

2018-08-22

# Middle School Principals' Understandings and Practices of Instructional Leadership

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Nelson, M. W. (2018). Middle School Principals' Understandings and Practices of Instructional Leadership (Doctoral thesis, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada). Retrieved from

<https://prism.ucalgary.ca>. doi:10.11575/PRISM/32844

<http://hdl.handle.net/1880/107664>

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Middle School Principals' Understandings and Practices of Instructional Leadership

by

Michael William Nelson

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

CALGARY, ALBERTA

AUGUST, 2018

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this case study was to gain insight into how experienced middle school principals understand the concept of instructional leadership and, further, perceive their enactments of instructional leadership to build the instructional capacity of the teachers in their schools.

Research into instructional leadership indicates that school principals contribute indirectly to school effectiveness and student achievement through actions (practices) that influence the type and quality of instruction in schools and classrooms; however, there is limited research on this topic that is specific to leadership in middle schools. The study used qualitative case study methodology involving semi-structured interviews with five experienced middle school principals, all from a large, urban public school district in Alberta. The findings of this inquiry revealed six key themes. Middle school principals in this study: (a) have a strong theoretical understanding of leadership for learning, (b) define their practices of instructional leadership through shared leadership, PLC structures, and a focus on relationships, (c) perceive their practices of instructional leadership to include developing leadership capacity of others, (d) share beliefs and understandings, and enact practices of instructional leadership that are strongly influenced by a specific body of leadership literature that is promoted through district-led professional learning initiatives, (e) believe there are contextual differences that impact not just their leadership generally, but their instructional leadership, and (f) have a sophisticated theoretical understanding of instructional leadership and leadership for learning; however, they struggle to provide evidence of how their practices impact teachers' instructional capacity and student learning. The findings of my study contribute to the growing body of knowledge related to instructional leadership, especially as it focuses on middle schools.

Key words: Instructional Leadership, leadership for learning, middle school

## **Preface**

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author M. W. Nelson. The findings and themes reported in Chapters 4-6 were covered by Ethics Certificate number REB17-1250, issued by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board for the project “Middle School Principals’ Understanding and Practices of Instructional Leadership” on September 18, 2017.

## **Acknowledgments**

There are many people to thank for providing all kinds of assistance in this journey to completion of my doctoral study. I feel very fortunate to have experienced such a supportive community over the past three years.

First, I would like to thank my supervisory committee members, Dr. Brenda Spencer, Dr. Jim Brandon, and Dr. Amy Burns. You provided critical feedback and helped shape my study from the proposal stage to final edits. I am truly grateful for your wisdom, time, and dedication.

To Brenda Spencer, my supervisor, I extend a special thank you. Your guidance, patience, academic insight, and keen eye for detail provided an incredibly rich learning environment. I've learned so much from you.

Thank you to the professors at the University of Calgary for sharing your knowledge and skills. To my colleagues in my cohort with whom I shared this journey since 2015, thank you for allowing me to be part of your journey and for supporting me. I am fortunate to have you as colleagues and friends.

I must also thank the five amazing middle school principals who volunteered and were so willing to share their leadership stories. Thank you for the gift of your time and willingness to share so others could learn from your experiences and understandings.

## **Dedication**

To my partner, Shannon,

This degree would have not been possible if not for your support. From being my emotional support, to my coach, and to my editor, you have been by my side every step of the way. It has been a long journey and there have been many changes in our lives over the past three years. I am so grateful for you and look forward to the many years ahead as we try to keep up with our children.

To my children, Sierra, Tavish, and Jasper,

I dedicate this work to you as an illustration that with hard work and dedication much is possible. I have so much to share with you and so much more to learn from you.

To my parents, Bill and Susan Nelson,

Thank you for your unconditional love and support. You helped me understand the value of learning, listening, and perseverance.

To my family, I owe all the best things in my life: Mom, Dad, Shannon, Sierra, Tavish, and Jasper.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction to Study**

For over a decade, the two terms, leadership and learning, have been regularly used together in educational discourse (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Researchers continue to search for insight into the nature of school leadership that positively impacts student learning, and this has engaged many academics in studying a variety of leadership models over the past several decades (Hallinger & Wang, 2015). Further, the role of the contemporary school principal has evolved over the years from that of “principal as bureaucrat” (Cuban, 1988, p. 54) to that of “principal as instructional leader” (p. 57).

Regardless of the changes to the role, current research about beliefs held by the public indicate that the principal is seen as the head of the school and is deemed responsible and accountable for students’ success and failure (Fullan, 2014). Over the past twenty years, an increased focus on accountability has led to greater demands and expectations for the principal to provide leadership and direction that directly results in both improved instruction by teachers and achievement by students (Elmore, 2005). Therefore, educational stakeholders have renewed calls for principals to be, first and foremost, instructional leaders (Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008, Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010), and there is an expectation that school leaders should be capable of improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools (Hallinger, 2011). My own teaching and leadership experiences in schools with different grade configurations have led me to wonder how instructional leadership is understood and practiced in different school configurations and, more specifically, in middle schools.

This case study aimed to gain insight into how experienced middle school principals understand the concept of instructional leadership and, further, perceive their enactments of instructional leadership to build the instructional capacity of the teachers in their schools.

This chapter begins with an overview of the context and background framing the study. I then articulate the problem statement, the statement of purpose, research questions, rationale, and significance of the study. I also include in this chapter a brief explanation of the research methodology and the research assumptions. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the significance of this research study, and definitions of some of the key terminology used.

### **Context of the Study**

Within school leadership studies centered on the principalship, research confirms that the principal's leadership practices in a school impact learning and achievement of students (Lai, 2014; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008). Among educational leaders, principals are in a unique position to influence the improvement of teaching by teachers, which in turn has the greatest effect on student learning (Louis et al., 2010). There is evidence regarding the contribution of instructional leadership in implementing initiatives aimed at improving quality in schools, teacher effectiveness, and student learning (Hallinger, 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Louis et al., 2010). Therefore, as stated earlier, principals are expected to be instructional leaders – a label developed in the United States during the Effective Schools Movement of the 1970s (Neumerski, 2013). The Effective Schools researchers developed a body of research that supports the concept that all children can learn and that the school controls the factors to assure student mastery of the curriculum (Lezotte, 2001). Further, this research highlighted that principals should concentrate on the core of teaching and learning; namely, that they take targeted actions to develop vision, team, and structure to enhance

conditions for improved teaching and learning in their schools (Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Louis et al., 2010).

The Effective Schools research, as well as studies that followed, revealed that principals' focus on instruction has a positive impact on teacher growth and student learning (Hallinger, 2011; Terosky, 2016). For example, Robinson et al. (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of 27 published studies on leadership and student outcomes, and found consistent themes among higher performing schools: principals in these settings focused on learning, teaching, and teacher learning, or, in other words, they focused on “the core business of teaching and learning” (p. 664).

With experience as a school-based administrator in schools ranging from Kindergarten (K) to Grade 12 in a large, urban public school district in Alberta, I understand myself as responsible for creating the conditions in which quality teaching and learning opportunities can occur and be sustained (Alberta Education, 2018). As a principal, I am required to frame my work within my school through the lens of instructional leadership, which is a central focus of my school district's administrative professional development (Alberta Education, 2018). Furthermore, Alberta's *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018<sup>1</sup>) identifies nine required competencies for which principals are accountable. Two of them, leading a learning community and providing instructional leadership, clearly focus on and communicate the instructional leadership expectations for all principals in all school contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> In March 2018, while I was writing this dissertation, the Alberta Government passed into legislation a new *Leadership Quality Standard*, which will come into effect on September 1, 2019. During my EdD studies, an earlier version, the *Draft Principal Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2016), was used as a guiding document in the school district in which I conducted my research. There are differences between the two documents; however, “competencies” are the same in both versions, and there are only minor changes to the specific “indicators” of the competencies in the new *Leadership Quality Standard*. The district is now using the new version.

My graduate studies exposed me to findings that suggest instructional leadership conducted in elementary settings is often generalized across all settings, including middle and senior high schools (Wahlstrom, 2012). Academic literature indicates that, due to structural and organizational differences, secondary (middle and high school) school principals are less actively involved in instructional leadership practices than they are at the elementary level. This could indicate that instructional leadership requires “substantial adaptation in secondary schools” (Hallinger, 2005, p. 231).

Several challenges for principals, especially those at the secondary level, are the size and complexity of their role in large urban schools with student populations ranging from 850 to 1500. Although the research suggests that principals should be effective instructional leaders, there are constraints due to time and scope of responsibilities. It is difficult for principals to solely implement quality instructional leadership, and although the research suggests that the principal needs to be specifically involved in instruction, they are unable to effectively lead all aspects of instruction within the school (Fullan, 2014).

Given the provincial mandate for instructional leadership by school principals, in conjunction with Alberta’s *Leadership Quality Standard*, as well as the diverse ways instructional leadership is understood and practiced by school principals, I examined how, if at all, middle school principals understand and rationalize their instructional leadership practices. Further, how do they perceive the impact of their practices on teachers’ practices within their schools?

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

During the 1990s, a significant period of standards-based education reform was introduced in Alberta, the core of which survives in the current focus on improvement in student

success, evidenced in the continued attention given to measures such as the provincial achievement test (PAT) data. Research into instructional leadership indicates that school principals contribute indirectly to school effectiveness and student achievement through actions (practices) that influence the type and quality of instruction in schools and classrooms (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood 2012; Leithwood, Sun, & Pollock, 2017; Robinson et al., 2008). Thus, the onus is on school-based leaders to improve the instructional capacity of teachers and, therefore, the achievement of students. However, there is little research on the topic of instructional leadership as it pertains to middle school principals.

While the instructional leadership phenomenon occurs across the K to 12 spectrum, offering some possibility of research transferability, Gale and Bishop (2014) reported that middle school principals face particular challenges to their effectiveness due to three key concerns: the unique nature and needs of 10 to 15 year olds (Anfara, Roney, Smarkola, DuCette, & Gross, 2006), the variety of building configurations in which they are served (Powell, 2011), and an increasing awareness of the critical role the middle grades play in later life success (Balfanz, Hertzog, & MacIver, 2007). Furthermore, Rockford and Lockwood (2015) suggested that the context of middle school is significantly different from elementary and high schools. They cited a number of factors that place demands on the middle school principal and impact the practices they undertake as instructional leaders. These factors include: increased number of students in large urban middle schools, number of staff they are managing, range in developmental age of students, increasing complexity of administrative team structures, and potentially other factors (Gale & Bishop, 2014, p. 1). Gaps in research have been further evidenced anecdotally through my own personal and professional conversations with practicing principals. Over the past several years, middle school principal colleagues have often suggested that instructional leadership

needs to be understood in relation to grade configurations (elementary, middle, and high schools) and, therefore, there is a need for the education system to modify instructional leadership expectations accordingly.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study was to gain insight into how experienced middle school principals understand the concept of instructional leadership and, further, perceive their enactments of instructional leadership to build the instructional capacity of the teachers in their schools. In the simplest terms, I wanted to understand how experienced middle school principals define and understand their lived experiences of instructional leadership.

### **Research Questions**

In seeking to understand the research problem, one primary research question and three sub-questions framed this inquiry. The primary question is: How do middle school principals understand the concept of instructional leadership and think about their practices of instructional leadership? Creswell (2015) suggested creating sub-questions to “provide greater specificity to the questions in the study” (p. 133). Therefore, in this study, the following sub-questions assisted in answering the primary question:

- How do middle school principals define and explain the concept of instructional leadership?
- What are middle school principals’ perceptions of their instructional leadership practices and how these practices impact teachers’ instructional capacities?
- What evidence do middle school principals cite for their claims regarding the effectiveness of their instructional leadership in their schools?

## **Research Design**

For this study, I conducted five semi-structured interviews with experienced middle school principals who all worked within the same large school district. By using several semi-structured interview questions, I gathered data on middle school principals' understanding of the concept of instructional leadership, and on their perceptions about their practices of instructional leadership and the link between these practices and their claims of effectively impacting teachers' instructional capacity.

I used a qualitative research design so that I could effectively understand the complex social phenomenon of the instructional leadership practices that principals employ in the specific context of the middle school. Qualitative research locates the observer in the world, making the world visible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Therefore, qualitative researchers study objects and people in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. To do this, in addition to the semi-structured interviews with five experienced middle school principals, I utilized pertinent data sources: documents, participant-shared artifacts, and a researcher journal. When possible, I tried to interview principals within their working environment so that, when referenced, artifacts were often close at hand.

Within qualitative research design, I used case study methodology. Several researchers (Flyvberg, 2011; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014; Simons, 2009) suggest that when a researcher wants to understand a phenomenon in any degree of thoroughness, detail, richness, or completeness, a case study is the methodology to employ. I found myself most aligned with Merriam's (1998) heuristic interpretation of case study research, as I wanted to illuminate the phenomenon of middle school instructional leadership. This explanation of case study is also in agreement with

Stake (1995), who suggests that previously unknown relationships and variables can be expected to emerge from case studies, leading to a rethinking of the phenomenon being studied.

### **Researcher Perspectives**

At the time of the research, I was a system principal in the school district in which I conducted the study. I had over 20 years of formal and informal leadership experiences in junior, middle, and high school environments, and my last school-based leadership position was as the principal of a K to 9 school. At the time of the research and writing phases of the study, I had recently moved into a new and interesting district-level position, which has me supporting school-based administrators in their daily work, and often creating and facilitating professional learning opportunities. I believe that my extensive and diverse practical experience in the public education has enabled me to bring to this research both rich knowledge and deep understanding of the field of educational leadership in the Alberta context. I came into this research with a keen professional interest in learning about middle schools, as well as a personal interest, having two (of three) of my own children at middle school age. Therefore, I believe I was in a unique situation to explore the research topic. By not separating my research from my professional life, I was afforded valuable information and insights that may not have been provided to an outside researcher. Therefore, I believe that the subjectivity I have is part of the story I am sharing, and that it serves to add strength to the research. I have adhered to the protocols necessary for my case study to be ethically, professionally, and pedagogically conducted.

### **Researcher Assumptions**

In doing this research, I held several assumptions that are important to note. My first assumption was that middle school principals have an understanding of the construct of instructional leadership. My second assumption was that the middle school context differs from

other school settings, and this assumes that contextual difference impacts why and how middle school principals practice instructional leadership. Thirdly, I assumed that experienced middle school principals would be agreeable to participating in the study, be open to interviews, and respond to questions in an open and honest manner. Fourth, I assumed that the phenomenon under investigation (instructional leadership) was researchable. Finally, I assumed that the use of a case study methodology, the research questions, and research methods (purposeful sampling, semi-structured interviews, use of artifacts) were appropriate to address the purpose of the study.

It should be noted that there are both middle and junior high school configurations present within the school district where the research took place. Within the district, middle years learning refers to education offered to students between the ages of 10 and 15. The school district's website states that, regardless of the grade configuration, all middle years teachers and principals must understand the complex and unique learning needs of this age group, which is explained as having a strong awareness of the following five domains: emotional, physical, cognitive, social, and behavioural. This study limited itself to grade configurations more commonly associated with middle schools: Grades 4 to 8, 4 to 9, 5 to 8, and 5 to 9.<sup>2</sup>

### **Rationale and Significance**

Ideally, findings and conclusion from this study may be relevant for school-based administrators interested in understanding instructional leadership practices, school district administrators who are providing professional learning opportunities to both formal and informal

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<sup>2</sup> Research from Manitoba Education (2010) indicated that schools' grade designations are not necessarily indicators of middle school practices. Junior high school approaches are evident in facilities labelled as middle schools, and innovative leadership and progressive teaching practices are found in facilities labelled as both middle and junior high schools. However, for the purposes of this study, because I was aware of the emphasis the school district within which I did the research places on middle years philosophy as the foundation of its middle schools, I assumed that middle school practices occur within those schools.

school leaders, or who are setting related policy; post-secondary administrators or instructors who are educating and preparing school leaders; and potentially government officials who are keen on understanding instructional leadership and the contextual implications for such practices in middle schools.

The knowledge generated from this inquiry provides new insights and therefore informs instructional leadership practices in middle schools. This study confirms aspects of the research already reported in the academic literature, further defines and expands on principals' understandings and practices of instructional leadership, and suggests new understandings about the conditions for instructional leadership within middle schools, thus adding to the existing literature on the topic.

My original rationale for examining this topic was that there was minimal research on middle school principals' instructional leadership. Although there has been significant research published on instructional leadership, scholars highlight that there remains a need for greater guidance in understanding "how this work is done" (Neumerski, 2013, p. 319), especially during a time of renewed calls for principals to prioritize instructional leadership over rising managerial tasks (Rigby, 2013, Terosky, 2016). Furthermore, there is a gap in the literature related to instructional leadership practices within the specific context of middle schools, and this study helps to close that gap.

At the most basic level, this research provides knowledge to guide future leadership practice, policy, and research. This study provides a starting point for discourse with various audiences about the future of instructional leadership and how middle school principals' practices of instructional leadership can impact teachers' instructional capacity.

## **Definitions of Key Terminology**

To provide clarity, the following specific terms have been identified and defined as they are used within this dissertation.

**Case Study:** A case study is a research methodology of an in-depth empirical inquiry investigating a contemporary phenomenon, within its relation to the environment (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Yin, 2014).

**District:** Within the study district refers to the entire large urban school district in which I conducted the study. Participants also referred to the district as the system.

**Instructional Leadership:** Instructional leadership is defined as leadership that “increases the school’s capacity for improving teachers’ instructional capacity” (Heck & Hallinger, 2014, p. 658).

**Leadership:** Leadership can be described by reference to two core functions: providing direction and exercising influence (Leithwood & Louis, 2012).

**Leadership for Learning:** Leadership for learning describes approaches that school leaders employ to achieve important school outcomes, with particular focus on student learning (Hallinger, 2003, 2011; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Robinson et al., 2008)

**Middle Schools:** Middle schools, middle year education, middle level education, and middle level environments are terms used interchangeably in current research. In this study, I most often use the term middle schools. The Association for Middle Level Education AMLE (2010c) stressed that the middle school essential characteristics are focused on adolescent students aged 10 to 15. The configuration in the United States often encompasses Grades 5 to 8, but the configuration within research studies ranges from Grades 4 to 9.

***Teacher Instructional Capacity:*** Teacher instructional capacity is defined as the degree to which resources and processes enable school professionals to convert information and knowledge into changes that respond to learning needs of students (Crowther, 2011; Hargreaves, 2011).

## **Organization of the Dissertation**

This chapter began with an overview of the context and background framing the study. The problem statement, the statement of purpose, and accompanying research questions were articulated. A brief explanation of the research design and researcher's perspectives and assumptions were then presented. The chapter concluded with the rationale and significance of this research study, and a list of definitions of key terminology used in this study.

The next two chapters set the stage for the inquiry and, thus, constitute its framework. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature relevant to instructional leadership and the role of the principal, and the interconnectedness between principals' instructional leadership and developing teachers' instructional capacity. It also provides a review of literature examining middle school characteristics and principals' leadership within middle schools. It ends with an explanation of the conceptual framework that I developed for my inquiry. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology and methods utilized in this study. It also addresses issues of trustworthiness, limitations, and delimitations, and it concludes with an account of the ethical considerations that were important in planning and conducting the research.

Chapters 4 through 6 present the study's data, and my analysis, interpretations, and recommendations. Specifically, Chapter 4 reports the research findings. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the themes that emerged from the findings. Chapter 6 presents conclusions and recommendations based on these themes.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

With a continued movement toward increased accountability in schools, there has been a simultaneous call for principals to take more responsibility for improving teaching and learning in their schools (Hallinger, 2005; Louis et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2008). Research has focused on the link between effective school leadership and positive academic outcomes for students. Leadership, in general, is the process of persuasion or example by which an individual or leadership team induces a group to pursue objectives held or shared by the leaders and their followers (Gardner, 2000, p. 3). Leithwood and Louis (2012) described leadership as providing direction and exercising influence (p. 4). The authors explained further that these two functions can be carried out in different ways, and within these two functions are various modes of practice, including those related to instructional leadership.

Research on leadership in non-educational contexts is frequently driven by theories that are sometimes described as adjectival leadership models (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 5). A review of such models identified twenty-one leadership approaches that have been examined both theoretically and empirically (Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005). Educational leadership has also been conceptualized and defined in numerous ways (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Adjectives used to describe school-based leadership have included: educational, focused, learning centered, student-centered, and instructional, to name a few (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

Over the past three decades, instructional leadership has assumed a place at the forefront of educational leadership literature, as research confirms that leadership practices that are focused on improving instruction in a school make a difference for learning and achievement of

students (Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Heck & Hallinger, 1999; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). A large body of international research has developed the idea that the impact of leadership on learning is achieved indirectly by shaping conditions that contribute to effective teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1996, 1998; Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008). Thus, it is important that principals understand their role as instructional leaders and how their practices impact instructional capacity. Further, the context of the school, whether due to grade configuration, specific learning needs of students, or experiences of teachers, seems to play a major role in the way in which principals practice instructional leadership (Wahlstrom, 2012). Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinback (1999) explained that one of their most robust findings regarding leadership is that there is no one way to be a successful educational leader in all situations because “outstanding leadership is exquisitely sensitive to the context in which it is exercised” (p. 4).

To conduct the proposed inquiry, it was necessary to complete a critical review of current literature. This review was ongoing throughout the data collection, data analysis, and synthesis phases of the study. During the course of this literature review, I used multiple sources including books, dissertations, professional journals, periodicals, and internet resources. The literature review critically explores: (a) the evolution and research on instructional leadership, and provides a definition to highlight what action and practices constitute instructional leadership, (b) the interconnectedness between principals’ instructional leadership and developing teachers’ instructional capacity, and (c) middle school characteristics, and principal leadership specific to middle schools.

## **The Evolution of and Research on Instructional Leadership**

Even with significant support for an instructional leadership model, the literature on instructional leadership is filled with contention. For several decades researchers and practitioners have used the term, but it continues to mean different things to different people (Hallinger, 2003; Robinson et al., 2008; Terosky, 2014). The instructional leadership model has evolved from a list of characteristics that describe the principal, to a coordinated series of tasks that may be accomplished by multiple leaders but are most often overseen by the principal (Hallinger, 2011; Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Neumerski, 2013).

**Early models of instructional leadership.** First introduced in the 1970s, instructional leadership models were developed during the Effective Schools Movement of the 1970s and early 1980s (Hallinger, 2003, 2005, 2010; Louis et al., 2010). In the original conception, the principal provides the primary source of instructional leadership. The principal acts as the central supervisor of the instructional program and leads the primary effort to improve teaching and learning by serving as the expert in curriculum, instruction, and assessment, while directly interacting with teachers (Hallinger, 2003, 2005, 2010; Louis et al., 2010). This conception was based on research done in failing elementary schools that required turnaround, and this context created a brand of instructional leader (principal) that was directive and authoritative (Hallinger, 2005, 2010).

In their review of the evolution of instructional leadership, Hallinger, Leithwood, and Heck (2010) explained that the first significant attempt to clearly define and empirically study what we now refer to as instructional leadership was undertaken by Gross and Herriot (1965) in a large elementary focused study. The researchers developed the concept of executive professional

leadership (EPL) and found positive correlations between EPL and three key outcomes: staff morale, the professional performance of teachers, and pupils' learning (Hallinger, 2010).

Ronald Edmonds (1979) first used the term instructional leadership, based on his and colleagues' (i.e., Brookover & Lezette, 1977; Rutter, Maugham, Mortimore, Oustan, & Smith, 1979) Effective Schools Research. Thus, the concept is rooted in what became popularized as the Effective Schools Movement, which emphasized the significance of the effort and effects of schools, teachers, and educational leadership, rather than suggesting, as earlier studies had, that genetics, socioeconomic status, and societal or racial background are accurate indicators of student success.

Edmonds (1979) reported that the differences in the performance of students were associated with factors under the control of educators, and that “administrative behaviors, policies, and practices in the school appeared to have significant impact on school effectiveness” (p. 16). The Effective Schools Research produced seven correlates of effective schools, and one of them was instructional leadership. Edmonds' early research revealed that principals in effective schools were more likely to be instructionally focused than their less successful counterparts. They were intimately involved with curriculum, teaching, and in monitoring student progress (Nuemerski, 2013). Proponents of the Effective Schools Model continued to make a case for principals to lead instruction with a direct, hands-on approach.

McEwan (2009) synthesized the Effective School Research, which he found included research on effective instruction and instructional leadership. McEwan's research examined case studies of highly effective schools and personal interviews of teachers, principals, district administration, and consultants in the highly effective districts and schools. With this information, he developed ten traits of effective schools. The first trait reported was that strong

instructional leadership was displayed by the principal. The prevalent and reoccurring thread found in Effective School Research is the importance of leadership, particularly instructional leadership.

After a review of empirical research from 1980 to 1995, Hallinger and Heck (1996) wrote: “Research on school effectiveness concluded that strong administrative leadership was among those factors within the school that make a difference in student learning” (p. 5). Therefore, to better understand effective schools, one must understand instructional leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; McEwan, 2009; Nuemerski, 2013).

The first wave of instructional leadership research suggested a list of personality traits and a bureaucratic top-down paradigm of instructional leadership; a conceptualization of that was later seen to be flawed (Hallinger & Wang, 2015). The early research also ignored “environmental and organizational influences” (Murphy, 1988, p. 124) including context, structure, size, level, technical clarity and complexity, and staff composition. Nonetheless, instructional leadership has become a normative role that principals who wish to be effective are expected to fulfill (Hallinger et al., 2010).

During the 1980s several models of instructional leadership to measure the principal’s impact on teaching and learning were proposed (Hallinger, 2005, 2010). Although overlap and commonalities exist among models, a model by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) has been used most frequently in empirical investigations (Hallinger, 2001, 2010; Hallinger & Heck, 1996, 1998).

Hallinger and Murphy (1985) described instructional leadership with three general domains: defining the school mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive learning environment. Within the domain of defining the school mission, they included

leadership behaviors for framing and communicating the school goals. The domain of managing the instructional program includes supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum, and monitoring student progress. Hallinger and Murphy's domain of promoting a positive learning environment includes (a) protecting instructional time, (b) maintaining high visibility, (c) providing incentives for teachers, (d) promoting professional development, and (e) providing incentives for learning.

According to Ylimaki (2006), instructional leadership models of the 1980s were criticized for being too directive and principal centered. By the mid-1990s, attention began to shift toward transformational and distributed models of leadership that focused on empowering others (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, & Hopkins, 2007; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

Despite the keen interest from academia, it appears to have been extremely difficult to validate a relationship between distributed leadership and student learning improvement (Hulpia, Devos, & Rosseel, 2009; Tian, Risku, & Collin, 2015). Even through meta-analysis, Tian et al. (2015) found it difficult to find examples or modeling of the causal relationship between distributed leadership and student learning outcomes, and they pointed to the problem of not being able to generalize identified applications of distributed leadership at a school or school-district level. Leithwood and Jantzi (2012) found that, when school leaders used distributed leadership practices, the impact on student achievement was primarily through the principal's influence on teacher motivation and working conditions. The principal's influence on teachers' knowledge and skills produced much less impact on student achievement.

More and more research began to examine instructional leadership at the district level and its effect on student achievement (Hallinger et al., 2010). Brandmo (2016) stated that "in search for the most suitable role for principals, two major approaches of conceptual leadership

models have dominated: instructional leadership and transformational leadership” (p. 92).

Hallinger (2009) agreed that, of the variety of conceptual models that have been employed as a result of research into educational leadership over the past 30 years, the most common are for instructional and transformational leadership.

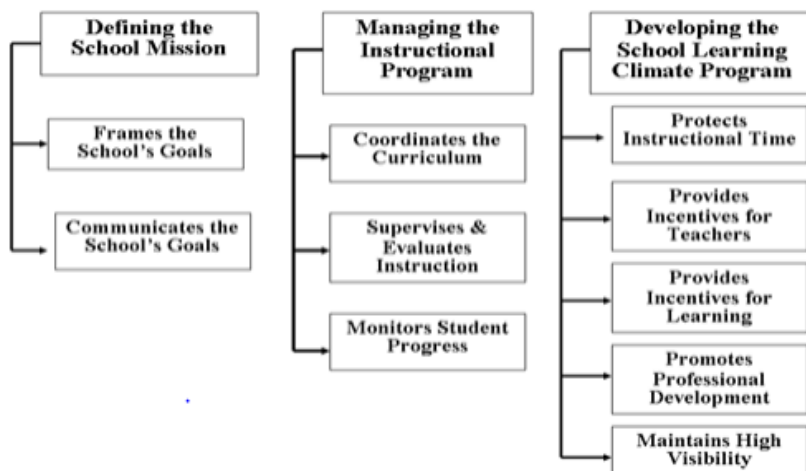
Robinson et al. (2008) performed a meta-analysis of 22 studies that investigated the effect size of different forms of leadership and student outcomes. The researchers found a small 0.11 effect size for the impact of transformational leadership on student achievement versus an effect size of .42 for instructional leadership. They suggested that school leadership models lack impact on student achievement because they are often too general and too abstract to describe the specific actions that school leaders should implement.

Robinson et al. (2008) argued that these results show that instructional leadership captures the impact of school leadership on learning better than transformational leadership. That is, transformational leadership as applied to education does not appear to measure all of the processes by which leaders impact teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2011). Robinson et al.’s (2008) findings, along with those of other researchers (Fullan, 2014; Hallinger & Heck, 2014; Hallinger, 2011; Terosky, 2016), have continued to raise the expectation that principals should become instructional leaders.

Although there are few instructional leadership studies focused on middle schools, Minus’ (2010) study provided a more recent example of middle school research that used Hallinger’s (1985) instructional leadership model. This study of 121 middle school principals and 484 middle school teachers examined the impact on student achievement in reading and math, as measured by Maryland’s state assessment. The results validated Hallinger’s (1985) claims about the impact of some instructional leadership practices on student learning, including

promoting professional development, framing school goals, supervising and evaluating curriculum, coordinating curriculum, and providing incentives for learning.

**Instructional leadership framework.** Hallinger (2000, 2003) shifted the focus of instructional leadership from an iconic principal who manages his or her school on his or her own, to a leader who shares leadership with staff and distributes responsibility for instructional improvement. Hallinger's (2010) framework and assessment tool, the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS), became the dominant source for a definition of instructional leadership (Hallinger & Wang, 2015; Neumerski, 2013; Urick, 2016), and went beyond the broad categories and observations of the initial instructional leadership models to incorporate an action-orientated framework. Hallinger's PIMRS identifies three dimensions of instructional leadership: defining the school mission and vision, managing the instructional program, and developing the school learning climate program. These dimensions are separated into 10 instructional leadership functions that combine to present a comprehensive picture of what instructional leadership entails (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) conceptual framework (Hallinger, 2010).

***Defining the school mission and vision.*** One of the most important factors in motivating a staff to change is the ability of the principal to create a common purpose (Leithwood et al., 2008; Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood, 2012). An instructional leader must be able to create a sense of collectiveness around a common goal of student success. Hallinger (2003) included two functions under the mission and vision dimension, framing school goals and communicating school goals. Although not the sole responsibility of the principal to develop the mission, the instructional leader is responsible for taking an instructionally focused vision and making it a cornerstone of the school's culture. Establishing such aspects as goals, purpose, and expectations collaboratively facilitates deeper understanding and collective ownership, leading to higher performing schools (Louis et al., 2010). Clear, common goals and purpose focus and direct the work of teachers, creating motivation and efficacy, which minimizes distractions that can detract from the work (Robinson, 2011; Sinnema, Ludlow, & Robinson, 2016). Communication is essential as goals are established, monitored, and assessed providing for current and timely feedback on progress (Leithwood, 2012; Marzano, Walters, & McNulty, 2005).

***Managing the instructional program.*** This dimension of the instructional leadership model requires a depth of instructional involvement not required in the other dimensions. To be effective, the focus of instructional leadership must remain on teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2005; Louis et al., 2010; Southwood, 2002). Principals' knowledge and expertise in instructional matters are valuable for instructional leaders, as they are able to provide quality guidance to teachers regarding teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2003, 2005, 2011; Marzano et al., 2005; Neumerski, 2013). Without a deep knowledge base of instructional matters, principals find hands-on facilitation and modelling of intellectual stimulation difficult (Hallinger, 2003, 2011;

Marzano et al., 2005).

Effective instructional leaders ensure the curriculum taught in their schools is aligned with district standards and assessments and make sure teachers understand current practices and theories. Effective instructional leaders are involved in instructional programming, assessment, and dialogue with teachers about their practice (Robinson, 2011). Leadership that focuses on “modeling common values through engagement in the work of instructional practice” supports improved instructional alignment (Elmore, 2005, p. 141). Effective principals in successful schools make more frequent observations of classroom instruction, and tie those observations with opportunities for discussion, feedback, and self-reflection (Blasé & Blasé, 2000; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Leithwood et al., 2012; Robinson, 2011).

Moreover, the instructional leadership behaviour of monitoring student progress initiates collaboration between the school principal and staff to recognize when efforts fall short of expectations and when to intervene if necessary (Cotton 2003; Hallinger, 2005). Research has shown that collaborative teams of school professionals can determine when to intervene, as they focus on student progress and growth measured with quality assessment data (Hallinger, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2008). Leading the learning together, through such organizational structures as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), strengthens the collaborative process and supports the alignment of practices towards common goals (DuFour, 2002; Robinson, 2011).

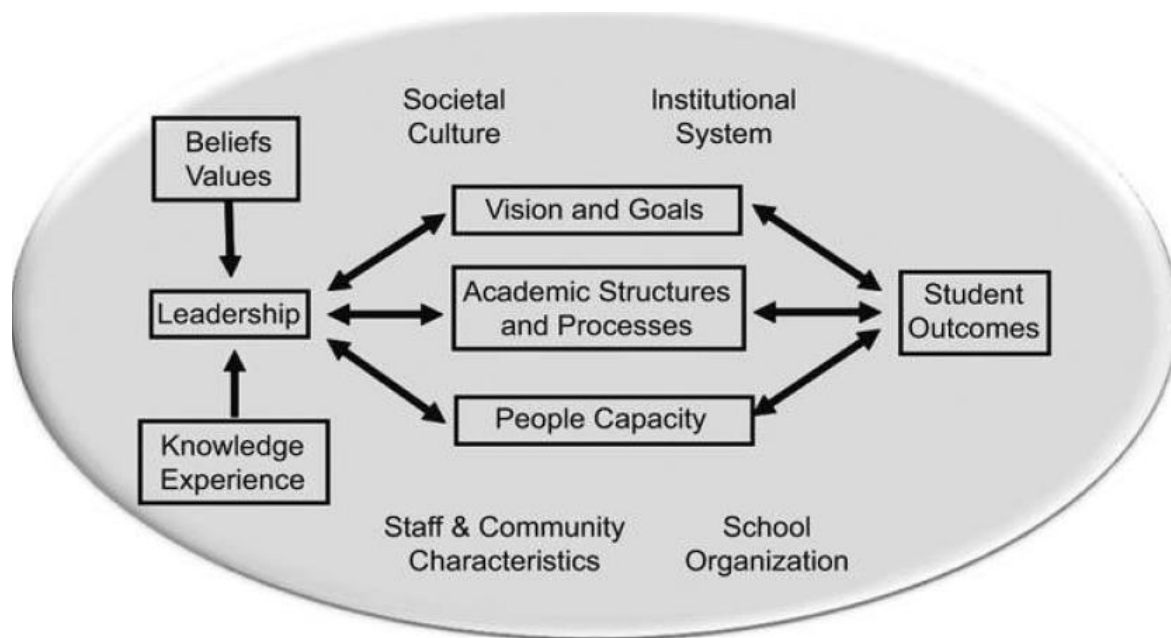
***Developing the school learning climate program.*** This dimension of instructional leadership practice focuses on five functions that guide the development of the climate of the school learning program. The functions require a mix of direct and indirect actions that foster an environment of high expectations amongst all members of the community (Hallinger, 2003). The instructional leadership behaviour of protecting instructional time is manifested when the

principal minimizes interruptions that impact the teaching environment of the classroom and shields teachers from internal or external distractions (Cotton, 2003; Hallinger, 2003, 2011; Marzano et al., 2005). Along with protecting instructional time, effective principals maximize instructional efforts for teachers and instructional resources of the school by aligning work to the vision and goal of the school (Marzano et al., 2005).

Effective school principals maintain high visibility by visiting classrooms on a regular basis and by having purposeful interactions with all stakeholders. The more visible principals make themselves, the more opportunities there are to build relationships with stakeholders on a personal level (Cotton, 2003; Hallinger, 2005; Marzano et al., 2005). For effective principals, there is an increased focus on providing direction and influencing direction through professional development learning opportunities (Leithwood et al., 2008; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Principals make it clear through missions, vision, and actions that the school is a place for learning. They prioritize instruction and hold the same expectations for their staff and students (Terosky, 2014). The evidence in the research has suggested that when principals lead teacher learning and development it has twice the effect size of any other aspect of leadership in terms of the link with student outcomes (Robinson, 2011).

**Instructional leadership as leadership for learning.** As shared by Robinson (2006), most of the 1990s and the early part of the 21st Century had the principalship focused on effective management of schools, whereas now there is a greater focus on leadership of teaching and learning. This is more relevant with a continued move to see principals work with teachers and other school-based leaders within a shared, collaborative, and distributed manner, and with instructional leadership theory taking on a more robust focus on improving teacher instructional capacity.

Hallinger (2011) himself explained that the term instructional leadership originally focused on the role of the principal. Hallinger redeveloped the model to use a new label, leadership for learning, which suggests a broader conceptualization that incorporates both a wider range of leadership sources as well as additional foci for action (p. 126). A new model proposed by Hallinger (see Figure 2) and conceptualized by other researchers, such as Leithwood et al. (2008, 2010), highlights several important assumptions about leadership for learning and displays a similar structure to models of system theory presented by Vornberg (2013).



*Figure 2.* Hallinger’s (2011) conceptualization proposed by leadership researchers over the past several decades (p. 127).

Hallinger’s (2011) new model highlights several important assumptions about principal leadership. Figure 2 indicates that leadership is enacted within an organization and environmental context. School leaders operate in an “open system” that consists not only of the community, but also the institutional system and culture (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al.,

2010). Hallinger explained further that the exercise of leadership is framed by personal characteristics of the leaders themselves. In particular, he highlighted personal values, beliefs, knowledge, and experience of principals and other leaders as sources of variation in leadership practice. The model shows that leadership does not directly impact student learning; rather, its impact is mediated by school-level processes and conditions (Hallinger 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2008). Further, the double-headed arrows within the model suggest that school leadership both influences and is influenced by these school conditions (Hallinger & Heck, 1996, 2010; Hallinger, 2011). Lastly, Hallinger's (2011) new conceptualization frames leadership as directly, though not solely, impacting student growth and learning outcomes, along with a more focused approach of the principal's role on improving the instructional capacity of teachers (Hallinger, 2011).

Along with a more focused base of research examining the principal's impact on teaching and learning and, specifically, increasing teacher capacity, researchers continue to examine the link between instructional leadership and a more shared model. Sharing and distributing leadership enables principals and teachers to work together to improve curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Louis et al., 2010; Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012). Further, when Louis et al. (2010) conducted a comprehensive study regarding educational leadership, one of the three themes that emerged was that principals most effectively create strong working relationships that impact student achievement when they share leadership with teachers. The interactions between principals and teachers in shared forms of leadership, particularly instructional, have demonstrated synergy (Urlick, 2016). Urick explained that in successful schools, where a shared form of leadership is created, teachers who are able to access power to lead and influence exhibit the personal resources, expertise, and knowledge needed by others in the organization. Further,

teachers who are empowered to participate in a collaborative and shared leadership environment are able to create two-way relationships or feedback loops between formal and informal leaders and followers. Louis et al. (2010) defined shared leadership broadly to denote teachers' influence over, and their participation in, school-wide decisions with principals. Their view of shared leadership reflects an emerging consensus among scholars about people who are concerned with formal and informal leadership roles (p. 41).

Hallinger's (2011) conceptual shift from instructional leadership to leadership for learning, along with the influences of Robinson's (2011) student-centered leadership model and Louis et al.'s (2010) combination of instructional leadership within a more shared leadership model, points to educational leadership as a humanistic and moral endeavor rather than a scientific one (Heck & Hallinger, 2005). Within the reframing of instructional leadership, scholars recognized the difficulty for a principal to lead in isolation. Although there has been extensive research on what behaviors constitute instructional leadership, there has been minimal information on how to best enact these behaviors. This gap, coupled with principals changing from positioning themselves as sole leader to one actor among others in a more distributed and shared leadership model, has guided researchers to explore a more team-based approach (Brandon, Saar, Friesen, Brown, & Yee, 2016; Friesen, Jacobsen, Brown, & Yanez, 2015; Louis et al., 2010; Urick, 2016).

The concept of shared instructional leadership conveys an account of how Robinson (2011) sees the work being organized in schools. She explained that instructional leadership is performed by all teachers who have some responsibility beyond their own classrooms for the quality of learning and teaching. The principal is an instructional leader and a leader of instructional leaders. Further, school leadership via the principal needs to move from a generic

leadership position into an *educational* leadership role (Robinson, 2006). Specifically, the goal is no longer to develop a cohesive culture, have strong communication channels with staff and students, and monitor and evaluate instruction; the “new goal requires leaders to do all those things in a manner that improves teaching and learning” (p. 68).

**Definition of instructional leadership.** Within the various changes to the instructional leadership model, the principal’s role has shifted, suggesting principals need to be greater instructional leaders (Wahlstrom, 2012). At the start of the new millennium, the model shifted to focus on the improvement of learning and teaching (Hallinger, 2003). As the models have altered, so too has the research about instructional leadership. Similarly, as Blasé and Blasé (2004) suggested, until recently little knowledge of what behaviors comprise good instructional leadership has been available in the literature.

More currently, educational researchers are starting to ask specific questions regarding how instructional leadership impacts instruction. As Louis and Wahlstrom (2012) emphasized, research shows that “consistent, well informed support from the principal makes a difference” (p. 30). Liu, Hallinger, and Feng (2016) have suggested that there is an ever-emerging body of research examining instructional leadership practices, as there is a “critical link between teacher capacity and student learning” (p. 79). However, even though there has been much written about the importance of the principal as an instructional leader, the research often fails to reflect what principals do on a regular basis. Theorists accept the need for instructional leadership, but have struggled to come to agreement on what instructional leadership really means; furthermore, what constitutes specific practices of instructional leadership remains vague. There have been many different definitions, each one reflective of the perspective of the researcher, but for the purpose of this study, instructional leadership is defined as leadership that “increases the school’s

capacity for improving teachers' instructional capacity" (Heck & Hallinger, 2014, p. 658). This definition concurs with Hallinger's (2011) leadership for learning instructional model, and includes both direct and indirect leadership actions.

### **Instructional Leadership and Teachers' Instructional Capacity**

As suggested earlier, it may be argued that early research reflects an out-of-date view on leadership: a strong, directive, hands-on principal using authority to supervise teachers in classrooms (Hallinger, 2003; Salo, Nyland, & Stjernstrøm, 2015). Over time, the concept of instructional leadership has broadened, and it now includes leadership practices aimed at enhancing teachers' professional learning and growth, and it involves various mediating educational and organizational practices by which principals support successful teaching and share the responsibilities of instruction (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008). Engaging in instructional leadership practices requires time, skills, knowledge, and attention to the interaction between people and the school's context. The principal has both a direct and indirect role in building the capacity of the teachers. More specifically, King and Newman (2001) explained that student achievement is affected most directly by the quality of teacher instruction, and they found teacher instruction to be most often shaped by professional learning, which improves instructional capacity.

**Defining instructional capacity.** Fullan (2008) stated that capacity relates to the development of competencies, resources, and motivation, and that individuals and groups have a high level of capacity if they possess and continue to develop knowledge and skills, if they explore and use resources wisely, and if they are committed to collectively and contentiously learning (p. 57). Leithwood and Mascall (2008) suggested that capacity includes the declarative knowledge (understanding) and procedural knowledge (skills or how-to) required to accomplish

work related tasks (p. 538). Within the context of education, capacity is often referenced as an essential condition for effective teaching, quality learning, and school improvement (Adams, 2013). Early capacity research by Corcoran and Goertz (1995) and Cohen and Ball (1999) focused on instructional environments supportive of quality teaching. They found that interactions among instructional materials, teachers, and students contributed to the capacity of a school to enhance student learning. Research evolved from describing elements of capacity to exploring processes supportive of its formations (King & Newman, 2001; Spillane & Louis, 2002). More recent work centers on policies (Fullan, 2010) and improvement models (Crowther, 2011) designed to support localized knowledge creation and learning among school professionals.

Just as there were changes to the instructional leadership model in the early 2000s, the definition of instructional capacity also evolved with reference to two interdependent properties of instructional capacity: resources within schools that enhance teaching effectiveness, and social processes that facilitate knowledge creation and professional learning. Both of these are directly and indirectly influenced by the school principal (Adams, 2013; Li, Hallinger, & Ko, 2016; Louis & Robinson, 2012). Newman, King, and Youngs (2000) described instructional capacity as embodied in competent teachers, professional community, and program coherence. Elmore (2004) similarly identified knowledgeable teachers, instructional resources, effective leadership, and program coherence as characteristics of schools operating at high capacity. Cohen and Ball (1999) argued that, rather than view instructional capacity as the sum of fixed resources, capacity exists within processes that allow teachers to develop knowledge and build expertise. The principal has a role in determining if the school professionals form either a strong, coherent, and

predictable instructional core, or a less efficient, isolated, and fragmented number of instructional practices (Adams, 2013; Cohen & Ball, 1999).

Adams (2013) suggested that it is difficult to envision a high performing school without access to adequate resources, or conversely, a school where effective instructional practices do not generate additional resources to improve learning. Adding to the complexity of increasing instructional capacity, Dinham and Crowther (2011) suggested that material features (teachers, infrastructure, instructional resources) and intangible features framed by culture and climate, combine to form capacity. Furthermore, Hargreaves (2011) defined capacity even more broadly as “those resources and processes that bear directly and indirectly on what happens in the classroom” (p. 685). Knowledgeable teachers, professional structures, and instructional materials can support collaborative and cooperative processes, and effective processes have consequences for social resources that improve readiness to meet student needs (Adams, 2013). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, instructional capacity is defined as the degree to which resources and processes enable school professionals to convert information and knowledge into changes that respond to learning needs of students (Crowther, 2011; Hargreaves, 2011).

**Principals’ instructional leadership practices and instructional capacity.** Louis et al. (2010) reported that, throughout their research, they did not encounter any instance in which students’ learning achievement increased without effective leadership and effective teacher instructional practices. The assumption here is that instruction will improve if the leaders provide detailed feedback to teachers, and that principals have the time, knowledge, and consultative skills needed to provide teachers in all relevant grade levels and subject areas with valid, useful advice about their practices (Hallinger, 2005). However, specific leadership required to establish and maintain focus on instructional leadership is poorly defined (Louis et al., 2010). The

evidence suggests that few principals make time and demonstrate the ability to provide high quality instructional feedback to teachers in order to improve teachers' instructional capacity (Louis et al., 2010; Nelson & Sassi, 2005). Part of the difficulty is that increased instructional leadership requires leaders to spend more time on the educational needs of students and staff, and less on the management aspects of their role, or at least to integrate instructional concerns into all aspects of their managerial decision making. Making this shift has been found to pose considerable professional and organizational challenges.

The professional challenges of making the shift to a more instructional focus include developing the capabilities required to engage in the practices described as instructional leadership (Louis & Robinson, 2012; Nelson & Sassi, 2005; Robinson, 2011). While the five dimensions of Robinson's (2011) model – of which leading teaching and learning have the most significant effective size at 0.84 – tell principals *what* to focus on to make a bigger impact on student achievement (Louis & Robinson, 2012; Robinson, 2011; Sinnema et al., 2016), the *how* part of Robinson's model involves the principal having a deep knowledge of teaching and learning, the ability to bring the knowledge to bear in context-specific management and instructional decision making, and the capacity to build relational trust in the process.

Robinson's (2011) student-centered leadership model, Hallinger's (2003, 2010, 2011) instructional leadership model, and Jaquith's (2012) four types of instructional resources all have common themes that focus on leading the development of capabilities that support and sustain focus on teacher instructional capacity. Jaquith (2012) stated that four types of resources are needed for high quality instruction: (1) instructional knowledge, which includes knowledge of content, pedagogy, and students; (2) instructional materials, such as curriculum, textbooks, and assessments; (3) instructional relationships that are characterized by trust, mutual respect, a

recognition of instructional expertise, and an openness to interpersonal learning; and (4) organizational structures that support the identification, development, and use of instructional resources. These four types of instructional resources are seen to be multifaceted and interdependent.

Within the research examining principal leadership and teacher capacity, there are common paths, such as leading professional learning, collective trust, and creating a collaborative network, that typically incorporate school and classroom constructs that directly impact student learning (Adams, 2013; Cohen & Ball, 1999; Corcoran & Goertz, 1995; Harris, 2011; Jaquith, 2012, 2013; Li et al., 2016; Spillane & Louis, 2002). Hallinger and Heck (2010) found that measures of an elementary school's capacity for academic improvement predicted change in student outcomes over time. These researchers, along with Youngs and King (2002), claimed that principals' actions and beliefs regarding teacher professional development were associated with the improvement of instructional capacity to impact student learning. Teacher development has been validated as a key path through which principals impact teaching and learning processes in schools (Leithwood et al., 2008; Robinson, 2011). Guskey (2000) defined professional development as the "process and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators so they might, in turn, improve the learning of students" (p. 16). Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung (2007) established that, over time, "the term 'professional development' has taken on conditions of delivering some kind of information to teachers in order to influence practice where 'professional learning' implies an internal process through which individuals create professional knowledge" (p. 3). Professional development and professional learning are linked, for without professional learning, professional

development is unlikely to have an impact. Principals have the responsibility to organize and support the professional learning of teachers (Alberta Education, 2018).

The research has indicated that there is increasing evidence that teacher learning can result in improved instruction and, subsequently, student achievement (Li et al., 2016). Regular embedded professional learning is a fundamental means for enabling teachers to adapt to changing needs and to improve instructional skills. Principals play a key role in creating conditions, such as structure, shaping the environment, and deciding on focus, which influence the motivation and support the ongoing learning of school staff (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Robinson, 2011; Li, et al., 2016). According to Timperley et al. (2007), the content of the professional learning opportunity is essential to effective professional learning. The principal needs to work with staff to create activities that have a clear focus on deepening professional understanding and extending teachers' skills in ways that will positively impact students. This only occurs if the design of the learning opportunities begins with a clear idea of what preferred knowledge and necessary skills are to be developed by the teachers, and these are most often guided by the principal (Timperley, 2011, Timperley et al., 2007).

May and Supovitz (2011) conducted a unique study examining the frequency and scope of principals' leadership activities. The researchers explained a narrow scope as a highly targeted influence designed to help a small number of teachers improve their practices. A broad scope was defined as the principal trying to produce school-wide change or change in a larger number of classroom teachers. The quantitative results from 51 urban schools in the southern United States indicated that principals spend differing amounts of their time (0% to 25%) on instructional activities. The magnitude of the changes in instructional practices relates to the frequency of an individual principal's instructional leadership activities.

Unrelated to the size of the school, only 22% of teachers reported high instructional leadership contact with their principals (Mary & Supovitz, 2011). The researchers concluded that the scope of principals' instructional leadership activities varies from one school to the next, from very broad approaches that target the entire faculty to narrowed approaches that target just a few teachers. Secondly, the frequency of a principal's instructional leadership activities with an individual teacher is directly related to the magnitude of instructional change reported by that teacher. Interestingly, Hallinger's (2003) earlier research concluded that relatively few studies confirm a correlation between the principal's direct work of supervising the instruction of teachers, and teacher effectiveness and student achievement. The desired results of increased teacher performance and student learning occurred in elementary schools, indicating that school size may serve as a limiting factor (Hallinger, 2003). One may conclude that a narrow focus on specific approaches to improving instructional practices appears effective as long as the principal provides frequent instructional interactions with teachers (Hallinger, 2003).

Further research has shown that a collaborative network is a key resource for improving teaching and learning (Jaquith, 2013; Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Leading and learning together, through such organizational structures as PLCs, strengthens the collaborative process and supports the alignment of practices towards the common goal (Harris, 2011; Robinson, 2011). Focusing on instruction supports curricular and instructional coherence, improving instructional capacity. Effective instructional leaders are involved in the instructional program, assessment, and dialogue with teachers about their practices (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Robinson, 2011; Wahlstrom, 2012). Fullan (2010, 2011) argued that purposeful collaboration is one way to ensure there is coherence and centrality of purpose to the work.

Instructional leadership is also directed at the improvement of teaching and learning through the principals' involvement in the coordination and evaluation of the instructional program (Robinson, 2011). Robinson (2011) identified this leadership dimension as having the strongest effect on improved student achievement. She explained that this is where the main emphasis of time and attention should be spent: "in higher-performing schools it is much more focused on the business of improving learning and teaching" (p. 3). Effective leaders in successful schools make more frequent observations of classroom instruction, and connect those observations with opportunities for feedback and self-reflection (Lai, 2014; Robinson, 2011).

Adams (2013) shared that relationships play a critical role in the performance of educational systems and are a major contributor to a principal's ability to create conditions for instructional capacity. Similarly, Louis and Wahlstrom (2012) found that supportive principal behavior and staff trust are significantly correlated in both elementary and secondary schools. In schools with more engaged teachers, the teachers express higher levels of trust in their colleagues, resulting in more collective decision making and a greater likelihood that change initiatives are implemented, improving student achievement. Further, Louis and Wahlstrom explained that when instructional leadership, shared leadership, and trust in the principal are combined there is an increased level in student learning.

This is similar to Robinson's (2011) focus on the leadership capability of building relational trust that is crucial to her student-centered leadership model. She explained that, in schools with higher levels of trust, teachers experience a stronger sense of professional community and are more willing to be innovative and take risks. Furthermore, students in high-trust schools make more academic and social progress than students in similar yet low-trust schools. Robinson concluded that student-centered leadership requires the principal to be

knowledgeable about how to align administrative procedures with important learning outcomes, skilled in using that knowledge to solve school problems, and able to accomplish these objectives in ways that build relational trust within the school community (p. 43). More recently, Friesen et al. (2015) suggested that the principal needs to work with the staff to create an environment that is trusting and should help to provide time for collaboration. This means reconsidering structural changes to schedules and timetables, and even rethinking the way students and teachers move and are placed within the school.

**Instructional leadership and context.** As noted earlier, the initial empirical studies of instructional leadership came from the Effective Schools Movement (Edmonds, 1979). A key strength but also a limitation of this research was the focus on urban elementary schools during challenging circumstances. Thus, researchers challenged the generalizability of the findings to the wider population of schools (Hallinger, 2011). Leithwood and Louis (2012) have also highlighted that instructional leadership studies conducted in mainly elementary settings are used to generalize instructional leadership practices across all settings, including junior, middle, and senior high schools. Hallinger (2011) explained that only in recent years have researchers begun to examine this oversight and explore the relationship between school context and leadership. Implicit in this critique is the recognition that school context represents an important factor in understanding leadership, building teacher instructional capacity, and improving student learning.

Although principals recognize the importance of instructional leadership, there seems to be significant variation in principals' understandings and practices of this type of work. This may be due to structural and organizational differences, as secondary school principals appear to be less actively involved in instructional leadership practices than elementary level principals.

When Wahlstrom (2012) compared the instructional leadership practices of secondary and elementary principals, the teachers surveyed indicated that the secondary principals did not engage or participate to the level of their elementary counterparts. This could indicate that instructional leadership requires “substantial adaptation in secondary schools” (Hallinger, 2005, p. 231). While principals implement instructional leadership practices across the K to 12 spectrum, offering some possibility of research transferability, Gale and Bishop (2014) suggested that middle school principals face particular challenges to their effectiveness due to three key concerns: the unique nature and needs of 10 to 15 year olds (Anfara et al., 2006), the variety of building configurations in which they are served (Powell, 2011), and an increasing awareness of the critical role the middle grades play in later life success (Balfanz et al., 2007). Furthermore, research has suggested that factors, such as increased number of students in large urban middle schools, range in students’ developmental age, number of staff being managed, and increasing complexity of administrative team structures, impact instructional leadership practices (Gale & Bishop, 2014, p. 1).

### **Middle School Characteristics and Principals’ Leadership in Middle Schools**

Since the purpose of the study was to examine how experienced middle school principals understand instructional leadership, and perceive and rationalize their enactments of instructional leadership to build the instructional capacity of the teachers in their schools, it was important for me to briefly review the history of middle schools, examine middle school characteristics and pedagogical practices that are outlined in the literature, and review the literature on middle school principal leadership.

There is not an extensive body of peer-reviewed research on the middle school configuration and philosophy, and even less on effective principal practices within the middle

school. Much of the research on middle schools is influenced by the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), an organization preceded by the National Middle School Association (NMSA), which, in 1973, was nationally recognized in the United States. The NMSA was itself an outgrowth of the Midwest Middle School Association, an organization formed in the early 1970s in response to the rise of the middle school movement (Schaefer, Malu, & Yoon, 2015). The 1970s was an important time in the middle school movement as it marked the initial period when researchers began to name, identify, and define what was meant by the idea of a *middle* school. In 1982, the NMSA put forth the inaugural *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*, encompassing 16 recommendations supported by research and the experience of its executive council to best support teaching and learning in middle level learning environments. The change of the organization's name in the spring of 2011 to the Association of Middle Level Education was not a result of a shift in the organization's mission, values, and core beliefs, which had remained constant since its inception in the 1970s; rather, it was reflective of a need within the research to distinguish between the middle school as a physical structure and middle level education as being shaped by an all-encompassing philosophy or conceptual framework (AMLE, 2010b). Regarding the Canadian educational context, research from the province of Manitoba has laid the groundwork for strong middle level education. This research has been adopted by other provinces and school districts across Canada (Manitoba Education, 2010).

**Middle school history.** The year 1963 is generally acknowledged as the beginning of the modern middle school movement. Concerns regarding the junior high school approach to teaching and learning with young adolescents were raised in decades prior to 1963 (Schaefer et al., 2015). Researchers who have examined the history of junior high school and the transition to middle school explained that the junior high school model was formed to bridge students to high

school and to increase graduation rates in high schools and decrease drop-out rates. Lounsbury (1960) suggested several reasons for junior highs: psychologists believed that the specific institution could serve the needs of early adolescents better, more citizenship education was needed due to the influx of immigration into the country, and it was a solution for the school building shortage caused by World Wars I and II. Further, Lounsbury explained that the junior high model was a downward extension of the high school, facilities were inadequate, there were no standards to follow, the teachers were not well-trained and lacked experience, and the junior high was not seen as important as high school by senior educational officials. Although there were calls for changes from 1950 into the 1970s, many of the practices that were called for were never really instituted or were poorly executed.

Most junior high schools patterned themselves after high schools, with a strong emphasis on subject matter specialization, departmentalization of the curriculum, and a broad range of extra-curricular programs and activities. Further, junior high schools often failed to adequately respond to the unique developmental needs of middle years students, resulting in early adolescents being poorly equipped for their transition from elementary school to high school, which many saw as the function of the junior high (George, 2009; George & Alexander, 2003; Meyer, 2011).

In 1963, Dr. William Alexander, a noted curriculum authority, spoke at a Cornell University conference convened to examine the status and future of junior high school. In his presentation, entitled *The Junior High School: A Changing View*, he focused on curriculum and instruction, providing participants with a thoughtful and challenging proposal to implement a new middle school taught by specifically prepared educators who would implement a relevant

curriculum and essential learning process that was developed appropriately for young adolescent students within the 10 to 15 years age range (Schaefer et al., 2015).

Alexander's proposed conceptual framework resonated with the attendees, along with others who were focused on educating 10 to 15 year olds. Donald Eichhorn, considered to be one of the founders of the middle years movement, also identified the need for schools that attended to both the academic and personal development of early adolescents. Eichhorn (1987) authored the book, *The Middle School*, wherein he suggested the middle school learning environment would feature interdisciplinary teaming among teachers, small learning communities, teacher advisory programs, frequent opportunities for hands-on learning and interactive learning with peers, flexible scheduling and groupings of students, and learning centers that would support students' needs. Most importantly, Eichhorn believed that, for these learning environments to be successful, teachers would require expert understanding of the developmental needs of middle years learners (Eichhorn, 1968, 1977; Schaefer et al., 2015).

The work of Alexander and Eichhorn helped bring awareness to the unique learning needs of early adolescents. The number of middle schools grew rapidly in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. This trend was also observed in other countries around the world. For example, there were no middle schools in the UK in 1968, and by 1978 there were 1,690 (Schaefer et al., 2015). This movement to middle schools led to the emergence of professional organizations, creation of resources, and acknowledgment at some post-secondary teacher training institutes with the creation of middle school pre-service training programs (Schaefer et al., 2015).

Through the 1980s and 1990s, many middle schools were not seen to be functioning in a manner necessary to meet the needs of adolescent learners. The 1985 report of the National

Association of Secondary School Principals Council on Middle Level Education, *An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level*, articulated more requirements for an effective middle school.

The authors suggested that middle schools should have a guiding set of values, a curriculum that is balanced, organizational structures that focus on instruction and learning, strong leaders/administrators, and outreach programs that connect the school community (Arth, et al. 1985). Meyer (2011) explained that some researchers believed that, at the end of the 1980s, middle schools were becoming known as holding tanks, where students were basically kept safe until it was time to go to high school.

In 1989, the landmark document, *Turning Points: Preparing America's Youth for the 21st Century*, was published by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. It claimed that middle schools were the best places to re-engage students who were failing and at risk for dropping out in high school. The report called for middle schools to rededicate themselves to the middle school philosophy. Although many of the original ideals from previous research were restated, *Turning Points* called for the empowerment of teachers and administrators to make sound decisions, a dedication to enhance student growth and learning through health and physical fitness, and the creation of small learning communities within the school. Subsequent research, such as a *Turning Points 2000* position paper, new iterations of *This We Believe*, and the revised *Breaking Ranks* for middle level learning, further supported the push for developmentally responsive learning environments for early adolescent learners (Schaefer et al., 2015).

In Canada, the 1990s saw the creation of middle years associations in most provinces and territories. Even more recently, position papers outlining the vision for teaching, learning, and leading in the middle years have emerged, as documented in *Engaging Middle Years Student*

*Learning: Transforming Middle Year Education in Manitoba* (2010), which provides a Canadian context for this literature review.

**Middle school characteristics and pedagogical concepts.** In many parts of the United States and in Canada, the middle school has replaced the traditional junior high, Grades 7 to 9 configuration. In many regions of the United States and Canada, the middle school grade configuration is Grades 5 to 8 or Grades 6 to 8, while many middle schools within the district in which my study took place take on a configuration of Grades 5 to 9 or 4 to 9. Within *This We Believe in Action: Implementing Successful Middle Level Schools*, the AMLE (2010b) states: “one of the most powerful lessons of the past decade is how necessary it is to implement multiple elements of middle grades reform and maintain those elements ... to realize positive outcomes for students” (p. 1). The AMLE (2010b, 2010c) has outlined four essential attributes of successful middle level learning environments, described as follows:

1. Developmentally responsive: using the distinctive nature of young adolescents as the foundation upon which all decisions about school organization, policies, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are made.
2. Challenging: ensuring that every student learns and every member of the learning community is held to high expectations.
3. Empowering: providing all students with the knowledge and skills they need to take responsibility for their lives, to address life’s challenges, to function successfully at all levels of society, and to be creators of knowledge.
4. Equitable: advocating for and ensuring every student’s right to learn, and providing appropriate challenging and relevant learning opportunities for every student.

(AMLE, 2010c, p. 13)

The AMLE (2010b, 2010c) research supports the idea that these four essential attributes of successful middle level education can be realized and achieved through 16 specific characteristics, which can be grouped into three categories: curriculum, instruction, and assessment; leadership and organization; and culture and community. According to the AMLE (2010c), “the characteristics are, however, interdependent and need to be implemented on concert” (p. 13). The categories and subsequent recommendations are outlined as follows:

1. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

- Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them.
- Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.
- Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant.
- Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches.
- Varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it.

2. Leadership and Organization

- Shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision.
- Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about the age group, educational research, and the best practices.
- Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration.
- Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices.
- Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.

3. Culture and Community

- The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all.

- Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.
- Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of your adolescents.
- Health and wellness are supported in curricula, school-site programs, and related policies.
- The school actively involves families in the education of their children.
- The school includes community and business partners. (AMLE, 2010b, p. xii)

For this research inquiry, I needed to have an understanding of these two lists of attributes and recommendations. It is clear within AMLE and other middle school research that the teachers and principal need a thorough knowledge of the unique learning needs and also the challenges facing early adolescent learners (AMLE 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Gale & Bishop, 2014). However, my study focused on the leadership and organization category, the five recommendations embedded, and their interconnectedness with instructional leadership.

**Middle school leadership and organization characteristics.** The AMLE (2010a) and other researchers (Brown & Anfara, 2002; Clark & Clark, 2008; Jackson & Davis, 2000) have explained that school leadership is foundational to ensuring functional, successful middle grades schools. Jackson and Davis (2000) wrote that “no single individual is more important to imitating and sustaining improvement in middle grades school students’ performance than the school principal” (p. 157). Effective middle school principals encourage, support, and sustain positive school-wide change based on their knowledge of young adolescent development, curriculum, instruction, educational standards, and their own professional disposition regarding programs, practices, and trends in middle grades schools (AMLE 2010a; Gale & Bishop, 2014).

There seems to be similarities between the concepts presented in AMLE (2010a, 2010b, 2010c) research and in instructional leadership models and related studies, which indicates that effective leadership impacts teacher instruction, which further impacts student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004).

***Shared vision.*** Swaim (2010) stressed that the middle school principal needs to create a shared vision that is developed by all stakeholders in order to guide school decisions. Focusing on vision should not be underestimated, as the vision “reflects the very best we know and lights the way toward achieving a truly successful middle level school” (p. 77). The AMLE (2010b) argued that the vision be a collaborative process that reflects the very best we can imagine about all elements of schooling, including student achievement, student-teacher relationships, and community participation. Along with collectively creating the vision and goals, there needs to be an understanding that communicating the process and vision and goals is important. George and Anderson (1989) identified a link between a clear and shared vision and the creation and maintenance of high quality middle school programs. Their research concluded that “understanding the purpose of the middle school, and the school’s commitment to the personal and educational needs of young adolescents appears to play a most important role, both prior to and following the implementation of quality middle schools” (p. 69). These specific middle school characteristics are in alignment with Hallinger’s (2003, 2010) instructional leadership and leadership for learning models, wherein vision and goals are central.

***Committed leader.*** The AMLE (2010b, 2010c) research supports the idea that school leaders “must possess a deep understanding of the young adolescents with whom they work and teach” (2010c, p. 28). To provide knowledgeable middle school environments, principals must consistently update their knowledge and understanding of research and best practices,

specifically the importance of teaming, student advocacy, and exploration. Principals must also possess a solid understanding of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices. Middle school principals use this information to empower and provide professional learning opportunities to educate teachers along with parents, policy makers, and community members. (AMLE, 2010c).

Zepeda and Meyers (2002) examined instructional leadership practices in middle schools and found that the goal of instructional leadership should remain focused on supporting teachers' efforts to improve instructional practices. Similarly, Marks and Printy (2003) examined the effect of principal leadership on school performance. Of the 24 schools studied, eight were middle schools. They reported that, when shared and instructional leadership coexists, the influence on school performance, measured by the quality of instruction and the achievement of students, is substantial (p. 370). Again, just like AMLE's (2010b) belief in the importance of vision and links to the instructional leadership framework, there are parallels between the beliefs of a committed leader presented by the AMLE research and Hallinger's (2003, 2005, 2011) instructional leadership model. To be effective, the focus of instructional leadership must remain on teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2005; Louis et al., 2010; Southwood, 2002). Principals' knowledge and expertise in instructional matters are valuable for instructional leaders in providing quality guidance for teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2003, 2005, 2011; Marzano et al., 2005; Neumerski, 2013).

***Courage and collaborative leaders.*** Research within the AMLE literature (2010a, 2010b, 2010c) supports the importance of collaboration, as already presented with the instructional leadership research reviewed in this chapter. Successful middle school principals use the expertise of a variety of people to ensure the academic growth and well-being of students (AMLE, 2010c). Kinney and Robinson (2010) stated that the principal must build the leadership

and instructional capacity of others. Just as Hallinger (2011) suggested that the leadership model of the principal has changed, Kinney and Robinson asserted that “the job of today’s principal is to ask questions rather than provide answers, to facilitate the process of school improvement rather than prescribe how it should be done, and to collaborate” (p. 98). The authors further explained that the AMLE characteristics of middle school principal leadership sees the principal as a collaborative leader who models risk taking and reflecting learning as key elements in leading a middle school.

***Professional development.*** The AMLE (2010c) position is that the middle school principal role should focus on professional development that is based on collaborative leadership. Kinney and Robinson (2010) explained that professional development in the middle school should be infused into the school routine through opportunities to share and discuss professional articles, the creation of PLCs, and participation in professional organizations. The focus on PLCs reflects the claim presented earlier in the literature review that the structures of PLCs strengthen the collaborative process and support the alignment of practices towards the common goal of improving instructional practices and inherently improving teachers’ instructional capacity (Harris, 2011; Robinson, 2011).

Beal and Arnold (2010) confirmed that there is “a growing body of research and practice that tells us effective professional development programs are those based on data collected about the middle school and the identified needs of teachers” (p. 30). They urged middle school principals to use data from observations, videotaping teaching, teachers’ journals, and student work, which may include standardized tests scores, to inform professional development. The AMLE (2010b, 2010c) resources align professional development with Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos’ (2009) research, which reported that effective professional

development: (a) is intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice; (b) focuses on student learning and addresses the teaching of specific content; (c) aligns with school improvement priorities and goals; and (d) builds strong working relationships among teachers. The middle school principal focus on professional development, as outlined in the AMLE (2010b) literature, aligns with Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) instructional leadership model and promotes professional development, which is one of five dimensions within developing the school learning program.

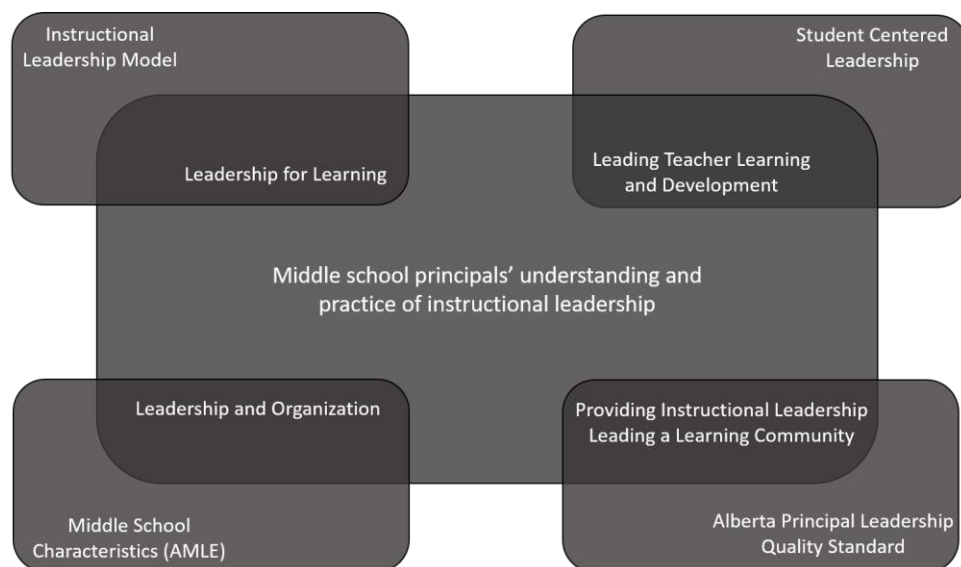
***Organizational structures.*** In *This We Believe in Action: Implementing Successful Middle Schools* (AMLE, 2010b), Kasak and Uskali (2010) argued that the principal should incorporate organizational structures that facilitate learning and nurture relationships. They shared that the structures a school adopts, which are often lead by the principal, are similarly described within the instructional framework as protecting instructional time, impacting what can occur in the middle school learning community. The AMLE (2010b, 2010c) stated that traditional departmentalized structures hinder efforts to personalize and differentiate instruction. The middle school principal should work to create a flexible, interdisciplinary team organization that is developmentally responsive (Kasak & Uskali, 2010, p. 129). These recommendations are supported by research that has shown significant benefits of teaming on academic and affective measures, when teaming is implemented effectively (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000).

It is evident from the reviewed research that principals should concentrate on the core of teaching and learning, namely that they take targeted actions to develop vision and collaboration, create focused learning opportunities for teachers, and enhance conditions for improved teaching and learning in their schools (Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Louis et al., 2010). However, my studies and literature review exposed me to findings that suggest instructional leadership conducted in elementary settings is often generalized across all

settings, including middle schools (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Although there is a body of research that helps guide principals' work in middle schools, there appears to be limited studies, and a lack of focus on middle school principals' understanding of instructional leadership and how their enactments of instructional leadership build the instructional capacity of teachers. The notion of one model or approach to instructional leadership applying across all contexts is questionable, as one-size-fits-all does not recognize the particularities of schools representing different grade-level configurations; thus, my argument for the need for further study of principals' instructional leadership in middle schools.

### Conceptual Framework

Ravitch and Riggan (2017) explained that a conceptual framework is used by a researcher to identify presumed relationships among key factors to be studied. They argued that the conceptual framework “serves as the superstructure for the work.” (p. 9). I formulated a conceptual framework to frame my study, and it helped establish a guide to gather and analyze data (see Figure 3).



*Figure 3.* Conceptual framework of the research study.

My overarching question was: how do middle school principals understand the concept of instructional leadership and think about their instructional leadership practices as building the instructional capacity of teachers? The conceptual framework was influenced by my experiences within the district that I conducted the research in, as well as from my literature review. When gathering and analyzing data, I used each of the four quadrants and their intersection as a guide to help keep me focused on the purpose of the study. I was aware there is a focus on instructional leadership within the school district, as the term has often been referenced in district meetings, along with Robinson's (2011) book, *Student-Centered Leadership*, and Alberta's *Draft Principal Leadership Quality Standard* (2016). I have further added leadership and organization characteristics, as outlined in research by AMLE, as an aspect of the conceptual framework, as it provides the middle school context. In Chapter 5, I explore the phenomenon of instructional leadership using both the conceptual framework and sub-questions. Through analysis and synthesis of my findings, I share how my conceptual framework changed.

## **Summary**

This chapter has reviewed of the literature pertaining to instructional leadership and, more specifically, the instructional leadership models constructed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) and Hallinger (2003, 2010, 2011), as well as principals' instructional leadership influence on teacher instructional capacity. Additionally, principals' instructional leadership impact on teachers' instructional capacity has been discussed, along with a review of the literature on middle schools and middle school principal leadership. Furthermore, Hallinger (2011) indicated the need for further study of instructional leadership responsibilities, particularly those outside of the elementary level. Given the wide range of beliefs, structures, and practices related to

instructional leadership, and the gap identified in the literature reviewed, I framed this study to be an exploration of how experienced middle school principals understand the concept of instructional leadership and, further, perceive their enactments of instructional leadership to build the instructional capacity of the teachers in their schools.

In the next chapter, I move on to the study's research methodology. Chapter 3 includes a discussion of the research context along with a rationale for the selected methodology and methods of this study. The chapter also includes a discussion about the tools used in data analysis, my approach to ensure trustworthiness, the study's limitations and delimitations, and, finally, pertinent ethical considerations.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology and Methods**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter begins with a brief description of the research context. Next, I explain my research paradigm, rationale for qualitative research, and rationale for the selected methodological approach. Following this, I discuss my methods, including a detailed description and justification of the participant sample and the specifics of my fieldwork: how, when, and where the data were collected. Further, I explain the approaches and tools that I used to analyze the data. Following the section on data analysis, I outline the measures I used to establish trustworthiness, and I also provide an explanation of study limitations and delimitations. Finally, I discuss the ethical considerations that were important as I planned and conducted the study.

#### **Research Context**

Among educational leaders, principals are in a unique position to influence the improvement of teaching by teachers, which in turn has the greatest effect on student learning (Louis et al., 2010). My interest and my work in schools with different grade configurations have led me to wonder how instructional leadership is understood and practiced in middle schools. The purpose of this case study was to gain insight into how experienced middle school principals understand the concept of instructional leadership and, further, perceive their enactments of instructional leadership to build the instructional capacity of the teachers in their schools.

In light of the limited number of studies that report on research about instructional leadership within the middle school configuration, and my desire to gain a deeper awareness of middle school principals' understandings of the concept and their practices of instructional leadership, I conducted this study to help address a gap in the research literature. Given my work

experience as a school-based administrator and my interest in middle schools; I was ideally situated to explore this topic. To gain a deeper understanding the following primary question framed this proposed inquiry: How do middle school principals understand the concept of instructional leadership and think about their practices of instructional leadership? The following secondary questions helped focus on instructional leadership in middle schools:

1. How do middle school principals define and explain the concept of instructional leadership?
2. What are middle school principals' perceptions of their instructional leadership practices and how these practices impact teachers' instructional capacities?
3. What evidence do middle school principals cite for their claims regarding the effectiveness of their instructional leadership in their schools?

### **Research Paradigm**

A paradigm, also referred to as a worldview, is considered to be the foundational lens that researchers use to interact with the world around them. It is a “basic set of beliefs that guides action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17). A paradigm is shaped by the discipline area, and beliefs and past experiences of the researcher (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Although the research paradigm is rarely explicitly referenced, it significantly influences the approach and practice of research. A paradigm is ultimately the researcher's general orientation to the world and is therefore reflected in the nature of the research that he or she conducts. It leads to choices about qualitative, quantitative, or mixed method approaches to research; it impacts all decisions made, from broad assumptions to details such as methods for data collection and analysis.

Although many of my past academic experiences were grounded in post-positivist approaches, early in the planning stage I recognized that my EdD study would be best

approached from an interpretivist paradigm because my primary interest was in interpreting and making sense of how others view the world, and in focusing on specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand their perceptions and experiences (Creswell, 2015). Thus, when planning my study, I recognized that my own background – my personal, cultural, and historical experiences – would shape the manner in which I positioned myself in relation to the research and my interpretations (Creswell, 2015).

Furthermore, by undertaking this inquiry, I wanted to engage, alongside the principals that participated in the study, in the co-creation of new meaning about the research topic. In this sense, my interpretivist inquiry would follow a social constructivist epistemology. I began by understanding the premise of constructivism: each individual mentally constructs the world of experience through cognitive processes (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006) by taking abstract concepts and actively make meaning of them via concrete experiences. This view of how reality is *constructed* is opposed to the positivist view that the world cannot be known directly and that we learn passively via the transmission of knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9). From this premise I could then see, by extension, how *social* constructivism applied to what I planned. Building on constructivist epistemology, social constructivism is concerned not only with how we know, but how we develop meaning together (Crotty, 1998). Social constructivism emphasizes that the social world is made real for individuals only in relation to others, through social processes and interactions, and through perceptions of these interactions. Thus, approaching the study as a social constructivist meant that I would invite principals to participate by reflecting upon and talking about their own understandings and practices of instructional leadership, and to offer their perspectives about how their instructional leadership impacts teachers' instructional capacity. Their responses to my questions, along with my interpretations

of their contributions, constitute the research findings – the co-created knowledge – that I present in this dissertation.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research Design**

According to Patton (2015), a study's research design should be determined by the nature of the research questions. Patton explained that "qualitative methods facilitate study of issues in depth and detail. Approaching fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry" (p. 22).

Qualitative researchers are focused on knowing how people make sense of their experiences in the world. In keeping with my social constructivist epistemology, I wanted this inquiry to create new meaning for myself and, hopefully, to also facilitate the principals' meaning-making as they participated in the study.

Kempster and Parry (2011) suggested that leadership research has begun to embrace the necessity of incorporating context and process into an understanding of the creation of the leadership phenomenon. Parry (1998) argued that qualitative methodology has not been a representative feature of leadership research and theory building in the past. Until relatively recently, the dominant methodologies shaping the field of leadership research have largely been positivist approaches in the form of quantitative data and analysis. The focus on quantitative approaches has also been documented within education research (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). However, several researchers (Kempster & Parry, 2011; Parry, 1998; Teram, Schachter, & Stalker, 2005) have suggested that quantitative research methodologies might not be suitable for addressing leadership from a process and contextual-based perspective.

Therefore, I planned to take a qualitative approach to this study so that I could effectively understand the complex social phenomenon of instructional leadership and the practices that

principals employ in the specific context of middle school. Qualitative research locates the observer in the world, making the world visible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Therefore, qualitative researchers study objects and people in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. Qualitative researchers believe in the socially created nature of reality, the familiarity between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational limitations shaping the investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Also, as explained by Creswell (2015), the goal is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of an essential phenomenon. Basically, the key to qualitative research is gaining an understanding of the participants' (in this case, middle school principals who have at least three years of experience) perspectives, to create an accurate account of the topic (phenomenon) under study (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Research focused on understanding and discovery from the perspective of those being studied offered me the opportunity of making substantial contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education (Merriam, 1998).

Qualitative research generates a wealth and depth of detailed information about a limited number of people (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In my study, during interviews, participants were encouraged to tell their own stories, reflecting on their day-to-day experiences. By capturing the participants' experiences, I used their direct quotations as a basic source of raw data to examine how the participants have organized their world and to gain insight into their thoughts about what is happening. As Merriam (1998) indicated, the focus is on "process, meaning, and understanding the product of qualitative study as richly descriptive" (p. 8). By aligning myself with Merriam's case study approach, I have shared my research findings by descriptively reporting concepts, by including participants' own words and direct citations from documents

and artifacts, and by including my own descriptions of the process as documented in my researcher journal.

In summary, because the purpose of my inquiry was to gain understanding of a phenomenon (middle school principals' understandings about and practices of instructional leadership), I was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, and I used fieldwork to gather, record, and analyze findings and report them in a descriptive manner, my study lends itself to a qualitative approach.

### **Rationale for Case Study Methodology**

A case study research design describes a set of guidelines connecting theoretical paradigms to both strategies of inquiry and methods for collecting empirical material (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Several researchers (Flyvberg, 2011; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014; Simons, 2009) have suggested that, when a researcher wants to understand a phenomenon in any degree of thoroughness, detail, richness, or completeness, a case study is the method to employ. I believe that most human behaviours, as they relate to leadership, cannot be understood in simplistic ways, and case study methodology provided insight and understanding into the complex phenomenon of principals' understandings of instructional leadership and their perceptions about how their own instructional leadership practices impact teachers' instructional capacity. Furthermore, for researchers, the closeness of the case study to real-life situations upholds the view that human behaviour cannot be meaningfully understood in simplistic ways; and a case study provides a process to support the researcher's own learning in developing the skills needed to conduct sound research (Flyvberg, 2011).

Merriam (1998) "concluded that the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delaminating the object of study, the case" (p. 27). The case is a unit around

which there are boundaries; the researcher “fences in what is studied” (p. 27). Creswell (2015) further explained that a case study is a detailed investigation of a bounded system where “bounded means that the case is separated for research in terms of time, place, or some physical boundaries” (p. 469). In my case study, the phenomenon being investigated was the principals’ understandings of instructional leadership and how their instructional leadership practices impact teachers’ instructional capacity. Also contributing to the bounding of the case and constituting the case study’s unit of analysis was the criteria that, at the time of the study, all the participants were middle school principals, they all worked within the same urban school district, and they all had three or more years of experience in the role.

I found myself most aligned with Merriam’s (1998) heuristic interpretation of case study research, as I wanted the case to illuminate the phenomenon of instructional leadership. This explanation of case study is also in agreement with Stake’s (1995) suggestion that previously unknown relationships and variables can be expected to emerge from case studies, leading to a rethinking of the phenomenon being studied.

In summary, the case study methodology of this study helped me to explore the real-life context of middle school principals’ understandings of instructional leadership and their perceptions about how their practices potentially impact teachers’ instructional capacity. By using Merriam’s (1998, 2009) methodological approach for rendering insight and understanding, I believe that my study will contribute to the field of educational leadership.

### **Research Setting, Participant Selection, and Recruitment**

The research took place in a large, urban public school district in the province of Alberta. The district has a diverse population of students who represent a variety of learning needs and a wide range of cultural and language backgrounds and social-economic circumstances. To reflect

the district's diversity, through recruitment I approached eligible participants from across the district from schools with varying demographic and program options. In addition, all principals selected were leading schools that have a specific middle school make up of Grades 4 to 9, 5 to 9, or 6 to 9; configurations that distinguish them from the traditional junior high schools of Grades 7 to 9 that also exist within the district.

For this study, I chose to purposefully select a small participant sample to permit deep inquiry into the phenomenon under study. Purposeful sampling is based on the premise that the investigator wants to ascertain, comprehend, and advance insight; therefore, I was concerned with selecting a group of participants from which the most could be learned about the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). Patton's (2015) view is that there are no rules for sample size; it depends on what the researcher wants to know and what will be useful and doable within the time and resources allocated for the study. With this in mind, for my study I needed to achieve a balance between my desire to generate, in a thoughtful and meaningful way, a sufficient amount of rich, in-depth data, and to conduct a study within a timeframe that would be reasonable for participants and manageable for me. Therefore, I chose to involve five participants and to complete the data gathering and the initial stages of analysis in the late fall of 2017. This allowed me to accommodate both the rhythm of the participants' school year and my own time constraints. Furthermore, by having a manageable sample size and setting out specific criteria for participants, I was defining the case. Merriam (1998) explained that the case is a unit around which there are boundaries; the researcher *fences* in what is studied. By fencing in the study, I was concentrating on a single phenomenon, as I was aiming to uncover the understanding, beliefs, and enactments of middle school principals' instructional leadership.

The criteria for selecting the interview sample of five middle school principals were as follows. Participants would:

- be currently practicing middle school principals,
- have been in their current location, as principal, for more than one year, and
- have been a principal for more than two years.

With the criteria of having experience as a principal in their school for more than one year, and as a principal for more than two years, I assumed that each participant would have an understanding of the role of the principal and of leadership, as is shared in the school district. Further, from my perspective and personal experience, a principal new to the environment and particularly to the principal role is often unaware of the issues, context, or responses within their school. Therefore, I assumed that selected participants, by being at minimum in year three of their principalship, would have knowledge of their school, its people, and the instructional leadership practices that occur within their school.

Once I received approval from both the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB) of the University of Calgary and the Research and Innovation Department of the school district, I recruited potential candidates by sending an email introduction (Appendix A) and copy of a Letter of Invitation (Appendix B). Eighteen principals met the criteria and I sent each of them an email introduction and Letter of Invitation. Out of those invited, five volunteered to participate in the study.

### **Data Collection Methods**

This case study was based largely on methods, as articulated by Merriam (1998, 2009), Merriam and Tisdell (2016), Patton (2015), and Brinkman and Kvale (2015). This inquiry employed different methods of data collection and analysis in order to achieve trustworthiness,

breadth, and depth. In the most basic terms, the case study had three stages: planning and conducting the case study; analyzing the case study evidence; and developing the conclusions, recommendations, and implications.

**Planning and conducting the case study.** The first stage of my inquiry involved conducting the case study. I employed individual, semi-structured interviews, as outlined by both Merriam (1998) and Brinkmann and Kvale (2015). After receiving approval to conduct research and recruiting the five participants, before starting the interviews I explained to participants via email and phone the purpose of the study, the possible places and times for the interviews, and the time commitment required of them. I further explained my plans for using the results from the interviews, and how, if they requested, a summary of the study would be provided to them when I completed the research. I also made sure that participants knew that they should not feel obliged in any way to participate, and that their choice to participate or not would in no way negatively affected their position (current or future) in the organization. My consent form is provided as Appendix C. Within 10 days to one week prior to the scheduled interview date, I provided each participant with a list of questions that would guide the interview. I have included this list in the interview protocol (Appendix D).

I used semi-structured interviews as I believed this type of interview would best allow me to learn about participants' understandings of leadership and perceptions about their practices. From my review of the literature, I understood that semi-structured interviews have several benefits over structured interviews, such as flexibility and the ability to probe. The freedom to probe during the interview provided opportunities for me to ask for clarification to ensure understanding, and it allowed me to respond to the interviewee and the context, as well as establish rapport in an interactive process (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Several researchers have suggested that the use of artifacts and documents can be a valuable source of information in qualitative research (Creswell, 2015; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, in addition to having participants respond to interview questions, I invited them to share pertinent supplemental evidence of their understanding of the phenomenon. To encourage the selection of appropriate artifacts to bring to the interview, the Letter of Invitation (Appendix B) included an explanation of the purpose of artifacts in relation to the study and the research questions. Artifacts included participants' notes, documents from meetings, articles shared with staff, documents shared with parents, resources that have guided participants' work, such as the district's meeting minutes and its Three-Year Education Plan, and the principals' own School Development Plans. Merriam (1998) explained the importance of "the paper trail for what it can reveal" (p. 114) so, where provided and possible, I considered artifacts as part of the study's evidence base. However, I also recognized that, similar to other sources of data, artifacts may have limitations related to authenticity and relevance to the conceptual framework of the study.

I conducted the interviews in a location that ensured confidentiality and participant anonymity, and that was free from distractions and noise to allow for clear and accurate digital recordings. During the interviews I took brief notes in case of a mechanical failure and to also record the feedback of the participants. For the most part, I followed the schedule of questions of my interview protocol (see Appendix D); however, I was flexible when a participant expanded on an answer or responded in a way that did not follow the line of questioning. In some cases, to gain clarity and to encourage interviewees to provide more information, I utilized probing questions. At the close of each interview, the participants were invited to add anything or to address an aspect of their understanding of instructional leadership and its impact on teacher

instructional capacity that they felt was not covered. Interviews ranged in duration from 55 to 85 minutes.

Although I used an audio recording device during the interviews, I also used a journal to note basic information, such as time, place, and purpose of the interview, as well key words, phrases, and direct quotes that were shared (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, in light of participants' responses, I recorded observations and reflections that occurred to me as a result of my own experiences as a principal.

The digital recording of each interview was transcribed in its entirety by a professional company that completed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix E). In accordance with Merriam (1998), I utilized member checks to provide participating principals with the opportunity to review transcripts of their interviews. Through this process, participants were asked to make additions, corrections, or deletions to the transcript, or to clarify meaning. Each participant was asked to return revisions to me through email within 10 days of receiving the transcript. Three of the five participants' made revisions or shared other documents after reviewing their transcript. At this time, each participant was also reminded of their right to withdraw from the study within the period of time leading up to December 20, 2017, when all data would be compiled and analysis would begin. No participant withdrew from the study.

**Analyzing case study evidence.** Merriam (1998) explained that, in interpretive qualitative research, data collection and analysis should be a simultaneous and interactive process, which begins with the first interview and the first document read, and intensifies as the study progresses. The focus should be on rigor, derived from the "researcher's presence, the nature of the interaction between researcher and participants, the triangulation of data, the interpretations of perceptions, and rich, thick description" (p. 147). In other words, data

collection and data analysis occur simultaneously; therefore, the process is iterative throughout (Creswell, 2015).

The initial step in the analysis was conducting the interviews and making journal notes of my observations and reflections. I uploaded the files to the transcription company within 24 hours of completing each interview, and I received the transcripts within 48 to 72 hours. As a novice researcher, I was surprised by the volume of text the interviews generated. To check for accuracy and to gain an initial sense of themes, I printed and then reviewed each transcript line by line while listening to the recording of the interview. In the transcript margins I recorded initial thoughts and perceptions, thereby engaging in the first cycle of my coding process. After the member checks of transcripts were complete, I uploaded them into NVivo.

A computer software program, NVivo is an encrypted internet-based application that supports the analysis of text data for qualitative research. Specifically, it is designed to help a researcher organize and analyze qualitative data from sources such as interviews, literature, and surveys, amongst others (QSR International, 2018). I used NVivo for the process of initially combining codes with similar codes and, then, organizing them into larger ‘nodes’ that were subsequently consolidated into themes.

Coding involved assigning designations to various aspects of the data to help categorize it and make it easier for retrieval. For these designations, I utilized key words and phrases from the data, which helped me to identify and interpret key themes (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) actually defined coding as analysis because of the nature of the reflection, analysis, and interpretation that is required throughout the process.

I followed a first cycle, second cycle, and third cycle coding process (Saldaña, 2016). Once the transcripts were uploaded into NVivo, I started the initial coding, formerly referred to

as “open coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For the purpose of becoming familiar with the data, I separated it into smaller parts and compared and contrasted to identify categories that required more attention and sub-categorization (Saldaña, 2013). I tried to not begin the coding process with predetermined categories, except for the three broad categories that I felt exemplified my three overarching research questions: understanding and beliefs of instructional leadership, practices of instructional leadership, examples or perceived evidence of instructional leadership practices impacting teachers’ instructional capacity. In this way, rather than using a deductive approach to trying to find excerpts from the data that fit into predetermined categories, I proceeded with a mostly inductive approach, whereby I worked with the interview data to explore connections and build interpretive categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014).

After applying initial codes to the data, I then proceeded to again reread the transcripts and the codes, and I began to make additional deletions and substitutions. During this second cycle of coding, there was significant renaming and regrouping of codes as patterns emerged. Patterns of codes often formed categories, which consolidated into larger themes (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2016). Figure 4 is a screenshot example of how some codes actually appeared in NVivo, and how they were associated with one another.

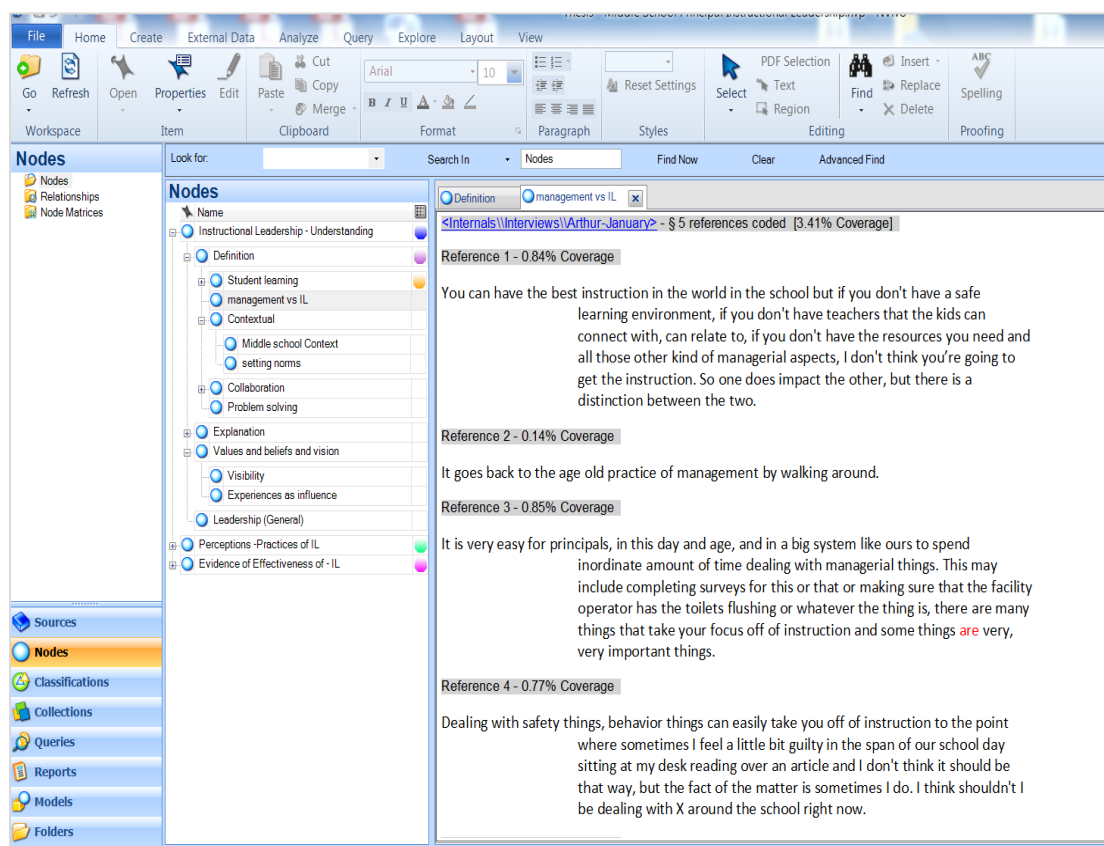


Figure 4. Example from NVivo of coding process.

**Develop conclusion, recommendations, and implications.** The third cycle of coding began after I started to write my findings chapters. Saldaña (2016) actually defines this stage in the process as “post-coding or and pre-writing – the transitional analytic process between coding cycles and the final write-up of the study” (p. 274). Although I had used NVivo, and this software creates a code book, I found myself needing to physically handle the codes that were grouped into nodes. I actually cut up the code book and organized codes within themes that had emerged. Since the process of analyzing continued while writing, as outlined by Saldaña (2016), I often revisited the transcripts and continued to make changes to how I had labelled codes and themes. At times I would move data between themes, and make additions and deletions of codes

within the nodes that supported the findings. This process continued as I worked with my supervisor to create clarity and as I identified the themes that were appropriate in explicating my research questions.

Patton (2015) discussed how, in qualitative studies, analysis is the means through which collected data is transformed into findings. The transformation occurs through a process of “reducing the volume of raw information, sifting trivia from significance, identifying significant patterns, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveals” (p. 521). Throughout this analysis process, I worked to ensure that data generated was pertinent to the study and reflected the purpose of the research (Merriam, 1998, 2009) through coding participants’ responses relative to concepts in my literature review and conceptual framework. According to Merriam, the categorization of the data “should reflect the *purpose of the research* .... In effect, categories are the answers to your research question[s]” (p. 183). Miles et al. (2014) explained that any early conclusions need confirmation, checking, and verification; the most frequently used methods for doing this involve “following-up surprises, triangulation, making if-then tests, and checking out rival explanations” (p. 117).

As a way to create a complete and informed set of findings, triangulation was a major focus throughout my data analysis. Miles et al. (2014) define triangulation as using multiple data sources, methods, theories, or data types to support conclusions (p. 157). In this study there were three types of data that were most often used: (a) the interview data contributed by the principals, (b) the artifacts provided by principals, (c) and the documents related to instructional leadership and teachers’ instructional capacity that were reviewed in the literature review. These data sources helped to clarify meaning to develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, pp. 107-108). I was careful to ensure that my conclusions

demonstrated that all relevant data were utilized, all rival explanations were applied, the analysis addressed the most significant aspects of the case study, and my knowledge and experience were used to seek clarity as revealed through the data sources.

### **Trustworthiness**

I recognized that that value of this case study depended on the claims trustworthiness that I could make about my study. Qualitative researchers like Merriam (1998, 2009), Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), and Patton (2015) have employed various terms and related strategies to discuss how trustworthiness is established. While I was influenced by all of their work, I utilized Lincoln and Guba's (1985) approach, as outlined in Bloomberg and Volpe (2012): to conduct a rigorous study one should focus on establishing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

**Credibility.** Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) explained credibility as “whether the participants’ perceptions match up with the researcher’s portrayal of them” (p. 112). Within this study, I considered credibility throughout the design, making sure that I linked research questions to the study’s purpose and that I attempted to gather data through a variety of sources. I collected data from semi-structured interviews, artifacts shared by participants, my researcher journal, and other documents related to instructional leadership and teachers’ instructional capacity that had been reviewed for my literature review. Member checking, which provided the opportunity for triangulation of data collection methods, also added to the credibility of the work (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Merriam, 1998, 2009). I also took advantage of debriefing opportunities with my supervisor and committee members to examine my assumptions and have them provide alternative ways of looking at the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 113).

**Dependability.** Dependability in qualitative research parallels reliability in quantitative research; however, it isn't assessed through statistical procedures. In qualitative research dependability is "whether one can track the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 113). To ensure dependability, during data generation and analysis I closely adhered to the planned study design so as to build integrity into the process. Since I was the sole researcher, I created protocols for data collection and aimed to analyze all data in a consistent manner, ensuring that findings strongly reflect the data.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability is comparable to the idea of objectivity in quantitative research; it refers to the findings being the result of the research, rather than an outcome of the biases and subjectivity of the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 126). To acknowledge my subjectivity, I was aware of my own positionality as the researcher, and my personal biases, beliefs, and assumptions. In order for the data to be tracked back to their origins, I created files of my analysis process through coding (NVivo files) and I also maintained an ongoing researcher journal, including a record of transcribed interviews and all artifacts shared by participants.

**Transferability.** Qualitative research findings are not expected to be generalized to another setting, though "it is likely that the lessons learned in one setting might be useful to others" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 113). The intent of this study was to understand middle school principals' perceptions about instructional leadership and how their respective practices impact teachers' instructional capacity. I worked to establish transferability by accurately providing rich description of the participants' perceptions by using direct quotations to illustrate the themes and recurring patterns within the data. By providing this specificity and, thus, depth to the research, I hope readers will see relevance and decide for themselves if the study is transferrable to their own situation (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Lastly, key to the trustworthiness of this inquiry is that it is “interpretively rigorous” (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011, p. 120). This meant that I needed to continually question if my findings were sufficiently authentic – that they could be trusted to provide insight into middle school principals’ understanding and practices of instructional leadership. As Merriam (1998) outlined, the question was “not whether the findings will be found again but whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (p. 206).

### **Limitations**

Limitations are external conditions that restrict or constrain the study’s scope or may affect its outcome (Creswell, 2012). When I proposed this study, there were several possible limitations that I took into account. The small sample size posed limitations in terms of breadth and scope of the phenomenon being studied. However, both Merriam (1998) and Patton (2015) suggested that sample size should be considered in relation to the purpose and rationale of the study. In consultation with my committee, it was agreed that a purposeful sample of five principals would provide an adequate number to investigate the phenomenon and to be manageable, as I had minimal research experience. As I was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, the research was also limited by my abilities and sensitivities in analyzing data and arriving at sound conclusions (Merriam, p. 42). I tried to mitigate this limitation by using member checking before I began data analysis. I also utilized peer reviews throughout the analysis process by discussing the data, coding, and the findings with my supervisor. Thirdly, as I am a system principal of the same organization in which the research was conducted, the concept of positional power may have impacted honesty of participants’ in their responses, as they may have felt the need to answer in a certain way so as not to be judged. I tried to mitigate this through reminding participants of the purpose of the study to seek multiple

and authentic perspectives, as well as by committing to anonymity and confidentiality, considerations that were reviewed with participants at the beginning of each interview as part of Informed Consent (see Appendix C). Transferability may also have been impacted due to the case study being conducted during a specific period of time, within a specific education jurisdiction, and with specific participants.

### **Delimitations**

The delimitations of a study are the conditions or parameters I intentionally imposed to limit the study's scope (Creswell, 2012). In effect, they defined the boundaries of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). In order to conduct this research within a suitable time frame and to collect an appropriate but manageable amount of data, my study was delimited to five principals from the same school district. As I intended to investigate the perspectives and practices of middle school principals' instructional leadership, only people in the role of middle school principal in the specific urban district were selected to participate. Further, participant selection was limited by participants being in at least their third year as a principal and having been at their current middle school for at least one year.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In conducting qualitative research with people, it is essential to consider the ethical aspects and ramifications of one's actions in order to make the experience not only positive, but also ethical. In the case of my study, this meant establishing a relationship with participants that respected human dignity and integrity throughout the process. There were specific responsibilities that were mine to initiate, oversee, and safeguard. One of those responsibilities was seeking to promote good, whatever and whenever possible, while always, as a minimum, choosing actions that prevented or largely mitigated the possibility of harm (Simons, 2009).

Creswell (2015) stated that it is important for the researcher to “protect research participants: develop a trust with them, promote the integrity of research, guard against misconduct and impropriety that might reflect on their organization or institution” (p. 229).

Before I could begin my study, as a first step, I applied and received approval from both the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB) of the University of Calgary and the Research and Innovation Department of my school district. I was then able to approach prospective participants.

For this study, material for informed consent explained the nature of the inquiry as well as the level of involvement of the participants. Initially, potential participants were provided with an information email (see Appendix A) and a Letter of Invitation (see Appendix B). Those who volunteered to participate were provided with specifics about how and when they would be involved by email and phone. Informed consent information was provided via email before meeting for interviews. Immediately before each interview was conducted, I reviewed this information with participants and, at this time, we both signed the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix C).

While participating in this study did not offer any direct benefits to the principals I interviewed, I believe that the benefits to the field of education outweighed the potential risks to the participants. In other words, this study was considered low-risk. To minimize hardship to the participants, I respected their privacy and autonomy, and treated them as equals throughout the research process. Participants were assured that, at no time, would their participation or their responses be judged or evaluated by me. Perception of participants that there may be a power difference between them and me because of my position as a system principal was mitigated by my assurance that I hold no authority over them that would influence or jeopardize their

positions or careers. Participation of all involved was of their own volition, and for the greater good of the profession and of public education.

The digital recordings of interviews, the transcripts, and my researcher journal were all held in strict confidence and stored in a secure manner, as outlined within the Informed Consent Form (Appendix C). To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, and to protect participants from any potential negative effects of being involved in the study, all interviewees and their school locations were assigned a pseudonym; thus, the data they contributed did not include any identifying information.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I described the research paradigm and epistemology of the study, and the methodology and methods, including the rationale for the case study approach, the research setting, and procedures for participant selection and recruitment. The data collection and analysis methods were also explained and justified. I provided an explanation of the coding process I used, followed by a brief summary of and rationale for how data were analyzed. I provided additional considerations related to study limitations and delimitations, and, finally, I discussed the measures I took to ensure that my work was ethical and that my findings and interpretations would be trustworthy. The next chapter presents the research findings.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Research Findings**

#### **Introduction**

This case study aimed to gain insight into how experienced middle school principals understand the concept of instructional leadership and, further, perceive their enactments of instructional leadership to build the instructional capacity of the teachers in their schools. I interviewed five experienced middle school principals, one female and four male, from a selected urban school district in Alberta, Canada. At the time of the study, each participant had experience as a principal for a minimum of three years, and had been in their current middle school for at least one year. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. The rationale for examining the topic was to contribute to the body of knowledge about instructional leadership, specifically as this relates to middle school principals. As stated in Chapter 1, there has been significant research published on instructional leadership; however, minimal research has focused on middle school principals. Furthermore, scholars have stressed that there remains a need for greater guidance in understanding “how this work is done” (Neumerski, 2013, p. 319).

In seeking to understand the research problem, this study was framed by one primary research question: How do middle school principals understand the concept of instructional leadership and think about their practices of instructional leadership? Three sub-questions assisted in answering the primary research question:

- How do middle school principals define and explain the concept of instructional leadership?
- What are middle school principals’ perceptions of their instructional leadership

- practices and how these practices impact teachers' instructional capacities?
- What evidence do middle school principals cite for their claims regarding the effectiveness of their instructional leadership in their schools?

The research results are organized using the three secondary research questions that, when answered by participants, contributed to addressing the primary research question. Before discussing the study's findings, the first section of the chapter contains brief profiles of each participant to add contextual information to the study.

### **Participant Profiles**

**Jim.** The first participant, Jim, is currently in his second year as the principal of a Grades 4 to 9 middle school with 800 students. The school opened two years ago to serve a newer suburban community in which the school is located. A career educator with 25 years of experience with the school district, for the past six years he has been a principal and, previously, for four years, an assistant principal, in schools ranging from Kindergarten to Grade 9.

I have known Jim professionally for the duration of his time as a principal. The interview was conducted in Jim's office, after touring his school. Jim appeared to be at ease and eager to participate in this study. Jim also provided artifacts in the form of middle school handouts that he shares with parents, and he provided additions and edits to his transcript through the member-checking process.

**Patricia.** The second participant, Patricia, is currently in her third year as the principal of a Grades 5 to 9 middle school with a student population of 850 students. The school opened seven years ago, and Patricia is the second principal of the school. She is a career educator with 30 years of experience, four years of which were as an assistant principal spread between two schools, one a middle school (Grades 4 to 9) and the other a more traditional junior high school

with a Grades 7 to 9 configuration. Patricia's first principalship was shared between a Kindergarten to Grade 6 elementary school, during which she also had the responsibility of a smaller public school with a focus on special education for students who were provided supports from Alberta Health Services.

Patricia shared early on in her interview that "the most important part of the work is building relationships – relationships with adults, students and the community." From 2015 to 2016, I had the opportunity to serve on a school district committee with Patricia. The interview occurred in Patricia's office, and she provided me with the notes she had prepared for our interview. She also completed a member check of her interview transcript.

**Arthur.** The third participant, Arthur, is in his third principalship at a Grades 6 to 9 middle school with a student population of 530 students. The school is an older facility, built in the 1960s and, because of the aging demographic of the community in which the school is located, an alternative program was added to the school's offering to increase the student population. Thus, the school is a dual-program school; students attend either a regular Grades 6 to 9 program or the alternative Traditional Learning Centre (TLC) program. The regular-program students reside in the local community or are bussed from a newer suburban community that was built over the last decade. The TLC program is a Kindergarten to Grade 9 alternative program with a more direct teacher-focused learning environment: students wear uniforms, students may be grouped according to ability for core classes, the curriculum includes a focused character education program, and both music and French are mandatory until Grade 9 (school district website). Almost all of these students live outside of the community, and either take a school bus or are driven to school by parents or caregivers.

Arthur has worked for the school district for 20 years and has been an administrator for

half of that time. He was an assistant principal and acting principal at a Grades 4 to 9 middle school, principal for two years at a Kindergarten to Grade 6 elementary school and, before his current position, was the principal at a Grades 4 to 9 middle school. I had the opportunity to work closely with Arthur at his previous school, as we were administrators in the same Area within our school district (which is divided into 7 Areas). Arthur was very keen to participate in the research and had mentioned early on in my doctoral studies that he would be interested in supporting my work if he ever had the chance. Arthur shared his experience openly and without reservation. The interview took place in his office, he shared journal articles that he recently used as a professional learning tool with staff, and he also completed a member check of his interview transcript.

**Thor.** The fourth participant, Thor, has 22 years of experience with the school district as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. Currently he is in his third year as the principal of a Grades 5 to 9 middle school that has an even split of students enrolled in a French Immersion program and an English program, with a total student population of 725 students. The students in the English program come from the local community, and many of them walk to school on a daily basis. The students in the French Immersion program come from a larger catchment area, and are bussed to school. Prior to being a principal, Thor was an assistant principal for six years at three different schools; one being a Kindergarten to Grade 6 school, and the others being Grades 4 to 9 middle schools. Thor shared that his job as an instructional leader is “very contextual to the school ... [and] is to set the vision and goals for the school, all the while understanding the context of the entire [school district].”

Thor has a wide range of teaching experiences, from Kindergarten to Grade 9, and has taught humanities, math, science, physical education in Alberta and, temporarily, overseas. I

have known Thor for the past seven years. The interview was conducted at my office after a meeting we both attended. Thor appeared to be at ease throughout the interview and was eager to contribute to the study and share his understanding of instructional leadership.

**Brad.** The fifth participant, Brad, is the principal of a Grades 5 to 9 middle school with a student population of 850. The school was built 10 years ago, and he is its second principal. He has been a principal for the past nine years, with the last five being at his current school. He previously led a Kindergarten to Grade 4 school. Brad gained leadership experience as an assistant principal at two different Kindergarten to Grade 9 schools, and as an assistant principal at a traditional junior high school with a Grades 7 to 9 configuration. Brad is a career educator with 27 years of experience, mainly in Alberta junior / middle schools, except for one year during which he participated in a teacher exchange program and taught Grades 7 to 11 in a coastal community of Australia.

I have known Brad as a colleague for several years, as we have attended middle school principals' meetings together. The interview was held in his office and, similar to the other principal participants, Brad appeared to be at ease throughout the interview and was eager to contribute to the study so that other aspiring middle school principals may learn from his experience.

### **Presentation of Findings**

The following is a discussion of the findings, with details to support and explain each finding. The findings are framed by the study's research problem, questions, and design, and are drawn from participant contributions, my own researcher journal notes, and the literature I reviewed. Where applicable, the findings are presented in narrative form using exact quotations from the interview transcripts. The emphasis was on having participants speak for themselves;

therefore, I used quotations from interview transcripts to portray participant understandings and perspectives and to capture some of the complexity of the topics and themes explored. Merriam (1998) explained that, in case study research, by using direct quotes the researcher provides “rich, thick description so that readers will be able to determine how closely their situations match the research situation, and hence, whether findings can be transferred” (p. 211). Each of the three research sub-questions and their related findings are presented separately.

**Research question 1. How do middle school principals define and explain the concept of instructional leadership?**

Based on an analysis of the data, the participants’ understanding of instructional leadership aligns very similarly with Hallinger’s (2011) conceptualization of leadership for learning, which was adapted from his and others’ earlier work on instructional leadership (Hallinger 2005, 2011; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). More specifically, the following themes emerged: the impact of beliefs and values, setting vision and goals, and contextual factors that impact instructional leadership. It is important to note that, within the participants’ explanations and definitions of instructional leadership, there emerged similar and overlapping themes related to the creation of structure/processes for shared leadership and to the importance of relational trust. Although I could have included these themes within the analysis of sub-question one, I found that they were both often presented by the participants as part of the way in which they practice instructional leadership and see their work impacting teachers’ instructional capacity. Therefore, for organizational purposes, I have included the themes related to the creation of structure/processes for shared leadership and to the importance of relational trust with my analysis of sub-question two.

**Finding 1.1. Impact of beliefs and values.** To begin my exploration of the first research question, I started by asking participants to define their roles and what they would describe as the key aspects of instructional leadership. Although there were differences, there were also great similarities in their responses. From his perspective, Arthur articulated how, as an instructional leader, he “needs to be able to attend to not only the managerial aspects of the school but also to what students are learning.” Arthur further explained that he is “focused on guiding the process of learning for all students.... It isn’t just about outcome, but also method of teaching and learning that is important.” All participants agreed that the fundamental focus of their work is on creating the conditions for student learning and student success.

Patricia explained her belief that, “as an instructional leader, each and every day you are challenged to really think about what is important about teaching and learning.” Furthermore, she related:

I think my job really is to make sure that every student at our school has the best possible learning environment, and that they have an opportunity to be successful through my support and leadership. John Hattie says one year of learning for each year of growth.... I try to create the best learning experiences that we can by drawing a straight line between what the current research says about best practices, who we know our kids to be, what we know our community to be, and what the evidence is.... I believe we need to create opportunities for students to be challenged academically, at whatever level they are at, and to be highly successful.

In this vein, Jim explained that “I work for an organization that has one main purpose – student success”, that he needs to ensure that everyone around him hears and sees his actions as a leader contributing to this purpose, and that all of his staff “believe that they are collectively doing

their part to ensure students are successful.” Interestingly, Jim shared his beliefs about leadership and his focus on student success with a business analogy:

Our products – if you will – are the kids. And you need to understand the product, you need to understand the essential elements of what that product is if you’re going to make it the best it can be.

All of the participants shared that their understandings and beliefs about instructional leadership were influenced by professional learning, experience, and mentorship. A majority of the participants shared that Viviane Robinson’s work has been a key influence. For example are Patricia’s words:

I would say that Viviane Robinson, for sure, is a book that I go back to over time and sits on my bedside table. I think that having a look at the competencies in her work and the direct line between that and leading a learning community has been super helpful for me. I think it’s also really helpful for me to really think about the balance of all of the pieces that are involved in leading a learning community. I try to remember that the focus of the work is really around instructional leadership. If you’re just not sure how to begin something, digging back into Robinson and saying, what are the pieces that I need to think about, is helpful. Do I have all the key pieces, like are there relationships there to be able to make the next decision. I have also found her Solving Complex Problems model to be very helpful in our work. It seems that most of our problems are complex, and looking at them through this lens depersonalizes and helps strategize.

Both Brad and Arthur mentioned Robinson’s (2011) Solving Complex Problems model, which refers to one of her three leadership capabilities (applying relevant knowledge, solving complex problems, building relational trust), while a majority mentioned the leading teacher

learning and development dimension, as outlined in Robinson's (2011) *Student-Centered Leadership* text. Another significant influencer on the participants was Michal Fullan, with the majority mentioning his work on instructional leadership. Jim stated: "Instructional leadership for me is Michael Fullan. I measure my instructional leadership against Fullan's work, as pretty much everything I do is influenced by him." A majority of the participants also referenced the influences of a university based professional learning organization (UPLO),<sup>3</sup> which partners with the school district to provide professional learning opportunities to teachers, learning leaders, and assistant principals. Participants explained how they have used the resources presented at network sessions as a tool for professional learning. Often, many of the principals have had learning leaders share information from these sessions within formal professional learning days at their schools, or within PLCs. Patricia provided a specific example: "We have taken the UPLO work that is being done, brought it back, and really focused on how to create a great task in our learning environment."

To some degree, all participants provided examples of how prior experience and mentorship influences their own understanding and beliefs about instructional leadership. Jim explained how an experience early on in his career has shaped his instructional leadership, and how he structures his school's learning environment by organizing teachers and students into several mini schools:

I was highly influenced by my first teaching position, which was in a learning community with 150 students, six teachers, and four hours of core. My vision has come from those years – those initial formative years in my own teaching. And then using that constantly as

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<sup>3</sup> UPLO (pseudonym) is an independent, charitable organization that collaborates with a range of organizations provincially and internationally to create and support networks for incubation, development, and innovation in leading, learning, and research (Organization Website, 2018).

a filter through my career to get to the point where now, as an instructional leader, I feel that creating small mini schools within my larger building makes the most sense. I feel like I'm making a difference in these students being successful at this school because I've been thoughtful and intentional about it for 25 years.

Regarding mentorship and the influence of colleagues on their own instructional leadership, Arthur shared the following example:

I've been fortunate to have good mentors over the years who are good leaders. They've helped shepherd me along the way. But some of the people I worked with over the years have been very strong instructional leaders. That has shaped my instructional leadership to a certain extent where I focus on things that I otherwise wouldn't.

Participants' beliefs that their fundamental focus should be on creating the best conditions for student learning were most often articulated in relation to their work with teachers. Jim explained that his "role is to create the conditions for them [teachers] to do what they need to be successful at providing an engaging learning environment." Similarly, Brad shared:

My role as an instructional leader is to move [teaching] practice forward in this school.... I need to know where they [teachers] are at. It's like teaching students' in a classroom ... I have my own students – teachers, which I need to know where they are at in their journey and what their next steps are.

Thor provided similar insights: "Whether it be the social-emotional piece, task design, your role as the principal is working with teachers so they have a better understanding of how to improve students' learning." Further, he believes that his role is to "help guide teachers to change their practice."

**Visibility.** Through the coding process it became evident that one of the beliefs of all the principal participants was that they need to be visible. They shared various reasons, from wanting to be connected to teachers and students, needing to have a sense of the “pulse of the building” (Arthur), or suggesting that by being visible they are more connected to the learning process: “It helps me be a better instructional leader ... others see me as an active member of the learning process” (Jim). Thor explained that his visits to classrooms provide an opportunity to see if teachers are “following through on our most recent professional learning.” All of the principals shared a position similar to Jim’s: “By being visible and spending time with students and visiting classes I have the ability to provide feedback.”

**School district influence.** Another influence on instructional leadership beliefs of all participants was the direction set forth by the school district. Brad explained that he must work with his teachers to “keep them in the bounds of our school system’s perspective.” Jim explained: “I would like to think that I have the right elements in place through my leadership to create conditions to meet the needs of my school, my organization [school district], and of education in general.”

Throughout his interview, Thor related how district direction influences his instructional leadership decisions and direction:

I take the larger [school district] vision of what instructional best practice and what the expectations of the board are, and I adapt that to meet the context of my building and supporting teachers to meet these [district expectations].... Our instructional response needs to be in alignment with the [district] vision of what we’re doing around task design.... As the instructional leader, I need to figure out what are the teachers’ needs and how do we support that while enacting the [district] vision of task design and assessment.

The analysis indicates that the direction set by the school district has a significant impact on each of the individual's leadership, as the direction set by the school district's senior leadership team impacts the knowledge and experience of the school-based leaders. An obvious example is the direct link between participants explaining how many of their leadership decisions are influenced and based on the literature of Robinson, Timperley, Fullan, Hattie, and UPLO – a body of work that has been drawn upon consistently in the district-led professional learning initiatives of the past 6 years.

**Finding 1.2 Setting vision and goals.** Participants emphasized that they saw that their role as an instructional leader was to help guide teachers to improve their practice. One of the most important factors in motivating a staff to change is the ability of the principal to create a common purpose and sense of collectiveness around a common goal of student success (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2008). Hallinger (2003) included two functions under the mission and vision dimension of his earlier instructional leadership model: framing school goals and communicating school goals. Although it is not the sole responsibility of the principal to develop the mission, the instructional leader is responsible for taking an instructionally focused vision and making it a cornerstone of the school's culture. Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) explanation of their original instructional leadership model emphasized the linkage between mission, vision, and school wide goals. Instructional leaders are often said to have a vision of what the school should be trying to accomplish. Defining the school mission involves communicating the vision to the staff and students in such a way that a sense of shared purpose exists, linking the various activities that occur in a school. "The leader's role in defining the mission involves framing schoolwide goals and communicating these goals in a persistent fashion to the entire school community" (p. 221). In his more recent leadership for learning

model, Hallinger (2011) used the terms vision and goals. Vision refers to the broad picture or direction in which school leaders want to move, and goals refer to the specific targets that need to be reached to achieve the vision (p. 129). The participants clearly explained the importance of vision and goal setting and how both are influenced by the district.

Arthur suggested that creating vision takes skill, and that it is a significant part of the work as an instructional leader:

Another skill is having the ability to see a vision or a goal and to have a big picture view of things. You have to kind of be that vision caster that can sort of say: “Here is what I think things could look like in six months, or a year, or in several years from now.” Furthermore, you have to work at figuring out how we are going to get there.

Clear statements of common goals and purpose serve to focus and direct the work of teachers, creating motivation and efficacy, which minimizes distractions that can detract from the work (Robinson, 2011; Sinnema, Ludlow, & Robinson, 2016). This theme was evident from the feedback provided by all five middle school principals in this study.

Specifically, Thor and Arthur described a through line between instructional leadership, context, district influence, and vision. It is important to note that the school district creates a Three-Year Educational Plan, which is informed by district data gathered from school-based administrators’ perceptions of the needs of the district, along with achievement data gathered from report cards and provincially mandated achievement tests. Each school within the district creates an annual School Development Plan that has specific achievement and instructional goals related to the needs of the school’s population. The goals are also aligned with specific strategies of the district’s Three-Year Education Plan, such as personalization of learning and building capacity;

and specific curricular strategies, such as literacy, mathematics, high school success, and an indigenous strategy:

Your job as an instructional leader is to understand the context of your school, and then to help set the vision and goals of your school within the context of the system.... I've created a strong focus on setting goals by having our learning leaders (LLs) lead Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which creates accountable and connects to the School Development Plan (Thor).

I ask the PLCs to come up with their goals for the year based on data and through conversation with learning leaders, then I can help guide what those goals might look like, what are the things that we want to work on in this school year, which things are most valuable to us, and how does it tie into the school development plan, and the [district's] Three-Year Plan. For example, in our Area principal meeting this fall, one of the things that we committed to doing was trying to target the bottom 5% of our students – those who are underachieving and who could really use some attention. It has been through this PLC process and focused conversations with learning leaders that I have encouraged that to happen in our school, and our School Development Plan targets directly reflect those conversations and vision (Arthur).

Although Patricia spoke about the district influences on the work within her school, she further explained the need for a school-based vision. She shared a common theme amongst the five participants regarding the need to work at creating a common school vision, which aligns with district's guiding documents, such as the Three-Year Education Plan. A common theme amongst

the five principals was how they use learning leaders to accomplish this. This was explained by Patricia as follows:

It is not my role or my personality to change things that are already successful, it is to support and make things even stronger and better. I think what we've tried to do is really look at what a high-performing middle school looks like and create that vision together. I always try and think about leadership from setting some guiding principles and then coming back to those guiding principles as a way to make decisions and map our way forward.... In creating this preferred future for our school, we must work as a leadership team to figure out how to put things in place to be able to ensure that we're working on this together and that we are holding each other accountable for this work ... to come up with a vision and set goals with all staff.

Jim had a unique perspective on enacting a vision for his school, as he recently had the opportunity to open a new middle school and hire a significant portion of his staff:

As the principal of a new middle school, I had a vision of the structures, organization, and learning environment I was keen to enact. The first step, I realized, was that I couldn't enact that vision unless, organizationally, I had the people to help me and work with me to enact it. So I went looking for those people during the initial hiring phase.

All of the participants' responses align with Hallinger's (2011) leadership for learning model and also with the Alberta Education (2018) *Leadership Quality Standard*, which includes the competency "embodying visionary leadership". However, there are variations in how each of the participants perceived the importance of how to use or even create collaboration opportunities with their staff. Furthermore, there are differences in organization processes among the five participants specific to how they each set or create vision and goals for their schools.

Furthermore, Jim's perspective for using the hiring process to create conditions for setting direction provides another aspect to the work of a principal as an instructional leader. The human resource aspects of the job are important and impactful but also create significant variations in opportunity, as hiring staff is highly dependent on staff movement and contractual processes.

**Finding 1.3 Contextual factors that impact principals' instructional leadership.**

Leithwood et al. (2010) found that school leaders operate in an open system that consists not only of the community, but also the institutional system and contextual variables that influence the leadership decisions that principals make. Although I am aware that context is recognized by several researchers as a factor that may impact the enactments of instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010; Spillane, 2017; Wahlstrom, 2012), I purposely did not include a question specific to context within my nine semi-structured interview questions. However, each participant, through their own process of explaining their understanding of instructional leadership spoke about contextual factors that impact their leadership practices, and, when asked about being a middle school leader, spoke of context and, more specifically, the contextual variables related to working in a middle school setting with adolescent learners. There were differences among the participants in the role context played in their understanding and practices of instructional leadership.

Specifically, during my analysis it became obvious that what participants referred to context varied. For example, some principals made reference to context when discussing school-based environmental factors, such as number of students and grade configuration, which may be linked to leadership differences between elementary, middle, and high schools. Participants also identified contextual factors, such as characteristics of teaching staff, and others referred to factors of the community outside of the school. Researchers (Hallinger, 2011; Heck, 1993; Tan,

2014) have found that context is often broadly described and impacts instructional leadership; this is similar to what I found. Heck's (1993) study, which examined context, principal leadership, and achievement, explained that leadership is thought to depend upon both the person and the specific organizational variables (e.g., the type of decision making, school climate and culture, teacher expectations for performance, and instructional organization) and contextual variables (e.g., size, characteristics of teaching staff, community characteristics, and school level) associated with the school.

Therefore, I wasn't surprised that each of the participants shared perspectives on how contextual variables, such as human resources, community influences, differences in student learning needs, and even program make up (alternative and special education programs/classes) impact their instructional leadership. For example, Patricia explained that past experiences have shown her that context impacts her instructional leadership dramatically, as the needs of staff and students at different school may be very different:

When I moved from one building to the other building, I put on a different hat, like it was two totally different environments and I had to be a different person in each of those buildings. Leadership looked totally different – what the teachers needed and what the students needed was so different in these two different contexts.

This contextual sensitivity was also reflected in Arthur's response:

In a very general sense, context is always hugely important because we are dealing with human beings, whether they are the staff or the students, and each one of them comes from a different place. So you have to be able to understand them. You understand the students as learners and as individuals. You understand the teachers as teachers and as individuals, and, in that way, you have to take context into account.

Both Brad and Arthur spoke of the need to be flexible as a principal and the need to use data to analyze the context of the school and to understand what various stakeholders' need, which often determines instructional leadership decisions:

So it might be assessment for one school and it might be around pedagogy for another school or for another person.... That's where, as an instructional leaders, you have to be flexible. In the school I'm currently in, not only is the outcome important but there is an aspect in which the method of teaching and learning is important (Arthur).

From an instructional leadership you may want to focus on instructional leadership as it relates to academics, but you must remember you've got the social emotional and behavior factors within the learning environment context that's going to mess with it (Brad).

Four principals, all at the schools with the most students, mentioned that, because of size, they had created organizational structures to share the leadership within their schools. Each of them spoke about how they saw their large student population as a contextual aspect that impacts their work as an instructional leader. For example, Brad offered the following:

I think you have to recognize the impact of the size of the school, number of students. I think even the size of the school is added into the instructional leadership because my goal is to be in the classrooms and to be a part of and witness the work. However, due to the vast size, I have to rely more on other people to do the work and share with me because the probability of getting into classrooms in such an active school is hard.

I wasn't surprised by participants' feedback regarding various community, student, and staff needs, and even views that the population size of the school influences their instructional leadership practices. The literature clearly reflects this finding, as Hallinger (2011) explained: "the capacity to

read your context correctly and adapt your leadership to the needs largely determines your success” (p. 135). My own experiences have highlighted that one’s instructional leadership decisions vary greatly depending on the needs of students, community, and staff.

***Middle school context.*** I was, of course, very keen to hear if and what middle school principals would share regarding contextual impacts of working with a specific age group of students within a specific middle school grade configuration. Thus, that the middle school, as a sub-theme of context, emerged strongly in the data was especially interesting to me. Specifically, because of my focus on instructional leadership, I was curious to hear about principals’ reflections about the impact of adolescent learners on their instructional leadership. Although there were variations in their answers, all participants provided specific examples of how they felt instructional leadership is different because of their middle school contexts and, more specifically, the influence of working with adolescent learners.

For the purpose of this study, all of the principals were leading middle level learning environments, as defined by the school district. However, as there is not a consistent grade configuration for middle schools in the district, it is important to note that two schools were Grades 4 to 9, one was Grades 6 to 9, and two were Grades 5 to 9. The participants shared interesting descriptions of how each of them ended up working with this age group of students; for some it was by chance, and for others, it was choice. Just as I discovered in my own career, these individuals all shared a similar passion for working with adolescent learners.

Prior to obtaining their current leadership designation, all participants had experience both as teachers and as administrators of adolescents in various grades and subject areas. Furthermore, it was clear from our conversations that each of the principals cared about their middle school learners and wanted to create learning environments wherein these learners would experience

success. Therefore, it came as no surprise that each of the participants provided examples of how the middle school setting impacted their instructional leadership, as well as their beliefs about what middle school learners need in a learning environment. Interestingly, several of the participants articulated their understanding and beliefs regarding how school grade configurations have impacted their leadership, and how they perceived differences between their present middle school and previous elementary school experiences. For example, Brad shared:

I've been a teacher in elementary. I believe working with the kids in the middle school is different. There are differences in the way you teach and lead along with differences in relationships – how you work with people; junior learners think differently than older learners.

Patricia talked specifically about the difference in how middle school staff relates to middle level learners:

The people [staff] are different in the middle school.... I have worked most of my career in weird cross-divisional settings, and I taught multi-age GATE – Grades 4, 5, 6 – I taught in a high school, and I have taught K to 9.... My love has always been in the middle, but people that are drawn to working with young adolescents are a totally different breed, in my opinion, than people who are drawn to other divisions.

Another theme that emerged was the importance of understanding the developmental characteristics and needs of adolescents. The following perspectives were shared:

Obviously, there's significant changes occurring for students as adolescent learners; there's some unique attributes, just like there is for younger learners and older students. Teachers need to be able to be responsive and able to interact with students at this specific

developmental range.... There needs to be a willingness to understand and be patient with this age group (Thor).

I believe one of the obvious pieces about being a middle school principal is that in a middle school we are dealing with kids who are preadolescent to adolescent. Something that is pretty typical of middle school approaches: you need to understand that age group of kids. You have to understand adolescence. I think there have been some fairly commonly held beliefs about middle schools that are good to know if you are going to be a middle school instructional leader. I would say some of those things are how the middle school brain works, their social needs, their physical needs, their emotional needs, their intellectual needs, and be able to address all of them in a way that is going to work for the kids, and that is, again, talking about being contextual. That's quite different, I think, than an elementary school or in a high school (Arthur).

They're [middle school students] at an age where their concepts of curiosity and their exploratory nature, their very being is around questioning. So, I love the idea – even as a young teacher early in my career – of working with junior high and then middle school kids to use that power to be an effective teacher. In AMLE terms, this would be the idea of being developmentally responsive to our students' needs (Jim).

Although I asked subsequent prompting questions, it was not always clear what grounded each participant's knowledge and perspectives about the significance of understanding the developmental characteristics and needs of adolescents and of supporting positive relationships among all involved in a middle school setting. Both Patricia and Jim explained that the National

Middle School Association informed their work, and they both referenced the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) (2010c) text, *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*. Jim also explained:

I'm a firm believer in strong success through purposeful, intentional, organizational platforms. We don't make it up as we go. We use the best research that we have from AMLE, from the [District] around our results statements, mission, and values. We use this research to inform how we create conditions for the kids to be successful.

During the interview, Jim showed me a handout that he shares with parents. On one side of the sheet are the district's mission, results, and values with a bolded title: "success for each student." On the other side are the four essential attributes and 16 key characteristics for implementing successful schools for young adolescents, as outlined in the AMLE's *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*, with his school logo located in the bottom left corner of the handout. Jim also showed me an early copy of a text published by the National Middle School Association (the predecessor of the AMLE). He explained how readings from the National Middle School Association impacted him early on in his teaching journey and how they remain relevant to him today. He explained how he works with teachers in his school to create learning environments that reflect the recommendations present in *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*.

Jim emailed me a few days after his interview to provide more information about how he "as an instructional leader, infuses middle school/general educational literature." Attached to the email was an article by James Davis (2017), who argued that there are seven elements of the middle school concept that need attention and commitment and, for the "middle school philosophy

to be successful, middle schools must be dedicated to implementing all aspects of the middle school concept” (p. 21).

Although all of the participants explained the importance of an instructional leader to be knowledgeable of the needs of adolescent learners, unlike Patricia and Jim, the other three participants didn’t explicitly explain what guides their understanding of how to create a learning environment that is pedagogically responsive to adolescent learners, nor did they articulate a clear understanding of middle school philosophy or concepts.

In addition to having knowledge and some understanding of the developmental characteristics and needs of middle school students, all five participants expressed that focusing on supporting positive relationships, both between teachers and students, and among students, was a key conceptual emphasis and a different type of work at the middle school levels. Thor shared that “middle school education should focus heavily on relationships, and there is a balance between focusing on relationships and content understanding”. He added the following:

You have to make sure that relationships are the first thing every day and the curriculum comes after that and when it fits. You have to brush yourself off and pick yourself up all the time, and you have to not be worried about kids that challenge you or your thinking.

You have to be prepared for them to push back. You have to be prepared for them to ask hard questions and challenge you.

Arthur and Patricia agreed about the importance of relationships. Their views, respectively, are as follows:

I must encourage and support the adults to build relationships with each child in this building, so that every child is known. I believe – every child is known well enough to

know what they need to be successful and that we can create a learning environment for them that does that.

The kids, of course, are more interested in relationships and friendships. They are exploring who they are, what they believe, and what's important to them. They are still in the early teens. They are not quite at these stages of some high school kids who are settling in a little bit and starting to think about their future and what am I going to do after high school.

They [students] can be a lot more playful in the middle school years and I believe that has impacts from an instructional standpoint. We are talking about kids who are still kids but big ones. How do you teach those kids? What is effective or what is not effective in teaching these kids? That goes back to ... decisions regarding teaching methods.

Although their answers varied in how contextual factors impact their instructional leadership, each of the five principal participants clearly understand (and feel) the magnitude of their role, and want to do right by their students, teachers, and school community. Early in their interviews, the participants stated that they saw their instructional leadership to be focused on student learning and success. However, as we moved to questions that explored their specific practices – the enactment of instructional leadership – the principals' responses were often framed, not in relation to student learning and success, but with reference to the organizational structures they have created and the mentorship they provide to their learning leaders. This interesting shift is explained in the following section.

**Research question 2. What are middle school principals' perceptions of their instructional leadership practices and how these practices impact teachers' instructional capabilities?**

I identified a number of indicators that participants shared when providing their perceptions about their practices of instructional leadership. Once analyzed, the following themes emerged: Middle school principals often see their practice through a shared, distributed, and collective approach in which they work directly with learning leaders to impact teacher capacity. Secondly, principals support or facilitate professional learning through a collaborative model that is often focused within a PLC structure. Lastly, their views about their practice and their success in impacting the instructional capacity of teachers is highly dependent on building trusting relationships within their shared leadership structures and with all staff.

**Finding 2.1. Practices of instructional leadership through distributed, shared, and collective leadership approaches.** Goksoy (2016) stated that recent leadership theories explain the concept of sharing leadership functions by referencing concepts such as distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002; Harris, 2004; Spillane, 2012) and shared leadership (Louis and Wahlstrom, 2012), and several researchers regard the notion of leadership as something bigger than the sum of the knowledge and abilities of one individual.

Distributed leadership promotes the decentralization of the leader function and moves to a collective approach within the organization (Harris, 2004). Frequently, in many secondary schools, structures exist which allow for leadership to be distributed amongst department heads or learning leaders (Timperley, 2011). This type of leadership does not suggest that everyone in a group is a leader, but opens the possibility for a more collective leadership approach (Harris, 2004). All the principals in this study explained their current experiences of leadership as distributed or shared. Patricia, for example, offered the following: "I would hope that every adult

in this building could identify something that they lead.” More recently, researchers have explained that shared, distributed, and collective approaches to overall instructional leadership deepen and widen impact (Brandon, Hanna, Turner & Tapajan, 2017). Goksoy (2016) argued that many researchers and principals use the terms distributed and shared leadership interchangeably; however, in the literature, these two leadership concepts are also accepted as separate approaches. Further, adding to this body of research about the values of distributed leadership is Leithwood and Jantzi’s (2012) large study of 2,570 teachers in 90 schools. The authors described distributed leadership as collective, and reminiscent of Spillane’s (2012) description of co-performance, which referred to leadership as not only collaborative, but also coordinated. Building on this, Leithwood and Jantzi (2012) coined the term collective leadership to better identify the degree of influence that staff and other stakeholders had on school-based decisions. Through analysis, I found that all of the principal participants of this study use a distributed, shared, and collective instructional leadership approach that is highly influenced by the work of the learning leaders of their schools.

The entire group of participants provided very descriptive examples of how they have created an organizational structure so that leadership can be distributed. Each further explained that it is their perception that these structures aid in their ability to influence instructional practices in the classroom. Furthermore, their work with the learning leaders is their main conduit to the classroom and facilitates their ability to gather information and data about the ongoing learning of students. For example, Arthur stated:

I’ve tried to figure out a balance in my principalship – in how directly involved that I should be with individual teachers and how much I should delegate, I found ... the learning leaders are my best conduit to the teachers, much of the time.

Similarly, Brad and Jim explained their shared leadership model as having a school within a school organization, with each of the smaller schools being learning communities led by a learning leader. As Brad related: “Due to the vast size, I have to rely more on learning leaders to do the work and share with me because the probability of getting into classrooms in such an active school is hard.”

Furthermore, Jim shared how, because he had the opportunity to open a new middle school, he was able to set up an organization of mini schools, a structure which was influenced by his knowledge of AMLE’s 16 characteristics of effective middle schools:

One of the first things we decided was if we have a school within a school, then we need leadership for that school within a school. So, what we’ve done is we have learning leaders – six of them. Each one is responsible for enacting our bigger understanding of what it is we’re trying to do here with that particular group of teachers and particular group of kids. Assigning a learning community to each of the LLs allowed us to create a scaffolded leadership model whereby decisions made at the admin table could be passed along easily and consistently throughout the school.... It becomes six schools within a school with the same over-arching middle school and system-influenced themes.

As one of the AMLE’s (2012b) 16 characteristics, organizational structures are recognized as a way to foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships. This characteristic specifically highlights the benefits of lower teacher-to-student ratios, and suggests that teams of only two, three, or four total teachers produce more positive outcomes for students.

Similarly, Patricia and Thor shared the perspective that learning leaders are a major driver in creating the conditions and leading the work with teachers that is related to instructional practices:

Our learning leaders have a huge responsibility ... our learning leaders are really leaders of learning and instructional design. We have an admin team of 12. There is somebody who takes responsibility for every grade team and then a few others who fill in specific academic roles like PE, technology, and student services. I ask LLs to really assess who their grade teams are and what the strengths are in those teams, and to really leverage their understanding of their teams to guide the leadership of their own teams.... Learning leaders are really focused on instructional leadership and less worried about management.... I have tried to create structures so that task design and student success can be the major focus (Patricia).

I very intentionally developed a distributive leadership model within the school, which is a bit of a shift for people. I have a learning leader designated to each grade team. They're responsible for consistency within that grade team, bringing visions forward, working with teachers ... because the teachers know the work best, as opposed to me making decisions for the grade team when I'm not there in the trenches with them (Thor).

Within a focus on a shared leadership model, all of the principals described how, in some form, their school is divided into smaller groupings of teacher and students. Interestingly, within these forms, four of the five principals stressed that their structure has learning leaders focused on leading a smaller learning community, or as Patricia explained, focused on teaching and learning, such as in the work of task design and assessment. Moreover, although each of the principals explained they had learning leaders for instructional areas like physical education or technology, only Arthur described an organizational structure where there was a learning leader for specific core subject areas, such as Math, Science, English Language Arts, and Social Studies. In this case,

much of the distributed nature of the work flowed through the disciplines and, then, through grade teams. Patricia described a model that focused the work solely through the grade teams. The other three principals described structural models that were a blend of both grade level and subject discipline-based organizational structures.

All the principals stressed that the structural ‘flow’ that most influences the instructional capacity of teachers is facilitated through connections and work with learning leaders who lead the PLCs in each of their schools. Thor and Brad explained this relationship through the following reflections:

In the lives of a principal, there are so many things that we’re accountable for that it does make it a challenge to consistently get in classes to observe or influence teacher practice. There are certainly ones I spend time in, but my connection to instructional leadership and impacting teachers’ practice would be through my work with learning leaders. Besides our regular admin meeting, I meet with learning leaders individually on a bimonthly basis, some more than others depending on their leadership needs ... to build their leadership capacity (Thor).

If you are improving your LLs’ practice, you’re going to help your teachers also improve. I’m a teacher to learning leaders, LLs to the teachers. I see them as my class ... I check in with my learning leaders quite a bit just to see how they are doing and so they can give me a quick snapshot of what they are focused on and what they are working on with their teachers. My work is going to be spending more time with a struggling LL and having conversations with them and listening to what their needs are. It might mean spending more

time within that team at meetings and listening to the conversations about curriculum, tasks, assessment, and asking more pointed questions of the team or LL (Brad).

The principals recognized that it is their leadership, or even the coaching they provide to their learning leaders, that impacts the success of their shared and collective leadership models. For example, each of the principals explained how they work at finding the strengths and areas of growth for each learning leader. All of the principals reported that they meet regularly with their administrative teams (principal, assistant principal and learning leaders) and often with individual learning leaders. Arthur explained that these meetings are often highly focused on instructional practices, and less on managerial tasks, in order to help set direction within his school. Brad highlighted how, “once a month we examine one of the competencies [of the Draft *Principal Quality Leadership Standard*] and discuss how the indicators guide or help us to reflect on needed areas of improvement.” Similarly, Patricia explained: “Learning leaders have a fireside chat in the fall, and I ask that they choose a leadership competency to focus on for the year.” Her perspective seems focused on providing support to create an environment in which all members are gaining the needed knowledge and have the resources to improve both their instructional and leadership practices:

I think it’s my job to keep people moving forward and to create the best possible opportunity for folks to continue to have learning conversations, whether it’s by resourcing them with time to continue those conversations, or resources, or networks. I would say that I work super hard to connect people with networks, both inside the school but also outside the school.

My analysis reveals that these middle school principals often use a shared and collective leadership model, and that they rely on learning leaders to influence the instructional capacity of

teachers. Each of them did provide examples, with varying degrees of detail, of instances of their work with individual teachers. Often these opportunities occur through their classroom visits. All highlighted that they enjoy and cherish the opportunities to work with teachers one-on-one, most often through the evaluation process for those on probationary contracts or for those seeking permanent certification. The evidence provided by participants most often indicated that their practice of leadership is focused on influencing their learning leaders who they rely on to influence the day-to-day instructional practices of teachers. Although I have highlighted that participants often used the terms shared and distributed leadership interchangeably, I would suggest that the participants were trying to achieve a collective leadership approach, as described by Leithwood and Jantzi (2012), with a belief that collective leadership has a stronger influence on student achievement than individual leadership.

**Finding 2.2. Leading teacher learning and development.** Robinson (2011) identified leading teaching professional learning and development as the leadership dimension shown to have the biggest impact on student learning outcomes. Participants recognized the important role they play in professional learning and development of their teachers, yet they shared that this was an area where they cannot always lead the way they feel they should. They spoke about how they often provided direction and, in turn, expected their learning leaders to put into practice the professional learning process. They also explained how they guide or coach their learning leaders in creating opportunities for professional learning, often through the PLC structure at their schools or by accessing other networks provided through the school district or professional associations.

Every principal explained how their school focus on gaining data, improving instruction, and meeting both the needs of staff and students flowed through the work of the professional

learning communities (PLCs). Arthur reflected on the use of PLCs and how he influences their direction, which he explains as part of his practice of instructional leadership. His perspective is interesting, as he inherited and now changed the PLC structure put in place by a former principal:

One area I identified when I arrived is that I didn't think the way that PLCs were working suited how I thought they should be working. That meant having conversations with the staff about what they liked about PLCs, what they didn't like about PLCs, observing how things worked, what things weren't working, and then instituting some changes. From the perspective of instructional leadership, PLCs look different regarding the topics that are being covered. When I go into PLCs now, I often see teachers discussing real problems of practice – more and more frequently in the presence of actual student work than when I first came here.... Regarding the structural aspects, I meet regularly with the learning leaders. The learning leaders all lead their PLC groups. I can work with the learning leaders through our admin meetings and provide direction to the PLCs. By working with the admin team and the learning leaders, then I have a direct lever onto the rest of the staff.

Having principals focus their leadership in the area of teacher professional learning is critical to the creation of a school learning community (Anderson, Leithwood, & Louis, 2012; Robinson, 2011). Researchers, such as Anderson, Leithwood, and Louis (2012), explained that the most powerful way leaders can promote PLCs is to provide professional learning opportunities incorporating theoretical principles and practical applications. When the focus is on data use and the combined responsibilities of all staff for learning, it results in a “strong, albeit indirect, relationship to achievement score” (Anderson et al., pp.164-165). This view was exemplified in several of the principals' responses when they shared that the PLC organization creates a place for

teachers to examine data, such as PAT, report card assessments, and student work to discuss strategies to improve student learning outcomes.

Patricia also shared her perspective on how Timperley's research has caused her to reflect on how she sets up PLCs and is able to leverage the work of PLCs as both a tool to create coherence among teachers and opportunities for professional learning:

What I get out of Timperley is a need for a strong focus on trying to develop high functioning professional learning communities. It is through my reflection on Timperley's research ... that I created a survey last spring and asked: what are we going to do this year with PLCs? Because I didn't feel like we were ever getting to the work, we weren't really ever digging in and I think especially with our system focus on assessment and task design, if you're meeting with people that are multi-graded and multidisciplinary, how is it that you ever get to creating tasks?

Patricia went on to explain that, through the information she gathered, she helped teachers join district networks that were focused on specific areas of needed professional learning, such as mathematical literacy. This is substantiated by Timperley et al. (2007), who reported that the opportunity to process the meaning and implications of new learning with one's colleagues appears to be fundamental to the change process. If teachers focus on analyzing their impact on student learning and engage in critical discourse to create new learning opportunities for students, then the PLCs can positively impact student learning. As previously shared, Arthur explained that process changes, such as using protocols and creating norms, have helped reimagine PLCs in his school, which has subsequently helped create focused conversations on student learning and implementation of teaching strategies. Thor, Jim, and Brad also expressed the importance of creating structures and norms to guide PLCs.

As Patricia related, most of the other principals also provided information on how they influence teacher practice by connecting teachers with learning networks within the district. Currently the district has created cohorts for literacy, mathematics, and to support the district's Indigenous strategy. Along with cohorts that align with areas of improvement in the district's Three-Year Education Plan, new teachers, through the teacher induction program, as well as learning leaders, through their focused series, are provided professional networking opportunities and are supported by the UPLO. All participants shared that their learning leaders lead focused professional development opportunities for staff that are based on the resources provided by the UPLO. As explained earlier, Patricia also had the UPLO work directly with her school in the area of task design. Arthur shared that he has, on occasion, solicited district support to lead and support teachers in areas of growth, such as assessment.

Arthur also provided a specific example of how he leads professional learning by engaging in conversations to share professional resources or research:

We were at a TLC PD day and I thought it would be interesting because in the afternoon after teachers went out to different sessions in the morning, we had the whole school back together as a school in the afternoon. That's when I shared an article discussing the use of inquiry-based strategies – is inquiry within a TLC in opposition to more traditional methods? It was an article I felt fit well with the day because we're thinking about different teaching methodology in the context of the TLC program, and in the context of the [district] where we are focused on personalization of learning and assessment.... So I used the article to try and kind of bridge the two worlds.

During his explanation, Arthur shared the article to which he referred.

Another observation, as previously explained, is how beliefs and values influence principals' views of instructional leadership. All principals identified a need for their teachers to have a strong and, in some cases, a better understanding of early adolescent development. Only Patricia and Jim provided an example of supporting learning opportunities for teachers to explore this area of research, and both spoke of exposing their teachers to information and research provided by the AMLE. That all principals did not mention this as an area of professional learning may be a result of the district not having a middle school leadership focus, unlike for other divisions where, for example, high school redesign has been a focus for the upper grades. Another factor may be that Alberta Education has not emphasized middle school learning in comparison to other provinces, such as Manitoba, which for several years has focused professional learning and research on transformation in middle years, helping to advance teacher development in the area of early adolescent learning (Yee, 2016).

**Finding 2.3. Relationships and trust.** During every interview, each participant explained that their instructional leadership and their ability to impact teachers' instructional capacity are influenced by the relationships they had created and, more specifically, the level of trust they had developed in and through these relationships. For example, Thor stated: "I think to build instructional capacity there needs to be relational trust. It's building those relationships, trust with teachers, so they realize I'm there to support, not to criticize or to punish.... Pushing teachers while providing support."

That the principals recognize the importance of relationships is not surprising. As Robinson (2011) explained, all five dimensions of student-centered leadership involve relationship skills, and as Timperley (2011) suggested, teacher professional learning best occurs in school environments that are characterized by high levels of trust. More specifically, the way in which relational trust

was spoken about by the majority of the participants reflected Bryk and Schneider's (2003) definition – the interpersonal social exchange that takes place in a school community that is built on four criterion: respect, competency, personal regard for others, and integrity. Regardless of how much formal power comes with any given role in a school, all educators remain dependent on others to achieve desired outcomes and feel empowered by their efforts. Before teachers assume the risk of changing their practice, they need to trust their efforts will be supported. In light of this explanation, I paid attention to how the principals defined and understood the components of relational trust that they identified as necessary to their instructional leadership.

During my interview with Patricia, she repeatedly spoke of the importance of leading a learning community. As a prompt, I asked her the following question: “What type of work do you do with your learning leaders so that you know that you are making progress on leading a learning community?” She quickly explained that an area of growth for her learning leaders was in building strong relationships within and amongst teams, in order to increase their ability to have critical discourse and to improve teachers’ instructional practice:

We’ve spent a whole year focused on how you build relationships with your team to be able to do that. How do you build a framework that brings out the best in people? Are we clear about expectations? How do you ask questions of a colleague?... They really have no positional authority, so how do you work alongside a colleague and yet still work to be able to create something that’s better than you could do alone?

Patricia and the other principals stressed the importance of listening, and then often quickly explained that one of the key factors in how they create trust is by building credibility through sharing their experiences and displaying their competency. For example, Jim shared: “I’ll always bring my own experience into the mix.” This was a direct answer to a question about how he

creates an environment for improving instructional capacity. Jim went on to explain that it is the process of paralleling his own experiences with those the teacher is facing, which creates a trusting environment and, in turn, also improves teacher capacity:

I like to parallel my own experiences with theirs so teachers know that it's normal to be questioning practice – you're here intentionally doing the best job you can and you're still going to hit bumps in the road ... them knowing that I have their back and that I have faced similar challenges.... I'm there to support them through whatever it is, and also coaching them to make some decisions based on their own thinking.

Furthermore, Jim highlighted that one of the factors impacting his ability to “build trust with teachers and trust in their work or, as Robinson says, relational trust, is by showing you bring a skillset of understanding pedagogy.” Similarly, in the other participants’ accounts of the importance of sharing their own pedagogical understandings, there was recognition of the necessity of ensuring that staff know they are supported by the principal. In relating these examples, every one of the principals spoke about how it was important to them that colleagues knew they “had their back.” I suggest this shows an understanding that, in order to build relational trust, principals must not only demonstrate competency but, in doing so, can also show personal regard for others.

Another participant highlighted that he recognizes that the work of the principal is highly dependent on developing strong relationships through the building of respect between himself and his colleagues, and through displaying integrity:

Forming strong relationships, establishing trust, I don't anticipate that anyone should just trust me because I am the principal. Hopefully they see that as I provide leadership, I'm trying to do that in a way that has integrity, in a way where I am approachable, or where

they can ask questions. Often part of how I build trust is by collaborating and bringing staff alongside through purposeful intentional work (Arthur).

When Thor started sharing his belief in the importance of creating strong relationships, he summarized his thoughts on creating structures and conditions so staff see him as approachable, a person of integrity, and a competent leader who is respected by staff because he is willing to show that he is open to failure.

Building relational trust is a big one of mine.... Being humble in my understandings and realizing and being okay with not being the master of everything.... Distributing leadership, I think it shows people you can take a risk, and if you're willing to ask people for help, they're more willing to listen to you when you're vulnerable. I believe I have the ability to listen and understand what people are saying, and we work to find solutions to some of the problems they have. My credibility comes from the range of experience I have.... I'm willing to provide examples from my own history, if I've had a similar struggle or similar experience whether it's a curriculum or a type of student. I've been there before, so I have some ideas that might work.

Setting up a structure and culture where teachers feel that they can talk to me. I need to listen to them about what they're saying ... understanding it is their context and supporting their reality in the classroom, with parents, with kids, with workload, and then respond through a coaching approach.

It was abundantly clear from the principals' responses that their instructional leadership and its impact on teachers' instructional capacity is highly influenced by their work with learning leaders within a shared / distributed leadership model. All of the principals have strong intentions and beliefs about leading learning in their schools. However, how this is enacted is highly

dependent upon the individual principal, the capacity of those other than the principal who have leadership responsibilities within the school, and the support and expertise offered for professional learning within the district. All principals feel that relationships are a key factor in the success of their leadership, and they were able to articulate this with examples of how they build relational trust.

**Research question 3. What evidence do middle school principals cite for their claims regarding the effectiveness of their instructional leadership in their schools?**

Since leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 5), and instructional leadership factors are often referenced as increasing achievement (Robinson, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008), I was keen to understand how principals know their instructional practices are impacting teachers' instructional capacity and, indirectly, students' achievement. Question six in my semi-structured interview asked participants: Can you provide specific examples of how your instructional leadership practices influence or change teachers' instructional practices? I found that, when asked this question, responses revealed a wide range in the principals' abilities to explain the evidence of how their practices – whether they be shared leadership, building relational trust, or leading teacher learning and development – created change in teachers' practice or capacity.

Patricia, for example, provided a clear picture of what constitutes evidence of her instructional leadership effectiveness. She explained one way of gathering evidence is to collectively examine

what evidence they [learning leaders] have that their leadership is making a difference for students.... When I think about how I gather evidence of my influence, it's no different

than my expectation of teachers gathering evidence about students. It's about artifacts, observations, and conversations.

She went on to provide an example of how she worked with her learning leaders to build a professional learning opportunity in math instruction for their peers. Patricia highlighted that she shared that she would help them but that it was the learning leaders who needed to present the learning and to collect the evidence. Patricia was very proud to share how well the day went. More importantly, she related that she had subsequently visited classrooms where new strategies were being used, and that she had heard hallway conversations of both students and teachers discussing math problems that revealed a direct link to the professional learning opportunity she had initiated. Unlike most of the participants, Patricia was able to provide an example of how she worked collectively with her learning leaders to identify an area of capacity building, organize professional learning, increase teachers' instructional capacity, change classroom practices, and, ultimately, gather evidence of improvement in student learning.

Arthur was the other participant who provided an example of how he has used professional learning opportunities to support the growth of teachers' instructional capacity, and it was through classroom visits that he was able to examine evidence of effectiveness:

Another school that I worked at, actually two of the schools that I worked out of, we did a lot of work around the topic of critical thinking. We engaged in quite a bit of professional development on critical thinking which was connected to our school development plan. We used resources and accessed experts through the Critical Thinking Consortium.... Where I would say I could see the greatest impact of it was when I went into the classroom and saw teachers implementing more critical thinking tasks in their everyday lessons than they had before.

However, Patricia and Arthur's clearly articulated examples of the desired outcome of their leadership practice were unique among the participants. This is not to say that the participants did not provide evidence of how they had worked with individual teachers or learning leaders to change understandings of practice. That is, they were all able to talk generally about how they knew their leadership impacted classroom practice; however, they often struggled to provide specific examples of how a change in a teacher's understanding actually ended up impacting student learning in the classroom. So, I found it interesting for example that, although they all provided great detail about how they created distributed and shared leadership structures, they provided few examples of how, through this model, their practice improved individual teachers' instructional capacity. When I used additional interview questions for focus and clarification, the participants often shared a story of a specific teacher they worked with.

In the case of both Brad and Thor, I asked for clarification when they mentioned areas in which they wanted to see improvement in their schools. An example of this is when I asked Thor the following question: Can you think of how your leadership has facilitated this type of improvement? Thor went on to explain how he had worked with a teacher in the area of science instruction to increase the teacher's understanding of the importance of personalized learning so as to ultimately increase the school's level of excellence in student achievement. He offered the teacher examples and an article about how to create tasks that provide scaffolding to help students gain a better understanding of discipline-specific literacy strategies in science. To encourage more specificity, I then asked: Through your guidance, how did that teacher's capacity change and, as a result, how did they go about their teaching? Thor explained that the teacher was "open to change and had a realization ... of how he could challenge his students." From this answer, Thor went on to share his perception that this type of work was made possible

because of his ability to build relational trust with the teacher. It would seem that his evidence for how his instructional leadership strengthened the teacher's capacity was related to building a trusting relationship through dialogue with the colleague, and not related to observations of how the teacher's practices had actually changed within the classroom, or evidence of how the teacher's new understanding of scaffolding actually improved the learning of students.

In the case of Brad, I was interested to know more about his practice of shared leadership and how he collects stories, which he provided a number of times as an example of how he knows what is happening in his school. I asked: Can you give me an example of how your instructional leadership impacted teacher practice and how teacher practice was different? Brad then shared a story where a learning leader was struggling with a new-to-the-district teacher in the area of assessment practice. Brad explained that there was conflict in the relationship between the learning leader and the teacher, so he decided to work with the teacher one-on-one. He engaged in several conversations and provided the teacher with guiding documents from the district. Brad explained that the process had helped the teacher move from a practice of "assessment of learning to assessment for learning" and had resulted in the teacher using more formative assessment techniques.

In both Brad and Thor's stories it was not clear to me that they had actually observed changes in practice within the classroom. It is possible that teacher capacity was increased; however, neither of these participants shared anything that I could interpret as real evidence of how, specifically, new understandings transferred into different practices. This may be a reflection of how many of the participants talked about how it is a struggle to find time, among the other priorities in their very busy schedules, to observe classroom practice.

Several of the principals also explained that they gathered evidence of their instructional leadership by attending professional learning activities that were provided by staff and by collecting evidence from electronic sources. For example, four of the five principals explained that they had a system where PLC meeting minutes and artifacts from the meetings are shared using electronic platforms, for instance, OneDrive. Brad related:

The LLs ask questions and post the work, so other staff can see the work. We can hope that this information being shared with other PLCs may help those that need that little push to get going and that's a great place for our staff to celebrate the great work they are doing.

During interviews, four of the five participants shared that they were working on implementing a district initiative to increase a focus on calibration between colleagues. This is the process where colleagues use a checklist tool to examine the commonality between tasks taught, and to examine the commonalities between teachers' interpretations of their assessments with the *Program of Studies* (curriculum document) as reference. Two of the participants explained that some of their teachers had already started to use an evidence-gathering tool for calibration that was very recently introduced at a district principal meeting. This highlights the influence of the district, and how quickly a new tool, concept, or term becomes part of the vernacular. But this does not necessarily mean that there is a clear understanding by principals about how to use the new tool or about its benefits. Brad shared the following: "The calibration work our system is undertaking is a new learning for me, and so I'm trying to support the direction of our system but, at the same time, support our teachers and help them gain new understanding." It seemed that Brad was struggling with his own understanding of the calibration process and how he was going to prepare his learning leaders to use this new tool.

With the exception of Patricia and Arthur's descriptions of having gathered evidence through observations, the above examples demonstrate what I see as a disconnect between how leadership practice and change in teaching were talked about by participants in a general sense, and how leadership practice was not only explained but was supported with a specific example of how it had actually translated into a certain kind of teaching practice that had actually improved student learning. I believe this disconnect reveals that participants may have strong skills in being able to refer to the leadership practices and structures that are in place to help increase teacher capacity and ultimately improve student learning, but may not be as adept at identifying and gathering the *evidence of successful outcomes* of their practice.

The purpose of the third research question was to gather an understanding of how middle school principals perceive their effectiveness as instructional leaders. Although they all reported their actions to be effective, only Patricia and Arthur provided examples of identifying a learning area of need, creating professional learning opportunities, gathering evidence of increased teacher capacity, and in turn observing a change in student learning. This was even after I had asked several follow up questions. Most often participants provided an example of how they worked with an individual teacher and how their involvement changed the teacher's understanding, such as Brad's example of improving a colleague's understanding of assessment, but no evidence was provided about how this new understanding impacted classroom practices. As shared in the findings from question two regarding instructional leadership practice, participants often explained their practices within a shared model that they perceived to improve teachers' instructional capacity. Most often participants explained they had processes and structures in place for gathering and examining evidence. However, as Brad explained, there isn't always a clear understanding of the impact on classroom practices: "We can hope that this information being shared with other

PLCs may help those [teachers] that need that little push.” There seems to be a strong understanding of the fundamental aspects of instructional leadership, such as the importance of vision and goal setting, the need for shared leadership practices, and processes to build a collaborative approach through PLCs. But the interview data did not reveal how principals actually gather evidence about the impact of their leadership as it transfers to individual teachers and, ultimately, students.

## **Summary**

This chapter began with participant profiles. In order to gain insight into the phenomenon of how experienced middle school principals understand the concept of instructional leadership and, further, perceive their enactments of instructional leadership to build the instructional capacity of the teachers in their schools, I coded data from the five transcribed semi-structured interviews. The findings were built from the problem, research questions, research design, and from the themes that emerged through the coding process. Data were connected and synthesized through explanatory text and, where appropriate, the findings were presented using participant quotations to allow the principals to speak for themselves to portray the variations of understandings among participants and the complexities of the phenomenon.

The research findings were organized following the study’s secondary research questions which, when answered, contributed to addressing the primary research question: How do middle school principals understand the concept of instructional leadership and think about their practices of instructional leadership?

The first subsection contained findings related to the first secondary research question: How do middle school principals define and explain the concept of instructional leadership? By utilizing the interview data, my research journals, and the literature reviewed, I found that middle

school principals' understanding of instructional leadership aligns very well with Hallinger's (2011) conceptualization of leadership for learning. While the data revealed that all the participants agreed the fundamental focus of their work is in creating the conditions for student learning and success, several other themes emerged. First, all participants' understandings and practices of instructional leadership are influenced by their beliefs and values; this is exemplified by a fundamental perspective that their instructional leadership is dependent on their visibility within their school. Furthermore, their understanding of instructional leadership is highly influenced by the district in which they work. Secondly, part of the work of an instructional leader is setting vision and goals, but there is variation in the level of collaboration and the manner in which principals go about this work. Thirdly, middle school principals' understandings and practices of instructional leadership is highly contextual, depending on the needs of the students, staff, and community, and on environmental considerations such as student numbers and grade configuration of their particular middle schools. Also, each of the participants explained that the middle school context is significant to their leadership, and that an understanding of this specifically is necessary to be an *instructional* leader in a middle school.

The second subsection contained findings related to the secondary research question: What are middle school principals' perceptions of their instructional leadership practices and how it impacts teachers' instructional capacities? I identified a number of indicators that participants identified when sharing their perceptions about their practices of instructional leadership. Once analyzed, the following themes emerged: middle school principals often see their practice as following a shared, distributed, or collective model for working directly with learning leaders to impact teacher capacity. Secondly, principals identify that a main leadership role should be leading teacher learning and development, which aligns with Robinson's (2011) research. This

work is most often shared and collaborative, facilitated through a PLC structure. Lastly, their practice and success of impacting instructional capacity is highly dependent on building trusting relationships with all staff within the structures they have developed for shared leadership.

The third subsection contained findings related to the final secondary research question: What evidence do middle school principals cite for their claims regarding the effectiveness of their instructional leadership in their schools? I returned to the data several times when analyzing this question and several findings emerged: participants struggled in their ability to clearly articulate what constitutes evidence and how they recognize evidence of the impact of their instructional leadership on teachers' instructional capacity. This is not to say they couldn't articulate examples of what they perceive to be evidence. However, unlike the process of asking interview questions that led to many of the other findings in the study, in the case of this question, I often had to ask prompting questions to gather more information and to understand further what principals perceived as evidence of the outcomes of their instructional leadership practices. At times I found it interesting how the evidence of participants' instructional leadership was not always linked to the practices of shared and distributed leadership, building trust, or the importance of having structures, such as PLCs, that they had referred to as being important in their work as instructional leaders. Evidence of instructional leadership was most often shared through an example of a participant's encounter with an individual teacher or of work in guiding learning leaders. Several of the responses did not explain how resources and processes facilitated by leaders enable teachers to convert new information and knowledge into changes that respond to learning needs of students.

Chapter 5 provides interpretive insights into the findings of this chapter, further analyzes and synthesizes the major themes, and builds a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon of instructional leadership from the perspective of these middle school principals.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

In Chapter 4 I presented the findings by organizing data contributed by the participants and various sources into categories to construct an understandable narrative. The purpose of Chapter 5 is to re-examine the connecting patterns and themes of the findings to build a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon of instructional leadership from the perspective of these middle school principals. In addition, I reference relevant theory and research, as the themes are compared and contrasted with issues raised by other researchers in the literature. I used three sub-questions to help answer and guide my research. First, I was seeking to understand how middle school principals define and understand the phenomenon of instructional leadership. Second, I examined principals' perceptions of their practices of instructional leadership and how these practices impact teachers' instructional capacities. Finally, I explored middle school principals' claims regarding the effectiveness of their instructional leadership practices and how do they cite them. Although I summarised the findings in Chapter 4 using the three sub-questions, which informed the primary research question, I have chosen to organize this chapter using major themes that have emerged in relation to my original conceptual framework. By doing so I also explore how I see my conceptual framework evolving in light of my research findings. This discussion is intended to deepen and enrich understandings and practices of instructional leadership – leadership for learning – within middle schools.

**Theme One: Middle school principals in this study have a strong theoretical understanding of leadership for learning.**

This first theme will be discussed in coordination with themes two and three to create a holistic understanding of the participants' understandings and practices of instructional leadership. Due to my insider knowledge of the district in which the research took place, I constructed my conceptual framework knowing all participants had been exposed to professional learning that focused on texts such as the Draft *Principal Quality Standard* (2016) and Robinson's (2011) *Student-Centered Leadership*. Furthermore, similar to all of the participants, on a regular basis I have heard senior leadership in our school district refer to instructional leadership and regularly assert that "leadership is second only to classroom instruction" in influencing student learning (e.g., Leithwood et al. 2004; Leithwood et al. 2017).

The findings of this study reveal that participants describe several factors and influences that define and support their understanding of instructional leadership. Although there are many leadership practices that principals pursue, participants' main understandings of instructional leadership aligned with Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) early instructional leadership model, and Hallinger's (2011) newer leadership for learning model (see Figure 2). Hallinger explained that leadership indirectly impacts student learning through school-level processes and conditions, which he categorizes as vision and goals, academic structures and processes, and people capacity. These three categories were evident as strong themes in each participant's interview. Hallinger uses the term leadership focus to refer to these three categories as the indirect *means* through which leadership impacts learning. Hallinger's model has common characteristics that are similar to other researchers' findings of school-based leadership, such as Leithwood's (2012) four categories of core leadership practices: setting direction, developing people, redesigning

organization, and improving the instructional program. Reflecting Hallinger's and Murphy's (1985) original model, each of Leithwood's four categories also comprises three to five more specific practices. The middle school principals of my study also described instructional leadership as a compilation of practices that ultimately serve to direct and support student learning.

**Setting vision and goals.** Reflecting Hallinger's (2011) model, the participants emphasized that creating a strong vision and setting goals was a primary instructional leadership practice. As Arthur stated early on in his interview, his work as an instructional leader is “focused on guiding the process of learning for all students.... It isn't just about outcomes, but also method of teaching and learning that is important.”

It is not surprising that participants articulated a key role as instructional leaders as setting direction through vision and goals. Hallinger and Heck (1996) identified vision and goals as the most significant avenue through which school leaders' impact learning. Robinson et al. (2008) reaffirmed this conclusion when they placed vision and goals as one of the top three most significant paths through which principals contribute to improving learning in classrooms. Reflecting Hallinger's (2011) leadership and learning model, the five participants of my study described vision as a broad picture of the direction that leadership and staff are working towards, and goals refer to the specific targets that need to be achieved on the journey towards that vision.

The process of setting direction through a vision and goals is intended to establish what Fullan (2003) calls moral purpose. Leithwood (2012) includes goals and vision within four specific practices for setting direction: building a shared vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, creating high performance expectations, and communicating direction. The participants echoed several of these practices by sharing, for example, the following: “I think what we've

tried to do is really look at what high-performing middle schools look like and to create a vision together.” Throughout her interview, Patricia explained the significance of a shared vision, and emphasized the collective nature of her leadership and the importance of clear communication. All of the participants shared that they had established organizational structures and processes to communicate direction, and that they had set goals through a collective process that was often focused on academic measures. As an example, Thor stated: “I’ve created a strong focus on setting goals by having our LLs lead PLCs, which creates accountability and connects to the School Development Plan.... our SDP is focused on the areas we need to improve instructionally and academically.” The linkage of goals to a strong academic focus shows a strong understanding of recent research literature.

Hallinger (2011) found that, when vision and goals positively affect school improvement, the goals have an academic focus. Robinson (2011) also concluded that principals influence school academic performance by establishing an academic focus through clearly shared goals (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). This was very evident in my interviews with principals, and it affirms my personal knowledge of the School Development Plan (SDP) process. Each school in the district creates an annual SDP that has specific achievement and instructional goals related to the needs of the school’s population. The goals are aligned to specific strategies of the district’s Three-Year Education Plan such as: personalization of learning; building capacity; and specific curricular strategies such as literacy, mathematics, and an indigenous strategy.

Smith and Smith (2015) stated that establishing a shared vision, goals, and expectations is one of the five elements of instructional leadership ability. They explained that the work environment of most schools is characterized by multiple conflicting demands that tend to make everything seem equally important. Similar to how all participants in this study explained the

importance of having a collective vision and shared goals, Smith and Smith argued that “clearly articulating the school’s learning intentions (goals) distinguishes what is most important from what is least important and focuses staff and student attention and effort accordingly” (p.36).

In schools that have shown high gains or have high student achievement, the school’s strategic priorities are clearly communicated by leaders at the same time that they are reflected in school and classroom lessons, routines, and procedure (Smith & Smith, 2015). Arthur used an example from a previous school to illustrate how the goals within the School Development Plan were the driving force of professional development, and how he observed changes in practice in the classroom:

We engaged in quite a bit of professional development around the goals connected to our school development plan. We brought in resources like the Critical Thinking Consortium, individuals came and presented at PD days, but where I would say I could see the greatest impact of it was when I went into the classroom and saw teachers implementing more critical thinking tasks in their everyday lessons.

This insight, along with several of the principals mentioning the importance of using data about student progress and achievement, highlights the necessity for principals to actively involve their staff in reviewing data as they identify academic priorities and goals. It also highlights the importance of principals having an understanding of how to collect, analyze, and share data.

Making sure that staff members have the knowledge and skills required to achieve the goals is an important aspect requiring consideration when setting the learning direction (Robinson, 2011).

Although all the participants articulated a clear understanding of the importance of setting a vision and goals, could explain the research perspective which influenced their knowledge and understanding, and were able to describe the importance of linking academic goals to the SDP and

the district's Three-Year Educational Plan, Arthur and Patricia were the two principals who were explicit about how setting direction improved teacher instructional capacity. What wasn't always clear from what the other participants shared was how they knew if they had teacher buy-in and commitment. Simply, other participants didn't always provide evidence that their processes of goal setting created the conditions and changes in teaching and learning for students.

In summary, setting a vision and goals is just one of the three categories – one of the leadership *means* – that Hallinger (2011) outlines in his leadership for learning model. All five participants have a strong theoretical understanding of the importance of having a vision and setting goals, and their responses displayed strong alignment with research associated with goal setting (Robinson, 2011; Robinson et al., 2008) and the concept of setting direction (Leithwood, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004). Regarding my conceptual framework, I now suggest that the *Leadership Quality Standard* competency of “embodying visionary leadership” (Alberta Education, 2018) is linked to the middle school principals' beliefs that a strong focus on vision and goals is an important aspect of their leadership for learning.

## **Theme Two: Participants define their practices of instructional leadership through shared leadership, PLC structures, and a focus on relationships.**

In this study, middle school principals' explanations of their practices of instructional leadership highlighted a strong need to develop and create academic structures and processes for shared leadership, which most often focused on the use of PLCs. Furthermore, participants explained the importance of building relationships and, in several cases, principals spoke of building relational trust with teachers as an important factor to improve instructional capacity. Most interestingly, however, was the way participants talked about building relational trust as

being intrinsic to and achieved by creating organizational structures and processes for developing capacity.

**Academic structures and processes.** Hallinger (2011) explored several research studies (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Heck & Hallinger, 2009, 2010) that offered key insights into the issues of leadership focus. Specifically, he found that the effects of leadership are not direct but are actually achieved through indirect school-level conditions that directly impact teaching. Hallinger (2011) provided empirical support for the premise that schools can improve learning outcomes by changing key organizational processes, such as leadership influences by the principal and improvement in instructional capacity of teachers. These conditions are strongly reflected in Hallinger's instructional leadership model, which highlights vision and goals, academic structures and processes, and people capacity. Hallinger's findings aligned with Fullan's (2001) view that changes in schools must be systemic, producing positive impact on academic structures that shape and enhance the practice of teachers.

In my study, the middle school principals all explained how they have spent significant time creating leadership structures, which were often focused on PLCs and professional learning opportunities that the principals perceived to support student learning by increasing the instructional capacity of teachers. These middle school principals' beliefs in a link between creating organizational structures and improving instructional capacity is similar to Hallinger and Heck's (2010) finding that collaborative leadership indirectly impacted growth in student learning through the building of the school's capacity for academic improvement.

**Shared leadership.** When discussing the work of the principal as instructional leader, Robinson (2011) acknowledged that the principalship is a dynamic position with such a broad scope that it is too expansive for one person to be able to perform successfully. The evidence

provided by participants of my study most often indicated that their practice of leadership is focused on influencing their learning leaders, who they then rely on to influence the day-to-day instructional practices of teachers. Although I explained in my findings that participants often used the terms shared and distributed leadership interchangeably, I would further suggest that the participants also use a collective leadership approach, as described by Leithwood and Jantzi (2012), with a belief that collective leadership has a stronger influence on student achievement than their own individual leadership. All of the principals explained specific organizational structures, such as in Jim's example, where the school was divided into smaller learning communities as a method to help distribute leadership and create a more collective approach.

The organizational practice of creating smaller sub-schools within the larger school align with the middle school research and presented by AMLE (2010b). Although other participants explained that large school size was the reason for sub-schools, Jim explained that creating these smaller learning communities was meant to enhance learning opportunity for students and to strengthen the opportunities for teachers to focus on fewer students and have their instruction be more responsive. Kasak and Uskali (AMLE, 2010b) explained that, in order to facilitate learning and nurture relationships, organizational structures have to feature flexible, small learning communities, so the needs of students can be recognized and adjustments made in form and function to maximize learning. The authors also explained that the effectiveness of middle level school rests in its capacity to personalize learning, and an organized team structure alters and personalizes the working relationships between students and teachers, therefore enhancing the context wherein good instruction can thrive. This is also similar to Friesen et al.'s (2015) view that the principal needs to work with the staff to create structures to provide time for this collective work. This means reconsidering structural changes to time schedules, timetables, and even the

way students and teachers move and are placed within the school. These types of struggles and decisions were present within the responses of each participant of my study.

Participants stressed that the structural “flow” that most influences the instructional capacity of teachers is facilitated through connections and work with learning leaders. All participants described a central administrative team, which is led by the principal, and smaller teams, which are led by a learning leader. Anderson (2012) explained that leadership responsibilities for developing people, leading instructional change, and managing instruction involve more people in a wider variety of roles. This is reflected by what I found in my study.

Louis et al. (2010) argued that shared leadership and instructional leadership are important variables, but that they are indirectly related to student achievement. This suggests that both gain their influence from strong relationships to other variables, such as the way teachers organize themselves in PLCs, engage in reflective discussions about instruction, and take a collective responsibility for learning. Participants of this study reported that learning leaders are most often coached by their principals in how to lead this kind of work, and, thus, principals have an indirect link to the work. This was evidenced in Arthur’s description of how his indirect involvement with teachers is achieved by delegation through his “best conduit”, his learning leaders. Arthur’s description echoes all participants’ explanations of how they rely heavily on a certain level of distribution in the leadership in their schools. As Malloy and Leithwood (2017) explained, distribution of leadership implies that a network of individuals is working more or less interdependently to enact leadership practices toward a common goal. This network is strengthened through processes that focus the collective work and teachers’ learning, such as inquiry processes that enhance capacity. In the case of the five principals of my study, this is often framed by the PLC.

Teachers and educators holding formal administrative responsibilities need to acknowledge and act on the importance of collective, shared efforts to improve instruction (Louis et al., 2010). This parallels Robinson's (2011) explanation that, while teachers do need to work together to improve instruction and student learning, administrators also need to be part of the process. The importance of supportive behaviours, as well as direct coaching or modeling of instruction, was emphasized by Louis et al. (2010). Their research also highlighted that, for middle and high school principals to realize their potential as instructional leaders, there is a need for particular modes of support to create the conditions for improved instructional capacity. Middle and high school principals face distinct challenges by the large, complex settings in which they work, and often the lack of support present within a larger school system.

Although there is a need to create a shared or distributed leadership model due to the complexity and size of large middle schools, the research indicates that direct connections to the classroom are very important for the middle school principal, which is not always reflected in the research (Wahlstrom, 2012), including my study. When Wahlstrom compared instructional leadership practices between secondary and elementary principals, she found that the secondary principals did not engage or participate to the level shown by their elementary counterparts. Similarly, Louis et al. (2010) found that middle school principals were least likely to monitor teachers' classroom work compared to high school and elementary principals. Often, the participants of my study spoke of a lack of time due to the workload or the size of the school as inhibitors to observing teachers' practice in classrooms. For example, Brad shared early on in his interview that "due to the vast size of his school" he relies on others to support his work as an instructional leader and the opportunity of getting into classrooms and even working directly with PLCs is limited.

These types of comments were common amongst participants who often stressed that, by working with their learning leaders, it becomes the learning leaders who take on the more day-to-day instructional leadership. This problem invites the opportunity for principals to extend ownership for learning and leading to others. Successful principals involve others in the leadership process to increase and build capacity (Mulford & Silins, 2011). It was Jim who explained that, in his opportunity to open a new middle school, he hired learning leaders with skills and knowledge to complement the needs of the team. Jim's insight is similar to that of Levin (2008), who explained that surrounding oneself with those whose skills and knowledge complement the leaders is seen as strategic. Shared leadership and teamwork contribute to progress and improvement. This is important in larger schools, as Levin also found school size was one of the contextual factors affecting the instructional leadership practices of secondary school principals.

Creating organizational and academic structures and processes (Hallinger, 2011), where ownership is extended amongst staff, appears to be a crucial aspect of principal practices contributing to their instructional leadership. Within these participants' schools, a major leverage point in their shared leadership approach is in the distribution of leading PLCs to learning leaders.

**PLCs.** Every principal explained their practices of instructional leadership with an emphasis on structures and processes for shared leadership, and the participants' perspectives about shared leadership focused on the use of PLCs. Throughout the interviews, principals referenced PLCs as an organizational structure to gain data, improve instruction, and to meet instructional needs of staff and students. The research agrees that PLCs may be an effective structure for principals to use in order to create improved instructional capacity and improved

learning (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010). Arthur explained, for example, that re-organizing PLC process was a major focus for him when he arrived at his current school. PLCs were important in his organizational structure as a way to support leading teacher learning and development, which Robinson (2011) described as the most impactful leadership dimension. More specifically, Arthur described how he leverages the work of PLCs to improve teachers' pedagogical understanding through the "sharing and critique of student work, analysis of student data such as assignments and tasks, report cards, and provincial achievement data available for Grade 6 and 9 students." He further explained that PLCs were also used to identify goals for the SDP and to analyze the success of these goals vis-à-vis student assessments. Arthur's descriptions were common amongst all participants. These findings underscore the importance of structures as a component of an effective learning environment and as a means for fostering a collaborative community for teachers.

Louis et al. (2010) found that when principals and teachers share leadership, teachers' working relationships are stronger and student achievement is higher. Further, leadership practices targeted directly at improving instruction have significant effects on teachers' working relationships and, indirectly, on student achievement. These indirect links to student achievement occur largely because effective leadership strengthens professional communities, which are environments wherein teachers work collectively to improve practice and improve student learning. Professional communities, in turn, are a predictor of instructional practices and are explained by a correlation with positive school climate that encourages levels of student effort above and beyond the levels created in individual classrooms (Louis et al., 2010).

Fullan (2014) recognized the importance of principal leadership activities on the effectiveness of PLCs, particularly from a structural and human resource leadership standpoint.

The principals of schools should define the goals for PLCs, and then coordinate the related activities. In other words, it is not enough for principals to say that PLCs occur within a school, but then leave the logistics of when and how to teachers. Principals in this study emphasized an admin team structure they used to influence the work of learning leaders. Jim also explained that he met regularly with individual learning leaders to learn about and guide the work of each team.

Kasak and Uskali (AMLE, 2010b) write less about PLCs and more about communication practices, setting direction, and specific structures, such as common planning time, team size (number of students and teachers), and the experience and expertise present within the team, as important factors for developing effective teams that improve student learning. The middle school principals in this study understand the need to set direction, and the importance of structures, similar to those listed in the AMLE literature, to create a collaborative culture that is centered on collective inquiry to determine best practices in teaching, and to assess their own current practices (AMLE, 2010b; DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). Participants of this study often explained that it was the PLC that was central to creating change in the school. An important point highlighted by DuFour and colleagues (2008) that was not always clearly explained by all participants of my study is that effective PLCs are results oriented. Members of the PLC should realize that all of their efforts are geared towards learning. Therefore, improvement efforts must deliver results measured in terms of student learning. As highlighted in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, it was not always clear from the accounts provided by participants how the middle school principals' direction setting and norm setting impacted PLC work and, in turn, student learning. There was variation in responses related to how directly the principals were involved with PLCs, as their leadership was most often indirect. The expectation seemed to be that the learning leaders take the direction from the principal through a coaching

approach and, thus, the learning leaders are prepared to be the direct leaders of the PLCs. Furthermore, although there are studies that have shown significant gains in student performance because of PLCs, others have not revealed significant positive outcomes (Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010). As research has indicated that the principal plays a major role in creating the larger cultural and social norms that determine the success of organizational and academic structures within a school (Fullan, 2014), it would seem to me that the success of the PLC is balanced between the extent to which the PLC work occurs in a very thoughtful and focused manner and the extent to which the PLC work is shaped by the principals' leadership practices of direction and norm setting.

Participants of this study believe that there is a need for a shared and distributed leadership model within middle schools. This is not only due to the size of the schools but also to the complexities of the work of being a principal. Related to organizational structures, all principals spoke extensively of their use of PLCs as a way to impact classroom practices. There are differences in how they have structured their PLCs and how directly each is involved in PLC work; however, most participants explained that they follow a distributed leadership model, with a learning leader leading each of the PLCs.

**Trust.** For all five participants, building trusting relationships was a valued instructional leadership practice. They shared that developing relational trust was a factor in their ability to be successful in mentoring and coaching others to in turn develop trusting relationships. All recognized that building strong relationships of trust among teachers and students is a key determinant of a middle school principal's success as an instructional leader.

I included Robinson's (2011) student-centered leadership model within my conceptual framework; however, I did not specify the three capabilities of her model: applying relevant

knowledge (knowledge), solving complex problems (skills), and building relational trust (attributes). In this discussion, however, I refer to these capabilities because they were identified as important to the participants of my study. Each of the participants spoke about the first capability in terms of applying their own knowledge – knowledge that they often explained as having been shaped by the professional development opportunities and resources offered by the district. The second capability was mentioned directly by two of the participants who spoke of the need to be able to solve complex problems. Patricia explained that using Robinson's (2011) problem-solving strategies helped to depersonalize the process with a large group of colleagues, as everyone understands that the goal is to create a solution that, as much as possible, satisfies the requirements that are identified early on in the problems solving process. It was the third capability, building relational trust, which was clearly significant to each principal.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) used the term relational trust as different from other forms of trust (e.g., organic trust and contractual trust). Organic trust was described as an unquestioned belief “of individuals in the moral authority of a particular social institution,” often located in small communities (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p.16). Contractual trust was explained as the more common form of trust existing in institutions. Unlike organic trust, the social exchanges and moral-ethical components of contractual trust are modest to weak in nature, as “the contract defines the basic actions to be taken by the parties involved” (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 17). Bryk and Schneider (2002) argued that neither of these forms of trust captures the social dynamic in schools, whereas relational trust does because it is built through daily social exchanges that support a moral imperative necessary for school improvement efforts. The critical attributes of relational trust include: (a) respect, (b) personal regard for others, (c) competence,

and (d) integrity. These critical attributes were often evident in the interview excerpts of Chapter 4.

Arthur shared a common belief of the principals that, in schools, many different people need to be included in building relational trust: “Often I build trust by collaborating and bringing staff alongside through purposeful intentional work ... it is important that I am visible and there to listen to each member of the learning community.”

Patricia explained how she purposefully explored the capability of building relational trust (Robinson, 2011) with her learning leaders. In the notes she prepared in response to the interview question about how instructional leadership impacts teacher instructional capacity, she highlighted “my relationship with the teacher and trust.” All of the principals repeatedly explained that, as instructional leaders, they needed to build strong relationships. The principals described relationship building not as an isolated activity, but as occurring holistically, in relation to their everyday practices. For example, through their instructional leadership, they felt they developed relationships as they guided teachers and learning leaders in developing the SDP, or as they supported a learning leader in creating the conditions for a successful PLC. Often the principals would share that they were also learning alongside their staff. This notion of learning together builds upon the capability of building relational trust that was identified by Robinson.

Participants’ focused approach to building trusting relationships as a way of enacting their instructional leadership is supported by research that explains that success in schools is more likely when people are empowered, involved in decision making through a visible supportive structure, and when they are trusted, respected, encouraged, and appreciated (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Leithwood et al., 2008). Louis and Wahlstrom (2012) completed an extensive analysis on the linkage between shared leadership, instructional leadership, and trust in the principal, and they

found that, when considered together, these factors have the potential to increase student learning. Indeed, trust was shown to predict how educators interpret their superiors' ability to carry out leadership functions. Another significant finding was that "leadership effects on student achievements occur largely because effective leadership strengthens professional community, a special environment within which teachers work together to improve their practice and improve student learning" (p. 39).

To summarize, embedded within participants' theoretical understanding of instructional leadership emerged a second theme that accounts for how their instructional leadership is practiced through shared leadership, a PLC structure, and a focus on trusting relationships. This theme is strongly aligned with the research findings of others (Hallinger, 2011; Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012; Fullan 2014). Louis and Wahlstrom highlighted that shared and instructional leadership, when used alternately, are often regarded as strategies for reaching the desired goal of student learning. Instructional leadership theory often emphasizes the need to maintain a singular focus on classroom practice as the key to improving student achievement, with the principal having a significant role in modeling by direct leadership; whereas shared leadership theory points to the importance of creating a learning organization wherein the focus is more on leadership for learning that values teachers' participation in and influence over school-wide decisions (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012). My findings are similar to Louis and Wahlstrom's, in that I was able to see how trust, instructional and shared leadership are not independent of each other but, rather, are highly connected.

Louis and Wahlstrom (2012) suggested that shared leadership and instructional leadership are important practices, but they are indirectly related to student achievement. They further explained that shared and instructional leadership gain their influence on improving

instructional capacity because of their strong relationships to other variables, such as the way in which teachers organize themselves in PLCs, engage in reflective discussions about instruction, and develop a sense of collective responsibility for student learning. Furthermore, Louis and Wahlstrom's claim that PLCs increase instructional capacity aligns with my findings about how middle school principals view PLCs as a key means through which to improve teaching. This is supported by other researchers who have indicated that PLCs do impact factors that correspond with increased instructional capacity (Brooks, 2013; Nelson, 2009). Placing significance on PLCs also reflects research about the importance organizational structures have in creating shared and collaborative learning communities that focus on improving student learning (AMLE, 2010b). How these instructional leadership practices were talked about by participants, along with their focus on relational trust, is in strong alignment with Robinson's (2011) student-centered leadership model.

Bodnarchuk (2016) explained that there is research (Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2009) indicating that principals who spend more time on organizational management have higher student achievement outcomes, are more likely to have parental support, and have staff who feel that school climate is improving. This research focused on the need for a balance between instructional leadership and organizational management duties. This highlights that the principalship is multifaceted and, more importantly, that the principal needs to have a strong understanding of how to create organizational structures that can lead to improved student achievement.

**Theme Three: Participants perceive their practices of instructional leadership to include developing leadership capacity of others.**

**People capacity.** Hallinger (2011) explained that capacity building should focus not only on the organization but also on people. He aligned his findings with Fullan's ideas about

organizational learning, and stated that “it has become increasingly clear that leadership at all levels of the system is the key lever to reform, especially leaders who focus on capacity building and develop leaders who can carry on” (p. 21). In my study, middle school principals’ instructional leadership was often explained by participants in terms of building the leadership capacity of their learning leaders; some talked about this in terms of taking a coaching approach. Other examples of capacity building involved participants working with individual teachers who were new to the profession and being evaluated, or assisting experienced teachers who were identified as struggling.

For example, Brad shared that he uses “coaching and modeling” to support his learning leaders. He went on to explain that he used the leadership competencies of the *Draft Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2016) with his learning leaders to help explore ways his administrative team may improve their practices. Jim explained that he often “coaches them [learning leaders and teachers] through my own examples,” and that he too uses the competencies in the *Leadership Quality Standard* to help frame this work, especially with those who are planning on pursuing more formalized leadership roles. Similar to both Brad and Jim, Patricia shared that she works from a “coaching perspective”. However, she also pointed out that there are limitations to how many people she can work with directly, and that her opportunities to coach often stem from a staff member’s evaluation or the need to support a team that is struggling. The participants primarily used the term “coaching approach” when they were discussing how they support learning leaders to develop both leadership skills and knowledge so that, in turn, learning leaders are able to support colleagues in improving teaching practices.

Supportive behaviours, as well as direct coaching or modeling of instruction, were emphasized in Louis et al.’s (2010) research. They explained that middle school principals

cannot be expected to provide substantive support for instruction, given the multiple disciplines that are taught in their schools. They further explained that many studies of instructional leadership in secondary schools emphasize the development of improved learning environments for teachers, focusing on the ability of principals to stimulate teachers' innovative behaviour.

In my study, all five participants articulated an understanding that they needed to take a role in guiding the professional learning and development of their teachers. They explained that the decisions teachers made about professional learning were often initiated and, in most of the schools, led by learning leaders. Often, the focus of the professional learning is further guided by the strategies embedded within the districts' Three-Year Education Plan. As reflected in the initial conceptual framework, the participants had a strong theoretical understanding that the leadership practice of promoting and participating in teacher learning and development can have a large impact on student learning outcomes, and they explained that they take on both direct and indirect roles in this kind of work. This aligns with Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe's (2008) findings that "the leader participates in the learning as leader, as learner, or both" (p. 663). This leadership dimension is referred to by Robinson (2011) as leading teacher learning and development, and it focuses on the provision of high quality and collaborative professional learning opportunities with and for teachers. The principals' organizational focus on PLCs also aligns with Robinson's findings that underline the importance of effective PLCs, wherein teachers take on both individual and collective responsibilities for learning of all students in the school.

As outlined in Chapter 4, it seems that the participants of this study often leveraged the learning opportunities that learning leaders were exposed to through district initiatives or their association with UPLO. All of the participants shared that they valued these opportunities and other resources provided, such as time and financial support for professional learning. Patricia

explained how she previously arranged for UPLO to support the entire staff at her school, and Arthur provided examples of how he partnered with other school principals and accessed experts from an outside organization to support knowledge building about critical thinking skills. All participants spoke of the importance of being out and about in their schools to engage in learning conversations and as a way to support teachers' professional learning. This ongoing visibility and connection with staff was highlighted by Murphy (2016) as important to building instructional capacity. Murphy argued that principals of high-performing schools understand the value of teacher learning and demonstrate a deep personal involvement in the learning of adults. Echoing Murphy, and highlighted several times by the participants of this study, leadership contributes to teacher learning and growth when principals share or distribute the responsibility for teacher development broadly throughout the school. The primary aim of these practices is capacity building, which is understood to include not only the knowledge and skills that staff members need to accomplish organizational goals (Timperley, 2011), but also the disposition that staff members need to persist in applying such knowledge and skills. This, I argue, links back to the leadership work of building strong, trusting relationships so that staff members can engage in critical discourse.

In summary, theme three highlights that the middle school principals who participated in the study have an understanding that their practices of instructional leadership should be focused on developing the capacity of teachers. Because participants have a strong understanding about the benefits of shared and distributed leadership, they task their learning leaders to take on significant roles as instructional leaders. All participants spoke of how they take on coaching and mentoring roles to develop the capacity of their teachers, with a focus on their learning leaders, as a way to enact instructional leadership through organizational structures in the school (i.e., PLCs). Within

my conceptual framework, I initially included the competency of “leading a learning community” from the *Draft Principal Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2016). Indicators such as creating meaningful, collaborative learning opportunities for teachers and support staff, and developing a shared responsibility for success of all students were also related to Robinson’s (2011) leadership dimension of leading teacher learning and development, which had the highest effect size of the five indicators the student-centered leadership model. In addition, it would seem that middle school principals also see “developing leadership capacity”, which is another competency in the *Leadership Quality Standard* (Alberta Education, 2018), as a fundamental part of their role as instructional leaders. The participants explained that their success is highly dependent on the capacities for leadership for learning of their learning leaders, as the learning leaders have the most direct impact on overall teachers’ instructional capacity. As noted in the Wallace Foundations (2013) research, a central practice quality of being a great leader is cultivating leadership in others. The learning-focused principal is intent on helping teachers improve their practice, either directly or with the aid of school leaders like department chairs and other teaching experts.

As explained at the beginning of this chapter, theme two and three were embedded in theme one – how the middle school principals of this study have a strong theoretical understanding of instructional leadership. In examining these three themes, it has become evident that the middle school principals in this case study have a strong theoretical understanding of leadership for learning. My rationale for making this statement is that all participants were able to share understandings, beliefs, and practices that align with Hallinger’s (2011) leadership for learning model, which evolved from Hallinger and Murphy’s (1985) earlier instructional leadership model. Each of the participants were able to explain and to describe processes and

actions related to the three categories, or leadership means, of Hallinger's leadership for learning model: vision and goals, academic structures and processes, and people capacity. My findings are also in alignment with other researchers, such as Leithwood (2012) and Louis and Wahlstrom (2012), who recognized that leadership practices targeted directly at improving instruction have significant effects. However, principals cannot do this work alone. There are benefits to shared leadership, and organizational structures may impact teacher instructional capacity (Leithwood, 2012, Horng et al., 2009); after all, building the capacity is another key means by which leaders can advance achievement (Murphy, 2016)

**Theme four: The middle school principals share beliefs and understandings, and enact practices of instructional leadership that are strongly influenced by a specific body of leadership literature that is promoted through district-led professional learning initiatives.**

Through my analysis it became evident that participants' beliefs, understandings, and, even to a greater degree, their perception of what they should do as instructional leaders was defined by professional learning, which was most often led by the school district. These influences can be categorized into district professional learning influences, literature influences, and outside organizations who partner with the district. District influences were represented in participants' beliefs and understandings of leadership, and in what they shared about their practices of instructional leadership, such as shared and distributed leadership, a focus on relational trust, and an understanding of the importance of principals leading teacher learning and development.

In response to my first interview question, which asked participants to define their role as an instructional leader, Brad highlighted how the district influences his leadership by stating that he must work with his teachers to "keep them [teachers] in the bounds of our school system's

perspective”. Jim explained that “I would like to think that I have the right elements in place through my leadership to create conditions to meet the needs of my school, my organization [school district]”. Similarly, Thor shared how he sets goals with teachers. He stated that he “supporting teachers to meet these [district expectations] . . . our instructional response needs to be in alignment with the [district] vision of what we are doing around task design.” And again, Thor indicated the degree of district influence on vision and goal setting at his school by relating that he does this work “within the context of the system,” and, further, explaining how district leadership meetings influence his understanding and practices of instructional leadership.

All participants explained how they benefited from the district’s partnership with UPLO. Two of the principals had independently brought UPLO to their school to provide dedicated task design and assessment learning opportunities to their teachers. All of the participants shared that they have learning leaders attending district mandated sessions (five to six throughout the year) with UPLO. In turn, learning leaders are responsible for supporting both formal and informal professional learning opportunities for their colleagues back at their individual schools. Other district influences were also identified in the organizational structure of cohorts. For example, Brad shared that his school was part of both the literacy and math cohorts, and that he had learning leaders who attended district-led, cohort-specific professional learning opportunities with an expectation that they provide leadership in these areas for their school colleagues.

Participants also explained that their beliefs and practices were often influenced by academic resources that they had been exposed to through district meetings. Two of the participants shared how there is a book draw at each monthly principal meeting and this provided them with an indication of what is currently setting the district direction. For example, Patricia referenced John Hattie when sharing the following: “One year of learning for each year of

growth. . . . I try to create the best learning experiences that we can by drawing a straight line between what the current research says about best practices.” Patricia went on to say that “Viviane Robinson, for sure, is a book that I go back to over time and sits on my bedside table. I think that having a look at the competencies in her work and the direct line between that and leading a learning community has been super helpful for me.” In regard to Robinson’s research, all five participants spoke about the leadership capability of building relational trust. Brad, Arthur, and Patricia shared how the capability of solving complex problems has influenced how they lead problem-solving processes, while both Arthur and Patricia explained how they use Robinson’s idea of “solution requirements” in the process. Another example was how Jim explained that his instructional leadership practices are influenced and measured “against Michael Fullan’s work.” It was evident that the principals’ beliefs, understandings, and practices of leadership were influenced by authors and researchers they have been made aware of through professional learning guided by the district.

Hallinger’s (2011) leadership for learning model includes the assertion that effective leadership is both shaped by and responds to the constraints and opportunities present in the school organization and environment. It is very evident that the district of my study has engaged their principals in a particular discourse of leadership, and has clear expectations for how leadership for learning is to be enacted. Mourshas, Chijioke, and Barber (2010) indicated that successful school systems establish foundational knowledge and practices across the organization to support a focus on instructional practices, and that an “intentional focus on the practice and internalization of pedagogy . . . requires institutional support” (p. 112). It is evident that the professional learning direction provided by the senior leaders in the district of this case study is intended to increase and enhance the ability of principals to perform as leaders for learning. Investing in a system approach

to leadership learning has been found to positively impact principals' confidence in their ability to provide instructional leadership (Leithwood et al., 2012). Furthermore, Anderson and Louis (2012) found that "district policies and practices around instruction are sufficiently powerful that they can be felt, indirectly, by teachers as stronger and more directed leadership behaviours by principals" (p. 181). This aligns with Wahlstrom et al. (2010), who indicated that high performing districts provide professional learning opportunities for the leaders that are systemic and coherent.

I have shared in my findings related to how participants have a strong theoretical understanding of instructional leadership, which is grounded in literature and research they have been exposed to by the district. However, participants' ability to articulate, with concrete examples, how the theoretical is actually practiced in a way that impacts teachers' instructional capacity and, in turn, student achievement was not always evident. I wondered about the reason for this, and I found myself reflecting on the data that clearly indicate that these leaders are highly educated and very articulate regarding the theories that shape their practices. For example, participants demonstrated an internalized ability to talk about the conceptual understandings of Robinson's student-centered leadership model (i.e., solving complex problems and building relational trust), shared leadership, and creating organizational structures such as PLCs. This is a real strength. I would argue that this is an indication of the success of our district's focus on professional learning initiatives that prepare school leaders for a coherent set of practices specific to leadership for learning (Hallinger, 2011). However, what I was unable to see evidence of is the same strength in participants' ability to articulate the outcomes of such practices specific to the increased instructional capacity of teachers and, from this, a link to improved student achievement. I surmise that there may be three possibilities for this: It could be that there is no evidence of improvement; however, this is unlikely given participants' sophisticated understanding of leadership for learning

and the number of references in their accounts to their strong instructional leadership practices. The other possibilities are that, while the evidence may exist, participants are not able to identify it; or, perhaps, it is that the leaders I interviewed are well versed in being able to identify evidence of improvement, but not as able to articulate this part of their leadership story (i.e., the effects of their work) as they are able to talk about how they know about and perceive their actions to reflect key ideas for leading a learning community. This may point to a way forward in extending the expertise of school leaders in being able to fully assess and articulate the impact of their instructional leadership.

**Theme five: Participants believe that there are contextual differences that impact not just their leadership generally, but their instructional leadership specifically.**

As outlined in Chapter 4, even with the use of subsequent prompting, it was not always clear what grounded each participant's knowledge and perspective about the significances of what they described as the contextual differences of middle schools. Louis et al. (2010) did find differences in how leadership is practiced between elementary, middle, and high schools. It would seem from the findings of this case study, that the contextual aspects these middle school principals most often referenced were school characteristics such as school size, range of learning needs of students, grade configuration, and developmental age of students. As highlighted in theme four, principals are to be cautioned in practicing an instructional leadership approach which adapts an excessively narrow focus just on classroom instruction. Principals must include careful attention to classroom instructional practices, but should not neglect many other issues that are critical to the ongoing health and welfare of school organizations. Classroom practices occur within larger organizational systems that can vary enormously in the extent to which they support, reward, and nurture good instruction. School leaders who ignore or neglect

this larger context can easily find their direct efforts to improve instruction substantially frustrated (Louis et al., 2010).

My research findings highlight a consistent belief of the participants that middle school principals should have knowledge of the developmental characteristics and needs of adolescents, and of supporting positive relationships (AMLE, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). However, unlike their strong theoretical understandings of instructional leadership, shared leadership, and PLCs, these principals were often unable to articulate what guided their knowledge about middle school education. For example, both Jim and Arthur expressed their belief that teachers' instruction must be developmentally responsive. However, from the perspective of having previously been leaders of Kindergarten to Grade 3 schools, both later explained that there shouldn't be a vast difference between elementary and middle school instruction. Arthur stated: "It probably shouldn't be quite as contextual as it is and you'd hope that teachers, as professionals, have a broad base of understanding about their craft". Jim explained his perspective:

If I look from my experiences which are being the principal of a K to 9 and 4 to 9 schools, I think in comparing those two schools I don't see any difference. I don't see [grade configuration] making a difference in the sense of what I'm here to do is provide the people that are working with the kids – including myself – the best opportunity to help those kids succeed.

I found it to be interesting that both Jim and Arthur explained that the work may not be as contextual as is often believed. They shared a belief that good teaching practices are common across grade levels and developmental age of students. In basic terms, according to Jim and Arthur, excellent teaching looks very similar no matter the developmental age of the students.

In *In Search of the Middle School Principal*, based on an international study of middle schools, Yee (2016) reported that very few middle school leaders have taken part in teacher training focused on working with adolescents in middle level environments. She further explained that many middle school principals have the belief that good teaching and leadership is good teaching and leadership, regardless of developmental stage of the students. While there may be key tenets of basic pedagogy that span the developmental spectrum, foundational middle years research (AMLE, 2010a, 2010b; Beal & Arnold, 2010; Davis, 2017) has demonstrated far more pedagogical considerations specific to age and developmental readiness. Middle school research advocates for responsive pedagogies that reflect the unique needs for early adolescent learners (Wormeli, 2011).

It is important to highlight that Jim and Patricia cited specific characteristics that align with the AMLE (2010b, 2010c), and Jim highlighted how recommendations present in *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* are used as professional learning tools with staff, and that they guide both his practices of leadership and of teaching teachers. Patricia, Jim, and Arthur spoke of organizational structures that were influenced by readings from AMLE. Jim also shared two different artifacts linked to AMLE research, one being an article by Davis (2017) highlighting middle school philosophy factors such as support services for middle school students, academic expectations, student teams, and professional development for staff. All principals explained that the learning environment should be developmentally appropriate; however, they did not clearly articulate how this impacted their leadership or how the specifics of their *instructional* leadership would be tailored to the middle school context.

When I asked him to describe middle school philosophy, another principal who explained that he was one of the early implementers in the district of middle school philosophy replied with the following: “You take all those great things that are in traditional elementary school, and you

take the great things from the traditional junior high, you put them together, and then you get rid of all the stuff that doesn't make sense.” Although all participants stated that the contextual difference that should be acknowledged and understood when leading a middle school, their interviews did not provide evidence of a consistent set of beliefs or of any particular practices that make their work unique to the middle school, such as are outlined in the AMLE literature (AMLE, 2010b, 2010c).

George and Anderson (1989) identified a link between a clear and shared vision and the creation and maintenance of high quality middle school programs. Their research concluded that “understanding the purpose of the middle school, and the school’s commitment to the personal and educational needs of young adolescents appears to play a most important role, both prior to and following the implementation of quality middle schools” (p. 69). My findings that middle school principals do not have a consistent understanding of middle school philosophy and practice is similar to Teague et al. (2012) and Anfara (2016), who point to a lack of knowledge on the part of middle grades teachers about appropriate middle grades instructional strategies, and a lack of implementation of the middle grades philosophy by schools and districts. These researchers cite that the middle school philosophy is easily accessed through resources made available by AMLE and backed by research, but related professional learning opportunities are not often supported through district resources.

Unlike the specific focus of the district of this study on improving leadership practices, such as instructional leadership, shared leadership, and the capabilities and dimensions outlined in Robinson’s (2011) student-centered leadership model, there is no specific district-initiated focus on middle schools. Yee’s (2015) international study revealed distinct differences in the ways principals in Manitoba and Alberta, as instructional leaders, approached leading, teaching, and

learning in their schools. Manitoba's principals, with support for provincial direction and resources to improve the learning experience for early adolescent learners, have a much more clear and cohesive sense of the factors that contribute to learning environments in which early adolescents thrive. Yee reported that there seems to be more consistency in Manitoba among school philosophy, instructional programming, and programming, and she suggested that this is most likely attributed to the intentional work lead by the Manitoba government. My conceptual framework illustrates how characteristics of leadership and organization are embedded within the 16 characteristics for a successful middle school. An understanding of these characteristics would seem to be valuable for middle school principals to understand and practice instructional leadership in middle schools.

**Theme six: Middle school principals in this study have a sophisticated theoretical understanding of instructional leadership and leadership for learning; however, they struggle to provide evidence of how their practices impact teachers' instructional capacity and, ultimately, student learning.**

In my literature review I explained that, within Hallinger's (2011) leadership for learning model (shown in Figure 2), there are double-headed arrows suggesting that leadership both influences and is influenced by school conditions. As explored throughout this chapter's discussion of themes 1 to 3, there are three indirect means through which leadership impacts learning: vision and goals, academic structures and processes, and people capacity. These characteristics are situated in the center of the Hallinger's model. What is important to consider is that there are double-headed arrows on the right side of the model symbolizing the influence between the three means of leadership impact on student outcomes and the need to be able to

gather evidence, which should directly influence the decisions and actions that occur within the leadership means (vision and goals, academic structures and processes, and people capacity).

I have discussed how participants often explained how their theoretical understanding, beliefs, and practices were evident in how they created a vision and set goals, and how they established specific organizational structures, such as for shared leadership, to improve teachers' instructional capacity. Participants also explained they had processes and structures for gathering and examining evidence, often through the work of PLCs, a quick classroom/school walk-through, or by using report cards and Provincial Achievement Test data. However, what I struggled to find was evidence of how they knew their practices, whether goal setting, working within PLC or other collaborative structures, leading teacher learning, or developing learning leader capacity, was specifically impacting teachers' instructional capacity and, in turn, student achievement. As Brad explained, there isn't a clear understanding of the impact on classroom practices, and "we can hope that this information being shared with PLCs may help those [teachers] that need that little push." This highlights that there seems to be a strong understanding of the fundamental aspects of instruction leadership, but a lack of clarity in how principals know and, subsequently, how they share their knowledge about how their leadership affects individual teachers and, ultimately, students. This can be especially related to how principals know and can share knowledge about the effectiveness of their work in terms of Hallinger's (2011) conception of a responsive process from student achievement back to the means of leadership that are in the middle of the leadership for learning model. I have personally witnessed that the School Development Plan process usually involves many staff at the beginning of the school year; however, beyond that there is minimal evidence gathering related to instructional goals throughout the year. Furthermore, in my study, when asked subsequent

interview questions as prompts, principals' examples of instructional leadership impact were most often based on interactions with a single learning leader or teacher, who was most often a struggling teacher or a teacher being evaluated due to his or her recent entrance into the profession or district. More importantly, participants rarely explained how they observed changes in practices or, more specifically, student achievement. The explanation was often anecdotal, related to a teacher's changes in understanding, which, of course could lead to greater instructional capacity, but it was the clear evidence of improved capacity that was not identified by participants.

Organizationally, these middle school principals appear to be particularly well situated to offer leadership to their colleagues. However, as Wahlstrom (2012) indicated in her research, the *potential* for leadership appears to be an unsuccessful resource. She explains that, adding to the complexities of the secondary school, research indicates that more often in secondary schools than in elementary schools, principals wrongly assume that if a vision of high-quality instruction is well articulated, then high-quality instruction will happen without further action on their part or, perhaps through delegation to designated teacher leaders. She groups instructional leadership practices into two complementary categories: instructional ethos and instructional actions. School leader efforts in instructional ethos category aim to build a culture that supports continual professional learning. "Principals whose teachers rate them high on instructional ethos emphasize the value of research-based strategies and are able to apply them in a local setting" (p. 68). With instructional actions, the principal is involved in explicit engagement with individual teachers about their professional growth.

Within the context of this study, it would seem that the principals have strong theoretical and practical understanding of how to set a tone and develop a vision for student achievement

and to establish organizational structures for teacher and student growth (instructional ethos), where there is a culture of inclusive decision making and a growth mindset that is about always doing better. However, what was not as evident, and often explained as something participants were unable to attend to on a larger scale, were frequent and specific actions with a direct focus on instructional improvements with individual teachers (instructional actions), especially as these connect to goals of increased teacher capacity and improved student learning. This finding may, to some extent, reflect what Wahlstrom (2012) found: Elementary school teachers working with highly rated principals report high levels of both instructional ethos and instructional actions. This was in contrast to how secondary school teachers rarely report that school-level leaders (i.e., principals, learning leaders, and other teacher leaders) engage in instructional actions.

However, Louis et al. (2010) found that, in schools with high levels of instructional leadership, principals themselves agreed almost unanimously on the importance of several specific practices, including keeping track of teachers' professional development needs and monitoring teachers' work in the classroom. In these schools, whether they called it formal evaluation, classroom visits, or learning walks, principals intent on promoting growth in both students and adults spent time in classrooms (or ensured that someone who is qualified did) observing and commenting on what is working well and what is not. These principals shifted from developing an instructional ethos to engaging in instructional action through ongoing and informal interactions with teachers. I would suggest that this regular classroom contact provides the avenue through which evidence can be gathered to inform what Hallinger (2011) refers to as the means of the leadership (vision and goals, academic structures and processes, and people capacity) for constantly improving learning.

In this case study, all five participants shared that they struggled finding the time to be directly involved in classroom observations on a regular basis. For example, Arthur explained that “it is very easy for principals, in this day and age, and in a big district like ours, to spend an inordinate amount of time dealing with managerial thing ... there are many things that take your focus off of instruction.” All of the principals spoke about the lack of time to be in classrooms even though they knew it was important. Thor shared that “there’s so much coming down that it’s hard to focus on all the instructional pieces and into classrooms.” And, similarly, Brad, Jim, and Patricia all spoke about the actual size of the school and number of staff as affecting their ability to focus as much energy as they wanted to on instructional leadership, or as Jim stated, “to focus the energy on teaching and learning and not on all of periphery.”

Louis et al. (2010) reported that both high and low scoring principals said that they frequently visited classrooms and are visible. The differences between principals in the two groups come into sharp focus in their reasons for making classroom visits. High scoring principals frequently observed classroom instruction for short periods of time, making 20 to 60 observations a week, and most of the observations were spontaneous. Their visits enabled them to make formative observations that were clearly about learning and professional growth, coupled with direct and immediate feedback. High-scoring principals believed that every teacher, whether a first-year teacher or a veteran, can learn and grow. In contrast, low scoring principals’ informal visits or observations in classrooms were not usually for instructional purposes. Even informal observations were often planned in advance. The most damaging finding became clear in reports from teachers in schools with low scoring principals who said they received little or no feedback after informal observations. What is evident is that principals need to be provided guidance and leadership opportunities, along with the ability to find time to observe in

classrooms and to understand what they are observing and how to utilize effective methods for providing feedback. Louis et al. suggested that the learning leader's job should be redefined so whoever holds the post is regarded, institutionally, as a central resource for improving instruction in middle and high schools. I would argue that many of the participants of my study have moved in this direction. What may need to be improved is the ability for learning leaders to take up this instructional leadership role by observing and working with teachers in their classrooms, instead of solely focusing on working through organizational structures such as PLCs, as was most often reported. A central part of being an effective leader is cultivating leadership in others. The learning-focused principal is intent on helping teachers improve their practice, either directly or with the aid of school leaders, such as learning leaders and other teaching experts (Wallace Foundation, 2013).

To cultivate the leadership of others and to truly influence the means of leadership for learning (vision and goals, academic structures and processes, and people capacity) along with data about student achievement, principals will need a greater understanding of how to gather evidence, continue to increase their own knowledge as a way to improve the capacity of others, and provide impactful feedback.

## **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to build a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study, specifically, how middle school principals define and understand the concept of instructional leadership and, further, perceive their enactments of instructional leadership to build the instructional capacity of the teachers in their schools. This discussion illustrates, through the use of the six emerging themes, the multifaceted and complex nature of the phenomenon of instructional leadership within middle schools. Moreover, rather than taking

a conventional approach of using just one lens (such instructional leadership, shared leadership, student-centered leadership, or distributed leadership) to determining which leadership theory has the most positive impact on student learning, this case study reflects Hallinger's (2011) leadership for learning model, which employs a broader conceptualization for exploring how principals understand and perceive their leadership practices to be effective.

The first three themes highlighted the strong theoretical understanding of instructional leadership which, through greater synthesis, aligned very closely with Hallinger's leadership for learning model and other researchers' views on instructional leadership (Leithwood, 2012). Theme four highlighted how the principals' theoretical understandings and practices were influenced by the district. Theme five provided an explanation of participants' understandings and beliefs about the contextual differences they see as affecting their instructional leadership practices in middle schools. This was an original rationale for the study as, to date, middle school principals have not been a major focus of instructional leadership research. Theme five exposed that, although there was a strong theoretical knowledge of leadership for learning, there was not a consistent understanding among the participants about what is unique and important about middle school instructional leadership. Lastly, theme six explored principals' perceptions about their own practices and their impacts on teachers' instructional capacity. This theme shed light on the middle school principals' struggle to articulate how their practices impact teacher instructional capacity, which may be influenced by their shared belief that, although they know they need to be present in classes and linked more directly to organizational structures such as PLCs, they are often unable to incorporate such involvement into their practice.

Through these six themes I have attempted to make sense of my findings as they connected to issues raised in the literature and, therefore, the key concepts of my original

framework. Through this discussion, I worked to build a more holistic view of the middle school principals' understandings and practices of instructional leadership, which I suggest evolved, for both the participants and me, into a more refined conception of leadership for learning.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how experienced middle school principals define and understand the concept of instructional leadership and, further, perceive their enactments of instructional leadership to build the instructional capacity of the teachers in their schools. My rationale for examining this topic was to add to educational research, specifically in the area of middle school principals' instructional leadership. Although there has been significant research published on instructional leadership, scholars highlight that there remains a need for greater guidance in understanding "how this work is done" (Neumerski, 2013, p. 319), especially during a time of renewed calls for principals to prioritize instructional leadership over rising managerial tasks (Rigby, 2013, Terosky, 2016).

This final chapter begins with a succinct review of the six themes as they relate to the research question: How do middle school principals understand the concept of instructional leadership and think about their practices of instructional leadership? These themes emerged for me through my recursive work to interpret the study data and to develop findings by way of a continuous focus on the three research sub-questions and constant returns to my conceptual framework. The themes were presented in Chapter 4 and more deeply explored in the discussion of Chapter 5. This chapter will conclude with my recommendations, a revisiting the assumptions from Chapter 1, and my final reflections on the study.

#### Overview of Themes

**Theme one.** Middle school principals in this study have a strong theoretical understanding of leadership for learning. I found that the middle school principals have a clear, well-articulated understanding of instructional leadership. Although my initial focus was to

examine middle school principals' beliefs about and practices of instructional leadership, I found that their understandings were strongly aligned with the theoretical conceptualizations of Hallinger's (2011) leadership for learning model, which offers a more encompassing view of the multifaceted role of the middle school principal. Each of the participants identified and explained processes and actions related to the three categories, or leadership means, of Hallinger's model: vision and goals, academic structures and processes, and people capacity. These findings align with the conclusions of other researchers, such as Leithwood (2012) and Louis and Wahlstrom (2012), who recognized that leadership practices targeted directly at improving instruction have significant effects.

**Theme two.** Participants define their practices of instructional leadership through shared leadership, PLC structures, and a focus on relationships. As I examined sub-question two, which asked what middle school principals' perceptions of their instructional leadership practices are and how these practices impact teachers' instructional capacities, I found that the five participants explained their practices of instructional leadership as highly focused on creating a shared leadership model in their schools. All of the participants explained their instructional leadership in terms of a shared leadership approach that was highly dependent on their work with learning leaders. As Malloy and Leithwood (2017) explained, distribution of leadership implies that a network of individuals is working more or less interdependently to enact leadership practices toward a common goal. This network is strengthened by focusing the collective work and teachers' learning on processes that enhance capacity.

In this study, I found that middle school principals relied on the PLC as the fundamental organizational structure for supporting teachers' instructional capacity and, to a lesser extent, offering professional learning opportunities that were often lead by learning leaders and

influenced by district-led initiatives. The reliance on specific structural aspects, such as PLCs, to provide a more shared or distributed leadership model was explained by the principals to be due to the complexity and size of their schools. Furthermore, regarding instructional leadership practices, these middle school principals shared that building trusting relationships was a valued instructional leadership practice and is a key determinant of middle school principal's success as an instructional leader.

**Theme three.** Participants perceive their practices of instructional leadership to include developing the leadership capacity of others. Due to the participants' strong understanding of the benefits of shared and distributed leadership, and their explanation of how learning leaders take on significant roles as instructional leaders, all of the middle school principals explained how they coach and mentor to develop the capacity of the teachers with whom they work. An important finding was that their coaching is most focused on the abilities of learning leaders to enact, through a distributed and shared approach, instructional leadership through specific organizational structures, such as PLCs. The intent is that this structure will have an impact on overall teacher instructional capacity. This agrees with Murphy's (2016) contention that building the capacity of others is a key means by which leaders can advance achievement.

**Theme four.** The middle school principals share beliefs and understandings, and enact practices of instructional leadership that are strongly influenced by a specific body of leadership literature that is promoted through district-led professional learning initiatives. This reflects Anderson and Louis' (2012) finding that, when directed at the leadership behaviors of principals, district policies and practices focused on instruction can be felt indirectly by teachers. This theme also aligns with Wahlstrom et al.'s (2010) finding that high-performing districts provide systemic and coherent professional learning opportunities for their leaders. Another aspect of the

influence of the district of my study, besides the strong connection to specific educational leadership scholars such as Leithwood, Robinson, Fullan, and Hattie, was the partnership with UPLO. All participants shared that they have learning leaders attending district-mandated sessions of this organization, and that they leverage these professional learning opportunities to improve the instructional capacity of their teachers.

**Theme five.** Participants believe that there are contextual differences that impact not just their leadership generally, but their *instructional* leadership specifically. As outlined in both Chapters 4 and 5, all the participants shared the view that their position in a middle school makes their instructional leadership different from what it would be in another setting. The contextual aspects that these middle school principals often referenced as unique were school characteristics, not student characteristics. It is argued in the literature that middle school principals should have knowledge of the developmental characteristics and needs of adolescents (AMLE 2010b, 2010c). Although this was mentioned by three of the five participants, only two explained what, specifically, guided their knowledge about middle school education. The participants suggested that instructional leadership practices should align with middle school research; however, unlike their strong theoretical knowledge of certain leadership models (e.g., Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood, 2012; Robinson, 2011), which points to the district's initiatives for principal professional learning that is focused on instructional leadership, the information they shared with me about their particular contexts reflects that there are presently no district-wide professional learning opportunities focused on middle schools.

**Theme six.** Middle school principals in this study have a sophisticated theoretical understanding of instructional leadership and leadership for learning; however, they struggled to provide evidence of how their practices impact teachers' instructional capacity and, ultimately,

student learning. I surmise that the principals are likely highly successful in developing a strong instructional ethos (Wahlstrom, 2012). What wasn't as evident in the data were references to frequent and direct engagements with individual teachers that were specific to instructional improvement. This was interesting in light of there being a district focus on instructional leadership over the past several years. However, all five participants shared that they were challenged to find the time to be directly involved in classroom observations on a regular basis, a practice that is linked to highly effective instructional actions (Wahlstrom, 2012). Furthermore, this finding was not surprising in another regard: Several educational leadership researchers (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Heck and Hallinger, 1999; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al. 2008; Urick, 2016) have explained that, even through large-scale studies, establishing strong causal inferences between specific leadership practices and increased teacher capacity and, therefore, improved student achievement has proven difficult. Nevertheless, there is an ever-expanding knowledge-base that suggests that school leadership matters for classroom instruction and student learning. It is with this in mind that I present the following recommendations.

## **Recommendations**

I offer the following recommendations, based on the findings, discussion, and conclusions of this study. These recommendations may be of value to a variety of stakeholders in education, including aspiring school leaders, current school leaders, district-level leaders and administrators, government officials responsible for education policy, as well as those in post-secondary institutions and other agencies who develop and deliver leadership education programs.

**For those in school districts.**

1. The fifth theme presented in this study highlights the need for a clearly articulated district vision related to leading, teaching, and learning in middle school environments. This would be an important step to creating a clear understanding of where support and resources should be directed regarding instructional leadership in the context of middle schools. A simple and relatively quickly implemented recommendation would be that all middle school principals in the district regularly access the literature available from AMLE.
2. Themes three, four, and six suggest that middle school principals who participated in my study perceive their practices of instructional leadership to include developing leadership capacity of others, and that principals have a strong theoretical understanding of instructional leadership and leadership for learning. Yet the study participants struggled to provide evidence of how their practices actually impact teachers' instructional capacity and student learning to ultimately effect improvements. This draws attention to a need to further develop principals' understandings of how to identify and gather evidence about the effectiveness of their leadership practices. This will allow principals not only to better understand the instructional practices of those they work with but, importantly, will also increase their knowledge about *their own* leadership practices for building the capacity of others so that they can provide the most helpful feedback to those they are coaching and mentoring.
3. Based on theme two, that participants define their practices of instructional leadership through shared leadership, PLC structures, and a focus on relationships, I recommend

that school districts ensure that aspiring and current school leaders have a clear and common understanding of the benefits and practical implications of shared, collective, and distributed leadership, as these were repeatedly cited by participants of my study. All participants explained that they use a PLC structure, and that PLCs are led by learning leaders who have a significant instructional leadership role. I recommend that the district continue to provide information about the benefits of PLCs and, through district-level research and consultation with leaders, teachers, and students, develop a common set of guidelines for effective PLC practices.

4. Based on themes two and five, principals should have an understanding of specific leadership for learning practices that align with current research. However, the principals that participated in the study struggled to align leadership for learning practices with an understanding of middle school philosophy. Besides creating a district vision for middle schools, I recommend that the district-level leaders who appoint individuals to leadership positions consider being clear about expectations and making their decisions about appointments with recognition of the unique knowledge and skills required to lead in a middle school setting

**For government officials and policy makers.**

1. With the new *Leadership Quality Standard* set to be put into practice in September 2019, I recommend that Alberta Education devotes sufficient resources to ensuring that school leaders not only have time and opportunities to learn about how to put into practice the competencies (knowledge, skills, and attributes) specific to leading a learning community, providing instructional leadership, embodying visionary leadership, and developing leadership capacity, but also to learn about how to assess

- the effectiveness of these practices (i.e., understand how the specific indicators of each competency can help them to identify and gather evidence and make improvements accordingly).
2. Similar to recommendation one for those in school districts, the Alberta Government should explore the creation of an Alberta middle school framework that clearly articulates a guiding vision related to leading, teaching, and learning in middle school environments. Such an endeavor may be strengthened and receive greater traction as a partnership with the Alberta Teachers' Association.

**Canadian universities and other educational organizations.**

1. I recommend that post-secondary institutions and other organizations and agencies (e.g., the UPLO and the Alberta Teachers' Association) that offer education and professional learning opportunities to school- and district-level leaders, continue to support leadership learning in the areas of both theory and practice specific to developing effective instructional leadership/leadership for learning, and the assessment of the effectiveness of these. Leaders in such programs should continue to be exposed to the most current, high quality research and literature, but should also be encouraged to critique prevailing ideas so as to prevent complacency and to ensure relevancy within the dynamic educational contexts in which they lead.
2. Based on the theme of exploring the contextual differences that impact principal leadership, I recommend offering differentiated leadership development programs that are specific to working in middle school, elementary/primary, and senior high settings.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

While I completed my study, a number of topics worthy of further research came to mind. I recommend additional studies specific to middle school leadership in Canadian schools be conducted. Specifically, future research might be shaped by the following considerations:

1. In this current research, only five principals participated. Further research that includes a greater number of principals, from a variety of school districts, might provide a broader contextualization and a better understanding of the perceptions and enactments of instructional leadership in middle schools within Alberta. Furthermore, a study that examines a sample of principals from various provinces would provide interesting data, especially if one was to compare instructional leadership between provinces that have a provincial vision for middle school education and others, such as Alberta, that do not.
2. Based on the findings of my study, further research that investigates how middle school principals approach their role in developing the capacity of the learning leaders as the conduit to improved teacher instructional capacity would be valuable.
3. Examining the understandings and practices of instructional leaders and of the learning leaders they work alongside would also be of value. In such a study one could further explore leadership for specific learning practices, such as vision and goal setting, academic structures and processes, and people capacity.
4. Large-scale, longitudinal studies of principals' instructional leadership practices and student achievement data, such as Provincial Achievement Test results or report card marks, might uncover some connections between leadership and student achievement that is specific to Alberta.

## **Revisiting Assumptions from Chapter 1**

Several assumptions were made at the beginning of this study, and they now provide useful points of discussion as part of the summary for my final chapter. The first assumption was that middle school principals have an understanding of the construct of instructional leadership. This assumption held true throughout the inquiry and, as explored in themes one, two, and four, the five participants provided a strong theoretical understanding of instructional leadership and identified and described specific practices that have been presented as effective by previous researchers (Blasé & Blasé, 2000; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Hallinger, 2005; Leithwood, 2012). The participants spoke deeply about the importance of being instructional leaders and how they perceive their practices to create the conditions for improving instructional capacity, with a goal of providing an excellent learning environment for students.

My second assumption was that the middle school context differs from other school settings, and that contextual differences impact why and how middle school principals practice instructional leadership. This assumption was mostly true. All participants in the research study indicated that they believe that being an instructional leader in a middle school is different from being an instructional leader in an elementary school. However, only three of the principals provided specific rationale for this opinion, and only two were able to articulate specific actions and research perspectives, such as information provided by AMLE, to provide clarity regarding what is unique about leading a middle school.

Thirdly, my key assumption was that experienced middle school principals would be agreeable to participating in the study, be open to interviews, and respond to questions in an honest manner. My impression is that this was true. However, I was surprised that, from a large pool of 18 potential participants, only five volunteered. Fortunately, the participants represented

various geographic areas of the district and a range of experiences in both their school-based leadership and teaching backgrounds. Most importantly, all five participants expressed how they believed this research topic was important.

Fourth, I assumed that the phenomenon of instructional leadership would be researchable. From the themes that emerged, it is evident that my inquiry generated the amount and type of data I had hoped for. Upon reflection, I see that a major factor in the success of my study was the willingness of the participants to share their understandings, stories, and struggles in a honest and raw fashion. I would also argue that the qualitative case study methodology also helped make the phenomenon especially researchable, as I was able to incorporate the voices of the participants as a way to lend depth and richness to my findings and interpretations. Ultimately this approach made the study particularly meaningful to me and, I hope, to readers of this dissertation,.

Finally, I assumed that the case study methodology, the research questions, and the specific methods were appropriate to address the purpose of the study. I believe this approach was indeed beneficial to exploring the phenomenon of middle school principals' understanding and practices of instructional leadership. I argue that middle school principals represent a segment of school-based leaders whose beliefs and practices are not adequately understood and, furthermore, that their unique and compelling insights could not have been brought to the fore by way of a quantitative design typically used in large-scale sociological research. I now recognize how qualitative case study research upholds the view that human behavior cannot be meaningfully understood in simplistic ways; and I am able to see how case study is a constructivist approach whereby both the participant and researcher are able to develop a new collective understanding of a phenomenon. In my case, although I set out to learn more about

instructional leadership, I came away with a more fully realized understanding of leadership for learning.

### **Researcher's Final Reflections**

When I applied to pursue my doctoral studies in the spring of 2015, I outlined in my application a desire to examine instructional leadership as an aspect of my general interest in learning about what principals do. From the onset of my first leadership course, I was intrigued by readings in the Leithwood and Louis (2012) text and by references to how instructional leadership practices make a positive difference in elementary, middle, and high schools. Reflecting my various personal and professional experiences over the past three years, I was able to continue to explore leadership theory and practice by settling on a study that examined instructional leadership, but with a focus on middle schools. I began this adventure hoping that conclusions from this study could be relevant for leaders.

Furthermore, there was a gap in the research literature that this study helps address. There was and continues to be a need to investigate the practices of instructional leadership, as well as if and how these practices are similar and different among elementary, middle, and high schools. As recently highlighted by Spillane (2017), there is more work to be done to explore how school leaders' practices actually influence instruction and student learning. In this study, while I started with a focus on instructional leadership, my work has brought me to a greater understanding of the complexities and the multi-dimensional aspects of the principalship. My use of Hallinger's (2011) leadership for learning model is not the dramatic flourish or grand announcement of a new innovation. Nevertheless, I hope my study makes a contribution of the kind that Hallinger himself described: What can make a difference is the persistent focus on improving the conditions for learning and creating coherence in values and actions across classrooms, day in

and day out (p. 137). Indeed, the themes that emerged in my study shed light on areas of strength and areas that we can focus on and improve.

In closing, I do hope that this study provides a catalyst for dialogue with diverse audiences about leadership for learning in middle schools. This conversation should include theoretical, contextual, and reflective ideas about how we incorporate various practices, subscribe to different leadership models, and engage in ongoing professional learning in the service of preparing current and future middle school leaders. As a scholar, I am grateful for all I have learned throughout this experience and, as a leader for learning, my practice is enhanced by the insights and feedback of the research participants who so willingly gave of their time to share with me their understandings, experiences, and reflections on practice.

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## **WERKLUND SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

Graduate Division of Educational Research  
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### **Appendix A**

#### **Information Email for Principals**

Dear Middle School Principals,

My name is Mike Nelson. I am a doctoral student in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary. For my dissertation, I am studying how middle school principals understand instructional leadership and perceive their instructional leadership practices to impact teaching. I am inviting middle school principals (grade configurations of 4-9, 5-9, and 6-9) who are presently in their third or more years of the principalship, and at least one year at their current school, to participate in an interview. This interview will be approximately 60 - 90 minutes in duration and will take place at a mutually agreed upon location.

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

If you are interested in participating in this study, or if you have further questions about this study, please email me at [email].

Thank you for your time and attention.

Mike



## WERKLUND SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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### Appendix B

#### Letter of Invitation – Individual Interview

Date: September 30, 2017

**Re: Middle School Principals' Understandings and Practices of Instructional Leadership:  
A Case Study**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I am writing to request your participation in a university research study on the topic of principal instructional leadership. I am conducting this study as part of the requirements for the completion of a Doctorate of Education (EdD) degree at the University of Calgary, specializing in K-12 Educational Leadership. Working under the supervision of Dr. Brenda Spencer, I am conducting a qualitative research study to investigate the current understandings and practices of instructional leadership from the perspective of experienced middle school principals in a large urban school district. The study will examine how principals understand their enactments of instructional leadership to build the instructional capacity of the teachers in their school. In the simplest terms, I wish to learn about how you define instructional leadership and hear your thoughts about your own instructional leadership practices. My rationale for examining this topic is that there is minimal research on middle school principal instructional leadership.

The study will involve one in-depth, face-to-face interview. Each interview will take approximately 60 – 90 minutes and, only if necessary, may involve some follow-up for clarification. Interviews will be arranged at a time and location convenient for you. The interviews will focus on your understanding of instructional leadership and your perceptions about how your own instructional leadership supports teacher practice and, potentially, student learning. With your permission, I will take notes and audio record the interviews. You will be asked to review the transcript of the interview, to ensure that your contributions reflect your intended meaning. You will be asked to return the transcripts with any comments or changes to me within 10 days from the time that you receive the transcript. Otherwise, an absence of response after the specified period will be taken to mean that you approve the transcript in its

present form. If you are interested in participating, I will send more detailed information about the study and set up interview times at your convenience.

As part of the study I am hoping you will share documents and/or artifacts that may be helpful in this inquiry, such as School Development Plans, leadership documents, minutes from meetings of Leadership Teams or of Professional Learning Communities, agendas of professional development days, district documents, or referenced materials (readings / meeting notes) that have informed their instructional leadership practices.

Please be assured that you are under no obligation to agree to participate. Should you choose to participate, you may withdraw if you so choose, prior to December 8, 2017, when I will begin analyzing all data of the study. If you choose to withdraw from this study prior to insert data, any or all of the data contributed by you will be destroyed. You are free to ask questions about the research, me as the researcher, and your involvement in the study. During the study, I will not be judging or evaluating you or your responses in any way, and there will be no risks to you as a participant.

All data gathered during this study will remain strictly confidential and be kept in a secure location. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the primary data. All data, including notes and audio recordings, will be destroyed five years after the study is concluded. A final copy of the dissertation will be made available to you upon request.

Confidentiality and anonymity will be protected. Participants' names and any other identifying information will not be used in any written report of the study

The study has been approved by the Research and Innovation Department of the Calgary Board of Education and the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board of the University of Calgary. Please feel free to raise any questions or concerns with me, throughout the study. I can be reached at (403) xxx-xxxx or [Email]. Alternatively, you may contact my research supervisor, Dr. Brenda Spencer, at (403) xxx-xxxx. If you wish to participate, please complete the attached Informed Consent Form and return this it to me by email.

Thank you for your considering this request. I am looking forward to hearing your perspectives soon.

**Michael W. Nelson**  
EdD Candidate

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form – Individual Interview

**Name of Researcher:** Michael W. Nelson  
Faculty of Graduate Studies, Werklund School of Education  
(403) xxx-xxxx  
xxxxxx@ucalgary.ca

**Supervisor:** Dr. Brenda Spencer  
Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary

**Title of Project:** Middle School Principals' Understandings and Practices of  
Instructional Leadership: A Case Study

---

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

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

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study is to gain insight into how experienced middle school principals understand the concept of instructional leadership and, further, perceive their enactments of instructional leadership to build the instructional capacity of the teachers in their schools.

#### **What Will I Be Asked To Do?**

The researcher would like to have the opportunity to engage in an in-depth, face-to-face interview with each participant. There will be one interview, with the possibility for a follow-up interview to clarify answers.

The researcher will take notes and use an audio recording device to capture the response of the participant. The participant will be asked to spend approximately 60 – 90 minutes for each interview.

Only the investigator, Michael Nelson, his supervisor, Dr. Brenda Spencer, and a professional transcriber will have access to the interview notes, recordings, and transcripts. The information provided will be kept anonymous. Participants will be provided a copy of their interview transcripts to review for accuracy and editing if necessary. The information will be kept confidential, as it will be stored at a secure location, to which only I will have access.

Please be assured that you are under no obligation to agree to participate in the study. Should you choose to participate, you may withdraw prior to the start of the data analysis (December 8, 2017) if you so choose. If a participant chooses to withdraw from this study prior to the start of the data analysis, any and all of the participant's data will be destroyed and withdrawn from the study. You are free to ask questions about the researcher and your involvement in the study. During the study, the researcher will not be judging or evaluating the participants, and there will be no risks or harm to the participants.

#### **What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to provide a pseudonym, length of time as a principal, length of time in your current school, educational background, number of years of educational experience, and email contact information so that transcripts can be sent to you for review. All personal information collected will be for use by the research only.

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

#### **Are There Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

There is no anticipated harm or predictable risk associated with participating in this research study.

#### **What Happens to the Information I Provide?**

Only the researcher, Michael Nelson, his supervisor, and a professional transcriber will have access to the data. The collected information will be kept confidential. It will be stored in a password-protected and encrypted computer file and in a locked cabinet. It will be kept for five years, after which time it will be permanently destroyed. A final copy of the dissertation can be made available to you upon request.

#### **Signatures**

Your signature on this form indicates that (a) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and (b) you agree to participate in the research project in one audio-recorded interview and, if necessary for clarification, a brief follow-up conversation.

In no way does this waive your legal rights or release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that I will be referred to in the final report by a pseudonym.

The pseudonym I choose for myself is:

\_\_\_\_\_

### **Questions and Concerns**

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

Mr. Michael Nelson (researcher)  
Faculty of Graduate Studies, Education  
(403) xxx-xxxx  
[Email]

Dr. Brenda Spencer (supervisor)  
Werklund School of Education  
(403) xxx-xxxx  
[Email]

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

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

## Appendix D

### Individual Interview Protocol

#### Middle School Principals' Understandings and Practices of Instructional Leadership: A Case Study

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_ Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Start time: \_\_\_\_\_ End time: \_\_\_\_\_ Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Demographical Information

#### Answer

How long have you been teaching and an administrator with the Calgary Board of Education?

How many years were you an assistant principal?

What division or grade configuration was the school(s) where you were an assistant principal?

How many years have you been a principal?

What grade configurations have you worked with as a principal?

How long have you been principal at your current school?

What is the grade configuration of your school?

#### Research Purpose

The purpose of this case study is to gain insight into how experienced middle school principals understand the concept of instructional leadership and, further, perceive their enactments of instructional leadership to build the instructional capacity of the teachers in their schools. In the simplest terms, I wish to learn about how you define instructional leadership and hear your thoughts about your own instructional leadership practices.

#### Individual Interview Procedures

The following questions and discussion prompts have been designed to guide our scheduled 60 – 90 minute audio-recorded conversation. You may ask for the recording to be stopped at any time or replayed for clarification and to ensure accuracy. A transcript of the audio recording will be

sent to you for your review so you can make corrections, additions or deletions. Please review and return the transcript to me with any changes, via email, within 10 days of receiving it. I may edit the transcripts for speech ticks, grammar, repeated words, etc. for the only purpose of smooth reading (not for content).

Apart from the semi-structured interviews, the other sources of data being collected may include: leadership documents, pertinent artifacts field notes, and my own reflective journal.

Please feel free to share documents and/or artifacts that may be helpful in this inquiry, such as School Development Plans, leadership documents, minutes from meetings of Leadership Teams or of Professional Learning Communities, agendas of professional development days, district documents, or referenced materials (readings / meeting notes) that have informed their instructional leadership practices.

You are under no obligation to participate and, if you do consent to participate, you may, without consequences, decide not to continue their involvement or refuse to answer any question. If you decide to withdraw your participation after the interview, any data collected will be withdrawn from the study. You may withdraw no later than the beginning of the analysis of the data collection (date). The data gathered in the study will be kept in strict confidence, and will be stored at a secure location, to which only I will have access.

### **Informed Consent**

Before we begin the actual interview, I want to review the Informed Consent Form that I emailed to you previously. It's important to me that you understand exactly what your participation in the study involves, and the steps I will take to ensure confidentiality and to protect your anonymity. Do you have any questions for me about the informed consent process, or about your participation?

[Pause for questions.]

[Provide a completed and signed (by both the participant and me) copy of the submitted Consent Form.]

## **Begin audio recording**

### **Research Questions**

The primary research question is: How do middle school principals understand the concept of instructional leadership and think about their practices of instructional leadership?

The following secondary questions will help focus on instructional leadership in middle schools:

- How do middle school principals define and explain the concept of instructional leadership?
- What are middle school principals' perceptions of their instructional leadership practices and how it impacts teachers' instructional capacities?
- What evidence do middle school principals cite for their claims regarding the effectiveness of their instructional leadership in their schools?

The following semi-structured questions and discussion prompts have been provided to initiate and guide our conversation.

### **Interview Questions:**

1. How would you define your role as an instructional leader?
2. What would you describe as the key aspects of an instructional leader?
  - a. Explain to me why you think these are the key aspects to instructional leadership?
3. What are the responsibilities that support this role?
4. How are you involved and connected to classroom teaching practices?
5. How does your instructional leadership impact teacher instructional capacity?
6. Can you provide specific examples of how your instructional leadership practices influence or change teachers' instructional practices?

7. What skills do you possess that are instrumental in supporting your instructional leadership?
8. What factors constrain your ability to be an effective instructional leader?
9. How do you continue to grow as an instructional leader?

Is there anything else you would like to talk about regarding instructional leadership and the principal?

### **Next Steps:**

Over the next week or so I will have the audio recording transcribed by a professional transcriber, who will sign a Confidentiality Agreement. As soon as the transcript is ready, I will email a copy to you. Please take a few minutes when you receive it to read it, and let me know if it looks accurate, or mark any required changes on it and return it to me by email. You are also welcome to send me additional information you'd like to include if you think of anything else that is important to note.

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

### **Closing**

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

## Appendix E

### Confidentiality Agreement for Transcription

#### Middle School Principals' Understandings and Practices of Instructional Leadership: A Case Study

I, \_\_\_\_\_, the transcriber, have been hired to confidentially transcribe digital recordings related to this research project.

I agree to:

1. Keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than the *Researcher*.
2. Keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession.
3. Return all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) to the *Researcher* when I have completed the research tasks.
4. After consulting with the *Researcher*, erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the *Researcher(s)* (e.g., information stored on computer hard drive).

_____ Print Name	_____ Signature	_____ Date
<i>Researcher(s)</i>		

_____ Print Name	_____ Signature	_____ Date
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This study received approval through the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board of the University of Calgary and the Research and Innovation Department of the school district.