Instructional Leadership in Alberta Public Charter Schools: An exploration into the perceived effects of instructional leadership practice on student success.

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Instructional Leadership in Alberta Public Charter Schools:
An exploration into the perceived effects of instructional leadership practice on student success.

by

Phil Butterfield

A DISSERTATION
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Abstract

This study examines instructional leadership within public charter schools in Alberta, Canada. The research questions addressed by this study are:

1. How do Alberta public charter school principals perceive that their instructional leadership practice impacts student success?
2. To what extent is it necessary that the approach to leadership align with the approach to student learning in the school?

Ten public charter school principals participated in the study. Each participant was interviewed twice within an eight-week period to determine their perceptions of the impact they have on student success in their roles as instructional leaders. Central to this research is the notion that instructional leaders exert significant influence on the culture and sense of community of a school and therefore play an important role in determining the degree to which students are successful within the school environment. An important conclusion emerging from this study confirms earlier research findings that the greatest positive effect on student success is derived through principals’ support and facilitation of meaningful, authentic, and timely professional learning for teachers in order that they may in turn improve their teaching practice and foster student success as a result.

Keywords: instructional leadership, innovation, public charter school, student engagement, inquiry, collaboration, transformation, relational trust, student success.
Acknowledgements

While there may only be one name that appears on the front of this dissertation, there are many whose efforts, enthusiasm, and encouragement have contributed to the completion of this study. Dr. Sharon Friesen, my supervisor and mentor at the University of Calgary, recognized how important this research was to me, fostering the confidence I needed to complete this journey, always encouraging me to dig for deeper understanding and meaningful conclusions. Dr. Garry McKinnon, Superintendent of the Calgary Science School, has been inspirational in formulating the research focus and providing guidance and feedback from the moment I decided to undertake a doctoral program to completion and defense of my dissertation. Dr. Dianne Gereluk’s insightful questioning and requests for clarification ensured the research questions were kept at the center of the discussion, while Dr. Jim Brandon was instrumental in scrutinizing the literature review and looking for the flow from questions to data to findings to conclusions. On a personal note, Dr. Brandon did not hesitate to provide wisdom and counsel when one of life’s unexpected challenges may well have shelved my goal of completing a doctoral program, and I am forever grateful. I am further indebted to Dr. Michelle Drefs of the University of Calgary and Dr. Paul Newton of the University of Alberta for agreeing to sit on my examining committee and providing succinct and accurate recommendations to improve my dissertation. In the early stages of the doctoral program, the on line and on campus interaction with our doctoral cohort proved invaluable in forging my understanding of educational leadership and the multi-faceted roles that comprise the leadership mantle.

My colleagues at the Calgary Science School have been nothing short of remarkable in their understanding of the demands of completing a doctorate while
working full-time as a school administrator. Darrell Lonsberry, Principal, and Scott Petronech, my Assistant Principal partner, never once hesitated to take on an extra load when I needed to focus on completing this dissertation. I would also like to acknowledge The Alberta Association of Public Charter Schools for supporting and encouraging this research with the objective of improving the quality of education for all children in the Province of Alberta. The ten public charter school principals who participated in this study gave of their time and spoke candidly of the successes, opportunities, and challenges that comprise their instructional leadership practice, affording me a glimpse into the amazing work that is being undertaken in charter schools across Alberta to ensure students are achieving success.

A doctoral program is not a unilateral undertaking; it requires consultation, collaboration, mutual respect and understanding. For all of that, I have my eternally patient, yet deep thinking, wise, and articulate wife, Susan Carson, to thank from the core of my being. Sue is the perfect balance of critical friend, voice of reason, cheerleader and confidante to always keep me grounded and in touch with reality. I would not have embarked on this journey without her blessing, and could not have completed it without her support, encouragement, and love.
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Chapter 1

Introduction and Purpose

The state has a responsibility to create policies to target opportunities and resources toward meeting the needs of those children who have the least; to ensure that conditions of universal access, equality of opportunity, and diversity are addressed; and that the good society is realized. Canadian-based research is also required to inform this national debate with data on what works and under what conditions the most dynamic educational reform strategies can succeed. (Bosetti, 2000, p. 189)

Context of the Study

Leadership in education has been scrutinized in detail by researchers for several decades. In synthesizing the significant body of empirical research that has been conducted on school leadership in the closing decades of the twentieth and early years of the twenty-first centuries, Hallinger (2011), concludes that “we need to obtain better information not just about ‘what works’ but ‘what works’ in different settings” (p. 138). With this summation, Hallinger opens the door to study differentiation of leadership within schools and removes any notion that ‘one size fits all’ in terms of educational leadership practice.

The variables affecting school leadership, by any definition, are contextual in nature and subject to diverse interpretation (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Comparing the impact of leadership practices on student success between a school with a transient population within a low socio-economic region, and a stable, affluent school community, may reveal markedly divergent approaches to many aspects of instructional leadership.

This study explores instructional leadership practices within Alberta public charter schools to identify themes, commonalities, and differences in approaches to leadership, and how charter school principals’ perceive those practices influence student
success. Public charter schools were selected for this study due to their legislated expectation to provide research-informed and innovative educational programs for the students they serve. In this capacity, instructional leaders within these schools are expected to stimulate innovation among teachers and generate engaging learning opportunities for students (Alberta Education, 2002, 2010).

The interconnectedness of student success, school leadership, and innovative educational practice is at the forefront of Alberta Education’s Inspiring Education initiative (Alberta Education, 2010). A Ministry directive released publicly during the period of this research captured the essential goal of education as the capacity to:

- inspire all students to achieve success and fulfillment, and reach their full potential by developing the competencies of Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit, who contribute to a strong and prosperous economy and society. (p. 3)

With this directive clearly at the center of Alberta Education’s expectations for student success, this study addresses an important element in achieving this goal through an exploration into the perceptions of public charter school principals on the relative influence they have on student success within their own school contexts.

**Overview of Alberta public charter schools.** In 1994, the Alberta Minister of Education, Halvar Jonson, introduced legislation to permit the establishment of charter schools under specific conditions and terms of reference (Alberta Education, 2002). The intended purpose of charter schools under the legislation was to “provide a basic education in a different or enhanced way to improve student learning” (p.1). A charter consisted of an agreement between the Minister of Education and an interested individual
or group applying for charter status, and required a comprehensive proposal of how the intended program would improve student learning and “implement innovative or enhanced educational services” (p. 2). Among the conditions and restrictions that apply to all charter school applicants are the following:

- Access to the school must be provided to all students provided sufficient space and resources are available.
- Charter schools will provide enhanced or innovative delivery of public education.
- Curricula administered by charter schools will conform to the provincial program of studies.
- Charter schools will receive the same per-pupil funding as all other public school jurisdictions and may not charge tuition fees.
- Charter schools must not be associated with any religious organization.
- Each charter is expected to address an area of specialization to meet the needs of a specific population of learners (Alberta Education, 2002, pp. 1-2).

Prior to submitting a charter school application to the Minister of Education, the organizing individual or group must approach the local public school board to determine whether the jurisdiction has an existing program similar to the one being proposed or would be willing to implement such a program. If the local school board rejects the proposal, application may then be forwarded to the Minister for consideration.

Of 34 charter school applications received by the Minister of Education between 1994 and 2006, only 15 were approved and three schools subsequently closed for a
variety of reasons ranging from financial mismanagement to declining enrollment. At the time of this study there are thirteen public charter school authorities in Alberta: six in Calgary, five in Edmonton and the surrounding area, one in Medicine Hat, and one in the rural community of Valhalla Centre (Ritchie, 2010).

Bosetti (2000) suggests that charter schools found fertile ground in Alberta due to their “propensity to become communities reflective of a civil society, where like-minded individuals voluntarily band together in a common purpose: the education of their children in a clearly articulated framework (as defined by the charter).” (p. 180). In summarizing her study of Alberta charter school effectiveness five years after inception, Bosetti (2000) determined that “charter schools purport to hold much promise for school improvement as a result of greater freedom from the bureaucratic structure of mainstream public education and greater accountability” (p. 188). Acknowledging that her research was undertaken when charter schools were still in a fledgling state in Alberta and would require more time to determine the long-term effects of charter schools on public education, Bosetti (2000) viewed the introduction of new alternative educational programs as welcome choices for parents who felt their children were marginalized because of a specific learning need that was not being met in larger public school jurisdictions where teaching and learning paradigms were homogenous and focused primarily on academic success.

In 2009, Alberta Education released a concept paper following a government-initiated study into the effectiveness of charter schools. The report suggests that the provision of more educational choices afforded by charter schools, together with generally enhanced learning outcomes among charter school students needs to be
balanced against the realization that, for the most part charter schools have not realized the objective of becoming centers for educational innovation and sharing of exemplary practice with other schools across the province. In addition, the paper refers to “concerns in the rest of the Alberta school system about charter schools and about where the movement is taking the system” (p. 1) and suggests there needs to be a revisiting of the goals and objectives for charter schools that addresses the current and future needs of public education.

Among the suggestions to achieve a new vision for charter schools is a revised approach to governance and leadership:

Governors of the next generation of charter schools would have a clear mandate: with post-secondary research partners, develop a thorough understanding of factors that influence student success, build those factors into effective school practices and help to make those practices available to all Alberta students. The success of the next generation of Alberta’s charter schools would be demonstrated by the effect these schools have on promoting student success across Alberta’s education system (2009, p. 3).

Reaching consensus among educational stakeholders on a definition of student success, however, returns the discussion to the contextual variables that form the basis of all schools. In order to bring about a cohesive long-range plan for the future of education in Alberta, and address the question of student success, the Ministry of Education engaged in a lengthy public consultation process referred to as Inspiring Education (Alberta Education, 2010). Emerging from this consultative process was a framework for all schools in the province to utilize in defining the potentially elusive concept of, ‘what
student success looks like’. Alberta Education identified standards for student learning that focused on the ultimate goal for all students to be “Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit” (Ministerial Order #001/2013, p. 2). The impact of this broad framework for student success has significant implications for this study as each participant will be asked to define success within the context of his or her own school.

Ritchie (2010) conducted a further study into the efficacy of charter schools in Alberta on behalf of the Canada West Foundation1, identifying several challenges that impede charter schools in attaining their mandated objectives, including:

- Misunderstanding by many components of the community regarding the purpose and goals of charter schools.
- A charter renewal process that fosters a climate of uncertainty due to the inability of a charter school to acquire property or financial support.
- Restrictions on facility acquisition due to lack of access to capital funding that leads to a perception of impermanence.
- Inconsistencies in legislation do not legitimize charter schools as a viable part of the public education system but rather marginalize them from receiving all the funding benefits afforded to other public school boards.
- Relationships with both the Alberta School Boards Association and the Alberta Teacher’s Association have given rise to tension between the

---

1 The Canada West Foundation is a non-partisan, public policy organization that conducts research into issues of health care, education, the environment, energy utilization, taxation, and social services in western Canada.
school authorities and charter schools over perceived rivalry for students and funding.

- Continued opposition to charter schools from various sources due to the perceptions of the fragmentation of public education and an argument that public charter schools are not really public due to the exclusion of certain student groups, or “social fragmentation and balkanization of society” (p. 19).

Ritchie (2010) also emphasizes that charter schools foster student success, and by doing so stimulate an awareness of the need for innovative educational programs. Coupled with a focus on success is the potential for public charter schools to become centers of research and educational development that can support professional learning for the benefit of all teachers and students in the province.

There are currently thirteen charter schools in Alberta, each offering an education program designed to address a specific pedagogical focus intended to foster enhanced student performance. Table 1 provides an overview of public charter schools in Alberta at the time of this study and illustrates the diversity of teaching and learning initiatives that contribute to the range of contextual variables that exist within charter school programs.

Table 1. Overview of Public Charter Schools in Alberta

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Number of Campuses</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Number of School Leaders</th>
<th>Total Student Population</th>
<th>Charter Mandate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4-9</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>Inquiry-based learning/ technology / outdoor education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4-9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>All female student body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>Gifted education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3100</td>
<td>Academic excellence/ character education/ direct instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>Number of Campuses</td>
<td>Grades</td>
<td>Number of School Leaders</td>
<td>Total Student Population</td>
<td>Charter Mandate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
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<td>--------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>K-9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>Arts immersion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>K-9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>979</td>
<td>English as a second language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1-9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>Academic and personal excellence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>K-9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>550 +</td>
<td>Direct Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>K-6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>Music integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pre-K-8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>Traditional indigenous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>K-9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>Rural leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14-19 yrs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>At-risk youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>K-9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>200 +</td>
<td>Gifted education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Accountability for achieving the stated goals and targets of a charter are rigid, and focus largely on student learning outcomes. All public schools in Alberta, including charter schools, are required to submit a Three-year Education Plan and an Annual Education Results Report each year, detailing measurable goals, strategies, and outcomes to ensure school objectives are being met. Variables such as teacher efficacy, school culture, learner engagement, standardized achievement test scores and parent involvement are among the measures used to gauge the success of charter school programs. School leaders within these independent, board-governed schools bear the responsibility of fulfilling the vision and mission of the school while striving to provide opportunities for research-informed, innovative teaching and learning to evolve. The thirteen autonomous charter schools find cohesion through The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools (TAAPCS), a consortium established to address professional development among charter school teachers and to provide a networking platform for leadership among Superintendents and school administrators. A School Leadership Learning Initiative undertaken by TAAPCS in 2012 afforded charter school leaders an opportunity to share, reflect on, and analyze their leadership practice. It was from engagement in this initiative that I identified the need to pursue research to specifically inquire into the efficacy of
instructional leadership within public charter schools and the perceived impact of those practices on student success.

**Problem**

In the context of this study, the problem under consideration emerges from the paucity of research focused on the nature and efficacy of instructional leadership among public charter school administrators in Alberta, Canada as it relates to student success. Leithwood and Louis (2012); DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008); and Schlechty (2009), among others, identify the need for further research into the influence of school leaders on student learning in a variety of contexts. Leithwood and Louis (2012) go so far as to suggest that despite the seemingly extensive research that has taken place into the realm of school leadership, a comprehensive, and universally accepted definition of ‘instructional leadership’ remains elusive. Linked to this absence of understanding is a void in current research that informs a satisfactory understanding of “how and when the principal might best engage with a teacher to address specific practices used by effective teachers” (p. 69).

Public charter schools in Alberta, by virtue of their respective mandates, are expected to provide qualitatively different educational programming to meet the specific needs of student populations based on perceived needs that are not being addressed in other available school options. Charter schools therefore provide programming in: inquiry-based learning, gifted education, academic and personal excellence, English language development, traditional learning methodology (direct instruction), music or arts immersion, youth at risk, girls’ only education, rural leadership, and traditional indigenous learning. Operating under the auspices of the provincial Minister of
Education, public charter schools are subject to intense scrutiny and analysis of program development and effectiveness. Despite the accountability measures inherent in the charter school system and the emphasis on enhanced student learning, no publicly distributed research has been conducted to examine the roles of charter school administrators, how they perceive their influence on student success, and what aspects of instructional leadership practice within charter schools have a discernible impact on learning outcomes.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceived influence of instructional leadership practice being exercised by Alberta charter school principals that directly or indirectly affect student success. The researcher anticipates that this study will further inform the recruitment, development, capacity, and succession planning of instructional leaders within and beyond the charter school milieu as a deeper understanding of the direct and indirect influences of instructional leaders on student success is realized. The following research questions will serve to focus the study:

1. How do Alberta public charter school principals perceive that their instructional leadership practice impacts student success?

2. To what extent is it necessary that the approach to leadership align with the approach to student learning in the school?

**Research Design Overview**

This qualitative study is embedded in the principles of modified participatory action research and constructivism (Callison, 2011; Lambert, 2002). These underpinnings recognize the experiential nature of knowledge creation and co-creation,
as well as provide the degrees of flexibility and latitude necessary to adapt the research protocol as it evolves and develops. A modified participatory action research methodology invited participants to engage in research that afforded opportunities for self-reflection, dialogue, and reframing of instructional leadership practice. This methodology is modified due to the fact that the researcher retains ownership of the data at the conclusion of the study. Participants were principals drawn voluntarily from within ten of the thirteen public charter schools in Alberta. The remaining charter school principals not represented in this study did not volunteer to participate.

Data was collected through survey instruments, interviews, and self-reflection. Data consists of qualitative survey and interview responses, verbal reflective feedback on leadership practice, and field notes recorded during the interviews. A system of data coding was utilized to extract themes and critical elements that were synthesized to determine the nature and degree to which the data informed the research questions being posed.

**Assumptions**

I carry forward into the study several assumptions regarding instructional leadership in public schools generally, and Alberta charter public schools specifically. These assumptions are based on my ten years’ experience as a public school teacher and counselor in three public school jurisdictions within British Columbia and Alberta, followed by a further twelve years experience as a school counselor and administrator in two public charter schools.

My assumptions are as follows:
1. School leaders play a significant role in establishing and nurturing the culture and community within a school that fosters an environment in which student success is optimized.

2. Effective instructional leadership practice does not necessarily need to align with a school’s pedagogical foundation, but may exist symbiotically to enhance teacher development and student learning.

3. Implementation of an inquiry approach to leadership promotes teacher engagement in their practice and fosters a culture of collaboration and collective influence on student learning outcomes.

4. The role of principal is influential in providing instructional leadership that promotes professional growth among teachers, exemplary learning among students, and a sense of community for all stakeholders.

**Researcher Perspectives**

At the time this study took place, I was in my sixth year as an assistant principal in a public charter school in Alberta, having served as a teacher and counselor in the same school for three years before assuming an administrative role. Prior to accepting a position within a public charter school, I was a school counselor for five years in a public jurisdiction in Alberta, having begun my teaching career four years prior to that in rural British Columbia. It is worth noting that I entered the teaching profession following a fourteen-year career as a police officer. This fact gains relevance when considering how the nature of leadership within various organizations and the paramilitary perspective that comprised the researchers police experience combined, and in some instances clashed, in an epistemological melting pot where the rigid leadership values of discipline, honour,
and integrity merged with pedagogical qualities of empathy, relational trust, and collaboration. It took a considerable period of time to reconcile that both paradigms can not only co-exist, but together they can deepen the understanding of ‘leadership’ by recognizing that the core objectives of policing and education are shared: to create a better society for our children and future generations.

The school in which I currently practice is infused with a ‘culture of mutual respect’ that has been developed as the school community evolved, and is consistently reinforced and modeled by staff. Few formal rules guide student conduct other than: respect yourself, respect others, and respect school and personal property. Through this ‘less is more’ approach, ethical citizenship emerges as a core value and objective of the school community.

A further, and equally compelling perspective worth noting is the ‘disposition of inquiry’ that permeates the frameworks of exemplary teaching, learning, and leading that are collaboratively developed, clearly articulated, and shared within the school community (see Appendix A). Inquiry-based learning has evolved from being a teaching strategy employing Socratic questioning as a means to stimulate discussion among students to a sophisticated and comprehensive paradigm of teaching and learning that blends authenticity of learning experiences, connections to experts in related fields, the meaningful integration of technology into learning, and views assessment as an integral component of the learning process (Alberta Education, 2004; Galileo Network, 2000-2011). When inquiry becomes infused into the fabric of a school culture to a degree that it is no longer thought of as a teaching and learning ‘strategy’, but rather defines the
culture itself, the learning community is disposed to embrace inquiry as an important element of relationships, communication, and collaboration among stakeholders.

The leadership team within my school relies on a model of collaborative decision-making that emulates the guiding principles of relational trust, transparent communication, and distribution of tasks according to interest, skill, experience, and capacity. Within this context, coupled with his experience as a teacher and counselor, the researcher has developed an understanding of instructional leadership that begs more questions about what works and why does it work?

The constructivist nature of this study resulted in multiple perspectives on instructional leadership being brought forward as participant knowledge and understanding deepened. I recognized the importance of allowing the participants’ voices to be heard and valued, and therefore also understood the need to set aside personal beliefs and assumptions that may have impeded the co-creation of leadership knowledge. Participants were encouraged to inform the researcher if they perceived the presence of any bias during interviews or informal discussions.

**Rationale and Significance**

The rationale for this study emerges from the need to understand the aspects of instructional leadership in Alberta public charter schools that directly or indirectly influence student success. Charter school administrators often work in isolation or with limited opportunities to share their practice with colleagues in other schools. This study will provide a platform for future collaboration and feedback that will foster dialogue and reflection on instructional leadership practice within public charter school settings.
Developing a deeper understanding of the influential aspects of charter school instructional leadership on student success will serve to inform transformational processes in all public school jurisdictions. Doing so, however, requires recognition that charter school administrators frequently assume roles and responsibilities that are the purview of district office staff in larger school systems. Given the small scale of charter schools as autonomous jurisdictions, school-based leaders perform tasks such as preparing education plans and accountability measures reporting.

**Definitions of Key Terminology Used in This Study**

*Instructional Leadership* – The actions undertaken by the formally appointed leaders of a school that are focused on “providing direction and exercising influence” to enhance the quality of teaching and learning within a school. (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 4)

*Public Charter School* – A publicly funded school with a charter mandate to provide a specific educational program with an expectation that the school will engage in research and innovative practice to foster collaboration and improvement in public education (Alberta Education, 2011).

*Collaboration* – The act of ‘co-laboring’ with one or more people to achieve a common objective and fulfill a collective purpose of improving teaching and learning. For the purposes of this study, collaboration is viewed as a desirable trait of successful schools when it occurs horizontally – *among* teachers and school leaders – as well as vertically – when it is an inherent characteristic of relationships *between* teachers and those in formal leadership roles Robinson, 2011).
Cognitive Coaching – a process of mentoring and coaching that fosters individual self-direction and organizational capacity building while striving for excellence within a community (Costa & Garmston, 2002).

Chapter Summary

This introduction has provided the contextual background for the study and has framed the nature of the problem as an absence of research into instructional leadership practice within Alberta public charter schools. This void in qualitative research, together with the explicit mandate of charter schools to provide research-informed, innovative educational programs, frames the rationale that fuels this study and captures the potential significance of the findings on instructional leadership, and hence teaching and learning, across other schools and jurisdictions. Chapter 2 will explore the literature and contemporary research related to instructional leadership practice, focusing largely on the aspects of leadership that are deemed to influence student success.
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

School leaders are a lot like long distance runners. Neither wants to run out of steam, head in the wrong direction or find obstacles they cannot handle. Both need to develop a good heart, a disciplined mind and capable strategies. Both want to be in it for the long run. (Novak, 2005, p. 44)

A deep and thorough understanding of contemporary research focused on instructional leadership practice is an essential component of this study. This literature review critically examines research of instructional leadership as well as peer-reviewed articles highlighting specific research or practice-oriented initiatives that are germane to the research questions of this study. Theoretical frameworks that support the intent of this research are also examined so the connection between research, theory, and practice, is fully understood. While this study focuses on charter school leadership in Alberta, it is important to be conversant and knowledgeable of the issues and initiatives affecting educational leadership in a variety of contexts.

In fact, it is worth noting that since public charter schools were first accredited in Alberta in 1994, there has not been a comprehensive study of school leadership effectiveness that seeks to discover common strengths, challenges and areas for professional growth among charter school administrators. It follows that the literature being reviewed, and the prior research that informs this study, has come from research conducted within public school jurisdictions in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and other international venues.

The body of work that comprises this literature review has been synthesized and organized thematically according to common threads that emerged from the readings. Six major themes will be addressed:
1. Historical perspectives on instructional leadership.

2. Theories and models of instructional leadership.

3. Current and prior research into instructional leadership.


5. Professional standards for school leaders.

6. Instructional leadership through inquiry.

As the review of this literature progressed, considerable repetition and redundancy in findings became apparent. Authors and researchers cited each other’s work frequently, revealing a need to further synthesize the material to avoid duplication of reported findings.

**Historical Perspectives on Instructional Leadership**

Providing a historical perspective on school leadership of any description may be an arguably subjective exercise. Kafka (2009) suggests that most historical accounts of education are crafted by non-historians who attempt to use past experiences as a means of informing current educational practice. She goes on to provide an interesting historical timeline of educational leadership as well as a comparative analysis of leadership practices through the twentieth century (Kafka, 2009). From this perspective it is worth noting that such commonly accepted leadership practice as classroom visits, teacher evaluation, and professional support to improve teaching, were included in the role of principal as early as the late nineteenth century (Kafka, 2009).

Rapid societal changes in the twentieth century, propelled by worldwide armed conflict, mass migration of settlers to North America, economic depression, and the introduction of cultural diversity, led to schools replacing the church as the community
focal point, with the direct result that principals were held in higher regard than they were previously and became recognized as pillars of their communities (Kafka, 2009, pp. 324-325). With this elevated social status came heightened expectations for school performance and programming, including the introduction of school-based community programs to support families. Expansive immigration in the early 1900s led to a widely held belief that a fundamental role of schools was to teach, “Anglo-Saxon conceptions of righteousness, liberty, law, order, public decency, and government” (Kafka, 2009, p. 324).

Throughout the evolution of schools in the past century, the role of principals has evolved in alignment with social and political values and expectations for schools (Kafka, 2009). Depending on the prevailing mood of the community, or society generally, the school principal served as a spiritual, scientific, or democratic leader in response to internal or external pressures. Kafka (2009) provided a notable example of this shifting role description by pointing out that in the 1920s and 1930s principals were heavily influenced by seeking alignment between church doctrine and scientific methodology. With the onset of World War Two, and the perceived threat of fascism and communism to the democratic structure, the role became one of ensuring that young people were acutely aware of their responsibility to preserve democracy in every way possible. From this emphasis on democratic process emerged a model of ‘participatory management’, a leadership model that elicits input into the decision-making process from teachers and students. This approach to school leadership did not gain widespread popularity and before long the control of school-related decisions returned to the principal (Kaffka, 2009).
Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) identified three historical iterations of educational change since the end of World War Two that reshaped teaching, learning, and leading. The ‘First Way’ spanned the years from 1945 to the mid-1970s and was characterized by liberalism in education that fostered teacher autonomy and innovation, but resulted in considerable inconsistency in curricula and student learning outcomes. The degree to which a school was considered innovative and successful during this era was largely attributed to the leadership style of the administration, and was unregulated by any measurable professional standards.

The ‘Second Way’ that followed was born during a time of global economic recession and was marked by government intervention in educational delivery that introduced centralized control of curriculum development and standardized testing to measure efficiencies within and between schools (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 8). Competition among schools to perform well on standardized tests that were then publicized, led to increasing pressure on school administrators, and ultimately classroom teachers, to make school rankings a top priority (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, pp. 8-9). As a result, teacher retention in the profession deteriorated significantly, and leadership capacity within school systems was adversely affected due to the extraordinary pressure of performance measures (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, pp. 10-11).

The ‘Third Way’ identified by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) is not a model of educational policy that has been embraced on the same global scale as the previous two paradigms. Citing implementation of the ‘Third Way’ in Ontario during the closing years of the twentieth century, they observe that this model merges the accountability of the ‘Second Way’ with the desired innovation of the ‘First Way’ and provides layers of
professional support for teachers and educational leaders to achieve these goals. An emphasis on students and learning replaced school rankings as the focus of educational reform in the latter years of the twentieth century. Despite the apparently progressive approach of the ‘Third Way’, Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) argue that there are significant limitations in implementation of this model due to political interference and an inferred need to react to the immediacy of political pressure rather than create measured and purposeful responses that maintain focus on the ideals of teaching and learning. Despite the external pressures influencing school leaders during this period, Kafka (2009) posits that it was from this process of reforming education that the term ‘instructional leadership’ evolved with reference to principals being change agents with a clear mandate to provide professional development for teachers and continually seek improved educational programing.

**Summary.** The evolution of educational systems in North America has been identified by significant and rapid growth in both population and cultural diversity. The role of school leader, the principal, has changed in accordance with the societal and political pressures that have been brought to bear on schools and the changing expectations for student learning. For the purposes of this study, it is interesting to note that the practices associated with effective leadership a century ago are still valid today. As Kafka (2009) points out, “although specific pressures might be new, the call for principals to accomplish great things with little support, and to be all things to all people, is certainly not” (p. 328).
Theories and Models of Instructional Leadership

It is from this historical context of educational paradigms that the question of effective instructional leadership emerges as one of increasing interest and importance to teaching and learning outcomes. This section will explore a wide range of leadership models that may be applied in educational settings. Through analysis of the current theories and models of school leadership, a succinct and practical definition of ‘instructional leadership’ will be developed for the purpose of this study and will serve to guide development of the research plan and methodology.

Reform and Transformation. To begin an exploration that leads to defining ‘instructional leadership’, it is first necessary to delve into the overt and covert forces that exert influence on educational systems. Each of the ‘ways’ characterized by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) may be viewed as reformist in nature, responding to the political, economic, and social conditions of the time and with a focus on what was perceived as important to education. As reform movements evolved, teachers and school leaders were expected to change their practice within an existing framework and thereby presumably improve the quality of teaching and learning.

Schlechty (2009) makes a clear distinction between reform and transformation. Changing existing practices and procedures without fundamentally altering the organizational structure is considered reformist, while transformation refers to a “metamorphosis: changing from one form to another form entirely” (Schlechty, 2009, p. 3). Schlechty (2009) goes on to validate and extend the arguments put forth by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) by advocating for a metamorphosis of educational bureaucracies into learning organizations that place student learning and transformation
of the social structures of schools ahead of government mandated programs of study. It is
important to recognize that Schlechty defined ‘reform’ as the strategies implemented to
improve current systems, while ‘transformation’ introduces entirely new ideas,
approaches, and values to an organization, effectively altering the culture and identity
that previously existed (p. 3).

Transformation, according to Schlechty’s (2009) model, is built upon ‘disruptive
innovations’, those culture-altering approaches that are “incongruent with existing social
systems and therefore require fundamental changes in these systems if the innovation is
to be properly installed and sustained” (p. 27). Recognizing that change can foster fear
and uncertainty, Schlechty (2009) supports a model of ‘participatory leadership’ to pave
the way for effective change in education. Similar to Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), he
points out the need for school leaders to engage teachers and students alike in the process
of planning and implementing elements of systemic change (Schlechty, 2009). From this
standpoint Schlechty endorses a need for a strong sense of community to prevail in order
for change to be effective and sustainable.

Dufour (2002) challenges the notion of instructional leadership, suggesting that
the term has too long been associated with school leaders focused on improving teaching
rather than striving to improve student learning. Offering as an alternative the moniker of
‘learning leader’, Dufour (2002) emphasized the importance of leaders asking the
question, “What steps can I take to give both students and teachers the additional time
and support they need to improve learning” (p. 13)? In answering his own question,
Dufour (2002) surmised that by determining the most essential learning outcomes for
students and discarding those that are less important, students will have increased opportunities for developing deeper understanding of key elements of knowledge.

**Theories of School Leadership.** Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) cite the work of several theorists in the process of identifying an array of leadership models that exist in educational settings (Appendix B). Noting the contributions of Bennis (2003), Block (2003), Collins (2001), Elmore (2000), Fullan (1993), Spillane (2001, 2003, 2004), and Hallinger and Heck (1998) Marzano et al. (2005) offer a comprehensive overview of contemporary school leadership. Of particular interest to this study are the common elements emerging from these theorists that will contribute to a definition of instructional leadership that is applicable to this research. The notions of shared vision, collaboration, and the distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities provide important building blocks in identifying effective school leadership for the benefit of student learning (Marzano et al., 2005).

Lambert (2002) adds to this understanding by applying the principles of constructivist learning: co-construction of knowledge, inquiry, participation, and reflection, to a model of constructivist leadership that is, “redefined by suggesting that leadership is beyond person and role and embedded in the patterns of relationships we will refer to as ‘reciprocal processes’” (p. 42). Marzano et al. (2005) cite a blended model of constructive transactional leadership, characterized by clearly identified goals, outcomes, consultation, rewards or recognition, feedback, and praise.

Robinson (2011) introduces a further critical element to the leadership paradigm: positive interpersonal relationships. The previous examination of leadership models has not directly addressed the role of respectful professional relationships in exemplary
leadership practice. Robinson, however, identifies three capabilities that are deemed essential for school leaders to possess: ability to apply relevant knowledge, capacity for complex problem solving, and building relational trust within the school community. Reeves (2006) supports Robinson’s premise by suggesting that a successful leadership framework will have “the primacy of interpersonal relationships” at the core (p. 21).

Lambert (2002, 2005) reinforces the importance of relationships and reciprocity in suggesting that a constructivist approach to leadership embraces the significant elements of inquiry, participation, and reflection as key factors in successful models of school leadership. While a constructivist view of leadership with a focus on relational trust may seem to provide a foundation from which to define ‘instructional leadership’, there are numerous models, theories, and conceptual frameworks of leadership in educational and non-educational environments that need to be investigated in order to gain comprehensive knowledge of the complex nature of leadership and it’s correlation to student learning. No fewer than fifteen leadership models have been identified by educational researchers as relevant options for leadership practice within specific contexts or school environments (Appendix B). From this array of leadership paradigms, several approaches to school leadership are worthy of further discussion to explore similarities and differences between the models.

**Discussion.** Transformational leadership has been characterized as a means to intellectually stimulate new approaches to addressing pre-existing problems (Marzano et al., 2005). The desire to transform school leadership requires a shared vision that consists of a desire for improved performance by “raising the bar and closing the gap” (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005, p. 35). Similarly, a Total Quality Management (TQM) model
of leadership relies on a leaders’ ability to stimulate change within a school and implies that all members of the organization will be invited into the process of improvement. The concepts of teamwork and trust are fundamental to successful implementation of a TQM model (Marzano et al., 2005). Davies and Davies (2005) refer to strategic leadership using similar criteria as transformational leadership and the Total Quality Management model. Focusing on development of a specific organizational strategy, an action plan is developed that identifies and incorporates the most appropriately suited staff members to implement the action plan and guide the organization towards its’ goals.

Several leadership models emphasize the value of sharing responsibilities among staff members in order to develop leadership capacity within an organization. Southworth (2005) offers a learning-centered approach to leadership that is founded on the assumptions that leadership is a shared function, is contextually oriented, and is intended to collectively improve the quality of teaching and learning. The learning-centered leadership paradigm relies on modeling of desirable characteristics, analyzing and responding to data that informs educational practice, and ongoing dialogue and collaboration among all educational stakeholders.

The concept of distributed leadership has been interpreted and applied in different contexts as a means of diversifying responsibility, recognizing that, “leadership, from this perspective, lies in the human potential available to be released within an organization” (Harris, 2005, p. 2). Arguably, distributed leadership is not a ‘model’ at all, but rather represents an initiative to develop leadership capacity within an organization, and can be implemented within a variety of more clearly defined leadership models. Spillane (2003) further suggests that leadership tasks can be distributed in a variety of ways depending on
the needs or goals of the organization, strengths of the participants, and situational context of the task at hand. Harris and Spillane (2008), while arguing that distributed leadership is “central to system reconfiguration and organizational redesign” (p. 31), caution that the concept of distributed leadership can be misinterpreted, resulting in a devolution of leadership that is not consistent with the intent of strengthening the leadership team.

Referring to Hallinger’s (2011) model of ‘Leadership for Learning’ (Figure 1) as the foundation of a shared vision and culture of exemplary educational practice, the interplay of forces on building school leadership capacity becomes apparent. It also becomes evident how Lambert’s (2002, 2005) constructivist approach to leadership represents a series of strategies for building capacity rather than being a model of leadership in isolation. The tenets of Southworth’s (2005) learning-centered leadership approach, with a focus on leadership as a shared function and the importance of dialogue and collaboration to improve teaching and learning, provide further building blocks to the development of a comprehensive instructional leadership framework.

Figure 1. Leadership for Learning Model (Hallinger, 2011, p. 127).
Common elements of these models include development of comprehensive organizational strategies that clearly articulate vision, goals and objectives, identification of the strengths of key individuals in the organization and distribution of leadership roles accordingly, and development of authentic professional relationships within a culture of trust and mutual respect.

Hallinger (2011) analyzed the historical iterations and contextual applications of instructional leadership, transformational leadership, distributed leadership, and shared leadership. Citing the work of Leithwood, Gronn, Barth, Hallinger, Heck, Robinson, and others that have studied the impact of school leadership on student learning, Hallinger concluded that regardless of the lexicon, all of these models fall under a broader scope referred to as “leadership for learning” (p. 126). This protracted discussion reveals that the semantics of leadership labels factor into development of a concise and comprehensive definition for the role of school leaders. For the purposes of this study, the term ‘instructional leadership’ shall be used in reference to the roles and responsibilities of school leaders as it pertains to their quest to improve teaching and learning.

Summary. The theories and models of instructional leadership presented here have covered a wide range of perspectives and contexts for implementation. Many of the characteristics and variables associated with some models have been reclassified as leadership ‘strategies’ or included subsets of other leadership models that focus directly on the improvement of student learning. A key objective of this synthesis is to develop a definition of instructional leadership that encompasses and develops:
• respectful and trusting relationships,
• common vision, goals, and a strategic plan to improve teaching and learning,
• a culture of collaboration and innovation,
• leadership capacity within the school community.

The following section will explore the research base that will further inform this definition and highlight key research findings while also identifying aspects of instructional leadership that require further study.

**Current and Prior Research into Instructional Leadership**

Within the context of this study, considerable attention will be focused on the practices of Alberta public charter school leaders and their influence on student learning. A review of recent and current research into the impact of instructional leadership on student learning reveals that the school principal is second only to the classroom teacher in terms of exerting influence on student learning outcomes (Hallinger, 2005, 2011; Marzano et al., 2005; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). It is worth noting at the outset of this discussion that a common finding of the research reviewed indicates that the principal’s influence, while profound, is indirect (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Hallinger (2011) reviewed forty years of empirical studies into school leadership practice, ultimately focusing on the degree to which leaders influenced student learning directly, indirectly, or reciprocally. He concluded that significantly greater influence on student learning is apparent when the principal focuses on building academic capacity through support for teacher professional growth (Hallinger, 2011).
Hallinger’s findings are corroborated by Marzano et al. (2005), who reported that 5000 studies of school leadership were conducted between 1970 and 2005, with only 69 of those exploring the correlation between leadership and student achievement. Upon completion of a meta-analysis of these 69 studies, the researchers concluded that principals could have a significant impact on student achievement if they are attuned to the needs and context of their school (Marzano et al, 2005).

Leithwood and Louis (2012) subsequently embarked on a five-year study funded by the Wallace Foundation\(^2\) to examine the relationships between leadership, educational practice, and student learning. Their study revealed three key findings with respect to the role of principals in student learning:

1. Principals are the greatest single influence on teaching practice.
2. Distributing leadership roles to others does not diminish the influence of the principal.
3. Greater degrees of ‘collective influence’ foster improved motivation and working conditions among teachers while also leading to improved student performance (Leithwood & Louis, 2012).

They summarize these findings by pointing out that when principals focus on establishing the conditions for teacher success in terms of professional development, working conditions, collaboration, and motivation, students will be the beneficiaries through improved learning opportunities (Leithwood & Louis, 2012).

Crum, Sherman, and Myran (2010) concede that, “unraveling the effects of principals on student achievement is a complicated, if not impossible, business” (p. 49).

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\(^2\) The Wallace Foundation is a national philanthropic society in the United States that supports research and innovation to improve education, enrichment, and leadership in public schools.
Their qualitative study into the practice of twelve elementary school principals revealed five themes:

1. Effective leadership needs to be informed by data.
2. Positive relationships are developed based on honesty, trust, and respect.
3. A culture of collaboration and a sense of ‘ownership’ for the school need to be fostered.
4. Leadership capacity needs to be nurtured within the staff.
5. Leaders need to be aware of the instructional program and the cultural shifts within the school (Crum et al., 2010).

While the research of Crum et al (2010) was focused on the acquisition of qualitative data through the use of interviews, a potentially valuable opportunity may have been missed in not providing the principals involved in this study the opportunity to use their reflections to develop an action research project focused on developing leadership practices based on the thematic findings.

In many instances, the performance of school leaders is gauged by the perceptions of those they are in contact with through their leadership role. Schulte, Slate, and Onwuegbuzie (2010) conducted a mixed-methods research study of 615 university students comprised of pre-service teachers and graduate level students in the field of education. The researchers’ primary goal was to determine the perceived effectiveness of school leaders based on the respondents’ prior experience in school settings.

Timperley (2011), engaged in a research study examining leadership characteristics in five New Zealand elementary schools where achievement results exceeded expectations. The research revealed that a significant contributing element to
the success of these schools extended from positive professional relationships that were forged between school leaders and teachers, “but first and foremost they were relationships based on promoting professional learning on how to make teaching more effective for students” (p. 166). A further important finding from Timperley’s (2011) research is that effective school leaders created “networks of informed influence” within their schools that distributed leadership roles and responsibilities among capable and interested staff, resulting in increased motivation and improved teaching and learning (p. 167).

Blase and Blase (1999, 2000) conducted two research studies focusing on participants’ perspectives on the role of instructional leadership. The first study involved 18 principals selected from the League of Professional Schools, a consortium established to promote a democratic model of education and action research that focuses on shared governance of schools. Built upon a framework that analyzes the importance that people attach to actions in their lives, a theory known as symbolic interaction, Blase and Blase (1999) concentrated their research on the metamorphosis of schools from a traditional model of bureaucratic leadership to one of collaborative and distributed decision-making. Their findings revealed that those principals who effectively restructured their schools to operate on a principle of shared governance that included teachers, parents, and students, realized significant gains in overall school performance. They also came to appreciate the complexities of implementing change on scale that fundamentally alters every aspect of the school culture (Blase & Blase, 1999).

The second pertinent, and somewhat related, study undertaken by Blase and Blase (2000) examined the perspectives of teachers on principals and how they support
teaching and learning within their schools. Specifically, they asked the question, “What characteristics of school principals positively influence classroom teaching, and what effects do such characteristics have on classroom instruction” (p. 130)? While acknowledging that correlations between instructional leadership, teaching practice, and student performance were under-researched, their study was able to posit that instructional leaders who engaged teachers in dialogue about their practice, encouraged reflection, and supported professional growth, reaped significant benefits in the form of teachers who felt highly motivated, satisfied, secure, and supported in their practice (Blase & Blase, 2000). Of further relevance to this study is the observation that principals who engage teachers in dialogue and reflection through the use of inquiry are, in fact, coaching teachers to enhance their self-efficacy and capacity for innovation and creativity through empowerment (Blase & Blase, 2000).

Hallinger (2005) refers to a body of research that explored the complexity of school administration through the latter part of the twentieth and early years of the twenty-first centuries. Examining specifically the role of a school principal as an instructional leader, empirical research reveals that administrators are, by and large, committed to fulfillment of a school’s mission statement and to developing a school culture or community that satisfies the stated goals of the school system rather than the individual school community (Hallinger, 2005). The research also indicates that school administrators are not transforming into instructional leaders in the sense of participating or collaborating with teachers in student learning experiences. In the context of the positions of Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), and Schlechty (2009), the research cited by Hallinger (2005) reinforced the need for school leaders to re-examine their role and
establish a set of clear goals and strategies to develop a collaborative and distributive leadership model that positively impacts student learning and teacher engagement in their practice.

It is important in understanding the context of this study to appreciate research that has been conducted to explore school leadership in Alberta public school systems. Barber, Whelan, and Clark (2010) conducted an international study of school leadership on behalf of McKinsey and Company³ that analyzed selection, training, retention, and succession planning of school leaders in eight centralized school jurisdictions. Sixty-two Alberta school boards participated in the study, together with Singapore, the Netherlands, England, Victoria (AU), Ontario, New York, and New Zealand. Among the conclusions highlighted by the report are that the,

Development of the collective capacity of leadership teams, rather than the individual capacity of leaders, is still limited, despite much research suggesting that collective capacity is a greater driver of performance than individual capacity.

All systems face challenges to refine, contextualize and optimize the processes they use to support their leaders. (p. 28)

When analyzed collectively with the 2003 Alberta Commission on Learning Report, the 2008 School Leadership Symposium Report, and the Education Sector Workforce Planning Framework for Action, the Alberta Commission on Learning determined that an examination of public school leadership would be required to examine:

1. The attraction, recruitment and retention of school leaders.
2. The evolving role of school leaders.

³ McKinsey and Company is a US based think tank committed to exploring issues surrounding global health, economic development, education, social innovation and sustainability.
3. Accessible quality school leadership preparation programs.

4. Ongoing professional development of school leaders.


As a result of these findings, a School Leadership Framework Committee was established “to ensure that all Alberta schools are served by highly qualified educational leaders whose work focuses on the provision of opportunities for the optimum learning and development of all students in the school” (p. 2)⁴.

Complications, confusion and contradictions in the research. The transition from development of sound leadership theories to frameworks of practice for instructional leadership represents a significant challenge for researchers and school leaders alike. Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006) challenge several assumptions regarding school leadership, and provide a clarifying perspective on the difference between leadership practice that is driven by the individual school leader’s values and beliefs rather than a set of leadership behaviors that are defined by a framework of leadership that has been proven to improve student learning. As a means of illustrating their point, Leithwood et al. (2006) refer to Goleman’s (1994) theory of emotional intelligence as an internalized state rather than an externalized behavior and caution must therefore be exercised in applying the concept to a generalized definition of effective school leadership. They further challenge the empirical evidence suggesting that ‘distributed’ or ‘teacher’ leadership contributed to improved student learning. In support of their assertion, Leithwood et al (2006) raise three salient points:

⁴ The work of the School Leadership Framework Committee resulted in development of the Principal Practice Competencies for School Leaders in Alberta, which are discussed in detail on pages 46-47.
1. Expanded leadership does not translate to ‘better’ leadership. While acknowledging that there is an insufficient body of research in this area to make a definitive claim, the findings up to the point of publication indicated no significant correlation between distributed leadership and improved student learning outcomes.

2. The definition of ‘leadership’ in schools is vague and potentially misleading. Recognizing the value of collaboration and shared decision-making, the question emerges, “How many of the functions being asked of teachers in the guise of ‘distributed leadership’ are tasks that should normally be expected of professional educators?” Leadership, with all its inherent functions and responsibilities, requires a clearly articulated and commonly understood definition that is distinct from the role of a teacher.

3. Challenging DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour’s (2005) premise that principals are “leaders of leaders”, the notion is introduced that in order for leadership to be meaningful and effective, there must be followers. Both are considered vital to the success of the organization but have very distinct roles and responsibilities.

(p. 10)

Summary. There has been a vast amount of research conducted into the practice of school leadership, but relatively little of it pertains to the influence of school leaders on student learning outcomes. Of the small body of research findings that focus on the question of student learning, a commonly held conclusion is that the principal significantly influences student learning indirectly, while having a direct impact on teacher efficacy through improved working conditions, motivation, and professional
development. Exploring the limitations of research conducted to date revealed that the very definition of ‘leadership’ in a school environment could be differentiated according to region, pedagogical perspective, school goals and vision, or the influence of senior administration.

Leithwood et al. (2006) characterize the nature of qualitative research conducted in ‘outlier’ schools, “settings believed to be contributing to pupil learning significantly above or below normal expectations” (p. 12). They point out that the nature of these studies makes it difficult to provide ‘external validity’ or ‘generalizability’ to other school settings. The public charter schools comprising the focus of this study may fit the criteria of ‘outlier’ schools and due regard will be required in exploring the transferability of leadership practice from these settings to larger public school environments.

Characteristics of Successful Instructional Leaders

Earlier in this review, reference was made to the three ‘ways’ of educational change that provide a historical context for this research proposal (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). In the process of defining the ‘Fourth Way’, Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) identify four elements that they deem to be essential to initiating and maintaining effective educational change: “sustainable leadership, integrating networks, responsibility before accountability, and differentiation and diversity” (p. 95).

Sustainability of Instructional Leadership. The issue of sustainable leadership, and the challenges of attracting teachers into leadership roles, is of critical importance in effecting meaningful and effective transformation in educational paradigms. Hargreaves and Shirley suggest, “leadership is the afterthought of educational change” (p. 95). Historically, school administration has had less to do with leadership and more to do with
enforcement of government or jurisdictional dictates. It is their premise that any sustainable change in education must include a specific mandate for administrators to develop leadership capacity within their own school. Referring to a model of distributed leadership, whereby responsibilities are apportioned to teachers according to their interest and expertise, Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) point to the education system in Finland as an example of successful distributed leadership. The Finnish model provides a template for teachers and school leaders to form a “society of experts” within their learning community (p. 96). Not only does this approach to distributed leadership result in greater inclusion on issues relating to teaching and learning, but it develops a natural plan of succession for those aspiring to school administration (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

Building on the premise of sustainable leadership, Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) further emphasize the value of ‘integrating networks’ as a means of sharing knowledge and developing relationships that are enriched through dialogue and mutual support for the implementation of transformational ideas. Through collaboration and mentoring, school leaders are able to examine each other’s practice and validate change that is designed to improve student learning. It is important to ensure that networks convened for the purpose of improving the quality of teaching, learning, and leadership must be purposeful and focused, without being overly restrictive or controlling. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) are clear that “the point of networks is to spread innovation, stimulate learning, increase professional motivation, and reduce inequities” (p. 101).

The tenets of ‘responsibility before accountability’ and ‘differentiation and diversity’ may be viewed through the same lens. The issue of accountability is often synonymous with standardized testing, whereas the principle of being responsible for
student learning aligns with the knowledge that educators are responsible for teaching a
diverse population of learners with a wide variety of learning profiles (Hargreaves &
Shirley, 2009). In the realm of school leadership it can be challenging to place
responsibility for exemplary teaching and learning in front of accountability measures
dictated by government bureaucracies, which in turn makes it difficult to honour the
diversity of cultural and learner profiles within most Canadian classrooms in the 21st
Century. In many instances the curriculum is aligned to a set of learning outcomes that
do not reflect the cultures and values represented in those classrooms. Standardized
assessment practices, by extension, measure a set of norms that are aligned with
accountability for prescribed curricula but do not take into account the unique traits of
diverse learners (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

Building capacity for instructional leadership. Lambert (2003) defines
‘leadership capacity’ as, “broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership.”
She goes on to explain this definition as one that is, “based on the premise that if virtually
all teachers, parents, and students are involved in the work of leadership, then positive
student achievement will occur along with high leadership capacity” (p. 4). As
contradictory as this capacity-building definition may be to Leithwood et al’s (2006)
premise of the need for distinct leaders and followers to create a successful organization,
it highlights a recurring theme that identifies the importance of relationships and trust in
fostering a culture of exemplary instructional leadership that benefits student learning.

Glaser (2005) builds upon Lambert’s work by introducing the ‘principle of
coherence’ (p. 3). Coherence, according to Glaser’s premise, is the desired state that is
achieved when relationships within the organization are aligned with common vision and
goals. The connection between coherence and capacity building becomes apparent when school leaders recognize the needs of stakeholders and are able to adjust organizational goals if required to ensure that those needs are satisfied (Glaser, 2005).

**Qualities of effective instructional leadership.** A review of the literature on school leadership reveals a significant number of guiding principles or seemingly authoritative statements on the constituent qualities of effective instructional leadership. Table 2 provides an overview of seven ‘plans’ for school leadership that will form the basis for discussion and synthesis of effective instructional leadership.

**Table 2. Characteristics of Leadership for Learning.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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2. Purposing: ensure a sense of direction for development.  
5. Reframing: using metacognition and reflecting on habits of mind.  
6. Transforming: continually checking one’s ‘moral purpose’ as well as values and beliefs. |
| **McEwan (2003, pp. 45-117)** | 1. Establish, implement, and achieve academic standards.  
2. Be an instructional resource to your staff.  
3. Create a school culture and climate conducive to learning.  
4. Communicate the vision and mission of the school.  
5. Set high expectations for staff and self.  
6. Develop teacher leaders (coaches, in research, curriculum leads).  
7. Develop and maintain positive relationships with students, staff, and parents. |
| **Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2003, pp. 108-109)** | 1. Develop a strong leadership team. Meeting the goals of leadership responsibilities requires a team, not an insular approach.  
2. Distribute some responsibilities throughout the leadership team.  
3. Select the right work and focus on common goals.  
4. Identify the order of magnitude implied by the selected work.  
5. Match the management style to the order of the magnitude of the change initiative. |
2. Be a servant leader (don’t be above the ‘dirty’ jobs).  
3. Apply external leadership principles.  
4. Insist on relevance and authenticity. |
| **Garmston and Wellman (2009, p. 24)** | **The Four Hats of Leadership**  
1. Facilitating - facilitator should not be the person with the skills and knowledge in the topic under discussion, but should be in charge of controlling the energy and flow of the discussion. |
Discussion. The overview of leadership characteristics and qualities provided in Table 2 highlight the role of bias and the subjectivity that can become apparent as researchers and authors in the field of school leadership develop and publicize the leadership qualities that conform to the particular model of leadership they are espousing. Lambert’s (2002) leadership principles align with her constructivist perspective just as Garmston and Wellman’s (2009) ‘Four Hats of Leadership’ reflects their research and teaching of cognitive coaching as a leadership paradigm, or DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker’s (2008) characteristics form a conceptual framework for leadership within a professional learning community. Leithwood et al (2004, 2006) provide a comprehensive leadership framework that is focused on fostering success through development of a
strong school community and restructuring of the organization to ensure collaboration
and student success are at the center of the school’s vision.

Notwithstanding this apparent lack of objectivity, several common threads can be
pulled together from the leadership frameworks to further inform a comprehensive
definition of instructional leadership that recognizes the diversity prevalent among
Alberta public charter schools. Among the leadership attributes that represent common
elements are: the importance of relationships and trust; positive and collaborative school
culture; common vision and goals; and authenticity, including reciprocity in feedback and
accountability measures.

Performance Standards for School Leaders

In 2008, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) ratified the
Educational Leadership Policy Standards to guide the performance of school
administrators in the United States during an era of accountability that demanded
improved student achievement (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO]). These
standards replaced the original policy of 1996 in response to research conducted into
educational leadership in the early years of the 21st century. The revision process was
undertaken by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) with
the following principles to guide the work:

1. Reflect the centrality of student learning;
2. Acknowledge the changing role of the school leader;
3. Recognize the collaborative nature of school leadership;
4. Improve the quality of the profession;
5. Inform performance-based systems of assessment and evaluation for school leaders;

6. Demonstrate integration and coherence; and

7. Advance access, opportunity, and empowerment for all members of the school community (p. 8).

Condon and Clifford (2012) summarize the ISLLC Standards as follows:

• Setting a widely shared vision for learning

• Developing a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth

• Ensuring effective management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment

• Collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources

• Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner

• Understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, legal, and cultural context (p. 2).

These principles and standards closely reflect the models and characteristics of effective school leadership reviewed in this chapter and provide further support for the need to place student learning at the core of leadership practice. The ISLLC 2008 standards are intended to support school jurisdictions in building leadership capacity by: establishing leadership training programs, providing a licensing and induction protocol, evaluating school leadership performance, fostering professional development programs, and improving working conditions for administrators (Condon & Clifford, 2008).
The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2011) developed a National Professional Standard for Principals in order to establish a unified definition and common understanding of the leadership role within Australian schools (p. 1). The AITSL (2011) identified three requirements, or capabilities, that are fundamental to school leadership: “vision and values, knowledge and understanding, and personal qualities and social and interpersonal skills” (p. 4). Expanding the NPSP framework reveals five professional practice statements that form the basis of the leadership protocol:

- Leading teaching and learning
- Developing self and others
- Leading improvement, innovation, and change
- Leading the management of the school
- Engaging and working with the community (p. 4).

The interrelationship between the requirements and professional practice statements aligns closely with Robinson’s (2011) model of five leadership dimensions being supported by three capabilities – in each instance the desired outcome is “high quality teaching and learning” (p. 16).

The importance of contextual orientation in the development of professional standards for school leaders is highlighted in the Pacific Professional Standards for School Principals (2012) that addresses the specific needs of school communities within fifteen island nations in the Pacific Rim. While the document extols the need for interpretation and application of the standards within the context of each individual country, the expectations are reflections of those to be found in contiguous geographical
settings such as North America, specifically targeting improved student achievement and “creating and sustaining conditions under which quality teaching and learning thrive” (p. 4).

The purpose to be served by professional standards for school leaders is an important consideration in understanding how such instruments can improve instructional leadership. The ISLLC 2008 standards, as well as the Australian National Professional Standards for Principals (2011) are intended to provide a framework for leadership development and performance evaluation. The Leadership Standards for Principals and Vice-Principals in British Columbia (2007) clearly states, “The standards, as they are written, do not lend themselves to evaluation procedures as they are generic, context dependent, and aspirational” (p. 4). In fact, the British Columbia ‘standards’ stated purpose is the preparation, development, induction, mentoring, and professional growth of principals and vice-principals within a framework built on, “moral stewardship, instructional leadership, organizational capacity, and relationships” (p. 10).

The professional leadership standards that are of particular relevance to this study are those developed by Alberta Education, the provincial education authority, in 2009 as the Principal Quality Practice Guidelines and revised as the Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders in Alberta in 2010. These parameters of leadership practice emerged from the work of the School Leadership Framework Committee (see p. 35) provide a set of competencies for school leadership in Alberta that states the primary purpose of educational leadership “is to ensure that each student has an opportunity to engage in quality learning experiences that lead to achievement of the goals of education and that address his or her learning and developmental needs” (p. 1). Under the auspices
of Alberta Education, a ‘Framework for School Leadership in Alberta’ was developed to
guide the development of leadership capacity within Alberta Schools.

In alignment with the British Columbia leadership model, Alberta includes
assistant, associate, and vice principals within the definition of ‘school leader’. Alberta
Education (2010) acknowledges, “Current stakeholder efforts to support and promote
effective school leadership, as well-intentioned as they are, may appear to be at cross-
purposes and to lack coordination” (p. 10). This revelation reinforces the importance of
interpreting and applying the competencies that shape the leadership framework with a
clear perspective on the diverse contexts in which they may be applied.

The Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders in Alberta are
comprised of seven key dimensions:

1. **Fostering Effective Relationships**: a school leader must build trust and foster
   positive working relationships within the school community on the basis of
   appropriate values and ethical foundations.

2. **Embodying Visionary Leadership**: a school leader must involve the school
   community in creating and sustaining shared vision, mission, values, principles,
   and goals.

3. **Leading a Learning Community**: a school leader must nurture and sustain a
   school culture that values and supports learning.

4. **Providing Instructional Leadership**: a school leader must ensure that each
   student has access to quality teaching and the opportunity to engage in quality
   learning experiences.
5. **Developing and Facilitating Leadership**: a school leader must promote the development of leadership capacity within the school community for the overall benefit of the school community and education system.

6. **Managing School Operations and Resources**: a school leader must manage school operations and resources to ensure a safe, caring, and effective learning environment.

7. **Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context**: a school leader must understand and appropriately respond to the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural contexts impacting the school (pp. 3-6).

While Alberta Education has directed school authorities across the province to develop contextually relevant leadership evaluation protocols based on the ‘competencies’, this research incorporates the essence of each competency into the fabric of survey, interview, and feedback questions to ensure consistency and alignment between participants from divergent school contexts and Alberta Education policy directives.

**Summary.** This review of professional standards for school leaders reveals that there is international recognition of the value in applying the findings of research to the establishment of competencies that serve to guide the recruitment, preparation, induction, support, and succession of school leaders. There is wide acceptance that school leaders represent the second greatest influence on student performance next to classroom teachers and are the most directly influential force on teacher motivation, working conditions, professional development, and efficacy (Leithwood et al., 2012; Marzano et al., 2005; DuFour et al., 2008; Robinson, 2011). The question that continues to vary across regions is the purpose of having professional standards for school leaders. British
Columbia is clear that there is no evaluative validity to the leadership standards introduced there, whereas the ILSSC 2008 standards suggest that the standards could be applied in an evaluative context with supported implementation. *The Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders in Alberta* make a vivid policy statement that requires school jurisdictions to develop appropriate procedures for evaluating school leaders using the seven competencies and the included criteria. From the perspective of this study, it is important to note that none of the leadership standards reviewed makes reference to the use of inquiry either as a specific competency or as an implied capability of effective school leadership. The absence of this reference point will make the inclusion of inquiry as a point of exploration even more relevant to this study as it seeks to determine whether approaching leadership through a ‘disposition of inquiry’ can have a positive influence on student learning.

**Instructional Leadership through Inquiry**

The application of inquiry as an effective element of effective instructional leadership is a recurring theme in the literature. The notion of inquiry-based leadership evolves from the principles of inquiry-based learning: establishing meaningful relationships, creating authentic and relevant learning experiences, connecting with experts within a specific field of study, and utilizing a variety of strategies and techniques to arrive at solutions to problems (Galileo Education Network, 2000-2011). A great deal of the literature reviewed for this study has emphasized the importance of collaboration, authenticity, and reciprocity as key qualities of effective instructional leadership (DuFour et al., 2008; Lambert, 2002; Leithwood et al., 2006; Sterrett, 2011). The act, or art, of inquiry is implicit in these qualities, as they all require dialogue and respect for the views
of others in order to achieve success. Blase and Blase (1998) point out the importance of inquiry in stimulating constructivist reflections among teachers by highlighting questions and curiosities that lead to enhanced student learning.

Kaser and Halbert (2009) “have found that the strongest school leaders are characterized by constant curiosity and a mindset of persistent inquiry” (p. 62). They strongly suggest that leaders who apply the principles of inquiry to leadership practice are more likely to initiate creative solutions to presented problems and are also better prepared to analyze jurisdictional directives and use the power of questioning and inquiry to ensure the maximum learning benefit is derived from external influences (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). Kaser and Halbert further expound on the merits of applying one or more of four forms of inquiry when the circumstances dictate:

- **Narrative** inquiry – exploring the anecdotal successes and challenges being experienced within the school community;

- **Appreciative** inquiry – building upon the common experiences within the community and building capacity for change within a shared vision;

- **Problem-based inquiry** – relies on a critical examination of teaching practice through analysis of the ‘action’ of teaching and the theoretical frameworks on best test teaching practice in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning;

- **Reflective inquiry** – utilizes past experiences and solutions to pre-existing problems in addressing current situations. A very effective support mechanism can be found in the use of a ‘critical friend’, an objective third
party who can ask probing questions to stimulate the inquiry process

(Kaser & Halbert, 2009).

Inquiry, however, can assume other forms beyond the humanistic, conversation-oriented paradigm. Earl and Fullan (2003) discuss the use of data to inform decision-making and leadership practice. Through a process of inquiry that entails asking the ‘what if’ questions, data on student performance can form part of a larger dialogue with teachers to establish school-wide action plans for improving student engagement and learning outcomes. Joyce, Calhoun, and Hopkins (1999) suggest a further application of the inquiry process to obtain data by having teachers undertake action research within their own learning environments. This innovative practice has been initiated in at least one Alberta public charter school in which 16 teachers, including one school administrator, completed action research projects on a variety of practice-related topics, including collaboration, formative assessment, technology integration, and instructional leadership (http://calgaryscienceschool.blogspot.ca/).

Chapter summary

This literature review has examined the body of work that has focused on school leadership, specifically as it influences student-learning outcomes. While there exists an immense amount of research on the topic of educational leadership generally, there are surprisingly few studies that explore in detail the variables of leadership that directly link to student success. Leithwood et al. (2006) utilized a ‘backward mapping logic’ to determine the extent to which school leaders might affect student learning and reconfirmed what previous studies had surmised; the leadership effect on student performance is an indirect one, feeding through a very direct causal link from school
leaders to teachers and the support of professional learning designed to foster improved teaching and learning.

Instructional leadership has deep historical roots as a concept for effective leadership practice in schools, however the lexicon has led to confusion and disagreement among some researchers who apply similar characteristics to identified leadership models and subsequently lay claim to a unique perspective that represents transformation in education (DuFour et al, 2008; Lambert, 2002; Leithwood et al, 2012; Marzano et al, 2005). As a means of reconciling this potential disparity, the common threads of key leadership paradigms have been extracted and synthesized to move beyond the need to identify with one model over another and instead look at the central characteristics of successful instructional leadership.

As the purpose of this study is to explore the influence of public charter school leaders on student success, relevant characteristics consist of those direct, indirect, and reciprocal factors that lead to an exemplary teaching and learning environment. Establishing positive and trusting relationships, development of leadership capacity, support of teacher professional growth, and nurturing a culture of collaboration and innovation are among the elements of instructional leadership that are common to many paradigms and which are deemed to provide the essential foundation for sustainable leadership development and enhanced student performance (Davies, 2005; Leithwood et al, 2012; Marzano et al, 2005; Robinson, 2011).

The research of the last decade into educational leadership has led to the development of several contextually driven professional leadership standards. Many common elements exist between these models, including the value of positive
relationships, the importance of leadership support for teacher development and efficacy, and above all else, a universal desire to improve the quality of student learning. Further to these basic principles is the recognition that school leadership will flounder if programs are not initiated to address succession, professional support, and mentoring for school leaders (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Marzano et al., 2005; Schlechty, 2009).

It is essential to this study that an understanding of public charter schools in Alberta, together with the inherent challenges and opportunities, be clearly articulated. The work of Bosetti (2000), Ritchie (2010), and Alberta Education (2002, 2009) provide valuable insight into the history and contemporary milieu of charter schools, including reference to the ongoing tensions that exist between charter school advocates, the Alberta Teachers’ Association and the Alberta School Boards Association.

The literature that most clearly addresses the aims and purposes of this study is that which places the student – and student success – at the center of the leadership paradigm (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Marzano et al., 2005; Robinson, 2011). Correspondingly, a definition of instructional leadership, for the purposes of this study, are the set of practices undertaken by school administrators to foster a culture in which student success is realized. Student success is defined within the context of each public charter school, and is subsequently used as the primary indicator of effective leadership. Contained within this definition are the essential elements of an exemplary learning community: relational trust, collaboration, shared vision, and nurturing of leadership capacity.

Notably absent from the literature are significant analyses of instructional leadership and the perceived importance of compatibility between the pedagogical
foundation of the school and the values, beliefs, knowledge, and experience of school leaders. This study begins to contribute important data and conclusions that will add to this body of knowledge and build capacity in leadership recruitment, professional learning, and retention of effective instructional leaders.
Chapter 3

Methodology

Often the first step in innovative problem solving is to abandon preconceptions so that you can try to see the situation from a different angle…But mentally pressing control-alt-delete – those keys on a computer that force a complete reboot – at work is really difficult to do. It’s human nature to want to retreat to assumptions; knowing is a lot more comfortable than feeling you’ve been cut adrift and have no clear idea where you’re going. (Lang, 2012, p. 51)

Introduction and Overview

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to examine the various aspects of instructional leadership prevalent among Alberta charter school principals that directly or indirectly affect student success. The following research questions will serve to focus the study:

1. How do Alberta public charter school principals perceive that their instructional leadership practice impacts student success?
2. To what extent is it necessary that the approach to leadership align with the approach to student learning in the school?

This chapter explores the research methodology that was utilized in this study and discusses in detail the key components of the research design, including: rationale for the selected methodology, composition of the research sample, critical information relevant to the study, research design characteristics, data collection methods, data analysis and synthesis of findings, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

Rationale for using qualitative research design

Strauss and Corbin (1990) define qualitative research as any non-statistical research “about persons’ lives, stories, behavior, but also about organizational
functioning, social movements, or interactional relationships” (p. 17). In questioning the purpose of conducting qualitative research, they suggest the usefulness of this design when delving into phenomenological contexts, such as understanding the significance of personal experiences on action (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

This study focuses on the personal and professional experiences of the participants that have shaped their perceptions and actions related to instructional leadership practice. With the exception of demographic statistics that will be gathered to provide insight to the nature of each public charter school involved in the study, the data collected and the findings generated will be based on interviews, dialogue, and reflection. These techniques for data collection are consistent with the application of a qualitative research design, or qualitative inquiry, in addressing the research questions for this study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

**Rationale for using a modified participatory action research methodology**

This research study provides an opportunity for participants to actively engage in dialogue and reflection on their instructional leadership practice and to establish an interim goal between research cycles that may contribute to their professional learning as school leaders. This methodology is modified by the necessity of the researcher, rather than the participants, to retain ownership of the data. In order to adequately understand the nature of this research methodology, it is necessary to explore the underpinnings of action research.

Reason and Bradbury (2001) define action research as:

a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory
worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.

(p.1)

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) further characterize action research as “a form of collective self-enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social and educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out” (p. 5). Kemmis (2006) goes on to explain a contemporary adjunct to this definition by positing, “action research must find a way to work…in the interstices between people and organizations” (p. 123). Reason and Bradbury (2008) extend the definition of action research as a means “to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities” (p. 4).

Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maquire (2003) challenge traditional research perspectives by suggesting that action research can be credible without the need for absolute objectivity, and further propose that knowledge is socially constructed and therefore is value-laden by nature. This premise validates a core principle of action research that demonstrates “respect for peoples’ knowledge and for their ability to understand and address the issues confronting them and their communities” (p. 14). In the spirit of inquiry, action research invites conversation and the uncertainty of
participants’ responses based on their individual experiences. A subsequent element of chaos or ‘messiness’ may permeate the data analysis and synthesis process as themes and common trends may be elusive while individual qualities, characteristics, anecdotes, and narratives may emerge as significant to the research findings (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003).

The constructivist nature of this qualitative inquiry afforded participants the opportunity to engage in action research as leaders in learning and actively reflect on their instructional leadership practice. The individualized and subjective nature of self-reflection, dialogue, and contextual variances among participant’s schools validates the selection of action research as an appropriate framework for this study.

Within the domain of action research, several paradigms have emerged that are closely related, but retain subtle differences based on specific applications. Following is an overview of participatory action research and the supporting research strategy of cooperative inquiry that will be utilized in this research.

**Participatory Action Research.** Hall (1992) cites three key elements as central to participatory action research: research, education, and action. While the participatory action research (PAR) model was born from a social justice perspective with the objective of empowering less fortunate citizens to effect significant social change, it is applicable to studies that invite active participation with the opportunity to effect organizational or systemic change to improve the environment under discussion. Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) characterize PAR as “more of an attitude or approach than a series of techniques” (p. 1671). They further point out that PAR is appropriately used “where the processes of generating ownership, equity, and empowerment are integral parts of the objectives” (p. 1672), referring to the introduction of PAR to health system
research in which the ‘learning’ encountered during the research process provides valuable responses to identified priorities and a commitment to change (p. 1672). For the purposes of this study, it is important to acknowledge that while the roots of PAR lie in the realm of social justice, the intent of the researcher was to engage participants in dialogue, reflection, and introspection, leading to a sense of empowerment to effect change in their instructional leadership practice.

Kemmis (2006) extrapolates the concept of action research into specific educational applications. Coining the term ‘practitioner research’ to characterize action research or participatory action research within educational contexts, he identifies three key principles that are essential to conducting quality research in school environments:

1. The problem being researched must be relevant to individuals participating in the study as well as within a larger societal context.
2. The research being conducted, while it may take place within a specific school, must benefit the community being served.
3. The critical nature of practitioner research explores practice from a variety of perspectives and will:
   inform wise and prudent collective action by a range of those involved in and affected by the practice, in the interests of transforming the collectively constructed social, cultural-discursive and material-economic fields that shape, structure, and support existing practice. (p. 471)

Kemmis (2006) further supports the premise of collaboration and transparent discourse among participants who assume the role of researcher and researchers who assume the
role of participant. From this foundation, ‘practitioner research’ may result in significant changes to practice within schools and the wider educational community.

The focus of this research was to develop deeper understanding of the participants’ perceptions relating to instructional leadership and to identify those practices that could support the professional learning of school leaders beyond the scope of this study. From these perspectives, a participatory action research methodology provided a solid foundation upon which to develop questions for reflection and discussion, analyze and synthesize data, and formulate summative results and findings, including recommendations for transformational instructional leadership practice and implications for further research. Participatory action research affords an opportunity for the researcher to observe and participate in the study, in addition to gathering and analyzing data, establishing themes and grounded theoretical connections, and determining the findings and implications that will emerge within the project. It is important to reiterate that PAR is a valid methodological choice for this study due to the larger context of the School Leadership Learning initiative being undertaken by The Alberta Association of Public Charter Schools as noted on page 8, which involves ongoing research that includes dialogue, interaction, reflection, and goal setting with the objective of advancing leadership practice.

A caution that Kemmis (2006) makes clear in the application of PAR pertains to the bias the researcher may bring forth in analyzing his or her own practice. While it may be impossible to eliminate personal prejudice in any type of co-operative or participatory research, it is worth noting that the bias exists and account for it in the data validation process.
Cooperative Inquiry. Heron and Reason (2006) apply action research through ‘co-operative inquiry’, a method of conducting research “with people rather than on people” (p. 144). A key premise of co-operative inquiry is the expectation of an action component following a reflective phase during each research cycle. The conceptual framework of this research study incorporated feedback loops that included dialogue within an interview format, reflection, and action, thereby matching the criteria for co-operative inquiry. As Heron and Reason further point out, “cycling enhances the validity of the findings” (p. 146).

Co-operative inquiry is also consistent with the constructivist theory that provides the framework for this study. The link between experience, narrative inquiry, and the conversion of knowledge into action are all integral components of a collaborative approach (Heron & Reason, 2006). Heron and Reason sum up their position as follows:

If the primary focus in co-operative inquiry is on action, on transformative practice that changes our way of being and doing and relating, and our world, then it follows that the primary outcome of an inquiry is just such a transformation, that is, our practical knowing, our transformative skills and the regenerated experiential encounters to which they give rise, together with the transformations of practice in the wider world with which the inquirers interact. The emphasis, with regard to research outcomes, shifts from the traditional emphasis on propositional knowledge and the written word to practical knowledge and the manifest deed (p. 149).

Summary. A common element of the action research methods discussed here is the participatory nature of those involved in the research. Significant characteristics of
this methodology are the need for relational trust, open and transparent communication, and willingness to self-analyze practice with a genuine view to recognize the need for and take action to implement change for the ultimate improvement of student success. For the purposes of this study, the term participatory action research will refer to the model of action research being undertaken, and the individual degrees of participation may vary due to professional or personal commitments of participants and unforeseen circumstances that may arise during the study period.

Research Participants

Participants for this study were drawn from the principals working within the thirteen public charter schools operating in the Province of Alberta at the time this research was conducted. An informed consent form was signed by each participant, in accordance with the Conjoint Faculties Ethics Review Board requirements, acknowledging that they had read and understood the document (Appendix C). The parameters of the study permitted one principal from each charter school authority to participate. Purposeful selection of participants from within these schools adhered to the following criteria (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008):

- Participants must be formally appointed to their role as a principal on a permanent, continuing basis;
- Participants must have been in their current role for a minimum of two years prior to commencement of data collection;
- Participants must voluntarily agree to engage in the study for a period of five months from the commencement of data collection, including survey completion and interviews.
For the purpose of this study, Alberta public charter schools were collectively considered a research ‘site’ and each participating school comprised a separate contextual perspective that had a bearing on the findings. In this manner the research questions were explored in depth and the contributions of the participants provided rich data from a variety of contextual backgrounds.

**Overview of Information Needed**

**Contextual Information.** Each Alberta public charter school is an independent, board-governed authority that is accountable directly to the Ministry of Education. In accordance with legislation, a maximum of fifteen charter schools may be in operation at one time. Of the thirteen public charter school authorities operating at the time of this study, ten are represented within the research. The unique contextual variables evident within each charter school made it necessary to establish a profile of each school in terms of grade configuration, approach to teaching and learning, and the goals of the respective charter mandates.

**Demographic Information.** Demographic profiles of the research participants were developed when the selection process was completed and before data collection began. This information was valuable in establishing the context and history that has shaped each participant’s perceptions of teaching, learning, and instructional leadership. Demographic data was collected from each participant through a confidential survey (Appendix D), ensuring consistent information is being gathered from all participants. When necessary, the researcher contacted participants directly to clarify specific survey responses.
**Perceptual Information.** Participant perceptions form a critical component of this study and were explored in detail through the demographic survey (Appendix D) and interviews (Appendix E) that took place with each participant twice during the study. Perceptions are founded in professional and personal experiences, values, beliefs, and assumptions. As such, perceptions exert significant influence on the constructivist perspectives of this study. The ‘lived experience’ of each participant was analyzed and reflected upon to determine the degree to which those experiences inform instructional leadership practice.

**Theoretical Information.** In order to fully appreciate the theoretical frameworks of this study into instructional leadership within public charter schools in Alberta, it is important to appreciate the philosophical roots from which the research evolved. The researcher, while exploring the supporting theory for this study, discovered the work of Alfred Adler, a noted psychologist of the early twentieth century who promoted the concept of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* (community engagement), a belief that human beings possess an innate desire for fellowship, belonging, and contributing for the benefit of the community over self-gratification and individual fulfillment (Stein & Edwards, 1998; Puget Sound Adlerian Society, N.D.).

Of particular significance to this study is Adler’s focus on the link between mutual respect between people and successful communities (Stein & Edwards, 1998). From this premise, Adler surmised that individuals have the power to change the way they approach aspects of their life, and essentially create new perceptions that will lead to profound actions that benefit the community as a whole. Adler’s philosophical
foundation provides a logical transition to the theoretical framework that informs this research study (Stein and Edwards, 1998).

**Theoretical Framework.** The theoretical framework for this research is embedded in the nature of participatory action research, specifically the co-construction of knowledge. The constructivist approach posits that knowledge is acquired through experience and the relatedness of events to form a contextual and epistemological framework referred to as ‘knowing’ (Callison, 2001). The premise of constructivism is that learners form connections between elements of knowledge, regardless of the method by which the teaching and learning occurs. A learning environment in which a disposition of inquiry is prevalent may be viewed as a prime example of constructivism in action, thus lending credibility to the application of this theoretical approach to a study of instructional leadership (Callison, 2001).

Instructional leaders, by the nature of their roles, are expected to espouse the principles of ‘life-long learning’ and therefore develop their knowledge base of effective leadership strategies through experience, dialogue, reflection, and feedback from their school communities. The process of feedback and collaborative discourse that comprise the action research methodology conforms to the constructivist premise of connecting knowledge events and building upon previous experience to construct new knowledge (Callison, 2001).

**Research Design**

Action research is characterized by the accumulation of data from participants during the course of a study (Mills, 2007). Processing, analyzing, and synthesizing the data becomes a critical and ongoing part of the research process and comprises the basis
for claiming validity and generalizability of the findings at the conclusion of the research. Data analysis, therefore, becomes an integral part of the research design, as ‘interim analysis’ of the data may dictate adjustments to the research questions or the subsequent actions that result from the research cycle feedback.

Research cycles serve as feedback loops that afford the participant an opportunity to review the interview data collected, reframe interview questions for participants accordingly, and collaboratively determine appropriate actions that may emerge from the data and dialogue with participants (Adams, 2009). For the purpose of this study, two research cycles took place approximately 60 days apart. The first cycle consisted of an interview that explored the participant’s perceptions of instructional leadership practice and concluded with the participant identifying a short-term leadership objective that they focused on during the two months between interviews. The second interview revisited the facilitators and/or inhibitors that affected the participant’s ability to achieve their goal and stimulated a dialogue on how instructional leadership practice can further enhance the notion of student success within the school community.

Following is the protocol that was followed as the research developed:

**Pre-research Phase.**

1. A comprehensive review of the literature relative to instructional leadership practice was detailed in Chapter 2. As the study evolved, further relevant literature emerged and was included to further inform the foundations of previous research, current practice, and future trends in instructional leadership.
2. The researcher submitted a research proposal and subsequently underwent an oral candidacy examination to defend this research topic and methodology.

3. Upon successful completion of the candidacy examination, application was made to the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB) of the University of Calgary for approval to commence data collection in accordance with the methodology and protocols detailed in this proposal.

Research Phase.

1. This research study was undertaken with the cooperation and endorsement of The Alberta Association of Public Charter Schools. The researcher did not contact potential participants regarding research procedures or data collection methods until ethics approval was received.

2. Upon receiving CFREB approval to proceed with the study, the researcher addressed a regularly scheduled meeting of Alberta public charter school principals to share details of the research study and to invite participation. The researcher subsequently received ten expressions of interest to participate. All those responding met the criteria for participation and were provided with informed consent forms to be signed and returned prior to the collection of any data.

3. The demographic profile survey was distributed to all participants (Appendix D), followed by informal telephone interviews as required to clarify any open-ended responses from the survey.
4. The researcher arranged to interview each participant in their own school and each interview was prefaced by a tour of the school to allow the researcher an opportunity to become familiar with the facility and school program.

5. The second interviews took place approximately 60 days following the first round. Seven of the interviews took place in the participant’s schools while the remaining three were conducted by telephone.

**Data-Collection Methods**

Data collection began with receipt of ethics review board approval and written consent from each participant, and continued until June 2013. It should be noted that the data collection methods and timelines were modified from the original research proposal due to the fact that participants are engaged in full-time practice as leaders in their schools and it was difficult to ask for an inordinate time commitment to this project. Modifications included telephone conversations instead of face-to-face interviews as required and clarification of specific datum with participants using email.

**Surveys.** An initial survey was conducted as part of the data collection for this research study. The survey consisted of a *demographic profile* that provided general information on each participant’s professional background and inquired into his or her instructional leadership experience. Appendix D provides a detailed version of the demographic profile survey. The data collected from this survey will assist in establishing themes in data collected through other sources and cross referencing items to demographic factors, including the number of years a school leader has been an educator in relation to the number of years they have been a school administrator.
Participants were asked to reflect on their profile and comment on any relationship between the survey results and previous perceptions of their instructional leadership style. This information provided important corroboration of data collected through the two interviews.

**Interviews.** Each participant was requested to participate in a minimum of two one-to-one interviews with the researcher during the study period. Participants were individually interviewed within the first 30 days of the research phase (Appendix E). The purpose of this interview was to gain a deeper understanding of the participant’s contextual background and perceptions of their instructional leadership style. There was also discussion of a goal related to instructional leadership that the participant may wish to strive for during the study period.

A second individual interview took place within 60 days of the first interview to ascertain any changes in perceptions of instructional leadership practice and to assess progress towards achieving any goal that may have been established at the time of the initial interview. All interviews were semi-structured and permitted a free flow dialogue between the researcher and participant. Interviews were digitally recorded for later transcription and analysis.

**Artifact analysis.** The web sites of each participating public charter school were analyzed to determine the nature of the charters governing the school programs and to obtain publicly available information regarding the nature of the teaching and learning philosophies, student selection criteria, enrollment capacity, and school profile. Information obtained in this manner was corroborated during the interviews with each participating principal.
Data Analysis and Synthesis

Data collection and analysis were ongoing during the research period. A caution that Mills (2007) points out is to avoid creating action strategies based on minimal or insufficient data. While the dialogue that was generated from the interviews stimulated reflection and may inform the action plans of specific participants, it was not considered conclusive or representative of a generalizable finding until the research project was complete and all data was synthesized.

A system of coding was employed to identify themes emerging from the data. Codes were cross referenced to the research questions to specifically address those realms of inquiry and extract the deepest meaning possible from the data collected. Data collected from individual participants was provided to them in the form of transcripts of interviews. The purpose of this integral step was to ensure accuracy of the data collected and to further ensure the data is being interpreted and analyzed accurately by the researcher.

The themes emerging from the data gave rise to analytic categories that evolved as extensions of the conceptual framework for this study. The analytic categories provided a means to examine and synthesize the findings in detail and extract the deep meaning and interconnectedness that existed between the data, the themes, the findings, and the conclusions arising from this research.

Issues of Trustworthiness

The question of accuracy and validity in collecting and analyzing data also leads to a further question of trustworthiness. Phillips and Carr (2009) define trustworthiness as including “transparency of process; data gathered with and for a purpose; a deliberate
stance of seeking multiple perspectives, including those found in literature; praxis and change in the researcher and in practice; and thus results that matter” (p. 208).

Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) cite credibility, dependability, and transferability as the key elements of testing trustworthiness within a qualitative research design. Credibility refers to the alignment that must exist between the data gathered from participants’ and the researchers interpretation of that data; dependability is the qualitative equivalent of reliability in quantitative research and provides accountability for the methods of data collection and analysis; and transferability provides some direction for subsequent readers or researchers to determine if the findings of the study can be utilized in a different setting or context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

Transparency in this research project was embedded in the format of dialogue between the researcher and participants with an open sharing of instructional leadership practice. The purpose of the research and data collection links directly to the last of Phillips and Carr’s trustworthiness criteria by determining action strategies that may be implemented by individual participants during the course of the project.

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

Ellis and Levy (2009) emphasize the importance of a researcher acknowledging the assumptions or preconceptions they may bring to the study. Furthermore they stress the need to identify limitations of the research, characterized as “an uncontrollable threat to the internal validity of the study” and delimitations, or the “boundaries of the research” that may affect the generalizability, and therefore the external validity of the research (p. 332).
**Assumptions.** The researchers own experiences, including those as an instructional leader, contribute to a set of perceptions and assumptions that must be addressed in the interests of maintaining validity in this research. In the context of this study, the researcher assumes that school leaders participating in the research share a common goal of improving student learning outcomes and ensuring that all children are successful. It is also assumed that participants in the study will value the opportunity to analyze and reflect on their own leadership practice in order to build capacity for exemplary teaching and learning. To this end a further assumption to be recognized is that all participants will reflect openly and honestly in answering the interview questions.

**Limitations.** Barab and Squire (2004) identify an inherent limitation of action research that is evident by the interventionist nature of the intended action. While intervention in support of the design and theoretical understanding is an integral component of the approach, it must be clearly stated and understood that “it is the responsibility of the researcher to draw on methodological practices consistent with other qualitative methods to convince others of the trustworthiness and credibility of the claims being advanced” (p. 10).

This study may also be limited by the fact that the participants are all engaged in their practice within charter public school settings. While the schools are very heterogeneous in terms of program delivery and mandate, the charter school structure provides a common framework of school operation and understanding that is not present in other public school jurisdictions. The researcher’s awareness and prior knowledge of the pedagogical foundations of charter schools in Alberta provided an opportunity to mitigate limitations within this study format. The nature of this study, however, elicited
participant’s perceptions of their instructional leadership practice that led to very disparate themes within the data. This limitation was due, in part, to the small sample size of ten school administrators and a logical extension of this research will be to explore the same research questions within other educational contexts such as public school systems of different sizes, as well as private schools.

**Delimitations.** This study is delimited by exploring the instructional leadership practice of formally designated school administrators and does not encompass the larger, semi-formal or informally designated school leaders whose impact on student learning cannot be minimized but is beyond the scope of this study. A further delimitation is that the study does not explore the roles of Boards of Directors and parents with respect to the nature and quality of student success. While these roles are important in student learning, the purpose of the study is to examine the effectiveness of instructional leadership on learning outcomes.

**Ethical Considerations**

Due to the fact that this research involved human subjects as participants, there were ethical considerations to acknowledge. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB) must approve all research proposals in which human or animal subjects will be used. This study conformed to the expectations and criteria of the ethics board and the researcher has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2 – CORE) Tutorial related to ethical considerations in research (http://www.ucalgary.ca/research/ethics).

Brydon-Miller (2008) points to the importance of a researcher being aware of their own value systems in order to be able to effectively address ethical dilemmas that
may arise during a research project. Furthermore, recognizing that differing sets of values and beliefs may exist among researcher, participants, and the institutions they represent is a positive step in preempting ethical or moral disagreements during the course of the research (Brydon-Miller, 2008). Brydon-Miller summarizes the issue of ethics in action research as “respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, as embodied in the shared values of action research – participation in democratic processes, the improvement of human life, and engagement in morally committed action” (p. 209).

The nature of this research was such that participants could hold diverse values and beliefs about teaching, learning, and instructional leadership. It was therefore incumbent on the researcher to acknowledge and accept this diversity, recognizing that there may be cultural, societal, or pedagogical belief systems that influence a participant’s understanding and acceptance of a specific approach to instructional leadership.

In addition to ethical considerations, there may also be political or micro-political influences within and among schools, as they will be drawn from a diverse variety of geographical, social, pedagogical and cultural milieus. While there is no indication that political factors at the provincial, municipal, or jurisdictional levels will affect the research process, the micro-politics of any given school could become a factor that will both inform and influence the findings emerging from the study. Eilertsen, Gustafson, and Salo (2008) characterize micro-politics in schools as “a continuing struggle for control, power and influence” (p. 300). Their offsetting solution to the potentially adverse effects of micro-politics is to discuss the dynamics of these relationships early in
the researcher-participant relationship and should be revisited and further discussed throughout the study to ensure any latent issues are being addressed.

**Significance of the Study**

The research design utilized in this study provided an opportunity for participants to engage in dialogue and reflection on their instructional leadership practice with the researcher and to consider strategies for changing their approach to instructional leadership if they felt the need to do so. The findings and conclusions of the study are significant as they illustrate the importance of considering the contextual variables of a school when recruiting instructional leaders to ensure there is appropriate alignment between the pedagogical foundation of the school and the principal who is ultimately responsible for actualizing the school’s vision and goals.

Within the context of Alberta Education, this research provided a framework upon which value is added to a set of leadership competencies intended to improve the quality of instructional leadership across the province. This study may conceivably prove to be a gateway to professional learning for school administrators that was previously undiscovered. At the very least, individual schools and jurisdictions may use the findings as a catalyst to open dialogue with school administrators on the role of instructional leaders in improving student success and the implications on teaching and learning generally as a result of an inquiry approach to leadership.

The results of this study will be shared through The Alberta Association of Public Charter Schools (TAAPCS), Council of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS), and Alberta Education staff with a specific interest in advancing instructional leadership practice. Opportunities will also be sought to share the findings and discuss the
implications of this research at conferences as well as through peer reviewed online and print journals.

In a more concentrated format, the research data will inform the refinement of an ‘exemplary instructional leadership’ framework that aligns with the existing exemplary teaching and exemplary learning frameworks that define and shape the disposition of inquiry at my school in Calgary, Alberta (Appendix A). As this school thrives on sharing practice with other educators, further opportunities to share the research findings will surface through interactions with visiting school administrators and regular postings on the school’s blog established for that purpose.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has explored in detail the research methodology, rationale, and design that shaped the nature of this study. Utilizing a participatory action research model within a qualitative inquiry approach addresses the humanistic nature of this research and validates the constructivist theory that supports this study.

This study is significant in determining the perceived ways in which the instructional leadership practice of public charter school principals’ influences student success as it is defined within each school context. Furthermore, the study will stimulate a discussion on the need for instructional leadership strategies to align with the teaching and learning methods within individual school contexts.
Chapter 4

Findings

Given the opportunity, charter schools could become centers for educational research and development, facilitating the implementation of innovative educational strategies in schools across the province and the country. (Ritchie, 2010, p.1)

Introduction

The findings emerging from this study have been extracted from the data collected through interviews with participants, demographic information surveys, and my field notes. This chapter focuses on the processes of identifying the findings and revealing the significant elements of each finding as they relate to the research questions being considered in this study of instructional leadership within Alberta public charter schools.

Participants in the study were principals representing ten different charter school authorities within the province of Alberta. Each charter school is guided by a unique and specific mandate to address the learning needs of students through innovative educational practices. The schools in this study represent a wide variety of teaching and learning models: gifted education, direct instruction, English language acquisition, music immersion, inquiry-based learning, traditional learning (direct instruction), academic and personal excellence, girls-only programming, and intervention for at-risk youth.

Each participant was interviewed twice, eight to ten weeks apart. The first interviews lasted 60-90 minutes and concluded with a discussion of an instructional leadership goal that the participant would undertake prior to the second interview. The purpose of this goal setting activity was to engage participants in focused reflection on their leadership practice and how principals influence student success. The second
interview began by revisiting the individual goal and the perceived impact of the goal on enhancing instructional leadership.

Interview transcripts and field notes comprised the data from which themes emerged and findings became evident. The findings of this research fall under four qualitative statements:

1. **Relates to research question 1 and 2**: Instructional leadership in Alberta public charter schools is significantly influenced by the contextual variables that exist within each jurisdiction.

2. **Relates to research question 2**: Individual beliefs about teaching and learning inform instructional leadership practice. This finding relates to research question 1.

3. **Relates to research question 1**: Support of exemplary teaching practice is regarded as essential to fostering student success.

4. **Relates to research question 1**: Time management and establishing priorities for task completion play a key role in creating instructional leadership opportunities.

Following is a detailed discussion of each finding and the data to support the conclusions that have arisen from this study. While interpreting these findings it is important to re-emphasize that this study explored participants’ perceptions of their roles as instructional leaders and the degree to which principals influence student success in that capacity.

**Finding 1**: Instructional leadership in Alberta public charter schools is significantly influenced by the contextual variables that exist within each jurisdiction.
By virtue of their legislated mandate, public charter schools are required to offer a teaching and learning environment that is substantially different from that which is available in larger public school systems (Alberta Education, 2002). In their quest to achieve this objective, charter schools create their own context, consisting in large part of the charter itself, from which goals, targets, and measures are established to quantify the performance of the school in relation to their mandate. The diversity that follows such an evolutionary process leads to heterogeneous philosophies, beliefs, and actions in terms of instructional leadership. This research revealed three primary contextual variables that relate strongly to both research questions:

a. The charter mandate of each school;

b. The definition of student success;

c. The school culture.

**Charter mandate.** The charter document that informs teaching and learning within a public charter school is rooted in a pedagogical belief that the chosen educational model is the best one to guide a specific population of students to academic and social success. The principal of one school characterized the learning experience as one that “is giving students authentic learning opportunities because we believe that it’s only through providing authentic learning opportunities that you can really deeply engage students and you can start to develop those critical, creative thinking skills”\(^5\). He further explained that his school has “gone through a couple of transitions” in developing the current model of teaching and learning. By contrast, another principal commented:

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\(^5\) Direct quotations extracted from transcripts and field notes are not referenced or cited as an additional measure in preserving the anonymity of research participants.
The people here, the parents, the teachers, really believe in what we’re doing, and think we’re doing a good job, and really don’t want to change it. To transform, you know, they really think we received this charter for a purpose. And why would we do anything else, and so any kind of change in this school is much harder than it would be in a lot of the other charter schools, I think.

These disparate views on change and transformation are representative of the nature of each charter; the mandate itself contributes significantly to determining if a charter school will lead change in public education or operate from a foundational belief that the original purpose and vision of the school must remain intact in order to maintain the pedagogical integrity of the charter. Of the ten public charter schools represented in this study, six have modified the teaching and learning methodology within the school since their inceptions while the remaining four have maintained their initial focus in accordance with their original charter.

**Definition of student success.** Alberta Education (2013) provides a framework to define successful students as “Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit, who contribute to a strong and prosperous economy and society” (Ministerial Order #001/2013). Among the attributes of a successful learner, as defined by the Minister of Education, are: knowledge and skill acquisition, critical thinking, problem-solving, information management, innovation and creativity, creation of opportunities, multiple literacies, communication skills, global and cultural understanding, and career and life skills.

As diverse as the mandates of each public charter school may be, and notwithstanding the direction provided by Alberta Education, seeking a common
understanding of what constitutes ‘student success’ within the framework of this study resulted in a continuum of responses ranging from academic excellence to appropriate and healthy management of anxiety. In the context of one charter school the principal noted that:

The successes I see are pretty common, like we got one girl here who, two weeks ago, told me she couldn’t eat in the lunchroom, right. She’s eating there now. It’s still nerve wracking for her and I check on her but she’s doing it, right, and she was the person who was disengaged from school because of this anxiety.

While all participants agreed that student success is the primary goal of their schools, interpretation of what success looks like reveals divergent responses. The notion of what constitutes student success is an important contextual variable within this study as it shapes each participants response to the first research question (Appendix F).

When asked to define student success within a participating school, one principal commented, "If I’ve done everything I can to maximize the time, and the quality of the experience that everybody has in the building every day. If I’ve done that, then I've done my best to ensure student success." The richness and value of learning experiences as an indicator of student success was echoed by another participant who observed that formative assessment practices (ongoing, anecdotal, and interactive assessment as part of the learning process) are replacing summative, grade-based measures of success as a means of reporting on student progress. A participant whose school embraces formative assessment noted that students are more likely to take calculated risks in order to demonstrate their understanding of key concepts and as a result display less anxiety with respect to their learning.
Another participant was unable to articulate a school wide definition of student success, as the parameters of success for each child are the product of consultations between school personnel and parents, with a focus on addressing individual student needs. Within this charter school program, students’ levels of knowledge and readiness to learn are identified upon entrance to the school and provide a foundation upon which student success is identified and measured individually. One principal, while espousing the importance of fostering student leadership as an indicator of success, noted that annual school rankings compiled and publicly distributed by the Fraser Institute create a business model among charter schools, whereby parents gauge school effectiveness by the quantitative data that is used to measure school effectiveness. It is worth noting that not all public charter schools in Alberta are subject to ranking by the Fraser Institute report. Only elementary schools that teach both grades 3 and 6, and thereby administer standardized provincial achievement tests, are compared with other schools of the same grade configuration for the purpose of the rankings. Those that teach other grade configurations, such as a grade 4 to 9 middle school model, are not included in the report.

Reaching consensus among a school’s stakeholders on how to identify and measure student success can be a challenging process. One participant observed that while the teaching staff and school leaders value critical and creative thinking through problem-based learning opportunities, many parents rely on letter grades and percentages to measure their child’s development as a learner. As a participating principal observed of his school community, “At the end of the day it’s the report card that matters, and it’s on percents.”

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6 The Fraser Institute is a Canadian public policy research and educational organization that produces an annual report ranking schools based on academic performance (www.fraserinstitute.org).
Some participants included the student voice in their definition of success by noting that the most successful students are those who are intrinsically motivated to learn and who “want to be here”. While the scope of this study focuses on the perceptions of principals, it is interesting to observe the influential nature of other stakeholders (parents, teachers, and students) on the participants’ definition of student success. One principal pointed out that it was not his responsibility to create a definition of student success, but his role was to engage stakeholders in a conversation to generate a common vision of success. The contextually-based responses of the participants to the question of defining student success resonates along a continuum from a quantitative, numeric system of measuring knowledge, skills, and attributes, to a qualitative system of determining success based on student needs and individual goals that may be academic, social, emotional or behavioural in nature. In the words of one participant, “Success is based on how closely they (the students) come to fulfilling their mission, and we need to support students into a formal relationship with education.”

Some public charter schools find other variables influencing a collective perception of student success. Principals of schools that prepare students to attend senior high school in larger public systems commented that the success of their students continues to be measured after students leave the charter school setting. Preparedness for high school and beyond is viewed as an important indicator of a successful charter school experience, albeit one that is difficult to maintain any control over. Nonetheless, it was a common sentiment among participants that student success included fostering capacity among students to be productive, confident, and capable members of society who could “enact their own vision of the future.”
The range of responses from participants when asked to define student success within the context of their own schools points to an important variable that will influence the remaining findings of this study. The goals and vision of each school vary considerably and student success is therefore reflected by the intent of the charter and the learning and teaching approaches that are embraced by the school. As a result, consensus on what constitutes student success will be elusive, and perhaps undesirable, given the objective of charter schools to explore a diverse range of teaching and learning experiences. The influence of this variable on instructional leadership practice is significant as the question of student success is always at the forefront of school goals, and becomes a key component of school culture.

**School culture.** Most public charter schools occupy facilities that have been vacated by other school jurisdictions due to declining enrolment or readjustment of program delivery models. As such, charter schools often draw students from a wide geographical area and must address issues related to transportation, traffic flow around the school, and geographical accessibility in order to create a viable school. As one principal noted, “we may not be a community school, but we are certainly a school community.” The challenge of developing a positive school culture in the absence of a surrounding community to provide support relies on the contributions and influences of many stakeholders: the school leadership, teachers, parents, students, and the board of directors.

In this regard, participants were in agreement that fundamental to the evolution of a healthy and vibrant school culture is a shared vision for the school and what student success will ‘look like’ within that context. School leaders are viewed as the gatekeepers
of school culture as they must have a clear sense of the school and how each of its component parts fits together as a community. Teachers who are committed to school values and mission provide important reinforcement and nurturing of the desired culture. Similarly, parental engagement is also considered integral to the success of most public charter schools. There are exceptions, however, as two of the participants reported low parental involvement due to the nature of their charter and the demographic profile of the schools. One school, in fact, reported that student report cards were kept at the school as a way to compel parents to visit the school during reporting periods and interact with teachers to monitor their child’s progress.

Student engagement in community building within a school was viewed as an integral component of instructional leadership as it fostered a sense of ownership and pride within the school culture; youth leadership opportunities, particularly for the oldest students within a school population are seen as effective strategies for empowering students to contribute positively to culture building in their school. The role of the Board of Directors must also be taken into consideration when examining the importance of school culture. The absence of clear guidelines from Alberta Education for the election or appointment of directors to, and the composition of, a charter school board has led to some boards being comprised of only parents while others have a blend of parental and community member involvement. Notwithstanding board composition, the role of the directors is to ensure the school is operated responsibly and maintains financial accountability as well as adherence to the charter goals. Board members are influential in establishing, supporting, and maintaining school culture through the relationship that is developed with the school community. As one principal noted:
Our Board is entirely made up of parents. They have changed the bylaws now and again to try and perhaps include outside people but it hasn’t happened yet. They’ve upped the number from five to seven, the possibility of having seven for next year, but there’s still only five on there this year. So there’s a lot of control.

The diversity found within the contextual variables of charter mandates, definition of student success, and school culture, represent the strength of charter schools in forging autonomous educational programs designed to meet the needs of specific student populations. These same variables also highlight the perceptual differences that are a recurring theme of this study. Instructional leadership practice is formulated by a combination of these contextual variables and personal or professional beliefs about teaching and learning that weigh significantly in defining the priorities assigned to instructional leadership and the manner in which those priorities are operationalized within a school setting.

**Finding 2: Individual beliefs about teaching and learning inform instructional leadership practice.** During the first interview with each participant, I explored their professional journey to gain an understanding of the significant events or people that may have contributed to shaping their instructional leadership practice. From these discussions emerged three thematic perspectives:

a. Compatibility or conflict may exist between a principal’s personal or professional beliefs and the vision for the school that is articulated in the charter;

b. The degree to which personal or professional beliefs and experiences influence instructional leadership practice;
c. The value of relationships, trust, and the nurturing of a positive and healthy school culture.

The importance of each participant’s personal journey into school leadership cannot be overstated. As the data reveals, experiences as a student, teacher, and school leader combine with personal values to consolidate individual instructional leadership practice. It is interesting to note at the outset of this discussion that of the ten principals participating in this study, six have spent their entire careers to this point in public charter schools and four of those have been at the same charter school since they entered the teaching profession.

**Compatible or conflicting beliefs.** Without exception the participants in this study voiced their commitment to providing an approach to instructional leadership that they believe provides the greatest opportunities to achieve the goals of the charter and for students to realize success within their respective educational programs. To this end they all believe their school is providing the best model of teaching and learning to meet the needs of the population they serve within the resources at their disposal. Most public charter schools began with few students and limited space, prompting one participant to comment on the growth of her school by reflecting,

> It was really interesting and exciting to be part of our foundational growth; I would take the lead on many of our initiatives, mentoring new teachers as they joined our professional learning community, as well as making sure that the vision of our school stayed strong and true but also evolved with our community.

The commitment to fostering teaching and leadership practice that aligns with charter goals resonated from all participants in this study. In one instance, a principal indicated
that while he is wholly committed to his school’s charter, mission, and vision, there is some inner contradiction between these principles and his own beliefs about teaching and learning. It also became evident from four other participants that they felt part of their leadership role was to evoke change in their school even if doing so would fundamentally change the approach to teaching and learning as mandated by the charter. As one participant stated, “my whole job is to remove blockages for the staff, for the students you know, if there’s a thing you want to do and it’s safe and not going to get us sued, then why are we waiting? You know, why are we doing anything else?”

Another principal echoed this sentiment when asked how challenges or roadblocks were addressed within instructional leadership practice: “I’m not a roadblock person, so you know what? I’m going over it or around it. I will find a way.” Other participants also expressed this resolve to effect change in their capacity as instructional leaders, that was perceived to be in the best interests of student success. One principal referred to an approach known as ‘pressure and support’ whereby aspects of teaching and learning that were perceived to be in need of improvement became focal points of staff professional development (pressure) and by engaging the staff to share best practices (support), change occurred in a collaborative manner.

The influence of personal or professional beliefs and experiences on instructional leadership practice. The interviews conducted during this study generated data regarding each participant’s perceptions of their impact on student success. The perceptual orientation of this research engaged participants in dialogue on how their personal and professional belief structures have shaped their instructional leader practice. Three key questions guided this aspect of the interviews and focused on
defining instructional leadership, examining the operational components of instructional leadership within their school setting, and the perceived impact of their instructional leadership on student success.

Without exception, every participant acknowledged the importance of an instructional leader as a resource and supporter of quality teaching practice. Responsiveness to the needs of teachers was seen as a critical element in ultimately supporting students to achieve academic and social success. As one principal commented, “instructional leadership needs to be authentic in practice; raise the ceiling so everyone knows what we stand for and then move forward. Always ask ‘why’, and ensure all actions are done with the best intentions of students in mind.” This observation draws together the importance of an instructional leader nurturing a shared vision that keeps student success at the forefront of the school’s objectives while continuously striving for innovative and creative strategies to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

Professional experiences as a teacher also contributed to formulation of participants’ views on instructional leadership. A principal, who has been at the same charter school since its inception, noted that there had been seven principals in the school during the first five years of operation. When he assumed the role of principal he was wholly committed to reversing that trend and bringing about stability along with a renewed focus on student success. Other participants drew on their experiences with previous school jurisdictions or the influence of professional mentors who contributed to development of their leadership framework.

The value of relationships, trust, and human capital in establishing a positive, healthy school culture. Key words emerged from the interview transcripts and field
notes that resonated as being essential to an understanding of instructional leadership and ultimately to addressing the research questions under consideration. When asked what constituted successful leadership, the initial response was often ‘relationships’, quickly followed by ‘trust’. All participants endorse the necessity of relational trust in fostering healthy culture within the staff, among the students, and throughout the school community generally.

One of the participants, together with the leadership team of the school and with considerable input from staff and students, developed frameworks for exemplary teaching and learning that focus on sixteen dimensions considered essential for student success. These dimensions are further categorized into four themes: Who are we, What do we do, Why do we do it, and How do we do it? Prominent throughout these frameworks is the collective value of developing human capital within a school; investing in building positive relationships, establishing genuine trust, and fostering a culture of respect within the school community in order to ultimately realize not only student success but also to achieve the stated goals of the charter. One participant summarized the importance of relationship building as, “communication to build common understanding and effective relationships amongst our community and networking outside of our community to meet individual student needs.”

While positive professional relationships between school leaders and teachers were a clear objective of all participants, some principals identified significant challenges while others had developed strategies to overcome perceived roadblocks to relational trust. A principal with over ten years experience in leadership at the same school noted that employing coaching techniques and conversations “conveys respect for the teacher”
and facilitates dialogue in a manner that stimulates problem solving and professional growth. The notion of coaching as a leadership strategy was echoed by four principals whose comments found agreement in the sense that coaching was seen as a form of mentoring and was therefore non-evaluative in nature. The perception by teachers that conversations with instructional leaders are evaluative by default was echoed by several principals participating in this study and was seen as a challenge in fostering open, honest, and transparent professional conversations.

Another principal gauges the strength of relationships with teachers and students by the degree of spontaneity with which he can unexpectedly visit classrooms. To this end, his “goal is to be able to walk into a classroom and not be noticed.” Another cites the importance of “being responsive to teacher’s voices and the needs within the school” as a way to determine staff satisfaction and reinforce trust among members of the school community. The principal of a school with a significant population of first nations students’ uses culturally based, ‘round table’ discussions that often convey ideas and suggestions through storytelling. He describes the essence of the school’s charter as “relationship-based…but it’s more than lip service, like we really don’t get anywhere until they trust us a little bit, you know.” From this basis of trust he is convinced his staff have become more innovative in their thinking and in their teaching practice.

**Finding 3: Support of teachers’ professional learning is regarded as essential to fostering student success.** Finding 2 referred to the importance that participant principals place on teacher efficacy and exemplary educational practice. In order to more deeply understand the role of instructional leaders within Alberta public charter schools it is necessary to examine the perceptions of principals in defining that role. Table 3 details
selected responses from participants when asked to share both their definition of instructional leadership and how instructional leadership is operationalized within their school. This information directly relates to Finding 3 as it demonstrates the extent to which principals recognize the value of providing relevant, timely, and authentic support for professional learning and growth.

Table 3. Participant Definitions of Instructional Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Instructional Leadership Defined</th>
<th>Instructional Leadership Operationalized</th>
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| 1           | • Building capacity with teachers to allow them to affect student learning.  
             • Describes role as 'bureaucratic' - more time required outside of classrooms.  
             • Roadblocks to effective Instructional Leadership are the time constraints imposed by all the administrative 'managerial' tasks. | • Goal to build capacity within staff.  
• Changing dynamics in upper leadership - less control by principal.  
• Only 5 PD days per year - PLC's meet on their own time.  
• Teachers resistant to taking lead on PD.  
• Would like to do more PD with staff |
| 2           | • To ensure a common understanding and vision of what inquiry looks like.  
             • Supporting teachers to get there through providing collaborative planning time. | • Desire to work more directly with teachers (collaborative planning) and eliminate some of the time impediments that interfere.  
• Needs to have a purpose for going into classrooms - not just to put in an appearance.  
• Direct support to teachers. Exemplary Instructional Leadership framework provides alignment between support for teachers and ensuring success for students. |
| 3           | • Being aware of what best practice is, sharing that with staff, and picking and choosing those practices that make sense in that context - providing necessary 'pressure and support'.  
             • Important to still have a small teaching role (writing process) - sees it as direct impact on student success.  
             • Responding to student needs, recognizing teaching strengths, and developing programming that accommodates both. | • Providing just the right amount of pressure on teachers to do something with the adequate amount of support.  
• Tricky to find the right balance and not exert too much pressure.  
• Conversations with staff are critical. |
| 4           | • Informal class visits; challenge for teachers to accept these as non-evaluative.  
             • Engages teachers in reflective discussions on what he observes. | • Collaborative approach to supporting teachers.  
• Challenge is the other responsibilities of being the sole administrator in the school. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Instructional Leadership Defined</th>
<th>Instructional Leadership Operationalized</th>
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</table>
| 5           | • Remove blockages for staff and students to achieve mission;  
• Removing blockages includes getting rid of 'old baggage' such as outdated approaches (as perceived by the principal) | • Models desired outcomes for staff and students.  
• Engages community in striving to achieve school goals and garners support from external agencies to do so. |
| 6           | • Asking teachers to "challenge their notions of what constitutes being engaged." Are we checking for the things that matter? | • Flattened structure with staff input on all important decisions.  
• Coaching model of leadership is embedded in Instructional Leadership practice, PD goals, and teaching and learning framework.  
• Coach's job is to ask questions that help the teacher to reflect and connect ideas. |
| 7           | • Champion of every student's success;  
• Create connections across the school community | • Open, trustworthy, honoring innovation and passion for what they do. |
| 8           | • Being a knowledgeable resource person that can provide support and encouragement;  
• Provide perspective for the group and individuals;  
• Trying to get into classrooms to provide support;  
• Teacher mentorship;  
• Professional relationships (including facilitating mentoring relationships between veteran teachers and new teachers).  
• Acknowledge what teachers are doing well.  
• Being responsive to teacher’s voices and the needs within the school (i.e. - timetable changes). | • Seeks opportunities to visit classes, either by invitation or by making an excuse to be there (eg - needing a place to work)  
• School-wide project based on mentorship is a catalyst for collaboration.  
• Teacher evaluation is evidence based and sets up conversations reflecting on practice.  
• Lead teachers identified in each subject area and for accelerated programs in math and LA. Providing catalyst and support for teachers to improve practice.  
• Respect for individual approaches to teaching mirrors individualized programming for students.  
Fair ≠ Equal (fairness more important than equality) |
| 9           | • Instructional Leadership needs to be authentic in practice - raise the ceiling so everyone knows what we stand for and then move forward.  
• Always ask 'why' - and ensure that all actions are done with the best intentions of students in mind.  
• Hierarchy of values that are so deeply embedded within you that you cannot deviate from them.  
• Must have a solid knowledge base along with intellectual honesty.  
• Must have tact, integrity, authenticity, empathy and trust.  
• OK for Instructional Leaders' to fail - keep it authentic and admit mistakes. | • Student-focused ideology;  
• need to support teachers in their practice in order to foster student success;  
• "who do you have to be and what do you have to know to act in the best interests of students?" "Theory of positive disintegration" modeling the importance of relationships for teachers and building trust as part of relationship.  
• Recognized need for a lot of PD in giftedness - development of PLC's. |
Among the common elements comprising participants’ definitions of instructional leadership are three aspects of support for teachers that are worthy of further exploration:

a. Professional learning;

b. Distributed leadership;

c. Capacity building.

All participants in this study acknowledged that teachers are the primary instructional resource for students. As such, supporting and mentoring teachers to continually improve their practice is viewed as a primary function of instructional leadership.

The contextually distinct nature of each participating school provides an important connection between the school charter; the beliefs, knowledge, skills, and attributes of the principal; instructional leadership practice; and perceived student success. In order to maintain anonymity of participants, however, the data contained in Table 3 is not intended to identify participants or their schools. With that caveat in mind, examples will be highlighted to provide evidence of the link between the charter, principal beliefs/values, and instructional leadership practice within selected schools.

**Professional learning.** Blase and Blase (2000) acknowledge a strong relationship between instructional leadership and improvement in teaching practice when teachers are encouraged to participate in meaningful and timely professional learning and are engaged in self-reflection and dialogue of their practice. The commitment to professional growth and development varies considerably between public charter schools. As illustration of
this point, one school schedules five professional development days for teachers during a school year while another provides sixteen days for professional learning and collaboration among staff. The other schools involved in this study fall between these two points on a continuum and most have implemented a professional learning community (PLC) format that espouses an expectation for teachers to share their practice and learn from each other as they strive to improve the quality of educational experience for students. In the context of this study, PLC’s are intended to stimulate collaboration among teachers and with school leaders in order to gain deeper understanding of student needs and how to achieve the goals of the charter. The views of the ten participating principals on collaboration and professional learning are as diverse as the charters they represent. For example, only one school provides scheduled collaborative planning time for teaching teams to meet during the school day. Others provide release time for teachers to collaborate on the basis of need while the remainder requires PLCs to meet outside of instructional hours and in the case of one multi-campus jurisdiction, grade level teachers from all campuses meet to ensure ‘collaborative coherence’ in the delivery of curricula, a core value that is considered essential to the success of the program.

The alignment of professional learning with public charter school goals becomes apparent when considering the conversations with other principals on this topic. In one school, a principal who recognizes the individual strengths and challenges of teachers in developing professional learning opportunities, suggests that doing so is a logical extension of the individualized nature of student learning plans that are required by the school’s charter, and is also compatible with her own beliefs and values as an educator. As she points out,
I was raised in the system. I mean, out of university I went straight to a charter school. Then I went to another jurisdiction and I’ve returned to a charter school, and so some of it is because my own personal belief and philosophies are in alignment with the school and I have a real interest in alternative forms of education and so the charter school was god sent.

Another principal notes that his teachers do not like taking risks and prefer a “direct leadership approach”, although he is quick to add that he and his staff recognize the benefits of distributed leadership and expanded opportunities for professional growth and are working to further build capacity in these areas in the future.

**Distributed leadership.** Assigning leadership responsibilities to teachers in varying degrees is relatively common practice within public charter schools. Six of the participants described models of distributed leadership within their schools that identified areas of expertise and interest among teaching staff who were ready and willing to assume those roles of increased responsibility. One other school outlined a future plan for identifying curriculum leaders who will assume a mentorship and coaching role in working with teachers and school leaders to further create opportunities for innovation and enhanced learning experiences.

In one participating school the principal considers that the distribution of leadership occurs ‘naturally’ based on ideas that are generated by teachers. As an innovative idea takes shape, a member of the staff with interest or expertise may choose to assume leadership in that area for a brief or extended period of time, depending on the scope of the project or innovation. Another school that follows a similar protocol strives to ensure that teachers who are not selected for specific leadership tasks are considered
when other opportunities arise. In yet another school the principal has introduced
‘divisional leadership’ whereby teacher leaders conduct mini-staff meetings and report
their discussions to the school leadership team. As Harris (2005) points out, distributed
leadership is not a uniform, homogenous paradigm that can be inserted seamlessly in
every school without regard for the specific context of the school. The process of
identifying opportunities for the distribution of leadership responsibilities and managing
the organizational change that may result either organically or by design is an important
element of effective instructional leadership and one which is integral to building
leadership capacity within public charter schools (Harris & Spillane, 2008).

**Capacity building.** Distributing leadership roles provides opportunities for
teachers to gain experience and assume responsibilities in areas of school administration
traditionally managed by a leadership team. Building capacity in school leadership is
also viewed by the participants of this study as a tangible benefit extending from
distributed leadership. Lambert (2002, 2005) cites a constructivist approach to leadership
as a consummate form of building capacity through the co-creation of knowledge and the
development of relational trust among stakeholders.

Principals participating in this study viewed capacity building as an important
aspect of instructional leadership practice despite the reality that there are limited
opportunities for teachers to move into leadership within most public charter schools. By
way of understanding this limitation, it is worth considering that six of the participating
schools are single campus authorities, of which three are aspiring to open a second
campus if facilities become available. Of the four multi-campus charter schools, three
are divided by grade levels and are not replicating their school model in its entirety at
each campus. Only one public charter school in this study has multiple campuses at each grade configuration.

The limitation on access to formal leadership roles in public charter schools is perceived by participants to be further impetus for distributing leadership and providing teachers with experiences that are fulfilling and rewarding beyond their classroom assignments. In addition to the motivational aspect of distributed leadership is the very tangible reality of succession planning for school leaders who may be nearing retirement or who move into other career paths. Participants identified the need to explore leadership development in order to establish a viable ‘pool’ of potential school leaders with the interest, expertise, and commitment to assume those roles.

The principal of one participating school noted that while the school was founded on a philosophy of administratively controlled leadership and decision-making, and was therefore adhering to the charter mandate; he recognized the value in developing greater leadership capacity among other staff members. The challenge inherent in fostering such an initiative may be the dissonance between the essential values and beliefs held by formal school leadership and teachers who are comfortable with a directed and vertical leadership configuration. As he observed,

Because of the top down approach, it (leadership) was always repressed. I think that teachers – not all teachers – but a lot of teachers fundamentally want to do more you know. Or they want more control. And that's, I think, that's the direction we’re looking at next year, is how to build capacity, and have the teachers fill more roles.
Finding 4: **Time management and establishing priorities for task completion** play a key role in creating instructional leadership opportunities. A recurring comment of principals participating in this study makes reference to their efforts to find balance between the time they have available in a day and the demands placed on their time by the number and magnitude of responsibilities and tasks they must complete. Timperley (2011) noted that neglecting administrative tasks in favour of providing professional support for teachers was a common characteristic of leaders in schools that demonstrated exceptional teaching and learning.

During the interviews for this study, frequent references were made by principals to their desire to spend more time in classrooms, working directly with students and supporting teachers in classroom practice through collaborative planning or team teaching. One principal was quick to articulate his perceptions of the struggle to balance time with priorities by making the following observation:

> I had an epiphany earlier this year and the epiphany was that it’s not a lack of time that prevents me from doing some of these really hands-on, direct instructional leadership kind of activities, it’s not that. It’s the number of things demanding my time and the number of transitions each day that every time you shift from one thing to another, you lose time in that transition, in that shift, and I think that’s really it. It’s an incredible number of demands and it would be far easier if you just know, could say, on Tuesday it’s these 3 things that I’m going to focus on and that’s it. But the reality is on Tuesday it’s these 30 things that you focus on and deal with and address and that’s really the challenge. It’s the number of things and the number of transitions we have to deal with.
There is a very tangible connection between the establishment of task priorities and the contextual variables discussed in Finding 1. The roles of the superintendent, Board of Directors, teachers, support staff, parents, students, and external community stakeholders all place demands on the principal of a public charter school, often in ways that are significantly different than their counterparts in larger public jurisdictions.

With the exception of one charter school jurisdiction involved in this study, none of the others have a staffed central office to address issues such as budgeting, accountability reporting, and strategic planning. These obligations must still be fulfilled within all public charter schools, and in the absence of central office staff to assume the responsibility, it reverts to the principal and the school leadership team to complete these necessary tasks, even if doing so leads to the perception of reduced time for effective instructional leadership.

By way of illustrating the changing time commitments and priorities, the principal of one charter school lamented that, due to increasing enrolment “the superintendent at the time said, ‘OK we need you more and more…out of the classroom’. And I found that kind of sad, ‘cause I, I missed teaching horribly, quite honestly.” Three of the principals participating in this study maintain a relatively minor teaching assignment by choice, and a further three expressed the desire to be able to teach but cannot due to other responsibilities. Those that still teach view it as an integral part of their instructional leadership practice. A principal who has seen his teaching time diminish in recent years appreciates the direct influence he has on student success through teaching but also recognizes a larger benefit to the student population by providing teachers with the resources and support necessary to enhance their practice.
Chapter Summary. The findings of this study have significant implications for defining the role of, and supporting, instructional leaders within public charter schools and other school jurisdictions. The contextual variables that influence the culture and operation of a school are the factors that make school communities unique and that dictate the need for a differentiated approach to leadership that does not expect all schools to conform to a specific instructional leadership ‘style’. It must also be acknowledged that public charter schools are not necessarily community schools but are very definitely school communities that create their own identity and culture.

Beliefs about teaching and learning are a further influence on instructional leadership as so much of this role is embedded in the strength of the relationships that are developed and maintained within a school community. Individual experiences as students, teachers, and school leaders combine with contextual variables unique to the school to shape an instructional leaders philosophy and approach to instructional leadership. This study has shown that those value systems can be thrown into conflict if the leader’s inherent beliefs about learning, teaching, and leading are not aligned with the school’s charter and guiding principles.

Those instructional leaders who find ready agreement between their own belief systems and those espoused by the school charter maintain that they are able to support teachers in improving their practice and ultimately foster student success. In keeping with the unique nature of each public charter school, the definition of student success varies depending on the charter and is often comprised of different, yet valued, perspectives from teachers, students, and parents. Interpreting these findings becomes increasingly complex in the absence of a common understanding of what constitutes
success for students, however it is also what validates the perceptual orientation of this study and provides credibility to the views of the participants within their own school contexts.

Finding 3 reported that while instructional leaders strive to spend more of their time working directly with students, they generally acknowledge that their greatest impact on student success is derived through their support of teachers in improving professional practice. Even those school leaders who still maintain a minimal teaching assignment concede that the impact they may have on the few students with whom they come in direct contact pales by comparison to the indirect effect they have on their student population through support of professional learning, distributed leadership opportunities, and capacity building for innovation and improved practice.

The issue of allocating and prioritizing time to address the multitude of responsibilities assigned to school leaders in public charter schools is one that emerged frequently in this study but also appears to be an aspect of leadership practice that requires critical thinking and problem solving strategies to address rather than being seen as a fundamental roadblock to supporting students and teachers. Participants in this study shared a common perception that their role as a charter school leader included duties outside of those normally associated with instructional leadership and therefore scheduling and planning to make the best use of available time was an essential component of their daily practice. The significance of these findings will become evident when the data is analyzed for deeper meaning in the context of current instructional leadership literature (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).
Chapter 5

Analysis, Interpretation, and Synthesis of Findings

Most school leaders sincerely believe that they make decisions that are in the best interest of students. But it is hard for them to test the validity of their belief without awareness of what they are assuming to be true and the ability to evaluate their assumptions against up-to-date evidence. (Robinson, 2011, p. 23)

The purpose of this modified participatory action research study was to explore Alberta public charter school principals’ perceptions of the impact their instructional leadership practice has on student success. The findings discussed in Chapter 4 emerged from participant interviews and researcher field notes made during the interviews. In order to provide structure and validity to these findings, they are analyzed within the context of contemporary research and literature on instructional leadership practices. Through this process the data will be analyzed, interpreted, and synthesized in order to ensure the following research questions have been adequately addressed:

1. How do Alberta public charter school principals perceive that their instructional leadership practice impacts student success?
2. To what extent is it necessary that the approach to leadership align with the approach to student learning in the school?

The qualitative nature of this study means the results may be interpreted to varying degrees based on the individual perspectives, biases, or experiences of the reader. In this chapter the data will be scrutinized to reveal patterns or ambiguities, and will also be analyzed relative to pertinent literature to reach a set of conclusions that satisfies the research questions. In order to more succinctly and critically address the findings in this study, three analytic categories have been identified (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). These categories serve as a framework to more deeply determine the meaning and significance
of each finding with relation to the research questions and address implications for instructional leadership practice and further research in this area (see Appendix B):

1. The influence of contextual variables within public charter schools on instructional leadership practice.

2. Principals’ perception that their greatest impact on student success was realized through supporting the professional growth and learning of teachers.

3. Reconciliation of personal beliefs and values with the school charter in order to provide effective instructional leadership.

These analytic categories will be examined in relation to similarities and differences in each participant’s perceptions of their instructional leadership role and their impact on student success, and furthermore as it relates to current literature and research conducted on this topic. It will then be possible to determine if this research corroborates prior studies or contributes a new perspective and understanding of instructional leadership to the body of knowledge that already exists.

**Analytic Category 1: The Influence of Contextual Variables Within Public Charter Schools on Instructional Leadership Practice**

Both research questions under consideration in this study are addressed by examining the contextual variables present within each participant’s respective school. Hallinger’s (2011) ‘Leadership for Learning’ model (see p. 27) provides a useful framework of generic variables that can be adapted to any school setting in which student success is the ultimate goal. The context of each school, and specifically in the case of this study the charter that provides the educational focus of each participant school,
provides a powerful distinction between instructional leadership in some schools, as well as a correlating force between others.

Hentschke and Caldwell (2005) characterize the philosophy of many charter schools in describing their ‘entrepreneurial model’ of leadership that advocates innovation and autonomy to meet the needs of a specific group of learners that is not being addressed elsewhere. The unique set of contextual variables that emerges when such a model is implemented will translate to significant variations in teaching, learning, and leading. The observation of one participant that her students are “wired differently and require additional social and emotional support” illustrates the localized nature of a contextual variable that will influence a principal’s approach to instructional leadership within a specific school.

The chosen learning and teaching approach within a public charter school may be viewed as the antecedent variable that gives shape to the context of the school itself. The specific needs and nature of students being attracted to the program, the teachers being recruited and retained, and the school leadership team that is developed, are all spawned from the initial intent of the school charter and thereby have a significant impact on the establishment of school culture, the sense of community that develops, and most relevant to this study, the nature of instructional leadership practice that evolves from all the contextual variables associated in a given school.

The contextual variables present in the public charter schools participating in this study reflect Schlechty’s (2009) view that transformational schools must fundamentally alter the pre-existing social structures by introducing new ideas and approaches to teaching, learning, and leading. It may be argued that when each public charter school
was granted its initial mandate, Schlechty’s (2009) notion of ‘disruptive innovation’ was being fulfilled by the incongruence that developed between new charter schools and older, established systems. This argument is further validated by the fact that larger public school jurisdictions responded to charter schools over time by opening parallel, specialized educational programs that mirrored those offered in charter schools.

In terms of analyzing the importance of Schlechty’s (2009) premise with respect to this study, it is worth noting that four of the participating principals maintain that they are actively and continuously stimulating innovative teaching and learning within their schools. Four other participating schools have made minor changes to their programs while keeping the original intent of their charters intact, while the remaining two schools maintain that parents want the program to remain aligned with the original charter and therefore any change or innovation would be perceived as a threat to the integrity of the school program.

The issue of a public charter school remaining static and not continuously seeking innovative and creative teaching practices is viewed by Ritchie (2010) as a significant challenge facing the future of charter schools in Alberta. Based on the findings of this study, this concern is validated from the data indicating that some public charter schools regard maintenance of the status quo as fulfillment of their charter mandate. As one principal noted, “the people here, the parents, the teachers, really believe in what we’re doing, and think we’re doing a good job, and don’t really want to change it.” While there is some disparity among charter school principals regarding the value of innovation and change within the scope of their respective charters, Alberta Education (2009) has expressed the view that:
charter schools could also offer the opportunity to explore and develop the education programs we will need to support the transition to a robust, knowledge-centred economy based in Alberta. The next generation for Alberta’s charter schools should serve as provincial innovative education research centres (p. 2).

It is worth bearing in mind that, while there is considerable variation in acceptance of innovative practice between public charter schools, all the principals participating in this study believed they were fulfilling their responsibilities in accordance with the expectations of Alberta Education and their respective Boards of Directors.

**Summary.** The contextual variables present within each public charter school play a significant role in determining the ‘look’ of instructional leadership within that school. While recognizing similarities between charter school programs, principals participating in this study are also quick to highlight the unique nature of their program and how it satisfies a learning need for a specific student population. Given the disparity of contextual variables present, it becomes a complex matter to analyze data across or between schools. It is therefore more helpful in addressing the research questions of this study to explore the role of contextual variables from a holistic perspective, essentially acknowledging that each school is substantially different and further understanding that instructional leadership practice is influenced by the variables in question.

**Analytic Category 2: Principals’ perceptions that their greatest impact on student success was realized through supporting the professional growth and learning of teachers.**
Leithwood and Louis (2012), at the conclusion of a five-year study into the relationships between school leadership and student learning, found the greatest agreement between principals and teachers on three key practices:

1. Focusing on the school goals and expectations for student achievement.
2. Keeping track of teachers’ professional needs.
3. Creating structures and opportunities for teachers to collaborate (p. 62).

The perceptions of principals participating in this study concur with these results by acknowledging that support of teacher professional learning and growth has the greatest impact on student success. One principal noted the following:

It’s adjusting the schedule so that there is common planning time. It’s making sure that when a teacher comes and says, “you know this might sound like a weird request for professional development but there’s this opportunity and this is how it connects to my teacher learning plan”, to support them in that as much as we can. So it’s really about removing barriers and providing support. It’s working with the teachers and supporting them directly.

Responsiveness to the needs of teachers in terms of scheduled planning time, professional learning opportunities, and being receptive to suggestions for improved teaching and learning are indicative of instructional leadership practice that positively influences student success through the indirect circuitry of supporting professional learning and growth while eliminating unnecessary challenges.

Another participant characterized the principal’s key role as one that goes beyond support for teachers:
I keep everybody safe. I support everyone to get everything done so the students can do the best that they can in their learning. So the teacher needs help, it’s my job. If the support staff person needs help, whatever people need to do so that the teacher in the classroom can do their job to support the student who then can be the best they can be.

As these statements reveal, it is the prevailing consensus of principals participating in this study that their primary instructional leadership function is to support teacher practice with the ultimate objective of fostering student success. The data points to the importance of relationships and the establishment of trust as key factors in principals effectively providing the support for teacher growth and learning. Developing sustainable relational trust, however, can be challenging. Lambert (2002) emphasizes the importance of trust as part of a constructivist approach to leadership that also requires continual reflection to ensure values, beliefs, and the ‘moral purpose’ remain focused and intact. One principal participating in this study candidly shared that,

I wouldn’t say yet that we’re all on the same vision page and I would say that that’s part of a staff getting to know you and I mean I spend hours on relationships, right, like I spend all day speaking and talking and spending time in conversations, working with staff and students, and teachers.

The complexity of developing and sustaining trust within professional relationships is a fundamental building block of leadership practice. Glaser (2005) reinforces the importance of relational trust within a successful organization by suggesting that a state of ‘coherence’ exists when a common vision and objective are shared by all members of
a team, with adjustments being made to satisfy the needs of individuals as the vision is operationalized.

Robinson (2011) identifies four components of relational trust that are reflected by the findings of this study. Interpersonal respect, regard for others, professional competency, and personal integrity contribute to strong relationships with teachers, parents, students, and all other members of the school community. The data that is evident from this study corroborates Robinson’s (2011) position on relational trust but also provides a reciprocal perspective that developing trust requires effort and commitment from all stakeholders. As one principal observed, “instructional leadership is part of the process of community engagement and all levels of the community contribute to student success.”

While the sense of a cohesive and trusting community is clearly important to the quality of educational experiences, the data emerging from this study focused primarily on the relationships between principals, teachers, and students to determine the impact of instructional leadership practice on student success. As the data reveals, principals perceive that their greatest influence extends from the support they provide to teachers in terms of professional learning, resource allocation, and day-to-day support of teaching practice. One participating principal, who has spent more than ten years in the same school, noted that,

I see that teachers are most motivated by the success of their own students so if they would try something, and they see that it has a positive effect for the classroom or for a particular student, I think they’re far more likely to pursue further developing innovation or expanding it. So I think my role is questions, its
information, its providing opportunities to dialogue and it’s keeping the focus on it.

Robinson (2011) describes the multi-faceted manner in which professional learning may occur within a school setting. Citing studies that examined the degree to which principals supported and participated in professional development with teachers and the achievement levels that were subsequently realized by those schools, Robinson (2011) stresses the importance of school leaders actively participating in professional learning “to learn in detail about the challenges the learning presents and the conditions teachers require to succeed” (p. 105).

Leithwood and Jantzi (in Leithwood & Louis, 2012) extend this thinking even further by reporting the results of a five-year study into collective leadership. For the purposes of their discussion, collective leadership “refers to the extent of influence that organizational members and stakeholders exert on decisions in their schools” (p. 11). Their study revealed three key findings that have implications in addressing the research questions under consideration here:

1. Collective leadership has a stronger influence on student achievement than does individual leadership.
2. In higher performing schools, principals, assistant principals, and district leaders retain the highest levels of influence, but almost all people are granted greater influence than in the case of lower performing schools.
3. Collective leadership is linked to student achievement indirectly, through its effects on teacher motivation and teachers’ workplace settings (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2012, p. 23).
All principals participating in this study alluded to the perceived importance of distributing or sharing leadership roles as a means of supporting the professional growth of teachers and/or increasing leadership capacity within their school. The approaches to achieve this goal, however, varied considerably between participant schools. Four principals participating in this study reported that leadership responsibilities were assigned to teachers based on their own expressed interests. Three other schools use a collaborative model whereby areas of expertise are identified and those teachers work together on specific, usually short-term projects. A fourth school employs a formal ‘divisional leadership’ model of distribution, a paradigm that will soon be adopted by another school within this study cohort. The remaining school utilizes a ‘student-focused’ model of distributed leadership that has an accompanying expectation that all those involved in leadership roles will approach their responsibilities with a common goal in mind. Determining the degree to which each of these applications of collective leadership affects student success was beyond the scope of this study; however, it is relevant to the research questions that each principal believed that apportioning relevant and meaningful leadership roles to teachers provided opportunities for professional growth, improved motivation, and greater efficacy.

Summary. The interpretation of data related to Analytic Category 2 reveals that principals participating in this study believe they have the greatest influence on student success by supporting teachers to improve their practice. Support may evolve in the form of professional learning opportunities, resource allocation, dialogue, or collective (distributed) leadership opportunities. The importance of establishing positive relationships consisting of trust, integrity, and open communication is considered to be a
key building block in developing a practice of instructional leadership that focuses ultimately on student success as the primary goal and indicator of overall school achievement.

There is considerable compatibility between the findings of this study and those of Lambert (2002), Robinson (2011), Leithwood and Louis (2012), Blase and Blase (1999, 2000), Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), and Hallinger (2011). These researchers have variously explored the roles of school leaders and the impact they have on teacher efficacy and student achievement. The results of their studies have generally indicated that successful schools are led by principals who support teachers and who are committed to doing so while always maintaining a focus on student success rates and outcomes, as defined by their charter.

**Analytic Category 3: Reconciliation of personal beliefs and values with the school charter in order to provide effective instructional leadership.**

This component of data analysis relates to Research Question 2: To what extent is it necessary that the approach to leadership align with the approach to student learning in the school? The perceptual orientation of this study acknowledges that a school administrator’s approach to instructional leadership will be informed by personal or professional experiences as well as inherent values, beliefs, and attitudes that all contribute to development of a leadership ‘style’ and have implications for the evolution of a school’s culture and the relationship building that takes place within that culture. Schlechty (2009) describes this issue as one that must examine the broader social systems that exist within schools in order to fully understand the impact of these variables on a school:
The rules, roles, and relationships, together with the values, commitments, beliefs, and traditions that shape behavior in human groups gain expression in what sociologists and anthropologists refer to as *norms*. Norms are expressions of patterns of behavior that are preferred or required of members of the group. They are also expressions of the values, traditions, lore, and beliefs that guide group action - that is the culture and the means by which the culture is defined. (pp. 29-30)

The ‘norms’ that exist within a school contribute to providing a sense of identity and community, and are influenced significantly by those in formal leadership roles. Robinson (2011) focuses the discussion of ‘norms’ within schools back to one of leadership by observing that:

In the culture of teaching, powerful norms about democracy, professional autonomy, and collegiality contribute to a deep ambivalence about the exercise of leadership. People fear standing out from their peers, being called *bossy* or *know it all* or being disrespectful of those with more seniority or experience than themselves. Such norms reinforce a culture of niceness that inhibits leadership and the critical collegial talk that is essential to a well-functioning professional learning community. (p.152)

The relevant inquiry to be addressed in this analysis is the perceived extent to which principal’s beliefs, values, and attitudes influence their approach to leadership within the context of their own school, and how that influence affects school culture or the ‘norms’ referred to by Schlechty (2009) and Robinson (2011). Many responses from participants in this study reflected the need for instructional leaders to engage members of the school
community in dialogue and active listening in order to fully appreciate the needs of students, teachers and parents. One principal characterized the transition to his current school by observing:

I knew I would have to change my thinking to work for the school. As a teacher coming from a very liberal education, I was really constructivist in my viewpoints on how to teach. But I know that’s not what the parent body here wants. And I know that’s not the focus at this school, so I respected that though. It’s successful; it’s a very successful model at this school, even though it’s kind of contrary to my own personal learning styles. I think you can still buy into something, without feeling that it’s personally beneficial to you, if that makes sense.

This statement indicates the presence of adaptability, or compliance, that is present in the contexts of some principals, as they must reconcile personal beliefs and values with the goals and objectives of the charter they are obliged to fulfill. Another principal, who assumed the position after having a teaching role in the school, acknowledged the complexity involved in the transition to new leadership by commenting:

I took that awareness of the staff commitment to that mission and the language being put out at the time by Alberta Education, which they’ve encompassed in these three E’s right, and turned that into…you know, with the agreement of the community, not unilaterally, I turned that into our mission and vision documents and updated the language so that the spirit of those statements could be obviously connected to the intent of the Ministry because it wasn’t very obvious in the language but certainly the intent was there. So for me, those are the two
tiebreakers every time, right. You know, as long as it doesn’t contravene the Education Act and it’s in line with the charter, then I’m doing what I’m supposed to do. So, even though there are just a million complications here every day, “Is it serving the mission?” and that’s my tiebreaker.

These two different approaches to the issue of reconciling beliefs and values as school leaders, acknowledge the autonomy that exists within Alberta public charter schools. One principal chose to set aside personal belief structures while recognizing the value of the charter that seemed to be in conflict with his own constructivist views, while the other evolved a metric to guide his leadership that deferred to the school charter and the goals of Alberta Education. Due to the perceptual nature of this study, this finding does not suggest that one approach is better than another, but points out the variance in how principals address the complexity of values, beliefs, and attitudes that may prevail within a school community.

As the research of Crum, Sherman, and Myran (2010) points out, school leaders need to foster a sense of ownership for a school program and be aware of cultural shifts that may impact student achievement. Contextual differences between schools will necessarily translate to various approaches to this issue, however it is worth noting the traits of effective leadership reported by Blase and Blase (1999, 2000) that include ongoing dialogue and reflection among school stakeholders, facilitated by instructional leaders, to realize increased innovation, motivation, and ultimately student achievement. It is also worth noting that in both cases noted above, the assistant principal in the school had been a long serving member of the staff and played a key role in coaching the new
principals on matters relating to school culture, charter goals, and community value systems.

**Summary.** It may be argued that the predominant values, beliefs, and attitudes of any given principal are yet another contextual variable, however personal belief systems can present an influential force on a school community that it is worthy of a distinct and focused discussion. Analytic Category 3 has served to discuss the perceived impact of individual values and beliefs on instructional leadership practice, and presented two examples of how principals are reconciling beliefs with the mandate of their respective charters.

The direct connection between this analytic category and research question 2 lies in the perceptions of principals that their instructional leadership practice does align with the model of teaching and learning as mandated by their school charter. In many cases there is also compatibility between leadership practice, charter goals, and personal beliefs, and where alignment is elusive, principals must make a conscious choice to reconcile their own beliefs to those of the charter in order to provide effective and exemplary instructional leadership.

**Revisiting Assumptions from Chapter 1**

In preparing the research proposal for this study, four assumptions were identified based on my background, current understanding of instructional practice, and knowledge of Alberta public charter schools. The data analysis that has been undertaken to understand the findings arising from this study and to frame new knowledge about instructional leadership practice will be further discussed with respect to these assumptions.
**Assumption 1.** School leaders play a significant role in establishing and nurturing the culture and community within a school that fosters an environment in which student success is optimized.

The findings of this study confirmed this assumption in many respects as public charter school principals perceived their role to be pivotal in developing school culture and fostering a strong sense of community within schools that often draw their students from far flung urban regions. A clear divergence of opinion became evident, however, when principals were asked to define student success within the context of their school program. While it may be reasonably expected that ten principals representing ten different school programs would bring forward a variety of perspectives on what constitutes student success, this assumption was challenged by the spectrum along which the definitions fell and the absence, in most cases, of a reference for success that was rooted in the parameters set out by Alberta Education’s (2013) guidelines for student learning. Interpreting the data relative to this assumption required the researcher to gain an understanding of the contextually driven definitions of student success that exist in each of the participant’s schools.

The question of whether a principals’ impact on student success is greatest when he or she interacts directly with students or when supporting teachers in their professional growth and learning so they are better prepared to provide exemplary instruction, revealed that while all principal’s view themselves as teachers first, they acknowledge their primary instructional leadership function being one of support for teachers. There was noted reluctance on the part of several participants to categorically state that their greatest influence on student success was primarily derived from support for teachers as
they attach great value to their interactions with students either individually, in groups, or as part of a teaching assignment.

**Assumption 2.** Effective instructional leadership practice does not necessarily need to align with a school’s pedagogical foundation, but may exist symbiotically to enhance teacher development and student learning.

This assumption was based on the researchers’ understanding that instructional leadership practice was informed by personal and professional experiences combined with values and attitudes that the principal had developed prior to assuming a leadership role. The use of the word ‘effective’ to qualify the nature of instructional leadership creates a need to further define what constitutes ‘effective instructional leadership’ for each participant. A review of Table 3 in Chapter 4 (page 90-92) confirms the wide range of interpretations participants attach to the definition of effective instructional leadership. This assumption is challenged by the data suggesting that some public charter school principals have developed the characteristics of their instructional leadership practice without being informed by current research that supports the importance of supporting teacher professional learning in fostering student success (Leithwood et al., 2012; Robinson, 2011).

This study revealed that public charter school principals perceived a direct connection between their instructional leadership practice and the learning and teaching approaches that exist within the school. Even in instances where the principal’s embedded values, beliefs, and attitudes toward teaching and learning may be in conflict with those of the school charter, principals developed mechanisms to ensure alignment of practice for the best interests of the school community.
Assumption 3. Implementation of an inquiry approach to leadership promotes teacher engagement in their practice and fosters a culture of collaboration and collective influence on student learning outcomes.

In many instances, the data revealed that public charter school principals employ the tenets of inquiry within their instructional leadership practice. Capacity for collaboration, dialogue, consultation, and coaching were repeatedly cited as desirable leadership qualities that led to effective distribution of leadership responsibilities and increased teacher efficacy. McKinnon (2013) refers to the importance of applying an inquiry approach to instructional leadership by suggesting that those in formal leadership roles should, “provide leadership through a disposition of inquiry, asking questions, exploring ideas, articulating a shared meaning and developing a deep understanding” (Connect! blog post, N.D.).

Assumption 4. The roles of principal, assistant principal, or vice-principal, are equally influential in providing instructional leadership that promotes professional growth among teachers, and exemplary learning among students.

In the evolution of this study the role of assistant or vice principals were not specifically addressed, however several principals did discuss the importance of these support figures to their instructional leadership practice. Often deferring to the expertise and knowledge of the school community held by an assistant principal, school leaders repeatedly reinforced the value of a strong and cohesive leadership team within the school that can consist of formally designated leaders, such as assistant or vice principals, or less formal roles such as curriculum coordinators, learning coaches, department heads, and ad hoc teacher leaders who are assuming a facilitation role on a specific project.
Through critical analysis of the assumptions conveyed at the outset of this study and the new knowledge gained from the data, the researcher discovered that aspects of these assumptions were inaccurate and worthy of being challenged. The assumptions noted were meant to be applicable to all public charter schools, whereas the unique contextual nature of each participant school rendered such a generalization untenable with the exception of Assumption 1, which held true for all participating principals. The remaining assumptions are only credible when applied to specific school environments. For example, Assumption 3 refers to use of an ‘inquiry approach to instructional leadership’ that does not complement the intent or nature of every other school’s charter. Similarly, Assumption 4 espouses the equality of influence between principals and assistant or vice-principals while the data concludes that the principal has the greatest potential impact on the school community.

**Chapter Summary.** This chapter has interpreted, analyzed, and synthesized the data emerging from this research to determine the degree to which it addresses the two research questions at the heart of this study. The contextual variables that shape each public charter school in Alberta are significant in defining the definition of instructional leadership and student success at each school participating in the study. Within each of those contexts, however, are some common findings that lead the researcher to conclude, based on the perceptions of the participating principals, that the greatest impact on student success is derived from an instructional leaders’ support of professional learning and growth rather than through direct interaction with students.

It is further concluded from the data analysis that principals perceive a necessary alignment between the nature of teaching and learning taking place in their school and
their instructional leadership practice. This is viewed as an important component of ensuring consistency between the pedagogical foundation of the school and the leadership role that is responsible for influencing the culture and complexion of the school community.

The findings and data analysis of this study represent new knowledge of instructional leadership practice in Alberta public charter schools by exploring the contextual variations between schools and developing an understanding of how the unique nature of each school and each principal combine to create an instructional leadership framework that is intended to support the charter. It also highlights the importance of the social systems that exist within each school and how delicate and vital the role of the instructional leader is in shaping culture and facilitating innovation and change within a public charter school to meet its mandate.
Chapter 6

Conclusions and Recommendations

In school improvement, timing is important: there are times when people in leadership positions must be the first to take action. In addition, staff members want their leaders to be forthcoming and sincere in their compliments, to avoid unnecessary advice, to eschew taking credit for the work of others, not to pass the buck, not to play favorites, not to dominate the airwaves, and not to be petty. In short, they want their leaders to be quite remarkable! (Townsend and Adams, 2009, pp. 95-96)

The purpose of this modified participatory action research study was to explore Alberta public charter school principal’s perceptions of the impact their instructional leadership practice has on student success. A second research question focused on the perceived degree to which instructional leadership within charter schools needed to align with the teaching and learning methodology that comprised a school’s charter. Ten principals participated in the study, representing ten different charter school jurisdictions, and include five male and five female participants.

The findings revealed in chapter 4 and the analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of the findings in chapter 5, provide a foundation upon which to identify conclusions relating to the research questions under consideration and put forward recommendations that will inform dialogue on the subject of enhancing instructional leadership practice within Alberta public charter schools and other public school jurisdictions (see Appendix F). Four key conclusions emerged from this study:

1. Comparing instructional leadership practice in public charter schools is a complex exercise because of the discrepancies between schools in terms of goals, measures of success, and model of teaching and learning present.
2. Beliefs, values, and attitudes are an integral part of developing instructional leadership practices.

3. Public charter school principals perceive that their greatest influence on student success, as articulated in their mandate, is realized through their direct support of teacher growth and learning.

4. Providing exemplary instructional leadership requires the prioritization and allocation of time, including scheduling time to visit classes, collaborating in teacher planning, and coordinating teacher professional learning opportunities in a timely and proactive manner that stimulates innovative practice.

Discussion of Conclusions

1. Comparing and contrasting instructional leadership practice in public charter schools is complex because of the discrepancies between schools in terms of goals, measures of success, and model of teaching and learning present.

This study determined that the diverse contextual variables evident within each public charter school made cross-school analysis an unproductive exercise that could produce misleading or inaccurate generalizations. It is important, therefore, to recognize the independent nature of each charter school and the intent of Alberta Education that charter schools should be centers of innovative teaching and learning that are distinctly different from education programs being offered in other public school jurisdictions (Alberta Education, 2011).
From this perspective, the perceptions of principals may be considered on an individual basis, and where commonalities exist between them there may be recognition of those characteristics that represent universally held perceptions about instructional leadership as they relate to the school mandate. For example, attempting to compare or contrast a model of direct instruction with one that addresses the needs of at-risk learners may prove futile as they have very different approaches to teaching and learning as well as divergent definitions of what constitutes student success. Those same principals, however, agree on the need to adhere to their respective charters in order to maintain the integrity of their programs and furthermore that they need to support teacher practice within their charters even when those programs and teacher practices were dissonant with their personal beliefs about teaching and learning.

2. Beliefs, values, and attitudes held by the principal are an integral part of developing instructional leadership practices.

The findings of this study corroborate those of other researchers (Blase & Blase, 1999, 2000; Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Marzano et al, 2005; Robinson, 2011) who concluded that the principal is influential in determining the culture and the nature of the school community and relationships that are developed among stakeholders. The beliefs, values, and attitudes held by respective charter school principals play a significant role in shaping the approaches to learning and teaching, and determining the degree to which teachers are prepared to implement innovative practices that extend and improve upon their stated charter goals. Those schools in which the principal finds a contradiction or conflict between their own belief system and those of the charter, seem
less likely to foster in their teachers the capacity to take risks and challenge their own teaching practice.

In a 2009 report, Alberta Education proposed a renewed vision for charter schools that focuses on innovative educational practice, active engagement in research, and expanding collaborative opportunities into non-traditional domains that can enhance the quality of teaching and learning. Partnerships with post-secondary institutions and faculties not normally associated with education such as medicine, law, engineering and social work, as well as collaborative ventures with technical and trades-oriented institutions, would foster student success through engagement in meaningful and relevant learning experiences while opening new ways of thinking about teaching and learning within public education systems.

This study concludes that introducing and expanding innovative practice in public charter schools as suggested by Alberta Education requires school leaders to have a deep commitment to the purpose and goals of the charter when those goals are in alignment with Alberta Education’s definition of innovative practice (Ministerial Order #001/2013). Instructional leaders who must reconcile their own beliefs and values in order to support the didactic foundation of the school may find the internalized strife that ensues detracts from their capacity for exemplary leadership. As Stirrett [nee Ritchie] (2013) observed, “not all charter schools have the depth of leadership”, adding that successful and effective leaders in public charter schools will be those who clearly understand the philosophy and goals of the charter, and who possess the “personality, rapport, subject expertise, and relationship building capacity” to nurture exemplary schools (Personal communication, April 3, 2013). Stirrett (2013) further corroborated this conclusion by noting that
innovative charter schools are those with “committed teams of leaders who share common goals”, also suggesting that while it is important that charter schools maintain some continuity between their original mandate and current practice, that “continuity does not equal stasis” (Interview notes).  

3. Public charter school principals perceive that their greatest influence on student success, as articulated in their mandate, is realized through their direct support of teacher growth and learning.

Unequivocally, public charter school principals acknowledged that their greatest influence on student success, as articulated in their respective mandates, was derived from providing authentic, relevant, and timely professional learning opportunities for teachers. In the course of the interviews undertaken for this study, several principals further recognized the value of their interactions with individual, small groups, or whole classes of students. The conclusion that the greatest impact of instructional leadership is derived from providing professional learning growth opportunities for teachers extends from the rationale that by improving the practice of a single teacher, the learning experience of an entire class of students is also improved. This conclusion also corroborates, and is supported by, the research of Leithwood and Seashore Louis (2012) and Robinson (2011) who have also noted that school principals are the second most influential factor in a student’s learning after the teacher.

Alberta Education (2009) has explicitly stated that charter schools must develop exemplary teaching practices within their own institutions, aligned with the ministerial order, and must also serve as a source of professional learning for educators across the province:
Governors of the next generation of charter schools would have a clear mandate: with post-secondary research partners, develop a thorough understanding of factors that influence student success, build those factors into effective school practices and help to make those practices available to all Alberta students. The success of the next generation of Alberta’s charter schools would be demonstrated by the effect these schools have on promoting student success across Alberta’s education system (p. 3).

Given this roadmap for the future role of charter schools within the public education system, the importance and value of meaningful, timely, and relevant professional learning opportunities becomes increasingly tangible and is clearly supported by the findings of this study.

4. **Providing exemplary instructional leadership requires the prioritization and allocation of time, including scheduling time to visit classes, collaborating in teacher planning, and coordinating teacher professional learning opportunities in a timely and proactive manner that stimulates innovative practice.**

Public charter school principals arguably carry more responsibilities that do not relate to instructional leadership than their counterparts in larger public jurisdictions. The absence of a ‘central office’ to complete tasks related to provincial accountability and reporting requirements or to address the needs of Board appointed committees, leaves the principals of most public charter schools with an additional workload that may impede their ability to provide exemplary instructional leadership to their school communities. In
a Canada West Foundation report entitled *Innovation in Action: An Examination of Charter Schools in Alberta*, Ritchie (2010) points out that,

The accountability requirements of charter school boards exceed those of local school boards because ‘charter boards are accountable for demonstrating that implementation of the charter goals has resulted in improved student learning outcomes and growth’ (Alberta Education 2002a:7). (p. 6)

Principals use of time during the school day varied greatly and depended on the priorities they established: those who intentionally set aside time for specific instructional leadership activities (class visits, collaborative planning with teachers, planning and participating in professional learning), or who aspired to do so, perceived that they were providing more effective instructional leadership than those who allocated their time to other administrative duties. In schools where an assistant or vice principal was present, opportunities to distribute both the administrative and instructional leadership functions provided flexibility in scheduling time and sharing responsibilities so more time was devoted to supporting teachers and working with students. Principals who maintained a small teaching assignment in an effort to ensure regular interaction with students felt a sense of satisfaction in working directly with students, but acknowledged that doing so did not provide the same benefit to student success as they would realize had they been working in support of teachers professional learning.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations emerged from the data analysis, findings, and conclusions that have been presented in this study. These recommendations are offered in the spirit of stimulating constructive dialogue and inquiry that will enhance public
education in Alberta and elsewhere, while maintaining a focus on the common objective of fostering student success. This discussion must be tempered by Alberta Education’s framework for student success as noted in chapter 4 as well as by the inherent autonomy of each charter school to define student success within the context of the schools’ mandate.

**Recommendations for Alberta Education.** In 2009 Alberta Education released a *Charter School Concept Paper* to stimulate discussion about the future of public charter schools in Alberta. Among the observations cited in the paper are:

- Charter schools have succeeded in providing educational choices to parents and in stimulating other jurisdictions to offer specialized programs that reflect those provided in charter schools;
- Student learning outcomes in charter schools appear to demonstrate improvement over those in other jurisdictions;
- The original intent for charter schools to serve as centers of educational research and innovation has not been actualized;
- Representing 1% of the Alberta school population, and with extensive waiting lists, charter schools could expand if facilities were provided;
- Reconsideration of charter school governance could address the concerns and needs of stakeholders in both charter and larger public jurisdictions and may result in revision of the original mandate of charter schools as detailed in the 1994 legislation. (p.1)

As Alberta Education reflects on the influence that public charter schools have had on teaching and learning over the past two decades, and plans for the future of innovative
educational practice in Alberta, it will be essential to examine the relative success of each school with due regard to the unique contextual variables that contribute to the school’s program, culture, and community. With this caveat in mind, the following recommendations are provided as points of discussion and inquiry:

1. Charter schools were initially established to provide models of teaching and learning that were not available within larger public systems and to provide parents with alternative choices in selecting a suitable school environment for their child. The large public systems have responded to charter schools by introducing similar programs within their jurisdictions. It may be beneficial to examine the purpose, philosophy, and qualitative success of these parallel programs, specifically related to instructional leadership practice. Doing so will provide useful insight into the quality of instructional leadership being afforded these programs and will address the following questions:

   a. To what extent and degree are public charter school principals fulfilling Alberta Education’s prescribed mandate for charter schools to be centers of research and innovation for public education across the province?

   b. How does the perceived quality and nature of instructional leadership within parallel programs that have been introduced within other public schools compare to that which is evident in public charter schools with similarly focused program criteria?

   c. Are the parallel programs that have been developed in large public jurisdictions meeting the needs of specified learners without detracting
from the quality of education being provided within ‘mainstream’ programs and furthermore, to what extent does instructional leadership play a role in addressing the needs of all learners?

2. While public charter schools have been part of the educational landscape in Alberta since 1994, they have largely been shrouded in misinformation about funding, student selection, and perceived elitism. Ritchie (2010) points out that, “Since inception, charter schools have struggled to be understood by the broader community. Many people believe that charter schools are private, elite institutions that charge tuition and cater only to the gifted (p. 17).” As the gatekeeper of public charter schools, Alberta Education should proactively and intentionally ensure that accurate information concerning the nature, purpose, and details of public charter schools is being conveyed to interested parties within and outside of educational circles. Doing so will open dialogue and generate opportunities for collaboration between charter schools and larger public jurisdictions to share exemplary practices in teaching, learning, and leading that will enhance educational experiences for all students.

**Recommendations for charter school leaders.** For the purposes of this recommendation the term ‘charter school leaders’ refers to the Board of Directors, superintendent, principal, and assistant or vice principals (if applicable) of Alberta public charter schools. The following recommendations are offered for the consideration of charter school leaders and to stimulate discussion on the essential qualities of instructional leadership that are necessary for each public charter school to achieve or exceed their stated objectives:
1. The current charter for each school should be presented as a framework to guide teaching, learning, and leading on a daily basis. Maintaining a clear focus on the school’s primary purpose and goals embeds the core values and guiding principles of the program into the ‘language of the school community’. From an instructional leadership perspective, developing a living framework of the school program invites teachers, students, and parents to express their needs and views concerning teaching and learning. Concurrently, the framework will provide stakeholders with the opportunity to reflect on the school’s program and examine the extent to which they are seeking innovative, research-informed practices to advance the intent of the charter and improve the quality of education in Alberta.

2. Providing support and resources to meaningful and timely teacher professional learning was identified in this study as a key element of effective instructional leadership practice. The Alberta Association of Public Charter Schools (TAAPCS), as part of their ongoing commitment to leadership development, may consider offering specific in-service opportunities for school leaders on the most effective strategies for providing professional learning support to teachers. As an extension of this initiative, it may be of value to examine the current process of teacher evaluation through a lens of ‘assessment for learning’ and consider refinements to the evaluation model that reflect formative assessment for teacher growth rather than summative assessment of the end product of teacher practice.

3. It may be of further value to introduce a leadership development program for teachers interested in assuming a leadership role within public charter schools or elsewhere. Doing so would address a frequently expressed concern regarding
limitations on building leadership capacity within small charter school jurisdictions and may open up opportunities for a leadership exchange program among charter schools in Alberta.

**Recommendations for further research.** While this study contributes to the body of knowledge concerning instructional leadership within Alberta public charter schools, there are many lines of inquiry that deserve to be pursued in the interest of reconciling the role of charter schools within the Alberta public education system. The following areas of research should be considered:

1. Replicate this study within the parallel, specialized programs in larger public jurisdictions to determine the perceptions held by school principals of their impact on student success within those programs. Comparing and contrasting the findings generated by such a study with those of this research would provide valuable insight into the efficacy of instructional leadership practice across educational programs with similar pedagogical foundations and objectives but with varying degrees of autonomy.

2. Extend this study to delve deeper into instructional leadership practices that foster teacher and learner engagement and that are ultimately reflected in increased measures of student success. Specifically, what are the characteristics of instructional leaders that foster success and how can those traits be captured within a leadership development program for school leaders in a variety of contexts?

3. Specifically examine the capacity for research and innovation that exists within Alberta public charter schools with a view to determining the extent to which they
may be considered ‘transformational’ in a contemporary educational context.

Research in this domain connects to earlier recommendations for Alberta Education and charter school leaders suggesting that the purpose for the existence of public charter schools requires clarification of their role as: a) schools of choice, b) centers of research and innovation, or c) a combination of these two elements.

**Researcher reflections**

As this study concludes, it is my sincere hope that the findings and conclusions contribute to the body of knowledge regarding instructional leadership generally, and the nuances that pertain to Alberta public charter schools specifically. The process of examining the literature relative to this field, preparing the research proposal, and conducting the interviews to collect the data was enlightening and caused many moments of self-reflection in pondering the notion of ‘exemplary instructional leadership practice’ and how the complexion of it can change from school to school.

There is a great deal more research, dialogue, and collaboration required to fully understand the complexity of school leadership in the 21st century. However, the essence of leadership must be to infuse a state of inquiry into a problem whenever possible, and it is from this perspective that we must always be asking the question, “How is the work I am doing today going to affect the success of my students?” With this question at the forefront of our thinking, every day becomes a new action research study and a new opportunity to continue striving towards the goal of exemplary instructional leadership.
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Pacific Professional Standards for School Principals


Appendix A

Frameworks for Exemplary Teaching, Learning, and Leading in the Calgary Science School
Exemplary Learning in the Calgary Science School

Who We Are: Relationships and School Culture

- Relationships
  We care for each other, share respect for everyone in the school and feel that “we are all in this together.”
- Culture of Innovation
  We are creative and willing to try new things.
- Student Wellness
  We develop minds, bodies, feelings and creative giftedness and grow as whole persons.
- Parents as Partners
  We include our parents in our learning.
- Communication
  We are heard and respected for openly sharing our thoughts and ideas.

What We Do: Exemplary Learning

- Inquiry-based Practice
  We help students explore and ask questions to develop a better understanding of our world.
- Technology Enhanced Learning
  We use technology to improve our learning and show what we can do in different ways.
- Meaningful Curriculum Implementation
  We enrich our learning because it is real and interesting.
- Authentic Assessment
  We know what we need to learn and what we need to do to be our very best.
- Environmental and Outdoor Education
  We understand the world outside of our classrooms and have opportunities to make a difference.

How We Do It: Community of Learners

- Collaboration
  We learn better by learning together.
- Research Focus
  We are all researchers working on new ideas.
- Leadership
  We are all leaders, sharing our talents and gifts to make a positive difference within the school and beyond.
- Professional Development
  We benefit from the opportunities our teachers have to learn and grow.

Why We Do It: Learner Engagement and Success

- Student Success
  We all learn different ways and benefit from different teaching approaches that help us be successful and confident.
- Engagement in Learning
  We are excited about learning and being part of an engaged, learning community.
Exemplary Instructional Leadership in the Calgary Science School

Who We Are
Relationships and School Culture

Relationships
As leaders we develop, model, and maintain relationships with students, staff, parents, and community members that are based on the principles of trust, mutual respect, fairness and integrity.

Culture of Innovation
We encourage teachers and other instructional leaders to engage in innovative teaching and learning practices that improve student learning experiences.

Student and Staff Wellness
We demonstrate our commitment to wellness through our responsiveness to the social and emotional needs of our school community with a focus on all facets of personal development (body, mind, heart and spirit).

Parents as Partners
We value and encourage open communication and active engagement of parents as partners in teaching and learning, and in contributing to the development and implementation of a vision for the school.

Communication
We model open, honest and generative dialogue with all members of the school community and as a guiding principle of instructional leadership we honour the voices of students, teachers and parents.

How We Do It
Leading a Community of Learners

Collaboration
As instructional leaders we foster and promote a culture of collaboration within the classroom, throughout the school and beyond.

Research Focus
We model and promote a research focus with students and teachers, developing a deeper conceptual understanding through a disposition of inquiry.

Leadership
We will actively develop leadership capacity and promote shared leadership among all members of the school community.

Professional Learning
We model, facilitate and support ongoing professional learning, embodying the CSS exemplary learning and teaching frameworks and the Alberta Education competencies for teachers and school leaders.

What We Do
Exemplary Instructional Leadership Practice

Inquiry-based Practice
We model and mentor instructional leadership through a disposition of inquiry. The tenets of the inquiry process inform leadership practice and define interactions with members of the school community.

Technology Enhanced Learning, Teaching, and Leading
We model and facilitate the effective and appropriate use of technology and the exploration of innovative and creative methods of integrating technology into teaching and learning.

Meaningful Curriculum Implementation
We collaborate in interpreting and implementing the curriculum to provide students with authentic experiences that deepen and broaden learner competencies.

Authentic Assessment
We promote and support the use of authentic assessment strategies to facilitate teacher and student learning.

Environmental and Outdoor Education
We support and participate in the environmental and outdoor education programs and recognize the merits of these programs in promoting the development of relationships, team building and leadership skills while fostering environmental stewardship among members of the school community.

School Operations
We manage the human, physical and financial resources of the school in accordance with Board policy and Alberta Education guidelines in order to optimize teaching and student engagement.

Why We Do It
Teacher and Learner Engagement

Teacher and Student Success
We embrace the rich diversity among our teachers and students and are committed to the shared vision of implementing strategies to achieve success for all members of the school community as engaged learners and ethical citizens with an entrepreneurial spirit.

Engagement in Learning
We measure our success as a learning community by the level of engagement of teachers and students as learners.
## Appendix B

### Models of Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Model</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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</table>
| **Transactional**         | Marzano et al. (2005)                       | • denotes some kind of reward for service system  
• constructive transactional leadership: involves goals, outcomes, rewards and recognition, consultation, feedback, praise                                                                                     |
| **Transformational**      | Marzano et al. (2005)                       | • individual consideration (personal attention to those who seem neglected)  
• intellectual stimulation (enabling people to think of ‘old’ problems in new ways)  
• inspirational motivation (high performance expectations)  
• idealized influence (“modeling behavior through exemplary personal achievements, character and behavior”) (Bass (1985).)                                           |
|                           | Leithwood, K. and Jantzi, D. (2005)         | • Emerged during the recession of the 1980’s in response to a loss of confidence in schools to produce students with high degrees of achievement.  
• Demand for improved performance by “raising the bar and closing the gap” (p. 35)  
**Characteristics:**  
• ‘Setting directions’  
• Developing people  
• Redesigning the organization                                                                                                                          |
| **Total Quality Management (TQM)** | Marzano et al. (2005) | • change agency (ability to stimulate change)  
• teamwork  
• continuous improvement (the leader ‘inviting’ all members of the organization to be part of the improvement process)  
• trust building |
| **Servant**               | Marzano et al. (2005)                       | Based on the premise that “effective leadership emerges from the desire to help others”                                                                                                                                 |
| **Situational**           | Marzano et al. (2005)                       | Leader matches style to followers ‘maturity’ based on their willingness to complete specified tasks.                                                                                                                                 |
| **Strategic**             | Davies, B. and Davies, B. (2005)            | • Direction setting  
• Translating strategy into action  
• Aligning the people and the organization to the strategy  
• Determining effective intervention points  
• Developing strategic capabilities                                                                                                                                 |
| **Invitational**          | Novak, J.M. (2005)                          | **Foundations:**  
• Democratic ethos – ethical and political commitment that all people matter  
• Perceptual tradition – focus on how things are seen by others  
• Self-concept theory – based on notion that all people are internally motivated to maintain positive perceptions of themselves.  
• Goal of educational living – idealistic approach to improving the quality of “individual and collective experiences”.  
**Assumptions:**  
• Respect  
• Trust  
• Care                                                                                                                                             |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Model</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical</td>
<td>Starratt, R. J. (2005)</td>
<td><strong>Five levels of ethical enactment:</strong>&lt;br&gt;• As a human being&lt;br&gt;• As a citizen-public servant&lt;br&gt;• As an educator&lt;br&gt;• As an educational administrator / manager&lt;br&gt;• As an educational leader&lt;br&gt;<strong>Three virtues of ethical leadership:</strong>&lt;br&gt;1. responsibility – being proactive&lt;br&gt;2. presence – affirming, critiquing, enabling&lt;br&gt;3. authenticity – relational, moral choice to shape one’s own life and work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning-centered</td>
<td>Southworth, G. (2005)</td>
<td><strong>Assumptions:</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Shared function within the school&lt;br&gt;• Contextually oriented&lt;br&gt;• Involves setting the direction for the school, including developing the people and the organization&lt;br&gt;• Process of social influence&lt;br&gt;• Makes individual and collective difference to the quality of learning and teaching in schools&lt;br&gt;<strong>Leaders influence through 3 strategies:</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Modeling – setting an example; role model&lt;br&gt;• Monitoring – analyzing data and responding to it or developing strategies based on it. Includes classroom visits, team meetings.&lt;br&gt;• Dialogue – creating opportunities for meaningful collaboration&lt;br&gt;<strong>Essential characteristics of student-centred leadership:</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Planning – scheduling, timetables, calendar&lt;br&gt;• Target-setting – clear, achievable, and articulated&lt;br&gt;• Communication –&lt;br&gt;• Monitoring systems – analyzing and using data, observing, feedback&lt;br&gt;• Roles and responsibilities of leaders – mentoring, coaching&lt;br&gt;• Policies for learning, teaching and assessment&lt;br&gt;Four implications:&lt;br&gt;• Understanding learning – of all stakeholders&lt;br&gt;• Leading learning – of all stakeholders&lt;br&gt;• Leaders skills and qualities – professional growth, sense of purpose, constructivist approach, shared leadership&lt;br&gt;• Distributed leadership – focus on distributing only those roles that directly influence student learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructivist</td>
<td>Lambert, L. (2002, 2005)</td>
<td>Based on:&lt;br&gt;• Relationships&lt;br&gt;• Co-creation of knowledge&lt;br&gt;• Inquiry&lt;br&gt;• Participation&lt;br&gt;• Reflection&lt;br&gt;• Reciprocity&lt;br&gt;• Constructivist leadership = building leadership capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Beatty, B. (2005)</td>
<td>• Emotions factor into virtually every aspect of leadership, including trust and the inquiry process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Model</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Characteristics</td>
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<td>------------------</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| **Entrepreneurial** | Hentschke, G.C. and Caldwell, B.J. (2005) | Entrepreneurship in education follows in the wake of a movement towards running schools along a business model approach. **Three characteristics:**
1. possess a unique vision that relates to an unmet need or unsolved and pervasive problem.
2. Willingness to act independently to acquire the resources necessary to implement their plan.
3. Strive to implement, sustain, and grow their plan. ‘Intrepreneurs’ – term used to describe entrepreneurs operating in bureaucratic environments. While traditional education systems focus on external threats to their systems, entrepreneurial organizations are seeking opportunities for innovation, growth, and development. Creativity is encouraged in classrooms of traditional schools but is encouraged throughout the organization in an entrepreneurial school. (p. 155). |
| **Distributed** | Harris, A. (2005) | Evidence of research conducted throughout the 1990’s and 2000’s (Hargreaves, 1991; Little, 1990; 2000; Rosenholz, 1989; Holden, 2002; Lieberman et al., 2000, McBeath, 1998; Crowther et al. 2000; Silns and Mulford, 2002; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000) reveals that distributing leadership holds many benefits for teachers, students, and school leaders, including:
- Positive morale and teacher effectiveness
- Improved collaboration among teachers
- Improved student learning outcomes and engagement
- Establishment of communities of practice |
| **Sustainable** | Hargreaves, A. (2005) | **Sustainable leadership**...
- Matters – creates and sustains learning
- Lasts – success is realized over extended periods of time
- Spreads – collaborative structure through distributed leadership
- Is socially just – benefits all students in all schools – not exclusionary by targeting ‘lighthouse’ or special interest schools only.
- Is resourceful – develops leadership capacity and networks for collaboration among leaders
- Develops environmental diversity and capacity – by empowering people to adapt to changing complex environments
- Is activist – proactive stance and engaging assertively within the environment.
- Is vigilant – monitors the viability and overall status of the environment to ensure continued prosperity.
- Respects and builds on the past in it’s quest to create a better future – “when change has only a present or future tense it becomes the antithesis of sustainability” Learn from the past and plan for the future.
- Is patient – recognizes the value of slow, steady progress with a goal of sustainability. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Model</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Instructional** | Hallinger, P. (2005, 2011) | • Create shared sense of purpose  
• Foster continuous improvement  
• Develop climate of high expectations and a culture of innovation and improvement in teaching and learning  
• Coordinate curriculum and monitor SLO’s  
• Shape reward structure to reflect school’s mission  
• Coordinate staff development  
• Be a visible presence in the school – model school culture. |
• resource provider  
• instructional resource  
• communicator  
• visible presence. |
|                  | Blase and Blase (1999, 2000) | Identify the following characteristics:  
• encouraging and facilitating the study of teaching and learning, facilitating collaborative efforts among teachers  
• establishing coaching relationships among teachers  
• using instructional research to make decisions  
• using principles of adult learning when dealing with teachers. |
Appendix C

Informed Consent for Research Participants

Researcher:
Phil Butterfield, Faculty of Education, Graduate Programs in Education (EdD), 403-815-3683, philbutterfield@mac.com

Supervisor:
Dr. Sharon Friesen, Vice Dean, Associate Dean, Faculty of Education

Title of Project:
Instructional Leadership in Alberta Public Charter Schools: An exploration into the perceived effects of instructional leadership practice on student learning.

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

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

Purpose of the Study:
The primary purpose of this study is to explore instructional leadership practice within Alberta public charter schools to determine what aspects of leadership have a direct or indirect effect on student learning outcomes. The study will further examine the use of inquiry within leadership practice to determine if it is effective in directly or indirectly influencing student learning.

In your capacity as a formally designated principal with two or more years experience in that capacity within an Alberta public charter school, you are invited to participate in this research study.

What Will I Be Asked To Do:
As a participant in this study you will be asked to engage in a variety of activities as detailed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Timeline</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Approximate Time Required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February - March 2013</td>
<td>Demographic Profile Survey.</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First interview and observation at participant’s school.</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April - May 2013</td>
<td>Second interview and observation at participant’s school.</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2013</td>
<td>Verification of findings with each participant.</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may refuse to participate altogether, may refuse to participate in parts of the study, or may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

Should you agree to participate in this study the following personal information will be collected to provide a demographic profile of participants but will not be associated with any participant’s name:

Name – Your real name will be collected for use by the researcher only. You will be asked to select a pseudonym that will be used in all references to your involvement in this study.
Age
Gender
Years in education
Years as a school administrator

Please read the following consent options carefully put a check mark on the corresponding line(s) that grants me your permission to:

I grant permission to be audio taped: Yes: ___ No: ___
The pseudonym I choose for myself is: ____________________________________________
You may quote me using my pseudonym: Yes: ___ No: ___

Are There Risks or Benefits If I Participate?

There are no foreseeable risks or benefits related to participation in this study, other than the professional learning opportunities inherent in the research design. Due to the limited number of public charter schools in Alberta, and the relatively small participant sample, it is possible that your involvement in this study will be recognized by individuals who are familiar with you and/or your professional role.

What Happens To The Information I Provide?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Personal information collected on the demographic profile survey will only be accessible by the researcher and his supervisor. Survey and interview responses will be attributed to the pseudonym you choose for this project. Findings emerging from this data will be synthesized and sent to you for verification of their accuracy and interpretation. Participants will have 14 days to review their contributions and provide feedback to the researcher. A lack of response from a participant within the 14-day review period will be deemed to indicate acceptance of the data as presented.

Following successful submission and defence of the dissertation relating to this study, the findings may be shared with the larger educational community through presentations, peer reviewed journals, or in book format. Anonymity cannot be assured if you share your pseudonym with others or reveal the content of your interview and survey responses to anyone other than the researcher. Should you decide to withdraw from the research study at any time, all data, including survey and interview responses, transcripts, audio tapes, and video or still images, collected to the date of withdrawal may be used in this study. In any case, all data collected in relation to this study will be kept in a locked cabinet, accessible only by the researcher and his supervisor, for a period of three years from completion of the data collection, and will then be destroyed in its entirety on June 30, 2015. It must be understood that the data and findings remain the property of the researcher unless you withdraw from the study, in which case all data relating to your participation will be destroyed.
Signatures (written consent)

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

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

Participant’s Name: (please print) ______________________________________

Participant’s Signature: ___________________________ Date: ________________

Researcher’s Name: Phil Butterfield

Researcher’s Signature: ___________________________ Date: ________________

Questions/Concerns

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

Mr. Phil Butterfield, (principal researcher)
Department/Faculty of Education
403-815-3683 or e-mail: philbutterfield@mac.com
and
Dr. Sharon Friesen (Supervisor), Vice Dean, Associate Dean, Graduate Programs, Faculty of Education,
403-220-5625 or e-mail: sfriesen@ucalgary.ca

If you have any concerns about the way you’ve been treated as a participant, please contact the Senior Ethics Resource Officer, Research /Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 220-3782; e-mail: rburrows@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

Demographic Profile Survey

Participant Information (Please note that your name, phone number, e-mail address, and date of birth will not appear in any findings or documentation related to this study and will only be accessible to the researcher and his supervisor).

Name: _____________________________________ Daytime Phone: ______________

e-mail address: ________________________________________________________________________

Date of Birth: _____/_____/_____

day        month        year

Male: _____ Female: _____

Pseudonym (to be used in data collection and reporting of all research findings):

________________________________________

Career Information

How long have you been an educator? _________________

How long have you been a school administrator? _________________

Briefly describe your career path in education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School or Organization</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Duration</th>
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</table>

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School Information

Current School: ________________________________

Describe briefly the nature of the charter that guides your school’s educational program?

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Current Leadership Assignment: (include a breakdown of any teaching or other assigned duties):

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Instructional Leadership Practice

How do you define the term ‘instructional leadership’ within the context of your school and your own practice?

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Please return your completed survey by e-mail to philbutterfield@mac.com or by surface mail to Phil Butterfield, 5915 Lewis Dr. SW, Calgary, AB, T3E 5Z4.
Appendix E

Semi-structured Interview Questions

Participant Pseudonym: ______________________________ Date: _________

Interview location: _______________________ Start time: ______ End time: ______

Environmental conditions that might affect the interview (noise, phones, traffic, etc...)

**IMPORTANT: The interview will be audio-recorded using two digital devices. You may ask for the recording to be stopped at any time or replayed for clarification and to ensure accuracy. I will also be taking notes during the interview; you may have a copy of these notes at the conclusion of the interview if you wish.

1. Please take a few minutes and talk about your career path in education. How did you arrive in an administrative role at this school?

2. Explain the goals and vision of your school’s charter?

3. Describe the nature of your school community: students, parents, staff, Board, cultural influences, other factors.

4. How would you describe the approach to teaching and learning that is predominant in your school?

5. How is student success defined within your school community?

6. Is there a commonly held definition of success that is shared by staff, parents, and students?

7. What type of learner is most likely to succeed within this school’s charter mandate and the teaching styles present here?

8. How would you describe the manner and degree to which parents are engaged in the school community?
9. Describe in as much detail as you wish, the roles and responsibilities you have within the school community. Further questions may emerge from this answer, as it could be a multi-faceted response.

10. Describe the leadership structure within the school.

11. To what extent, and in what ways, are leadership responsibilities distributed to staff members who are not assigned to formal leadership roles (principal, assistant principal or vice principal)?

12. By what mechanism or process does this distribution take place?

13. In your view, what is the primary function of formal school leadership (principal, assistant principal or vice principal)?

14. From your perspective, how do you define ‘instructional leadership’?

15. How does your definition of instructional leadership align with the predominant approach to teaching and learning within the school?

16. To what extent do you perceive that your definition of instructional leadership is being practiced within the school?

17. In what ways does student success, according to your earlier definition, rely on instructional leadership practice? Expand on those aspects of instructional leadership that may have a ‘direct’ or ‘indirect’ influence on student learning.

18. What are the facilitators or roadblocks to operationalizing your definition of instructional leadership within your school? Responses to this question will require further discussion to expand and deepen meaning.
19. How do you perceive that the school community view your leadership style: teachers, parents, students, support staff?

20. What is one professional goal related to instructional leadership that you would like to achieve?

21. What supports and/or strategies do you think would help you achieve this goal?
## Appendix F

### Defining Student Success

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Selected Participant Comments on Defining Student Success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1           | 1. Student reporting heavily anecdotal with a numeric component. Striving for mastery (80%+) in grades 1-3 and 65% in grades 4-9.  
2. Start students at their point of readiness and build on their success, always ensuring the foundation of knowledge is solid.  
3. Student success discussed in personal conversations with parents - based on alignment between goals identified by teachers and parents. |
| 2           | 1. Being redefined with new assessment protocol - less emphasis on grades and more on process through formative assessment.  
2. Taking risks and demonstrating strong understanding; not full of anxiety; appearance of happiness on the part of the student. |
| 3           | 1. To be leaders of tomorrow - demonstrated by fostering leadership among students today.  
2. Noted that the Fraser Report puts schools in competition, creating a business model of charter schools; parents therefore look at 'numbers' to make decision. |
| 4           | 1. Are students working at a level that challenges them and are they demonstrating high standards in those areas? Do they feel good about themselves? Some parents only care about academic excellence.  
2. Need to move into application of knowledge through problem-based learning and creative thinking strategies.  
3. Successful students have ability to persevere - make mistakes and take positive action to fix them. They are intrinsically motivated. Do students want to be here? (Important question in determining perception of success). |
| 5           | 1. Charter vision: students being confident and capable and able to enact their own vision for the future.  
2. Leadership vision: “If I’ve done everything I can to maximize the time, and the quality of the experience that everybody has in the building every day. If I’ve done that, then I’ve done my best to ensure student success.”  
3. Ideal student vision: total engagement in learning |
| 6           | 1. Different stakeholders will have differing perspectives: parents will likely be more academic oriented while teachers may be more process-oriented.  
2. Students will likely characterize success as confidence and being prepared for the 'next step'. May also be finding success in the social context.  
3. Points out that it is not his responsibility to say what success looks like but rather to ask the question of teachers, students, and parents. |
| 7           | 1. Teachers and school leadership more focused on student preparedness for high school.  
2. Some parents value the Fraser report and place quite an emphasis on Provincial Achievement Test results.  
3. Future focus will be on struggling students. |
| 8           | 1. Definition varies according to where students are academically, socially, and emotionally at entrance point.  
2. Success is based on how closely they come to fulfilling mission (supporting students into a relationship with formal education). |
| 9           | 1. Structured lesson plans. "At the end of the day, it's the report card that matters, and its on percents".  
2. Students with special needs are not accommodated - rely on charter school regulations and legislation to allow for selection of students. |
| 10          | 1. Who do you want your kids to be when they walk across the podium?  
2. "Being the best you can be and valuing those differences." |
Appendix G

Analytic Interpretation of Findings

The following analytical procedure illustrates the process of identifying categories for analyzing, interpreting, and synthesizing the findings.

Analytic Category 1:

The influence of contextual variables within public charter schools on instructional leadership practice (Research Questions 1 and 2). Does the individuality of charter schools ultimately lead to such divergent approaches that comparisons become meaningless?

- Preserving the uniqueness of charter schools sometimes seems to be a goal in itself.
- Variance between schools in terms of innovation and willingness to extend teaching practice is immense. Some continually push the innovation boundaries while others prefer the status quo – and the reason their charter exists (their perception). (Harris, 2005)
- Is there a greater, more active, role for Alberta Education in clarifying the intent of charter schools to be constantly in motion as far as being research centers and seeking out different ways of fostering student success?
- Do the school leadership competencies provide a viable framework for charter school principals to develop their instructional leadership practice? It could be argued that the demands being placed on charter school principals are so great that they can’t provide exemplary instructional leadership. (see lit review, Performance Standards)
• Definitions of ‘student success’ and ‘instructional leadership’ are important contextual variables in determining how practice affects success. (Refer to lit review – Marzano et al, Leithwood, etc…)

Analytic Category 2:

Principals’ perceptions that their greatest impact on student success was by supporting the professional growth and learning of teachers (Research Question 1).

Principals agreed that the most significant part of their instructional leadership role is supporting teachers to improve their practice and thereby enhance student success. (see lit review – Hallinger et al)

• This finding coincides with the research of Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), Schlechty (2009), Leithwood & Louis (2012), and Robinson (2011).

• Relationships and trust are key elements of successful instructional leadership. (see lit review – Characteristics of Leadership for Learning and p.35)

• Does, or should, it imply that principals should not have a teaching assignment if doing so takes away time from collaborating with teachers on planning and/or providing the professional growth that the data indicates is critical to success?

• Is the teaching assignment more for the principal’s own satisfaction – and perhaps that is justification enough if it gives them more insight into the needs of exemplary teaching and learning?

• Leadership ‘style’ is very individualized and plays a significant role in how a principal approaches their practice.
Analytic Category 3:

Reconciliation of personal beliefs and values with the school charter (Research Question 2).

- In some cases the principal was drawn to a specific school because of the charter and how it aligned with their own beliefs and values about teaching and learning. (see lit review, contradictory research from Crum et al on need for ‘ownership’ & Hallinger (2005) – commitment to school goals by principal.)

- In other instances the motivation for taking on the principals role is questionable since the individual’s own beliefs seem to conflict with those of the charter. Interestingly, the individual’s instructional leadership practice aligns with the charter and they may set aside personal beliefs in the perceived better interest of the school. (lit review – Leithwood et al, 2006)
## Appendix H

**Consistency of Findings, Interpretations, and Conclusions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Findings</th>
<th>Interpretations</th>
<th>Conclusions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Instructional leadership in Alberta public charter schools is significantly influenced by the contextual variables that exist within each jurisdiction.** | Any analysis of public charter schools must take into consideration the unique nature of each school based on its charter and culture.  
The inconsistencies in the composition of Boards of Directors, and the resulting discrepancies in establishing priorities among charter schools seems to be of significance in determining the degree of autonomy that principals have to exercise instructional leadership according to their preferred ‘style’. | Comparing charter schools is not possible because of the discrepancies between schools in terms of goals, measures of success, and approaches to learning and teaching present in each school. |
| **Individual beliefs about teaching and learning inform instructional leadership practice.** | Personal and professional experiences, together with established values, beliefs and attitudes about teaching and learning, influence a principal’s approach to instructional leadership practice.  
In most instances principals have been drawn to a particular charter school because of a perceived compatibility between their own belief system and that of the charter. In other cases there is an acceptance of the charter-focused pedagogy in the school even if it conflicts with personal beliefs about teaching and learning. | Beliefs, values, and attitudes are an integral part of developing instructional leadership practice and the schools that demonstrate the greatest innovative capacity are those with a very clear alignment between the charter and the belief system of the principal. |
| **Support of teachers’ professional learning is regarded as essential to fostering student success as defined by the charter mandate.** | The principal’s role as an instructional leader can have the broadest influence when he or she provides effective and responsive professional support to teachers, who in turn improve their teaching practice and hence see enhanced student success as defined by the charter mandate.  
Principals are teachers first! The desire of principals to interact | Public charter school principals perceive that their greatest influence on student success is realized through their direct support of teacher growth and learning.  
Direct interaction between the principal and students is perceived to be of great value in establishing relationships and can be instrumental in influencing the |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Findings</th>
<th>Interpretations</th>
<th>Conclusions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>directly with students and thereby influence their opportunities for success are representative of a strong commitment to teaching and learning.</td>
<td>student’s success, however the number of students impacted in this way is minimal in comparison to the number that are affected by a teacher who has a high degree and quality of professional support from the principal.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Time management and establishing priorities for task completion play a key role in creating instructional leadership opportunities</strong></td>
<td>A public charter school principal’s time is apportioned between tasks that are school-centered (e.g.-facility, budget, staffing), those that are charter-centered (e.g.-education plan, jurisdictional results reporting, Board meetings and committees) and those that are focused on instructional leadership (e.g.- student issues, professional teacher support, parent meetings, class visits). There are often more tasks than time, requiring principals to set priorities and complete tasks not related to teaching and learning outside of school hours, or to sacrifice instructional leadership time in order to manage other responsibilities.</td>
<td>Providing exemplary instructional leadership requires the prioritization and allocation of time, including scheduling time to visit classes, collaborate in teacher planning, and coordinate teacher professional learning opportunities in a timely and proactive manner that builds capacity for learning and teaching to occur.</td>
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</table>