. To address this gap, perceptions of senior leaders are required to provide greater insight and a deeper understanding about preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders. This is the purpose of my study. While there are a few Alberta

studies that include a similar purpose (Brandon et al., 2013, 2015, 2017), research that takes into consideration the recent implementation of the SLQS and the LQS in Alberta is necessary. This is because we cannot assume the extent to which and how these formalized directives and practices will be relied on by senior leaders; nor can we assume the extent to which and how senior leaders will continue to promote learning opportunities to prepare and develop principals as instructional-learning leaders now that the formalized professional practice standards and accompanying credentialing programs exist.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This qualitative case study was focused on the key research question: What are senior leaders' perceptions about how they prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders in Alberta urban schools? Using a social constructivist approach, the goal of my research was to advance the knowledge base related to district and school leadership practices that build aspiring and developing principals' capacity as instructional and learning leaders. Ultimately, recommendations to educational leaders, post-secondary institutions, and policy makers for the practical implementation of principal preparation and development will have the potential to improve system- and school-level leadership, and through them, teaching quality, and student learning.

This chapter on methodology and methods outlines essential components of the research inquiry. I present a description of the research paradigm with a rationale for a qualitative research approach and case study methodology and share my research design by describing the setting and research sample. In addition, I include a detailed account and justification of the data collection and analysis methods. The chapter addresses appropriate ethical considerations to ensure compliance with the requirements of the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB). Finally, measures to establish trustworthiness, and the limitations and delimitations of the research study, are explained prior to the chapter summary.

Research Stance

I conceptualized a qualitative case study for my research that was commensurable with my epistemological and ontological stance and that cohered with the research problem, purpose, and the overarching question. I took a constructivist stance with a subjectivist epistemology

(knowledge is socially constructed) and a relativist ontology (multiple realities exist). The social phenomenon investigated through constructivism was that of senior leaders' perceptions about preparing and developing Alberta's urban principals as instructional and learning leaders.

Epistemologically, I acknowledged that education is a social process, and that knowledge is generated in social circumstances as a product of social engagement. As an educational leader with 27 years of experience in teaching and administration, I subscribed to constructivism, as it accords with my understanding of the production of knowledge and nature of learning. I believed and continue to believe that knowledge is constructed through people's social experiences—“reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6) as they attempt to make sense of their experiences. I also recognized that knowledge is negotiated within a social context and then internally constructed; knowledge is not discovered (Crotty, 1998; McNiff, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). That is, individuals actively construct their own understanding by building on prior knowledge linked to current experiences of a social nature.

My relativist ontological perspective acknowledged that each individual interprets the world differently, depending on their cultural and historical background and experiences. This aligns with one of the most foundational tenants of constructivism: universal truths are nonexistent as meaning is socially negotiated (Crotty, 1998; Duffy & Cunningham, 1996; Windschitl, 2002). Here, the purpose of knowledge creation or knowledge advancement is not toward a single truth, but toward idea improvement with an iterative component (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2005).

Finally, specific to research, a constructivist is non-judgemental, mindful, and respectful of participants and their perceptions, allowing participants “to share their views relatively unconstrained” by the researcher’s perspective (Creswell, 2015, p. 211). When doing this research, I positioned myself as a constructivist, acknowledging and disclosing any assumptions and preconceptions but purposefully open-minded to others’ perceptions. Simons (2009) asserted that the researcher’s subjectivity is unavoidable and becomes crucial to interpreting and making sense of the inquiry. Integral to being a researcher with a constructivist position is “understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspectives” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6) and, therefore, embracing an emic (insider) or participant’s perspective in combination with an etic (outsider) or researcher’s perspective when disseminating the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Rationale for Qualitative Research Approach

Qualitative research occurs within a context, making the world visible through the interpretation of a social phenomenon in its natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, a qualitative research approach is conducive to a research study that requires a “complex understanding of the issue” (p. 46), encourages participants to voice their perspectives, is “context-dependent” (p. 44), and intentionally aims to present a “holistic, complex picture” (p. 45).

Thus, qualitative research was commensurate with the problem and purpose of my study. Specifically, I aimed to explore the multiple perceptions of senior leaders by focusing on their understandings of the specific leadership practices that prepare and develop Alberta urban principals as instructional and learning leaders. The data, generated by participants who shared

their experiences and voiced their perspectives, helped me to understand how individuals interpret and make meaning from their experiences (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The “lived experiences” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6) of the participants were significant so that I could gain a holistic understanding of the phenomena. By drawing upon the insights of senior leaders, as those engaged with the phenomenon, and through engaging in an interpretive process, my findings extend the knowledge base of my research topic and field of study, and may contribute to improving educational practices to make a difference (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 1998).

To summarize, a qualitative research approach was most aligned with the purpose and problem of my study and mirrored my epistemological and ontological stance. By analyzing the generated perspectives of multiple senior leaders within an educational context, I gained a holistic understanding of how principals are prepared and developed as instructional and learning leaders.

Rationale for Case Study Methodology

Case study methodology, a qualitative research design, emphasizes the significance of the integration and alignment of researcher epistemological, ontological, and methodological orientation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Grounded in a constructivist epistemological stance, through case study methodology I explored a central phenomenon through multiple perspectives, co-constructing knowledge in a holistic manner. Of the key scholars that are often drawn upon for case study, I subscribed closely to Merriam’s (1988, 1998) conceptualization of case study, perceiving qualitative case study as an “end product” (p. 27)—“another interpretation by the

researcher of others' views filtered through his or her own" (p. 23). Merriam (1988, 1998) defined case study methodology as "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process or a social unit" (p. xiii). Implementing case study, a methodology for studying a bounded phenomenon such as a "social unit" (Merriam, 1988, 1998) allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of senior leaders' perceptions about preparing and developing principal instructional and learning leaders (bounded phenomenon) in Alberta urban school districts (bounded geographically).

Specific aspects drawn from other prominent case study methodologists, Stake (1995) and Simmons (2009), were considered to be consistent with my conceptualization of case study methodology. Similar to Merriam (1988, 1998), Stake (1995), and Simons (2009) emphasized a qualitative research approach focused on a constructivist epistemology in which knowledge is constructed, not discovered. Focusing on case study as an object such as "a noun, a thing, an entity" (Stake, 2006, p. 1) rather than a process, Stake (1995) defined case study as "the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (p. xi) rather than making population generalizations. The researcher strives to "maintain vigorous interpretation" during the data collection, gain an experiential understanding, and represent the multiple perspectives (Stake, 1995, p. 9). More succinctly, to identify a case, Stake (1995, 2006) indicated the importance of determining the boundedness, context, and lived experiences of the study.

Simons (2009), similar to Stake (1995) and Merriam (1988, 1998), perceived case study as a methodology for studying a bounded phenomenon using subjective data that is gathered, interpreted, and reported by the researcher, the primary instrument in data collection.

Simons' (2009) concept of case study emphasized the process of exploring a particular unit of study, in a real-life context, and for the purpose of attaining a deeper understanding of the case through the interpretation of multiple perspectives.

As a nascent researcher, I was drawn to the flexibility provided by case study methodology, as this approach embraces an emergent and evolving framework which allows for design alterations in response to adaptations in the research process (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Simons, 2009). For example, this became advantageous when I was able to insert probing questions during semi-structured interviews to clarify and extend participant responses, and when I adapted questions for a second round of interviews (Creswell, 2015). This flexibility was paramount, emphasizing a “dynamic process” (Creswell, 2015, p. 129) with a primary focus on understanding how participants construct, interpret, and understand their experiences.

I perceived case study methodology to be a compatible, valuable, and meaningful research approach as insights garnered from the study may potentially improve educational practices, influence policies, and bridge future research in this area (Merriam, 1988, 1998). Merriam (1998) echoed these sentiments regarding the significance of case study methodology in education when stating that “Research is, after all, producing knowledge about the world—in our case, the world of educational practice” (p. 3). Moreover, I selected case study methodology because it is one of the most effective ways to gain an understanding of the authentic experience of a particular context, through the perceptions of those connected to the phenomenon (Stake; 1995; Wilson, 1979). This makes the knowledge generated through case study more concrete, as it is steeped in context for the purpose of learning (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Using a case study

methodology, I was able to “engage participants in the research process” (Simons, 2009, p. 23), working with them virtually as the main instrument for data collection and, therefore, deepening my understanding of the phenomena through the insights of multiple participants.

As well, I was able to ensure greater research cohesion because my inquiry was illuminated through three prominent features significant to case studies: being particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam, 1998). Particularistic inquiry denotes that the case study emphasizes a particular phenomenon, program, or process (Merriam, 1998). This was congruent with my research on senior leaders’ perceptions about preparing principals as instructional and learning leaders. My case study methodology also yielded descriptive, rich data containing quotes, documents, and the viewpoints of senior leaders (superintendents, chief deputy superintendents, and system education leaders) that was holistic and exploratory (Merriam, 1998; Wilson, 1979). Finally, a heuristic element was evident in my research inquiry: the approach was practical by extending, reaffirming, or enhancing the reader’s understanding of the study (Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015).

In summary, I chose a case study methodology for my qualitative research inquiry, subscribing to Merriam’s (1988, 1998) definition of case study as this aligned closely to my constructivist epistemology. This methodology allowed me to use various sampling strategies to recruit participants which was critical during the restrictive protocols of the global pandemic. I gathered data with the flexibility to adapt second round interview questions and employ probing questions during semi structured interviews, gaining a deeper, holistic understanding of participants lived experiences. Analyzing participants’ multiple perspectives and interpreting the generated data revealed insights to this bounded phenomenon of senior leaders’ perceptions

about preparing and developing principal instructional and learning leaders in Alberta urban school districts.

Research Design

A research design “describes a flexible set of guidelines that connect theoretical paradigms, first, to strategies of inquiry and, second, to methods for collecting empirical material” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 14). The qualitative design must be “emergent as opposed to preordinate,” as the understanding gained through context, multiple realities, and the interaction between the researcher and participant cannot be predetermined (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 208). I was cognisant of the “interconnectedness” of the components and the “interactiveness of the design process” (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Congruence amongst ontology, epistemology, and my qualitative case study methodology produced a reliable and defensible design ensuring credibility, dependability, and transferability of the research. Within the following explanation of my research design, I also address the details of the study setting and participants.

Research Setting

My case study took place in Alberta, narrowing the research scope to encompass three urban public and Catholic school districts, ensuring the manageability of the study. These three districts were selected because they employ numerous principals who lead schools and serve a vast population of students. As a result, I was able to gain insights from senior leaders who had experience in preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders. By collecting data from three districts within sizeable cities, I ensured an “intensive, holistic description and analysis” (Merriam, 1998, p. 134) that emphasized both the breadth and depth of

the inquiry. This study excluded the Edmonton Catholic School District, my former employer, thus avoiding any “tension between a professional distance and a personal friendship” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 97).

With the changing landscape of research during COVID-19, most districts were overwhelmed with the evolving demands of the unpredicted pandemic, shifting their focus to student online learning and their attention to the educational, emotional, and psychological needs of students and staff. Reviewing and approving research applications came to a halt for many districts. Many senior leaders in research approved districts were overwhelmed with their workload and unavailable to participate. Once school re-entry plans and district re-entry task forces were in place for the school relaunch, some districts returned to reviewing research applications.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

This research inquiry included seven Alberta school district senior leaders responsible for implementing professional practice standards and for preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders, roles intended to improve teacher quality and student achievement (Alberta Education, 2018). I considered three significant components when selecting participants during the research design process: the participant criteria (sampling strategy), sample size, and the case being studied or the bounded phenomenon of a social unit (Merriam, 1998), emphasizing the perceptions of senior leaders about leadership preparation and development. Firstly, in selecting the participants, I implemented a method that was most conducive to qualitative research, purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My intent was “to discover, understand and gain insight and therefore . . . select a sample

from which the most [could] be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). To attain a deep understanding of the phenomenon from those who could provide the most substantive information (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2015), I purposely drew from senior leaders including superintendents, chief deputy superintendents, and system education leaders within three Alberta metropolitan public and Catholic school districts. These participants were chosen because of their expertise in the fields of educational leadership and principal preparation and development. Criterion sampling, a type of purposeful sampling, was used to ensure participants met the following criteria: (a) they had worked in a senior leadership role for at least two years, and (b) they had worked as a principal in a school for at least two years. Participants met these two criteria, experienced the phenomena being studied, and thus contributed information-rich data to the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2015).

Secondly, considering the sample size or number of participants was essential. Ideally, I aimed to select two or three participants from each of the three school districts, totaling 6-9 senior leaders in the sample size. This was compatible with Patton’s (2015) suggestion for a small number of “information-rich” participants to yield “insights and in-depth understanding” (p. 264). Merriam (1998) concurred, recommending a sample size that had “an adequate number of participants . . . to answer the question posed” (p. 64). Similarly, Lincoln and Guba (1995) urged sampling until there was a repetition or redundancy of responses to a point of saturation. A sample size of eight to ten participants ensured manageability of my research study and avoided the “danger of sampling too narrowly” (Miles et al., 2014).

Finally, selecting participants according to the case being studied was critical, since the foundational feature of case study research lies in “bounding” or “fencing” in the object of study

and being able to define the “unit of analysis” so that it is seen as a “distinct entity” (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I explored the bounded single phenomenon of the perceptions of senior leaders in the context of Alberta urban school districts. I gathered information and constructed knowledge around the single unit of analysis of senior leaders’ insights about preparing principals as instructional leaders to lead learning and potentially influence quality teaching and student learning. This was accomplished by intentionally selecting senior leader participants in Alberta urban school districts who were supervising and implementing educational policies, leadership standards, and programs to prepare principals to lead learning. These senior leaders were considered as participants because of their expertise in the fields of educational leadership and principal professional development and learning.

With the unforeseen 2020 pandemic, the demands on district staff significantly impacted recruitment and momentum of my study. Most districts halted research application reviews and, from March 15 to December 31, 2020, redirected staff efforts to student online learning and staff/student social-emotional-psychological wellness. As a result, the recruitment of senior leader participants in those districts was paused indeterminately. Although a limited number of districts granted approval to conduct research during the initial onset of the pandemic, potential participants were sparse due to the overwhelming demands of COVID prevention protocols and the shift of in-person student learning to a virtual platform. By accessing support from Dr. Jim Brandon, an intermediary and committee member, I was able to implement snowball sampling to inspire some senior leaders to participate. Still with an insufficient number of volunteers, I re-submitted district research applications in September and October 2020 to include the new COVID requirements for virtual interviews. With the reduction of COVID cases in September

2020, and the Alberta government's requests to initiate school re-entry plans, my revised research applications were reviewed. Following the school relaunch, I received district responses in November and December 2020, resulting in the participation of two more volunteers. After 11 months of recruitment and eight research ethics application submissions, I was able to recruit seven participants and begin the pre-interview process.

Interviews were arranged and conducted following the approval granted from the University of Calgary CFREB and the appropriate research departments of the school districts. Relying on the support, expertise, and networks of one of my supervisory committee members, Dr. Jim Brandon, I extended an email invitation to recommended potential participants to partake in the study, along with information and details about the study (Appendix D, E, and F). Participant's contact information was accessed through the public websites of the school districts. Those who volunteered to participate completed a Consent Form (Appendix G) that I attached to the email invitation. I also emailed them the first round of interview questions that would guide the inquiry, and we mutually agreed upon a virtual meeting date and time for the first interview.

Data Collection Methods

Acknowledging that "the primary instrument in qualitative research is human and that all observations and analyses are filtered through that human being's worldview, values, and perspective" (Merriam, 1998, p. 22), my responsibility as an emergent researcher was to ensure research rigor. I planned to use methods of interviews, documents, artifacts, and researcher journal to gain multiple perspectives. Although senior leader participants were invited to bring artifacts to the interview that could assist them in conveying their experiences and perceptions as

recommended in the Initial Participant Email Contact (Appendix D), participants were confident in sharing their perceptions without the use of artifacts as references to support their conversation. In addition, my researcher journal was not used as a data source, being that my experiences as a principal could not contribute directly to senior leader perspectives. Together, with the methods of interviews and document reviews, I was confident that I was generating robust, authentic data.

Interviews

According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), interviewing is a “craft,” whereby the conversation has both purpose and structure allowing for the construction of knowledge through the interaction of the interviewer and participant. The interview process elicited ““contextualized accounts of participants’ experiences, rather than ‘information’” (Josselson, 2013, p. 178).

Unfortunately, as a result of the unexpected pandemic, face-to-face interviews were prohibited. The participants and I adapted to this unprecedented situation, communicating virtually through Zoom and via telephone to generate data.

To ensure the success of the interviews, I piloted the interview protocol in January 2020 with a candidate who possessed the same criteria as my purposely selected research participants (Merriam, 1998). By conducting a pilot interview, I was able to refine the interview questions, improve my interview techniques and procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018), develop an effective line of questioning (Yin, 2014), and acquire greater confidence in conducting interviews.

The interviews I conducted took place over 9 months from April 2020 to December 2020 and consisted of two 1-hour semi-structured interviews with each participant, drawing understandings that reflected “a truth rather than *the* truth” (Josselson, 2013, p. 178). The success

of the interview relied upon interviewer-participant interaction, as well as my research skills to pose effective questions that were aligned with the key research questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Jones et al., 2014; Merriam, 1998) (Appendix A and B). The interview questions were embedded into an interview protocol script (Appendix B and C).

Being an effective communicator was essential when conducting semi-structured interviews. My intent was to have “a conversation with purpose” (Merriam, 1998, p. 23). Thus, the type of questions I posed were open-ended to elude information from reticent interviewees (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015), capturing the participants’ lived experiences to yield robust data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Josselson, 2013). As Patton (2015) contended, “open-ended responses are the heart of qualitative data, and they emerge from asking open-ended questions” (p. 446). The interview balanced inquiry and conversation (Castillo-Montoya, 2016), incorporating common language as opposed to theoretical jargon (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Merriam, 1998, 2009; Patton, 2015).

I found that crafting and refining research questions was an iterative process (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018, Merriam, 1998, Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interview questions were purposely developed to include a sequence of non-threatening introductory and background questions, transition questions, key questions, and closing questions (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012), thus providing coherence, clarity, and direction while eliciting rich, meaningful data. IAfter the first few interviews, I was more confident adding or modifying questions in an impromptu manner to probe and clarify for a deeper understanding during the interview—qualitative research is emergent and evolving (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The second round of interview questions addressed

and clarified questions that emerged from the first round. I noticed that participants were more comfortable in the second round of interviews, evident in the increased flow of conversation, level of excitement, and willingness to share their perceptions. Having become familiar with me as a researcher and the research questions, participants shared more in-depth information.

When interviewing participants, I established a positive rapport and a trusting relationship by listening intently, empathizing, hearing the implicit within the explicit, observing participants' facial expressions, and being cognisant of verbal pauses (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Merriam, 1998). An important relationship was co-created between the interviewee and me; I ensured that the interviewee came away with a feeling of being valued (Josselson, 2013) by listening intently, sharing genuine interest in their responses, expressing my sincere appreciation for their participation, and respecting their time commitment by keeping to the agreed upon schedule. For the qualitative research to be fruitful, I recognized the importance of being tolerant of ambiguities, sensitive to others' perspectives, and diligent with the data collection process (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Merriam, 1998).

For participant perspectives to be captured accurately, I used two audio recording devices to mitigate possible technology glitches. After the first interview had been completed, the same process was followed to arrange for a second interview with each participant. I transcribed each audio recorded interview within approximately 3 days and emailed the transcription to the participant for verification and feedback, completing a member check. One participant requested minor transcript revisions which helped to clarify the data. The interview process and schedule were modified to accommodate senior leaders' schedules during the challenging pandemic.

Documents

The term *documents* refers to “a wide range of written, visual, digital, and physical material relevant to the study” that is publicly accessible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 162). The documents of my research focused on principal preparation, professional development, principal capacity building for instructional leadership, and policies; for example, Alberta’s *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2020a) and *Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2020b). The document reviews served as a form of empirical material that participants and I were able to refer to and engage in during our interview conversations.

Data Management

Directing careful attention to data management and its security was a significant component of my research design and assisted in preparing, organizing, and storing the generated data for the purpose of analysis (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 1998). To honour participant confidentiality, I secured all raw, hard copy data in a locked cabinet within a secure location (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Electronic copies of transcriptions and my researcher journal were encrypted and stored on my password protected laptop. Electronic data, including the recorded interview files, were also automatically stored in Dropbox, a secure file storage site, and manually saved to an external hard drive as well. All hard copies of the data, along with a master copy of backup data files on the external hard drive, and the scan disks from the audio recorder, were secured in a safe deposit box off site (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Willis et al., 2010).

Audio files were stored electronically and labelled with the precise date, time, and participant selected pseudonym. A codebook containing “all the information needed to find each

piece of a particular participant's data set" (Willis et al., 2010, p. 313) was also created and safeguarded according to the management system previously described.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Data analysis is the "process of making sense out of the data . . . [by] consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 202). As a complex and unformulated process, data analysis is iterative, heuristic, dynamic, and ever evolving (Creswell, 2015; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2015; Saldana 2016). After transcribing the generated data, I developed "an overarching theme from the data corpus, or an integrative theme that [wove] various themes together into a coherent narrative" (Saldana, 2016., p. 199). Specifically, the themes were derived from units of data that summarized or explained what was happening (Saldana, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Because "guidelines exist but no recipes" (Patton 2015, p. 521) for qualitative data analysis, I followed Patton's (2015) recommendation to "do your very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal" (p. 522).

I transcribed the interviews verbatim following each interview with only one transcript requiring minor revisions as requested by the participant after the member check. Being immersed in the data through transcribing the audio recordings allowed me to engage in thoughtful reflection of the participants' lived experience and gain a deeper connection and understanding of the multiple perspectives (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2015). I utilized the markup application in Microsoft Word to jot down notes in the transcript margin to capture my reflections or memos—"little conceptual epiphanies" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 99). During the transcription process, I simultaneously recorded my insights, new learnings, and thoughts in the

researcher journal. These memos or notes not only assisted me in synthesizing ideas and key concepts but served as an audit trail to validate my thinking processes and understandings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Keeping track of my “thoughts, musings, speculations, and hunches” as an introductory analysis assisted me in drawing connections to the raw data of interviews and documents (Merriam, 1998, p. 165). In the researcher journal, I also noted connections between the data and the literature in relation to the research questions. With each successive interview, I identified and recorded recurring themes connected to the key research questions. These preliminary themes, or phrases that encapsulate a unit of data, emerged across the corpus of data, running like a thread through the tapestry of data (Saldana, 2016). The themes were “discerned during data collection and initial analysis, and then examined further as interviews continue” (Saldana, 2016, p. 199)—data collection and analysis occurred concurrently (Miles et al., 2014).

To analyze the data, I selected two coding systems or management strategies aligned with the study: manual and computer. The combination of manual and computer systems improves the credibility of the analysis (Merriam, 1998). The process of coding consists of the following: condense the codes into categories, reduce the categories into themes, and finally, present the data in figures, charts, and/or tables (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldana, 2016). After reviewing the data corpus and gaining a “sense of the data as a whole” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 194), I decided upon a first and second coding cycle.

For me as a nascent researcher, the analysis stage was exciting and yet intimidating, as there was a heightened responsibility to analyze the data appropriately and maintain the integrity of the study. I began the qualitative analysis using the manual system to get a sense of the coding process and to experience its messy complexities, which required sheer grit in making meaning

of the data. I began with a first coding cycle to summarize large units of data (Miles et al., 2014; Saldana, 2016). To complement my study, I selected first coding cycle methods descriptive coding and in vivo coding, also termed “elemental methods,” recommended for nascent qualitative researchers who are new to coding (Saldana, 2016). Descriptive coding, also referred to as topic coding, “summarizes in a word or short phrase . . . the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data” (Saldana, 2016, p. 102). More specifically, a code is “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2016, p. 4). As I analyzed meaningful segments of data, each data unit was reduced to a code to make the analysis manageable. The more I engaged in the coding process, the more comfortable and confident I became. To keep a record of the numerous codes that evolved throughout the cyclical analytic process or “data analysis spiral” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.185), I developed a codebook which consisted of a “compilation of the codes, their content descriptions, and a brief data example for reference” (Saldana, 2016, p. 27). I created my codebook as I manually worked through the data corpus, coding passages. Next, I implemented the other first coding cycle method, in vivo coding, also known as verbatim coding, inductive coding, and literal coding, using terms verbatim to emphasize participant perspectives (Saldana, 2016). I used in vivo coding to honour the participants’ “voice and to ground the analysis in their perspectives,” accurately representing their experience and perceptions (Saldana, 2016, p. 71).

For example, in analyzing participants’ transcripts using both descriptive and in vivo coding cycles, I summarized large units of data into one or two words, assigning a particular code (INST=instruction, CURR=curriculum, ASMT=assessment, QT=quality teaching, and

SHF= shift) to a segment of data to capture its essence. Since these segments closely resembled teaching and learning concepts focused on instruction, curriculum, and assessment, I labeled them accordingly. Specifically, data units representing large paragraphs were coded as instruction: “understanding of . . . pedagogy” (Michael), “it is really important for principals to understand what instruction looks like . . . taking an active role in the learning” (DDnols), “talking about instruction” (Michael) to “impact teaching and student achievement” (Zoe), and “it all starts with teachers [and leaders] having good pedagogy” (Phil). I also coded large segments of data associated with the topic of curriculum: “to be a strong instructional leader is to really know the curriculum, understanding the Programs of Study” (Michael), “blueprinting is curriculum alignment or working with the end in mind” (Michael), “it was a curriculum focus right from the very beginning” (Joey), and “instructional leaders oversee the curriculum” (Phil). In addition, data units were coded in relation to the topic of assessment: “Helping our principals see and understand how assessment is connected so strongly to learning and the power of formative assessment to adjust to practice is absolutely key” (Zoe), “As an instructional leader, I need to be in classrooms to see that effective assessment practices lead to effective teaching and learning” (Bill), “Principals are asked [by system leaders] to review all of the assessment practices of their teachers” (Phil), and “Principals had to share how they were going to implement that [assessment practice] into their observations of their teachers and how they were getting their teachers on board with these new assessment practices” (Phil). In addition I found segments of data that corresponded to quality teaching (QT): “quality teaching means that a person is teaching in alignment with the TQS . . . practicing good assessment strategies” (Matt), “it comes down to . . . best practice, best ways of [student] learning . . . and teacher feedback . . .

to fine-tune their practice” (Michael), “you know what good teaching is and I think that is so important as a leader” (DDnols), and “being a teacher in a learning leader role was a key foundational piece in developing me as an instructional leader” (Zoe).

Consistent across all interviewee transcripts, participants shared that the role of system and school leaders has predominantly shifted to an instructional imperative rather than a managerial imperative. I summarized sentences and paragraphs that reflected school and system leaders’ role shift, coding them as SHF: “you are trying to re-educate and do a paradigm shift for some of these people [principals]” (Michael), “the role of teaching has changed . . . and then leaders needed to change and understand and develop what instruction looks like” (DDnols), “we also have to change our mindset . . . and believe, at our core, that our principals are instructional leaders, not managers” (Joey), “there is that shift from that principal as manager to principal as instructional leader” (Bill), and “we have been working to develop the role of the principal as an instructional and learning leader more and more . . . and you can see a whole paradigm shift in the role of principal” (Phil).

While first coding cycle methods provide primary approaches to summarizing data segments, the second cycle of coding then groups these summaries into fewer number of themes or ideas (Saldana, 2016). In a second cycle of coding, I used pattern coding to group “summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes, or concepts” (Saldana, 2016, p. 236). This secondary analysis, an “interpretive act,” further condenses the first coding material into more meaningful and succinct analytic units to identify emergent themes (Miles et al., 2014, p. 87). Namely, I curated similarly coded segments derived from the first coding cycle and examined their commonality and relationship to create a pattern code (Saldana, 2016). Pattern codes were

then generated by looking for “common threads in participants’ accounts” or differences (Miles et al., 2014, p. 87). For example, reflecting on the meaning of each data unit and the relationship between coded segments, I manually aggregated common data units related to instruction (INST), curriculum (CURR), assessment (ASMT), and quality teaching (QT) under the new category or pattern code of instructional leadership (INSTL), as found in the reviewed literature. I then charted these codes—assembled the component codes that aided in creating the pattern code along with the corresponding passages from the interviews to visually see interconnections (Miles et al., 2014).

Besides the manual coding system, I used NVivo, a data analysis software program, for enhancing my analysis of qualitative data generated through interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Saldana, 2016). After attending online NVivo sessions, viewing YouTube tutorials, and utilizing NVivo resources, I quickly learned that NVivo “does not code the data for you [but rather] . . . efficiently stores, organizes, manages, and reconfigures your data to enable human analytic reflection” and thus allowed me to report from the data (Saldana, 2016, p. 30). Using the codebook I had created through the manual coding system, I inputted and aggregated the codes (nodes), imported the interview files, and then harnessed “the computer’s capacity for recording, sorting, matching and linking” to assist in answering my key research questions (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013, p. 2). Making sense of the data units through a reflective, iterative process incited me to rethink the preliminary emergent, repetitive themes derived while interviewing participants and transcribing their lived narratives verbatim. Interpreting these preliminary emergent themes alongside the patterns or categories that occurred within and across the participant transcripts, allowed me to reduce the categories into more solid themes. For

example, from the category of instructional leadership (INSTL) along with the idea of system and school leaders role shift (SHF), I developed the theme, *system leaders understand their shifting role in supporting principals as instructional and learning leaders focused on quality teaching and student learning* (see Table 2, Chapter 4).

By importing coding queries into NVivo such as text, coding, and matrix coding, I further explored ideas and patterns, and identified connections between themes, topics, and participants. This increased rigor, broadened my perspective, and opened my mind to “new ways of seeing” the data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013, p. 2). Specifically, examining participant perspectives on specific concepts within the context of the narrative and across participant narratives allowed me to see nuances in their conviction through word usage and repetition of what was valued. Recognizing an absence or lack of particular words also yielded new insights. For example, I anticipated the terms *student learning* and *student achievement* to be used more frequently, which surprisingly did not occur. As well, the term mentoring and coaching were used synonymously by most participants. Interpreting the data involved “abstracting out beyond the codes and themes to the larger meaning of the data” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 195).

After condensing codes to categories and reducing categories to themes, I found specific concepts connected to the theme that led me to specific findings. For example, drawing from Theme 1 (see Table 2) I used NVivo text queries such as shifting, role, support, instructional leaders, learning leaders, quality teaching, and student learning—words that made up the theme—to retrieve data units and determine specific findings through an interpretive process. Grounded by the key research questions, I prudently worded the findings in a way that appropriately connected the theme to findings (see Table 2). For example, associated with

Theme 1, I developed Finding 1: *System leaders' shift in practice ensures principal instructional-learning leaders are equipped to support quality teaching focused on curriculum, instruction, and assessment.*

This data was represented in tables to compare the findings. As well, I chose to organize and display the data in a matrix of categories to discover patterns, insights, and repeating concepts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2014). During this entire process of data analysis and synthesis, I worked reflectively, recognizing that the significance of how “introspection, political consciousness, cultural awareness, and ownership of one’s perspective” impacts data collection, analysis, and synthesis (Patton, 2015, p. 604). Specifically, I used my researcher journal to record my thoughts and feelings, taking ownership of my perspectives so as not to judge or evaluate participants’ narratives. I recognized participants work in various political systems that are centralized or decentralized, either similar or different from my own lived experience. I acknowledged that participants are immersed in a multicultural and both denominational and non-denominational systems, recognizing my own assumptions coming from faith-based school system.

In summary, the data analysis that I conducted was a complex process used to make sense of the raw interview data by drawing out patterns and themes while making connections with the reviewed literature (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This process required me to be immersed in the data. Qualitative analysis involved “sorting, refining, refocusing, interpreting, making analytic notes, and finding themes in the data” (Simons, 2009, p. 119), a process of “pulling the data apart and putting them back together in more meaningful ways” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 206). I recognized that the codes I selected to represent the

data units, and the patterns and themes I drew from the generated data, was my “interpretation” of what was experienced (Miles et al., 2014, p. 11). This interpretation, too, was part of the data. I realized that the influence of my own personal beliefs, attitudes, and values on the interview process cannot be disregarded (Miles et al., 2014). Through analysis, synthesis, reflection, introspection, and interpretation, I drew insights from the data, which comprised the findings of the inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Ethical Considerations

Planning and Conducting the Research Study

As an ethical researcher, it was my moral obligation to plan and conduct research in a way that minimizes potential harm to participants, safeguards the rights of participants, and ensures confidentiality (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Patton, 2015). It was also my responsibility to foresee and address any emergent ethical issues, as these “can indeed arise in all phases of the research process: data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and dissemination of the research findings” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 161). The *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS 2: CORE, 2014) clearly outlines the ethical principles for research. I closely adhered to these principles when implementing my research project. To conduct research in three school districts across Alberta, I sought approval first from the University of Calgary CFREB and, then, from each of the selected Alberta urban districts. I was careful to follow the specific research application deadlines, processes, and requirements unique to each district, as outlined on their websites.

Once I had received district permission to commence my research, I sent out an initial email (Appendix D) to the participant. All contact information was retrieved through the

intermediary or digitally through public district websites. To ensure that participants were well informed of the study, I clearly outlined the foreseeable risks and potential benefits in both the Information Form (Appendices E and F) and the Consent Form (Appendix G). Prior to conducting any research, informed consent was obtained to identify the terms and conditions of participation, which “is central to research ethics” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 162). To highlight the rights of the participants and the participant benefits, the consent form was crafted to meet the language needs of the participants, ensuring clarity of the information presented. Participants were informed of their voluntary participation and their right to withdraw at any time prior to the analysis of the data in its entirety, commencing two weeks after the second interview. No participants withdrew from the study, but if they had, their contributions would have been removed from the report and destroyed to protect their privacy.

As well, participation benefits were clearly articulated. By being involved, participants could gain insights that enhanced their professional practice (Miles et al., 2014). In addition, participants were informed that the research would result in recommendations to educational leaders, post-secondary institutions, and policy makers for the practical implementation of principal preparation and development. A clear sense of reciprocity in this research process was paramount, as participant perceptions were valued (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Patton, 2015). Lastly, participants were encouraged to ask questions throughout the study to ensure they understood all aspects of their involvement.

To address any power differential between the participants and me, and to avoid a sense of coercion or influence, I selected participants with whom I had no prior relationship. I was

transparent about my role and intentions as a researcher, which was strictly to gather information, not to judge or evaluate participant responses.

To mitigate any potential risks to the participants, I ensured their rights to confidentiality and nondisclosure by safeguarding the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Patton, 2015). This minimized the risk of participation affecting their jobs or ostracizing them from their colleagues. All digitally collected data was encrypted and computer password protected, while hard copy and handwritten documents were locked in a cabinet in a secure location (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015). Only my supervisor and I had access to raw data.

In addition, to protect participant confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used instead of participant names to replace any identifying information mentioned in the interview transcripts and my researcher journal, and later in any reports, articles, or presentations about the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015). I aggregated participant profiles, described district jurisdictions using a range of total schools within the district, and chose alternative district program names so as not to identify a particular interviewee or district during the reporting of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To prevent the disclosure of results that were unilateral or one-sided, I intentionally presented multiple perspectives to reflect the complexities of the data. With the conclusion of the research study, a final copy of the dissertation will be provided to participants upon their request. As well, all data collected for this study will be destroyed after five years.

As a researcher with a constructivist stance, I was aware that my assumptions influenced the interpretations of other individual's perceptions. Having critical reflexivity was important

(McNiff, 2013). My assumptions were connected to my experiences as a principal for 11 years. I was originally apprehensive about the quality and intensity of professional development and professional learning provided for principals to develop their instructional leadership practices to lead learning. By acknowledging my own assumptions, I remained open to constructing new knowledge and understandings about this complex phenomenon.

Trustworthiness: Credibility, Dependability, and Transferability

Patton (2015) illuminated the controversy that surrounds qualitative research: there are “doubts about the nature of qualitative analysis because it is so judgement dependent” (p. 653). In order to address the trustworthiness of my qualitative research, I used the criteria of credibility, dependability, and transferability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To determine the credibility of my research, I examined the data collection process, as well as my own assumptions, and my epistemological and ontological stance (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With the implementation of two data collection methods (interviews and document reviews), I ensured research rigor, producing robust, descriptive, and authentic data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). In preparing the interview transcripts, I confirmed that the participants’ perceptions were congruent with my portrayal of them, to capture the reality of the phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Merriam, 1998). I accomplished this using “member checks,” wherein participants reviewed and revised the transcripts to ensure that the documents accurately depicted their intended views (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 1998, Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In addition, I used the criterion of dependability to examine the trustworthiness of my study and “establish confidence” in the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). It was critical

that my findings were consistent with the generated data. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) defined *dependability* as tracking “the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data” (p. 163). I also developed an audit trail to document my thinking and rationale for choices when collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data, so as to enhance research dependability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). This was achieved by recording my reflections, insights, and understandings in my researcher journal and by making memos in the margins of the transcripts. By implementing “self-reflexivity” (Patton, 2015, p. 604) throughout the analysis and reporting of the research, I gained a deeper understanding of what I know and how I construct this knowledge (see also Rossman & Rallis, 2011). I also included observations recorded during the interview process (emotional cues or gestures used by the participant that could be pertinent for clarifying the verbal response). Ultimately, the dependability of the research relies on my credibility and competence as a researcher, along with my use of rigorous and ethical data collection methods and analysis. In addition, having worked closely with my supervisor and committee members also ensured research rigor, ethical practices, and consistency throughout the research process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 163).

Finally, in using the criterion of transferability, I gained greater confidence in the trustworthiness of my qualitative research. The concept of *transferability* refers to the ability of the phenomenon in context to transfer to another similar context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Merriam (1998) stated that transferability is determined by the “rich, thick descriptions” (p. 211) and the detailed information provided in the context of the study. By employing a strategy that provided robust, detailed information in the findings, I enhanced the believability, accuracy, and

plausibility of the study, namely, the trustworthiness of the inquiry. As a result, educational professionals can therefore determine the transferability of the findings to their own school districts and sites.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

Research limitations reveal those conditions of the research methodology or design that abate the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Creswell, 2015; Rossman & Rallis, 2011). These are factors that the researcher cannot control; they are the external conditions that restrict the scope of a study. The research limitations of my inquiry included case study methodology, research design, research methods, researcher experience and assumptions, and time.

My research was limited by choosing a case study methodology. Although case study emphasizes a constructivist approach to provide an in-depth, holistic inquiry within a context, my research only uncovered the complexities of one case. Stake (2006) asserted that “the power of case study is in its attention to the local situation, not in how it represents other cases in general” (p. 8). As a result, the findings within one context are not necessarily transferable to other similar contexts. A multiple case study could have perhaps generated more data, and a cross-case study could have offered more diverse perspectives; however, for the purposes of this EdD inquiry, I limited the research to a single case that allowed me to study one phenomenon in depth.

My research was also restricted by virtue of the research methods. In selecting semi-structured interviews as one of the data collection methods, I recognized that each participant could vary in their ability to articulate their knowledge, thus affecting the richness of data

(Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Secondly, the ability of the participant to cooperate during the interview (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016) and openly share their perceptions was proportionate to their comfort levels. Although I am confident that participants were comfortable sharing about their lived experiences, they were careful in representing the district respectfully. As a result, attaining all substantive data may not have been possible.

My skills as a nascent researcher influenced the collection of pertinent data. The research process was complex and multifaceted; I established the context and purpose, developed an effective line of inquiry, and conducted the inquiry within the context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Merriam, 1998; Simons, 2009). As well, I analyzed and interpreted significant amounts of data and converted the data into findings (Patton, 2015). This required skill and expertise, which as an emerging researcher, I was still developing. Since there was no formula or blueprint for analyzing qualitative data, only guidelines, I used my best efforts to accurately represent and communicate the data (Patton, 2015).

Finally, time was a factor in abating the research inquiry. The research required commitment and time. As Stake (2006) indicated, one hour of data collection equates to six hours of research analysis, synthesis, and writing. My goal was to complete the doctoral program requirements by June 2020. Due to the unanticipated pandemic and the unprecedented measures taken province-wide, this was not possible. As a result, the extensive inquiry process required for data collection, analysis, and synthesis was restricted to a revised time frame, limiting the quantity of data.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the choices I made as a researcher to determine the “exclusionary and inclusionary” boundaries of the research design (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 165). The inclusionary boundaries encompassed a qualitative case study with seven senior leaders employed by Alberta metropolitan public and Catholic school districts. Using the research methods of semi-structured interviews and document reviews, data was gathered, analyzed, and synthesized.

The exclusionary boundaries in my inquiry consisted of choosing the research approach, participants, and data collection. First, I narrowed the scope of my study by focusing on a qualitative research approach as opposed to quantitative or mixed methods. Secondly, I acknowledged the delimiting factors associated with the selection of participants. This study excluded the district of my former employer, to avoid any professional-personal tension (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Private or francophone schools were also excluded, along with districts from smaller Alberta cities or rural areas, as these were not similar in size to the larger urban center districts and may have less access to human, financial, and physical resources, influencing the inquiry findings. Also, I chose not to draw upon the perceptions of retired senior leaders who were removed from the complex, daily experiences of principals as instructional and learning leaders, impacting the relevancy of the data generated.

Finally, by narrowing the scope of data collection methods to semi-structured interviews rather than including focus groups, I may have delimited the quantity and quality of rich data generated through the co-construction of knowledge. However, semi-structured interviews

provided rich, manageable data that represented the context within a targeted time frame and allowed me to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon.

Summary

Qualitative research is “a set of complex interpretive practices” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 6) and is “suited to promoting a deep understanding of social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 38). I designed a qualitative case study to reflect my social constructivist stance. Based on Merriam’s (1988, 1998) framework, I explored the bounded phenomenon of senior leaders’ perceptions about preparing principals as instructional and learning leaders within the context of Alberta urban school districts. Drawing upon the perceptions of seven senior educational leaders, I analyzed and synthesized the rich data generated through research methods of interviews and document reviews to gain an in-depth, holistic understanding of this complex phenomenon. Ethical considerations ensured compliance with the requirements of the University of Calgary CFREB and the research departments of the various school districts. Throughout the study, I was mindful of the importance of trustworthiness, and the limitations and delimitations of the study.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings of my qualitative research came from generating and analyzing data simultaneously through an iterative and rigorous process—analysis was concurrent with the collection of data (Creswell, 2015; Merriam 1998; Miles et al., 2014). After several interviews, themes began to emerge, supported by the findings and grounded in my key research questions.

District Context

The research occurred with participants employed by three moderate-to-large metropolitan separate and public school districts in Alberta. Collectively, these urban school divisions educate a diverse population. Their attendance ranges from approximately 6,000 to 100,000 K-12 students, and their number of schools ranges from 20 to 250. Foundational to each district are their mission, vision, and values statements, and each district has a strategic education plan with student success, achievement, and wellness as their top priorities. With the evolving challenges of the pandemic, educators of these three districts strive to ensure continued student growth and achievement and to build capacity system-wide to enhance public trust and confidence in the education system.

Participant Profiles

To maintain participant anonymity, I outline participant profiles in a manner that aggregates and highlights their educational background, experience, professional qualifications, learning attributes, and contributions in preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders (see Table 1). These seven individuals were recruited, each meeting the criteria of serving as a senior leader and school leader for at least two years in each role during their time as educational leaders. Regarding demographic characteristics, four of the seven participants

were male and three were female. All individuals were identifiable as Caucasian and their ages ranged from approximately 50 to 65 years. They have worked in several senior leader positions over the course of their careers: Director of Instructional Services, Director of Curriculum and Development, Area Director of Inclusive Education Services, Supervisor of Principals, Deputy Superintendent, and Superintendent of Schools.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Participants	Matt	Michael	DDnols	Joey	Zoe	Bill	Phil
6 plus Years of Formal Education	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15 Plus Years of Informal Education (in-services, online resources, YouTube, Ted Talks)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5 Plus Years of Classroom Teaching	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5–10 Years of School Leadership	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2 Plus Years of Senior Leadership Years	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Received Educational Leadership Awards	X	X	✓	X	X	X	X
Received Formal Principal Preparation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Designed and Implemented Learning Opportunities District-Wide	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mentored and Coached Principals	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Participants	Matt	Michael	DDnols	Joey	Zoe	Bill	Phil
Received Formal Mentorship Training	✓	X	X	X	✓	X	X
Designed or Instructed Principal Preparation and Development Programs	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	X	✓
District Partnership with University	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X
Member of CASS and or CCSSA	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLQS) and/or Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) Certification	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Instructed/Designed LQS or SLQS Certification Courses	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X

The participants, Matt, Michael, DDnols, Joey, Zoe, Bill, and Phil, in their roles as senior leaders, have demonstrated a passion for learning and leadership that is evident in their educational accomplishments. All participants have a formal education consisting of a B.Ed. and a Masters' degree in either Educational Administration and Leadership, Curriculum and Teaching and Learning, Counselling, Theology, or a diploma in School Counselling. Some senior leaders have achieved Doctorates in Education. Formal education has played a part in preparing these senior leaders: "Graduate studies have helped prepare and develop me as an educational leader" (Zoe). Teaching between 5 and 12 years in classrooms, leading schools as a principal for at least 5 years at most division levels, and being in a district level position for at least two years, together these senior leaders have over 175 years of educational experience.

Each participant shared a desire to improve professional practices and hone the craft of instructional and learning leadership, as evidenced in Joey’s response: “I am a person that is always looking at best practice, so I did a lot of research on my own time before I even did my Masters.” As life-long learners, these senior leaders continue to engage in informal professional learning through in-services, conferences, seminars, professional reading, research-based articles, online webinars, YouTube, and Ted Talks. Building individual capacity and sharing expertise early in a teaching career to cultivate collective capacity was shared by Zoe and echoed in all participants’ experiences: “I was a Learning Leader . . . leading PLC work in the school . . . in an influencing/coaching type of position . . . with a teaching assignment.” As a member of CASS, these senior leaders have had the opportunity to collaborate and network, enhancing their learning around the newly formalized and mandated professional practice standards. In combination with the six or more years of formal education, these participants have attained their Superintendent Leadership Certification and/or School Leadership Certification, through the one- or two-day sessions provided in collaboration with the ATA and CASS. These highly qualified senior leaders are recognized for their effective leadership.

Each senior leader highlighted their role as an instructional and learning leader as they designed and implemented learning opportunities district wide. Like the other senior leaders, Matt’s enthusiasm for teaching and leading appeared early in his career: “I kind of loved the whole mentoring and coaching of other staff members. I took on the role of a teacher trainer, designing and implementing in-services for many different curricular areas throughout the school district.” Mentoring and coaching principals as instructional and learning leaders has been rewarding and enlightening for these senior leaders. Surprisingly, many of them, like Michael,

did not immediately see themselves as mentors, even though they guide, support, and direct the preparation and development of principal instructional-learning leaders.

I am present in schools, troubleshooting and helping. Literally, I'm not a mentor but I could be a mentor, but just working with the principals— answering a lot of their questions and where they need to go in regard to the district for help.

To further illuminate the participant profiles, most senior leaders collaborated with peer mentors, with two participants having the additional opportunity of being paired with formally trained mentors: “I have had a few informal mentors in our district; however, I have kind of reached out externally from our district too” (Phil). Although many senior leader participants have had less rigorous, after school aspiring leadership preparation learning experiences, they have found other ways to bolster their leadership efficacy in preparation for system leadership. Senior leaders have worked diligently and with great tenacity to develop a high level of leadership competency through self-directed and job-embedded professional learning. As a result of mentorship of and by senior leaders, along with their formal and informal professional learning, senior leaders have the expertise to design and/or lead a principal formation program, building the leadership capacity of aspiring and novice principal leaders. The majority of the participants' districts are partnered with a university in some capacity, although not directly coordinated with a university level principal preparation program. Bill has experienced the impact of a district-university partnership focused on teaching: “We saw an incredible uptake in instructional leadership and learning leaders that moved significant work around literacy and math in our system.” As each senior leader has various educational background experiences, qualifications, and learning attributes, their insights have contributed to my deeper understanding

in relation to this study's phenomenon: senior leaders' perceptions about preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders.

Presentation of Research Findings

In this section I present my findings in terms of emergent themes drawn from the interviews. These themes are grounded in the three key questions of my study, as interview questions were designed to elicit responses that address these research questions. Using a narrative format, I present the findings supported by participant quotes—the voice of lived experiences.

During the interviews, senior leaders were asked about their perceptions and practices preparing and developing instructional and learning leaders, including the supports and challenges encountered. Through an iterative process of analyzing and synthesizing the data generated, themes emerged. Senior leaders' responses reflected the following six key themes:

1. System leaders understand their shifting role in supporting principals as instructional and learning leaders focused on quality teaching and student learning.
2. System leaders build principal capacity through mentoring, modelling, supervising, and evaluating.
3. System leaders align practices, policies, and procedures system wide with district priorities to impact quality teaching and student learning.
4. System leaders promote district-led principal preparation and development programs.
5. System leaders equip themselves and each other as instructional-learning leaders to prepare and develop principal instructional-learning leaders.

6. System leaders ensure successes and navigate challenges in preparing and developing principal instructional-learning leaders.

These themes are supported by correlated data findings and are grounded in the three key research questions (see Table 2).

Table 2

Data Findings and Emergent Themes

Research Questions	Emergent Themes	Research Findings Statements
<p>Research Question 1 What are senior leaders' perceptions about how they prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders in Alberta urban schools?</p>	<p>Theme 1 System leaders understand their shifting role in supporting principals as instructional and learning leaders focused on quality teaching and student learning.</p> <p>Theme 2 System leaders build principal capacity through mentoring, modelling, supervising, and evaluating.</p>	<p>Finding 1 System leaders' shift in practice ensures principal instructional-learning leaders are equipped to support quality teaching focused on curriculum, instruction, and assessment.</p> <p>Finding 2.1 System leaders build relationships of support and trust to enhance learning and improve professional practices.</p> <p>Finding 2.2 System leaders supervise and evaluate to build principal instructional-learning leadership.</p>

Research Questions	Emergent Themes	Research Findings Statements
	<p>Theme 3 System leaders align policies, procedures, and structures system wide with the district priorities to impact quality teaching and student learning.</p>	<p>Finding 3.1 System leaders develop system-wide data-driven learning priorities.</p> <p>Finding 3.2 System leaders support instructional-learning leaders to understand and implement the Teacher Quality Standard (TQS) and Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) policies.</p> <p>Finding 3.3 System leaders align procedures and structures system wide.</p>
	<p>Theme 4 System leaders promote district-led principal preparation and development programs.</p>	<p>Finding 4 System leaders design, implement, and lead principal programs that build principal capacity as instructional-learning leaders.</p>
<p>Research Question 2 What supports exist in Albert for senior leaders to prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders?</p>	<p>Theme 5 System leaders equip themselves and each other as instructional-learning leaders to prepare and develop principal instructional-learning leaders.</p>	<p>Finding 5 System leaders rely upon professional practice standards and engage in professional learning communities, mentoring, and networking.</p>
<p>Research Question 3 What are some of the successes and challenges in preparing and developing school principals as instructional and learning leaders?</p>	<p>Theme 6 System leaders ensure successes and navigate challenges in preparing and developing principal instructional-learning leaders.</p>	<p>Finding 6 System leaders create conditions that successfully support principal instructional-learning leaders and adapt to challenges.</p>

Theme 1: System Leaders Understand Their Shifting Role in Supporting Principals as Instructional and Learning Leaders Focused on Quality Teaching and Student Learning

In reviewing the research data, I recognized system leader participants' deep understanding of the principal's role as an instructional-learning leader, centered on quality teaching and student learning. One main finding emerged, confirming evidence in the research literature review. With a shift in expectations of principals from a managerial to a learning imperative, system leaders re-conceptualized their role to respond to principals' needs of being equipped with skills and knowledge in instruction, curriculum, and assessment—competencies that reflect quality teaching to influence student learning.

Finding 1. System Leaders' Shift in Practice Ensures Principal Instructional-Learning Leaders are Equipped to Support Quality Teaching Focused on Instruction, Curriculum, and Assessment

System leader participants clearly indicated that the principal's role has shifted from a managerial imperative to learning imperative: "The managerial components are second to the primary importance, and that is a focus on teaching, learning, pedagogy, and things like assessment, which drive teaching and learning and get more airtime from me at meetings than completing reports" (Matt). Likewise, Joey shared that "15 years ago, the role of the principal was very much that of a manager . . . relying heavily on consultants coming in to support the learning that was happening in their building." She explained that instructional-learning leaders are now shifting their thinking, prioritizing instructional learning over management: "It is just trying to change mindsets." Throughout the interviews, participants felt that effective

instructional leaders manage operations and resources in the background, while instructional and learning leadership remains prominently in the foreground:

When I work with my principals, especially the new ones . . . we talk about management getting done on the shoulders of the day, unless there is something pressing that must be done. Your work as a principal is really leading learning in the building. And what that looks like is being in classrooms. It is pointing out when you see really great things happening with a teacher or staff member, and then when you see something that is not quite right. That must be addressed because at the end of the day, the success of the students is at the core. (Joey)

Similarly, Zoe conveyed that system leaders empower “principals to be that instructional or learning leader and be active participants in the professional learning of teachers or actively lead the work of the school, not just set up a PD day and walk away” to manage the school.

Matt described how modeling a learning imperative consists of senior leaders making intentional decisions to prioritize instructional agenda items. Designating significant meeting time towards instructional leadership, he believed, would significantly impact staff and students by setting a precedent for learning: “Model what is important to you outside of management, and that is teaching and learning.”

Phil, similar to the other senior leaders, acknowledged “the paradigm shift in the role of principal” towards a learning imperative. However, there are some principals who “still gravitate to the management piece” (Bill), “get caught up in the paperwork and don’t get out into the classrooms” (Joey), or “get distracted with putting out fires . . . versus focusing on what really matters, and that is leading the learning” (Michael). Bill and Joey shared that, now more than

ever, as system and previous school leaders, there is an urge to prioritize instructional and learning leadership over management, especially with the “refinement” (Bill) of the newly mandated and formalized professional practice standard.

All system leader interviewees expressed the importance of their work in building principal pedagogical knowledge and instructional leadership competencies to impact teaching by implementing and leading professional learning focused on instruction, curriculum, and assessment. System leaders communicated that they ensure principals are equipped as instructional-learning leaders. They equip principals by supporting aspiring leaders to complete a successive 2-year district-led principal preparation program and a 2-year district-led principal development program, alongside bi-monthly instructional meetings that are centered on instructional leadership and led by system leaders. As a system leader, former principal and teacher practitioner, Michael shared the significance of having a solid teaching foundation to effectively support principals as instructional leaders. He shared that he modelled effective teaching to aspiring leaders and principals to build their pedagogical knowledge.

Instruction. DDnols shared her thoughts about the systemic parallels of system leader, principal, and teacher instructional practices that promote engaged learning. Just as teaching has changed from a “stand and give” model to one of student engagement, similarly, principals’ instructional leadership capacity can be augmented through the support of system instructional-learning leaders (DDnols). Like DDnols, all interviewees iterated that senior leaders design and lead learning for principals during instructional leadership meetings, using engaging research-informed practices. By modelling effective instructional leadership practices for principals, DDnols expressed that senior leaders aspire for principals to reciprocate these practices for

teachers at the school site, impacting students and thus creating system-wide effective instructional leadership practices.

Joey recalled her own experience as a former principal, as well as her current work in supervising principals during school walkabouts. She felt it was essential for a principal to be engaged at the classroom level and immersed in best teaching practices. Once in the classroom alongside the principal, Joey would model instructional practices, observing and asking students questions about what they were learning. She dialogued with the principal, expressing the value in classroom observations and the tremendous learnings gained from those experiences to bridge praxis and theory. As a senior leader, Joey posed critical questions to principals during the walkabouts to reinforce their responsibility as instructional-learning leaders.

Curriculum. Being well versed in designing and implementing curriculum, Joey worked alongside principals, guiding them in their important role as instructional leaders to align curriculum with resources. She coached principals on how to “take out the fluff” so as to target the learning objectives within the Programs of Study (Joey).

Zoe shared her thoughts about empowering principals to be active instructional-learning leaders focused on curriculum: “Principals need to be purposefully leading some of the professional learning around understanding the curriculum, understanding the Programs of Study, seeing key outcomes, and seeing learning outcomes and how to prioritize.” Zoe also articulated that senior leaders ensure lead teachers, like principals, are prepared in curriculum work and encourage building collective capacity through collaborative work among principals, lead teachers, and teachers within Professional Learning Communities. She emphasized the

importance of teachers, supported by principals and system leaders, designing curriculum-based learning to ensure students achieve mastery.

Assessment. System leader participants supported principal instructional leaders by ensuring principals' clear understanding of assessment and how it informs teaching and learning. Zoe felt strongly about her role in guiding principal instructional leaders to see the value of student assessment, particularly formative assessment. Alongside the principal, she shared that she would enter the classroom, observe the instruction, and together dialogue about student learning: "Helping our principals see and understand how assessment is connected so strongly to learning and the power of formative assessment to adjust practice . . . is absolutely key." Zoe stressed the significance of principal follow-up with the teachers to ensure adjustments were made to respond to student needs.

Michael shared a glimpse of his own experiences in supporting principals centered on formative assessment, empowering principals to provide meaningful teacher feedback during classroom visits. Michael indicated that he encouraged principals to be actively involved in building teacher capacity, even though some principals felt it to be "intrusive to get into the nitty-gritty of the teacher's business." Michael added, "I think sometimes principals don't see their role as having a direct correlation with learning. So, we [senior leaders] need to teach principals that and hopefully bring them to understand."

In summary, senior leaders ensure principal instructional-learning leaders have the capacity to impact teaching and learning because "if they don't have a clue about pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment, then [staff] are going to have a hard time wanting to follow" (Matt).

Theme 2: System Leaders Build Principal Capacity through Mentoring, Modelling, Supervising, and Evaluating

System leader participants shared their professional practices that build principal instructional-learning leadership capacity through mentoring, modelling, supervising, and evaluating.

Finding 2.1. System Leaders Build Relationships of Support and Trust to Enhance Learning and Improve Professional Practices

All participants talked about their actions to support principals as instructional-learning leaders, building supportive, trusting, purposeful, and collaborative relationships through the work. System leaders highlighted the mentoring and modelling of instructional-learning leadership practices that build relational trust and support through learning opportunities of one-on-one visits, walkabouts, principal cohorts or PLCs, and district meetings.

During one-on-one monthly visits to 20-25 school sites, system leaders provided direct support to the principals. These visits aimed to build rapport, meet principal individual professional learning needs, and collaboratively devise the school plan (DDnols, Joey, and Michael). System leaders had “deep conversations with principals” focused on school learning priorities, student concerns, new curriculum implementation, and components of the LQS (Matt). Four times a year, each system leader, coupled with the support team of a curriculum and inclusive education expert, visited the school to provide principal support and direction with the initial September visit consisting of a needs assessment of the school, school leadership team, teachers, staff, and students (Michael). Mentoring and modelling during the school visits, system leaders expressed that they were “walking shoulder to shoulder” with principals to create a

“culture of collective efficacy” (Bill). Zoe and DDnols, like the other system leaders, added that the scope of work also includes assistant principals and vice-principals. When mentoring aspiring principals collaboratively with the principal, inquiries are made to determine areas for growth. Modelling this dialogue assisted the principal in being “the assistant principal’s key mentor or key resource” (Zoe). DDnols expressed that she mentors aspiring leaders using open and authentic conversations that build trusting support, creating a transparent pathway to principalship.

Harnessing their pedagogical knowledge and instructional-learning leadership as a former principal, system leader participants expressed the importance of building a collegial relationship of support and trust with the principal. This positive relationship, participants expressed, contributes to meaningful walkabouts alongside the principal, with the system leader modelling effective instructional leadership practices. Committed to supporting school leaders in a purposeful way, system leaders shared that being physically present for principals, “boots on the ground” (Matt), and actively participating during the school visit, was a priority: As a system leader, “being an instructional leader means being visible and being hands-on” (Michael).

Bill, similar to the other system leader participants, respected principals and valued their work and system leaders’ efforts to improve instructional leadership. He recalled working collaboratively with principals to conduct walkabouts as a system leader, repeatedly “modelling behaviours” that he wanted to impress upon principals as being valuable to teaching and learning: “I was in schools every month and most of those visits were visiting classes. That modeled to principals about what I valued. And then we had conversations about what we saw.” System leaders expressed that purposeful conversation to provide principal feedback following a

walkabout, enhanced their relational trust and bolstered principal confidence. DDnols, Zoe, Joey, and Bill stated that principals were grateful for their ongoing support.

System leader participants, demonstrating their own vulnerabilities as learners, foster relational trust through their work in mentoring principal instructional leaders during the principal cohort or PLCs. Leading a group of 20 to 25 principals or principal cohort, Michael shared how he purposefully built principal capacity using instructional leadership research articles coupled with scenario-based learning to connect theory and practice. This system leader participant shared that he talks aloud to the principal cohort, imparting knowledge about his own reflective practices centered on instructional-learning leadership. He recognizes that reflection is a personal “area of growth” and is developing this practice further by modelling reflective practices to school leaders. By expressing this vulnerability to them, Michael felt he was able to build a stronger connection of trust with his cohort.

In reviewing the interview data, every interviewee talked about their active participation in and contribution to modelling instructional learning in a positive, collegial manner during district meetings to support aspiring principals and school leaders. With professional learning centered on building instructional and learning competencies, Matt expressed the critical responsibility entrusted to principals by system leaders to share the knowledge gained at the meetings and subsequently lead professional learning at the school site to build collective capacity. Reflecting on her own system leadership practices, Joey shared her experience about being a “liaison” for the vice principal executive leadership meetings. Working alongside them to develop an annual agenda-meeting outline, they collaboratively devised a plan focused on “instructional ideas.” Joey ensured that presentations during the meeting focused on instructional

leadership practices. She felt that her role as an instructional-learning leader bridged professional learning between aspiring principals and experienced principals, creating a culture of trust.

Throughout the interviews, system leaders foster positive, trusting relationships through their work in supporting instructional-learning leaders. Zoe described how she fosters a positive working relationship with principals and aspiring leaders through her ongoing mentorship, stating that cultivating a “relationship is everything . . . just like teaching, my role is all about relationships!” Zoe expressed that “relationships are built through the work,” validating her ongoing, consistent mentoring work with principals.

Having “lived experience as a principal,” Zoe shared that she “knows the context” of this work, endorsing in-person, audio, and virtual meetings as opportunities to “explore learning” and build rapport, using Robinson’s (2011) “open to learning conversations” (p. 38). Zoe recalled having limited connection with her supervisors as a principal, usually connecting with them only when there was an issue. Now in her newly structured role involving principal mentorship, there are frequent opportunities to build principals’ trust and confidence: “This [new role] is a different way of working. The feedback that I am getting from the principals is that they feel connected to me. There is no fear of reaching out.”

DDnols and Zoe shared the importance of building an authentic rapport with principals to support instructional-learning leadership and understand the school context through frequent, ongoing site visits. Sometimes these visits were formal, with a planned agenda to talk about instructional leadership and learning leadership, and at other times, they were more informal. Reflecting on his experiences working alongside principals and building a rapport during monthly planned school visits, Bill shared that “he has a connection with them.” Bill emphasized

that his work in supporting principal instructional leaders is “actually about building trust through the work.” Most system leader participants conveyed the importance of cultivating a culture of care and support.

DDnols spoke about developing positive relationships with principals through collaborative instructional work during system leadership meetings. By joining principals at their table, “not at another table with all superintendents,” DDnols believed that effective integration and rich conversations could occur.

To continue the open dialogue with principals about instructional-learning leadership practices, DDnols shared that she has virtual meetings with her principal cohort. Initially created in response to the pandemic, she hoped to maintain virtual meetings “once a week” as an effective way to “touch base” more regularly with principals. DDnols shared the importance of providing ongoing communication to address principals’ follow-up meeting questions in a supportive, small group environment where they could respond freely without fear or intimidation. The informal online conversations are successful, having a purposeful intention to connect, build rapport, and provide principal support. In many cases, principals “are asking for more virtual meetings,” as these are timely, relevant, convenient, and therefore “very valuable.”

Joey reflected on her experience that encouraged and supported principals to grow as a learning leader. Building a positive, trusting relationship with principals through supportive, open conversations, Joey shared, is especially important. She encouraged principals to take risks and lead learning during staff meetings, modelling the courage to be a learner. Joey stated, “I encourage leaders to take risks and I think the rapport that I have . . . with the majority of them, [they] have felt very safe in doing so.” Together, she stressed, “we figure it out,” emphasizing

the learning gained and changes needed for improvement going forward. Expressing the importance of giving learners the permission to take risks and growing from opportunities, Joey drew parallels between student learners and school leader learners:

We tell our kids that they need to take risks in their learning; that it is okay to fail. Why would we not expect that of our leaders? I have learned from every mistake. We need to encourage that [risk taking].

Likewise, Michael expressed the importance of empowering principals to attempt new practices and learn from possible errors. He shared that he intentionally creates a supportive, trusting relationship with school leaders, whereby principals can enhance learning and improve their professional practices.

Finding 2.2. System Leaders Supervise and Evaluate to Build Principal Instructional-Learning Leadership

Coupled with mentoring and modelling, system leader participants shared their supervising and evaluating experiences that supported principals as instructional-learning leaders.

Supervising. Some system leaders are responsible for overseeing approximately 20 schools, “directly supervising the principal” (Matt) of each school. System leaders implement principal supervision to ensure effective development and execution of the principal growth plan and school plan so that these align with the district plan. Supervising principals during

walkabouts supports the development of principal instructional leadership, assisting principals to identify areas for growth and evidence of improvement.

Principal Growth Plan. Matt recalled his own experience as both a former principal and with supervising principals, stating that a principal’s leadership “can impact teachers and students in a positive way if principals possess both instructional and learning leadership.” To ensure principals build their capacity as instructional-learning leaders, Matt shared that each principal is “required to be on a growth plan that is linked to the LQS” and under the supervision of system leaders. Michael, Zoe, and Joey described their supervision of the principal growth plan as requiring collaborative support and ongoing follow-up to observe evidence of instructional-learning leadership. When developing the growth plan, Matt indicated that system leaders guide principals to recognize their own professional areas for growth through a self-reflective process that compares current leadership practices with required LQS competencies. Then system leaders, working collaboratively with principals, take action to build principal capacity by collectively setting goals, and determining strategies and resources to attain them.

Similar to Matt, Joey elaborated on the process of principal supervision, stating that her one-on-one meetings are rooted in the LQS competencies. She purposely dialogues with principals about evidence of leadership that corresponds to specific LQS indicators. Regularly referring to the professional practice standards during each visit to target instructional leadership improvement, she recognized that this is an iterative process. By mentoring and modelling research-informed practices and providing ongoing principal feedback, system leaders’ support principals’ reflective processes that ignite continuous improvement as an instructional and learning leader.

Phil and Joey recalled their experience supervising principals to build instructional leader capacity by conducting effective walkabouts. Following the walkabout, routine principal debriefings with a review of observations took place, to ignite purposeful “open to learning” conversations. Phil expressed his expectations of principals and desire to empower them to perform impactful routine classroom visits, building principal capacity and improving teacher quality: “Instructional leadership is not just going to the classroom and sitting and watching. Instructional leadership is giving feedback. It is actually taking action when we see something.” Supervising is not just developing a plan but also ensuring the plan is implemented and monitored, shared Joey.

School Plan. Bill, having experience supervising principals in school plan development, recalled working with principals to design a plan consistent with the district priorities. Over a 3-year course, he supervised the principal and provided school plan feedback. Bill had a responsibility to build principal capacity in developing an effective school plan, stating that “if they are struggling” and require support, he would “need to be involved.” Bill indicated that the school plan impacts staff capacity and student learning.

Zoe spoke about her supportive efforts to supervise principals’ ongoing commitment to teacher professional learning made visible through the school plan. She emphasized the importance of “having principals be key leaders” in promoting “iterative cycles of professional learning with their staff” rather than a “one off” workshop. Zoe recalled her experience as a teacher and compared that to principal practices today:

I am not quite sure how often I could honestly say that my principal was involved in my own professional learning; whereas I think nowadays . . . research really supports this.

We know that this has an impact [on student learning], and we know that this makes a difference. It is key that a principal is involved with instructional leadership, that quality teaching, and being part of implementing curriculum, instruction, assessment, and then focusing on student learning.

Matt reinforced Zoe's sentiments, emphasizing system leaders' significant role in supervising principal instructional leaders and equipping them with the capacity to engage teachers in effective "pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment." Supervising principals as learning leaders, Matt conveyed that the principal's role is to "teach others," and empower them to "walk alongside you . . . building that momentum to develop the school." Michael described his supervisory role in a way that bridges the district expertise to the school through supports in staff professional learning. He stated that he "works collaboratively with [the Learning Department and Inclusive Education Department] to make sure that schools are compliant."

Joey spoke about supervising and monitoring principals while they create a school plan correlated with the LQS, stating that "we are going to see a real change in our principals knowing that they have to understand what good learning looks like . . . and how to get their staff moving in that direction, as a group." Michael reinforced Joey's statements, sharing that system leaders are supervising and supporting principals in the school plan design and implementation. System leaders expect principals to understand that professional practice standards and district priorities are embedded in the school plan and then enacted.

Evaluating. Participants described their experiences in building principal instructional-learning leadership capacity through the process of principal evaluations. System leaders are either indirectly or directly responsible for evaluating principals. Michael outlined that he is "in

charge” of evaluating 20 to 25 school principals in his School Family cohort, while the principal evaluates vice-principals, assistant principals, teachers and support staff.

Zoe stressed the value of conducting principal evaluations with “a laser focus on how principals are doing in relation to the LQS.” Michael reinforced that the LQS is foundational to evaluations to support and maximize principal capacity while holding the principal accountable. He stated that, “I am able to . . . through the evaluation, be more purposeful and have expectations of principals to ensure accountability.” Adding to Michael’s thoughts, Matt highlighted the significance of the professional practice standards in “providing a framework for us to help in self-reflection, and to help all our teachers, principals, and system leaders grow.” When a principal is being evaluated, Joey indicated that school visit conversations are directly connected to the LQS in an identified area of principal growth pertaining to instructional-learning leadership.

Zoe shared that, with the “remodeling of our organization,” system leaders now have monthly school visits rather than “on a needed basis” like in prior years. She indicated that ongoing monthly school visits with open dialogue, small principal cohort scenario-based learning, and collaborative instructional leadership meetings provided meaningful ways to get to know her principals, making “a principal’s evaluation so much easier” to write: “I knew them as leaders.”

Zoe expressed optimism about the impact of her new role in supporting principals to be confident and competent as instructional-learning leaders. By fostering a positive connection between the school and district, Zoe hopes that her frequent visits to the school to supervise and

evaluate principals “is making a difference” and will be visible in the results of upcoming district surveys.

Reflecting on how he felt about being both a mentor and supervisor/evaluator of principals, Michael indicated that “it’s a little harder” to be both. He shared that principals tend to direct “some of those intimidating questions” to a peer mentor as there is an underlying “trust factor” when the system leader mentor is also the principal’s supervisor and evaluator. By authentically demonstrating vulnerability and openly sharing stories of professional challenges in his practice, Michael believed that he could develop a trusting rapport with principals: “Sharing some of my weaknesses is helpful, you know. I sure try to be humble and share all my problems that I’ve gone through.”

Theme 3. System Leaders Align Policies, Procedures, and Structures System Wide with District Priorities to Impact Quality Teaching and Student Learning

System leaders are engaged in purposeful and intentional work related to aligning data-driven learning priorities, leadership practices, and procedures across the system, ensuring a collective and collaborative effort in prioritizing student learning and teacher quality.

Finding 3.1. System Leaders Develop System-Wide Data-Driven Learning Priorities

System leaders support principal instructional-learning leaders by setting the direction of the district based on data-driven priorities and articulating and promoting these goals across the school plan, principal growth plan, and teacher growth plan for the purpose of school improvement. To link priorities system wide that stem from district priorities, system leaders first mentor principals through a data analysis process that requires collective inquiry and dialogue to identify priorities that impact student learning and teaching practices. All system

leaders I interviewed spoke about the significance of data analysis in determining district, and in turn, school priorities for teaching and learning. System leaders Matt and Joey indicated that “the role of the principal as an instructional leader is to have a really good understanding of the data” (Joey) and then to develop and implement a strategic education plan focused on student learning. That is, “work closely with their staff and the jurisdiction to inform planning to move their school forward” (Matt). Joey and Bill shared that they not only mentor principals and aspiring leaders in data analysis, but also in taking the next steps to address learning needs.

Joey highlighted an accountability shift whereby the responsibility for data analysis transitioned from a central department working in isolation to a collaborative format across multiple levels of system leadership. DDnols added that consultants no longer bypass the principal when presenting data to teachers. Rather, DDnols shared that system leaders ensure “that principals know the data, share it, and can live it.” Joey elaborated that she and her supervisor form part of a team that meets with the principal to collaboratively review the data, reaffirm priorities, and ensure supports for staff and students are accessible. Joey stated that the data “is driving” the school plan, and she is responsible for supporting principals to carry out the school plan.

Specifically, Matt described how the data analysis process unfolds to principals. First, there is training for principals to “help them understand this technology.” During a meeting, principals work collaboratively in division level groupings, to discuss the results, priorities, and strategies centered on “instructional leadership and good pedagogy” to target areas for growth: “Let’s talk about our results. What things are you doing that are working well? What things are not working well?” Matt highlighted the continued success in “principals working with their

data, identifying curriculum subject areas, setting concrete goals, and working mostly with their professional development committee and their staff to help improve the results in those areas.” He indicated that collective collaborative efforts achieve “strong academic results.”

Joey shared the importance of supporting principals in making data-informed decisions that coordinate professional learning with priorities in the district plan and school plan. By analyzing the data and mapping out priorities for learning, Michael indicated that this work establishes a framework for the 3-Year Education Plan, school plan, principal growth plan, and teacher growth plan. He expressed that the school plan is the “catalyst” and the “backbone” for school improvement ensuing the professional development plan.

Matt and Michael described the importance of system-wide planning centered on data: “We take our district priorities, once those are established based on the data and the Alberta Business Plan, and we then shape a district plan” by identifying priorities and strategies to attain these goals (Matt). Matt shared that it is essential the district plan be linked to the school plan “like a spider web” as these goals need to be “cohesive,” recounting a dialogue with system leaders: “What can we do as a district to help meet these goals and priorities that we’ve outlined? What are we doing at the school level to improve our results?”

Matt added that the challenge for schools is “following through and building systems in place” to attain the goals and meet the needs of the students. Michael reinforced this idea, indicating that system leaders organize professional learning for the year based on district plan priorities, and “principals do the same with . . . their school plan,” using the data to determine professional learning priorities at the school level. System leaders support principals as instructional and learning leaders by guiding them through collective data analysis to establish

data-driven priorities for learning, consistent with the district, and correlated to professional learning.

Finding 3.2. System Leaders Support Instructional-Learning Leaders to Understand and Implement the TQS and LQS Policies.

Matt and Bill recounted similar experiences helping principals gain a better understanding of professional practice standards by examining the LQS competency indicators. They met with a principal cohort to have “deliberate conversations” (Matt) about the professional practice standards and shared lived “examples of good practice” (Matt) or “problems of practice” (Bill) related to each competency. Bill highlighted that they could “explore the LQS through those problems or practices.”

Sharing case studies based on the LQS during aspiring leader cohorts, new leader cohorts, and leadership meetings was a common practice among the participants. These methods of active engagement use relevant, authentic scenarios that assist principals and aspiring leaders to gain a better understanding of the competencies and indicators. DDnols, echoing the other participants, shared that “we are responsible as leaders . . . to understand those competencies and standards of practice and then to break it down for our principals.” DDnols described the rigorous, “dig deeper” engagement process used by system leaders to communicate professional practice standards to principals during leadership meetings: “We have table talks. We make activities out of those competencies and we talk about, for example, what would evidence of leadership be in this area.”

Providing collaborative opportunities for principal colleagues to engage in “rich conversations” around leadership evidence is intentional (DDnols). DDnols explained that the

LQS consists of suggested leadership indicators or criteria but are not limited to those currently listed under each competency. She recounted critical discourse with principals to elicit additional indicators that demonstrate evidence of their leadership, drawing upon their background experiences.

Working collaboratively with principals on their growth plan that guides continuous refinement of professional practices, Joey shared that the LQS is used “as a living document” to guide competency discussions with the principal and aspiring leaders. Zoe echoed Joey’s ideas, adding that principals need to “think about the competencies in terms of evidence of leadership and what difference it makes to student learning and achievement.” Reviewing and discussing the LQS regularly with the principal during school visits and observing evidence of principal instructional-learning leadership is critical, Phil pressed: “Understanding and implementing those competencies comes with the repetition of your practice; you learn things through practice.”

Finding 3.3. System Leaders Align Procedures and Structures System Wide

To support principal preparation and development, system leaders leverage collective efforts to align not only leadership practices as shared earlier, but also procedures and structures system wide.

Procedures. System leaders support principal preparation and development by aligning professional learning procedures system wide that impact learning for school leaders, and ultimately teachers and students.

Professional Learning. With a shared vision and system-wide data-driven learning priorities, system leaders support principals in establishing procedures that provide targeted job-embedded professional learning. To link learning priorities system wide, system leader

participants clearly communicated the procedural guidelines for implementing professional learning to principals, ensuring a through line of consistent action. To build principal pedagogical knowledge and instructional leadership practices that improve quality teaching and student learning, system leader participants led principal professional learning using a process that examines research literature focused on instructional leadership (Michael). Also supporting principal professional learning, participants implemented procedures to analyze the Annual Education Results Report (AERR) or district results consisting of student achievement from the previous year and staff, student, and parent surveys. System leader participants led deep conversations focused on student results and district surveys to determine targeted actions for school improvement. Bill described the significance of a reiterative, deep diving, “slug approach” to professional learning that emphasizes rigor around relevant system-wide topics of teaching, learning, and leadership.

In bridging district and school professional learning that centers on student learning, DDnols expressed the necessity to strive towards a “relentless consistency” at all levels of the system, through collective efforts. System leader participants supported principals in preparing school-based professional learning, understanding that school leaders “play a critical role as a learning leader . . . develop[ing] procedures within their own building to build capacity with their own staff” (Matt). School-based professional learning is planned collaboratively by the principal and school professional learning committee to align with the school and district plan (Matt). The emphasis of the professional learning focused on examining student work, as well as looking at professional practices reflected in examined research literature. This professional learning process invokes deep conversations around teaching and learning. When mentoring principals,

system leader participants indicated that effective school-based professional learning is “not a one-shot session” (Matt), but rather an ongoing process focused on deep, collaborative conversations around student generated work. School-based professional learning aligned with district-led professional learning provides deep layered learning experiences system wide. According to senior leader participants, aligning professional learning that generates instructional improvement across all levels of the system has a profound impact on student learning (Matt, DDnols, Zoe, and Michael).

Organizational Structures. Senior leaders shared how they support aspiring and novice principals as instructional-learning leaders by providing and promoting collaborative organizational structures focused on instructional improvement across all levels of the system: meeting framework, school support model, and professional learning communities.

Meeting Framework. Matt indicated that “the biggest challenge . . . is to develop systems where we can have those conversations about instructional leadership and leading learning.” In the past, Matt shared that “frequency of communication” was an issue, “there was too big of a gap” between meetings. Matt described implementing “regular touch point” superintendency team meetings that included senior leaders who then share with the principals that they work with directly to ensure a “through line” of communication between central office and schools. Matt added that frequent communication will provide “momentum to really invoke change.” Bill echoed Matt’s ideas and added that system-wide meeting alignment is important as “our principals need to see that there is a through line between the meetings, a connection . . . to show that teaching and learning is at the core of the work.” Similarly, Joey expressed that to prepare and develop principals effectively, professional learning presented at instructional leadership

meetings needs to be reiterated system wide to emphasize consistency, rigor, and concept depth rather than breadth. That is, implementing instructional leadership meetings at the district level cascades to the school level whereby principals lead instructional learning staff meetings to ensure alignment system wide.

Professional Learning Communities. Cultivating professional learning communities that align through all levels of the system assists system leaders in supporting principals as instructional-learning leaders and supports principals in building teacher capacity to impact student learning. Senior leaders, principals, and teachers who are immersed in “communities of practice that are highly collaborative” (Bill) can maximize individual and collective capacity. Implementing PLCs provides opportunities for dialoguing, co-constructing knowledge, and sharing research-informed practices to design and implement learning that impacts student learning.

All participants indicated that they actively participate in professional learning communities and mentor principals on how to engage teachers in effective PLCs that emphasize teaching and learning. PLC time provides teachers with an opportunity to be immersed in rich conversations around instruction, curriculum, and assessment (Michael). By working in PLCs, system leaders, school leaders, and teachers became less “siloes” and more “invigorated” by learning from each other, impacting student achievement. Therefore, implementing the PLC organizational structure at all levels of the system assists in aligning focused instructional improvement system wide.

Theme 4. System Leaders Promote District-Led Principal Preparation and Development Programs.

System leaders design and implement district-led principal preparation and development programs to support aspiring leaders and principals as instructional-learning leaders. Senior leader participants shared insights on creating robust, rigorous, and cohesive principal programs through purposeful structure, content, and process.

Finding 4. System leaders design, implement, and lead principal programs that build principal capacity as instructional-learning leaders.

Participants were asked to describe their ideal principal preparation and development program and its impact on quality teaching and student learning. Most participants identified their current district program as being ideal, recognizing their own biases: “By no means is it perfect . . . there is room for a lot of improvement and enhancements” (Matt), but “I am going to be biased because I feel like our program nails it!” (DDnols).

Structure. After analyzing the data, I deduced that most participants had similar perspectives about the structure, content, and process of an ideal principal preparation and development program to purposely impact teaching and learning. However, there was some variance in the leadership preparation and development pathways existing in participant’s districts.

Many participants conveyed that the structure of an ideal principal preparation program, “which forms up-and-coming leaders,” would be comprised of two series, one each year, consisting of 10 modules each with one full-day session every month based on the LQS competencies. The structure of the program supported a job-embedded approach. Differing in

structure, the principal preparation program about which Phil spoke held quarterly meetings after school for approximately 2 hours. Phil shared that all senior leaders attend these sessions “to help answer questions.” He also spoke about the powerful, well attended, 2-hour quarterly cohort sessions led by the superintendent to provide aspiring leaders and principals an opportunity to ask questions.

While participants from smaller districts relied on senior leader one-on-one visits and district meetings to develop novice principals, many participants spoke about their district-led principal development programs. Michael shared that the 2-year principal development program consisted of ongoing professional learning in small collaborative groups. Novice principals, alongside their purposefully assigned mentor, met four to six times a year to engage in meaningful dialogue with senior administration in every department. Novice principals also receive ongoing guidance from other informal principal peer mentors. Many participants echoed similar perspectives about the value of principal mentorship but were not aware of any program that provided principal mentor training.

Content. Regarding program content, senior leaders shared that their current principal preparation and development programs are robust and rigorous: “It is literally a junior Masters’ program. It is that intense” (Michael). Echoed in the sentiments of all participants, Matt and Michael reiterated the significance of creating principal program content grounded in the LQS and rooted in experiential learning to engage aspiring and novice principals: “It is really important to look at different scenarios that are linked to the different components of the LQS. It is not a sit and get. It is engaging, deeply rooted in problem-solving conversations, scenarios, and exemplar sharing” (Matt). Michael indicated that like the program for aspiring leaders, the

novice principal program modules are “linked to the LQS” and intentionally “linked to principal’s needs.” Matt elaborated on the novice principal program stating that the content is not only scenario-based, but includes professional learning focused on district priorities.

Phil conveyed that the content of an ideal principal preparation program is focused on topics provided by the aspiring leaders coupled with the LQS competencies: “It’s a very open curriculum.” He revealed that he leads many sessions, presenting on “issues and concerns in HR and administration,” and the CFO leads “presentations on budgeting.”

Process. DDnols expressed that not only is program content important, but so, too, is the instructional process. She shared that fellow system instructional leaders design principal preparation and development programs and deliver these programs through engaging research-based instructional strategies. Specifically, system leaders use scenario-based learning that focuses on experiential learning. Extending this idea, participants shared that ideal principal preparation and development programs are comprised of authentic job-embedded experiences paired with theoretical formal instruction that together build skill sets to prepare and develop aspiring and novice principals.

Designing, implementing, and leading a principal preparation program is impactful: “I hold it very close to my heart because it is some of my most favorite work I have ever done in my career” (Zoe). Similarly, Michael shared his excitement in actively leading scenario-based learning, the “backbone” of the sessions, highlighting the program quality and the “incredible sharing” of instructional leadership practices. Matt described the engaging, relevant, and authentic learning process used to develop novice principals which consisted of members contributing scenarios and collaboratively examining these using critical inquiry and problem

solving. He spoke highly about the empowering work of senior leaders and their involvement in leading principal preparation and development programs using experiential learning processes.

Improvements. Zoe and DDnols expressed their thoughts on how to improve principal preparation and development programs. They indicated that senior leaders need to contribute their time and expertise to actively engage in leading principal preparation and development programs. It takes an entire team to pave a pathway to principalship succession. DDnols expressed, “We all need to be presenting, we all need to be present, and we all need to be a part of it.” Zoe and DDnols emphasized the benefits of all senior leaders leading principal preparation and development programs to enhance their own instructional and learning leadership practices. Being visible and working elbow to elbow with aspiring leaders and novice principals provides opportunities to network and build relationships.

Theme 5. System Leaders Equip Themselves and Each Other as Instructional-Learning Leaders to Prepare and Develop Principal Instructional-Learning Leaders.

Participants shared their confidence and tenacity in equipping themselves and fellow system leaders as instructional-learning leaders. By relying on the foundational documents of the SLQS and LQS as a framework to ground their work, and engaging in formal and informal professional learning opportunities to build capacity, they felt supported in preparing and developing principal instructional-learning leaders.

Finding 5. System Leaders Rely Upon Professional Practice Standards and Engaging in Professional Learning Communities, Mentoring, and Networking

Formalized Professional Practice Standards. Participants indicated that the SLQS, LQS and TQS (Teacher Quality Standard) “are guiding documents” (DDnols) that outline

professional practices and competencies that support teachers and instructional-learning leaders in building capacity to ensure student success. Bill indicated that “the Leadership Quality Standard and Teacher Quality Standard has actually helped influence my understanding of instructional leadership.” Attending CASS presentations and seminars have also aided to “further understand the leadership standard and how to support both instructional leadership and capacity building of others,” expressed Bill. Phil indicated that using the LQS competencies and indicators can direct senior leaders to lead professional learning sessions, dialogue with principals, and select research-based literature to improve professional practices. He shared that “delving” into the LQS, supported by research “literature,” and having deep conversations with principals, is “messy work,” but it “takes the mystery out” of instructional-learning leadership. Phil expressed optimism about working with principals to make small but significant steps toward understanding and implementing the LQS.

Matt shared that the SLQS and LQS provide “a framework” that assists senior leaders in “self-reflection” and alternatively, preparation and development of principals. With the alignment or “connection” of the SLQS and LQS, much like a “spider web,” senior leaders look for evidence of principal instructional-learning leadership that relies on the LQS competency indicators to guide principal capacity building. Matt shared that professional practice standards support him in his work with senior leaders and principals in aligning the district plan, school plan, and principal growth plan to directly influence teacher efficacy. Content with the professional practice standards, Michael shared that they provide guiding criteria that he has relied upon to support principals in creating the principal growth plan and conducting principal

evaluations. DDnols echoed Michael's perspectives and added that the LQS "helps guide our conversations, and it helps develop our principal preparation program."

Formal and Informal Professional Learning. Formal professional learning is mandated with a defined curriculum within a structured environment, while informal professional learning is generally self-initiated and job-embedded (Richter et al., 2011). Most participants spoke about the benefits of engaging in formal university education to prepare themselves as instructional-learning leaders and support their work in building principal capacity. Bill shared that pursuing a Masters' degree in curriculum allowed him to examine his practice "in a deeper sense" and not only "understand the philosophical, but also the practical aspects of pedagogy." Having concerns about university preparation program quality disparity, Phil indicated that not all universities implemented progressive pedagogy and relevant leadership curriculum to effectively prepare and develop instructional-learning leaders. He elaborated, stating that some "universities were using old resources" and were hesitant to offer progressive online Master's leadership graduate programs.

Participants talked about how their informal professional learning has supported them in preparing and developing principal instructional-learning leaders. Being prolific readers of research-informed literature has been an integral part of their success. To be prepared as an instructional-learning leader, Bill read about progressive research-informed practices, enhancing his professional practice, and bridging theory and praxis: "I have definitely been improving my own practice by examining research and instructional leadership or researching curriculum design pedagogy."

Informal job-embedded, in-house professional learning during district meetings, sessions, and conferences assisted senior leaders in supporting principal instructional-learning leaders: “Certainly doing PD that was offered at the district level” was helpful, as “I am a person that is always looking at best practice” (Joey). Joey added that she attends numerous conferences and then “brings back snippets” to apply to her practice. Michael stated that the senior leaders’ meetings throughout the year provide “strategic planning and lots of time for professional development,” including numerous in-house professional learning opportunities that support senior leaders in preparing and developing principals. Michael pondered the existence of relevant resources for supporting senior leaders stating, “You know, interestingly enough, I don’t see a lot of just the senior leaders given specific tools other than some time and lots of collaboration and lots of discussion.” Zoe shared similar thoughts, indicating that there was no formal training to prepare senior leaders for their instructional-learning role. She added that she was “not bothered” by the limited supports because “when you are at this level of leadership in a district” your work is a “larger extension” of your prior professional practices and competencies.

With all senior leaders being members of the Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta (CCSSA) and/or the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS), formal professional learning through these organizations was valuable and provided “a broader perspective” about “what is going on in our province” (DDnols). The summer, fall, and spring CCSSA and CASS conferences held throughout the province provide opportunities to collaborate, DDnols shared, and “the district made it a priority for our leadership team to attend.” Echoing other participants, DDnols described that “both internal and external speakers” from across the province present on the topics of human resources, inclusion, mental health,

professional practice standards, curriculum, and trending topics related to the current societal context. Matt explained that the professional learning sessions build collective capacity: “We took all our senior leaders . . . so that helps build their instructional background by participating, and in turn, they can go and lead the learning back at their school.” Participants talked about the professional learning supports received through the Alberta Consortium, local Consortium, Catholic Leaders Network, National Leadership Academy, Alberta Teachers’ Association, and Alberta Education. Zoe reflected further, adding that “CASS, for me, has become a good networking place in the sense that I have learned that I can ‘phone a friend’ in a few different districts.”

Mentoring and Networking. Having a formal mentor to help navigate senior leadership responsibilities in building principal capacity unearthed mixed reviews. Matt shared that although he attended a 2-day CASS mentoring institute, he was never partnered with a mentor, but has several informal peer mentors. When asked whether a formalized mentorship program providing mentees with trained mentors would be of value, Matt stated that “the challenge at this level is very difficult, not impossible.” He shared that “there are only 61 school jurisdictions in Alberta, and they are so diverse” in population, rural or urban location, faith-based and secular, or societal context; he stated, “I’m not sure formalizing it because each of our realities are so different.” He also added that if retired senior leaders became trained as mentors, they may not be as helpful because “education just changes at such a fast pace.” Also hesitant about formal

mentorship, Zoe expressed a preference for informal peer mentorship as formal mentorship was not always effective:

I find that mentorship opportunities have to be so incredibly purposeful and almost contrived because it is so easy to not have it work . . . and I am sure that if it was a bit more purposeful or a bit more designed, it could be successful.

Regardless of having a mentor or not, the most important component “is knowing that there are people that you can go to when you need support or help as a leader” (Zoe).

Zoe expressed a preference to learn within a cohort that provides more opportunity to network with various people of diverse expertise. Matt, similar to Zoe, explained his preference to collaborate with a “learning network of people that are in like roles,” as well as a network of university professors and retired senior leaders, rather than an arranged formal mentor:

That is the challenge, finding the right person at the right time so that it is not a make-work project. There are some mentorships that could be seen as a make-work project . . . The better approach is an informal mentorship, and networking with peers is highly encouraged at a team level.

DDnols and Michael shared that they are supported in preparing and developing principals through ongoing informal mentorship from a direct supervisor and had frequent opportunities to dialogue with fellow senior leaders in the same role through professional learning cohorts or networks: “The purpose of us being paired in an office was for that collaboration and mentorship . . . and that has been very helpful” (Michael).

Zoe shared similar experiences of receiving informal mentorship from her immediate supervisor. She highlighted the opportunity to work collaboratively through some of her

questions about her instructional practices with principals. Working with her supervisor, DDnols indicated that this system leader offers suggestions and recommendations to help her resolve problems through modelling effective communication. She appreciated the advice and uses “the same language” when mentoring her principals. DDnols and Phil expressed the value of “mentorship and learning from supervisors” by “sharing best practices” during weekly meetings to improve their own professional practices (DDnols).

When asked about opportunities to receive mentorship and to collaborate with other same role senior leaders in other local or provincial school districts, Michael expressed excitement: You know that would be interesting! I think we would share a lot of good information!

Theme 6. System Leaders Ensure Successes and Navigate Challenges in Preparing and Developing Principal Instructional-Learning Leaders

Finding 6. Recognizing Successes and Challenges in Preparing and Developing Principal Instructional-Learning Leaders

After I asked about the successes and challenges senior leaders experienced in preparing and developing principal instructional-learning leaders, participants shared various insights.

Successes. Participants experienced many successes in supporting principal instructional-learning leaders by implementing specific policies, practices, and procedures including formalized LQS, principal preparation and development programs, school support models, organizational restructuring, virtual meetings, and data-driven decisions.

Understanding and implementing the newly formalized LQS is significant to all participants, thus indicating that the professional practice standards are foundational to their work in supporting principals through the principal preparation and development programs,

school plan, growth plan, principal and teacher evaluations, and staff capacity building. Zoe shared that the aspiring and new principal cohort model series “focused the cohort professional learning on the LQS.” Zoe added that “candidates who applied to the cohort had to provide evidence to their supervisor of where their leadership had been sitting in relation to the LQS.”

Many participants highlighted the success of implementing a robust principal preparation and development program designed and delivered by principals and senior leaders. Greater success, accountability, ownership, and self-growth was attained when senior leaders participated in designing, implementing, or participating in principal preparation and development programs (DDnols, Zoe). Zoe shared that aspiring leaders wanted to be selected for principalship based on “merit,” having “some professional learning prior to assuming the roll” rather than through cronyism. The cohort model is successful in principal preparation and development as it has a rigorous application process, the curriculum is purposely aligned with the LQS, and provides relevant professional learning opportunities.

DDnols expressed the significance of supporting principals to mentor aspiring principals, building an effective pathway to leadership: “I think it is so important . . . that we are using our principals to teach those administrators that want to become principals.” Michael expressed his passion and commitment to building the capacity of aspiring and novice principals: “I think that principal preparation and development does not happen overnight. It takes time, and it takes multiple experiences to prepare and develop a principal to lead in today’s world that’s ever-changing.”

Success of restructuring the organization to incorporate a school support model with senior leaders being the “boots on the ground” (Matt), visiting schools and mentoring principals,

permeated the perspectives of all participants. Some senior leader roles were restructured to encompass a dual responsibility. Being accountable for an educational portfolio, coupled with principal mentorship, allowed them “to be operational in the schools” (Joey). Joey stated that “our focus primarily is still to be in the schools the majority of our time when we can.” Prior to the restructuring, senior leaders visited schools when “there was something wrong, or there was an evaluation, or a growth plan” (Joey). Joey recalled many positive comments from principals who approved of the school support model. Phil added to these sentiments of support stating, “We always do surveys at the end of the year, and principals always say that we senior leaders are approachable, and we are available to answer questions.”

Cultivating a culture of collaboration by restructuring the organization of senior leaders provided the necessary change to focus on instructional leadership, which impacts their work to navigate a pathway for principal instructional-learning leaders. DDnols shared that “there are no individual departments,” as they have been “meshed” together, moving towards more coherence. DDnols added that by “working together . . . we are all . . . ensuring that instructional leadership is happening.”

Hosting virtual leadership sessions with principals during the pandemic has become an effective strategy for senior leaders to connect more frequently with principals. Matt expressed that “with every crisis there are opportunities,” and introducing virtual meetings as a result of COVID-19 has been most successful: “It is something we will maintain even after COVID . . . as it provides that synergy and alignment between everyone in the organization.”

Challenges. Participants shared challenges they experienced in preparing, developing, and supporting principal instructional-learning leaders—unforeseen circumstances, finances, varied professional/personal contexts, lack of time, and limited district-university partnerships.

The unprecedented conditions of the pandemic continue to erode leaders’ resiliency (Phil), and government mandated social distancing restrictions impede face-to-face learning opportunities for principal instructional-learning leaders (DDnols). Although evolving COVID-19 protocols urge people to be flexible, adaptable, and resilient, most participants shared that employees are overwhelmed, experiencing high anxiety with some on stress leave (Phil). With rapid changes imposed on the delivery of education, pivoting from in-person learning to virtual or hybrid learning, principal online meetings did not provide the same proximal connections and collaborative interactions: “They are missing their colleagues and that rich conversation that they have sitting around a table” (DDnols).

Challenging financial factors were a common thread in several participants’ responses. From the perspective of an experienced leader with vast budget planning experience, Matt shared that “many times the school jurisdiction has different realities or different initiatives” that may “interfere” with instructional meetings and impact opportunities for learning.

Zoe, having been instrumental in the genesis of leadership cohort models, expressed concerns with the waning vitality of robust principal preparation and development cohorts due to dwindling district funds:

I am really worried about the impact of our budget on this cohort model. It was a full department that had a director, three system principals, and it was a really robust team of people providing professional learning and working collaboratively with our service units

. . . related to the LQS . . . Now as it sits with some of the redesign and some of the budget reallocations, the cohort has only one system principal.

Elaborating, Zoe stated that this “large and really powerful” cohort model has “taken a hit” and has “kind of been whittled away.” Zoe recognized that “it is a challenge to keep the cohort as it is an expensive thing to do,” but aspiring leaders and novice principals “value the cohort.” She emphasized that her “challenge is maintaining it, keeping it going.” Zoe believed that “the cohort is making a difference for new principals and new APs” and shared that principals are voicing their support for the leadership cohort model.

Phil identified challenges in preparing, developing, and supporting principal instructional-learning leaders; he recounted stories of principals who “are at different stages in their professional career and family” situations. Due to professional differences in competencies amongst principals and the personal differences in family obligations and circumstances, “let’s go in understanding these family and career differences” by meeting principals where they are in their learning and their time availability.

The lack of time was a challenge for most participants, whether for self-reflecting (Joey), visiting schools and classrooms (Zoe, Phil), participating in meetings, presenting at principal preparation and development programs, leading professional learning cohorts, and running a system portfolio:

I don’t want to be cliché and say time is a challenge, but . . . for me to go and physically visit 17–20 schools every month, participate in all the meetings that I am expected to participate in, and carry a system portfolio . . . it is a bit overwhelming. (Zoe)

Being able to sustain this rigorous work at high levels of effectiveness is “what I worry about,” asking “is this making a difference?” (Zoe). “It takes about two weeks out of every month to actually visit these schools” and “you want them to matter,” stated Zoe.

Limited district-university partnership negatively impacts the quality of leaders within a district, as some participants indicated it is difficult to respond to district needs without communication and collaboration with the university. When asked about existing district-university collaboration to determine district hiring needs for leader skill sets or the curriculum content to best prepare aspiring and current leaders, Phil stated, “the only communication I have had with the university and our district has had with the university is regarding the qualifications required of students to enter a certain program.” Phil added that no “formal meeting” has been established with the university, and “we are asked very little about curriculum input.” Other participants had very positive experiences partnering with universities to design district surveys, participate in research projects, or engage in innovative teaching and leadership programs to improve professional practices.

Chapter Summary

Through a narrative format, I captured the perspectives of seven senior leader participants on preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders. Beginning with the district context and participant profiles, the chapter also highlights the data generated from semi-structured interviews. During research analysis and synthesis, the raw data was condensed into codes, and reduced to categories and patterns, rendering emergent themes. The themes provided a framework to organize participant findings. Subsequently, I incorporated interviewee

comments verbatim and used paraphrasing to communicate the essence of the data and accurately depict participant narratives. Finally, a summary of the findings was included.

Chapter 5 is my interpretation of the participants' narratives. I present an evidence-based argument drawing from the data and integrating the literature, research, and participant perspectives to inform the research questions. The research questions will provide the framework for the chapter, and I use my conceptual framework to scaffold the discussion.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In Chapter 5, I interpret participants' narratives to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, senior leaders' perceptions about preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders, and I discuss my Chapter 4 findings with the rich, descriptive narratives of study participants to provide evidence for my arguments. I frame this chapter using the key concepts of the conceptual framework: learning-focused leadership theories, core leadership practices, accountability, and principal preparation and development. By analyzing the data to determine where the findings converge with and diverge from the literature and key research studies, I reveal important insights that I hope will contribute to understanding and further discussion about policies and practices in the field of K-12 senior leadership.

Learning-Focused Leadership Theories

After analyzing, synthesizing, and interpreting the data generated from my study, I found that system leader participants know and are clearly attuned to the prevailing educational leadership literature. Listening to their consistent responses to the interview questions, I recognized that their common language was strongly rooted in leadership theories that promote pedagogical knowledge and instructional-learning leadership.

System Leaders “Talk the Talk”—A Shared Vision and Common Professional Discourse

Together, the interview transcripts of the system leaders revealed that they are very familiar with the current literature on setting and maintaining a district direction to shape a vision and establish goals or priorities for learning (Brandon et al., 2013; Leithwood et al., 2008; Robinson, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008; Tingle et al., 2019; Wallace Foundation, 2013). Indeed, they “talk the talk”.

System leaders spoke about embracing a shared vision of quality teaching and a “laser focus” (Zoe) on student learning that is based on data-driven learning priorities. They saw themselves as having an obligation and a unique opportunity to work collaboratively with principal instructional-learning leaders to generate a shared sense of moral purpose that impacts student learning (Brandon et al., 2015; Fullan & Quin, 2016). To sustain a system-wide focus on student learning, this shared purpose was clearly and consistently communicated by senior leaders. Michael articulated the importance of using common professional discourse centered on student learning as he prepares and develops principals: “There is one message, and we all have to do things that are aligned with that message.” DDnols, too, expressed the importance of communicating district learning priorities at all meetings, using a “common language” focused on “common goals” with “relentless consistency” for improved instruction: “We are all on the same page.” By promoting a common discourse that aligns professional learning with district learning priorities, system leader participants were confident that they can prepare and develop principals through collective efforts to influence student learning.

Senior leadership teams promote learning and “develop a common language ... that is sustained and communicated consistently across the system” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 22). The senior leaders of my study individually and collectively used learning-focused language with a great deal of consistency when talking about how they directly impact principal preparation and development and, in turn, influence student learning. Senior leaders also talked about how they met regularly in their system leadership teams to design learning for principals, thus ensuring not only learning-focused leadership *language*, but also learning-focused leadership *practices* during

instructional district meetings, school visits, and principal cohorts that centered on improving instruction and student learning (DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

It is not surprising that the system leaders who participated in my study focused on setting a direction centered on quality teaching and student learning, using common pedagogical terminology, and establishing consistent practices. The pressure for even high performing districts to do better reflects the broader educational discourses of high standards for continuous improvement. The current leadership literature reflects this discourse, promoting student achievement predicated on district-level improvement through pedagogical knowledge and instructional leadership.

While the participants of my study emphasized the benefits of the use of common discourse, this finding also made me wonder about a potential downside to the requirement to consistently communicate through a language that is shared throughout the district. I point to the risk of a kind of content saturation that results from the same literature being prescribed and circulated at district meetings, principal cohorts, professional learning communities, and among superintendency teams. I worry that people may be confined by and even defined by a dominating professional discourse, which can lead to insular ideas about “best practices.” For example, starting new conversations that involve innovative and creative solutions, procedures, and practices can be challenging if these deviate from what has become familiar and predictable—the norm. During these times when diversity and inclusion and other thought-provoking global issues related to Black Lives Matter, gender identity, and Truth and Reconciliation, to name a few, are resulting in social movements that cannot be ignored, I think it is critical to be aware of alternative perspectives to educational problems, impelling those in leadership positions to be

open and adaptable. Such alternative ideas may not be as readily considered when districts are entrenched within a specific discourse about leadership. It is important to contemplate these possible perils if system and school leaders are not encouraged to expand their thinking beyond the common, circulated literature.

System Leaders “Talk the Talk”—We Grow Our Own Leaders

System leader participants talked the talk of the literature in another important way: “We grow our own leaders.” Specifically, system leaders design, implement, and lead district-led principal formation programs that uniquely shape and grow their own leaders (Orr et al., 2010; Tingle et al., 2019).

System leaders have a significant role in cultivating quality instructional-learning school leaders, bolstering system capacity towards sustained leadership succession. To cultivate quality teachers and leaders, participants ensured “targeted professional learning in such strategically significant areas as instructional leadership, engaging pedagogy, and student assessment” provided by internal and external experts (Brandon et al., 2015, p. 82). By identifying and nurturing aspiring leaders, senior leader participants ensured a robust, rigorous, and efficacious pathway to principalship. Succession planning through capacity building is a collaborative effort among senior leaders, school leaders, and teachers, echoed by most participants in the statement, “We grow our own leaders.”

Of course, there are some benefits of supporting internal career trajectories, promoting from within the district. System leaders who build capacity in an organization are assured that most internal principal employees know and understand district learning priorities, common pedagogical knowledge, and leadership practices focused on instructional-learning leadership.

Growing leaders from within is advantageous, as system leaders do not have to expend an exorbitant amount of time and effort instructing and informing new district members about routine processes, embedded practices, or the academic culture. As well, system leaders do not have to grapple with new, diverse, and perhaps contradictory ideas brought forward by new district members. This was clear as one system leader participant expressed his preference to hire school or system leaders from within the district (Matt).

Two of the seven participants acknowledged the importance of recruiting for external expertise but reported that this was rarely done. The discourse of “we grow our own leaders” could be problematic if this leads to a district with siloed language and siloed knowledge—a closed district system. I wondered if “outsider” applicants who do not share the common discourse and represent their ideas in ways that are familiar and readily recognizable, may not be considered. Specifically, on one hand, system leaders may find it difficult to hire new school leaders from outside the district because of an inability to see beyond certain ideals of leadership. On the other hand, potential candidates may not be able to see themselves as part of or as accepted by a district that defines itself according to certain conceptions of leadership and practice.

Furthermore, if the discourse of growing one’s own leaders limits recruitment to those within the jurisdiction, external expertise that could cultivate diversity, ingenuity, and innovation is excluded. Alternately, hiring a percentage of leaders from outside the district could allow for a sharing of varied expertise, creating numerous opportunities for innovation and problem-solving that may otherwise not have been possible. While the system leaders (e.g., Matt, Michael) of my study welcomed further collaboration and opportunities for mentorship with peer leaders across

districts in Alberta, highlighting the tremendous value in sharing information, such collaboration seldom translates to hiring practices. This has implications for system leaders who may face a pool of potential recruits that may not be representative of the school populations of the district. In looking at the broader Alberta context, this could also mean that system and school leaders who are promoted to new positions may not be adequately prepared for their role, particularly if the district comprises a racially or ethnically diverse student population or includes schools in unique contexts that offer specialized student programs with, for example, an Indigenous or language-based focus. I suggest that system and school leaders need to be open to identifying and recruiting well-qualified individuals with different perspectives who can challenge the status quo in responding to student needs.

Core Leadership Practices

System leader participants not only “talked the talk,” they also “*walked* the talk.” That is, participants not only knew the prevailing literature, but they took action to implement core leadership practices to the best of their ability.

System Leaders “Walk the Talk”—Modelling a Commitment to Professional Learning

As my research findings indicate, system leaders shared how they were empowered with confidence to learn with leaders who walked the talk, giving high accolades to those colleagues and supervisors who were effective mentors. System leader participants were inspired to embrace innovative learning opportunities and enact progressive leadership practices towards school and system improvement, knowing they were among leadership practitioners who actively engaged in professional learning aligned with the district learning agenda. This speaks to the importance of system leaders modelling a commitment to lifelong learning. Modeling

professional learning emphasizes a system-wide learning priority for the purpose of school and system improvement (Leithwood, 2013). By actively engaging in and modelling a commitment to professional learning, system leaders can make decisions grounded in research-informed practices, garnering greater credibility and the confidence of school, district, and community members.

To me, this finding is most interesting as system leaders, in my early leadership years, were not usually seen learning alongside school leaders or fellow colleagues, but rather showed up only to introduce professional learning events delivered by internal consultants or external guests, leaving quickly to address managerial issues. Participants of my study reported that, through collective learning and collaborative co-construction of knowledge, system leaders demonstrated a deep passion for learning, igniting an agency and confidence that was contagious across all levels of the system. In their districts, not only were their learning leaders valued, but so, too, was the learning of teachers and students. It was evident that these system leader participants walked the talk, demonstrating a commitment to learning. As a result, quality teaching and student learning in these Alberta districts would most likely continue to be impacted.

System Leaders “Walk the Talk”—Sustaining Effective Instructional Leadership

The contributions of the participants in my study reflected the current literature on sustaining effective instructional leadership. Specifically, system instructional leaders in high-performing districts support and guide principals to enact effective instructional leadership practices (Alberta Education, 2020b; Barber et al., 2010; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004; Tingle et al., 2019). Like teachers and school leaders, system leaders need a deep

understanding of pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment. Investing in sustained, intensive instructional leadership development at both the school and district level is a hallmark of strong districts (Leithwood et al., 2004). While principals are identified as the main instructional leaders at the school site (Maguire, 2003), system leaders, too, are required to have a firm understanding of instructional practices (Alberta Education, 2020b), underscoring the pivotal role senior leaders play as instructional leaders.

Illuminating how system leaders walk the talk, I found that participants not only shared a deep understanding of “foundational pedagogical knowledge” (Bill), but took action to support and implement leadership competencies. Having a growth mindset (Dweck, 2016) and a passion for life-long learning, all senior leader participants understood that instructional leadership focuses on teaching, learning, and leadership, prioritizing “the learning needs of the students” (Michael). Participants were well versed in research about informed practices and, as practitioners, they implemented instructional leadership practices daily to directly impact principal capacity and indirectly improve teacher practices. They mentored principals, demonstrated effective use of observational guidelines and purposeful inquiry during classroom walkabouts, modelled constructive feedback for teacher supervision and evaluation, facilitated principal-led teacher professional learning communities, provided insights on curriculum alignment, monitored the school plan and principal growth plan development, and discussed effective staff meeting structure, with the majority of time directed to professional learning rather than administrative matters. Specifically, system leader participants indicated that “the role of an instructional leader is to guide and grow their staff” (DDnols), thus ensuring that teaching and learning is happening at all levels of the district. Being visible, rolling up your sleeves, and

working directly with school leaders and teachers is a necessary part of being an effective instructional leader (Michael, Zoe).

My findings reflect Hallinger's (2005) position that the role of an instructional leader is to be hands-on, immersed in the grit of curriculum and instruction, and working collaboratively with teachers towards ongoing instructional improvement. This also corresponds with the assertions of other researchers who highlight the need for instructional and learning leaders to be active participants, work elbow-to-elbow alongside staff to build collective capacity, and improve teaching and learning (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011). In further support of participant views, Fullan and Rincon-Gallardo (2018) state that "the most effective teachers and school leaders learn alongside those they lead" (p. 1). My findings reveal participants' deep understanding of the system leader's role as a practitioner of pedagogical knowledge and instructional leadership. System leaders do not impart instructional leadership competencies to school leaders but build principal capacity directly through active co-construction of knowledge, engaging in reciprocal learning alongside principal instructional-learning leaders.

Strong school and system instructional leaders in Alberta school jurisdictions may contribute to a potential increase in student academic achievement. As well, in managing the educational aftermath of the pandemic, system and school leaders, equipped as effective instructional leaders, are likely to address student learning gaps with greater success. However, system leaders' investment of time and resources into building principal capacity as instructional leaders may have implications. Where there is such an emphasis in one direction, it is possible that other imperatives do not receive sufficient attention. For example, I wonder if the current fixation on instructional leadership rather than managerial leadership might result in novice

system and school leaders not receiving the support they need to develop administrative and financial acumen. Moreover, I also wonder if the conception of instructional leadership so strongly connected to the standards of professional practice for senior leaders and principal and to student academic achievement may lead to a reliance on outcomes that are easily measured (i.e., student performance through standardized test data, leader performance through SLQS or LQS evidence). Specifically, although the focus on “system-wide data-driven learning priorities” and “evidence-based” instructional leadership decisions with which the participants of my study seemed enamored are commendable, relying on data and evidence solely to improve student achievement may be a narrow or limiting approach. As many scholars have argued, student academic achievement is one matter, while student *well-being* is another (Biesta 2015; Brandon et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2013; Sahlberg, 2008; Sprenger, 2020; Stiggins, 2002).

Some scholars critique the dominant discourse of achievement that has an extreme emphasis on educational outcomes, evidence-based learning, and academic achievement, providing solely measurable data (Biesta, 2015; Sahlberg, 2008; Stiggins, 2002). Although this conception of achievement is important, the purpose of education is not limited to qualifying or preparing a student for an occupation, but is also to develop relationships, self-confidence, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, patience, and other values that cannot be measured. There are two main concerns with the over emphasis of standardized testing policies and standardized practices. First, there is a risk that underscoring standardized testing may be restricting student engagement, creativity, and innovation (Sahlberg, 2008). System leaders are held accountable not only for ensuring student achievement, but also instrumental in “improving student success—student engagement, learning, and well-being” (Brandon et al., 2015, p. 1).

With a shared vision of clearly defined priorities, conditions can be created to support student learning *and* well-being (Brandon et. al, 2015). Promoting education that includes a focus on social networking and relationship building by fostering cooperation over competition among students, staff, and schools is important (Sahlberg, 2008). According to Sahlberg (2008), “collective responsibility for learning, well-being, and happiness” of students, teachers, and instructional leaders should be a priority (p. 58). As system leaders support principals in their work, it is critical to acknowledge the accomplishments of the whole child and to render a holistic approach for meeting student needs. Scholar findings suggest that student well-being is related to student achievement (Clarke, 2020; Miller et al., 2013). Therefore, by engaging students in creative and innovative activities that build their confidence and self-esteem through, for example, music, art, dance, and outdoor programming—items not measured by district standardized tests—system leaders can celebrate the whole child, ensuring student success and achievement. Similar, using a holistic approach to support principal instructional-learning leaders, system leaders can rely on practice standards in a way that allows for more flexibility in creating appropriate indicators of competency representative of the school context, rather than viewing the listed SLQS or LQS indicators as a check box process for evidence of leadership impact.

System Leaders “Walk the Talk”—Promoting a School Support Model

System leaders walked the talk through their “hands on, boots on the ground” (Matt) actions, supporting principals through a school support model. I was fascinated by this finding. Having been an assistant principal and principal practitioner for 17 years, I rarely saw system leaders at my school site. Through this research, I have gained insights about current school

support models that enhance principal formation and efficacy. Over the past 2 to 4 years, district “innovation” has disrupted or positively changed the way principal development was previously provided, transforming school and district connections (Matt). Working within growing districts, system leader participants talked about how they purposefully restructured their resources to respond to principal needs. They mentored principal instructional-learning leaders through monthly one-on-one school visits and collaborative principal cohorts, dramatically transforming district leadership structures to impact school leader preparation and development. A school support model represents a catalyst for change through the aim of developing a collaborative partnership between system and school leaders, bolstering principal efficacy. Consistent with my findings, system leaders in high performing districts create organizational “structures . . . to support the learning of teachers and administrators” (Leithwood, 2008, p. 14), developing principal capacity that impacts quality teaching and student learning (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011).

Participants in this study worked in districts that designated time for senior leaders to actively participate in the mentorship of principals. Participants identified a school support model as being “a great innovation!” (Matt). All participants highlighted their capacity building work with principals, which evoked a ripple effect whereby principals support teachers to improve instructional practices, and in turn, teachers influence student achievement. Restructuring the organization to incorporate a school support model, senior leaders visited schools to mentor principals on instructional and learning leadership practices. Disrupting principal preparation and development through job-embedded mentoring demonstrates the importance placed on principal instructional-learning leadership. Leadership matters.

With regard to system leader participants' creation and implementation of a school support model, I was impressed by how they invested significant time and resources to support principals in developing their instructional-learning leadership competencies. This demonstrated to me that system leaders knew the significance of the research literature on instructional and learning leadership and how research-informed leadership practices impact student learning.

There are significant implications associated with this finding. I do not know if all Alberta districts are aware of a school support model and, if so, whether they are financially equipped with strategic resources to implement this innovative model. With limited resources, each district determines funding allocations, and the repercussion of implementing this expensive model could mean fewer programs for students, such as artist-in-residency programs, robust music programs, and land-based learning programs. As well, a consequence of this model may be that school principals develop a dependency on system leadership support that could lead to a kind of learned helplessness, by which principals are apprehensive to make even the smallest of decisions; for example, contacting the district frequently to determine whether students should remain indoors for recess (Phil). On a deeper level, I am curious if a school support model could be associated with an exercise of system leader power over school leaders, where principals are monitored so closely, especially if in relation to a limited interpretation of the LQS, that some highly independent school leaders may feel suffocated rather than empowered.

System Leaders “Walk the Talk”—Challenges

While system leaders of my study were committed to doing everything possible to walk the talk, this does not come without challenges. Participants shared two interesting challenges:

finding an effective formal mentor and sustaining robust district-led principal preparation and development programs, as prescribed by the literature.

Although system leader participants prudently and purposefully designated formal mentors for novice principals and used specific selection criteria based on leadership competencies, certified leadership qualifications, evidence of leadership impact on instructional improvement (Getty et al., 2010), relational trust (Sharpe & Nishimura, 2017), and interpersonal styles, learning needs, and professional objectives (Daresh, 2004; Gettys, 2007), they found it challenging to be effectively matched with a formal mentor for themselves. Several participants expressed their skepticism about receiving an effective formal mentor at the system leadership level and were dubious about mentor matching given their varied working contexts, which make formal mentoring a challenge (Matt, Zoe). Matching a system leader with a formal mentor seemed problematic to a few participants, as the “lived experience does not always work” (Zoe), causing a “make-work project” (Matt). Confident in their own abilities, many system leader participants preferred collaborating in cohorts with informal mentors of diverse expertise.

Regarding participants’ challenges in attaining a formal mentor, I pondered whether participants had allotted themselves enough time to build relationships with formal mentors to embrace the valuable mentee–mentor opportunity. One participant optimistically indicated that formal mentorship “could be successful” if purposely designed (Zoe). I believe district mentoring programs have the potential to be effective when adequate time is incorporated to build a trusting mentee–mentor relationship that prioritizes instructional leadership (Sun, 2011; Tingle et al., 2019; Wallace Foundation, 2007). The research confirms that a well designed and implemented induction program that is co-constructed with mentor support increases novice

leaders' confidence and reduces isolation when learning occurs in a collaborative community of practice (Bush, 2018). This suggests that more time and resources might need to be directed at equipping formal mentors with the knowledge and skills that can support system leaders effectively in their work of building principal capacity.

In addition to the challenges of appropriate mentorship, system leader participants also talked about the difficulty of sustaining robust district-led principal preparation and development programs without the full participation of system leader colleagues, diminishing their ability to walk the talk. All system leader participants spoke about the challenges of finding time to effectively lead principal preparation and development programs due to their complex and demanding roles. Along with the responsibility for managing a district portfolio, many system leaders are held directly accountable for supervising 15 to 25 school leaders and additional aspiring leaders, with monthly visits to the school, conducting principal evaluations, attending district meetings, leading professional learning, and teaching principal preparation and development programs. A shared challenge expressed about supporting principals was that because school leaders are at "different levels and different areas in their learning," more time is required to meet individual needs (Michael). Michael stated that supporting principals becomes more complex when there is high principal mobility or when there is a need to "re-educate" seasoned principals to understand the current "paradigm shift" of principals' managerial to instructional role (Michael). Conversely, system leader participants indicated that many aspiring principals who have completed a master's degree and the district-led preparation program are "more comfortable" as instructional-learning leaders, but require further support with management skills (Zoe). As participants shared, aspiring principals value the preparation

programs, which build competencies for instructional and learning leaders to impact student learning. Unfortunately, according to participants, many aspiring principals are recruited for principalship prior to completing the 2 years of district-led preparation. This is consistent with the research literature, which reports that one-fifth of novice principals have not participated in the valuable learning opportunity of principal preparation (CAP, 2015).

Strategic resourcing is required to sustain district implementation of quality principal preparation and development programs. Zoe expressed her trepidation about “the impact of the budget” reductions on providing human and financial resources to effectively support leadership programs. She indicated that job-embedded professional learning is “expensive” to implement and involves many instructional leaders and replacement staff. As research suggests, successful high-quality principal preparation programs require commitment, support, infrastructure, funding, and collaboration from the province, district, and university (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Sun, 2011). Although costly to implement, principal leadership programs are vital to principal efficacy that can affect student achievement. That is, research links leading learning, building teacher efficacy (Hallinger, 2005), and developing instructional leadership capacity to a significant impact on student learning (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011). Clearly, budget cuts affect the human resources available to lead these programs. This is Zoe’s concern. Prior to the financial cuts, leadership programs in Zoe’s school district were led by an entire department of people “that had a director, three system principals, and a really robust team providing professional learning and working collaboratively with our service units” (Zoe). That is, many qualified and knowledgeable system leaders were once highly invested and actively involved in designing, implementing, and leading principal leadership programs. However,

budget reallocations have imposed a redesign of the leadership programs, leaving only one system leader spearheading the programs and “a few of us to care for it . . . on the side of our desk.” Rigorous principal preparation and development programs have been diminished in Zoe’s school district, which may be representative of many school jurisdictions experiencing budget constraints. Transitioning to a compartmentalized, less rigorous “workshop” delivery, with system leaders from their specific departments presenting on isolated topics about human resources, legal policies, and financial responsibilities without integrating and embedding these concepts in an authentic “teaching and learning” context is a concern for Zoe: “What I worry about is the sustainability of this (principal leadership program) . . . My challenge is maintaining it, keeping it going.” Zoe’s passion to support and sustain principal preparation and development programs is evident: “This is important to us as a district. This is an investment in our people; this matters.”

To me, this finding was most compelling. System leaders’ desire to walk the talk and design, implement, and lead sustained exemplary district-led principal programs as described in the literature was evident despite the prevailing circumstances of limited time and resources. The implications of working with limited resources can lead to frustration, induced stress, and health issues for system leaders. With the demands of effectively sustaining principal programs, system leaders’ district-level work may also be compromised. Without the strategic resourcing allotted to system leaders to fully sustain a robust principal program, the ability to provide effective district-led principal preparation and development is at risk, which directly affects quality teaching and indirectly impacts student learning. In the Alberta context, this could result in

decreases in the metrics that indicate student achievement and, thus, affect the status of high performing districts.

System Leaders “Walk the Talk”—From Challenges to Opportunities

Not mentioned in the literature but noteworthy in my study was system leaders’ compelling insights about managing in a time of crisis. In this case, the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic placed significant restrictions on system leader participants’ abilities to prepare and develop school leaders. However, with a strength-based mindset, system leaders donned coats of resilience, approaching every challenge as an opportunity for innovation (Matt). Participants talked about building adaptive organizational capacity to improve instructional practices at all levels by designing and leading learning through a hybrid of virtual and in-person learning and networking opportunities. In impactful, innovative ways (Hallinger, 2003), their work showcased their adaptive professional expertise (Brandon et al., 2017; Brandon et al., 2015) in utilizing deep instructional and leadership knowledge to demonstrate flexibility to address evolving challenges (Timperley, 2011).

The ways in which system leader participants navigated their work to support principal instructional-learning leaders during the restrictions of the pandemic was compelling. System leader participants’ use of an online platform to connect virtually with principals for collaborative practices suggests that, post-pandemic, some of the support offered by system leaders could continue to be addressed virtually, eliminating travel time to some meetings. System leaders have perhaps gained a better understanding of which activities lend themselves best to in-person participation and which could be engaged most effectively online. As a result, districts may require less physical space in their central buildings, as system and school leaders

work remotely, saving facility costs that could be invested to support principal development programs. A consequence of virtual meetings may be that system leaders will have greater expectations for school leaders to be more technologically adept, utilizing digital platforms more readily at the school site. Another implication is that districts across Alberta may engage in more professional learning networking due to an increased familiarity with virtual technology, strengthening “collaborative, collective capacity to lead in complex and demanding times” (Friesen et al., 2021a, p. 45).

Accountability

System leaders who walk the talk are held accountable for supporting principals in establishing foundational knowledge and enacting core leadership practices in relation to the professional practice standard. This notion of system leaders supporting principals in such an involved manner is novel. That is, system leaders in their complex and demanding roles are now also actively walking alongside principals to support school leaders.

In reference to the Ministry of Education’s newly formalized professional practice standards, the SLQS and the LQS, system leader participants shared that they relied upon these standards as a “framework of expectations” or “roadmap” to navigate the learning (Matt) required for principals to build competencies. Working directly with school leaders and indirectly with teachers, system leader participants depended upon the practice standards, rooting them in their daily routines to influence instructional practices. They perceived the professional practice standard as an accountability tool to develop a curriculum for principal leadership programs, guide principals in establishing the school plan, and direct supervision and evaluation of principals towards school and system improvement.

System leaders also utilized the SLQS, LQS, and TQS as a “framework for self-reflection” to assist system leaders, school leaders, and teachers, respectively, to grow (Matt). By reflecting on leadership practices in relation to the professional practice standards, system leaders supported changes to sustain student and school improvement. Implementing learning-focused leadership practices, coupled with reflecting on professional practice standards, informs and supports school leader efficacy in achieving school system success.

While there are clear benefits to relying upon the professional practice standards, I am concerned about the degree to which the standards are also standardizing practice. It is critical that the professional standards provide a guideline for leadership practice but do not obstruct progress by being too rigid. Some system leader participants, working diligently to support principals, frequently refer to the LQS as a checklist by which to hold principals accountable. The accountability component is important. However, the purpose of the indicators is to provide guidelines for principal practitioners. More suitably, some system leaders purposely converse with principals during their one-on-one school visits about adding further, not currently listed indicators, to LQS to ensure a focus on principals’ individualized leadership development with differentiated supports to impact principal efficacy: It is “not about” checking off “a list of things that I need you [the principal] to do.” (Zoe).

Although strict adherence to the SLQS and the LQS could be problematic, the indicators identified under each competency are presented as mere guidelines and offer flexibility to take into consideration the diversity of system and school leaders and of Alberta’s school contexts. Further indicators could be added with discretion, provided the indicator is an outcome that is equal to or better than those present; that is, implementing indicators or “actions that are likely to

lead to the achievement of a competency” (Alberta Education, 2020a, p. 2). Therefore, the practice standards could be improved upon. It is my assertion that the competency criteria for the work of system and school leaders needs to be in place, particularly for novice leaders who are finding their bearings. However, it is essential that practices demonstrating evidence of leadership’s impact be differentiated to accommodate specific and unique school contexts. While the professional practice standards may be in place to standardize outcomes, they do not have to standardize the strategies employed to attain the outcomes.

After reviewing the professional practice standard documents, I identified an interesting finding that was absent in the participant narratives. Senior leaders play a critical role in developing leadership capacity system wide. Surprisingly, this key leadership practice of *developing leadership capacity* is not represented as a competency in the *Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2020b), but rather is listed as an optional indicator. As a result, I surmise that many system leaders might feel there are some incongruences between their current role as an instructional-learning leader and the expectations of their role as outlined in the SLQS. Specifically, the SLQS does not include the competencies of *sustaining effective instructional leadership* and *developing leadership capacity*, providing limited direction for system leaders who are not in the position of Superintendent of Schools, and yet are held accountable for building principal capacity. The three existing indicators under the competency of *leading learning* within the SLQS provide general expectations for system leaders to build the instructional leadership capacity of principals and provide strategic resourcing (Alberta Education, 2020c). Although the competency of *leading leaning* is not demarcated and clearly overlaps with other SLQS competencies, I believe it is essential that the

practice of developing leadership capacity be recognized as a competency within system leaders' professional practice standards.

System Leaders' Role in Developing Leadership Capacity

System leaders are responsible for building the capacity of principals, teachers, and other system leaders to meet the needs of all students (CAS, 2018a), building capacity at all levels of the district. This makes them accountable for providing instructional leadership (Alberta Education, 2020b). By investing in the development of instructional leadership practices, system leaders influence principal capacity and efficacy (Leithwood et al., 2012). Participants of my study took action to develop school and system leadership capacity by identifying, recruiting, and cultivating quality teachers and leaders; engaging in open, frequent, and purposeful dialogue; and providing learning opportunities at the next level.

Identifying, recruiting, and cultivating quality instructional-learning leaders is critical to developing system capacity towards sustained leadership succession. Drawing upon numerous research claims that leadership is second only to teaching when it comes to influencing student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004; Wahlstrom et al., 2010), senior leaders select, recruit, and professionally equip highly qualified teachers (Maguire, 2003) and principals (Alberta Education, 2020b) to develop and maintain high-performing districts. In my study, senior leader participants talked about how they met with principals to identify master lead teachers as potential candidates for leadership. Collaboratively, participants and principals empowered lead teachers to participate in the district principal preparation program and pursue a master's degree, enhancing teacher leadership skills and credentials. In my findings, Zoe, like many senior leader participants, indicated that potential leadership candidates first receive a performance-based

assessment from their direct supervisor in the form of a rubric, identifying evidence of leadership in relation to the competencies. System leaders also recruit aspiring leaders for the principal preparation program according to district needs to “balance out different divisions, languages, and inclusive education pieces” (Zoe). According to Zoe, the candidates next apply and complete a case study and written reflection screening item. Then qualifying applicants proceed through an interview process led by a committee of system and school leaders. At the end of this rigorous process, approximately 20 successful candidates are selected to participate in the principal preparation program.

Another way that system leaders talked about developing leadership capacity was by providing learning opportunities for principals at the next level—a pathway to system leadership. System leaders worked collaboratively with principals, mentoring them during one-on-one school visits using open, purposeful dialogue to determine where they “sit on the professional growth continuum” (Zoe). Encouraging principal self-reflection of strengths and areas for growth, system leader participants engaged in constructive discourse with principals, together identifying evidence of principal leadership capacity in relation to the LQS competencies and areas for improvement (Zoe, Joey). Just as senior leaders and principals work collaboratively to build teacher leader capacity vertically, effective senior leaders purposefully and intentionally provide school leaders with experiential leadership opportunities at the district level—vertical learning (Barber et al., 2010). For example, senior leader participants made principal learning opportunities available, inviting principals to participate as members of district leadership committees. These opportunities encouraged principals to voice their perspectives and contribute to district decision making. In addition, DDnols and Joey invited principals to join the district

“interviewing team” to recruit aspiring leaders for principalship, “connecting them to see the bigger picture” beyond the school site, broadening their leadership experiences and perspectives about district leadership work, and preparing a pipeline to senior leadership (DDnols).

Interestingly, specific details on succession planning did not emerge from the literature pertaining to Alberta. Implications for succession planning are that when principals are invited more frequently to participate in system leader responsibilities, system leaders can prepare principals more effectively for system leadership. Valuing principals and acknowledging their skills and talents are a significant component of the succession. If system leaders are not intentional about initiating “heart-to-heart conversations” (Joey) with principals to determine their interest in pursuing system leadership positions, succession is less likely to occur. Effective system leaders take responsibility for supporting principals in navigating a pathway to system leadership by intentionally providing learning opportunities, resources, and mentorship in this direction.

System Leaders’ Role in Developing Programs for Principal Preparation and Development

System leaders in high performing districts design, implement, and lead principal preparation and development programs that build principal capacity to impact teaching and learning. Hallmark principal preparation and development programs are informed by research and underpinned by policies. Although multiple pathways to principalship exist, it is critical that aspiring leaders and novice principals participate in district-led, research-informed preparation and development programs with solid structures, relevant content, and rigorous processes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2005; Orr, 2011; Young & Perrone, 2016).

Most system leader participants designed and implemented rigorous principal preparation and development programs that are job-embedded. My findings revealed that not all system leaders found time to lead these important programs, while others, who were actively involved, inspiringly urged their system leader colleagues to contribute (DDnols; Zoe). Although leadership preparation and development programs that occur after work are beneficial, cost efficient, and may be the only option for smaller districts with limited budgets, job-embedded programs are highly supported by research (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, 2010). System leader participants designed district-led leadership programs that ranged from four 2-hour after-school quarterly sessions to 10 full-day monthly sessions, each running the course of 2 years with a designated mentor. While research supports integrating coursework with an internship for highly successful principal preparation programs, district internships were not mentioned by participants. The findings also indicated that aspiring leaders were assigned principal mentors to support their learning journey; however, these mentors had no formal mentorship training.

The curriculum or content of effective principal preparation and development programs is grounded in the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2020a). In designing preparation programs, system leaders promoted content flexibility in responding to varying school/district contexts. Instructional leadership was a primary focus of these programs, alongside learning leadership (transformational and instructional leadership), with the inclusion of leadership management skills. A balance of theory and practice was encouraged to successfully prepare and develop principals and promote school improvement.

System leaders of my study shared that they delivered district-led principal preparation and development programs using a collaborative and rigorous process of problem-solving,

dialogue, and reflection focused on scenarios or case studies. This process of experiential learning or adult learning principles provided leadership practitioners with research-informed learning opportunities to develop and improve instructional-learning leadership practices (Barber et al., Darling Hammond et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2005). System leader participants indicated that they implemented scenario-based learning for principal preparation and development programs to ensure an engaging, relevant, and authentic learning experience.

Most significant were system leaders' objectives to prioritize and sustain district-led principal preparation and development programs. Unfortunately, due to budget cuts and the unprecedented pandemic demands, some system leader participants expressed that there was not enough personnel and time available to design and lead these important principal capacity building programs.

There are several significant implications related to these findings about principal preparation and development. First, system leaders committed to supporting principal preparation and development make every effort to design, implement, and lead robust, rigorous principal leadership programs to build principal competencies. Regrettably, this commitment sometimes falls on the shoulders of one or two system leaders, even though all system leaders likely would benefit from leading these principal leadership programs. Second, without adequate financial and human resources to support leadership programs, these programs are at risk of becoming ineffective and inactive. Third, to sustain quality district-led principal programs, system leaders can implement exemplary program features that reflect a solid structure, relevant content, and rigorous process. Fourth, in an Alberta context, consistent rigorous principal leadership programs across districts build collective capacity. It is critical for system leaders to

invest in aspiring leaders and principals to ensure continued quality teaching and student learning.

System leaders are held accountable for “providing learning opportunities, based on research-informed principles of effective teaching, learning and leadership, to support building the capacity of all members of the school community” (Alberta Education, 2020b, p. 4). Specifically, system leaders are responsible for ensuring aspiring leaders receive effective principal mentorship and opportunities to build competencies that will prepare them for leadership, such as the provision of a trained principal mentor and internship, both confirmed in the literature. Although research indicated the importance of providing aspiring leaders with a rigorous principal preparation program combined with job-embedded learning opportunities, such as working with a trained mentor and completing an internship (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010, Wallace Foundation, 2016), trained mentor principals and aspiring leader internships were not a feature of the participants’ districts. This implies that in the Alberta context, there is room for improvement. By investing in the training of principal mentors and providing internships to aspiring leaders, Alberta districts can continue to prepare and develop exemplary principals, impacting quality teaching and student learning.

System Leader Preparation and Development

Alluded to on one occasion in my study data and rarely found in the literature are references to district-led system leadership programs. While principal preparation and development is the topic of an extensive amount of literature and research, and indeed on the minds of the participants of this study, who were well attuned to its importance and its place of primacy in their districts, there seems to be little evidence of a parallel process of preparation and

development for aspiring system leaders. This is my current dilemma as I make every effort to enter system leadership—the lack of job-embedded learning opportunities to bridge experiences of school and system-level leadership. I argue that there would be benefits to implementing a district-led system leader preparation and development program, as this may further support system instructional-learning leaders in their complex roles and assist in preparing aspiring system leaders in an efficient and appropriate succession plan.

Surprisingly, some participants indicated that at this level of system leadership, tremendous pedagogical knowledge and leadership experience have been achieved, and with current support of available professional learning focused on instructional and learning leadership, further extensive professional learning, such as system leadership development programs, may not be necessary (Zoe, DDnols). Corroborating recent research, Friesen et al. (2021a, 2021b) claim that superintendents and system leaders have a “low level of need” for professional learning in relation to the competencies (2020, p. 53). However, on this point, “further investigation” is needed (2021, p. 53). With limited experiences as a mentee partnered with a formal system leader mentor and minimal mentorship training, system leaders may advocate for a trained formal mentor to support their learning around building principal capacity and understanding mentorship benefits.

Preparing and developing aspiring system leaders ensures effective succession, coherence, and sustainability. The absence of district-led system leadership programs implies that there is no need for this preparation, that financially these programs are challenging to support, that it is believed that preparation happens outside of the district arena, or that this topic

has rarely been broached. I believe the concern for establishing district-led system leadership preparation and development is highly under researched, leaving a gap for further research.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 5 provided a broadly themed depiction of participants' experiences to generate a deep understanding of the phenomenon of senior leaders' perceptions about preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders. Grounded in my research questions, I scaffolded the chapter discussion using key ideas of my conceptual framework. Using an interpretive process, I integrated the findings with research studies, literature, and practice to develop the discussion of this chapter.

In summary, I believe the discussion points presented offer important insights. First, pertaining to learning-focused leadership theories, system leader participants “talk the talk.” That is, they shared a vision of quality teaching and student learning and emphasized growing their own leaders while using common professional discourse attuned to the prevailing literature. The caution in using a common discourse is that this may result in a district with siloed language and siloed knowledge. The perils of using a discourse of “we grow our own leaders” generally excludes external recruitment, potentially impeding opportunities for increased diversity, ingenuity, and innovation.

Second, concerning the core leadership practices, system leaders “walk the talk.” Participants in my study not only knew the current research literature, but they actively implemented core leadership practices to the best of their abilities. Specifically, they modelled a commitment to professional learning, sustained effective instructional leadership, promoted a

school support model, navigated challenges, and embraced opportunities to target learning priorities that ensured school and system improvement.

With a preoccupation towards building principal and system instructional leadership, there is a risk that important aspects of managerial leadership may not be given sufficient attention. Also, with instructional leadership practices that are highly linked to student academic achievement, a focus on outcomes that are easily measured (i.e., student performance through standardized test data, leader performance through SLQS or LQS evidence) may overshadow those that are more complex to measure in a standardized format, such as creativity, innovation, self-confidence, engagement, social-emotional learning, relationship building, growth as a learner, and well-being. Illuminated by participants' implementation of a school support model, I found system leaders using effective instructional leadership practices to build principal capacity. However, this opens potential risk of principal dependency on system leaders.

In relation to system leader participants' challenges that inhibited their ability to walk the talk, that is, enacting leadership practices, I found that they faced obstacles in obtaining effective formal mentors and sustaining robust district-led principal preparation and development due to limited time and resources. Regarding successes in their ability to enact leadership practices, many participants perceived the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to implement innovative technology solutions that fostered collaboration and built collective efficacy.

Regarding accountability, system leader participants are held accountable by the Ministry of Education for supporting the building of principal capacity according to the professional practice standards. Relying upon the SLQS and LQS as frameworks of expectations, participants navigated their own growth and principal preparation and development. Although there are clear

benefits to relying upon the professional practice standards, there is a risk in the degree to which they may standardize practice; that is, professional standards provide a guideline for leadership practice but should not prohibit practitioners' progress by being prescriptive or inflexible. System leader participants are also held accountable for developing leadership capacity in principals, ensuring succession to system leadership by intentionally providing learning opportunities, resources, and mentorship.

Finally, system leader participants designed, implemented, and led principal preparation and development programs to build principal capacity, and to impact teaching and learning based on a solid structure, relevant content, and rigorous process. Although supported by research, working with a trained mentor and completing an internship were not program features of the participants' district-led leadership programs. Furthermore, without adequate financial and human resources to support district-led leadership programs, principal preparation and development programs are at risk of becoming less effective in Alberta, thus possibly having a negative affect on leadership, teaching, and student learning. As well, most surprisingly, there seems to be little evidence of a process, parallel to that of principal preparation and development, for aspiring system leaders. This may be a potential concern for effective succession planning in and across Alberta's school jurisdictions.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this case study was to gain a holistic understanding of senior leaders' perceptions about their practices in preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders in Alberta urban schools. At the outset of the study, I identified a potential problem: principals may not be prepared as instructional and learning leaders, requiring sustained, relevant professional learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Lashway, 2003a; Shelton, 2012). Given that school and system leadership practices significantly impact teaching and learning, there was a need for greater insight into how senior leaders relied upon formalized professional practice standards, how they participated in less formalized approaches, and how they sustained learning opportunities to prepare, develop, and support principal instructional-learning leaders.

Outlined in this section is a brief overview of the dissertation chapters. The background and context of the inquiry was presented in Chapter 1. I identified the research gap or problem: principals may not be prepared as instructional and learning leaders. On further investigation, I learned that the significance of senior leaders' role in and their perceptions about preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders was an under-researched topic. Thus, the purpose of the study was to link theory to specific leadership practices that senior leaders believe will improve instructional and learning leadership. As a constructivist researcher subscribing closely to Merriam's (1988, 1998) conceptualization of case study, I explored the bounded social phenomenon of senior leaders' perceptions about their practices for preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders. A brief overview of the research

design, researcher, and researcher assumptions were shared. Finally, the rationale and significance of the study were underscored, ending with key terminology.

In Chapter 2, I presented a review of the literature centered on three main areas: school and system leadership, principal preparation and development, and system leaders' supports and challenges in building principal capacity. In response to supporting principal instructional and learning leaders, system leaders' roles evolved from a managerial to a learning imperative. School and system leadership have been linked to school improvement and student achievement (Brandon et al., 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood 2008; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters et al., 2003), specifically through practices of instructional, student-centered, learning, and distributed leadership. Implementing specific learning-focused core leadership practices (Leithwood et al., 2008), system and school leaders impact teaching and learning. System leaders are held accountable for building principal capacity by providing district-led leadership programs, ongoing professional learning, and district-university partnerships. Responsible for designing, implementing, and leading district-led leadership programs with an emphasis on instructional leadership and grounded in the professional practice standard, system leaders support principals to develop competencies to meet targeted school and district data-driven learning priorities. To support system leaders in their complex, evolving roles for building principal capacity, system leaders rely upon professional practice standards, collaborative organizational structures, mentorship programs, mentorship training, and informal mentors. Finally, barriers exist that impact system leaders' abilities to prepare and develop principals: principal mobility, inconsistencies of principal preparation program completion,

disparity in leadership programs and professional learning opportunities, and inconsistency in enacting professional practice standards.

Chapter 2 culminated in the conceptual framework of my study (see Figure 1). It depicts relationships among the key concepts gleaned from the literature and research that I reviewed over the course of several years. At all points of the study process, the conceptual framework helped me to maintain coherence among my research questions, methods, data analysis, and interpretation of the findings of the study.

In Chapter 3, I described the methodology and methods of my study, outlining the components of the research process. I used a qualitative case study as a methodology that was commensurable with my ontological and epistemological stance and that cohered with the research problem, purpose, and three key research questions. I explained my data collection methods of interviews and document reviews, and I elucidated details of the research design, ethical considerations, and limitations and delimitations.

Through a recursive analysis of the data generated from semi-structured interviews of seven system leaders across three school districts, themes emerged. Guided by the themes, findings were identified through attention focused on key research questions, as presented in Chapter 4. I provided an overview of the findings generated from participants' lived experiences in relation to six themes (See Table 2, Data Findings and Emergent Themes). Drawing from the first theme—system leaders understood their shifting role in supporting principals as instructional and learning leaders—I identified the finding that system leaders' shift in practice ensures that principal instructional-learning leaders supported quality teaching. Two findings connected to the second theme—system leaders build principal capacity through mentoring,

modelling, supervising, and evaluating—became evident. First, system leaders built relationships of support and trust to enhance learning and improve professional practices. Second, system leaders supervised and evaluated to build principal instructional-learning leadership. In relation to the third theme—system leaders aligned practices, policies, and procedures system-wide with district learning priorities—three findings were identified: system leaders developed system-wide data-driven learning priorities; system leaders supported instructional-learning leaders to understand and implement the TQS and LQS policies; and system leaders aligned procedures and structure system wide. Associated with the fourth theme—system leaders promote district-led principal preparation and development programs—I identified the finding that system leaders designed, implemented, and led principal programs that build principal capacity as instructional-learning leaders. In connection with the fifth theme—system leaders equip themselves and each other as instructional-learning leaders to prepare and develop principal instructional-learning leaders—I identified the finding that system leaders relied upon professional practice standards and engaged in professional learning communities, mentoring, and networking. Finally, in relation to the sixth theme—system leaders ensure successes and navigate challenges in preparing and developing principal instructional-learning leaders—I identified the finding that system leaders created conditions that successfully supported principal instructional-learning leaders and adapted to challenges.

In Chapter 5, I integrated the findings of Chapter 4 with relevant literature and research using a nonlinear “layered synthesis” process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 243). I scaffolded the discussion using the key concepts of my conceptual framework. The discussion points presented were as follows: System leaders talked the talk and walked the talk; that is, system

instructional-learning leaders used a prevailing discourse of leadership literature and enacted learning-focused core leadership practices to build principal capacity that impacts teaching and student learning. Attuned with the current leadership literature, system leaders used a common discourse to ensure a shared vision centered on quality teaching and a strong and clear focus on student learning, alongside the pressure to grow their own leaders. There may be some risks, though, in talking the talk as prescribed by the prevailing discourse of the literature: a district has the potential to become entrenched within the same discourse, which may lead to an exclusion of innovative ideas or practices. As well, the discourse of growing one's own leaders may have unintended effects of excluding diversity, ingenuity, and innovation, and becoming a closed system.

Similarly, walking the talk or implementing leadership practices as prescribed by the current professional literature may be problematic. A preoccupation with building school and system instructional-learning leadership may neglect managerial leadership. Also, if the conception of instructional leadership is tied so closely to student academic achievement, this may result in relying on outcomes that are easily measured rather than unstandardized outcomes of creativity and innovation and student well-being. While a reliance on the SLQS or LQS professional practice standards is highly beneficial, it may be problematic if these practice standards are used as rigid indicators or as a mere checklist by which to assess leader performance.

The concern remains about the degree to which standards standardize practices. The discussion highlights system leaders' innovative development of support structures that effectively build principal capacity, but I caution against enabling school leaders too much; it is

essential to strike a balance. System leaders' actions to implement core leadership practices are also impeded by challenges, such as finding an effective formal mentor or of sustaining robust district-led principal preparation and development programs with limited time and resources. Finally, the discussion underscores that there is little evidence of a process for aspiring system leaders that is parallel to that of preparation and development of principals. By gaining a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences and taking an accurate account of their narratives through plausible interpretations, this case study contributes to the larger body of knowledge aimed at improving system instructional and learning leadership practices.

This final chapter re-examines researcher assumptions. I also offer recommendations to educational leaders, post-secondary institutions, and policy makers for the practical implementation of principal preparation and development that has the potential to improve professional leadership practices, instructional practices, and ultimately, student learning. The chapter concludes with suggestions for further research.

Researcher Assumptions Revisited

At the beginning of this case study, I identified several assumptions. Reflecting on the research process provides an opportunity to revisit these. First, I assumed that senior leaders would be eager to participate in this study, which aimed to improve school and system leadership practices that impact quality teaching and student learning. Although the seven participants were generally eager and excited to participate, I found it challenging to recruit participants. One unprecedented obstacle in the recruitment process was the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This unexpected occurrence halted district research application review processes, leaving my submitted applications sitting idle for months. Some districts required 11 months to

process applications, only to find the district unable to participate due to the numerous research studies in their queue. Later, upon a review of the application, some districts required revisions to replace in-person interviews with virtual ones. Because of the pandemic's effect on K-12 education, many system leaders were overwhelmed with the implementation of government protocols to mitigate COVID-19 spikes, shifting their focus to student and staff safety and wellness. As a result, in some cases, district committees may have approved the research application, but personnel were unable to commit to research, feeling inundated, exhausted, or unwell.

Second, I assumed that senior leaders have had recent opportunities to work directly or indirectly with principals. This was primarily the case; however, some system leaders are not responsible for designing, leading, or participating in principal preparation and development programs, nor can they regularly meet with principals at the school site. All participants were eager to access the research findings and have requested a copy of the research study. I am optimistic that educational researchers, educators, and leadership practitioners will be interested in this research inquiry, particularly with the lessons learned, recommendations for practical implementation of school and system instructional-learning leadership practices, and principal preparation and development initiatives that impact system coherence.

As well, I assumed that I could maintain my independence as a researcher, since I had no direct reporting relationship nor any conflict of interest with participants. I believe this was an accurate assumption. Participants shared their lived experiences very openly, and I believe that, even in a 2-hour online interview, we developed a rapport. However, forming a *trusting*

relationship under such limited circumstances was a lot to expect, so I understand that participants may have been cautious or hesitant to share fully.

Furthermore, I assumed that my epistemological stance, methodology, and research design would be appropriate for addressing the research problem, purpose, and questions I originally identified to guide my study. I believe this was an accurate assumption. By implementing a qualitative research approach and case study methodology (Merriam, 1988, 1998), I constructed knowledge, drawing from the perceptions of participants' lived experiences and my interpretations of their narratives in a process of making meaning. Data generated through semi-structured interviews, along with document reviews, deepened my understanding of senior leaders' practices in building principal instructional-learning leadership capacity. I listened intently to the participants' multiple perspectives and used a recursive process to analyze, interpret, and construct new meaning for the presentation and discussion of findings.

Finally, I made an accurate assumption about the influences of my background and professional leadership experiences. Specifically, I focused on keeping an open mind to the currently prevailing leadership practices, although I had previously witnessed managerial leadership as a K-12 student and had worked as a principal in an educational context wherein system leaders had a greater managerial than instructional role. These assumptions were disclosed in the self-reflexive notes of interpretive memos and my researcher journal, in which I had written, "I recognize that my background and leadership experiences may or may not be similar to the participants' lived experiences."

Recommendations

Based on the findings, discussion, and conclusion of this study, I humbly offer the following recommendations. These recommendations for practical application may be of value and significance to educational leaders, those in post-secondary institutions that offer K-12 leadership certificate or degree programs, and policy makers. The recommendations are presented with the hope that they may contribute to improving the work that system leaders do in the service of principal preparation and development.

System or District Leaders

The following five recommendations are for system leaders. First, consistent with Theme 3, Finding 3.3, and as discussed in Chapter 5 under the heading “System Leaders ‘Walk the Talk’—Promoting a School Support Model,” which emphasized an alignment of structures, I recommend that, where necessary, system leaders across Alberta restructure/redesign their organizations to facilitate system-school leader collaborations that build principal capacity and collective capacity towards district, school, and student improvement. For example, by implementing a school support model, a unique organizational innovation that emphasizes a mentor-mentee relationship between system leader and principal respectively, system leaders can leverage instructional-learning leadership practices to develop principal leadership competencies that indirectly impact student learning. Strong districts redesign their organization to achieve positive conditions and processes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2005; Huber, 2004, Leithwood & Louis, 2012, Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010; Robinson, 2011; Wahlstrom et al., 2010). Achieving district coherence on goals, procedures, and structures is necessary for supporting, preparing, and developing principals as instructional-learning leaders

(Leithwood et al., 2004). System instructional-learning leaders work alongside principals with a focus on curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices (Hallinger, 2005; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011). By leveraging technology through virtual meetings, system leaders can engage in collaborative practices more frequently with school leaders, thus fostering relationships and encouraging reciprocal learning (Sharpe & Nishimura, 2017).

Second, consistent with Theme 4, Finding 4, and as discussed in Chapter 5 under the heading “System Leaders ‘Walk the Talk’—Challenges,” system leaders, where necessary, are encouraged to strategically resource, fund, and sustain job-embedded, district-led principal preparation and development programs. Specifically, I recommend system leaders design, implement, and lead principal leadership programs grounded in the professional practice standards and coupled with relevant learning to meet principals’ needs within the unique context of their school and school jurisdiction (Wallace Foundation, 2016). One significant insight garnered from system leader participants was their concerns about reductions to the human resources that support rigorous principal preparation and development programs due to budgetary cuts. The principal instructional-learning leader is pivotal in directly influencing teacher quality and indirectly impacts student learning (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011). My research clearly concurs with literature that emphasized the need to prioritize principal preparation and development when developing district policies and procedures (Davis et al., 2005, Wallace Foundation, 2016). This means not only safeguarding job-embedded principal leadership programs but also ensuring that credentialing and qualification programs offered through post-secondary institutions and professional learning organizations do not replace highly beneficial district-led principal preparation and development programs. These

programs should be offered in conjunction with one another, as complementary, to augment principal professional learning by bridging theory and practice.

Third, consistent with Theme 5, Theme 2, Finding 2.1, and as discussed in Chapter 5 under the heading “Principal Preparation and Development,” which highlighted mentoring, I recommend system leaders participate in mentorship training/mentor-coach training. The skills and knowledge attained through such opportunities result in benefits to both mentor and mentee in establishing a trusting, professional relationship that involves reciprocal learning (Sharpe & Nishimura, 2017). Participants of my study shared insights that are reflected in the literature about leadership preparation and development: Robust induction programs that include mentorship and mentor training influence novice leaders’ efficacy, reduce isolation (Bush, 2018), encourage reflective practices, and support the mentee to take ownership of their learning (Daresh, 2004; Getty et al., 2010; Gettys, 2007; Sharpe & Nishimura, 2017), and build collective capacity to impact student learning, particularly when focused on instructional and learning leadership (Cordingley & Bell, 2012; Sharpe & Nishimura, 2017).

Fourth, consonant with Theme 5, Finding 5, and as discussed in Chapter 5 under the heading “Principal Preparation and Development,” I offer a recommendation to design and implement a district-led system leader preparation and development program to further support system instructional-learning leaders in their complex roles and assist in preparing aspiring system leaders for efficient succession. From what I have learned through this research, it seems that district-led system leadership programs paralleling district-led principal leadership programs do not currently exist. By preparing and developing aspiring and system leaders, Superintendents

of Schools can ensure effective succession, coherence, and sustainability within the school jurisdiction.

Fifth, in relation to Theme 3, Findings 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3, and as discussed in Chapter 5 under the headings “System Leaders ‘Talk the Talk’—A Shared Vision and Common Professional Discourse,” “System Leaders ‘Talk the Talk’—We Grow Our Own Leaders,” and “System Leaders ‘Walk the Talk’—Sustaining Effective Instructional Leadership,” I make a weighty recommendation. There may be potential risks when system leaders “talk the talk” and “walk the walk”, as prescribed by the prevailing discourses of leadership literature and of the standards of practice, the SLQS and LQS. First, perils may exist regarding content saturation or the entrenchment of a dominating professional discourse in relation to prescribed leadership literature; this may lead to insular ideas or a closed system of “growing” and hiring “our own leaders.” I offer a recommendation to reach out beyond the common, circulated literature and to consider new ideas. As well, I recommend expanding recruitment beyond the district to cultivate and reflect the diversity represented in student populations. Second, there is concern with the conception of instructional leadership that is so closely connected to student academic achievement. An overemphasis on instructional leadership may lead to a reliance on outcomes that are easily measured; that is, student performance measured through standardized test data and leader performance measured through SLQS or LQS may be too rigid. There is a potential risk for collecting data that does not holistically represent students, aspiring leaders, and leaders. I recommend that system leaders look for less conventional ways of measuring student/staff performance by incorporating targeted student/staff well-being goals and formative assessment that emphasizes student/staff growth, as there is a positive association between well-being and

academics (Clarke, 2020; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022). I also recommend promoting the professional agency of leaders to add or modify indicators within the professional practice standard, to allow for flexibility when measuring leadership performance and using the SLQS and LQS as guidelines that frame exemplary leadership practices.

Post-Secondary Institutions

A recommendation to university leaders that encompasses Theme 6 and Finding 6 highlights the significance of building relationships to enhance professional practices and leadership programs. I propose a recommendation to bring greater equity of opportunity for learning across the province in relation to arrangements that, for example, support the implementation of district-university partnerships. System leader participants had varying degrees of success partnering with universities, ranging from minimal contact regarding entrance qualifications to full participation in collaborative research, survey creation, and joint programs to improve professional practices. Strong district-university partnerships bolster collaborative preparation, development, and certification of leaders (Anderson et al., 2018; Wallace Foundation, 2016). This could include establishing partnerships in research, engaging in joint curriculum planning for certificate and masters and doctoral programming, and/or instituting a leadership internship/practicum. Districts benefit from participating in university-led research-informed practices; universities benefit from access to districts to conduct research or to provide internships for graduate education students. This arrangement represents a symbiotic relationship that authentically bridges theory and practice to support system leaders in preparing and developing principals.

Educational Policy Makers

Finally, I have one recommendation for Alberta Ministry of Education policy makers and CASS leaders that is consonant with the literature (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, 2010; Wallace Foundation, 2016) and discussed in Chapter 5 under the heading “Principal Preparation and Development.” Although there are multiple pathways to leadership, the varying levels of program rigor are problematic, and policies guiding these programs may need to be refined to ensure all principals experience robust preparation and development. Policy makers can establish and implement guidelines for district-led preparation and development programs to ensure coherence across Alberta, using exemplary program features that also provide flexibility for creativity and innovation to meet the needs of schools and districts within their unique contexts (Wallace Foundation, 2016). Co-constructing flexible program guidelines, success criteria, innovative practice strategies, and shared resources for district-led principal programs are just a few ideas that may enhance support for system leaders as they prepare and develop principal instructional and learning leaders.

Recommendations for Further Research

During this research journey, I considered several topics worthy of further research. I recommend continued exploration of system leaders’ roles in preparing and developing principals, as this is an under researched area. For my study, I was able to recruit seven participants. To provide a broader contextualization and a more holistic understanding of system leader practices as instructional and learning leaders building principal capacity, further research is required, including a greater number of system leader participants from both urban and rural districts across Alberta. As well, further research that examines system instructional-learning

leadership practices with system leaders in Ontario would be most compelling, as Ontario, too, has comprehensive leadership programs. This may lead to a collaboration among provinces across Canada, heightening the equity of learning opportunities for all educational leaders through increased networking, strategic resourcing, shared experiences, and innovative solutions.

Based on the findings of my study, I also recommend further research on implemented school support models to determine if system leadership practices impact principal efficacy.

Concluding Remarks

My dissertation journey began in 2016. I was elated to be on this learning path at Werklund School of Education, having waited for over 20 years to pursue my dream of attaining a doctoral degree. I was also humbled by the words and actions of all those who graciously shared their knowledge, time, and expertise to support me. The learning-focused discourse was engaging and challenged me to think critically and to analyze leadership theories, research-informed leadership practices, and the impact that educational leaders have on students. My selected research topic focused on school leadership and then expanded to encompass system leaders and their work in preparing and developing principals as instructional-learning leaders. I realized that researching this juncture between school and system leadership could contribute to the knowledge base, as it is an under researched area. Through the recommendations I have offered in this chapter, I hope to impact leading, teaching, and learning.

This long and arduous journey towards the completion of a dissertation required commitment, dedication, determination, patience, and resiliency, particularly during a pandemic. During these unprecedented and uncertain times, I was impelled to embrace a change mindset, to look at challenges as opportunities for learning. The rigorous processes of robust learning have

deepened my understanding in ways that allow me to think differently, using a broader lens with greater goals for future contributions. I believe that these transformational processes with emotional highs and overwhelming lows, built character: humility, vulnerability, strength, and gratitude. I feel compelled to embrace new opportunities to serve others and am reminded of those most precious—God, family, and friends. I feel I am now more empowered with the agency to make a difference in my leadership career in K-12 education. My mind is overflowing, my heart fulfilled, and my dreams have only just begun.

In closing, my hope is that this research provides a catalyst for critical conversations that will ignite deep learning and transform leadership practices for continuous school and system improvement. It is with great gratitude that I extend my sincerest appreciation to research participants who selflessly gave of their time, during the pressing demands of the pandemic, to share understandings, insights, and experiences of their leadership practices. Thank you for your many helpful and insightful contributions.

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Appendix A: Research Questions and Interview Questions

	Interview Questions	Type of Interview Question	Research Questions		
			#1	#2	#3
		Hypothetical (H) Ideal Position (IP) Devil's Advocate (D) Interpretive (I) Knowledge (K)	What are senior leaders' perceptions about how they prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders in Alberta urban schools?	What supports exist in Alberta for senior leaders to prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders?	What are some of the successes and challenges in preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders?
1.	What is the role of a principal as an instructional leader? Can you provide some specific examples of what a school principal does as an instructional leader?	(K) (I)	✓		
2.	What is the role of a principal as a learning leader? What are some specific examples of how a school principal leads learning?	(K) (I)	✓		
3.	Follow-up Question: How do you feel that this role has changed over the past 10 years?	(I)	✓		
4.	Follow-up Question:	(I)	✓		

	Interview Questions	Type of Interview Question	Research Questions		
	How important is the role of a principal as an instructional leader? Why is this role important?	(I)			
5.	Follow-up Question: In your experience, how has the principal as an instructional and learning leader impacted teacher quality and student achievement?	(I)	✓		
6.	Follow-up Question: Some principals would say that they are not confident as instructional leaders to lead learning. What are some specific actions that might assist their success as instructional leaders that lead learning?	(DA) (I)	✓		
7.	Do you feel principals are prepared for their role as instructional leaders that lead learning? In what way are they prepared or	(I) (I)	✓		

	Interview Questions	Type of Interview Question	Research Questions		
	not prepared? Please provide specific examples.				
8.	What actions do you take to prepare principals as instructional leaders to lead learning?	(I)	✓		
9.	What actions do you take to develop novice principals as instructional and learning leaders in their first two years?	(I)	✓		
10.	What occurs in your district to prepare and develop school principals as instructional leaders to lead learning?	(K)	✓		
11.	Follow-up Question: If you were an aspiring leader pursuing principalship, what professional learning would you want and need to be a successful instructional and learning leader? How could senior leaders support you on your principal pathway?	(IP) (IP) (IP)	✓		

	Interview Questions	Type of Interview Question	Research Questions		
	What might this look like?				
12.	What processes are currently in place in your district to support you in preparing school principals as instructional and learning leaders? Can you provide a specific example of this?	(K)		✓	
13.	Follow-up Question: How are other districts and institutions in Alberta supporting senior leaders to prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders?	(I)		✓	
14.	How are the newly formalized professional practice standards (LQS and SLQS) able to assist senior leaders in preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders? (LQS D6 Providing Instructional Leadership and	(I)		✓	

	Interview Questions	Type of Interview Question	Research Questions		
	SLQS D4 Leading Learning).				
15.	Follow-up Question: How can senior leaders support principal preparation and development to ensure that “students have access to quality teaching experiences that enable their achievement of the learning outcomes outlined in the programs of study” (Alberta Education, 2020a, p. 1)	(I)		✓	
16.	Follow-up Question: How can expected principal instructional leadership competencies and standards of practice be understood and implemented?	(I)		✓	
17.	From your experience, what are some of the successes in preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders?	(I)			✓

	Interview Questions	Type of Interview Question	Research Questions		
18.	From your experience, what are some of the challenges in preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders? Can you provide specific examples?	(I)			✓
19.	Follow-up Question: If you were asked to create a principal preparation program, what would that ideal program look like?	(H)			✓
20.	In your opinion, how can current principal preparation be improved for principals to be successful as instructional and learning leaders?	(I)			✓
21.	How can Superintendents and other senior leaders support principals in their development as instructional leaders?	(I)			✓
22.	Follow-up Question: How can principal preparation and development	(I)			✓

	Interview Questions	Type of Interview Question	Research Questions		
	programs influence quality teaching and student achievement?				
23.	Is there anything else that you would like to add to our discussion regarding the preparation and development of principals in their role as instructional and learning leaders?	(I)			✓
24.	Are there any documents or artifacts that you would like to share that would assist me in gaining a deeper understanding of your insights in preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning?				✓

Source: Adapted from Strauss, Schatzman, Bucher, and Sabshin (1981) typology of questions, Patton (2015), and Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) matrix of questions template.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Key Research Questions

- A. What are senior leaders' perceptions about how they prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders in Alberta urban schools?
- B. What supports exist in Albert for senior leaders to prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders?
- C. What are some of the successes and challenges in preparing and developing school principals as instructional and learning leaders?

Key Terminology

Instructional leadership: Leadership practices that focus on student learning and quality teaching such as implementing curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Learning Leadership: Leadership practices that focus on student learning and quality teaching, and in addition, highlight building staff capacity by distributing leadership practices.

Professional Background Information

Tell me about your professional background (career roles, years of experience, credentials)?

Tell me about your current role in the district?

How many years have you been in this role?

How did you prepare and develop your instruction and learning leadership practices?

Probing questions: *Do you attribute this to graduate or district programs, district mentorship, peer-mentorship, conferences, external training, lived experience, networking, etc.?*

What other educational roles have you held in this district or other districts?

Tell me about your teaching experience in the system and the number of years?

Tell me about your principalship experience in the system and the number of years?

Interview Questions: The follow-up questions are possible interview questions for Round #2 depending on the participant responses to interview Round #1, as this is an iterative and evolving process.

Key Question A: What are senior leaders' perceptions about how they prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders in Alberta urban schools?

1. What is the role of a principal as an instructional leader? Can you provide some specific examples of what a school principal does as an instructional leader?
2. What is the role of a principal as a learning leader? What are some specific examples of how a school principal leads learning?
3. **Follow-up Question:** How do you feel the role of a principal as an instructional and learning leader has changed over the past 10 years?
4. **Follow-up Question:** How important is the role of a principal as an instructional and learning leader? Why are these roles important?
5. **Follow-up Question:** In your experience, how has the principal as an instructional and learning leader impacted teacher quality and student achievement?
6. **Follow-up Question:** Some principals would say that they are not confident as instructional leaders to lead learning. What are some specific actions that might assist their success as instructional leaders that lead learning?
7. Do you feel principals are prepared for their role as instructional leaders that lead learning? In what way are they prepared or not prepared? Please provide specific examples.

8. What actions do you take to prepare principals as instructional and learning leaders?
9. What actions do you take to develop novice principals as instructional and learning leaders in their first two years?
10. What occurs in your district to prepare and develop school principals as instructional leaders to lead learning?
11. **Follow-up Question:** If you were an aspiring leader pursuing principalship, what professional learning would you want and need to be a successful instructional and learning leader? How could senior leaders support you on your principal pathway? What might this look like?

Key Question B: What supports exist in Alberta for senior leaders to prepare and develop school principals as instructional leaders?

12. What processes are currently in place in your district to support you in preparing school principals as instructional and learning leaders? Can you provide some examples of this?
13. **Follow-up Question:** How are other districts and institutions in Alberta supporting senior leaders to prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders?
14. How are the newly formalized professional practice standards (LQS and SLQS) able to assist senior leaders in preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders? (LQS D6 Providing Instructional Leadership and SLQS D4 Leading Learning).
15. **Follow-up Question:** How can senior leaders support principal preparation and development to ensure that “students have ongoing access to quality teaching and learning opportunities to meet the provincial goals of education”? (Alberta Education, 2020b).

16. **Follow-up Question:** How can expected principal instructional leadership competencies and standards of practice be understood and implemented?

Key Question C: What are some of the successes and challenges in preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders?

17. From your experience, what are some of the successes in preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders? Can you provide some specific examples?

18. From your experience, what are some of the challenges in preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders? Can you provide some specific examples?

19. **Follow-up Question:** If you were asked to create a principal preparation program, what would that ideal program look like?

20. In your opinion, how can current principal preparation be improved for principals to be successful as instructional and learning leaders?

21. How can Superintendents and other senior leaders enhance support for novice principals in their development as instructional and learning leaders?

22. **Follow-up Question:** How can principal preparation and development programs influence quality teaching and student achievement?

23. Is there anything else that you would like to add to our discussion regarding the preparation and development of principals in their role as instructional and learning leaders?

24. Are there any documents or artifacts that you would like to share that would assist me in gaining a deeper understanding of your insights in preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning?

Appendix C: Individual Interview Protocol

Interview Materials:

- Audio recording device and back up recording device
- Charging cords for recording devices and an extension cord
- Researcher journal and two pens to record participant gestures
- Documents of the Consent Form, Individual Interview Protocol, and Interview Questions (2 copies)
- Copy of previously signed Consent Form if participant has emailed this in advance

Pre-Interview Protocol:

- Call participant the day before the interview to ensure a quiet space and verify the meeting start and end time (60 minutes, but account for an additional 10 minutes for possible closure)
- Arrive 10-15 minutes before the interview to set up materials
- Concisely review the research study and the purpose of the inquiry with the participant
- Review the Consent Form emphasizing voluntary, anonymous and confidential participation with the option to discontinue at any time
- If a signed copy the Consent Form has been emailed to me prior to the meeting, provide the participant with a copy of the form, which now includes my signature. If a signed copy of the Consent Form has not been emailed to me prior to the meeting, have the participant sign two copies (participant's copy and researcher's copy) and give the participant his or her copy of the Consent Form to keep.

Interview Protocol

- Inform the participant that he/she may ask questions at any time during the interview to assist in providing clarity and probe for understanding
- Remind participant of the time frame allotted (60 minutes plus 10 minutes for closure)
- Remind participant of the audio recording in place
- Inform participant that notes will be recorded to assist in the inquiry process

Interview Script:

Date of Interview: _____

Good morning/afternoon/evening _____. My name is Melanie Mazurek, Doctor of Education student from the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Calgary. I really appreciate you taking time from your busy schedule to meet with me today to participate in this research study that has the potential to advance the knowledge in principal preparation and development practices. As a researcher, I am very interested in your perspectives and value your insights. My main purpose is to learn from you and try to gain a better understanding of your insights on how to prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders.

Before we begin the interview, I would like to review the Consent Form that was emailed to you earlier and highlight some important items to ensure clarity. Please note that your participation is voluntary, and you may discontinue the research study at any time up until the analysis of the data begins. As well, you may choose to remain anonymous by selecting a pseudonym. Confidentiality will be strictly maintained, as my supervisor and I will be the only individuals with access to the data collected. All data will remain secured in a locked area and digital data will be encrypted. This is the first of two interviews that will be conducted. Today's interview will be approximately one hour. I will be using an audio recording device and written

notes to assist in accurately capturing your perceptions. The recorded interview will be transcribed, and the transcript returned to you for your review to make any revisions or suggestions. Your input in capturing your thoughts and ideas accurately are important, as your opinions are valued. Once your revisions are made and returned to me, this will indicate that you want to continue to participate in the research study.

Do you have any questions? If you agree to these terms, please complete and sign the two copies (The forms are completed and signed with one copy to be kept with the participant and one copy to remain in my secured files).

Once again, by sharing your insights and experiences, my hope is to gain a deeper understanding of how best to prepare and develop principals as instructional leaders to lead learning. Please feel free to ask questions at any time, as I would encourage this interview to feel more like a conversation.

Interview commences.

Post Interview:

The interview will be transcribed and returned to you by email in one week for your review to make any additions, revisions or suggestions. I will send this with a read receipt to assist me in reassuring that you have received this transcript. You will have one week to provide any revisions. If after a week I have not received your feedback, I will assume that the transcript is accurate. I recommend that a personal email be used, as all information sent through a work email is proprietary ownership of the organization.

You may choose to discontinue participation at any time prior to my analysis of the data, which will begin once your feedback on the transcript is returned to me. If you choose to

discontinue, all your data will be destroyed for confidentiality purposes and not included in the research study.

Thank you for taking the time to share your insights, experiences, and expertise. The information shared today will assist me to better understand how to prepare and develop principals in their role as instructional and learning leaders, and potentially make recommendations to educators, practitioners, and policy makers for the improvement of practices in principal preparation.

Confirmation of Information:

Participant email: _____

Participant preferred contact number: _____

Participant pseudonym: _____

Transcript date provided to participant: _____

Requested date of revised transcript: _____

Final date to discontinue participation: _____

Date and location of next interview: _____

Yes, I would like to have a copy of the final report upon its completion: _____

Appendix D: Initial Participant Email Contact

Good morning _____,

I am a Doctoral student at the University of Calgary initiating a study which may be of interest and value to you. This study focuses on senior leaders' perceptions about preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders. Under the guidance of my supervisor, Dr. Brenda Spencer, I hope to gather information that will allow me to make recommendations to educators, practitioners, and policy makers for the practical implementation of principal preparation and development.

Participation in this research is voluntary and participants can withdraw at any time up until the data of the study, in its entirety, is compiled. If you would like to participate, please review the attached Letter of Information for Superintendent and Letter of Information for Participants outlining the research study and the participation commitments, and the attached Consent Form. Also, please complete and sign, and, using a personal email account (not your work account), return the Consent Form at your earliest convenience to: Melanie.Mazurek@ucalgary.ca

If you choose to participate, please feel free to come to the interview with artifacts or items that could assist you in sharing your experiences and perceptions.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Melanie

Melanie Mazurek, B.Ed., M.Ed., M.R.E.
EdD Candidate
Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary
Melanie.Mazurek@ucalgary.ca

Appendix E: Letter of Information for Superintendent



WERKLUND SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Graduate Division of Educational Research
2500 University Drive NW
Calgary, AB, Canada T2N 1N4
ucalgary.ca

Date: TBA
Superintendent
School Division
Address
City, Postal Code
COUNTRY

Re: Senior leaders' perceptions about preparing and developing Alberta's principals as instructional and learning leaders

Dear _____,

Thank you for considering the participation of district senior leaders (superintendent, deputy superintendent, associate superintendent, assistant superintendent, and system education leaders) in this university research study focused on preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders. Senior leaders' insights will contribute to the knowledge base about district and school leadership practices that prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders. Working under the supervision of Dr. Brenda Spencer, the collection and analysis of the data will assist me in the fulfillment of degree requirements for a Doctorate in Education: Senior Leadership K-12. My rationale for conducting the study is to gain a greater understanding of the topic and to potentially make recommendations to educators, practitioners, and policy makers for the practical implementation of initiatives for principal preparation and development.

I am extending an invitation to participate in the study to you, superintendent, and/or your senior leaders (deputy superintendent, associate superintendents, assistant superintendents, and system education leaders) which will include three urban school districts. Participant involvement will consist of two semi-structured interviews, either face-to-face, by phone, or through Skype. The interviews will be scheduled at mutually agreed upon times and locations. As I recognize that senior leader time is valuable, each interview will be approximately one hour in length and the interview questions will be emailed to the participant in advance. Additional questions may be asked during the interview for clarification and understanding. The interview questions will draw on participant's perspectives and professional educational leadership experiences on how to prepare principals for instructional leadership and to lead learning. During the semi-structured interviews, an audio recording as well as detailed notes will be taken. To ensure that the participant's ideas are accurately represented and conveyed in the transcribed interviews, I will send a copy of the transcripts to the participant to review and

make any modifications (additions or deletions) or add comments to the transcript within one week of receipt. The revised version can be kindly forwarded to me by email at Melanie.Mazuzrek@ucalgary.ca

For the purpose of maintaining strict confidentiality and to safeguard entrusted information, all digitally collected data will be encrypted and computer password protected, and all hard copy or hand-written documents will be stored in a secured location. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the data. To protect participant anonymity throughout the study and in the dissertation and any publications related to the research, a pseudonym will be used instead of the participant's name and to replace any other identifying information, such as the name of a site or location.

Please note that as researcher, I will not be judging senior leaders or evaluating their responses, but merely collecting data to gain a greater understanding of the topic. Senior leader participation in this study would be much appreciated but are under no obligation to be involved. If senior leaders volunteer, they may withdraw at any time prior to the analysis of the data in its entirety, which will commence two weeks after the second interview. If a participant chooses to withdraw, please note that all of the participant's contributions will be removed and destroyed to protect the individual's privacy.

More detailed information regarding the study will be made available if you and/or your senior leaders are interested in participating. If you have any questions regarding the research study, I would be happy to address these. Once the research study has concluded, a final copy of the dissertation will be provided to you and/or participating senior leaders upon request. In addition, all data that has been collected for this study will be destroyed after five years.

This research study has been approved by the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board of the University of Calgary and that of your district. If you have any questions regarding the process or research study, please feel free to contact me at Melanie.Mazurek@ucalgary.ca. Alternatively, you may contact my research supervisor, Dr. Brenda Spencer, at (403) 220-6097 or spencerb@ucalgary.ca.

If you and/or your district senior leaders decide to participate, please complete and return the attached Consent Form. To ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality, please return the Consent Form to me using an email account that is not your work email account. I will then follow up with you using this personal email address to arrange interview times and locations.

Thank you for considering your participation and that of your district senior leaders in this research study to gain a greater understanding of senior leaders' perceptions about preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders.

Sincerely,

Melanie Mazurek, EdD Candidate

Werklund School of Education,
University of Calgary
Melanie.Mazurek@ucalgary.ca

Appendix F: Letter of Information for Participants



WERKLUND SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Graduate Division of Educational Research
2500 University Drive NW
Calgary, AB, Canada T2N 1N4
ucalgary.ca

Date: TBA
Superintendent/Deputy Superintendent/Assistant Superintendent/Associate
Superintendent/System Education Leaders
School Division
Address
City, Postal Code
CANADA

Re: Senior leaders' perceptions about preparing and developing Alberta's principals as instructional and learning leaders

Dear _____,

Thank you for considering being a participant in this university research study focused on preparing and developing principals as instructional and learning leaders. Your insights will contribute to the knowledge base about district and school leadership practices that prepare and develop principals as instructional and learning leaders. Working under the supervision of Dr. Brenda Spencer, the collection and analysis of the data will assist me in the fulfillment of degree requirements for a Doctorate in Education: Senior Leadership K-12. My rationale for conducting the study is to gain a greater understanding of the topic and to potentially make recommendations to educators and policy makers for the practical implementation of initiatives for principal preparation.

I am extending an invitation to participate in the study to you, superintendents, deputy superintendents, assistant superintendents, and district principals in three urban school districts. Your involvement will consist of two semi-structured interviews, either face-to-face, by phone, or through Skype. The interviews will be scheduled at mutually agreed upon times and locations. As I recognize that your time is valuable, each interview will be approximately one hour in length and the interview questions will be emailed to you in advance. Additional questions may be asked during the interview for clarification and understanding. The interview questions will draw on your perspectives and professional educational leadership experiences on how to prepare principals for instructional leadership and to lead learning. During the semi-structured interviews, an audio recording as well as detailed notes will be taken. To ensure that your ideas are accurately represented and conveyed in the transcribed interviews, I will send you a copy of the transcripts and you will be asked to review and make any modifications (additions or deletions) or add comments to the transcript within one week of receipt. The revised version can be kindly forwarded to me by email at Melanie.Mazuzrek@ucalgary.ca

For the purpose of maintaining strict confidentiality and to safeguard entrusted information, all digitally collected data will be encrypted and computer password protected, and all hard copy or hand-written documents will be stored in a secured location. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the data. To protect your anonymity throughout the study and in the dissertation and any publications related to the research, a pseudonym will be used instead of your name and to replace any other identifying information, such as the name of a site or location.

Please note that as researcher, I will not be judging participants or evaluating their responses, but merely collecting data to gain a greater understanding of the topic. Your participation in this study would be much appreciated; you are under no obligation to be involved. If you volunteer, you may withdraw at any time prior to the analysis of the data in its entirety, commencing two weeks after the second interview. If you choose to withdraw, please note that all your contributions will be removed and destroyed to protect your privacy.

More detailed information regarding the study will be made available if you are interested in participating. If you have any questions regarding the research study, I would be happy to address these. Once the research study has concluded, a final copy of the dissertation will be provided to you upon request. In addition, all data that has been collected for this study will be destroyed after five years.

This research study has been approved by the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board of the University of Calgary and that of your district. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at Melanie.Mazurek@ucalgary.ca. Alternatively, you may contact my research supervisor, Dr. Brenda Spencer, at (403) 220-6097 or spencerb@ucalgary.ca.

If you decide to participate, please complete and return the attached Consent Form. To ensure your anonymity and confidentiality, please return the Consent Form to me using an email account that is not your work email account. I will then follow up with you using this personal email address to arrange interview times and locations.

Thank you for your consideration to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Melanie Mazurek, EdD Candidate
Werklund School of Education,
University of Calgary
Melanie.Mazurek@ucalgary.ca

Appendix G: Participant Consent Form



WERKLUND SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Graduate Division of Educational Research
2500 University Drive NW
Calgary, AB, Canada T2N 1N4
ucalgary.ca

Researcher: Melanie Mazurek, Faculty of Graduate Studies, Werklund School of Education, Melanie.Mazurek@ucalgary.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Brenda Spencer, Faculty of Graduate Studies, Education

Title of Project: Senior Leaders' Perceptions about Preparing and Developing Alberta's Principals as Instructional and Learning Leaders

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. Participation is completely voluntary, anonymous and confidential. You are free to discontinue participation at any time during the study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to explore and analyze senior leaders' perceptions about how to prepare and develop principals as instructional leaders to lead learning. Using a social constructivist approach, the goal of my research is to advance the knowledge base of professional principal practices focused on instructional and learning leadership so as to make recommendations to educators, practitioners, and policy makers for the practical implementation of principal preparation and development that may have the potential to improve teacher quality and student achievement.

What Will I Be Asked To Do?

The researcher would like to engage you in two in-depth interviews, either face-to-face, by telephone or via Skype. Each round of interviews will be approximately one hour in length. An audio recording device will be used and written notes will be taken during each interview. Scheduled interviews will be arranged after the first contact with the participant's agreeance to volunteer. The researcher will transcribe the interviews and, to ensure the accuracy of the intended meaning, you will be provided with a copy of the transcript for review and revision.

You are free to ask questions about the research at any time.

Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions and are free to withdraw at any time, without penalty, prior to the analysis of the data in its entirety, which will begin two weeks after the second interview. If you decide to withdraw from the study, all your contributions will be removed and destroyed to protect your privacy.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

Other than your name, educational and professional background, and your contact information, no other personal identifying information will be collected in this study, and all participants shall remain anonymous.

Participants will be asked to select a pseudonym for the researcher to use during this study which will be kept confidential.

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

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: _____

I grant permission to be audio-recorded: Yes: ___ No: ___

A sample of interview questions for the interviews is attached to this consent form.

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?

Please note that there is no anticipated risk or predictable harm associated with participating in this study as confidentiality and anonymity will be assured. Taking part in this research study will provide a better understanding of how best to prepare principals as instructional leaders to lead learning.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

With your permission to audio-tape the interview, only the researcher, Melanie Mazurek, and her supervisor, Dr. Brenda Spencer, will have access to the interview recordings, notes, and transcripts.

The key code linking your name, educational and professional background, and contact information with the pseudonym will be kept in a secure location. All electronic data will be encrypted and password protected, while interview notes and other hard copies of documents will be stored in a locked cabinet within a secure location. All data and study documents will be kept for five years and then destroyed.

The data you provide will be used for my dissertation and possibly for articles or presentations in the future. I will not use your name or any other identifying information in publications or presentations. Upon your request, a final copy of the dissertation can be made available to you.

Would you like to receive a summary of the study's results? Yes: ___ No: ___

Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project. You have agreed to participate in this research project consisting of two 1 hour audio-recorded interviews, and are invited to bring documents or artifacts that will assist in sharing your professional experiences.

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 prior to the data analysis. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Contact information for correspondence: _____

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:

Ms. Melanie Mazurek (researcher)

Doctoral Student, Werklund School of Education
Senior Leadership: K-12
University of Calgary
Melanie.Mazurek@ucalgary.ca

Dr. Brenda Spencer (supervisor)
Faculty of Graduate Studies, Education
Werklund School of Education
University of Calgary
(403) 220-6097
spencerb@ucalgary.ca

If you have any concerns about the way you have been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services, University of Calgary at 403.220.6289 or 403.220.8640; e-mail cfreb@ucalgary.ca.

ONCE YOUR HAVE COMPLETED AND SIGNED THIS CONSENT FORM, PLEASE USE A PERSONAL EMAIL ACCOUNT (not your work email account) TO RETURN IT to Melanie.Mazurek@ucalgary.ca

A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep for your records and reference. The researcher will also sign and keep a copy of this consent form.