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**PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP:
ENHANCING ACADEMIC SUCCESS FOR STUDENTS IN HIGH-
POVERTY ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS**

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Treatise

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Dedication

I dedicate this to my family. To my parents, Salvador and Graciela, thank you for supporting and believing in me. Father, thank you for showing me the value of education, dedication and drive to get me beyond a high school diploma.

To my husband, Mark, thank you for being my greatest cheerleader and for consistently keeping me on the path. I could not have been able to accomplish this milestone without you. To my daughters, Zuria and Aislin, thank you for being my inspiration. You two turn any gloomy day into sunshine.

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Abstract

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP: ENHANCING ACADEMIC SUCCESS FOR STUDENTS IN HIGH- POVERTY ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2018

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The role of the principal has evolved over the past few decades from a managerial role to an instructional leader. The type of setting, environment or conditions of the school may impact the everyday practices of the elementary principal as a result the day to day tasks can vary depending on their school environment and context. Schools faced with issues of high-poverty, high-minority demographics, high mobility and low student achievement may be conflicted on prioritizing their daily practices. Depending on the school contexts in which they work, principals face very different sets of challenges. Thus, there is a need to continue to examine instructional leadership particularly in schools that serve a high number of economically disadvantage students.

The study followed a qualitative approach with grounded theory. Participants included three principals, three teachers and three instructional leadership members,

purposefully selected in each of the three schools focus of the study. Data was collected through individual interviews, observations and a document review.

The findings revealed that principals in these high-poverty schools used the following instructional practices; creating an instructional plan with expectations, building a system of collaboration and support, implementing a support system for students and designing a system to monitor students and teachers. Furthermore, the study found the following contextual challenges, poverty, high mobility, low parent involvement, student mental health, parent concerns, high number of English Language Learners and Refugee students and community affairs. The contexts resulted in a variation of practices from each school. The practices were not all instructional but also social emotional learning practices that demonstrated a great focus on the whole child. Based on these practices, a set of strategies was revealed. These five strategies were frequently used in all three schools. They included allocating funds for additional support positions, building collaboration and accountability, creating systems and developing community outreach and partnerships.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Educational leadership has become one of the forefront topics in education in the 21st century. It is a growing interest in our society due to the focus of improving public schools. Efforts to enhance public education have been a point of great importance amongst America's leaders. Organizations that focus on leadership development and research, such as The Wallace Foundation, have found that "without effective principals, the national goal we've set to improve failing schools will be next to impossible to achieve, but with effective principals in every school comes promise" (Wallace Foundation, 2013, pg. 17). The notion of accountability dates back to the 1980s when House Bill 72 was adopted to improve the overall financial system of public education, followed by Senate Bill 1 in 1995. Both policies focused on the improvement of public schools, specifically finances, and the increase in district power. However, neither policy had great emphasis on student achievement, which didn't come until 2002 when president George W. Bush signed a major bill that increased the demands for accountability. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) was designed to increase accountability and sanction schools that did not demonstrate student learning. In 2010, President Barack Obama implemented the Race to The Top grant that encouraged school districts to create comprehensive plans for Title 1 schools. Unfortunately, not all states participated and Texas was one of them, but the accountability system has not stopped evolving. More recently, in 2015, President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law to improve equity for all students and allow for flexibility measures in states where NCLB did not. The goal of ESSA was to help ensure success for all students and schools in the nation.

In spite of continued focus on school improvement, and the advancing accountability system, achievement gaps persist among minority children. Student achievement in high-poverty schools remain low, demonstrating the demand for greater effective school leadership to guide school improvement. This improvement, according to some researchers, requires instructional leadership. As defined by O’Doherty and Ovando, instructional leadership is “promoting a positive learning environment, enabling strong collaboration, intentional capacity building, and personal growth” (2013, p. 537). Other researchers, such as Sergiovanni and Starratt, also suggest that a key role in improving teaching and learning requires the instructional leadership of a principal. Sergiovanni and Starratt define instructional leadership as “focusing on teaching and learning in a way that ensures an emphasis on three themes: subject-matter content, principles of learning, and teaching processes” (2007, p. 284). The content knowledge of a principal impacts his or her ability to be a leader for instruction. To accomplish this, leaders must know the content, understand how students learn, and understand how teachers learn to teach (Graczewski, Knudson, & Holtzman, 2009).

There are other qualities that have been found to increase student achievement such as the use of time, setting high expectations, developing a vision, cultivating a climate focused on learning, managing people, and communication. The Wallace Foundation (2013) and Goldring et al. (2005) discovered that by increasing time spent on instructional activities, the knowledge and guidance of the leader would increase, thereby resulting in increased student performance. In addition, Garza, Gurr, Jacobson, and Merchant (2014) found that qualities such as resilience, motivation, social justice approach, ethics, and courage are necessary leadership talents for success. However, it should be noted that the context of the school might impact principal practices due to the challenges of their environment. A study by Jacobson et al. (2007) found that

principals in high-poverty communities must establish safe nurturing environments, set high expectations for all, and hold everyone accountable for meeting those expectations (Jacobson et al., 2007).

According to Nettles and Herrington, “the national focus is now turning to what the principal can do to improve student achievement” (p. 732). This suggests the need for tremendous redirection and focus. Understanding the impact, a principal has on student academic performance can have the potential for extensive value for leaders and schools across the country (2007). Education today requires a leader who is willing to foster student achievement in some of the most complex environments and, at the same time, remain aware of the current accountability systems. However, it is crucial to closely analyze the school leader within the specific context of their environment. Leadership roles, level of accountability, and barriers faced by high-poverty schools can impact the practices of an elementary school principal. As noted by previous researchers, “School-level differences or contextual factors have important implications of their leadership practice” (Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008, p. 27). School differences and unique contexts may include student background factors (e.g. minority, poverty), school location (e.g. rural, urban), school size, school level (elementary, middle or high school), and may influence how a principal leads the campus. “The specific contexts in which schools operate may limit school leaders’ room to maneuver, or provide opportunities for different types of leadership” (Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008, p. 26). Specifically, in high-minority and high-poverty urban elementary schools, leaders must be able to manage the daily roles and responsibilities and continue to remain focused on instruction to improve academic performance of students.

The pressure of accountability systems in Texas, coupled with the challenges due to specific contexts of high-poverty urban elementary schools, draw attention to leadership

practices that are critical for student and school success. Therefore, public schools continue to be impacted by the changes of the requirements, which is the case in Texas. The current Texas accountability system measures schools using four indices. **Index 1: Student Achievement.** This index considers the total number of tests taken, including students with accommodations. It provides the state with a snapshot of student performance across subjects. **Index 2: Student Progress.** This index specifically measures students' progress. It allows schools and districts to receive recognition of the progress regardless of the student's achievement. **Index 3: Closing Performance Gaps.** Index 3 highlights the academic achievement of economically disadvantaged students as well as the two lowest-performing sub groups. **Index: 4 Postsecondary Readiness.** This index measures the percentage of students receiving high academic results and emphasizes the role of schools in preparing students for the rigors of high school, college, career and life (TEA, 2017). Given the various contexts of schools, more research is needed to highlight how school leaders actually help guide high-poverty schools to success. This research is important, as suggested by Pont, Nusche & Morrman in 2008, when they reported that "school leadership practice has been greatly influenced by changes in educational governance and school contexts" (p. 32).

Statement of the Problem

The role of the principal has evolved over the past few decades from a managerial role to an instructional leader. "While school leaders are beginning to get more autonomy and support, the new approaches to teaching and learning processes and increasingly varied student populations are changing leadership roles and responsibilities" (Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008, p. 32). The type of setting, environment or conditions of the school may impact everyday practices of the elementary principal as a result of day-to-day roles and tasks performed, and can

vary depending on their environments. Schools faced with issues of high-poverty, high-minority demographics, high mobility and low student achievement may be conflicted with prioritizing their daily practices. “Depending on the school contexts in which they work, principals face very different sets of challenges.” “School-level differences or contextual factors have important implications for their leadership practice” (Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008, p. 27). For example, “Children raised in low-income families are at risk for academic and social problems as well as poor health and well-being, which can in turn undermine educational achievement” (Engle & Black, 2008, p. 244). Lacour & Tissington (2011) site the following key findings based on longitudinal support from the U.S. Department of Education: In 2001, high-poverty schools “scored below norms in all years and grades tested; schools with the highest percentages of poor students scored significantly worse” (p.1). Poverty has a great impact on the home and school life.

Children in poor families tend to develop weaker academic skills and to achieve less academic success. Many arrive at kindergarten without the language or social skills they need for learning. They miss school frequently because of health or family concerns. They slip behind in the summer with little access to stimulating educational programs or even regular meals (Hernandez, 2011, p. 7).

The challenges of high-poverty urban elementary schools result in more barriers and a set of unique leadership skills needed to allow the principal to guide the school toward student success. School context may affect how principals enact their leadership; thus, the need to continue examining instructional leadership in relation to teaching and learning, particularly in schools that serve economically disadvantage students (Neumerski, 2012).

The principal has been recognized as a vital player in the success of the school. According to Pont, Nusche, and Moorman (2008), principals “play a key role in improving school outcomes by influencing the motivations and capacities of teachers, as well as the environment and climate within which they work” (p. 32). To improve the efficiency and equity in schools, leadership is necessary (2008).

Schools with higher percentages of students from poverty can present great challenges for school leaders, whereby leadership roles and responsibilities may change. A study by May and Supovitz (2011) found that leadership activities and the time involved in matters of instruction were related to working with teachers on how to better address students’ needs that varied from school to school. This created the need to further investigate how principals might enact their “instructional leadership in ways that are most likely to yield the greatest instructional improvement for the largest number of students” (p. 348), particularly in schools that serve students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. School context, therefore, should be embedded in instructional leadership and not seen as a separate factor (Neumerski, 2012). “Although we know some of the conditions leaders create for teachers and students to learn, we know much less about what happens inside these moments of learning or what type of interaction facilitate them” (Neumerski, 2012, p. 49). Thus, there is a need to continue to examine instructional leadership practices of school leaders in specific contexts, such as high-poverty schools (Neumerski, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

The Texas accountability system continues to increase in rigor regardless of the school context. Expectations are the same for all public schools despite poverty and achievement gaps remaining high. Therefore, twenty-first century learners need skills that meet the demands of our

society regardless of their socioeconomic background. As reported by the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF), statistics from 2015 show that 14.5 million children live in poverty. “Children remain the poorest age group in the nation, and 1 in 5 poor children continue to have the odds stacked against their success” (CDF, 2015). “In more concrete terms, one of six children is poor, and one in three Black children is living in poverty” (Cuthrell, Stapleton, & Ledford, 2010). As school leaders experience the ongoing changes in demographics and the increase in poverty, they are expected to focus on student achievement in low socioeconomic areas of our state and our nation. The purpose of this study was to identify the instructional leadership practices of principals in high-poverty urban elementary schools that have demonstrated success as measured by the accountability system. Concurrently, this research identified contextual challenges faced by principals in high-poverty elementary schools and examine how these challenges were managed in high-poverty elementary schools.

Research questions:

1. What principal instructional leadership practices improve teaching and learning in high-poverty elementary schools?
2. What contextual challenges do principals in high-poverty elementary schools face?
3. How do principals address the challenges faced in high-poverty schools?

Methodology

The focus of this study was on principal instructional practices that may impact student achievement in high-poverty elementary schools. The researcher used a qualitative approach with grounded theory. “The intent of grounded theory study is to move beyond description and to generate or discover a theory, a “unified theoretical explanation” for a process or an action” (Corbin & Strauss, 2007, p. 107; Creswell, 2013, p. 83). The researcher attempted to develop a

theory based on the practices and views of the participants. “The participants in the study would all experience the process, and the development of the theory might help explain practice or provide a framework” (Creswell, 2013, p. 83). A total of four elementary school principals from a large urban school district in Central Texas will be selected according to specific criteria. The principals have held their positions for the last three years. Other participants included a teacher and a member of the leadership team, such as an assistant principal, reading specialist, or instructional coach, that have also remained in their respective positions for the past three years.

The context of the schools was similar in demographics with a high number of minority children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The schools were selected according to the results of the state accountability system from 2014 through 2016. Each campus selected had demonstrated student progress for at least two years and earned a minimum of four academic distinctions (one being for student progress) each year for the past three years. Through interviews and observations, the researcher analyzed the principals’ practices for enhancing student achievement through the lens of a constructionist. Crotty, 2015, defines a constructionist as “Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (p. 43).

Definition Of Terms

Accountability System – A system used by the state of Texas to evaluate public schools.

Economically Disadvantaged – A student coded as eligible for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Program (PEIEMS Data Standards 2011-12).

Instructional Leadership – “Requires focusing on teaching and learning in a way that ensures an emphasis on three themes: subject-matter content, principles of learning, and teaching processes” (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2007, p. 284).

Instructional Leader – A principal’s primary role is to serve as the instructional leader on the campus and to guide teachers to implement best practices to ensure success for all students.

High Poverty Schools – Schools that have a high percentage (80% or higher) of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Leader – A person who can lead and influence an organization toward a goal, vision or objective.

Instructional Practices – Instructional activities that may enhance teaching and learning.

Principal – Leader of the school.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) – A major accountability system adopted in 2002 to ensure academic success for all students.

Poverty Threshold – According to the U.S. Census: 2 adults and 2 children, \$24,339.

Successful Schools – Schools in Texas earning four or more academic distinctions in the state accountability system of Texas. The six distinctions are Academic Achievement in English Language Arts/Reading; Academic Achievement in Mathematics; Academic Achievement in Science; Top 25 Percent: Student Progress; Top 25 Percent: Closing Performance Gaps; and Postsecondary Readiness.

STAAR Test – State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness test. An assessment given by the state to measure a school’s performance.

Texas Education Agency (TEA) – The agency that oversees primary and secondary public education.

Title 1 Schools – Public schools with high numbers of children from low-income families.

Title 1 – Grants given to schools to help improve the academic achievement of disadvantaged students.

Urban Schools – Inner city schools with a high concentration of students that come from diverse high-poverty backgrounds.

Delimitations/Limitations

Due to the focus of the research, this study only included the instructional principal practices within a specific school context. Only selected elementary schools from high-poverty urban settings participated. The criteria used by the researcher resulted in limitations that include a small sample size (three principals, three teachers, and three members of the leadership team), and principals that have at least three years of experience. Therefore, findings may not be generalized to other school levels or other school contexts.

Assumptions

The researcher assumed that the principals demonstrated specific instructional practices that might enhance student achievement in high-poverty urban elementary schools. It is also assumed that other informants, such as assistant principals, instructional specialists, and teachers, were familiar with their principal's instructional leadership practices.

Significance

This study may contribute to existing research of instructional leadership practices in high-poverty urban elementary schools. It may also enhance our understanding of unique principal instructional leadership practices that help increase student achievement in poor elementary schools. Additional insight may serve to inform principal preparation programs and

school districts by suggesting professional development for elementary school principals in high-poverty areas.

Summary

Effective leadership is necessary for improving public education especially in schools of high poverty. The high accountability and the varying school contexts may be determining factors that impact how a principal leads a school. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how principals can move schools toward academic success. Research has found that instructional leadership in poor schools is necessary for student performance; however, further exploration is needed on the topic of instructional leadership practices of elementary school principals in high-poverty schools.

Chapter II

The Review of Literature

The role of an elementary school principal has evolved from building manager to more complex and involved responsibilities with many dimensions that have gained greater value over time. The phase of high-stakes testing, standards and accountability has considerably transformed the function of the principal. The demands of 21st century learners require that principal candidates have unique skill-sets enabling them to meet the needs of school, community, and students yet, at the same time, be effective leaders. “Schools and school districts need effective leaders like never before to take on the challenges and opportunities facing education today and in the future” (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 7).

The role of the principal is vital to success, however, the charge becomes greater when the campus serves a large percentage of students from low socioeconomic and minority backgrounds. “The principal is a key ingredient in the performance of the school, especially if that school enrolls a large number of low-performing and/or poor and minority students” (Krasnoff, 2015, p. 7). High-poverty demographics often impact the school’s budget, resources, and student performance due the needs of the children. A study by the U.S. Department of Education (2011) shows that “many high-poverty schools receive less than their fair share of state and local funding, leaving students in high-poverty schools with fewer resources than schools attended by their wealthier peers” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). For purposes of this study, the term ‘poverty’ will be based on the current poverty threshold established by the United States Census Bureau of 2017, which is a family of four earning \$24,339 per year.

The high-poverty and minority context of elementary schools can bring many other challenges, such as immediate academic gaps in early childhood. Many children born into poor homes often experience less academic content and language, and have fewer experiences, thereby, entering school with greater gaps in their learning. An article by Ferguson, Bovaird, and Mueller states that “children from low-income families often start school already behind their peers who come from more affluent families” (2007, p. 1). Despite the difficulties that arise from leading high-poverty schools, principal leaders must be able to meet the educational demands of providing a safe learning environment while, at the same time, managing the facility, staff and resources.

The importance of principal leadership is well documented and researched by distinguished organizations, such as The Wallace Foundation, RAND Corporation, and the American Association of School Administrators. In a recent survey of educational leaders who ranked 21 educational issues in order of priority, ranging from special education to student dropout rate, principals’ leadership was ranked second only to teacher quality as a factor in achievement rate (Simkin, Charner, & Suss, 2010). Over the course of this literature review, the following areas are examined to provide both context and background: the importance of the principal leadership, leadership in high-poverty schools, effective principal leadership, and leadership styles. The purpose of this study was to identify the effective instructional leadership practices of principals in high-poverty urban elementary schools.

The Importance of the Principal

A low-performing school cannot turn around without the presence of an effective leader. “There is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership” (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins,

2008, p. 29). Principals are the leaders that provide a vision, a mission, and set goals for success. According to Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins, principal leadership “serves as a catalyst for unleashing the potential capacities that already exist in the organization (2008, p. 29). The concept of principal leadership began in England, Australia, and North America in the 19th century. The role of the principal and the leadership function has continued to transform over the decades. From the 1960s, “the role incorporated improving instruction, and included activities such as classroom observation” (Gurr-Mark, Drysdale-George, & Mulford, 2010, p. 301). In the 1970s, the focus for the principal became supervision of instruction and providing instructional leadership through the direct teaching of students and teachers, as well as curriculum improvement (Gurr-Mark et al., 2010; Horng & Loeb, 2010). These practices were created to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The role of the principal leadership continued to evolve in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which also resulted in a change in the approach to research. The focus of studies became more intricate with the analysis of a variety of variables or contexts, such as student background, school size, student demographic and academic growth. The tools used to evaluate a principal have also been modified and improved; however, practices vary based on the context of the school. Despite all the measurement tools, high-stakes accountability overrides everything; a successful principal equates to high student achievement despite the population served.

It is critical to understand the role of the principal in the 21st century. The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (2015) was created to help guide principals and educational leaders to effectively meet the demands of our society as they continue to develop. According to a report titled *The Principal as the Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning* by the Wallace Foundation (2013), principals can no longer function simply as building managers

tasked with adhering to district rules, carrying out regulations, and avoiding mistakes.

“Principals must be (or become) leaders of learning who can develop a team delivering effective instruction” (Wallace Foundation, 2012, p. 6). The link between principal leadership and student learning requires a holistic view of all the dimensions of the position (Professional Learning Standards, 2015). “Educational leaders must focus on how they are promoting the learning, achievement, development, and well-being of each student” (Professional Learning Standards, 2015, p. 3).

The Wallace Foundation is an organization that has conducted over 30 years of research in principal leadership. The company has also developed a framework of key responsibilities practiced by effective principals. The responsibilities are: (1) Develop a vision of academic success for every child, (2) Create a climate hospitable to education, (3) Cultivate leadership in others so that all staff members can support the vision, (4) Improve instruction to help teachers teach and students learn, and (5) Manage staff, data and practices to promote school improvement (Wallace Foundation, 2013). The demands of the school principal are large and often “knowing is not enough” (Klar & Brewer, 2013). It has been found that if a principal understands how to lead according to his or her community context, the success of their efforts will be determined (Klar & Brewer, 2013).

Principals have many resources that are easily accessible, such as taking a course, looking into research findings and reference books, as well as familiarizing themselves with leadership frameworks to improve their leadership practices. However, the task is not an easy one. Our society continues to evolve and experience budget cuts, increased accountability and safety concerns. The decrease in budgets does not mean a decrease in accountability and expectations (Professional National Standards, 2015). Social media has contributed to an

increase in safety awareness and focus. This can be quite an issue if the context of a school community is in an area of high crime. School leaders are also expected to work for the safety of the students and staff. Sebastian and Allensworth found that “schools with stronger leaders are more likely to be safe and orderly” (2011, p. 4). Their study also identified safety as the second major task after student achievement (2011).

Of all the school-level factors, researchers estimate that teachers account for more than a third of the variation in a school’s achievement. Principals, however, represent nearly 25 percent of that variation (Louis et al., 2010). Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin (2013) conducted a study on the effects of teachers and students on their schools. The results demonstrated that a highly effective principal might increase student achievement in a typical student between two to seven months of learning in a single year, while an ineffective principal might decrease achievement by the same amount. The investigation demonstrates that while teachers may have a greater impact on their students, an effective principal will impact an entire school, resulting in greater overall improvements.

Principals play an enormous role for schools to function properly and effectively. They are a critical piece in the success of the school. “Principals are judged on many facets of their schools, but the number one concern of stakeholders is the academic success of their school” (Suber, 2011, p. 3). Therefore, principals must be able to lead instruction and enhance student achievement for all. “Great principals dramatically improve student achievement by developing teachers, managing talent, and creating a great place to work” (New Leaders Org., 2012, p. 6). Unfortunately, while great principals can create an ideal learning environment, ineffective principals can bring a school to failure by decreasing performance (New Leaders Org., 2012).

Leadership in High Poverty Elementary Schools

Principal leaders that serve high percentages of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to experience more stress aside from high-stakes testing and accountability. The context of the school brings a variety of challenges, such as high teacher turnover, discipline issues, low parent involvement, limited resources, and budget constraints. Despite the challenges of leading a high-poverty school, leaders must be able to overcome the barriers and improve student performance. “Good leaders are adept at listening to stakeholders and understanding the nuances of the contexts in which they work” (Klar & Brewer, 2013, p. 801). The environment of the school often determines the approach of the leader. The contextual variations of schools, such as enrollment and student demographic diversity, are important because they affect the organizational complexity of school leaders (Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson, & Ylimaki, 2007). This has also been documented in a study by Taylor and La Cava in which they found that principals in Title 1 schools reported a higher use of school improvement actions to increase student performance. The principals in Title 1 schools implemented these practices to improve student achievement more frequently and more purposefully than principals from non-Title 1 elementary schools. The actions or practices include high academic expectations for all students; decision-making focused on student learning; commitment of each staff member; and, increased focus on curriculum and instruction (Taylor & La Cava, 2011).

Title 1 schools often experience limited budgets and challenging demands from districts, students and teachers. Principal leaders must also provide teachers with the resources and support they need to meet the demands of the students. Additionally, they must guide teachers and ensure that instruction is of the highest quality, and that students are learning. In a 2016 case study by Brown, the principal he observed was able to develop creative ways in which to fund programs and, at the same time, implement a variety of projects, monitor student growth, create

schedules, maintain a culture of high expectations, implement a behavior program, and provide professional development. Leading a high-poverty school often requires creativity and flexibility and can result in increased teacher buy-in. Such was the case with Brown's principal, who gained the admiration of her teachers and respect for her creativity and ability to collaborate (Brown, 2016).

Leading a high-poverty low-performing elementary school often requires a unique skill set that involves specific training. "Educational leaders need to understand not only the characteristics of effective principals but also the factors that increase the chances of selecting a capable leader" (Hochbein & Cunningham, 2013, p. 85). Other studies have also demonstrated a need for additional training of principals assigned to high-poverty schools. In their investigation, Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, and Levy found that no two schools had identical turnaround profiles, and conditions, perceived as being problematic, varied from principal to principal. There were some similarities across settings that suggested a core of fundamental problems in the areas of programs and organizations, student academic performance, student behavior, and staffing. "The consistencies in conditions argue for an emphasis on a common set of additional specialized skill sets for use in specific school settings" (2007, p. 19). Their findings support the need for "some degree of generic training for principals in low-performing schools based on the nature of the conditions" (2007, p. 20).

The study included 19 principals that were newly assigned to low-performing elementary schools, and focused on the conditions they perceived to contribute to inadequate student achievement. The conditions were assigned to five clusters: (a) student achievement and behavior, (b) school programs and organization, (c) staffing, (d) school system concerns, (e) parents and community (Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, & Levy, 2007). However, the principals

that participated in this study were only able to identify the conditions in two categories: (a) school achievement and behavior, and (b) school programs and organization (Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, & Levy, 2007). The findings in this study suggest that more research is needed in order to compare successful and unsuccessful principals working in similar situations. They also suggest the need for new guidance regarding leadership of low-performing schools. The assessment of the findings supports some degree of customized training for principals in low-performing schools (Duke, Tucker, Salmonowicz, & Levy, 2007).

Effective leadership often means high-performing schools often have strong leaders. Principals must not only ensure that teachers and students are performing, but also that the campus is receiving community support and building partnerships with local businesses. “As schools have become more intricate and intense in the needs and demands of daily practices and ongoing accountability, the definition of the school leader has changed” (Crum, Sherman, & Myran, 2009). Today, principals are expected to work with the entire education system, including board members, policy makers, local business owners, and even leaders of local unions (Crum, Sherman, & Myran, 2009). Furthermore, principals are expected to provide ongoing professional development that meet the needs of their learners, increase student achievement, increase quality of teacher instruction, work with diverse student groups, set high expectations for all, and collaborate with all stakeholders. In order to accomplish this, principals must build trust. When principals are approachable and demonstrate openness to ideas and suggestions by others, then teachers, staff and students respond with trust (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2014). “In order to foster trust, principals must also be competent in their duties as instructional leaders” (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2014, p. 86). Elementary school leaders must be able to manage daily operations, roles and responsibilities, and at the same time have sufficient content and

pedagogy knowledge of teaching and learning to improve student achievement. “Effective principals emphasize research based strategies to improve teaching and learning” (Syed, 2013, p. 11).

The contexts of the school often play a role in the approach and practices of the principal. A study by Klar and Brewer, in 2013, found that “leadership practices and beliefs that influenced student achievement in these schools were adapted to and commensurate with each schools’ immediate context” (p. 768). Principals in high-poverty schools often have a large array of responsibilities than principals of non-Title 1 schools, as described by Taylor and La Cava. Therefore, it is important for leaders to understand common practices that may help alleviate some of the stresses. The challenges of managing an elementary school can be intimidating and overwhelming, requiring specific leadership. Finnigan & Stewart (2009) suggest that districts should carefully assign school leaders with appropriate knowledge and skills to lead low-performing, high-poverty schools.

Instructional Practices

Schools can be organizations with complex and uncertain environments. The core challenge of leadership is to move an organization from the former to something more like the latter (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Without a strong principal leading the organization, academic success is less likely to occur. “The principals of the highest-gaining schools made effective teaching their top priority and performed their responsibilities with exceptional thoroughness and quality” (New Leaders, 2012, p. 36). However, school context matters and impacts practices of the principal. While every school has its own unique profile and conditions, in the following literature successful leaders highlight common themes, practices, and functions that may lead to improved academic success. Such as in the case of New Leaders, 2012, which found that highly-

effective principals work explicitly to improve instruction in the classroom through classroom observations and teacher feedback, as well as professional development and high expectations and use data to drive instruction (New Leaders, 2012).

A study by Finnigan and Stewart consisted of 10 schools in Chicago that were academically low-performing, high-poverty, minority and highly mobile populations. The researchers specifically explored the leadership practices of the principals to determine whether the “current theoretical and empirical literature on school leadership is consistent with the realities of the crisis orientated, high-stress context” (2009, p. 588). The study involved semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted during a three-day site visit to each school. Teachers, parents, local school council members, school community members, special education coordinators, principals and assistant principals were interviewed. Schools that are on probation for lack of student progress, or due to low student achievement, often experience additional responsibilities that requires the principal to be able to do more with less time (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009).

The investigation found distinct patterns among schools that moved off probation quickly. The principals at these schools demonstrated transformational leadership traits with some important distinctions. “What set these two schools apart (besides their increased scores) was their leaders operated quite differently from the leaders of the schools that were slower or unable to move off probation” (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009, p. 594). The results were organized by thematic areas guided by the framework of transformational leadership. The key thematic areas were: setting the direction, developing people, developing the organization, managing the organization, and distributing leadership. Principals, at schools capable of getting off the probation list, were able to “strengthen their vision and direction through a clear articulation of

their high expectations for school staff and targeted attention and resources to improve the school organization” (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009, p. 595). The successful principals implemented a comprehensive instructional program that allowed teachers to develop their knowledge and skills while maintaining a collaborative approach to instruction (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009). In addition, they focused on monitoring the program for consistent implementation, and removed teachers that were not effective (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009). The principals in this investigation were able to protect teachers and the campus from external mandates (usually district obligations) that were not in the best interest of the school. Principal leaders did not feel threatened by school closures and found being on probation a benefit for school improvement (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009). According to Finnigan and Stewart, there should be more focus on the perceptions of leadership, including principal practices and behaviors (2009).

Other investigations have determined that principals in high-poverty schools must be able to create common themes to ensure student academic success. Such was the case of Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson, and Ylimaki, 2007. They found three common themes for successful high-poverty elementary schools: 1) establishing a safe environment for children and adults, 2) setting high expectations for student performance, and 3) holding everyone accountable for meeting those expectations. The principals had their own personal styles, but all three set clear direction for their schools and influenced their communities to begin moving in the same direction (2007). The leaders had a strong sense of knowing and understanding poverty. “They recognized the barriers to learning and academic achievement that poverty can produce but none would allow these conditions to be used as excuses for poor performance” (2007, p. 310). Poverty was not a final determinant of their students’ futures. The goals they set were understood and attainable by both children and adults, and they knew that they would be provided with the

necessary resources and support needed to attain them (Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson & Ylimaki, 2007). These themes allowed their schools to increase in academic performance.

Effective Principal Leadership

The principal is known to be critical to the school's success, especially in a school that has been consistently low performing over time; "the greater the challenge, the greater the impact of the leadership on teaching and learning" (Wilson, 2011, p. 393). Doris Wilson was a superintendent for both urban and suburban school districts, and was also a member of the California Department of Education DAIT (District Assistance Intervention Team). According to Wilson, 16 years of service and numerous observations confirmed that the principal plays a key role in the success of a school (2011). In order for principals to be successful, there are six keys they must follow. (1) An agreed upon vision created by community and communicated consistently. (2) Instructional leadership. This means that the principal supports and guides the teachers in improving the instructional practices and is consistently engaged. (3) A safe, orderly and respectful environment. There are explicit and consistent rules and procedures. (4) Timely monitoring of student progress. The uses of effective curriculum and proper assessments, as well as progress monitoring of student learning. (5) Professional learning communities. Teachers from all grades share experiences that promote continuous learning and have a culture of collaboration. (6) School and family partnerships. They create many opportunities for families to be involved in the school as well as in the learning. Schools must have trust and respect towards families (Wilson, 2011).

The role of the elementary principal is large. It goes beyond the scope of managing a facility and staff. The case study conducted by Brown, in 2016, found that the principal created support systems to ensure the success of their schools. The principal in this case set up the

following support systems to ensure success: (1) curriculum being aligned to the standards, (2) data driven instruction efforts, (3) the development of common assessments, (4) professional learning communities, (5) a behavior program, (6) budgeting, and (7) a schedule that allowed for uninterrupted instruction (p. 101). The investigators of this qualitative study interviewed the principal on three different occasions and evaluated documents, such as building plans. The researcher also observed six teachers in the building for one hour. The principal created a data-driven instruction and systematic structure that gave teachers the opportunity to make data-driven decisions about their students, which had been key to the school's success (Brown, 2016, p. 113).

Highly effective principals can increase student achievement in high-poverty schools and, at the same time, maintain a safe learning environment and strong teacher support system. Ramalho, Garza, and Merchant (2010) found that successful principals resulted in successful schools. The investigation included two principals, eleven teachers, five administrative staff, twelve parents, and eleven students at Mira Vista Independent School District. MVISD is an urban district with 93% of the student population being economically disadvantaged and 67% at risk, according to TEA data from 2009. Both schools had been academically acceptable or higher, according to the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS), for the past four years. The researchers selected two inner-city elementary public schools serving low income, predominantly Hispanic children, with over 75% of the students being economically disadvantaged.

The data collected through interviews and questionnaires identified three prominent themes in their analysis of principal practices: focus on student achievement, building efficacy among faculty and staff, and collaborative and trusting relationships. Ramalho, Garza, and

Merchant “found that the principals in the study had two different leadership styles in a similar context but they had the same goals and expectations for their students, teachers and parents” (2009, p. 51). The focus on student achievement was very evident in both schools. One school had a strong sense of achievement through targeted, individualized interventions while the other school focused on veteran teachers helping to grow and prepare new teachers. Both schools had a strong sense of high expectations, and parents who were interviewed felt the principal was a major factor in their success. Each principal also had a different approach to building efficacy among faculty and staff. One principal focused on mentoring others and promoting a campus culture, while the other focused on teacher-to-teacher mentorship. The principal at one school focused on opening the school to family events and activities to build community and trust amongst families, while the other principal focused on providing families with incentives and organizing bimonthly meetings around topics of interest, such as financial advice. Despite the differences in approaches, both principals had the ability to focus on student achievement, build efficacy among faculty and staff, and build collaborative and trusting relationships. “The two principals in the study demonstrated different leadership styles in a similar context but had the same goals and expectations for their students, teachers and parents” (Ramalho, Garza, & Merchant, 2010, p. 51).

Principals in high-poverty schools must be able to understand their student and community demographics and have the desire to lead such high-stress campuses. It is also important for principal leaders to understand poverty and its effects on the whole child. Ramalho, Garza, and Merchant found that the principals in this research were “invested in working within low socioeconomic areas and were sensitive to cultural factors influencing the success of students, particularly students of color” (2010, p. 52). Academic optimism was maintained

despite the high stress levels that both teachers and principals experienced year after year. The principals were perceived as innovative by the researchers for creating programs that met the needs of all learners.

The role of the principal can become more demanding when leading a school with a large percentage of students that live in poverty due to the additional worries of student health, student gaps and achievement. Typically, schools with high levels of poverty tend to focus on student achievement and staffing issues. In 2007, Goldring, Huff, May, and Camburn investigated how principals chose to establish their daily focus and how their surroundings impacted their decisions. They concentrated on nine leadership functions and activities that included: building operations; finances and financial support for the school; community or parent relations; school district functions; student affairs; personnel issues; planning/setting goals; instructional leadership; and personal professional growth. They found three types of leaders; eclectic principals, instructional principals, and student-centered principals. Eclectic leaders have the ability to: distribute their focus across all realms of responsibility, be leaders at schools that are of higher economic status, and spend less time on student affairs but more time on personnel issues. Instructional leaders reportedly spend more time on community and parent relations and student affairs. These leaders appear to understand the need to involve others and communicate the school's instructional vision. Student-centered leaders spend the majority of their time on student affairs, such as building operations, school finances, school districts, and professional growth (Goldring, Huff, May, & Camburn, 2007, p. 345).

School demographics and student needs often impact daily operations and tasks of the school principal. Goldring, Huff, May, and Camburn (2007) concluded that contextual factors impacting the time spent on certain activities were affected by the percentage of disadvantaged

students, the number of students in the school, a teacher's average number of years in each school, the level of academic press, and the level of student engagement (p. 345). "Principals seem to prioritize and focus their actions under more challenging, contextual conditions" (p. 349). Their findings suggest a need to continue to analyze the effects of leadership characteristics. The authors ask, "Is there a linear relationship between time spent on instructional leadership and student achievement regardless of school context?" (p. 349).

Elementary school principals, with a high number of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, experience student achievement as a major focus. One of the major roles and responsibilities of elementary school leaders is to be the instructional leader of their campus. Principals are expected to work directly with teachers in order to enhance teaching and learning that will ensure high achievement. Elementary school leaders are expected to lead teachers through effective professional development and maintain expectations due to the high demands of testing. Assessments have become synonymous with accountability as testing is the primary tool states and local school systems have used to monitor progress" (Crum, Sherman, & Myran, 2009). Principals are often caught between the needs of accountability and improvement while at the same time trying to grasp the significance of the data. Principals often try to align the curriculum standards to meet state standards through pacing guides and frequent assessments. Unfortunately, this has created an environment driven by accountability where pacing guides, alignment of standards with curriculum, and an increase in testing overshadow the significance of quality instruction (Crum, Sherman, & Myran, 2009, p. 52).

Crum, Sherman, and Myran selected twelve principals from diverse student groups, school sizes, and school environments (rural, suburban and urban) to participate in a research study that would help identify common themes and practices. All principals agreed to participate

in an interview where data would be collected and analyzed. The participants were asked a variety of questions that focused on how they created a “shared understanding of the organization and the individuals within their school as well as how they designed the school to support all stakeholders” (p. 53). Principals were asked about change initiatives, meeting accreditation policies, how to maintain a competitive staff, staff empowerment, and high quality instruction to meet the needs of all students (p. 53). The twelve selected principals worked in diverse communities across the Commonwealth of Virginia that included nine females and three males. The student demographics ranged from 97% African American to primarily White to mixed populations. More than half of the schools were designated as Title 1 schools with low-income student percentages ranging from 46-82%.

The twelve school leaders in this investigation demonstrated similar practices. The study found four common themes around these successful elementary school leaders: (1) leadership with data, honesty and relationships; (2) fostering ownership of school practices and collaboration; (3) recognizing and developing leadership; and (4) instructional awareness and involvement. Leadership with data means that principals are very aware of the repercussions of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, and accountability is constantly at the forefront of every discussion. The principals used their data to drive instruction and interventions, and incorporate remediation programs. Based on the conversations, it was evident that environments of trust were fundamental, and building relationships a key component to the community-building process. Discussions also included the importance of fostering school ownership, knowing and recognizing the interest and strengths of staff, and collaborating with staff to empower them to become leaders. Awareness of the instructional activities taking place within the building and communicating instructional expectations clearly to the faculty were also shared. The four

themes that emerged allowed the principals to have a positive impact on their student achievement, despite student demographics and the obstacles set forth by challenging accountability demands (Crum, Sherman, & Myran, 2009, p. 59). Based on this literature, it is clear that elementary school principals need to understand the importance of curriculum and instruction to support teaching and learning; thus valuing teachers and providing the necessary support and guidance.

Stone, Bruce, and Hursh closely analyzed six of the highest performing elementary schools in the state of Tennessee in a report created for the Education Consumers Foundation. The report found twelve different practices and procedures in all six successful schools. Many of these schools faced challenging diverse populations. The elementary schools were selected based on the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS). According to the report, “the TVASS is the most sophisticated educational accountability system in the country” (2007, p. 1). The six elementary schools were winners of the Foundation’s Value-Added Achievement Award and had been among the top performing schools in the state of Tennessee for four consecutive years.

The schools in this report used routine assessments to allow teachers to be able to analyze student progress as well as provide the learners with feedback and high quality instruction. The students were expected to master skills on the assessments and set their criteria well above 80% mastery. Students had to score between 80% and 100% on test questions for a skill in order for teachers to consider students as having mastered that skill. Activities implemented included tutoring, small reading group instruction, or computer-based programs that allowed for targeted instruction and interventions based on the skill. Principals of the six schools received frequent reports and analyzed data to review student progress. If students were not making gains, the

principals would take action to prevent the gap from getting larger by investigating other ways to support the students, or determine the types of support needed, such as identifying learning disabilities or reading difficulties. The teachers also received frequent reports that allowed them to plan for interventions, identify learning problems, or move students to the next level.

Students at these top-performing schools were not allowed to fail but were quickly assigned to small group interventions or tutoring. Student progress data was used to assess effectiveness of the teachers, and, together with the principals, work with struggling colleagues who grappled with improving their teaching skills. Principals of all six schools were able to purchase the resources needed for teachers to teach. The schools were also able to provide parents with information on their child's performance, make the necessary attempts to work with families when students made minimal progress, and consistently evaluate their parents' level of satisfaction with the schools' services every year. Principals used incentives to reward positive social and academic behaviors, and closely monitored student referrals for behavior problems. The researchers found that the principals who led these schools were not able to provide a certain formula for success; however, the "practices and procedures they described centered around repeated objective measurement of student progress toward objectively related outcomes" (Stone, Bruce, & Hursh, 2007, p. 22).

The array of leadership responsibilities for elementary principals goes beyond knowing and understanding the daily operations. Principals need to know effective instruction and understand the pedagogy and research behind it. May and Supovitz (2011), found that "the scope of principals' influence on instructional improvement is significantly related to their interactions with individual teachers" (p. 347). "The frequency of a principal's leadership activities with an individual teacher is directly related to the magnitude of instructional change (p. 348). The study

focused on principal efforts to improve instruction and the types of activities that were commonly used. The longitudinal research included 51 schools from different southeastern U.S. school districts.

Researchers Stone, Bruce, and Hursh used activity logs as well as yearly teacher surveys. The logs allowed them to capture an “hour-by-hour account of how principals allocated their time across nine categories of leadership: (a) building operations, (b) finances and financial support for the school, (c) community or parent relations, (d) school district functions, (e) student affairs, (f) personnel issues, (g) planning/setting goals, (h) instructional leadership, (i) principal professional growth” (May & Supovitz, p. 338). The teacher report measure of instructional leadership was derived from a five-item scale in which teachers described how often they worked with the principal in the following five ways: (1) “The principal and the teacher discussed the teacher’s instruction; (2) The principal observed the teacher instructing a class; (3) The teacher observed the principal instructing a class; (4) The principal provided feedback after observing the teacher’s instruction; (5) The principal reviewed the work produced by a teacher’s students” (May & Supovitz, 2011, p. 340).

The results of the study demonstrated that the “time principals spend on instructional leadership is predictive of increases in the variability in instructional change across teachers within a school”. A principal’s choice of how to allocate time and energy across broad base activities versus targeted activities is an important determinant of the actual amount of scope of instructional change achieved” (May & Supovitz, 2011, p. 348). The study found that the types of leadership activities such as observing a classroom or monitoring student work and the amount of time needed to carry them out, can vary from school to school; thereby, requiring further investigation into how principals might target their “instructional leadership in ways that

are most likely to yield the greatest instructional improvement for the largest number of students” (May & Supovitz, 2011, p. 348).

The Impact of Leadership Styles

Leadership styles vary from principal to principal, as well as their experiences and community context. Research studies demonstrate and highlight certain leadership practices that are necessary for student achievement, such as instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and distributed leadership. However, there is not one single leadership style recognized as the ultimate approach to increasing student achievement, particularly in schools of high-poverty.

The impact of leadership types may have different effects on schools. This was documented in a study by Horng, Klasik, and Loeb in 2010, when they found that a single-minded focus on one type of activity may be detrimental due to other responsibilities of the principal, such as organization. Other researchers, such as Grissom and Loeb, also found that it was not a best practice to narrow the principals’ focus to only overseeing day-to-day instructional practices and observing teachers in classrooms, which could result in neglect of the budget, manpower, or the facility (2011). Furthermore, Grissom and Loeb found that instructional management, as well as distributed leadership, is an element in effective schools. Through a survey taken by principals, assistant principals, teachers, and parents the researchers tested the range of skills needed for principals to perform their jobs effectively. Behaviors deemed most effective included instruction and organizational management. The results of their findings recommended a combination of traditional management functions coupled with involvement in instructional matters (2011).

Grissom and Loeb conducted a factor analysis and t-tests of a 42-item task inventory. Findings revealed that the only item affecting student achievement, as measured by the state accountability system, was the principal's self-assessed effectiveness in organization management, defined as the principal's effectiveness in overseeing school functioning (e.g., maintaining campus facilities, managing budgets, and resources). Principals' self-ratings showed a mean score of 3.5 on a four-point response scale. No other dimensions had a meaningful association. "We might conceive of effective instructional leadership as combining an understanding of the instructional needs of the school with an ability to target resources where they are needed, hire the best available teachers, and keep the school running smoothly" (Grissom & Loeb, 2011, p. 1119).

The role of the principal as the instructional leader is a complicated and often confusing task. The responsibilities that accompany this role often vary from school to school, principal to principal, and district to district; however, a key function of an elementary school principal is the role of the instructional leader. Principals must be able to articulate and set goals for a school to be able to have a successful learning environment. "When a principal was able to articulate clear goals and strategies for improvement of instruction, when the goals were understood and supported by the majority of the teachers, and when the strategies for professional development were consistent with each other, there was more likely to be coherent and relevant professional development" (Graczewski, Knudson, & Holtzman, 2009, p. 90). Therefore, there is a "strong relationship between certain aspects of school leadership and professional learning opportunities at a school". The case study by Graczweski, Knudson, and Holtzman "highlighted the relationship between the principal's ability to foster a coherent vision and the coherence and relevance of professional development at the school" (2009, p. 90). For elementary principals to

deliver effective professional development and lead their teachers toward school improvement, it is crucial that they know and understand instruction. “Leaders at all levels must know the subject matter, understand how students learn the material, and understand how teachers learn to teach the material” (Graczewski, Knudson, & Holtzman, 2009, p. 91). The role of the instructional leader does not remove all other functions of the school principal; they must continue to balance the demands of other responsibilities, such as construction of the building or the school budget. Instructional leadership, however, is quite necessary for scholastic improvement. “Within a system driven by instructional improvement, the potential effect of leadership activities on improved teacher practice is promising” (Graczewski, Knudson, & Holtzman, 2009, p. 91).

Principals must continue to keep abreast of understanding the content and pedagogy in order to monitor, support, and identify high quality instruction. A study by Louis, Dretzke, and Wahlstrom found that both instructional leadership and shared leadership are necessary for improving schools. The data for this study was collected from teacher surveys developed for a U.S. research project funded by The Wallace Foundation in which 157 schools participated from randomly selected states and districts. Surveys used contained items from established instruments as well as new items. The tools were field tested by teachers and, once finalized, mailed to individual schools where they were administered during whole-group staff meetings. The analysis of the results consisted of two rounds of surveys that determined the importance of further research on the collective and shared work around instruction. “Not only do teachers need to work together around instruction and student learning but administrators need to be part of that process” (2010, p. 332). The findings suggest that principals must primarily focus on instructional and shared leadership.

It is impossible to state that one certain leadership style impacts student achievement, however, it is necessary to look at leadership through a fully-rounded comprehensive lens. In an investigation headed by Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe, researchers examined the impact of certain types of leadership in student outcomes that led to the same answer. The closer principals got to the core of teaching and learning, the more likely they were to have a positive impact on student achievement (2008). The findings suggest that instructional leadership is three to four times greater than that of transformational leadership. A possible explanation for this is that transformational leadership has a greater focus on the relationship between leaders and followers than on their work. Consequently, there is a need to combine practices to ensure that focus is on both relationship and teaching and learning (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). In 2014, Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, and Brown similarly found that instructional leadership has a greater impact in contrast to transformational leadership.

Instructional leadership responsibilities vary with school context and principal style. There are numerous research investigations indicating that instructional leadership is critical to increased academic performance, however, it is difficult to determine the exact instructional leadership practices. Therefore, further examination of effective instructional leadership practices is needed in high-poverty schools, and greater understanding of exactly how that would look and sound. The purpose of this study is to identify instructional leadership practices of principals in high-poverty urban elementary schools.

The researcher assumes that the principal must play the role of instructional leader in a high-poverty urban elementary school in order to improve academic performance. There may be specific instructional leadership practices that principals can implement to positively impact student achievement and eliminate achievement gaps in high-poverty elementary schools. This

qualitative study will use the grounded theory approach to develop a framework of principal practices that may increase student achievement.

The next chapter will describe the research process in detail, including participants selected, methods and tools used, and how data will be analyzed.

Chapter III

Methodology

This study focused on the instructional leadership practices of principals and how they might have enhanced student achievement in high-poverty urban elementary schools in Central Texas. Participants included one principal, one teacher, and one member of the leadership team, such as assistant principal, instructional specialist, or instructional coach, from Title 1 schools that had received merits for at least two years in student progress. Schools invited to participate had demonstrated academic success as measured by the Texas accountability system and had received at least three distinctions for academic performance over the past three years. This chapter describes the plan for completing the research and explains each step in the data collection and analysis, as well as the approach used, the theory, the type of epistemology, and criteria used to select the principals and the research protocol. The research examined contextual challenges in high poverty elementary schools and how principals manage those challenges.

Research questions:

1. What principal instructional leadership practices improve teaching and learning in high-poverty elementary schools?
2. What contextual challenges do principals in high-poverty elementary schools face?
3. How do principals address the challenges they come high-poverty schools?

Methodology

This qualitative research study placed a great emphasis on the natural setting and perspectives of the participants, as well as the selection of instruments that were used to collect data. The researcher assumed that there are principal instructional leadership practices that may

enhance student academic success in high-poverty elementary schools. Creswell states that “qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (2013, p. 44).

The researcher used a grounded theory approach to determine the instructional leadership practices of principals that may enhance student learning. Grounded theory is a “qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation of a process, an action or an interaction shaped by the views of the large number of participants” (Creswell, 2013, p. 83). A key to grounded theory is that it is entrenched or created in the data gathered from the participants that have been involved in the process (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of grounded theory is to develop or generate a theory that is shaped by the views of the participants. Grounded theory does not attempt to prove anything. It is intended to discover or generate a theory (Creswell, 2013). The study was interpreted using the social constructivism framework, “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). As Creswell points out, the goal of such research strongly relies on the participants’ perspective of the situation. The researcher in this investigation heavily relied on the responses of all individuals who participated, in order to generate a theory.

Site and Participant Selection

The Texas accountability system compares schools to others that are similar in student demographics and student social economic status. The system is based on four different indices that allow the state to recognize how schools are performing compared to schools that are similar. **Index 1: Student Achievement.** This index considers the total number of tests taken including students with accommodations. It provides the state with a snapshot of student

performance across subjects. **Index 2: Student Progress.** This index specifically measures students' progress. It allows schools and districts to receive recognition of the progress regardless of the student achievement. **Index 3: Closing Performance Gaps.** Index 3 highlights the academic achievement of economically disadvantaged students as well the two lowest-performing sub groups. **Index: 4 Postsecondary Readiness.** This index measures the percentage of students receiving high academic results and emphasizes the role of schools in preparing students for the rigors of high school, college, career, and life. (TEA, 2017). Elementary schools can receive up to six academic distinctions when compared to other like schools. For the purposes of this study, schools will need to earn a minimum of four distinctions and one must be on student progress. The six distinctions that may be received are:

- Academic Achievement in Reading/English Language Arts
- Academic Achievement in Mathematics
- Academic Achievement in Science
- Top 25 Percent: Student Progress
- Top 25 Percent: Closing Performance Gaps
- Postsecondary Readiness

The district selected for the investigation was the Austin Independent School District in Austin, Texas. It is a large urban school district in central Texas with approximately 84,000 students. AISD has a total of 130 school sites with 85 being elementary schools. The overall total of economically disadvantaged students was 53.3%. Over half of the 85 elementary campuses are considered high-poverty due to their high percentage of students on free and reduced lunch.

The schools were purposefully selected based on a set of criteria using the Texas system. The Texas accountability results were used from 2014 through 2016. (1) The schools selected

have received a minimum of four distinctions from 2014 to 2016. (2) One of the four distinctions was on student progress at least two of the three years. (3) The schools selected must receive Title 1 funding and have at least 85% or more of their students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Based on the criteria, three schools were selected to participate.

The participants selected were according to a set of criteria. Each school were to have three participants; a principal, a teacher and a member of the leadership team, such as an instructional specialist, coach, or assistant principal. The principals selected have remained at the same school and the same position for at least three years. The teachers selected have been in the school for a minimum of three years and be current employees of AISD. The participants from the leadership team have been in the same school and in the same role for the past three years and be current employees of AISD. Therefore, a total of three schools and 9 participants were invited.

Data Collection Instruments

This study used three data sources, interviews and an interview guide, observations and a review of documents.

Interviews

The researcher used semi-structured interviews as well as an interview guide. Each participant was interviewed individually for 40 to 60 minutes. Interviewing “is practical and will net the most useful information to answer research questions” (Creswell, 2013, p. 164). As recommended by Creswell (2013), the researcher used an interview guide and started by developing the research questions followed by selecting the participants and type of interview. For this investigation, the researcher developed a protocol to guide participants on the study being conducted and allowed for open-ended questions

Observations

The scholar also conducted short observations to fully understand the practices described by the principals during the interviews. “Observation is one of the key tools for collecting data in a qualitative research” (Creswell, 2013, p. 166). Each principal participant was observed to allow the research to identify and understand instructional leadership practices and contextual challenges that were described during the interviews. Observations took place during a meeting with instructional leadership team where principals facilitated the meeting.

Review of documents

The purpose of reviewing documents is to better understand the activities and processes the principals may use that impact student achievement. “Multiple data forms often play a secondary role to interviewing in grounded theory studies (Creswell, 2013, p. 162). The researcher reviewed a variety of campus documents that allowed for a verification of instructional practices, supported the identification of contextual challenges and how they managed these challenges. Documents included Title 1 Budgets, Campus Improvement Plans, Meeting Agendas and Texas Education Agency Report Cards.

Field test

The purpose of conducting a field test is to ensure validity and reliability of the interview questions. The researcher created a pilot test to help refine the interview questions. Creswell (Yin, 2009), “recommends a pilot test to refine data collection plans and develop relevant lines of questions” (2013, p. 165). The researcher tested the interview guide to interview with assistance from other principals, teachers and instructional leadership members in schools with similar student demographics.

The field test resulted in the development of two interview guides with minor modifications to the questions in section 2. This change allowed the participants to reflect on the instructional leadership practices based on their current positions. For example, the principal participants were asked about their instructional leadership while the teacher participants were asked about their principal or instructional leadership team instructional practices.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher applied for an IRB approval from The University of Texas at Austin, then followed all requirements presented by the university and school district. Once the Office of Research and Support from the university approved the IRB, the researcher followed guidelines given by the district. Participants received an email as well as a phone from the researcher describing the purpose of the study and data collection instruments to be used. The email and phone call asked for availability of dates and times to complete interviews and observation. The IRB approval letter, interview guide, consent form and abstract were provided to each participant. Once participants signed the consent forms, interviews were recorded and stored in the researcher's laptop. The purpose of the interviews was to learn more about the instructional practices of the principals, identify contextual challenges and how they managed these challenges. All interviews took place in the school where each participant worked, and lasted from 40 to 60 minutes to complete. An interview ensured a clear focus. The interview guide was divided into three major sections and two variations of the interview guide were developed. One was specifically for the principal and the other was for teacher and instructional leadership member. The interview guide started with a brief introduction followed by section one where participants provided their educational background, work history and information regarding the current school. This section allowed the research the opportunity to establish rapport with the

participants. The second part addressed the instructional practices of the principal and leadership team. The third section allowed participants to respond to open-ended questions and elaborate on the research focus.

The goal of the observations was to see the principal facilitating a meeting with the leadership team regarding instructional practices and the management of contextual challenges. Observations only focused on principals and took place in the school of their employment, lasting no more than 25-40 minutes. This allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of the instructional practices and contextual challenges that were described by the principals during the interviews. During the review of documents, the researcher made notes and highlighted statements and data aligned to the responses of the participants. All documents were stored in the researcher's folder and kept confidential. All data collection procedures were completed immediately following the interview to ensure clarity and understanding of the responses.

Data Analysis Procedures

The researcher followed the recommendations for grounded theory used by Creswell (2013) in *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*. Analysis began by reviewing the data using open coding. Creswell refers to open coding as the “first step in the data analysis process that involves taking data and segmenting them into categories of information” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 289). The researcher then identified casual conditions, strategies and intervening conditions that may contribute to the central phenomenon. This type of coding is known as axial coding (Creswell, 2013). Finally, the researcher focused on specific factors and used selective coding to identify major categories of instructional practices and the management of contextual challenges. Creswell described selective coding as the final phase of coding the information. Selective coding allowed the researcher to “the researcher takes the central phenomenon and

systematically relates it to other categories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 289). Further, the researcher developed propositions of the interrelationship of categories and is articulated in chapter 5 (Creswell, 2013).

The technology used to collect data included a recorder to record the interview and a laptop to store both the interview recording and the notes from the observations. Rev.com was used to transcribe all interviews.

Quality Measures

The research relied on triangulation to reduce bias and increase validity. The investigation included a variety of data collection instruments to gain a better understanding of the problem. The researcher used multiple instruments to support the inquiry, such as interviews, interview guides, observations, and document reviews. The purpose of using triangulation was “reduce the risk that your conclusion will reflect only the biases of a specific method, and allows you to gain a more secure understanding of the issues” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 102).

The role of the researcher

The role of the researcher during this study was that of an observer. The researcher has experience being an educator in high-poverty elementary schools and as a school leader, specifically as an elementary principal. Due to this experience and knowledge, the investigator may have brought bias, perspectives, and insights. These viewpoints were minimized by having data tables that allowed the researcher to remain focused and identify specific practices described by each participant. The researcher has experience in conducting qualitative research, as well as having taken research courses and participated in professional development activities that expanded her experiences. This training included interviewing, analyzing data, and drawing conclusions.

Summary

The researcher selected schools that have demonstrated student success according to the Texas accountability system. The participants in each campus have remained in their position for the last three years which allowed them to be able to orally express and describe the instructional leadership practices that occur in their schools. The researcher conducted interviews, reviewed documents and observed the principal to be able to recognize instructional leadership practices that may enhance student success and strategies to manage the contextual challenges faced by each campus.

The next chapter describes the findings based on the data analysis. The researcher will analyze all the data collected and develop a framework for research question #1 and #3. This analysis will describe the instructional leadership practices that made it possible for these schools to demonstrate student progress year after year and, at the same time, have high-student academic performance.

Chapter IV

Findings

This chapter included a description of each site and each participant followed by findings and recommendations of the researcher. The study consisted of face-to-face interviews with three principals, three teachers, and three members of the instructional leadership team. This qualitative study attempted to identify instructional leadership practices used by principals in high-poverty elementary schools. Furthermore, the study identified contextual challenges faced by each campus and discovered practices that helped them manage their challenges. The interview transcripts reflected each participant's background and perceptions regarding instructional leadership practices that have been instrumental in the success of their schools. To better understand participants' responses on effective instructional leadership practices, campus documents were reviewed and principals were observed conducting a team meeting. To protect anonymity of the participants and the school district, pseudonyms were used. This chapter presented results of the analysis of data collected.

Description of Participants

The participants in this study worked in the same school district. Selection criteria included: (1) participants who have served in the same position for a minimum of three years, and (2) participants who have been in the same elementary school for at least three consecutive years. All three administrators were female with three to seven years of experience as elementary school principals, and teaching experience of 12-17 years.

Principals

Leeya works at Lamar Elementary School and is on her seventh year as a principal. She has been at her current campus since opening day five years ago. Leeya had the opportunity to

select every piece of furniture, every piece of tile, the colors on the walls, and each staff member. She has a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration with a certificate to teach early childhood through sixth grade. Her Master's degree is in Educational Administration and she holds principalship certification. Now in her ninth year as a principal, Leeya's current campus is the second elementary principal position she has held. Before moving into administration, Leeya taught for five years in the third, fourth and fifth grades, which she loved and had not planned on leaving so soon. But when the opportunity presented itself nine years ago, she moved into the position of assistant principal at a neighboring elementary school. All of her background in education has been in the same district and all have been in Title 1 schools.

Sylvia is on her third year as principal and fifth year at Hudson Elementary School. Prior to becoming a principal, she was assistant principal at Hudson Elementary for two years. She has a Bachelor's degree in Family and Consumer Science and is certified to teach elementary through eighth grade as well as special education. Her Master's degree is in Educational Administration and she holds a principalship certification. Prior to this campus, Sylvia was a teacher for 17 years in the sixth, seventh and eighth grades, and had the opportunity to teach a special education class in middle school called Life Skills. These combined experiences have given her the knowledge to understand the importance of a good quality education at the elementary level. Sylvia was a teacher in three different middle schools in the same district and became assistant principal for four years at her last middle school prior to arriving at Hudson Elementary. She is now on her ninth year in administration and her entire career has been in the same district.

Margaret has served as the principal of McNeil Elementary for the past five years and is originally from south Texas where she gained all of her teaching experience. She has a

Bachelor's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies and is certified to teach elementary through eighth grade. Her Master's degree is in Educational Administration and she holds a principalship certification. Margaret has taught for 15 years at every grade level from pre-k to fourth grade. She was assistant principal at a middle school for three years that afforded her the opportunity to see firsthand the importance of an elementary education, and describes that experience as being an eye opener that allowed her to see the importance of literature. When Margaret relocated to central Texas, she became an administrative supervisor at the district level for one year prior to becoming principal at McNeil where she is on her eighth year as an administrator.

The three principal participants that held the principal position during this study had common work experiences. All three principals had the opportunity to work in Title 1 elementary schools. Two of three participants had middle school experience and all three participants had over 10 years of practice in education. The principals in this study were all female with at least three years of experience as a principal. Table 1 demonstrated a summary of the three participants.

Table 1:

Profile of Participants - Principals

Principal	Years as Principal	Years in Education	Certifications	Gender	Experience
Leeya	7	12	Principal & 4 th -6 th	Female	Elementary
Sylvia	3	20	Principal & 6 th -8 th & SPED	Female	Elementary & Middle School
Margaret	5	15	Principal & EC-8 th	Female	Elementary & Middle School

Teachers and Instructional Leadership Team

Criteria for selecting these individuals included (1) participants who have served in the same position for a minimum of three years, (2) participants who have been in the same elementary school for at least three consecutive years, and (3) participants who have worked under the same principal for a minimum of three years. Selected individuals consisted of two males and four females with 5-25 years of experience in education.

Joe is a male fifth-grade math teacher at McNeil Elementary originally from north Texas before moving to central Texas about 11 years ago. He has a Bachelor’s degree in Marketing and is certified to teach bilingual education in fourth through eighth grades. This is Joe’s fifth year of teaching, although teaching was not his first choice; he did not have plans to teach nor did he want to have anything to do with math. His career was in sales before moving into the field of education. Joe has been in the same district in the same school where he is departmentalized and says he loves teaching math to his fifth-grade students.

Lisa is a female instructional specialist who has been in education for 19 years and has taught at McNeil Elementary for 14 years. She has a Bachelor's degree in Education and is certified to teach bilingual in first through twelfth grades. Lisa has taught kindergarten and first grade and has been a reading specialist for the past nine years. Her greatest passion is helping students in small groups, as well as coaching teachers. Reading is her favorite subject, so much so that she obtained a Master's degree in literacy. Lisa originally came from west Texas where she taught for five years, and emphasizes how much she loves her school and reading.

Wendy, a female instructional specialist at Lamar Elementary, is in her twentieth year in education. She has a Bachelor's degree in Literature and is certified to teach early childhood through fourth grade. Her current and only role at Lamar, since the school opened five years ago, is as instructional coach for Language Arts. Her major focus is third-grade reading, her favorite subject, and fourth-grade writing. Wendy has taught pre-k, second, third and fifth grades for the last 15 years, all in the same district. She loves her campus and the challenges that working in high-poverty elementary school brings.

Mary is a female fifth-grade teacher at Lamar Elementary and has been involved in education most of her life. She did not, however, have her teaching certification until ten years ago. Her career began in a head-start program in south Texas where she discovered the love of teaching children. Mary has a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood and holds a teaching certificate to teach bilingual education in early childhood through fourth grade. Teaching experience includes pre-k, kinder, first, second and fifth grades, working only in Title 1 schools. Mary has only been teaching for the past five years, and loves her campus where she currently teaches fifth-grade math.

David is a male fifth-grade teacher at Hudson Elementary in his tenth year of education. He has a Bachelor's degree in Sociology and is certified to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) and bilingual education from early childhood through eighth grade. David is from Missouri State University where he taught ESL classes at a center for migrant workers. However, the effect of an immigration raid left him without a job, so he decided to get his teaching certification and move to Texas. David is in his ninth year at Hudson where he has taught kinder, first and fifth grades. He loves teaching Science and is currently teaching reading and weekly Science labs to all fifth-grade students.

Alma, a female curriculum specialist at Hudson Elementary, has been in education for fourteen years. She has a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and is certified to teach bilingual from early childhood through fourth grade. Alma taught first grade for six years in north Texas before relocating and finding the position at Hudson where she has taught first and fourth grade. Alma loves her school, loves helping others, and her favorite subject is reading. Her major focus is coaching fourth-grade teachers and pulling out small groups for writing.

The teachers and instructional leadership members in this study had a variety of experiences and backgrounds. Two of the six participants studied education in college while the others acquired different degrees. Of the six participants two were male and four were female with experiences that range from 5 years to 20 years of practice in education. Table 2 demonstrated a profile of each participant that was a teacher or an instructional leadership member during the study.

Table 2

Profile of Participants – Teachers and Instructional Leadership

Participant	Gender	Positions	Years in Education	Certification	Degree
Joe	Male	Teacher	5	4th-6th grade & Bilingual	B.A. Marketing
Lisa	Female	Instructional Specialist	19	1st-12th & Bilingual	B.A. Education & Master's Literacy
Mary	Female	Teacher	10	EC-4th & 6th – 8th & Bilingual	B.A. Early Childhood
Wendy	Female	Instructional Specialist	20	1st – 12th grade	B.A. Literature
David	Male	Teacher	10	EC-4th grade, 4th -6th & Bilingual	B.A. Sociology
Alma	Female	Curriculum Specialist	14	EC-4th grade & Bilingual	B.A. Education

Site Description

Each of the schools selected to participate in this study are located in a large urban school district. There are a total of 84 elementary schools in the district, 60% of which are Title 1 schools. They are located north of the city, between a 2- and 6-mile radius of each other, and meet the criteria of being both high-poverty and high-minority elementary schools serving student populations of at least 90% poverty and 90% minority. The schools are in areas that have the highest crime rates in the city. Selection criteria included (1) schools that have received a minimum of four academic distinctions for three consecutive years from 2014-2016, and (2) schools that have earned at least one distinction for student progress in at least two of three years. Table I provides a short summary of each school.

Lamar Elementary School

Lamar Elementary opened its doors in August of 2013 and was built to relieve overcrowding of various elementary schools in the area. The building is located in the northern part of the city and intersects with a very busy street with high gang violence and crime, a well-known area for being unsafe. The city's most recent immigration raids, in 2017, have occurred in this same area. Lamar currently has 650 students, 35 classroom teachers, and 7 instructional specialists. Staff comprises one principal, two assistant principals, a counselor, a librarian, and a parent support specialist. The majority of Lamar's students are either new or recent arrivals to this country, or are first- and second-generation born U.S. citizens. Of the 650 students, nearly 600 are English Language Learners (ELL). The percentage of students from low socio-economic backgrounds is currently 97.6% with 85.8% of those being English Language Learners. The majority of students live in a nearby low-rent apartment complex, part of the city's housing development, and houses many of the refugee families from Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. Many of their youth attend Lamar Elementary, numbering approximately 40 students and contributing about 13 different languages. They have four special education units, two resource units, and two Preschool Programs for Children with Disabilities (PPCD). According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA) 2016-17 Report Card, Lamar has 10.2% students in special education, 17.1% mobility rate, 97% economically disadvantaged, and 84.9% English Language Learners. The school's demographic by race/ethnicity is 88.3% Hispanic, 4% African American, 3.4% White, and 3.3% Asian.

Hudson Elementary School

Hudson Elementary is located northeast of the city, approximately 5.6 miles from Lamar Elementary. The building is located off of a major highway in the northern part of the city. The school opened its doors in 1998, serving a large percentage of students from northeast Austin.

The school currently serves about 680 students from nearby affordable housing and affordable apartments. These apartments are a place where the city's refugee center also places many new immigrants. The campus has about 60 refugee students that speak about 17 different languages from countries such as Iraq, Iran, Peru, and Afghanistan. Prior to four years ago, this area of the city did not have a safe route to school and the district was forced to remove all buses due to budget restrictions. More recently, however, the district, along with the city, was able to establish a safe route to and from school for the children and their families. There are about 38 classroom teachers, seven curriculum specialists, two assistant principals, one principal, a parent support specialist, a librarian, a counselor, and a social worker from Communities in Schools. The school also has various special education units such as Resource, Life Skills, Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities (PPCD), and a Social Behavior Unit (SBS). According to TEA's Report Card from 2016-17, Hudson has 8.5% in special education, 18.4% mobility rate, 96.8% students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and 96.8% English Language Learners. The school demographic by race/ethnicity is 81.2% Hispanic, 8.5% African American, 4.3% White, and 4.7% Asian.

McNeil Elementary School

McNeil Elementary is located about 2.2 miles north of Lamar Elementary, and is near a major area for gang crimes and violence. The local HEB store was recently in the news due to a major immigration raid. The campus has about 400 students that live in nearby rental homes or two apartment complexes in the area. There are 26 teachers, one assistant principal, one principal, a counselor, a librarian, a parent support specialist, and four instructional coaches. McNeil's enrollment has steadily decreased due to so many families stabilizing in the affordable homes; children grow up and move but parents remain in the homes. This has slowly declined

McNeil’s mobility rate and student population. About five years ago, enrollment was close to 600 hundred students, but more recently the numbers have dropped to 400. The campus has several special education units, such as two Life Skills, two Resource, and two Preschool Programs for Children with Disabilities (PPCD). According to TEA’s 2016-17 Report Card, McNeil has 14.5% students in special education, 18.5% mobility rate, 94.4% economically disadvantaged, and 78.1% English Language Learners. The school demographics by race/ethnicity is 94.9% Hispanic, 3.8% African American, .7% White, and .2% Asian.

The three schools that were included in this study were similar in their student demographics. Each of the schools had at least 90% or higher of their students considered economically disadvantaged. In addition, each campus had Hispanic students as their largest student group with 81% or higher. The number of English Language Learners in each school was over 75% of their student population. Table 3 demonstrated a description summary of each school that participated in the study.

Table 3

School Description Summary

School Name	Economically Disadvantaged	ELL	Mobility Rate	Hispanic	African American
Lamar Elementary	98%	85%	17.1%	88%	4.0%
Hudson Elementary	94%	79%	18.4%	81.2%	8.5%
McNeil Elementary	95%	78%	18.5%	95%	3.8%

In addition to the similar demographics, each school has demonstrated student progress according to the Texas accountability system between 2014 and 2016. The distinction for student progress is represented by the number 4 in the column titled Distinctions Earned in 2016. Table 4 offers an overview of each school and the distinctions earned in 2016. Each number represents a distinction, 1. Academic Achievement in Reading/English Language Arts; 2. Academic Achievement in Mathematics; 3. Academic Achievement in Science; 4. Top 25 Percent: Student Progress; 5. Top 25 Percent: Closing Performance Gaps; 6. Postsecondary Readiness

Table 4

Summary of Distinctions Earned

School Name	Year Built	# of Students	# of Classrooms	# of Instructional Specialist	Distinctions Earned 2016
Lamar Elementary	2013	650	35	7	2,3,4,5,6
Hudson Elementary	1998	680	38	7	1,2,4,5,6
McNeil Elementary	1999	400	26	4	1,2,4,5,6

Research Questions

Each participant in the study contributed their perceptions of instructional leadership practices and contextual challenges encountered in their schools. The principals were able to reflect on their instructional leadership while teachers and instructional specialists were able to describe their own campus leadership practices comprised of principal, assistant principal, and instructional specialist. According to Creswell, interviews play a major role in the collection of data in research studies that use grounded theory (2013). The researcher used an interview guide

that differentiated principals, teachers and instructional specialists. The first section of the interview allowed the participants to build rapport with the researcher. The second section of the interview posed structured questions and third section of the interview offered open-ended questions that allowed for reflection on other practices that might not have been discussed previously.

Data collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, observations, and a review of documents provided a rich description of the participants' lived experiences associated with instructional leadership practices that may have enhanced student performance in their schools. In addition, these data collection tools allowed the researcher to determine the contextual challenges of each site and identified the practices that were used to manage these challenges. Data were analyzed first through open coding to identify meaningful statements and reflections aligned to the research questions. Once a category was evident, axial coding was used. The researcher then used selective coding to discover themes. The results are presented according to each research question, including emergent themes and participants' voices that support each topic.

Question 1: What principal instructional leadership practices improve teaching and learning in high-poverty schools?

Data analysis surfaced four major themes regarding instructional practices used by principals. According to the participants, these included creating an instructional plan with expectations, building a system of collaboration and support, implementing a support system for students and teachers, and designing a system to monitor the instructional plan.

Creating an Instructional Plan with Expectations. First, the principal must identify the needs of the school (both teacher and student needs) and create an instructional plan with clear

expectations. This means that the principal aligns the plan to meet the needs of the teachers and the students. If students need to improve their reading skills, then the instructional plan would have clear and explicit strategies, resources, interventions and expectations of how the reading block would like in every grade level. For example, the plan may include a computer program to build the students' fluency and comprehension skills as well as a resource for teacher to use during their guided reading or intervention time. Each component of the reading block would include a set of expectations such as a read aloud text aligned with the reading comprehension skill of the week for at least 15 minutes a day. The plan may also include the scope and sequence of reading skills for the entire semester or year and the resources and strategies that will be used to teach each reading skill. The instructional plan would include professional development for teachers as well as campus-wide strategies. For example, all teachers would use the reporter's formula when teaching summarization in all grade levels. The instructional plan may use a program that allows all students and teacher to focus on reading. For instance, a school may use Accelerated Reader to promote reading and encourage students to continue earning their reading points to earn rewards and recognitions.

Leeya reflected on her expectations for grade-level planning:

My expectation is that we all plan together and if there is something that you would like to read, or if there is a strategy that they would like for us to try, then they bring it up in common planning and we can all decide as a team if we want to implement. Then if we all agree, the expectation is that you are going to do it in your room.

Sylvia described the common school-wide strategies that her campus uses for math and reading:

We all need to be on the same page with our reading strategy. We have really started working on alignment of writing throughout the grade levels. For Reading, we are all

using the same strategy, and for math we use SPAR. We make sure all the strategies are aligned.

Creating an instructional plan with expectations was evident in the observation of the principal at Lamar. For instance, during the meeting with the instructional leadership team that included the principal, assistant principal and instructional specialist, each participant reviewed the status of students in their intervention groups and their use of the reading strategies during their Friday assessment. The team also had a quick discussion about the teachers in their grade level to confirm the use of the same strategies during their reading core instruction. This confirmed that the campus has an instructional plan with clear expectations for reading.

Another example of a campus with an instructional plan was observed during the meeting of Hudson Elementary, the principal questioned whether the use of the math strategy was evident between students and teachers. The principal wanted to ensure the strategies that were being used were aligned with the math strategy referred to as STAR (Stop, Think, Act, Review). In response, the instructional specialist recounted the alignment in the math strategies of each classroom and the actions she had taken to support the teachers and students. A third example, as described by the principal of Lamar Elementary, was that her team discussed reading components and whether they should be occurring every day up until state assessments. After reviewing the reading plan, they decided to remove the read-aloud section of the model until state testing was concluded in May. This is an example of a principal having a specific instructional plan in mind that included expectations for a specific part of the year.

In the Campus Improvement Plan (CIP), principals included an instructional plan for each content area and designate who is responsible for monitoring that plan. The CIP for Lamar Elementary includes professional development and resources for teachers and specialists, and

“provide professional learning for teachers on math content training that supports conceptual understanding with math skills, computational fluency and differentiation for students” (p. 21).

Building a system of collaboration and support. This theme refers to the principal forming an instructional leadership team that communicates, guides and supports the implementation of the instructional plans. The team may include the principal, assistant principal, instructional coach, reading specialist and librarian. This support system also incorporates coaching and mentoring for teachers and modeling lessons by an instructional leadership member and/or the principal or assistant principal. According to the data, the principal is responsible for creating a cohesive team that will collaborate and support implementation of the instructional plan. Participants were able to reflect on their schools’ support team.

Alma, fourth-grade curriculum specialist at Hudson Elementary, explained how she supports her group of teachers:

I have to mentor them, and I have to show them how we do things. I support the teachers in whatever they need. If they need lessons to be modeled, I model.

Joe, fifth-grade teacher, described the support and collaboration that occurs between him and the instructional coach assigned to his team:

I have had an instructional coach to help me pull materials, help me clarify misconceptions that I might have, or confusions and apprehension about how I am going to teach this lesson. We have an instructional coach that will offer her expertise and her experiences, and not just her but other coaches as well as our administrators.

Sylvia, who is a principal, described how her campus specialist supports teachers:

Every grade level meets with their specialist and they share out their lesson plans. The specialist guides and provides input, and ensures they are following expectations.

Knowing that teachers have the specialist for support is key.

A system of collaboration and support was noted during each observation. Structure of the meetings clearly reflected the supportive environment for teachers. Principals at Lamar and Hudson depend greatly on the support of instructional specialist and their abilities to monitor instructional plans. The instructional specialists appear to articulate the needs of their grade levels, specific teachers, and content areas that may have been observed to be in need of alignment. For example, at the Lamar meeting, the instructional specialist described the steps she took to support one of the new fourth-grade teachers who was having difficulty following a lesson plan while teaching the skill of the week. This is an example of the collaborative approach teams used to update each other on what is happening on campus. The structure of the agenda items also supported this environment and can include counselor updates, parent support specialist updates, and librarian updates, with each member of the team having the opportunity to share student and teacher progress.

CIP documents from all three schools validate the collaborative system of placing the responsibility of monitoring and supporting the instructional plan on the instructional leadership team. This team is also responsible for implementing campus-wide instructional initiatives. The CIP from Lamar Elementary states “Implement professional learning communities that support use of best practices in math instruction and assessment and allow for collaborative planning, reflective learning, mentoring and coaching” (p. 21). According to the CIP, the instructional leadership team is responsible for the implementation and monitoring of this section. Title 1

budgets also show how principals allocate money to fund instructional coaches, parent support specialists, and other additional positions as needed; a practice consistent in all three schools.

Implementing a support system for students. According to participants, establishing a system of support for student learning is essential. This may include small group reading instruction or small group math intervention by a specialist or afterschool tutoring program. In regards to student support at home, participants find ways to support students who cannot complete assignments or read at home due to lack of support and/or resources. Systems of support may include help with homework before or after school or allowing students to complete their reading logs during school hours with no consequences.

Leeya described the support her school offers to her learners:

If a parent shows us that they don't have the tools to support us in getting the homework done, then we figure out how they are going to get the homework done at school and we don't address it as a consequence anymore. All of my coaches are on duty at seven. The intermediate students report to the gym and they read or do their homework. If they didn't do their homework at home or if they are struggling, then a coach will give them feedback immediately.

Wendy defined an effective instructional practice to help students:

One important instructional practice is the intervention groups. I think it is important to pull them in very small groups; it targets these kids. In these groups, you are teaching specific strategies towards what they need.

During the observations, it was clear that each principal applied a system of support for their students. For example, the Lamar principal reviews her weekly assessment by small groups to determine progress of students and if any need to be moved from the group. The principal at

McNeil reviews their Google document to check student performance from the previous week's Grammar assessment. According to the team agendas, it was evident that each principal took time out of their weekly meetings to review data and student support. The principal at Lamar was observed reviewing academic growth data from a math program called Formative Loop used in each classroom, then discussed how to adjust interventions.

According to Title 1 budgets, each campus demonstrated the allocation of funds for specific programs. McNeil and Lamar allocated money for Accelerated Reader and Formative Loop. Title 1 budget from Hudson and Lamar support Imagine Learning, amongst other programs, as well as funds that pay teachers for tutoring and extended-day support for students. CIP documents also confirmed the implementation of student interventions in reading, writing, math and science, and placed the responsibility for their completion on the teachers and instructional leadership teams.

Designing a system to monitor students and teachers. Data revealed that establishing a system to monitor student learning, as well as teacher implementation of the instructional plan, is critical. A variety of tools are used for monitoring purposes. These include weekly observations, walkthroughs, classroom environments, student work, team meeting agendas, and lesson plans. Student progress is also monitored using weekly assessment data, benchmark data, student products and artifacts, as well as progress in programs such as Accelerated Reader. Teachers use the data to modify their core instruction and interventions, and the instructional leadership team can also collectively monitor the data to adjust teacher and student support.

Margaret described the way her leadership team monitors student data:

We do it at CST every Friday; we have a meeting on the different grade levels. Those are already pre-scheduled from August to May, so that way we know what grade level is

coming up every Friday and who we are going to discuss. We have a Google chart where we track kids. If we see anybody not meeting expectations, this is when we discuss “Okay does he fit in a reading group or math group?”

Sylvia reflected on how she and her instructional leadership team monitors their instructional plan:

Walk-throughs [and] monitoring lesson plans: we make it a point, the three administrators. Monday morning we sit here in my office and we each check our grade levels’ lesson plans. We follow up with teachers making sure they get their’s posted. We attend team meetings, we ask questions, we make sure everything is aligned. We monitor and see that they are following strategies and if they know them. Walkthroughs are really, really a good tool because you get to dialogue, too, with the students.

Sylvia further explained how they monitor the Instructional Plan:

I’m a stickler for if it’s in your lesson plan and I don’t see you following it then we have conversations. If it’s in your lesson plan and you are not doing it, what’s going on? I do tell staff, and I get it, sometimes we get a little bit behind, but why are you getting behind?

All three principals were observed analyzing student data, particularly data about students on a watch list or students of concern. The instructional coach at Lamar Elementary reviewed the progress of each student in her intervention group and was able to give the principal an update on their progress and next steps. If a student was not making progress, they adjusted the interventions and amount of support. For instance, the principal of Lamar was observed asking her instructional coaches the progress of students that attend the morning reading interventions.

The Title 1 budgets for the three schools revealed evidence of allocations of funds for afterschool tutoring opportunities for students. Each campus budget allocates money to finance afterschool interventions and resources for teachers. The budgets at Lamar and Hudson demonstrated the allocation of money for teachers to plan and prep tutoring interventions in math and reading. In addition, the agendas of all three schools set time aside to review assessment data and adjust small group interventions.

Question 2: What contextual challenges do principals in high-poverty elementary schools face?

According to campus documents and data, participants serve in schools with similar demographics: high-minority, high-poverty families. The schools are located in close proximity to one another, so given the student demographics and according to participants' perceptions, principals face a multitude of similar challenges beyond their control. Data revealed seven contextual challenges which include high mobility, low parent involvement, poverty, student mental health, parent concerns, the number of English Language Learners, and community affairs. While the three schools were similar in student demographics, some of their contextual challenges varied from campus to campus.

High mobility. Participants from each school recognized that student mobility is a major challenge. According to the Texas Education Agency 2016-17 Report Cards, the state mobility rate was 16.2%, which is lower than the rates in the three schools in this study. McNeil's mobility was at 18.5%, Hudson at 18.4%, and Lamar at 17.1%. The participants were able to recognize the challenges of mobility and how they managed to consistently enroll new students. As stated by Margaret, "Mobility is huge. It is at 18.5%". Mary acknowledged the administrators who are able to monitor their student's mobility:

Mobility is an issue at our campus and I don't know how our administrators do it to keep up with it, but luckily for us they are watching attendance and who is out and who is new.

Leeya reflected on her number of students at her school:

We have about 650 because we have such high mobility, the number fluctuates throughout the school year.

David, the teacher at Hudson described how much their mobility impacts their planning and preparation:

And then we get new kids all the time. So then as soon as you think you might have figured it out, a new kid changes the dynamic and you have to scramble to find things and spend more time to figure it out. It is overwhelming when we have all the other things going on and having to do.

During observations at McNeil and Hudson, it was noted that the principals allocated time during leadership meetings to review attendance and enrollment. Challenges associated with mobility arose as they identified new students struggling with attendance and academic issues. For example, the principal at Hudson Elementary had her team report on the arrival of any new students that may have enrolled during the week. She continuously asked how the students were adjusting to their school.

According to the agenda from leadership team meeting at McNeil Elementary, the principal listed several items she wanted to discuss, such as student attendance, enrollment, absenteeism, and tardiness. Further, the McNeil's principal sets time on a weekly basis to discuss enrollment of current and new students and their attendance data, which ultimately reflects on the amount of time most principals spend on analyzing pertinent data.

Low parent involvement. Participants reported having low parent volunteerism and involvement during activities. It appears that many of the same parents help out all the time and are the same parents that are involved in their child's academic plans. For instance, Sylvia discussed the challenges she has when speaking to some parents about their children's academic needs:

Sometimes they don't see eye to eye with us. They don't see what we are doing for their child. They don't get it and they don't understand it.

David, from Hudson Elementary, described one reason why he thinks parents are not involved in their school:

They don't participate as much because they aren't really from this area. The students come from all over and do not know our community.

Margaret reflected on parent involvement in her school and explained a few reasons why the involvement may be low:

Parents come in but it's the same parents all the time. I wish we had more participation but our parents work and if they don't work then it's the spouse not letting them come to our campus or what have you. Because they have to be at home to take care of the little ones or they have to have dinner ready for them. It's just the culture that our community has, that's the way they are.

While observing the leadership team meeting at McNeil, it was noted that the parent support specialist (PSS) reported updates on a variety of parent classes and activities occurring throughout the school. The updates included the amount of parents in attendance and a quick review of the sign in sheets to check if any new parents participated.

Review of the CIP from Hudson Elementary illustrates a section that focuses on increasing parent involvement in the education process. The CIP includes a section with a goal to have more parent meetings and activities during the day and after school. The types of parent meetings include coffee with the principal, family fun nights, academic family events and student recognition assemblies. Such planned activities are integrated into the master calendar to help increase parent involvement. The CIP states, “the principal and parent support specialist are responsible for the planning and implementation of these activities” (p. 14).

Poverty. A participant from each school in this study expressed poverty as a challenge for their school. This can mean that students may have limited resources at home such as food, clothes, warm water or a bed. It can also affect their living situations. For example, some families may live in shelters, motels or with a friend. Margaret, the principal at McNeil, described the poverty at her campus:

Poverty. Poverty’s big. Our kids come in with nothing. No food. No clothes. They can’t even do their homework because they don’t have the ability to, once they leave school.

Some kids are sleeping in cars or have no one to support them at home.

Mary, fifth-grade teacher, expressed her view of the challenges of poverty at her school:

Poverty is a challenge for our school. The poverty level that some of our kids live in, and some of the home lives, they have difficult situations that they have to go home to.

Sylvia reflected on one of the school’s greatest challenges and comments, “poverty and homelessness has been very challenging this year.”

According to the participants, the levels of poverty are critical contextual challenges calling for focused support. During the observation of the principal at Lamar Elementary, the principal reiterated the importance of morning support for reading and homework assistance for

the students. During the observation of the principal at Hudson, Sylvia reminded her team of how much their children need the school's support.

Furthermore, according to Texas Education Agency Report Cards, the district's and state's percentages of economically disadvantaged students are much lower than the schools in this study. The report card shows the district to be at 53.3% economically disadvantaged and the state at 59.0%; however, the schools in this study are over 90% economically disadvantaged. Title 1 documents also confirmed that all three schools have been allocated funds due to their poverty levels. According to these documents, the three participating schools receive between \$369,262 and \$715,994 every year from Title 1 grants.

Student mental health. According to participants in two of the three schools, students' mental health is a tremendous contextual challenge. Because of trauma and unidentified mental health illness, they have experienced a sizeable increase in behavioral difficulties, such as insubordination, anger outbursts resulting in destruction of property, and assault on teachers and students. Participants from McNeil and Hudson reported that mental health and behavior is a tremendous challenge; however, they also have a Special Education Unit called Social Behavior Skills (SBS) for children labeled as emotionally disturbed. These children have demonstrated the need for a more restrictive environment and allows the teacher to focus on their specific behavior needs and skills. Unfortunately, there are not always quick solutions.

Alma reflected on the challenges their behavioral unit has on instruction:

We have a behavioral unit. That is something big because we have a lot of kids with mental health problems. They are in the classrooms, they have outbursts, then maybe its 30 minutes of instruction [time] that the teacher is using to calm the student.

David described how these extreme behaviors impact the teachers:

I think with behavior, not the overall, I think the extreme behavior from the unit or kids that could qualify, I don't know if there's much more that they can do and I think that's how teachers feel too, which brings down the moral because when you are constantly dealing with these things and you feel like, okay but if they have been advocating for me and I am advocating for myself to get more help and nothing happens, then teachers don't know what to do next.

Margaret explained her schools' next steps in regards to their mental health concerns:

We have a lot of mental health issues with students. We are at the point where we are going to get two mental health specialist. So I am giving them a classroom where they can actually start seeing students, parents and community. That is huge.

During a meeting at Hudson Elementary, the principal, in an effort to discuss behavior concerns, was observed asking the curriculum specialist about the SBS unit and asked "if she had any interruptions with a student from SBS that week." The specialist expressed her frustration and said "the fifth-grade student had been having constant meltdowns during interventions and had interrupted her small groups every day that week."

The CIP from Hudson Elementary included a section on campus climate and discipline, "the school will implement a campus-wide positive behavior system from the beginning of the academic year" (p. 18). This plan also included a "strong behavior system with clear expectations." It was noted that the agenda from the instructional leadership team meeting at Hudson Elementary included time for discussion on behavior concerns.

Parent concerns. Many of the participants expressed that parent concerns were a common pattern in all three schools. The responses consisted of family issues, such as Child

Protective Services(CPS), domestic violence, and immigration. Joe explained how parents' challenges and status in the United States might impact their children's emotions:

I think some of our parent's legal status in the country may also be detrimental to the kids' feelings of safety or even belonging more recently.

Mary described parent concerns she has dealt with:

Sometimes it is CPS involved with the family or immigration or even a more traumatic event such as the family as lost their home to a fire.

Leeya reflected on the immigration status of many of her families:

Now with the political climate a lot of them are really afraid because the majority of them are undocumented. So they work really hard and a lot of them are living in fear, so I think it makes our responsibility even more so that we do what they are trusting us to do.

During the meeting at Lamar Elementary, it was observed that the principal asked the PSS to give an update on the case of a family that had recently lost their home to a fire. The Parent Support Specialists (PSS) helped the campus stay abreast of different parent situations, and is present at a portion of the instructional leadership meetings at Lamar.

It was noted that the meeting agendas from McNeil and Lamar included the PSS as part of their weekly meetings, thus allowing principals time to focus and keep track of any specific parent or family concerns. Campus Improvement Plans and Title 1 budgets for each campus also demonstrated the need for allocating funds for the parent support specialist to help bridge parent-teacher communication and increase engagement between families and schools.

Number of English Language Learners and refugee students. English Language Learners (ELL) refers to students whose first language is not English. According to the data, all three schools have a high percentage of ELL students: Lamar with 85%, Hudson with 79% and

McNeil with 78%. Refugee students from other countries also fall under this label, however, the federal government determines their status. The schools in this study receive students from all over Latin America, as well as the Middle East such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Peru, among others. This presents a major contextual challenge in two of the schools that have a high number of refugee students; all three schools, however, serve predominantly ELL students. Reportedly, meeting the unique needs of each learner can be very difficult, especially with the various backgrounds and experiences they bring from their countries. Alma explained how and why refugee students can be challenging:

We have a big population of refugees. That is a big challenge because of the language. Not just the language, even the culture. They do not always know how to sit down. It is not just the language, it's the culture because they are coming from different systems. It's not like it is good or bad, it is just different. They have to set down over there and then they have to go and eat lunch at a table. They just don't always understand.

Leeya described the challenges of having over 600 English Language Learners at her campus:

Not a lot of people know how to help us. An ELL is not just an ELL. They come to us at different points. Some are migrant, they have been in states that don't support Spanish, so they have been doing English immersion. How can we place them in a full English classroom when they do not completely grasp the language?

David explained the challenge of having so many languages at his campus:

It is harder to make sure that parents are included when you have 17 languages and it is harder to make sure that everyone's included when their kids are in the behavior unit or having trouble with academics.

The high number of refugee students attending both Hudson and Lamar bring a different set of needs. While observing the principal in a meeting with the leadership team at Hudson Elementary, the person responsible for providing instructional and emotional support to refugee students was present and commented on the most recent updates concerning a refugee family. This position is focused on all the school's refugee students and their families.

According to the CIP for Lamar Elementary, "the campus will train teachers to use second language acquisition strategies such as sheltered instruction, biliteracy, and dual language to make core content more comprehensible and to develop academic language" (p. 14). McNeil's CIP states "that the campus will ensure all teachers use their proficiency level descriptor to identify their ELL's proficiency levels in listening, speaking, writing and reading and will also teach the English Language Proficiency Standards as part of their daily core content curriculum" (p. 11).

Community affairs. While all three principals work in high-poverty areas of the city, only one spoke about community affairs being a challenge that impacted the daily operations of the school. Examples mentioned refer to crimes occurring close to campus that prevented teachers and staff from either leaving work or experiencing a forced lockdown because of an armed suspect seen in the area. Wendy reflected on her school community challenges:

We have been through lockdowns and drills, like there is someone with a weapon running across our yard. With those challenges outside, sometimes we have no choice but to deal with them inside.

Mary described how occurrences in her community can impact their school:

There was somebody who was running and there were police chasing them, and we had to have a reverse lockdown. We have to deal with the drugs going on, the prostitution that is going on in the neighborhoods, all of that stuff.

During the instructional meeting at Lamar Elementary, it was observed how important their need to maintain constant communication with city officials and the district police department. As an example, the counselor and PSS shared an update on an investigation that had taken place near the campus where a person had been found dead. The counselor did not have all the information other than that the area should be clear and safe. The counselor also listed other community-related problems such as drug related crimes. Lamar Elementary has vision statement in their CIP that states “committed to providing high-quality and challenging instruction in a safe learning environment” (p. 3). In addition, the campus has written safety procedures posted throughout the building.

The challenges experienced by each school varied, however they did have many similarities. For example, Lamar Elementary experienced all but student mental health while Hudson experienced six challenges except community affairs. Table 5 provides an overview of the challenges experienced by each campus according to the responses of the participants.

Table 5

Contextual Challenges per campus

School	High Mobility	Low Parent Involvement	Poverty	Student Mental Health	High Number of ELL's and Refugee	Parent Concerns	Community Affairs
Lamar Elementary	x	x	x		x	x	x
McNeil Elementary	x	x	x	x		x	
Hudson Elementary	x	x	x	x	x	x	

Question 3: How do principals address the challenges faced in high-poverty elementary schools?

During the interpretation of data for the question 3, the researcher discovered two levels of analysis. One level described the practices of each individual school furthermore discovering that practices does not always mean they are instructional. The researcher referred to instructional practices as defined in chapter 1. Many of the practices identified fall into a different category called social emotional learning. These social emotion learning practices allow students to be able to participate and engage in their learning without the worry of some factors that are outside of their control. In the case of the three schools in this study, these practices support the social and emotional well-being and learning of their students. The second level analysis occurred after closely analyzing the responses of each school. The researcher discovered a set of common strategies that derived from the practices of each individual campus.

Lamar Elementary

The data collected from the participants that have been employed with Lamar Elementary for the past three years demonstrated that their major contextual challenges include high mobility, low parent involvement, poverty, parent concerns, high number of English Language Learners and Refugee students and community affairs. Lamar had a set of distinct practices they have implemented to help them manage these challenges. Wendy, the instructional specialist reflected on practices they have implemented to support refugee students and students of poverty:

If they come with no language, we are going to work on getting you language, you come in with hardly any clothing we will get you a decent wardrobe. You know if this child is

homeless, she is able to come in a little before everyone else and take a shower because we have showers in particular locations.

In addition, Wendy explained a few practices that have supported students of poverty:

The dental programs, every child gets services. Each student gets a free pair of shoes.

The administration has gone through extremes to get these programs. Every child received a coat this year and it's not just like every child, it's like every child and their siblings was able to get a coat.

Leeya described how they have created programs that are structured to support the academic needs of new students:

A lot of our programs are structured so that if a student moves away and we get another student, there is so much of a system that the new student easily know what they are supposed to be doing at any time. And then also, it helps the teachers because it's a system and you can just kind of plug in students and it still works. So a lot of the differentiated support to get new students adjust usually comes from someone other than the classroom teacher, so it comes from the coach or a counselor or an administrator.

Mary, teacher at Lamar Elementary described how local partnerships have supported their community affairs:

We have a lot of community support. I know that the police department and other programs that are working in the community to support us as well. We have the YMCA that not only comes to our school for programs but has a facility down the street as well. I think that bringing the community has been very helpful in cleaning up this area.

Mary continued to describe how her principal and leadership team monitored mobility and held others accountable:

Mobility is an issue and I know our administrators are watching attendance. The administrators question those in charge about student attendance and enrollment and request updates from that person and figure it out as a team if the family is going through a hard time such as no electricity at home.

The participants of Lamar Elementary implemented a variety of practices to address each of their contextual challenges. Table 6 provided a summary of the instructional practices as well as the social emotional learning practices for each challenge identified.

Table 6

Practices of Lamar Elementary

Lamar Elementary	High Mobility	Low Parent Involvement	Poverty	Parent Concerns	High Number of ELL's and Refugee	Community Affair
Instructional Practices	-Create a system for assessing new students and placing them in appropriate placement and interventions -Develop structured academic programs and interventions	-Parent support specialist organizes and plans education classes and activities for parents		-Parent conferences to inform the parent of the interventions and progress	-Students are assessed for language and academic needs to determine placement and support -Structured academic programs and interventions	-Explicitly review each safety drill with all staff members -Written procedures of each drill provided to each staff member
Social Emotional Practices	-Create a system of communication with counselor, Parent Support Specialist and instructional specialist when a new student enrolls to provide the necessary support	-Large focus to increase PTA enrollment and participation -Consistent and clear communication with parents -Schedule field trips with parents and their child -Plan evening school events for families	-St. David's free dental services for every student -Vision Supports provide glasses and eye exams for students in need -Each child receives a coat and a pair of shoes from local organizations -School allows students to use facility including showers -Free breakfast and lunch program for all students	-System for meeting with parents -Frequent parent communication -System for conducting home visits as needed -Parent Support Specialist maintains up to date documentation of services for families in need		-Developed a partnership with local YMCA to provide enrichment opportunities for all students within the school facility and their own facility -Alliance with police department to offer afterschool sports and activities -Established a system of communication when a drill occurs

Hudson Elementary. The participants from Hudson Elementary identified a set of similar but different challenges compared to Lamar Elementary. The responses included the following contextual challenges, high mobility, low parent involvement, poverty, high number of students

with mental health, parent concerns and a high number of English Language Learners and Refugee students. Hudson Elementary participants explained many of their practices that helped them manage their challenges. Sylvia described practices that support families of poverty and student with mental health issues:

I have a really strong afterschool program called Rocket Peace Club which is funded through the Andy Roddick Foundation. We also have 21st century and Prime Time that have helped fund afterschool programming. That really benefits our students after school. It helps to keep them safe but also focus on the academics. We are also fortunate to have Communities in Schools. They target really high needs families and they work with families provided wraparound services, really intense services with families.

Sylvia continued to explain how they have managed to increase parental involvement:

The Kellogg Grant, which is now Families as Partners, has really been helpful. We are finally seeing the planning. Take all the planning and the meetings and we finally saw the fruit of our labor, so to speak. We have more parents involved. The grant helped us take our students on a college trip with their parents. We also started a garden club with a grant from Sprouts and UT.

David, teacher at Hudson Elementary reflected on practices to help them manage their increased numbers of mental health behaviors and how a partnership supported them:

We have these character traits that we follow and we do our SEL lessons. Then we have a Knighting Ceremony once a month. We were adopted by the rotary club. Two different rotary clubs and they have supported this event every month. Each month is a new theme, a new character theme and then we talk about it during every morning announcement. Teachers and students vote on who they think represents the character trait the best.

Those students are recognized during these ceremonies. The fifth grade students actually come up and they get to sit down on a pillow and they are knighted by a knight dressed up.

David continued to describe the amount of parent communication practices they implemented to get more parents informed including refugee families:

We work together a lot. We try to get as many helpers as we can. We have someone to work with the refugee students and we have our parent support specialist work with the district to send out living tree messages and a phone service that can translate for all families.

Alma, curriculum specialist explained how she helps teachers with behaviors and provides additional support for students' academics:

I am in charge of fourth grade, so I support the fourth grade team with behaviors. I also intervene by providing students with small group interventions. I am also like an interventionist. I am also in charge of the students taking the test in Spanish. I have all the kids that are going to test in Spanish. That helps the teachers, because that frees them to teach English instead of trying to juggle English and Spanish.

Hudson Elementary has established many practices to help them manage their contextual challenges. However, many of the practices described fall under social emotional learning versus the instructional practices. Table 7 demonstrated a summary of their practices for each contextual challenged identified by the participants.

Table 7

Practices of Hudson Elementary

Hudson Elementary	High Mobility	Low Parent Involvement	Poverty	Student Mental Health	Parent Concerns	High Number of ELL's and Refugee
Instructional Practices	-New students are provided the appropriate support and interventions	-Parent support specialist organizes and plans activities in the school for parents		-Character Traits lessons every week taught by counselor -Social Emotional Learning Curriculum taught in every classroom every week	-Conference with parents to problem solve	-Computer program to support newcomers with literacy skills
Social Emotional Practices	-Create a system with instructional specialists to monitor new enrollment	-Parents are offered free English as a Second Language classes (ESL) -Technology Class for parents free of charge -Nutrition Class for parents free of charge -Grant from Sprouts and UT to start a garden club for families -Kellogg Grant to support with parental engagement and increase parent leadership	-Local organizations donate school supplies for all students -Communities in schools offers wrap around services for families in need -Andy Roddick Foundation offers after school enrichment -Prime Time and 21 st Century Learning offers enrichment classes for students after school	-Private Foundation offers a Rocket Peace Club -Knights ceremony celebrated once a month to acknowledge students and classrooms demonstrating the character traits -Character traits are announced every morning to remind students -Curriculum specialist in every grade support teacher with behaviors -Rotate students between classrooms	-Communities in Schools' Social Worker supports families in need -System of communication with parents	-Refugee specialist supports students with transitions from home to school -Work with Caritas a local organization to communicate and support refugee families

McNeil Elementary. The three participants who worked at McNeil Elementary also identified their own unique set of challenges and explained the practices they have implemented that helped manage them. Their contextual challenges included, high mobility, low parent involvement, poverty, high number of students with mental health and parent concerns. This campus had the least number of challenges that were identified by the participants in comparison to Lamar and Hudson. However, it is the smaller in total number of students from the three schools. Joe explained how his campus has implemented practices to help manage low parental involvement:

Our leadership team addresses those challenges by creating more community based events. So we have been blessed to get this grant for a garden. So we are going to have a community garden. Things like that, have brought our parents in and has them engaged and involved. Taking our students to college campuses with our Kellogg Grant has also opened some of these parents eyes to participating because they are just as interested about seeing the University as their kid because they haven't seen one.

Joe continued to explain other practices that have helped with parent engagement:

We have a welcoming environment. We welcome parents to take GED classes too. If we are pushing their kids to better themselves, we are also doing the same thing with the parents. We provide them with services. We have an amazing parent support specialist that comes out and lets parents know about services offered, what programs they can participate in, programs to learn English, programs to join book clubs, everything that is going to encourage their child when they see their parents doing it.

Margaret, described how they managed their number of students with mental health:

We are at a point where we are going to get two mental health specialist. I am giving them a classroom where they can actually start seeing students, parents and community. They will also be able to support us with mental health behaviors on campus and find additional outside resources for families.

Margaret further explained how they have managed their levels of poverty:

Poverty is big. Kids come in with nothing. They don't even do their homework. We are not giving them consequences. We let them do their homework and teach them how to do it.

Lisa reflected on how they have managed to increase parent involvement:

We have family events like student recognitions and parents like to see their children get rewarded. It is a school wide event and we allow parents. They thank us and say oh you need to keep doing this.

The three participants that worked at McNeil Elementary provided responses that revealed five major contextual challenges their schools face. Table 8 provides an overview of the practices they have implemented to manage each challenge.

Table 8

Practices of McNeil Elementary

McNeil Elementary	High Mobility	Low Parent Involvement	Poverty	Student Mental Health	Parent Concerns
Instructional Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Assess new students to determine appropriate placement of interventions and support -Provide new student with services such as special education or speech. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Welcoming environment -Weekly student recognition assemblies 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Social Emotional Learning Curriculum taught in every classroom every week -Character Lessons taught by counselor every week 	
Social Emotional Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -System of communication with registrar and instructional specialist when new student enrolls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Grant to increase parental engagement and parent leadership -Organize family evening events -Established a community garden -Field trips with parents and students to universities -Book Clubs for parents -GED classes free of charge for parents -English classes free of charge for parents -Parent Support Specialists supports families in need 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Coats for Kids program gives a coat to every child during the winter months -Operation school bell offers free set of clothes for families in need -Dental van provides free dental services for all students in need -Vision services provide glasses for students in need -Parent support specialist seeks resources for families in need 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Mental Health Specialist works with parents and children in need -Mental Health Specialist supports with extreme behaviors -Mental Health Specialist works with parents to find outside services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Parent meetings with counselor and administrator and social worker to problem solve -Continuous and frequent communication with parents through flyers, letters, phone calls and meetings -Parent support specialist works with families and maintains up to date information of services provided

The second level of analysis resulted from the practices of each individual school. The researcher found that while their practices of managing contextual challenges were different,

they did share a common set of strategies. For the purpose of this research, the definition for strategy was retrieved from the Miriam Webster Online Dictionary (2018). Strategy is defined as “a careful plan or method” (Miriam Webster Online Dictionary, 2018). The three schools had a similar set of strategies they used to manage their contextual challenges. Based on these similarities, a set of four themes was revealed. The themes included, allocating funds for additional support positions, building collaboration and accountability, creating systems, developing community outreach and partnerships. While each principal and each school has specific challenges, all three principals appear to have a similar set of strategies to manage them, and, according to the state accountability system, at the same time maintain their high-student academic performance.

Allocating funds for additional support positions. According to the data, principals used Title 1 budgets to fund additional support positions for full-time parent support specialists, instructional specialists, and reading specialists. These positions are charged with managing contextual challenges as well as the implementation and support of the instructional plan. Each position is responsible for a variety of responsibilities such as the parent support specialist is responsible for parent involvement and parent concerns. In addition, this position may support the students by providing the parents with the information and tools they need to help their children with their academics. An instructional coach can also help with behavior and refugee. A specialist may also be able to help monitor new enrollment and assist in finding resources for the families in need. Leeya explained how and why she uses her Title 1 budget for manpower:

With the Title 1 money I get, I spend the bulk of the money on staff. Finding the right staff is tricky but my goal is to always spend a lot of it on people. Because when you do

find those challenges, you have someone there to support the teacher in making the best of it.

Sylvia currently hired six specialists using Title 1 grant funds and described how heavily she relies on specialists to support and guide her teachers for best instructional practices and implementation of campus planning:

We are lucky enough to have funding to fund instructional specialists at every grade level, so that has helped a lot. The specialists pull students that are struggling and they also help teachers. I rely on them a lot because they are curriculum specialists for their grade level. I am very lucky. They provide the support for the teacher.

Lisa described how much she supports the school:

We plan with teachers on a weekly basis. We review data. If teachers need resources and materials, we get them. We coach and model. We get training on interventions. We support our families in need in any way we can.

Consistent with team meeting agendas and review of Title 1 budget, all three schools in this study allocate funding for instructional support specialists, parent support specialists, and curriculum specialists. According to the principal participants, these positions are crucial members of their team.

Building collaboration and accountability. The data indicates that the principals of the participating schools were able to build collaboration through teams and hold each member accountable for their roles and responsibilities. These collaborative teams include counselors, parent support specialists, librarians, administrators, and other members of the instructional leadership team. Many of these positions are funded through Title 1 grants. Jointly they discuss concerns and create plans for collective action, and work together as a team to manage the

challenge. In addition, the principal creates a system for accountability and consistently meets with the team to review the progress or get up to date information. Each member of the team is responsible for maintaining accurate records and maintain communication with all stakeholders. Stakeholders may include principal, assistant principal, parents and teachers. Margaret described a typical Friday meeting that included her instructional leadership team and support team:

Every Friday during our leadership team meeting our reading coaches...push in for reading, and our math coach is strong in math. The counselor is here, the librarian is in here, my PSS is in here, and we are hashing out anything that needs to be discussed. As soon as I am done with my PSS, anything with parents or community stuff, then she leaves. Then the librarian and anything dealing with reading and what have you, and then she leaves.

Sylvia described how she collaborated with her team and, at times, included others who might cooperate and help with the next steps:

We have a meeting. Let's say we are seeing some challenges. Let's have a conference with the parent and then I try to have everybody there to add to their support, always the parent support specialist, always the counselor, our Communities In Schools program manager. It depends on the challenge.

Alma reflected on how her campus and members of her team support each other:

Everyone gets in. We have the counselor, we have our parent support specialist, we have CIS people working with us too; every single person.

The principal at McNeil Elementary was observed working with team members to provide a variety of support that would address many of their daily challenges. For example, the parent support specialist planned community engagement activities and helped families find the

resources they need to improve their quality of life, which could include counseling services. Hudson Elementary Parent Support Specialist organized parent classes that enhanced a family's understanding of how they can help their children with reading and math strategies.

It is evident from the weekly agendas that these schools allocate time in order to meet with all support team members and hold each other accountable for keeping the team informed. The CIP included a description of each member of the team and the responsibility they hold for their part of the plan. The three campuses in this study have plans that are consistent with each other and validate the dependence they have on their entire team to collectively and collaboratively complete their work. For example, the CIP from Lamar Elementary reads, "the counselor is responsible for monitoring attendance" and the PSS is responsible for "visiting local businesses that parents frequent, and develop a relationship with service providers" (pp. 6 & 19).

Creating systems. The responses of the participants imply the need for schools to develop a variety of systems in order to help them manage their contextual challenges. The need for team members and staff to know exactly what steps they must take when they encounter an issue is critical. Therefore, establishing clear and consistent systems was revealed during the data analysis. Developing systems for communication between the instructional leadership team when a new student enrolls is crucial to the academic success of that student. Other structures may include a system for parent communication, a system for interventions and programs and a system to maintain instructional leadership members accountable for their responsibilities. Leeya described how she managed parents requesting meetings or support:

We do have a pretty good system for parents. I rarely have parents just pop in and they want to speak to me. We built that, I started that earlier on, that I need to be in classrooms, so we need to make appointments. So, if it's an extreme case then yes I will,

but if it's just a concern about a teacher or this or that, then it's always by appointment so that I don't get bogged down with those things and not get into classrooms.

Leeya continued to explain how their system of support for new students and new to the country allowed them to properly place students:

A lot of our programs are really structured so that if a student moves away and we get another student, there's so much of a system that new students easily know what they are supposed to be doing at any time. And then also, it helps the teachers because it is a set system and you can just kind of plug in students and it still works.

Sylvia explained her system with parents:

You know most of our parents already know, unless it's an emergency we will see you soon. Fill out this conference form, we will see you within 24 hours. We will call you at the end of the day to set up an appointment, we will meet with you hopefully the next day, depending on the schedule.

During the observation of Leeya, principal at Lamar Elementary, a system of communication was notable during their meeting. Each member of the team provided a detailed report of their responsibilities such as the third grade instructional specialist explained the progress of her students during reading groups. In addition, the 3rd grade specialist provided the team with an update on the implementation of strategies from the instructional plan.

The agenda of the instructional leadership team meeting at McNeil Elementary validated their systems for communication. According to the principal, their agenda remained the same all school year and each member was accountable for providing the team with updates on their responsibilities. For example, the counselor provided the team with updates on her small counseling groups while the reading specialist explained the progress of her reading groups.

Developing community outreach and partnerships. Participants' descriptions surfaced how the schools' leadership teams implemented community outreach and built partnerships in order to organize activities that helped manage low-parent involvement and increase resources for the families. Community outreach engagement and the building of partnerships was a consistent practice in all three schools. In order for many schools to be able to organize and plan parental engagement activities, they needed support from local businesses and organizations. According to the data, principals in these schools planned parent activities, parent classes, and projects throughout the year that allow schools to meet the needs and interest of their community. Community partnerships allowed the school to introduce parents to community resources that allowed them to support their needs. Some of these partnerships included local police station, a nearby restaurant or bank, dentist office, insurance office and large store chains such as SAMS. In addition, the schools applied for grants to allow them to plan and organize a variety of activities for increase parental engagement. Mary described what she witnessed when her campus leadership team dealt with the challenges of their community:

It is cleaning up. It is getting better. We have a lot of community support. I know the police department and other programs are here that are working in the community as well. We got the YMCA that not only comes here but we have them down the street as well. The students and parents can attend the YMCA for a very low cost.

Mary expanded on how they have increased parent engagement on campus and how the team approached parents' concerns and challenges:

A lot of communication and getting everyone involved. Our PTA has actually grown; our CAC has actually been more successful. The fact that teachers take time to listen to our families when they have concerns, I know that makes a big deal. It's looked at as

somebody cares and they know when they come to our campus that everyone's going to care. From our custodians, to our kitchen staff, to our support staff, to our leadership team, everyone knows and cares and is going to take the time to say 'I don't know the answer to that but let me help you find out.'

Joe related how his campus leadership team responded to their low parent involvement by providing community-based events to increase parental involvement:

I would say the leadership team addresses those challenges by creating more community-based events. We have been blessed enough to get this grant for a garden, so we are going to have a community garden. Things like that have brought our parents in and has them engaged and involved. Taking our students to college campuses with our Kellogg's grant has also opened some of these parents' eyes to participating and coming in because they are just as interested about seeing the university as their kids, because they haven't seen one.

By observing the campus principals with their teams, it became evident that they work together to plan parent activities that are centered on the needs and interests of their communities. It is also evident that each member is accountable for providing the team with up to date information. For example, the counselor at Hudson planned parent classes that are focused on social emotional learning, which allowed parents to better understand how the school teaches their children about handling emotions. The counselor was able to give details on the participation of the parents and how they felt about the class. The PSS at McNeil Elementary planned college visits with parents and students to help parents better understand the advantages of going to college. The parent support specialist informed the principal how the parents felt after their visit to the university.

According to McNeil Elementary’s CIP, “the school will plan school-wide activities and programs to encourage parent participation such as family nights, field trips, various events during the day, and volunteer opportunities.” The CIP for Lamar Elementary states that “the campus will plan effective and meaningful parent and family engagement activities that enhance parent capacity, improve student academics, and foster authentic relationships” (p. 18). Both sets of plans included a section on improving parental involvement and engagement.

The analysis of the data for question three resulted in a set of individual campus practices for every contextual challenge. The outcome of these practices led the researcher to find a common set of strategies that allowed the principals at each campus to implement their strategies to help them manage their contextual challenges. Table 9 provided a summary of the second level analysis for the research question 3.

Table 9

Second Level Analysis – Common Strategies

Allocating funds for additional support positions	Building collaboration and accountability	Creating systems	Developing community outreach and partnerships
-Allocate funds to obtain additional positions to support, mentor and guide teachers to implement the instructional plan and manage the contextual challenges	-Reliance on team to collaborate and collectively manage and support contextual challenges and instructional plan. -Hold all members accountable	-Establish a system for accountability and communication within the team -Establish instructional and social emotional learning systems for teachers	-Find community resources -Search for opportunities for parents to be involved and engaged in the school. -Create an association with local organization and businesses

Summary

Chapter four presented findings resulting from the data collected. Themes were identified for each research question. 1) Question one described the instructional leadership practices that may enhance student success. The practices included, creating an instructional plan with expectations; building a system of collaboration and support; implementing a support system for students; and designing a system to monitor the instructional plan and student learning. 2) Question two identified the contextual challenges faced by high-poverty elementary schools. The challenges varied from school to school, however the entire list included high mobility; low parent involvement; poverty; high number of student mental health; parent concerns; a high number of English Language Learners and refugee students; and community affairs. 3) Question three examined how principals managed these challenges. According to the data, there were two sets of analysis on how they were managed. The first level included practices for each contextual challenge by school. The second level of analysis included a common set of strategies that principals used to implement many of their practices. The four major strategies included, the allocation of funds for additional support positions; building a collaborative team with accountability; creating systems and developing community outreach and partnerships.

Chapter five includes a summary, a discussion of the findings with connections to current literature, and recommendations to district leaders and elementary school principals.

Chapter V

Summary of Findings, Conclusions and Implications

Due to the growing demands of high stakes testing and accountability, coupled with student diversity, the context of high-poverty elementary schools affects the way principals lead schools, and becomes an important consideration for school leaders. As illustrated by others, the role of the principal has evolved to a leader that must focus on instruction and academic achievement. Therefore, some emphasize the need to focus on principal instructional leadership practices that have demonstrated effectiveness in improving student academic performance, particularly in schools that serve students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (May & Supovitz, 2011). Further, researchers suggest that certain contextual challenges, which high-poverty elementary schools experience on a daily basis, become obstacles to students' academic success (Neumerski, 2012).

In an effort to highlight what principals do to better serve students in high-poverty schools, the purpose of this investigation was to identify instructional leadership practices in high-poverty elementary schools that have demonstrated academic success according to the state accountability system. In addition, the study examined the contextual challenges faced by principals in high-poverty elementary schools and examined how these challenges were managed.

This chapter presents an overview of the study and a summary of the findings with connections to the literature. Additionally, recommendations for practice, and further inquiry are also offered.

Overview of the Study

This study followed qualitative methods with a grounded theory approach, the intent is to generate a general explanation of a process, an action, or an interaction shaped by the perceptions of the participants (Creswell, 2013, p. 83). Data was collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, observation of the principals, and a review of campus documents. Each participant was interviewed using an interview guide with open-ended questions that allowed them to reflect on their experiences, considerations and other insights associated with serving students in high-poverty school context. In addition, principals were observed approximately 30 minutes leading a meeting with the campus instructional leadership team. Documents analysis included Texas Education Report Cards, Campus Improvement Plans, Title 1 budgets, and meeting agendas.

Data collected was kept in a private, locked desk and computer files. None of the documents had identifiable information about the participants. This was communicated to the participants to ensure that they were aware of the fact that their identity would remain confidential and that they would feel comfortable sharing their experiences. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using rev.com. Data analysis was completed using open coding to determine categories, followed by axial coding and selective coding.

The district selected for this study is a large urban school district in central Texas with a total of 130 campuses, of which about 85 are elementary schools. According to the district data, 53.2% of their student enrollment is economically disadvantaged. The selected campus sites serve a high number of students in poverty with at least 90% being economically disadvantaged. These schools have demonstrated academic success according to the Texas accountability system as they have received a minimum of four academic distinctions consecutively from 2014 through 2016. Namely this included; Academic Achievement in Reading, Academic Achievement in

Mathematics, Student Progress and Top 25 Percent in closing performance gaps. One of the four distinctions must have been on student progress in two of three years in order to meet the criteria for this study.

Participants were purposefully selected; and therefore, they had to have the same position for a minimum of three years, and served in the same school for a minimum of three years. This selection yielded a total of nine participants, including three elementary principals, three classroom teachers, and three members of the instructional leadership team.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine how principals enhance student academic success in high-poverty elementary schools. The data collected through interviews, document reviews and observations brought into focus several themes on each research question. The following is a summarized account of findings followed by pertinent connections to the extant literature.

Instructional Leadership Practices

The principals of these three academically successful schools relied on several practices that reflect an intentional focus on instruction, specifically: 1. Creating an instructional plan with clear expectations, 2. Building a system of collaboration and support, 3. Implementing a support system for students, and 4. Designing a system to monitor students and teachers.

Creating an instructional plan with expectations. According to the findings, principals have a consistent instructional focus as they create a campus plan which appears to be inclusive of expectations and professional development. This means that all teachers must know what is expected of them when they design their own lesson plans, critical knowledge for each content area, the resources and teaching strategies to use. This is congruent with the notion that

principals in high-poverty schools must know and understand poverty, are able to set attainable goals for both teachers and students, and can provide them with the necessary resources (Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson, & Ylimaki, 2007). A high focus on instruction was also acknowledged by Crum, Sherman, and Myran (2009). These researchers found that fostering ownership of school practices is necessary for principals in high-poverty schools. They also suggest that principals must be aware of the instructional activities taking place within the building, and communicating instructional expectations clearly (Crum, Sherman, & Myran, 2009). In addition, professional development was found to be essential to assist teachers with the implementation of their lesson plans. As researchers affirm, if principals can set clear goals and strategies for improved instruction they actually understand, and support their teachers, then the result in professional development is more likely to be coherent and relevant (Graczewski, Knudson, & Holtzman, 2009).

Building a system of collaboration and support. Working jointly with teachers and the leadership team to address the needs of teachers appears to result in the creation of a collaborative mode for the purpose of supporting teachers. As teachers need guidance to implement instructional plans, principals build teams of support which may include the assistant principal, instructional coaches, and a reading specialist. Teams consistently meet to collectively guide, coach, model, and provide assistance to all teachers. This practice echoes previous research in that collaboration has been recognized as an important organizational structure. For instance, O’Doherty and Ovando suggest that elementary school “principals describe collaboration through teaming as a vehicle to bring together groups of teachers with a common purpose and mutual interests to make contributions to the education of children on their campus” (2013, p. 542). Such collaborative teaming focuses on lesson plans, analyzing data, instruction,

modeling, and small group interventions. This finding supports Brown's assertion (2016) that principals create support systems to ensure the success of their schools, which also gained admiration from the teachers. Further, according to Finnigan & Stewart (2009), successful principals implement a comprehensive instructional program that allows teachers to develop their instructional skills while at the same time maintain a collaborative approach to instruction.

Implementing a support system for students. Findings suggest that just as teachers may need support, students can also benefit from assistance to enhance their core academic skills through interventions such as targeted small group instruction as well as homework help. This support may focus on homework, particularly when students don't have the tools at home to complete assignments. It is important to note that students are not penalized for not completing their homework; instead they have an opportunity to complete the assignments and reading logs at school before the instructional day begins. As the 2015 Professional Learning Standards indicate, school leaders must focus on how they are promoting the learning achievement development and well-being of each student. Thus, a principal's capacity to understand and recognize students' academic and social challenges is important as an initial step to ensure student success. This is in concert with previous research findings which determined how important it is for school leaders to recognize barriers in learning and academic achievement resulting from poverty, and not allow these conditions to be used as excuses (Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson, & Ylimaki, 2007). It appears from the findings that, in high-poverty elementary schools, barriers are recognized but not taken as an excuse. Instead, students are consistently supported throughout the school year with various interventions, small group instruction, tutoring, and homework support.

Designing a system to monitor students and teachers. Findings suggest that once the instructional plans are designed, and teachers and students are provided with the necessary support, it is essential to have a monitoring process in place. Therefore, the principal must design a structure that guides both the principal and the leadership team to follow-up both the implementation of the instructional plan and student progress. It appears from the findings that such monitoring is accomplished by conducting walkthrough observations followed by constructive feedback, reviewing lesson plans and looking over student work samples, and attending team planning meetings. This supports results from a study by Finnigan and Stewart (2009). These researchers report that principals focus on monitoring the program for consistent implementation. Similarly, others reveal that effective principals work explicitly to improve instruction (New Leaders, 2012). Further, monitoring is not completed by the principal alone the instructional team, is also responsible for verifying students' learning outcomes. According to the findings, monitoring takes time to analyze student data and adjust support, interventions and instruction. This echoes prior research by Brown (2016) who discovered that a key to success is creating a data-driven instruction and systematic structure that gives teachers the opportunities to make data-driven decisions about their instructional practices and student learning.

Contextual Challenges

The data revealed specific contextual challenges confronting the three high-poverty elementary schools in this study. The challenges were similar but not identical for each school. Lamar and Hudson Elementary were very similar, while McNeil identified less contextual challenges. Problems identified among all three schools include high mobility, low parent involvement, poverty, a high number of students with mental health issues, parent concerns, high

number of English Language Learners and refugee students, and neighborhood issues such as crime, immigration and security.

High poverty schools often experience a wide range of contextual challenges that require a unique skill set for the leader. These principals must not only be able to manage budgets and daily operations, they have to be involved in instruction and the contexts of their communities. Taylor and La Cava (2011) found that principals in high poverty schools have a multitude of responsibilities in comparison to more affluent schools. This was confirmed when analyzing the data of each campus. Each school had a range of five to seven major contextual challenges. The principal of each school was able to identify their challenges which affirmed the findings of Klar & Brewer (2013) who recognized that successful principals understand their school's community context and lead accordingly.

High mobility. The challenges of high mobility was a common issue in the three participating schools. According to the Texas Education Agency Report Cards in 2016, the mobility rates of the schools in this study was higher than the average mobility of the state. Frequent moving presents many challenges to the academic success of children. According Voight, Shinn, and Nation (2012), mobility during the elementary years may cause students a hinderance in the areas of math and reading achievement in third grade which is the earliest level of testing. An interruption in a "child's routines and social ties during these formative years may have an enduring detrimental effect on children's learning" (Voight, Shinn, & Nation p.390). Therefore, schools must practice other interventions that focus on the socio and emotional aspects of mobility such as adjustment counseling, tutoring, monitor enrollment and provide students and families with networking opportunities (Voight, Shinn, & Nation, 2012).

Low Parent Involvement. The participants' responses revealed that low parent involvement was a common challenge experienced in all three schools. Despite the limited involvement, it was evident that principals made efforts to engage parents in school activities and student achievement by consistently communicating with all parents, building a relationship and implementing clear systems for parents. According to the findings of Kraft, Papay, Johnson, Charner-Laird, Ng & Reinhorn (2015), an open system approach to frequent interactions and stronger home-school relationships could help students recognize the importance of school while informing teachers about how to best address problems that might arise" (Kraft, Papay, Johnson, Charner-Laird, Ng & Reinhorn, p. 775). It is critical for schools to ensure there is a consistent communication with parents in order to build trust and respect and motivate families to be a part of the school.

Poverty. The levels of poverty for the three participating schools was well above 90%. Many of the students and families face financial challenges that prevent them from obtaining all the resources their children may need. The schools have been able to provide many valuable services and resources such as dental work, glasses, clothing and food. Similarly, Green (2015) reported that leaders of high poverty schools in the study "changed how resources were distributed including fresh produce, health care and access school facilities" which enhanced the partnership between various community organizations" (Green, p. 704). The leaders in such schools must build those partnerships in order to help alleviate students' barriers that are outside the control of the school.

Student Mental Health. The challenges of mental health amongst elementary students has increased tremendously according to the principals in two of the participating schools. The difficult experiences their students face at home often impacts their behaviors in school.

Therefore it is crucial to have a schoolwide behavior management plan. “An orderly and disciplined school culture could play in helping students make a successful transition from stressful, often unpredictable, experiences outside the school to a stable learning environment within it” (Kraft, Papay, Johnson, Charner-Laird, Ng & Reinhorn, p.769). Therefore, implementing a consistent and clear behavior plan coupled specialized support for students with severe behavioral problems is essential for student learning (Kraft, Papay, Johnson, Charner-Laird, Ng & Reinhorn, 2015).

Parent Concerns. The challenges that many families face in their homes often impacts students daily routines and instruction. The responses revealed that the three participating schools experienced a variety of parent concerns that are brought into the school such domestic violence, immigration issues and child protective services. Principals in the current study made great effort to establish consistent and clear communication with troubled families while building relationships of mutual trust and respect. Similarly Kraft et al reported that successful principals made parent outreach a priority and implemented an open system that allows them to constantly invite parents to be a part of the school and participate in activities (Kraft, Papay, Johnson, Charner-Laird, Ng & Reinhorn, 2015).

High Number of ELL's and Refugee Students. The number of English Language Learners and Refugee students presented a challenge in two of the participating schools, especially many linguistic challenges. Schools with many English Language Learners must be knowledgeable and equipped to implement effective instructional programs, especially in literacy to meet the needs of their diverse learners. This demands leaders who understand literacy and reading instruction to be able to implement language and content-rich settings in addition to strong literacy instruction throughout the school (Lesaux, 2012). This involves a focus on vocabulary and specialized

structures of language. In addition, principals must create cohesive environment through continuous professional development and teacher collaboration and support (Lesaux, 2012). *Community Affairs*. The location of the schools presents challenges that often start within the community and make their way into the building. One of the participating schools revealed that community issues such as robbery or police in search of criminals impact the learning environment due to the random safety drills that interrupt instruction and structure. Due to these challenges, the principal sought outside community support such as local government agencies, organizations and business owners. These partnerships can serve as a valuable resource for the students, parents and community. Green (2015) found that “principals can link and gain support to change school culture by connecting with community-wide initiatives and partnering with local organizations to address key school-community concerns” (Green, p. 704). The study also found providing a range of resources such as financial literacy, health care, as well as education is important for schools in high-poverty contexts (Green, 2015).

Managing Contextual Challenges

Contextual challenges can vary from community to community. The data in this study revealed a variation of challenges between the three schools. The diversity in practices also changed from one campus to another which lead to two different levels of analysis. The first level is by individual campus. These findings identified practices used by each school to manage their specific challenges. This confirmed the findings of Jacobson, Brooks, Giles and Ylimaki, (2007). These researchers concluded that the contextual variations of schools such as enrollment and student demographic diversity, are important because they affect the organization complexity of school leaders which is aligned to the differences in the results of the practices from school to school (Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, & Ylimaki, 2007). However, not all practices are

instructional. Many of the practices identified by each campus fall under a social emotional learning practice rather than an instructional practice. The second level of analysis allowed for five themes to surface. While each school had their own challenges, they had a similar approach in regards to the implementation of their practices. The five major strategies included: allocating funds for additional support positions, building collaboration and accountability, creating systems and developing community outreach and partnerships.

Allocating funds for support positions. The first strategy that quickly became a common theme amongst the three school was the ability for principals to allocate a portion of their grant money to fund additional support positions. Funding is essential, and means that principals may allocate grants to fund positions such as instructional coach, parent support specialist, reading specialist or curriculum specialist. These positions are critical to the success of the implementation of the instructional plan. In addition, these positions also support the principal with managing the contextual challenges. However, Grissom and Loeb (2011) reported that it was not best practice for principals to only focus on instruction because it would neglect other areas, instead principals must be able to delegate leadership to manage instruction. Furthermore, they found that effective instructional leadership is a combination of “understanding the instructional needs of the school with an ability to target resources where they are needed” (Grissom & Loeb, p. 119). This theme implies not merely allocating support positions but also to placing them strategically in areas of critical need.

Building collaboration and accountability. Building a collaborative team that collectively works to manage and support contextual challenges is critical. This team may include a counselor, librarian, parent support specialist, social worker, instructional leadership team members, a principal, and an assistant principal. The team must meet jointly and work

cooperatively to develop a system of collaboration, communication and accountability between each other, the students, the community, the teachers, and the staff. This finding is aligned with research by Ramalho, Garza, and Merchant (2010) which concludes that principals must work not only on student achievement but also on building efficacy among faculty and staff for collaborative and trusting relationships. Principals need to ensure their teams are working in partnerships to manage the contextual challenges their schools face. Furthermore, it is crucial to hold all members accountable as suggested by Brooks, Giles, Johnson, and Ylimaki (2007). They found that holding everyone accountable was one of the three major themes for academic success (Brooks, Giles, Johnson, & Ylimaki, 2007).

Creating systems. Due to the growing demands of education coupled with the challenges in the diversity of needs, creating systems was another common strategy amongst the three school. The development of systems supports an increase in accountability for all members. These systems may include a system to communicate with parents or a system to monitor a student's academic progress. Creating systems allows the principal and instructional leadership team to be able to manage the organization. In addition, systems create clear expectations and structure. It allows all members to know what to do when an issue arises. Creating a systematic structure of learning is also critical according to Brown (2016). He discovered that "creating data driven instruction and systematic structure" is a key to a school's success (Brown, 2016, p. 113).

Developing community outreach and partnerships. The data demonstrated a fourth common theme among the three schools: developing community outreach and partnerships. This theme is a critical strategy to manage the contextual challenges that face high poverty schools. This strategy involved reaching out to find local community resources such as police department, government agencies, restaurants and organizations that may help the community of the school.

It also included building partnerships with local business owners and community leaders. This is aligned with the finding of Crum, Sherman and Myran who found that principals are expected to work with all community members, such as policy makers, local business owners, and even leaders of local unions (Crum, Sherman, & Mayran, 2009). These community resources and partnerships may support the school with funding of activities and resources for parents, students and teachers. In addition, these alliances can help the campus with clothes and health services for students as well as monetary donations to pay for school wide projects, resources and materials to help increase parental engagement. As Wilson (2011), discovered the success of a school includes family partnerships, which may involve bringing community partners to school events or asking them to fund a school activity that would in turn promote their business. Furthermore, these activities allow the school to build trust and respect toward families and at the same time it creates opportunities for families to be involved in the schools which is critical in high-poverty schools according Wilson (2011).

In order to establish strategies, it is important to know and understand the instructional leadership practices and be aware of the contextual challenges of the school. They are all interrelated and are dependent of each other. For example, if we do not have an instructional plan, then we cannot build collaborations and systems. Further, if the context of these communities are different, then the instructional practices would not be the same. As Goldring, Huff, May, and Camburn, (2007) confirmed, contextual factors impacting the time spent on certain activities was influenced by the number of economically disadvantaged students.

Given the nature of this study and taking the findings collectively and the contexts of the schools, this study advances the following propositions that future inquiry might confirm:

1. School leaders in high-poverty schools must understand the context of the school in order to implement the necessary systems.
2. All practices must be established and organized to work simultaneously in and address contextual factors in order to enhance student success.
3. A strong reliance on collaboration amongst principals, teachers and instructional leadership members to support and monitor systems, practices and strategies is crucial to the academic success of high-poverty elementary schools.
4. Schools in high-poverty contexts must implement instructional and social emotional learning practices that ensure a safe learning environment while at the same time provide a high-quality education.
5. Leaders in high-poverty schools must be able to implement social emotional practices coupled with instructional leadership practices to ensure student academic success.
6. Both instructional and social emotional practices must be differentiated based on the needs of the students, teachers and community.
7. High-poverty schools must build partnerships with various organizations in the community that can continuously provide support.

Implications for Practice and Further Inquiry

This study examined instructional leadership practices of successful schools according to the Texas accountability system. In addition, the research investigated the contextual challenges faced by these schools and examined how they were managed. The responses of principals, teachers and instructional leadership members were analyzed to discover the common themes.

It is important to note that this study only focused on three elementary schools that included a small sampling of participants; however, based on the findings there are some

recommendations for practitioners. School districts may need to select principals who are instructionally strong in teaching and learning, and have experience particularly for high-poverty elementary schools. Additionally, districts can create a system of collaboration with their principals, especially those in high-poverty schools, to ensure best instructional practices are implemented. Campus principals will need to be knowledgeable about curriculum and instruction, and incorporate systems of collaboration and accountability to ensure academic success. In addition, it is important for principals to be aware of the importance of developing community outreach and partnerships to be able to implement parent engagement opportunities and provide resources. Further, it is critical for principals to know the socioeconomic and cultural context of their community in order to implement practices to support students, teachers and parents.

As stated earlier, this study was limited by the research approach and the number of participants representing only elementary schools serving students in high poverty areas. Therefore, additional inquiry might contribute to further expand our understanding of how principals and teachers contribute to student academic success in schools that serve a high number of economically disadvantaged students. For instance, investigate how others such as parents and community members may impact student achievement or study the instructional practices of high poverty middle schools and high schools.

Summary

This study revealed the instructional leadership practices of principals who worked in high-poverty elementary schools in a large urban school district. In addition, the research identified contextual challenges and discovered the unique practices of each campus. These practices were not only instructional but included social emotional learning practices. Therefore,

schools are managing their contextual challenges by going beyond providing quality instruction but are focused on the whole child. According to the Texas accountability system, these practices and strategies have been proven to be effective. Therefore, the need to further investigate instructional leadership practices in high-poverty elementary schools is important to better understand the significance of being an instructional leader in a Title 1 school.

A strong focus on instruction is critical in high-poverty elementary schools. However, it is necessary for principals to build collaborative teams that jointly provide teachers and students support. It is equally important to monitor all systems, hold others accountable and develop community outreach and partnerships in order to have student academic success.

Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Guide for Teachers and Instructional Leadership Members

I am an educational doctoral student in the Cooperative Superintendency Program at The University of Texas at Austin. I am interested in learning more about your school's academic success, as reflected by the accountability system. I am particularly interested in learning more about the instructional practices your principal uses to increase student achievement. In this study, I would like you to answer three questions:

1. What principal instructional leadership practices improve teaching and learning in high-poverty elementary schools?
2. What contextual challenges do principals in high-poverty elementary schools face?
3. How do principals address the challenges that come with high-poverty elementary schools?

I will be recording our interview in order to have an accurate transcription. All recordings will be confidential.

Section 1.

Teacher and Leadership Member

Tell me about yourself and your experience in education.

Prompts to use if necessary:

- How long have you been in education?
- What grades do you teach?
- Favorite subjects?

Tell me about your school.

Prompts to use if necessary:

- What do you like?
- What Programs? What Resources for teachers and students?
- What schools have you taught in? Districts?

How is the vision of your school communicated?

Prompts to use if necessary:

- Meetings
- Family Events or Staff Activities
- Announcements
- Around the campus

What is the culture of teaching and learning at your school?

Prompts to use if necessary:

- Does everyone know the vision?
- Does everyone follow the vision?
- Is there a no excuses approach.

Section 2.

Teacher and Leadership Member

Describe your principal's instructional leadership practices.

Prompts to use if necessary:

- Are teachers involved in decision-making process with leadership team?
- Does the leadership team make all the instructional decisions?

- Do you collaborate with the leadership team to decide which strategies to use?

Describe the instructional support teachers receive from the leadership team.

Prompts to use if necessary:

- Do teachers get instructional support such as modeling or co-teaching from a coach, specialist or administrator?
- Do teachers get lesson plan support from a coach, specialist or administrator?
- Do teachers receive guidance with intervention plans?

Describe the instructional support students receive from the leadership team.

Prompts to use if necessary:

- What student interventions (RTI) does your leadership team encourage?
- Does your leadership team set before, during after school interventions?
- Is your leadership team involved in the development or creation of the intervention plans?

Section 3.

Teacher and Leadership Member

Unstructured Questions:

1. Name the most important instructional practices your campus leadership team implements to ensure your students are successful.
2. What instructional practices implemented by the campus leadership team are most effective and why?

3. What instructional practices implemented by the campus leadership team have made your students and school successful?
4. What are some things that may distract your leadership team from focusing on instruction?
5. What are some of the contextual challenges that your campus leadership faces?
6. How does the campus leadership address those challenges?
7. Is there anything you would like to share regarding the academic success of your school?

Appendix B

Interview Guide for Principals

I am an educational doctoral student in the Cooperative Superintendency Program at The University of Texas at Austin. I am interested in learning more about your school's academic success, as reflected by the accountability system. I am particularly interested in learning more about the instructional practices principals use to increase student achievement. In this study, I would like you to answer three questions:

4. What principal instructional leadership practices improve teaching and learning in high-poverty elementary schools?
5. What contextual challenges do principals in high-poverty elementary schools face?
6. How do principals address the challenges that come with high-poverty elementary schools?

I will be recording our interview in order to have an accurate transcription. All recordings will be confidential.

Section 1:

Principal

Tell me about yourself and your experience in education.

Prompts to use if necessary:

- How long have you been in education?
- What grades do you teach?

- Favorite subjects?

Tell me about your school.

Prompts to use if necessary:

- What do you like?
- What Programs? What Resources?
- What schools have you taught in? Districts?

Principal

What is the vision for your school and how does it influence your school culture?

Prompts to use if necessary:

- What is the shared vision?
- What is the mission?
- Do you have a mission statement and where is it displayed?
- How is it communicated?
- Describe your school culture.

What do you do to ensure teachers are teaching the curriculum and students are learning?

Prompts to use if necessary:

- Use of curriculum
- Assessments
- Progress monitoring
- Staff development
- Vertical alignment

Section 2.

Principal

Describe your instructional leadership practices.

Prompts to use if necessary:

- Decision-making process?
- Who makes decisions?
- Collaboration practices.

Describe the instructional support teachers and students receive.

Prompts to use if necessary:

- Do they get instructional support from a coach?
- Do they get lesson plan support?
- Student interventions (RTI) support.
- Who creates/plans interventions?

Section 3.

Principal

Unstructured Questions:

8. Name the most important instructional practices you do to ensure your students are successful.
9. What instructional practices are most effective and why?
10. What instructional practices have made your students and school successful?
11. What are some things that may distract you from instruction?
12. What are some of the contextual challenges that you face?
13. How do you address those challenges?

14. Is there anything you would like to share regarding the academic success of your school?

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