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PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF URBAN ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS:
READING-PROFICIENT STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education
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ABSTRACT

Changes in the demands on educational leaders have necessitated shifts in the roles and responsibilities of school principals. Meeting the needs of students with disabilities is among the critical challenges that administrators face today. The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of elementary school principals where students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) demonstrate reading proficiency. Phenomenological research was conducted to identify the themes associated with effective school leadership, related to this specific population, students with SLD. Informal, non evaluative observations were conducted in conjunction with analysis of leadership summaries that were submitted by teachers who were nominated by the participants, to determine theme congruence.

These results indicated that the lived experiences of elementary school principals are a complex blend of characteristics and practices. Seven specific themes were identified in the qualitative interviews: 1) Embedded personal and/or professional experiences; 2) Adaptability; 3) Relationship orientation and commitment to collaboration; 4) Focused responsibility and accountability; 5) Hiring and supporting teachers while maintaining a culture of high expectations; 6) Resource allocation; 7) Reflection that informs decision making. This research provided preliminary evidence to demonstrate the lived experiences of elementary school principals, with a particular focus on students with SLD, and can be used to inform and adapt current practices to address anticipated challenges in the future.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Leadership, as it relates to organizational effectiveness, has been examined from the perspective of business, economic, and private sector outcomes (Bohlman & Deal, 2011; Collins, 2001; Kotter, 1999, 2008). Subsequently, school leadership has also gained researchers' interest and has led to an evolution in the understanding of the factors that influence school effectiveness and transformational change (Fullan, 2006a; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Wagner et al., 2006). Contemporary factors, including advances in technology, complexity of students' needs, and an increased emphasis on data-driven decision making, have impacted school leadership (Fullan, 2013; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

In recent years, many changes have necessitated shifts in the roles and responsibilities of the school principal (Fullan, 2007; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Principals must be responsive to changes in organizational structures, political demands, and legislative actions. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), along with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; IDEIA) and other similar laws, have mandated educational change and have influenced current practice, particularly related to educating students with disabilities (Bursztyn, 2007; Wright & Wright, 2004). Local, state, and federal laws require schools to increase the achievement of all students, with even greater accountability than in the past, coupled with the threat of imposed sanctions. These changes have had direct impact on leadership because of the intense focus on developing reading proficiency in all students, particularly students in high-risk groups.

Contributing to the increased demands on educational leaders, students with disabilities are included in public schools within general education far more than in the past. Current estimates indicate that 13% of students enrolled in public schools are served by special education programs (Aron & Loprest, 2012). Therefore, educators have been mandated to adapt traditional views and teaching practices and are considered ethically and professionally responsible for increasing academic achievement. Cumulatively, these changes have invoked a heightened focus on instruction and on instructional leadership that support the achievement of all students.

Despite the changes that have required an increased focus on achievement for all student subgroups, strong evidence suggests that students with disabilities, along with other targeted subgroups, are performing significantly below their same-age peers (Florida Department of Education, 2013b, 2014a; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013a, 2013b). In order to address students' underperformance, the role of the principal is evolving, and principals are now, more than ever, expected to be instructional leaders of the school (Hattie, 2009). Over time, principals have had to develop competencies in a variety of areas to accommodate the changing needs of students and the increasing complexity of schools (Elmore, 2006; Erkens & Twadell, 2012; Fullan, 2007; Reeves, 2006). The present research examines these competencies by using qualitative methods to study the lived experiences of effective elementary school principals in schools where students with Learning Disabilities (LD) have demonstrated proficiency in reading.

Statement of the Problem

Background: Learning Disability

Students with a Learning Disability (LD) typically demonstrate low achievement that cannot be explained by other conditions (Kirk, 1963; Wong & Butler, 2012). Learning

disabilities appear to be brain based, with inherited tendencies (Wong & Butler, 2012) that impact learning in a variety of ways, primarily in the processing and use of information (Fuchs, Deshler, & Reschly, 2004; Waber, 2010). In the past, determination of a learning disability was based on a discrepancy between intellect and achievement (Rutter & Yule, 1975; Waber, 2010). The research of Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, and Barnes (2007) questioned the validity of the discrepancy model and resulted in research to determine more valid ways to identify the presence of a learning disability. Currently, in Florida students' individual responses to instruction and intervention are used to identify students with a Specific Learning Disability within a framework, known as Florida's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (Florida Department of Education, 2014b). Because Florida uses the classification category of Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) among other categories, the terms LD and SLD are used interchangeably to indicate the same group of students.

Background: Current Status

Results from the National Association for Educational Progress (NAEP; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013a) indicate that students without disabilities showed improvement between 2011 and 2013 (from a scale score of 225 to 227), and students with disabilities declined in proficiency (from a scale score of 186 to 184). Between 1998 and 2013, students without disabilities increased their overall scale score from 217 to 227, whereas students with disabilities increased their overall scale score from 176 to 184. These results indicate that students with disabilities are making less progress and have not yet approached the 1998 results shown by students without disabilities.

This dissertation study took place in Florida, so examining the results of tests that measure reading proficiency of students with SLD will be included here. The statistics that show

the reading proficiency of Florida's students with SLD appear to be as grim as the national statistics. Although 57% of all Florida students in grades three through ten scored in the proficient range on FCAT 2.0 in 2013, only 17% of students with SLD throughout the state of Florida were considered proficient in reading (Florida Department of Education, 2013b). When limiting the results of FCAT 2.0 to students in elementary grades three through five, the statistics indicate an even greater disparity. Fifty-eight percent of all elementary students in Florida were considered proficient, whereas only 14% of elementary students with LD in Florida were considered proficient (Florida Department of Education, 2013b).

Further analysis of a large urban school district located in central Florida, where the research study took place, showed that 20% of all students with SLD in grades 3–10 were proficient, slightly higher than the state average of 17% (Florida Department of Education, 2013b, 2014a). Seventeen percent of the students with SLD in grades 3–5 in the study district were considered proficient on FCAT 2.0 in 2013, compared to the state average in grades three through five of 14%. Student performance is summarized in Table 1. Clearly, students with SLD are performing well below their same-grade peers, based on national, state, and local test results. These results are troubling for educators, school leaders, families, and students, particularly when comparing the performance of all students with the performance of students with SLD. The results of these analyses serve as evidence for the need to understand the factors that contribute to the success of students who have SLD.

Table 1: Summary of National, State, and Local Student Performance Data

	Students without disabilities	Students with disabilities
NAEP Reading 1998 Scale Score 2013 SLD only	217	176
NAEP Reading 2011 Scale Score 2013 SLD only	225	184
NAEP Reading 2013 Scale Score	227	186
Florida FCAT 2.0 Reading 2013		
Grades 3–10	57	17
Grades 3–5	59	14
Study district FCAT 2.0 Reading 2013		
Grades 3–10	57	20
Grades 3–5	60	17

Background: Influences on Performance

Numerous factors contribute to the educational outcomes of students (Hattie, 2009). Hattie (2009) and Marzano (2007) conducted meta-analytic studies that identified home, school, instructional, and curricular factors that influence student learning. Hattie (2009) reviewed the literature and pointed out that Gottfried, Hart and Risley, Hong and Ho, and Sirin found connections between student achievement and socio-economic status, including family income, education, occupation, home environment, and parental expectations. High-quality classroom instruction and instructional strategies have consistently been confirmed as a leading indicator of student learning (Allington, & Cunningham, 2002; Leithwood, Jantzi, Earl, Fullan, & Levin, 2004; Lou, Abrami, & d’Apollonia, 2001; Marzano, 2007, 2012; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Springer, Stanne, & Donovan, 1999). Classroom climate and teacher-student relationships also appear to produce positive effects on student achievement (Cornelius-White, 2007; Hattie,

2009; Marzano, 2000, 2012). These factors influence student learning and, thereby, success in school.

In addition to the individual, family, and school-level factors that contribute to the academic success of students, there is also evidence that school leaders impact student achievement (Elmore, 2006; Hattie, 2009; Marzano et al., 2005; Reeves, 2006); thus, school leadership will constitute the primary focus of this dissertation. In particular, leadership in schools where students with LD are proficient in reading will be examined. This research is essential to the understanding of leadership qualities needed to address the underperformance of students with LD in reading.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to describe the lived experiences and views of leadership of effective elementary school principals. This research was conducted in order to identify the key qualities of effective leaders, thereby strengthening the understanding of school leadership. In particular, this study focused on the qualities of principals within elementary schools in which students with SLD are performing at proficient levels in reading. At this stage in the research, effectiveness of principals will be defined as principals leading elementary schools whose students with SLD have demonstrated the highest percentage of reading proficiency in the selected school district, as measured by performance on Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) 2.0 Reading. The Florida Department of Education (Florida Department of Education, 2014a) has set criteria for performance on the FCAT based on five achievement levels. These achievement levels are based on developmental scale scores, ranging from 140 to 302 for Reading. Students who score in levels three, four, or five are considered to be within the passing range, indicating satisfactory performance (Florida

Department of Education, 2014a). This standard for reading proficiency is recognized throughout the state of Florida, where the research took place. Although other factors influence reading proficiency of students with SLD, the intent of this research study was to describe the leadership qualities and practices in inclusive schools where students with SLD have demonstrated success.

Research Questions

The primary research questions of this study are as follows:

1. How do principals of effective elementary schools describe their experiences and views of typical leadership behavior?
2. What are the characteristics of elementary school principals with the highest percentage of students with SLD who have demonstrated proficiency in reading, as measured by FCAT 2.0?
3. What is the essence of effective elementary school leadership?

Research Design

This research study used a qualitative research design to explore the leadership qualities of principals who lead elementary schools in which students with LD are proficient in reading. Specifically, the phenomenological research approach was used to study the meaning that individuals attach to their lived experience (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005).

In Phase One, the participants and sites were purposefully selected using set criteria (Creswell, 2003). In the second phase, qualitative interviews of the selected principals were conducted to explore the themes related to experiences and views of their leadership style and practices. The interviews were followed by at least one qualitative observation of each of the

selected principals. Additionally, each principal was asked to nominate at least two teachers to complete a description of the principal's leadership qualities, as related to the reading proficiency of students with SLD. The observation and teacher descriptions were used to attain multiple perspectives, thereby confirming or denying consistency of the data derived from the interview. These data points were triangulated in order to validate the findings and to identify deeper meaning from the research (Patton, 2002). The data triangulation process serves to ensure credibility and trustworthiness and will extend the research beyond the self-reported responses in the interview (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Definition of Terms

Achievement levels—five categories from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest), based on developmental scale scores, that are used to determine student proficiency (Florida Department of Education, 2013a)

Coding—process used to analyze the transcripts and manuscripts that are used to determine themes and patterns (Seidman, 2013)

FCAT 2.0—Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test—part of Florida's overall plan, authorized by state statute, to increase student achievement by measuring students' understanding of the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards; the test is given annually to students throughout the state of Florida in grades 3–10 to determine reading and math proficiency; writing and science are also assessed at specific grade levels (Florida Department of Education, 2014a)

Intermediate-level—students in grades three, four, and five

Learning disability—neurological disorder affecting the individuals' ability to process and use information that impacts learning (Cortiella & Horowitz [NCLD], 2014)

Lived experience—a detailed account of the perceptions of the participants involved in the research, as related to the phenomena in question, typically accessed through interviews (Giorgi, 2009)

Phenomenology—qualitative research method that describes the common, lived experiences of participants and identifies a universal essence (Ary, Jabobs, Razavieh, & Sorenson, 2006; Creswell, 2007)

Principal effectiveness—a measure of principal performance in leading elementary schools where students with LD are considered proficient, based on reading performance on FCAT 2.0

Proficiency—an achievement designation indicating the attainment of scores in Achievement Levels three, four, or five, consistent with on- or above-grade-level performance (Florida Department of Education, 2013a)

Purposeful sampling—sampling method used to select individuals for the research to provide the researcher with a clearer understanding of the phenomena by providing credible responses to the research questions (Creswell, 2003)

Qualitative research—research methodology used to attain an understanding of the phenomenon to be studied (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Saturation—point at which the researcher discontinues data collection due to repetitiveness and lack of new insights being produced (Creswell, 2014)

Textural description—description of the participants' lived experiences, as told in the interview (Creswell, 2007)

Triangulation—combining data sources to develop a coherent, justifiable theme and to improve result validity (Creswell, 2014)

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, students with disabilities have been served in separate schools, and they were taught in separate classes, if they were served at all, when being educated in public schools. Since the inception of P.L. 94-142, the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act*, in 1975, students with disabilities have had the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment (Bursztyn, 2007). The historic law guaranteed a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for all students; it ensured the rights of individuals to be educated in the least restrictive environment; it outlined the procedural and management requirements to ensure due process; and it provided federal funding to be used to supplement state and local contributions (Wright & Wright, 2004).

Over time, further legislation has clarified the intention to include students with disabilities in public schools. The *Americans with Disabilities Act* (1990) provided broad protections and sought to prevent discrimination against individuals with disabilities and other groups (Bursztyn, 2007). The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) of 1997 provided clarification on the identification process and steps that schools are required to use when providing a free and appropriate education, while ensuring access to the general education curriculum (Bursztyn, 2007). The *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001, though not specifically a special education law, also supported access to the general education curriculum. By mandating participation of students with disabilities in testing and in accountability measurement, inclusion has been supported (Kimmelman, 2006). This law merged the need for

students with disabilities to have access to the general education curriculum with a focus on student outcomes (Hyatt, 2007; Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, & Jones, 2007). In alignment with NCLB, the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEIA) was established in 2004. This law continued previous attention to due process procedures, educating children in the least restrictive environment, mandating teacher requirements, and identifying and providing services to young children with disabilities (Hyatt, 2007). In 2012, the Secretary of Education offered states the option of NCLB waivers. Conditions included continued accountability of overall student outcomes and subgroups, including students with disabilities (Riddle & Kober, 2012).

Overall, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of students with disabilities who are included in general education. Between 1940 and 1978, the percentage of students with disabilities enrolled in public school increased from 1.2% to 8.2% of school-aged children (Winzer, 2009). Current estimates indicate that 13% of students enrolled in public schools are served by special education programs (Aron & Loprest, 2012). This increase demonstrates the shift away from seclusion in separate schools and institutions toward more inclusive settings, a dramatic change in special education reform. Schools now have a vested interest in the performance of students with disabilities. This interest has resulted in a renewed focus on instruction and on instructional leadership that supports the achievement of all students.

These changes have increased the responsibilities that school principals now have in comparison to the previously accepted paradigm associated with school leadership. In response to early changes, Fullan (1997) identified the increasing demands on principals and the perceived lack of effectiveness due to being unprepared for the shifts and the previously static expectations. In the past, the primary responsibilities of the principal involved management of facilities and

other resources of the school (Barnet, 2004; Shellard, 2003; Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). The role of the principal has evolved, and now principals are expected to be instructional leaders of the school while also managing the school's assets, property, and budget. Over time, principals have had to develop competencies in a variety of areas to accommodate the changing needs of students and the increasing complexity of schools (Fullan, 2007).

Effective School Leadership

Early research by Lezotte (1981) and Edmonds (1983) defined the critical issues of effective school leadership. Comprehensive understanding and use of curriculum, instruction, assessment, safety, and discipline have been identified critical features of school success. These key aspects have been consistently supported and refined in subsequent research. School administrators must possess the knowledge and skills to provide feedback to teachers in order to improve the quality of instruction and, thereby, student achievement (Villa, Thousand, Stainback, & Stainback, 1992). Goleman (1995) identified emotional intelligence as a key indicator of principal effectiveness because of the need for openness, collaboration, and focused vision in order to build capacity for improvements in student achievement. Research conducted in Chicago schools found that effective principals were focused on collaboration, efficiency, student achievement, along with strategic support and direction (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998). Sammons (1999) confirmed the integral role of school leaders in effecting change. Further study identified the principal as critical in leading the development of a trusting school culture, necessary for school improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Several studies have highlighted the importance of clear, consistent communication that supports school improvement efforts (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom,

2004; Marzano et al., 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Furthermore, teacher collaboration in professional learning communities has been thought to enhance school improvement, and the role of the principal in developing and maintaining authentic, focused collaboration appears to be integral to success (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). The research findings of James, Connolly, Dunning, and Elliot (2006) have emphasized the role of principals in supporting the professional growth of teachers in order to improve student achievement and overall school effectiveness. In addition to key knowledge and skills, Billingsley (2005) noted that school leaders who have strong professional identities with a history of professional preparation and successful teaching experience were more likely to be successful. These results suggest that a variety of skills and dispositions are needed for effective school leadership

Several authors have synthesized research in order to advance the field of educational leadership. Leithwood, Louis, and colleagues (2004) found three common characteristics of effective leaders, including creating and maintaining a shared vision, developing personnel, and shaping organizational change. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) found similar results and identified 21 leadership behaviors that were positively correlated with improving student achievement. When Hubbard, Mehan, and Stein (2006) analyzed the reforms that were instituted in San Diego schools, they found that success was associated with the relentless involvement of principals in the change process. These results demonstrated sharp contrast to the Cross City Urban School Reform (Allen, Osthoff, White, & Swanson, 2005), where principals were less involved. Despite significant investment, the results were below the expected level, leading the authors to conclude that the role of the principal is integral to success.

Expanding the organizational work conducted in the private sector by Jim Collins (2001), Gray and Streshly (2008) developed a model for evaluating schools and school principals. Their

research identified key school principal characteristics that are considered to be highly effective. These included nine critical findings associated with principal effectiveness: 1) maintains a posture of personal modesty; 2) combines humility with fearlessness; 3) focuses on improving student achievement; 4) values hiring and development of personnel; 5) uses effective interpersonal skills to develop relationships; 6) persistently focuses on school improvement; 7) consistently communicates the vision through passionate resolve and involvement (hedgehog concept); 8) uses data to inform decisions and confronts challenges; 9) displays commitment to the school and staff with professionalism (Gray & Streshly, 2008).

These research findings have informed the development of the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards by the Council for Chief State School Officers. Each of the six standards focuses on the knowledge, dispositions, and performances required of school leaders (www.ccsso.org/Resources/Publications). The standards emphasize the importance of a clearly articulated vision and a rigorous, responsive instructional program with aligned professional development programs that are maintained by a safe and orderly school environment. Furthermore, the standards indicate the need for school leaders with ethical decision making that address family, community, political, and social engagement. These standards were developed to support improvement of leadership preparation programs and, therefore, are maintained as benchmarks to develop and evaluate school leaders (Green, 2005).

In summary, the changing landscape of education has required principals to create cultural, procedural, and structural shifts in the organization (Whitaker, 2010). These adaptations have resulted in changes in the way leaders lead and the decisions that leaders make. Clearly, the research indicates that principals influence the organizational structure, climate, and instructional health of the school, which are thought to be key factors impacting outcomes in

schools. The lived experiences of effective school principals have yet to be defined; therefore, they are the subject of the present research.

Leadership Involving Special Education

In addition to these critical standards and shifts, school leadership also involves focused attention to the needs of students with disabilities. Valesky and Hirth (1992) first discussed the need for school leaders to possess a broad knowledge of special education in order to comply with the obligations of the law and to reduce the possibility of legal action. Weishaar, Borsa, and Weishaar (2007) identified the need for school administrators to develop proficiency in a wider variety of areas, including supporting students with disabilities. The research of Campbell-Whatley and Lyons (2013) supported the notion that school-level administrators require expertise in the areas of both general education and special education.

In addition to the knowledge and skills needed to become effective school leaders where students with disabilities are included, Lashley (2007) found that dispositions and relational skills are needed in order to be successful. Principals must have a working knowledge of special education law, along with supervising the implementation of supports and programs needed to ensure the success of all students (McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004).

Educating students with disabilities in the general education classroom, in conjunction with the increased focus on accountability, has transformed the role of the school principal (Bruskewitz, 1998). If inclusion is to be successful, a positive, accepting climate must be established. Therefore, the attitudes and beliefs of the school principal are important because they are conveyed to staff members (Dyal, Flynt, & Bennett-Walker, 1996). Elementary principals with positive attitudes toward inclusion were more likely to place students in the least restrictive settings (Praisner, 2003).

Krajewski and Flaherty (2000) suggested the success or failure of an inclusion program relies greatly on the school principal. They argued that a principal must value and believe in the importance of inclusion and help teachers transform this vision of inclusion into tangible programs and services. Likewise, Domencic (2001) found principals' attitudes were related to inclusion outcomes. Principals with positive attitudes about inclusion for students with physical and academic disabilities were more likely to include more students with disabilities in general education classes than their counterparts with less positive attitudes.

Principals demonstrate their values through the decisions they make, and subsequently they influence the development and successful implementation of inclusion and inclusive practices (Bateman & Bateman, 2001; Praisner, 2003). Principals who understand the challenges of working with students with disabilities and their families are more likely to make decisions that provide support and resources that lead to improved student outcomes and performance (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). It also appears that principals' decisions also influence teacher retention and attrition (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Otto & Arnold, 2005). Ultimately, the school principal determines funding allocations for personnel and influences communication, professional development, and programing decisions (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998; Nanus, 1992). These research findings indicate that principals' values and decision-making processes impact the success of students with disabilities.

Recent research has examined and clarified key elements of effective leadership in inclusive schools. Hoppey and McLeskey (2013) conducted an extensive case study analysis of a single principal who successfully created positive school change in an inclusive school. The conclusions from the case study indicated that a school culture of caring and commitment were critical. The principal also valued and consistently used distributed leadership to create

meaningful professional development to sustain significant school change. Like Hoppey and McLeskey (2013), Hehir and Katzman (2012) found that the school leaders of three inclusive schools that were identified as effective consistently demonstrated an intense desire to include and educate all students, and they have created a culture of acceptance and high expectations. Additionally, innovation, collaboration, and problem solving were valued by school leaders and, therefore, were evident in the effective schools (Hehir & Katzman, 2012). The school leaders in each of the schools demonstrated strengths in the four frames of leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2011). The structural, political, symbolic, and human resource frames were observable in the effective inclusive schools (Hehir & Katzman, 2012).

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has adopted standards for special educators and special education administrators that identify these targeted areas (Council for Exceptional Children, 2009). Specifically, these standards have been developed to address the unique and dynamic needs associated with administering special education programs and serving students with disabilities. They focus on the development of leadership and policy as well as the elements of the instructional and cultural environment. The standards emphasize the importance of research-based and evidence-based instructional and assessment practices known to be effective with students with disabilities. Ethical professional practice is explicitly included in the standards, along with collaboration and distributed leadership. These standards outline the expectations for special educators and provide direction for the benefit of students (Council for Exceptional Children, 2009). Combined, the ISLLC Standards (www.ccsso.org/Resources/Publications) and the CEC Standards (Council for Exceptional Children, 2009) are considered the primary guidance for school leaders, particularly those working in inclusive schools.

This literature review has provided the foundation for developing the questions and the design methodology for the current research. Specifically, the role of the elementary school principal was examined within the context of the current school climate. There was a detailed focus on the aspects of leadership that support reading proficiency in students with SLD. Key aspects of the research findings were incorporated in the research in order to extend previous research and inform future research.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Previous research has revealed that the school principal is integral to student achievement and school success. This dissertation research examined the specific qualities and competencies of elementary school principals at schools where students with SLD were performing at proficient levels in reading. The qualities and competencies were explored by examining the lived experiences and perceived factors that influence effectiveness of the identified principals. The leadership attributes and actions of elementary school principals were identified in order to inform the field of educational leadership. The primary goal of this research was to develop responses to the research questions related to effective school leadership, with particular emphasis on the practices related to improving reading proficiency of students with SLD.

This chapter is organized into ten sections: (a) research design, (b) research questions, (c) selection of participants, (d) instrument, (e) data collection, (f) data analysis, (g) limitations, (h) delimitations, (i) assumptions, and (j) summary.

Research Design

This research study used a qualitative research design to explore the leadership qualities of principals who lead elementary schools in which students with SLD are proficient in reading. Specifically, the phenomenological research approach was used to study the meaning individuals attach to their lived experience (Brantlinger et al., 2005). The intent of the research was to identify the essence of effective school leadership. This research design was deemed appropriate to study this phenomenon because of the scarcity of existing cases of effective school leadership,

as defined by the criteria of this study. Combined with the critical need to understand this construct, this research method can provide a thorough analysis of the characteristics of school leadership in effective inclusive schools.

Research Questions

The research questions were derived from the need to understand effective school leadership and served as the foundation of this research study. The primary research questions focused on identifying the characteristics and practices that are defined by the lived experiences of school principals in effective elementary schools. Specifically, the research questions were:

1. How do principals of effective elementary schools describe their experiences and views of leadership and typical behaviors?
2. What are the characteristics of elementary school principals with the highest percentage of students with SLD who have demonstrated proficiency in reading, as measured by FCAT 2.0?
3. What is the essence of effective, inclusive school leadership?

Selection of Participants

This phenomenological research involved principals of elementary schools with SLD students demonstrating proficiency in reading in a large urban school district in the South. The school district is composed of 125 traditional elementary schools that serve students in grades three through five. There are two additional ESE center schools that serve elementary-aged students, and there is one primary learning center that serves students in Pre-K through the second grade only. These three schools were excluded to maintain sample integrity.

Students in grades three through eleven throughout the state of Florida participate in the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) 2.0. Only schools with ten or more students in any given subgroup are reported by the Florida Department of Education to maintain student confidentiality. Therefore, only elementary schools with ten or more students with SLD in grades three through five who attend one of the traditional elementary schools were included in the analysis.

The principals selected for participation in the research were identified as the researcher created a hierarchy ranking system of student data, compiled by the district from a state database. The report provides a comprehensive listing of the performance of the subgroup of students with learning disabilities in each school relative to the performance of all the students at the school. The researcher used this report to select elementary schools within the entire school district.

The proficiency levels of the SLD subgroup in each grade level of each elementary school in 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 were analyzed. All principals leading schools with student proficiency levels that exceeded the state average in each grade level were considered potential participants. This selection process allowed the data to be stratified equitably and resulted in a sample that met purposeful sampling requirements (Mertens & McLaughlin, 1995; Richey & Klein, 2007).

Procedures

All steps to obtain permission from the University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board and the Review Board of the school district were followed in order to protect the rights of human participants. Following the approval from the university and school district, the research process was initiated.

In Phase One, purposive sampling procedures were used to identify key subjects for participation. Participants and sites were purposefully selected using set criteria (Creswell, 2003). This sampling method was selected in order to contribute to the overall understanding of the characteristics of effective leadership and, ultimately, to maximize the utility of the findings. The goal of this phase was to identify the cases for study using the stated criteria. In this phase, potential leader candidates were identified using a systematic, purposive sampling process. Towards this goal, the researcher analyzed the percentage of students with SLD who were considered proficient in reading in each grade level. Reading proficiency is generally defined as performance in Levels 3, 4, or 5 on FCAT 2.0 Reading.

The district provided a data set that combined the FCAT Reading results of students with SLD in grades three, four, and five. This analysis was provided by the district, per the guidelines of the Department of Accountability, Research and Evaluation. Schools with students with SLD that exceeded the weighted state average were considered for inclusion in the research.

A caveat of the system is that the state does not report group proficiency levels when fewer than ten students are in the subgroup, in order to protect confidentiality. Therefore, there may be schools without groups of students with SLD to be included in the analysis.

For the purposes of this research study, the participants were selected with the intention that at least five subjects would fully participate in the research. The principals of the schools with the greatest percentage of students with SLD who exceeded the weighted state average were considered. All schools within the district, and their accompanying test results, were listed. It was decided in advance that if the frequency distribution revealed that several schools had the same ranking, based on the percentage of proficient students, each of the principals would be contacted for possible participation in the study. The list of all schools was maintained

throughout the duration of the research study so that participants could have been replaced, if needed.

Another exclusionary selection factor involved leadership retention and availability. If the principal was present at the school for the designated years and remained at the school as principal, the principal was included as a possible participant in the study. If the principal was no longer at the designated school site but remained employed in the school district, the principal remained in the selection pool. If the principal relocated outside of the district but was available for participation, the individual was included. If the principal was unavailable by usual contact means, the principal was excluded from the research. Only principals in good standing with district and state requirements were included.

In Phase Two of the research, the research participants were contacted. The researcher provided information about the research study and obtained consent from each individual participant. The participants were made aware that at any time they could decline participation or withdraw from the study. The participants were made aware that there would be no compensation provided, beyond their being able to learn more about the research process and building professional expertise by participating in the research process. A demographic questionnaire was also submitted to each participant.

The next phase of the study was conducted using the principles of phenomenology. An interview of the selected principals was scheduled with each individual. The research consisted of semi-structured interviews of selected participants in order to identify the essence of providing support and leadership in schools where students with SLD were demonstrating proficiency. Principals' reports of their beliefs, experiences, and actions that demonstrated their lived

experiences as an elementary school principal where students with SLD were proficient in reading were accessed via the interviews.

The interviews were conducted to explore the themes related to experiences and views of leadership style and practices. The interviews consisted of three distinct sections: 1) Life History; 2) Contemporary Experience; and 3) Reflection (Seidman, 2013). Specific questions in each of the sections were developed to create consistency and to increase the validity of the research. (See Appendix A.) The questions were selected to contribute to the thematic and dynamic aspects of the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview structure, including introductory questions, specifying questions, and direct questions, were punctuated with follow-up questions, probing questions, and interpretative questions, in order to maximize the interview quality (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The researcher used silent listening to detect unstated or unclear messages from the participants, as recommended by Seidman (2013). Identified themes were used to identify the perceived factors associated with reading proficiency within schools with the highest percentage of students with SLD, suggesting possible interpretations of the participants' responses.

During the participant interview process, the researcher recorded all interviews and was responsible for the transcription. The researcher attempted to maintain the integrity of the interviews throughout the transcription process by ensuring acoustic quality and maintaining recordings to reference (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Password-protected files were then transferred from the researcher's computer to an external hard drive. The external hard drive was secured in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office. All data were kept confidential, and only the researcher and the faculty advisor had access to the data.

The researcher analyzed the recorded data, using the horizontalization method (Moustakas, 1994) to develop clusters of meaning and determine theme statements. A textural description of the participants' experience and perception was developed. Then, the essential invariant structure was produced to focus on the common experience of the participants (Creswell, 2007).

Additionally, at least one scheduled, informal, non-evaluative observation of each principal, completing one of the stated actions, was conducted. The researcher observed and recorded, without participating. Each principal nominated at least two teachers to complete a description of the principal's leadership qualities, as related to the reading proficiency of students with SLD. The observation and teacher descriptions were used to attain multiple perspectives, thereby confirming or denying the consistency of the data derived from the interview. These data points were triangulated in order to validate the findings and to identify deeper meaning from the research (Patton, 2002).

This research process was intended to describe in greater detail the experiences and perceptions of elementary school principals and their role in contributing to the success of elementary students with SLD. These findings will be used to advance the understanding of effective leadership and accepted standards of professional conduct.

Instrument

In the initial analysis, the school district provided a report of student performance that was used to identify the percentage of proficient students with SLD in each elementary school. In the second phase, a demographic questionnaire was completed, and an accompanying in-depth, semi-structured interview took place between the researcher and the interviewee. The

interview questions addressed the key indicators of leadership and were used as a representation of the key strategies and qualities of professionals leading schools.

Data Collection

The interview questions were open ended to allow the participants to reveal the leadership characteristics, practices, and behaviors being studied. The participants' perspectives were exposed through direct and indirect questioning and were recorded using standard interview protocols. The focused interviews were recorded and transcribed using audio recording (Kagan, Dennis, Igou, & Moore, 1993), and the recordings were used to clarify questions about the notes taken during the interview.

An observational protocol was used for recording data secured during the principals' observations. Both descriptive and reflective notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), along with demographic and observational time and place data, were recorded.

Data Analysis

The basic steps of data analysis, advocated by Creswell (2003), were followed. The researcher completed a detailed description of the settings and of the individuals selected for participation. The recording and field notes were transcribed and confirmed in order to determine general overall meaning (Creswell, 2003). Key words were identified. Next, the responses were transformed by creating codes and themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Seidman, 2013). A textural description of the participants' experience and perception were developed from the content analyses. Then, the essential, invariant structure was produced to focus on the common experience of the participants (Creswell, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This process allowed the researcher to respond to the research questions and to produce an interpretation of the interviews.

Limitations

There are limitations typically associated with qualitative research. This study has the following limitations:

1. The researcher is subject to researcher bias because the research was conducted within the school district that employs the researcher. This bias was recognized throughout the research process and was explained in the narrative. The researcher actively sought to reduce any bias by disclosing information throughout the interview process and result-interpretation process (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). This backyard research bias is a common, yet complicated, limitation to research. Therefore, the researcher attempted to identify biases and misperceptions throughout the research study.
2. Qualitative research is subject to flawed data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The researcher used interview protocol standards and standard analyses procedures in order to limit research bias. The researcher had access to subject area experts and data analysis experts through the university. These specialists were contacted, as needed.

Delimitations

The primary delimitation is the result of participant selection. The selection criteria were limited to participants within one public school district, located in the central Florida region. Using a public school district within an urban locale did not allow the researcher to identify the views of principals in private or charter schools or schools of various economic, social, or geographic areas.

Assumptions

The following assumptions were made while conducting this research:

1. Participants in the study have met highly qualified standards because they maintain their professional certification and standards of conduct.
2. Participants answer truthfully and accurately to the survey and interview questions.
3. Participants are willing to provide responses that will inform future decisions in special education and effective schools.

Summary

This research study was designed to examine the perceptions of school principals in order to uncover the perceived leadership qualities that contribute to the success of students with SLD in elementary schools. A qualitative research design approach was selected to examine the research questions. Standard phenomenological research protocols were used to secure research integrity and to ensure that the research purpose was aligned with the research questions and methods. This research is intended to define the essence of effective inclusive school leadership in order to inform the field of special educational leadership.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to reveal and to understand in detail the lived experiences of elementary school principals where students with SLD were demonstrating reading proficiency based on performance on FCAT Reading. The research goals were achieved by examining the perceptions of the principals obtained during qualitative interviews and by examining the supporting evidence from document analyses and from informal, unofficial, non-evaluative observations. The data from the interviews were analyzed to determine common themes among the five principals who agreed to participate in the research. The data from the document analyses that focused on teachers' perceptions of the principals' leadership, along with the informal, non-evaluative observations, were used to provide further evidence of the lived experiences of the principals and to determine theme congruence. This chapter presents the results of the research, based on the three research questions that focused on the essence of effective elementary school leadership, as it relates to supporting students with SLD.

Method

The descriptive statistics were initially used to identify the participants who met the eligibility criteria. Further descriptive analyses were conducted to obtain and summarize demographic data.

Descriptive Statistics for Student Achievement Variables

Student achievement data, based on FCAT Reading scores from 2012-2013 and 2013-14, were provided by the district and included the performance of students with SLD. The district aggregated the data for the identified student subgroup in grades three, four, and five for each of the years for each of the schools in the district. The researcher then compared the school-level data to the state average of the group being examined. All schools with student subgroup scores that exceeded the state average in both years, 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, were considered to be eligible, based on the predetermined criteria, and are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Schools With Subgroup Scores That Exceed the State Average

School	<u>School year</u>	
	2012–2013	2013–2014
1*	29.4	37.5
2*	26.3	25
3	50	66.7
4	30	27.3
5	25	28.6
6	46.2	26.9
7*	60	28.6
8	38.5	40
9*	46.2	33
10	35.3	26.7
11	29.4	25
12	25	25
13	28.6	25
14*	46.2	35.7
15	28.6	47.1

*Participated in the research study

A total of 15 schools met the eligibility criteria by maintaining proficiency levels above the state average for two consecutive years. Of those 15 schools, two of the principals had been replaced (School 5 and School 10) and were excluded. Two of the principals retired from OCPS (School 6 and School 11) and were excluded from the study. One principal did not maintain the administrative status required for inclusion (School 8). Five principals declined to participate (Schools 3, 4, 12, 13, and 15). Schools 1, 2, 7, 9 and 14 agreed to participate in the research study. Two of the principals (Participant 2 from School 2 and Participant 3 from School 7) were assigned to a different school in 2014-2015 but agreed to participate in the research study based on their leadership involvement in the previous school. The five participants satisfied the requirement for participation, as identified in the initial proposal.

Interviews were conducted at each individual participant's school site at a mutually agreed-upon time. Following each interview, each participant nominated a teacher to construct a summary of the principal's leadership, and each document was analyzed to determine theme congruence. These summaries were completed within the week of the interview and were emailed directly to the researcher. Also, the researcher conducted an informal, unofficial, non-evaluative observation of the principal at a recommended time and event or scenario. The data collected during the participant observations were used as a third data point to triangulate the data with the other two data sources, the qualitative interviews and the document analyses.

Participants

Participant 1 (School 1)

Participant 1 is a Caucasian female who has been a principal for two years. The school maintains an enrollment of approximately 1,200 students, and 36.98% of the students are eligible

for the Free/Reduced Meal Program that is funded by the federal Title I Program. The principal maintains Florida certification in the following areas: Elementary Education K-6, ESOL, Educational Leadership, and Principal. She has prior experience in special education as a classroom teacher, and she currently serves as Principal of School 1, which has been designated as a district elementary center school for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The school provides self-contained, pull out, and consultation support as stated in the IEPs as the primary service delivery models for students with disabilities.

Participant 2 (School 2)

Participant 2 is a Caucasian male who has been a principal for three years. The school maintains an enrollment of approximately 450 students, and 53.97% of the students are eligible for the Free/Reduced Meal Program that is funded by the federal Title I Program. The principal maintains Florida certification in the following areas: Social Studies 5-9, Social Studies 6-12, Educational Leadership, and Principal. He has prior experience in special education as a middle school SLD Math teacher, and he was an assistant principal assigned to evaluate and support the ESE Department for seven years at a high school in the district. At the time of the dissertation interview, he served as Principal of School 2, which has been designated as a district elementary center school for students with physical impairments and students who are medically fragile and/or have severe intellectual disabilities. The school uses an inclusion model with push-in support for all ESE students who are taking the Florida Standards Assessment, the assessment that replaced the FCAT, beginning in 2015. Students with severe medical or intellectual disabilities are included, as the IEP requires and the students' health allows. He has subsequently been reassigned to a high school within the district.

Participant 3 (School 7)

Participant 3 is an African American female who has been a principal for four years. The school maintains an enrollment of approximately 300 students, and 57.83% of the students are eligible for the Free/Reduced Meal Program that is funded by the federal Title I Program. The principal maintains Florida certification in the following areas: Elementary Education, Exceptional Education (K-12), Educational Leadership, and Principal. She has prior experience in special education as a middle school teacher for students with emotional disabilities, as a preschool teacher for students with disabilities, as a classroom teacher, as a teacher for students who were classified as gifted, and as a teacher providing resource support. She also served as a staffing coordinator and as an assistant principal, prior to becoming a principal. The school provided resource room and support facilitation to support students with disabilities during the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years. She has subsequently been reassigned to another elementary school within the district.

Participant 4 (School 9)

Participant 4 is an African American male who has been a principal for four years. The school maintains an enrollment of approximately 475 students, and 42.95% of the students are eligible for the Free/Reduced Meal Program that is funded by the federal Title I Program. The principal maintains Florida certification in the following areas: Elementary Education, Educational Leadership, and Principal. He has experience in special education as an assistant principal assigned to evaluate and support the ESE Department of a district high school. During 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, all students with disabilities were provided with Resource level of support at School 9. The school has been designated as an elementary center school, serving students with visual impairments.

Participant 5 (School 14)

Participant 5 is a Caucasian female who has been a principal for 33 years. The school maintains an enrollment of approximately 850 students, and 26.70% of the students are eligible for the Free/Reduced Meal Program that is funded by the federal Title I Program. The principal maintains Florida certification in the following areas: Early Childhood Education, Elementary Education, Educational Leadership, and Principal. She has special education experience as a parent and as a school leader. School 14 provided Resource level of support to students with disabilities.

In summary, three of the five participants are female; two of the five participants are male. Three of the five participants are Caucasian; two of the five participants are African American. Four of the five participants have fewer than five years of experience. The average number of years of experience of the participants is 9.2 years. The median number of years of experience of the participants is 4 years. None of the five schools was eligible for funding from the Title I Free and Reduced Meal Program. Three of the five schools serve as center schools for students with low incidence disabilities. All of the participants maintained certification in Educational Leadership and as Principal. Three of the five participants maintained certification in Elementary Education. One of the five participants maintained certification in Exceptional Education (K-12). Table 3 summarizes the demographic information detailed by the participants.

Table 3: Participant Demographics

Partic. code	Years as principal	Gender	Race	% of free and reduced	Certification
P1	2	F	C	36.98	Elementary Education; ESOL; Educational Leadership; Principal
P2	3	M	C	53.97	Social Studies, 5-9/6-12; Educational Leadership; Principal
P3	4	F	AA	57.83	Elementary Education; Exceptional Education (K-12); Educational Leadership; Principal
P4	4	M	AA	42.95	Elementary Education; Educational Leadership; Principal
P5	33	F	C	26.7	Early Childhood Education; Elementary Education; Educational Leadership; Principal

Epoche

Epoche is a process whereby the researcher identifies the primary biases that could potentially interfere with the outcomes of the results. Moustakas (1994) clarified the definition of “epoche” as “a Greek word meaning to stay away or abstain from” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). With phenomenological research, the researcher is challenged to suspend presuppositions or

preconceived ideas about the topic and the individuals. In the case of this researcher, there were several potential areas of bias: 1) Having extensive experience within the district where the research took place; 2) Having worked with two of the participants informally in the past; 3) Having worked with two of the participants extensively in recent years; 4) Having completed extensive study of educational leadership and developed a professional foundation in educational administration and in special education; 5) Having served as a teacher for students with SLD and worked extensively with students with disabilities over time; 6) Having raised a child with a severe, specific learning disability, who attended public school and who is now an adult. Prior to beginning the research, these beliefs, attitudes, and biases were identified in order to avoid their contaminating the research process or results.

Data Analysis Procedures

The interviews were divided into three main sections with identified questions and follow-up questions to clarify the participants' responses. These sections included 1) Life History; 2) Contemporary Experience; and 3) Reflection. The selected questions were intended to access the impact of past experiences on current beliefs, attitudes, and practices, along with identifying the critical features of leadership. The questions that made up each section were selected based on literature findings.

The researcher transcribed the recorded interviews and analyzed the transcriptions using the framework advocated by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2012). Following the transcription, member check was provided. No additional changes or clarifications were made. Analysis of the interviews was used to code and categorize responses in order to identify themes related to the lived experiences of elementary school principals where students with learning disabilities demonstrated proficiency in reading. Subsequent analyses through horizontalization

were conducted. Initially, each statement was given even weight, but through repeated readings and analysis, the researcher determined whether participants' statements were relevant and/or redundant in order to eliminate statements that did not contribute to the research questions. Horizons, "the textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon," (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97), were given labels. Then, the meanings of the units were identified, and clusters were grouped into themes. The clusters revealed similarities in the experiences and descriptions of the principals, and the final themes were identified. These themes were organized and described according to the research questions in the next section.

This process was repeated for each interview. The same process was used for the document analyses and observational field notes to determine theme congruence. Throughout the entire process, participant confidentiality was maintained at a premium level. Only the researcher had access to the interview recordings, transcriptions, and notes. All identifying information was removed and stored securely, without any insult or incident. A synthesis of transcribed participants' statements, document analyses, and observational field notes follows.

Themes Derived from Qualitative Interviews

Research Question 1

Question 1: How do principals of effective elementary schools describe their experiences and views of leadership and typical behaviors?

The life history section of the interviews composed the primary responses to Question 1. The themes of 1) embedded personal and professional experiences and 2) adaptability were identified.

Research Question 1, Theme 1: Embedded Personal and Professional Experiences

Theme 1 was described in detail by all of the participants as they recalled professional experiences and their impact on the roles and beliefs they maintain. Additionally, two of the participants described the experiences with family members that informed their professional life as well.

Participant 1 attributed her experience as a teacher to the development of her views of leadership, stating,

My past experiences stem from my first year as a classroom teacher, having to understand the meaning of differentiated instruction and how to meet children where they are. It was something I had to learn early on. Now, as a leader, it's something that we work towards making sure teachers understand and are able to implement differentiation strategies in their classroom.

She elaborated on her early beliefs about children and expanded her views of leadership as she explained,

I've always believed that you do what's right for children, so trying to find the right strategies to work with each child, so, yes, there's some trial and error and it takes time to find out what works, but when you find out what works, you roll with it.... And they make gains. Mostly, here at [School 1) because we have a huge spectrum of students, ranging from nonverbal autistic to high achieving, gifted children, so most of my experiences leading a staff come really come from my experience here and working with the staff to understand that all children do learn differently and it's not that SLD students can't get it. It's that we have to find the appropriate strategies to use so they can get it.

This participant contended that previous administrative experiences were instrumental in her becoming an effective principal. She stated that,

Being an assistant principal, being under leaders that gave you opportunities to make decisions and think through things, not always having to reach out to them that they had trust in you that you were going to make the right choices (was the best preparation for your role as the elementary school principal).

Furthermore, she stated, “You have to rely on what you experienced in the past. And what you know is right and policies and procedures and ethics and principles and colleagues, leaning on colleagues for advice.” These statements underscore the relevance of previous experiences being embedded into current thinking.

Participant 2 credited his previous teaching experiences and former administrators to informing his views of leadership. He stated that,

My first teaching assignment was a while ago, but it was in a self-contained, when we had them, EH classroom in a middle school. Just my experience from that, even without having any data to support it, but just my gut feeling was that wasn't a good model. That segregating students based on disability was not positive for them and not even for their peers. Because then the view was that it was acceptable to put people in classrooms and keep them there.

My next experience was that I was in a co-teaching model, where we blended in students with disabilities. I found that to be an effective model. It was a difficult model based on a lot of variables, mostly teacher collaboration. You had to have a relationship between the two teachers to be an effective one. That didn't mean just having two strong teachers because sometimes two strong teachers was actually a

deterrent because you have difficulty in assigning roles and that was key to have effective roles between the two parties. Then when I moved to high school, and became an administrator, partly because of my background, I was over exceptionalities. Students with exceptionalities at the high school. So I was able to not only view various programs and strategies, I was able to help form them. Thankfully, I had a principal at the school who was very supportive of the things that we did and his vision coincided with mine and vice versa. Where we thought the object was to make a broader community statement both academically and emotionally....

He incorporated those experiences into his leadership as principal. He strives to create ... a school that thinks of itself as a community and not just a collection of classrooms. That means that students with disabilities, all disabilities, are a part of the overall school. Initiatives in that we can move them together as much as possible.

He elaborated on his beliefs about leadership when he described the need for students to struggle in the process of experiencing success. He said,

it's important for us to let children struggle, especially for students with disabilities. Because the struggle is where they get their strength. If we are constantly intervening before the struggle can be brought out, then they'll learn to look for crutches and look for other people to solve their problems. One of the big goals of education, not just at an elementary school, is that we want to make children independent entities. If we are constantly intervening and saying that this problem is too difficult for "Little Johnny" to solve, then I'm going to bring them

into my classroom and I'm going to work it through for them and I'm going to do all of the work for them and I'm going to give them all of these interventions so that they don't have to do it because they'll cry or freak out or whatever. Then that will be their solution to any problem when they struggle.

Participant 2 has embedded professional experiences into the lived experience as a principal.

Participant 3 attributed her leadership views and practices to previous teaching experiences that developed her sensitivity to the diverse needs of students. She stated that she perceived the benefits of

...being in the classroom, general education classroom and coming across children that were at different levels and also seeing my colleagues needing support with those students and being the one who often times would get their children. Would time out their children, or help them with their students. Also, in New Jersey, one of the last assignments I had before coming to Florida was what they call an 'at-risk third grade classroom.' That classroom had 25 students, the majority of them were boys and it was the third grade, so many of them had been retained or had been at risk for retention.

She reported having developed a skill set and a mindset that were incorporated into her professional repertoire.

Participant 4 credited his experience as an assistant principal at a traditional high school within the district to shaping his leadership at an elementary school where students with learning disabilities are proficient in reading. His previous work provided perspective when

...you're talking about students ...graduating who are ESE making sure that they have their foundations for success and the urgency with that. Made me really

understand that that has to start at the elementary level because it's a domino effect, it's a cycle. If they're not successful in elementary and middle school, when they get to high school their chances of success are so much less and it becomes very intense at that point and that is when you might just get kids who will maybe just drop out and then what happens?

Participant 4 reported having adapted his experience as a high school administrator to leading an elementary school where students with SLD demonstrate proficiency in reading.

Participant 5 recognized the previous experiences that have led to her views and decisions as an elementary school principal. She stated, "I've always believed that all kids can learn and it's always been a priority to me that starting in a high poverty school with 95% poverty, I was working with lots of kids with learning challenges." She adopted the model used by "Reading Recovery" at this school and recognized its impact on teachers and students, stating, "It was really great because not only did they impact the kids in the classroom but they helped teachers learn how to teach reading." Participant 5 has embedded previous experiences into her belief system and has created a culture of high expectations, aligned with that belief system.

In addition to the professional experiences that framed the leadership experiences for the participants, two of the five participants had personal experiences with family members with disabilities. Participant 3 noted that,

My original, foundational beliefs, my core beliefs come from having a nephew who is in his 30s who is diagnosed with autism. One of the most severe forms of autism - he does not speak, he does not hear. Having difficulty finding appropriate care and education for him. Now mind you he is in his mid 30s, during that time it was a challenge. And it just so happens I was going to college at the time and

seeing the need for quality services for individuals with disabilities, so because of that, I pursued a master's degree in special education.

Participant 3 incorporated her personal experience with a family member into her professional experience, striving to provide adequate care and education for students with disabilities.

Like Participant 3, Participant 5 has a family member who influenced her beliefs. She explained the influence as

Well, my son was a SLD student—very intelligent, just had some processing difficulties and so, it helped me to identify how you can see children that are having a learning disability does not mean that they are not very very capable. So I guess that would be my, you know, I was teaching already, but that was my first personal experience.”

She elaborated, saying,

Well, I don't know if that was the only thing, but that was one thing that made it very personal and the thing that was great about it was it gave me an experience to share with parents who sometimes think that means that their child is not capable or they don't want to have a label or anything and I would talk about my experience with my own son. So that I think that helped me as a leader...

Participant 5 has chosen to help other parents adjust to the needs of their children by sharing her personal experience. The participants' claims that their professional and personal experiences influenced leadership patterns were validated with their statements and explanations.

Research Question 1, Theme 2: Adaptability

The second theme in this section was related to adaptability. This theme was identified in the participants' responses in direct and indirect explanations throughout the life history and the

contemporary experiences sections of the interviews. Many of the descriptions highlighted the multitude of changes that have been experienced in recent years and the flexibility needed to navigate through the changes.

Participant 1 highlighted the importance of adaptability when she described the progress monitoring system in use at School #1. She responded that,

...it's an all day, every day type thing. We provide support based on what the students' needs are...I feel like every nine weeks, our plans get tweaked to make sure we're meeting the needs of the students. Sometimes, we add a little more time to this group. Maybe we change this group to make them a push-in model where we're going in the classroom and that really depends on the standards that are being worked on, the scales that are being worked on, and then, to monitor their progress, on a weekly basis, every child has a different progress monitoring plan that's in place and we monitor their progress based on where their needs are.

Participant 1 gave another example of adaptability when she compared the challenges of being a classroom teacher to the challenges of being an elementary school principal. She said,

It almost feels like a classroom where every year you have kind of a different group of kids and so the big picture priorities remain the same, but your little focus areas may change, based on the needs of the school, the staff, and the students. For instance, last year, I had lots of seasoned teachers on staff and for various reasons, we ended up with 25 brand new teachers to our school this year. Some were fresh out of the boat beginning teachers. Some were transfers. The majority of them were relatively new. So, my leadership had to change, given that. Big picture remains the same. It's the little focus areas (that change).

Participant 1 demonstrated the need for and use of adaptability for the benefit of the students, families and teachers at the school.

Participant 2 stressed the importance of adaptability in his leadership style. He said, ...you want to solve problems immediately and sometimes “immediately” doesn’t allow the correct fermentation of an idea, especially a big idea. Then you have to be flexible enough to revisit decisions and change them as needed. Sometimes that means adapting them. You know what works today might not work tomorrow and more importantly ten years from now. So you have to constantly be looking at and evaluating and using data, which is something I learned from my previous Area Superintendent.

He explained the need for adaptability when he stated,

I just think in today’s world you have to be ready for just about anything and you can’t and with that flexibility you have to have the ability and I think this is separate but very close - the confidence to take risks. I do think that great leaders have to have the confidence to take risks or chances, they have to be flexible, they have to be inclusive.

This statement demonstrated Participant 2’s willingness to adapt and be flexible as a critical feature of elementary school leadership.

Participant 3 explained the need for adaptability as her views of leadership have shifted over time. For example, in the past, she had strong feelings about the use of medication to control the symptoms of ADHD. Her beliefs have changed, based on experiences that have demonstrated the efficacy in some cases. She explained the way her thoughts have changed as,

When I first came down, I was not a proponent of students being medicated for ADHD or just anything to help...ADHD, I would say. And the reason I say that and I don't think every child should be drugged...don't get me wrong. But, I have seen the impact of a child who can't sit down, who can't think clear, who can't focus on instruction...I've seen that and then, I've seen that same child with the right...not just medication, but with the right counseling...with all of the right things in place and that includes medication in this case. A lot of those students happen to be labeled in school SLD. I have seen the difference and one example is last year, at [School], there was a fourth grade student, a girl...and that's not usual because typically ADD-ADHD are boys. Her parents struggled—fourth grade-her parents struggled year in, year out with what to do with her because she was just not thriving, would not learn, scored Level 1 in Reading, 2 in math, just did not do well. So, we had a conversation, and mom talked to the doctor about medication. Dad wasn't for it. So, I talked to both parents....I said, "Listen...I don't think everybody should be on medication especially just not alone... counseling"...we talked, and the parents came to the decision to try medication for their daughter, and that child scored a Level 5 on FCAT. Her confidence boosted, she was happier, she was just a different kid...now, that's one child but you know, it made a difference and it's still making a difference.

As Participant 3 explained in the interview, her open-mindedness has led to a more flexible view that has helped students succeed.

Participant 4 explained the need for flexibility in leadership with his description of meeting the needs of all students by saying,

But what we all agree on is that we want to do what is best for the kids. We always agree on that. We always somehow find a good resolution for success. And when you're dealing with students who are SLD, one size does not fit all. It's trial and error some times. But the key is, eventually at the end, making sure that the student is successful....being flexible, thinking outside of the box.

Later in the interview, when explaining his day-to-day routines, he explained that, "It's very different every day, honestly, because without an assistant principal it is different because I am managing and leading a lot of different things." This description was evidence of the flexibility that Participant 4 uses regularly and has contributed to his views of leadership.

Participant 5 explained the need for flexibility, particularly when adapting resources and services to help all students achieve. She explained the approach being used at the school as, "We have to continually diagnose students to know what you need to do next." She emphasized the process for determining adjustments that are needed, based on the needs of students at the school. She also explained the intervention programs that have been tailored to meet the needs of all the students including those who are below grade level and those who are above grade level and need enrichment.

The qualitative interviews revealed the theme of using personal and professional experiences to impact and expand views of leadership. Along with the element of adaptability as a typically occurring behavior, the participants consistently highlighted their personal and professional experiences as influencing their views of leadership. These two qualities were revealed in response to Research Question 1 and appear to contribute to the lived experience of elementary school principals where students with SLD are proficient in reading.

Research Question 2

Question 2: What are the characteristics of elementary school principals with the highest percentage of students with SLD who have demonstrated proficiency in reading, as measured by FCAT 2.0? The second research question was answered with participants' responses in the interviews and revealed two primary themes: 1) relationship orientation and commitment to collaboration; and 2) focused responsibility and accountability. These themes and supporting evidence will be described here.

Research Question 2, Theme 1: Relationship Oriented and Commitment to Collaboration

There was a preponderance of evidence supporting the participants' being relationship oriented. Through a variety of descriptions by each of the participants, it became apparent that the participants valued relationships while supporting students with learning disabilities.

Participant 1 described herself as compassionate and understanding. She also listed being "student-centered" as a key characteristic of her leadership style. She stated that her interactions were critical because,

based on how I interact, I mean, I'm the model and I'm the one who has to lead the charging force to show everybody what positive interactions are and building relationships whether it's with staff members, community members or parents...we have to have buy in from everyone to make it happen. The magic just doesn't happen. It's a team working together to make sure that we're meeting the needs of all students.

She also explained that her focus on relationships was conveyed "through communication, through presence, through everyone knowing my door is always open. Keep everyone motivated, making sure morale is high, having a smile on my face." She also attributed success to the

collaboration at the school. Specifically, she noted, “This year, everybody is on the same team and everybody is working toward the same cause.” She clarified her stance that,

....on a day to day basis, those are things I would focus on greatly....making sure I’m, as a leader, visible and in classrooms and available for students, available for parents, not waiting 24 hours to return a phone, trying to do it the day that they’ve reached out or email the same kind of thing.

These statements supported the development of the theme of relationship orientation and commitment to collaboration.

Participant 2 described trust and strong relational skills as critical factors in effective school leadership. He used the example of employing trust to ensure teacher buy-in and to ensure student success. He values adult-child relationships and has arranged for additional support for students who struggle. He explained the level of support as,

We have (university) students that come in and they’re partnered up with our classes. Those students will oftentimes work one on one with the really struggling kids. So, again, while they’re (the university students) in class, I have my paraprofessionals pushing in, we’ve got (university) tutors, we’ve got interns because my thing about, you know in your prologue you talked about Hattie and one of the things that Hattie believes in is the student-teacher relationship. And I believe that it is more than just student-teacher relationships, it’s student-adult relationships. I believe that the more student-adult relationships that we can build on a campus, the more successful our children will be. And the data seems to bear that out.

He explained the importance of positive, dynamic adult-child relationships as a means of improving student performance. He said,

What I think is critical is that I get to know my kids—all my kids. So that when I'm in a PLC and they start talking about "Little Johnny" I know who "Little Johnny" is. I know them, maybe not better than the teacher, but in a different light because students will tell me things that they may not tell the teacher. In order for them to feel that power to tell me things they have to know me and I have to know them. I think it is important for principals to be in the classrooms, to be visible. When you're in the classrooms to focus on the kids and the adult-student relationship. I need to have relationships with my students, especially the fragile students. Especially those students that have struggles.

He extended his response to communicate his belief that,

If a kid feels special, they're going to do well. I believe that in order for teachers, and this can be anyone, but teachers to move from good to great, they first have to love the kids and the way they love the kids is having a relationship with the children. By having more adults there are more opportunities for the child to feel loved. That right there is the basis for success.

This belief has been strengthened by the observation that,

...a lot of them, you look at their relationships outside of school and they're pretty troubling. It may be a single parent, it may be a family that isn't worried about school because they're worried about getting meals on the table or the parents are working in such a capacity that they don't see their kids very often. I can't fault those parents for making life decisions but if I know about that then I can build

some support for them here on campus because it takes a community to raise a child. Part of the community, especially because it seems like traditional community members organizations are either becoming more strained or less involved like churches and community centers. It just seems like families don't have the resources in the community that they once had, so schools can't let the answer be someone else has to do that—we have to be part of the answer because if we aren't part of the answer then the problem isn't going to go away and we failed our duty. On one hand it is tough. A lot of my teachers are substitute moms. While in a perfect world that wouldn't necessary, this isn't a perfect world. You know, I have two teachers on this campus who went out and there was a little girl who didn't have money for new glasses and the teacher went and bought them. She didn't do it for glamour, didn't do it for an award she just did it for the right thing. You know, what a powerful statement for the child. The child will be forever indebted to that teacher and now that child will work a little bit harder in class. Not because they will be able to see a little bit better, although that will help, it'll be because they love that teacher a little bit more. That again, and I said that earlier, is the basis for making good teachers into great teachers. It is because the teachers turn around and love them back. And don't you work harder for the people that you love than the people you like?

These statements demonstrated the participant's focus on the development of positive relationships between students and adults.

Participant 2 also supported the relational aspect of leadership when he described this focus throughout his work as, “If I’m going to look at leadership I guess that would be what I would say is my strength is just empowering people around me.” Furthermore, he stated that,

I do think that great leaders have to have the confidence to take risks or chances, they have to be flexible, they have to be inclusive....Even if I feel like I’m an expert on something, I have to get buy in. So many—there are like a gabillion programs out there that help kids, but if you’re going to pick one program over the others, you’re going to have to - to make it successful it’s never the program that makes it successful, it’s the buy in you get with that program. So when it comes to reading program, I’d rather let a group of teachers pick it out than me.

These statements showed the participant’s belief in the value of building a collaborative culture that supports teachers as well as students.

Participant 2 focused his comments to address his commitment to collaboration, including students with disabilities. He stated that,

I want a school that thinks of itself as a community and not just a collection of classrooms. That means that students with disabilities, all disabilities, are a part of the overall school. Initiatives in that we can move them together as much as possible.

He also has actively involved parents to maximize collaboration. He explained their involvement as, “...the parents are here much more often, so you have to make sure that you’re communicating with parents, and keeping them a part of the process.” He elaborated with,

I have parents that basically live here. You have to know how to harness that so that they aren’t a distraction, but an asset. So how can they make the school

better? Whether they are a resource teacher or helping in the classroom, or doing projects or doing the ancillary things around the school like running the school bookstore or making the, you know we're getting ready for our school play and they're all making the set and decorating. You have to make sure you include them or then it is a waste of time and energy and it's not always positive if they have all of that idle time and energy and they are not feeling like they are a part of the school.

These statements confirmed the value the participant places on all aspects of relationships in the school environment.

Participant 2 explained his rationale for building a healthy school culture in order to support collaboration when he stated that,

I do believe that there should be a culture and a climate that supports alternative views. I'm not a big proponent again, I know some principals will say this and not really mean it—some leaders, I shouldn't say principals—do believe that I don't always have the right answer. More importantly even if I have a good answer, just like I said I make those big decisions, how you implement an answer can come in so many ways and that is where you need to make sure that we're involving the right people...

This became apparent to him when he first became a principal. He explained,

I walked into a very fractious, a very suspicious group that was afraid to say things to me for fear that it might bite them in the backside. So that was one of my first goals was to—I don't want to say “mimic”—but establish a team and then once that team was established, establish a school where we could trust each

other. And that if a teacher doesn't agree with me, that's fine. I'm perfectly content with that. At the end of the day if they're doing right by kids, if they have a better way of doing it or even a different way of doing it, I'll live with that. So I do think that I have worked very hard, like I want students to be inclusive, I want teachers and administrators to be inclusive.

Through these statements, the participant actively demonstrated his belief in the power of relationships as related to school leadership. Participant 2 mentioned relationships and his commitment to collaboration in many parts of the qualitative interview, solidifying the theme.

Participant 3 stated that she values collaboration and underlined its importance with the statement, quoting Comer (as cited in Payne, 2008): "No significant learning takes place without a significant relationship." She stated,

When you reach and teach all children, I truly believe that no significant learning occurs without a significant relationship. So, we do have to develop those relationships, the reaching part...before students will truly, truly learn anything from you. Kids don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Cliches—I believe them. I believe the relationship can make the learning so much more the richer, the powerful...the sustained. My fifth grade team is a prime example of that...It's five of them. One went out on maternity leave. The intern that they brought in...they have such tight systems and relationships that that intern came in, fell in with their structures and relationships, and that class has not skipped a beat. The five of them know all 98 kids. There's the same level of respect and trust in that entire grade level...and they're demonstrative of the importance of relationships.

Throughout the interview, she referenced the importance of school culture in influencing student achievement.

Participant 3 also referred to herself as a “servant leader,” elevating relationships over systems, as related to working with students, particularly students with disabilities. She explained that she believes that motivating teachers, staff and students is an essential part of building relationships and achieving success. Furthermore, she explained,

I want to be a transformational leader; that’s in my mind, but I’m not going to transform by putting a lot of systems in place. I believe in relationships and in building culture, and building an environment that is going to sustain learning...even after I’m gone. I want to put things in place that no matter who is at the helm, those teachers still have what they got under my leadership and no one can take that away from them.

The responses that Participant 3 gave supported the relational theme that was being illustrated throughout the interviews.

Participant 3 also explained her commitment to collaboration with all stakeholder groups, parent piece is making sure they understand that this is a partnership, this is a collaboration....and when it comes to dialoguing with teachers, trying to get them to understand that all children can learn...can learn...and there are some strategies that we all have to employ to make sure that happens. And those strategies are hand strategies, head strategies, and heart strategies...all of those things....It’s not asking anyone to do anything you wouldn’t be willing to do...

These responses, featuring relationships and collaboration within and between groups at the school, demonstrated the participant’s commitment to positive interactions and relationships.

***Participant 4 described himself as “accepting,” “including,” “caring,” “understanding” and “student centered.” He likened the school culture to a family, requiring values of positive relationships. He stated that, “it’s everyone working together and sometimes, with parents you really have to know, and teachers, our goal is to do what is best for students and sometimes we don’t always agree. But what we all agree on is that we want to do what is best for the kids. We always agree on that. We always somehow find a good resolution for success.” He emphasized the importance of positive relationships with parents as being critical to the success of students. He stated, “I’m happy to say that I do have a good relationship with parents. If there is something going on that I may not know, they’ll unofficially tell me, just so I know. They know that if I know, then I’ll take care of it. I think that’s good when you have parents who are trusting, who are willing to do that. Who understand that it won’t be punitive, there won’t be any retaliation. They do that because they know we are all working together for the schooling of the kids.” He has prioritized collaboration with families and stated, “Their personal perspective is sometimes different than what our academic perspective is and sometimes its hours meeting with those parents to get a happy resolution. What we all agree on in these meetings is that this is such a hard, difficult process because none of us have the answers and we’re all trying to find the answers and sometimes, like I said earlier, it’s trial and error. But it really is putting a lot of time in those meetings. Working with those parents, making sure we have those accommodations, selecting teachers that will be the best fit for next year.” These views supported the importance of building and sustaining positive relationships with various stakeholder groups and ultimately, a strong statement of the participant’s commitment to collaboration.

Participant 5 defined the role of relationships that she believes supports learning. She stated, “I also believe in relationship as far as a family atmosphere. Ever since I’ve opened this

school, we have a family picnic that is just my faculty and staff and their families because we spend a lot of time together and I want them to feel connected. You can have high expectations but you also have to provide support and you also have to have that relationship that helps people to realize that they're a part of something special.” She also explained her experience as a parent of a child with a learning disability, intimating the importance of relationships in helping parents accept their child’s needs. She stated, “.....it (having experienced parenting a child with a learning disability) gave me an experience to share with parents who sometimes think that means that their child is not capable or they don’t want to have a label or anything and I would talk about my experience with my own son. So that I think that helped me as a leader because the personal information you can share with parents help them to say, “Maybe if the principal’s son, and she thought that was okay and she saw the potential and he was able to graduate college, so maybe this isn’t a bad thing for me to go ahead and get help for my child.” She explained that she believed that the relationships that were developed were critical in all aspects of the school environment and the development of a positive school culture. Relationships were accepted as critical features of leadership and were cultivated with persistence, as reported by all of the participants during the interviews.

Research Question 2, Theme 2: Focused Responsibility and Accountability

In addition to the relational characteristic, the interviews revealed that strong feelings of responsibility were a commonality among the participants. The participants expressed responsibility in a variety of ways described next.

Participant 1 described herself as, “data-driven,” and “detail oriented.” Furthermore, she stated that she describes herself as a “tough cookie.” When compiled, these characteristics were considered to be indicators of the theme, focused responsibility. She stated, “Well, this year,

we're definitely more focused on....maybe not we...my vision has always been to make sure every child is making gains." She elaborated on her feelings of responsibility, as she described herself as someone "...who always has the best interest of students in mind, data –driven, results driven..." These key phrases were considered to be evidence of the theme of responsibility and accountability.

Participant 2 stated and then repeated his belief that the role of the principal is to maintain the big picture in the school, contributing to the theme of focused responsibility. He stated that, "So when I look at my leadership, I kind of take a view on leadership that it's my job to make the very big decisions and some of the very little decisions. The very big decisions are setting the vision, setting the agenda...." Further explaining his focus on the responsibilities associated with responsible decision making, he said, "Finding people who could be supportive and people who could be leaders because again there is only so many hours in a day and that allowed me to the freedom to focus on the school's identity and visions and again make all of those big decisions and then even some of the small decisions." This statement explained his emphasis on creating and supporting the school's vision as his primary responsibility.

Participant 3 explained her feelings of responsibility in response to the interview questions that asked her to reflect on prior experiences and current practices as an elementary school principal. She stated, "Just being a leader...and knowing that I'm responsible not just for that year's learning but for that child being as prepared as possible for the future. I think that was one of the first things that hit me as a new principal that....we need to be mindful of that...that it's not just preparing for the test but preparing a child for life. I think just that situation...just knowing that I'm the educational leader of that building." When she defined mindfulness, she expressed again her feelings of responsibility associated with being an

elementary school principal as, "...being mindful that somebody cares about this child and I need to remember that as I interact and teach the child." She clarified her feelings of responsibility when she stated, "I feel responsible for everything that happens here...Everything!...the good, the bad, and everything in between." This participant experienced strong feelings of responsibility associated with being a principal.

Participant 4 explained his feelings of responsibility as he transitioned from being an assistant principal to a principal as, "...your internship as an AP and your experiences don't prepare you for the role as a principal because there are just so many things that you don't experience as an assistant principal. When you think about it everything comes back to you, you are really responsible for every single thing that occurs even if you had control over it or you didn't, it doesn't matter. You're the person who is responsible." Like the other participants, Participant 4 also expressed the intense feelings of responsibility related to being a principal, especially in comparison to previously held positions.

Participant 5 explained that she takes the responsibility of school improvement very seriously. She stated that, "... if you truly want to turn around a school or if you truly want to have a school that makes an impact you have to do it based on that student (population) at that school and even that teacher population." She further explained the responsibility of the principal as "in order to create change, first you have to create an understanding for a need for change." Like the other participants, Participant 5 expressed her understanding of the seriousness of the many aspects of school improvement.

The interviews revealed that the participants identified being relationship oriented and being focused and responsible as primary characteristics of principals in elementary schools where students with SLD are proficient in reading. The participants explained their strong

feelings of responsibility in response to the heightened levels of accountability. According to the participants, there is a dual focus on collaboration and developing positive relationships while also maintaining an intense focus on responsibility and accountability.

Research Question 3

Question 3: What is the essence of effective, inclusive school leadership? The responses were derived from all three sections of the interviews: 1) Life History; 2) Contemporary Experience; and 3) Reflection sections. The participants' responses were analyzed to generate a description of effective school leadership. Several key themes were identified: 1) Focus on hiring and supporting teachers while maintaining a culture of high expectations; 2) Effective allocation of resources; and 3) Reflection that informs decision making.

Research Question 3, Theme 1: Hiring and supporting teachers while maintaining a culture of high expectations

The participants explained that a clear focus on hiring and retaining teachers while maintaining a culture of high expectations was essential for effective school leadership. This theme was developed by statements that involved descriptions of the hiring and interviewing process as well as ways that the participants provided support to teachers and the ways high expectations are communicated throughout the school.

As mentioned in the description of the responses to Research Question 1, Participant 1 explained her approach to hiring and retaining highly qualified teachers. She stated that she adapted her leadership when “we ended up with 25 brand new teachers to our school this year. Some were fresh out of the boat beginning teachers. Some were transfers. The majority of them were relatively new.” She emphasized that while recruiting new teachers, it was important that they shared the vision of ensuring student growth and success, “This year, everybody is on the

same team and everybody is working toward the same cause.” She also viewed providing professional development as a critical responsibility of school leadership. She said that, “So, whether they’re a beginning teacher or not, we’ve provided, we’ve scaffolded their professional development to shape them so they are working towards the same vision.” Personalizing professional development has become a part of the model used at School 1 in impacting effective school leadership. She provided more detail to explain the approach to providing differentiated professional development, “This year, we would spend time surveying the staff to find out their strengths and weaknesses and what they felt like their needs are. And we tried to develop our professional development plans based on their input and feedback but also based on what we’ve seen in the classrooms through observations and maybe through conversations and meetings, so I had a plan at the beginning of the year of what it would look like, and it changed as we saw the needs.” The interview with Participant 1 revealed that the theme of supporting teachers in various ways was critical to effective school leadership.

Participant 2 has experienced success with empowering teachers within the school to provide professional development to others. He explained that, “Because we all have our own strengths and we can’t be experts individually on everything, collectively there’s an expert at every school on everything. Even professional development - I don’t bring outside people for professional development and I never will - some day they might make me, but I never will. Because I think I’ve already got the experts here, so if I’m going to do something with PLC or reading strategies or interventions or how to teach science or STEM or whatever I’m going to do - going out and finding someone on the outside and having them come and spend a day and they’re probably fabulous, I need to find people on my campus and empower them. That is what I’ve really tried hard to do. I’ve been here three years and I’ve yet to have an outside person to

come and do a professional development and we've seemed to have done okay. There are lots of schools that bring in outside people, whether it is LSI or whatever and I don't know that they have any success stories to tie to that? Maybe, maybe. I think finding the right people here builds that family." In addition to providing professional development to teachers, Participant 2 expanded professional development opportunities to paraprofessionals. He explained the decision making process as, "My thought immediately was why shouldn't they be going to these trainings? And that is when I started saying yes and they get all of the trainings from FDLRS forwarded to them and they'll pick three or four to go to that they think will make them better in the classroom and again it is about allowing them to have a voice..." Participant 2 indicated that focusing on strategic hiring and professional development was critical for effective school leadership.

Participant 3 described the attitude that is expected from the teachers in order to be successful. She described the challenges of shifting the mindsets of the teachers when she explained, "The biggest challenges were teachers, opening teachers' minds to the possibility of children that don't learn like their age mates. That was the biggest challenge. How do I get them to see their students like I see them? ...I didn't win everybody. Everybody didn't open their mind or open their heart or believe in the future of the children. Or believe that they belonged in the classroom the amount of time they belonged in the classroom. But... that was the biggest challenge. Another challenge was preparing the teachers to teach all students." This participant advocated a two pronged approach that focused on shifting teachers' mental models while also providing teachers with skills necessary to attain success with students. Both of these approaches depended on ongoing professional development.

Participant 4 demonstrated his commitment to maintaining a culture of high expectations when he described the way continued support and focus would be provided in the upcoming year. He stated that, “Each year has to be better than the year before and what am I/what are we going to do to do that. And actually, my philosophy with our leadership team is the “Princeton reboot.” You have the “Man of Steel,” “Iron Man,” “Spiderman,” you had “Star Wars,” and they all made a ton more money. We aren’t going to make any more money, but we are going to have a reboot. Which means that there is nothing wrong; it means that we have a good model, but how can we enhance the model? And that is really what a reboot is. What can we look at as professionals and how can we make the process and experience better for everyone? And make everyone happy. I know that is not always easy, but if a parent is unhappy, even if it doesn’t make sense to me, I’m still not happy. If a teacher is not happy, I’m not happy. Especially if a student is not happy, then we are not doing our jobs because kids always have to be happy. That’s our job and our responsibility.” By focusing on continuous improvement by providing professional development and maintaining a culture of high expectations, Participant 4 added support to the theme that was identified.

Participant 5 explained her opinion about the value of hiring high quality teachers to impact student learning. She stated that, “... when I interviewed potential ESE teachers I realized they didn’t know how to teach reading either. And that was a big “aha!” to me because I was like, ‘you’re taking our most needy kids and what you’re telling me is that the classes that you took were mostly on assessment and testing.’ It just broke my heart. So then it changed my strategy for hiring ESE teachers too because I shouldn’t know more about teaching reading than the specialist at my school that wants to work with reading strategies. So, I’m very particular when I hire ESE teachers. I look for people who understand reading and understand how to teach

reading because you've got to have a repertoire of strategies in there. I was just - like I said when I observe and I saw a person struggling, this wasn't my first year as a principal and I said, 'Didn't you take any reading classes?' 'Well actually we mostly took assessment' ...And it's like oh...okay. So then I had to work with them to learn how to teach reading. So I just have a heart for making sure every child is successful." She reiterated her position on the importance of hiring high quality teachers when she described the challenge as, "That is the hard thing and that is the key because it is who you put in that room and is working with those kids that makes the difference. They have to be skilled, they have to understand the process of reading and so when you can get the right teachers it is great and when you don't you see the impact right away."

Participant 5 explained the focus on communicating the importance of high expectations and the ongoing need to continue to grow professionally. She stated, "I think, I think first you have to set a tone of expectation at your school. I think you can probably interview anybody in my school and they would tell you that I have very high expectations. I expect differentiated instruction, I expect them to meet the needs of every child, and they also get nervous when I come into observe - they really do and I try not to but I try to create that environment of growth and learning. My questions at the very beginning of opening this school was I want learners. I want learners from the pre-k student to the principal. If you think you know it all already, you're probably coming to the wrong school because we're going to keep learning. I mean the brain research, everything continues to come out that helps us to understand more about what is happening with children. So I don't appreciate those people who aren't willing to learn. I get excited! I still get excited about learning. They laugh because I read things and I'm sending them emails from something that I saw on Twitter about teaching and articles. You know? This is a great article. The frustration is when people start to think, 'I'm a great teacher so I don't really

need to learn anything else.’ So that, but also support. I do have some great instructional coaches and I don’t mind - one thing my professor told me and I quote this often because it stuck with me, ‘When you’re in a leadership position, you’re going to have teachers at all levels on the ladder and that is okay because you’ve got your new teachers, you’ve got your veterans, what is not okay is if they’re comfortable staying on that same level on the ladder. Your job is to be the alligator that is snipping at the bottom so that they are never comfortable without learning more.’ And I’ve taken that because I really truly believe that instructional leadership starts with the principal but it should go through all the way to the youngest child in the school..... You can have high expectations but you also have to provide support and you also have to have that relationship that helps people to realize that they’re a part of something special.” Participant 5 clearly explained her belief in the value of recruiting high quality teachers and retaining teachers through professional development.

The interviews revealed that the participants identified recruiting and hiring highly qualified teachers and then, retaining teachers and strengthening their skills through professional development as critical aspects of effective school leadership. Each of the participants demonstrated their commitment to improving the quality of instruction by providing a culture of high expectations and professional growth opportunities for teachers.

Research Question 3, Theme 2: Effective Resource Allocation

Effectively allocating resources was another theme that was identified throughout the interviews. Each participant described the evolution of the service delivery models that have been used in an attempt to best meet the needs of students and its basis on resource allocation.

Participant 1 explained the redistribution of resources that was put in place this year in order to focus “.... a lot on helping the teachers to understand what Tier 3 is, what resources you

have, how do you run intervention time, how do you monitor the students' progress, which allowed for our resource teachers to focus on the needs of our ESE students. That was a big change for us this year." This decision involved a commitment to resources that had previously been allocated elsewhere. This participant made the decision to redistribute the available resources to meet the needs of struggling students who would benefit from these resources.

Participant 2 described the way that service delivery has evolved at School 2. He stated, "Well when I came here there were students in SLD, since we're focusing on that, even in SLD they were a separate community. They had a teacher that loved them to death, but kept them in a classroom and was afraid to set them out because she was afraid they would be unsuccessful. And the reality is that there is going to be some instances of a lack of success, but it's important for us to let children struggle, especially for students with disabilities. Because the struggle is where they get their strength. If we are constantly intervening before the struggle can be brought out, then they'll learn to look for crutches and look for other people to solve their problems." In his opinion, the views of leadership have shaped the allocation and distribution of resources. For example, he explained that, "...my agenda has been since I arrived here to get students out of self-contained classrooms or support classrooms. I don't like pull-out interventions where kids are pulled out of their classrooms to get math instruction or reading instruction. The only time that, you know, we want to minimize that, so that kids are with their peers as much as possible. That means now we do more push-in support and look for classroom solutions and not make everything an outside the classroom solution." He further explained the changes as, "when I first came here there were a lot of pull-out classes where exceptional ed teachers would go pull out four or five kids and go work with them in this classroom. We had one teacher who basically was a full-time SLD teacher and the kids were there in the classroom basically 80 percent of the

time if not more. The only time that they would go out was for specials or music and PE. So, all of the academics were being done through a self-contained classroom. I eliminated all of that. I eliminated, you know, we have a number of really exceptional paraprofessionals that are every bit as good as some of the teachers that I've seen. What we've done is target those paraprofessionals to push into classrooms. And I don't cluster kids either, I don't like clustering kids where there is a classroom where it is half SLD half regular ed. I think that becomes overwhelming even though that might be easier for my resources. We spread them out and distribute them with meaning two or three in each class and the support people go into each class and give them support during the academics. The only time that we do pull-out is for intervention period, which is not academic time. We have a built in period, just like every school, where anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour daily where if kids need extra support or enrichment, they can be pulled out at that time to receive services. The way that I look at it is services in the classroom are always done on grade level. Meaning that if a child is struggling in reading in the fifth grade, when they are in the classroom they are doing fifth grade work. They may have a paraprofessional supporting them, they may have lots of other accommodations. When we take them out for the intervention period now, the instruction is on their ability level. So if they are doing main idea, in fifth grade they are doing fifth grade main idea, which is going to have a lot of details, the writing material is going to be very difficult for these students, they are probably going to struggle with it, they are probably going to need some sort of dictionary with them or a thesaurus or have tablets for them so that they can immediately go and look up words. Because the vocabulary is going to be very challenging if they're reading at a third grade level but they're doing fifth grade reading. Now when they go to the intervention class, then all of a sudden if they're on a third grade reading level, then the reading material is on a third grade

level but they're still doing main idea. So that in the pull-out intervention period, they can get the support at their ability level, so they'll have success with the topic, or the strand or the benchmark or whatever it is that they're working on." This participant effectively reallocated resources in order to provide a service delivery model that is based on the least restrictive environment and supports higher levels of achievement.

Participant 3 used fiscal and personnel resources to meet the needs of individual students with SLD. At the school where students with SLD demonstrated reading proficiency, the participant described the service delivery model as, "we did a combination of push in and pull out. And that was dependent upon student need, the level of learning and the classroom environment. So depending on who the child was---the team, we sat down and determined what is going to be best for this child and when they're out of the class, how are we going to ensure that they still got grade level content? So, using everything you know about the whole child...what the child needs academically, how is it best presented for instance if a child needs to have those skills to plug up gaps, that's best done outside the classroom, so that was pull out. And we use that as minimal, as little time as possible outside the classroom because what's best is support inside the classroom to ensure that they were getting the grade level content and that it was comprehensible. You know, they had that support." Participant 3 continued to provide a broader continuum of services for students with disabilities in order to fully meet students' diverse academic and social needs.

Subsequently, the participant was assigned to a new school and was faced with redesigning the service delivery model with the resources available at the school. She explained the restructuring as, "I came into a situation where I had to dismantle a self-contained unit labeled SLD. In the unit, when I got here, almost 25 children were scheduled to be in that unit.

It was not a sanctioned unit because we don't have SLD self-contained units any more. So, we had to contact parents a month before school started, to let them know that we were disbanding the unit, we needed to have meetings to change the children's IEPs and literally, we had to convince at least four parents that this was the right thing because the children had been in this self-contained unit for two or more years. For instance, one student who is now a fourth grader had been in that self-contained unit since kindergarten. And the unit ranged from students that were IND to students that were just mildly SLD, so very few of those students had ever received grade level content, so moving them out—and socialization was also an issue as well because they were always in the classroom with non-age like peers. So, the social interactions they received were never really appropriate. She clarified the need to use resources effectively in order to satisfy many needs. She considered the teachers' concerns when communicating the changes because "teachers were getting students that they knew were in self-contained and they didn't understand why they were being sent back out to mainstream." She stated that she had to be "...very strategic in selecting those teachers, making sure that they had an open mind as much as possible to receiving students that were not at grade level, where in some cases were two grade levels behind and letting them know they would get facilitative support in the way of the ESE resource teachers. At that time, we used 3 adults to support grades three through five and we had one person who was already doing it for K, 1, and 2, so that wasn't an issue. But, for the most part, it was those kiddos in grades 3-5 that needed the support because some of them had not been in gen ed so we had to make sure right off the bat that we provided that support...and that we made sure that during the core instruction time, the students were in the class and they had somebody there with them helping them access the curriculum. And, then, they had time outside the class where some of their skills that they were lacking were reinforced...AND they

got support with the grade level content as well.” The participant utilized the resources to overcome the challenges that were present by addressing the various concerns at both schools. Participant 3 focused on providing a broader continuum of services for students with disabilities, rather than a single model that separated students with SLD, by effectively allocating resources in order to fully meet students’ diverse academic and social needs.

Participant 4 had identified the need for additional administrative support in order to meet the needs throughout the school and the community. He explained the demands that were considered when determining the need for additional resources. There’s a need to conduct, “...more classroom observations because that’s the expectation. Providing input and feedback. Unfortunately, when you’re the only administrator on campus, sometimes you’re pulled away from that. Like this past month, I was finishing observation for teachers, but also I’m planning everything for the next school year. Meeting with parents, working on initiatives, and sometimes that pulls me away from what I really want to do, which is being in the classrooms as much as I would like to be in the classrooms.” He described the decision making and the administrative processes used to address these needs by evaluating and effectively using the school’s resources. He stated, “... as a result, I’ve worked with my boss and I am going to have an assistant principal next year, which I think will be a great benefit because there are lots of initiatives that I need to accomplish.” Participant 4 reallocated fiscal resources to increase the administrative support at the school. With the addition of an assistant principal, Participant 4 expects to provide additional support giving feedback to teachers to improve instructional quality and to increase adult supervision at the school. This addition is likely to have a school-wide impact and does not compromise the integrity of the service delivery models in use at the school in any way.

Participant 5 described the model that was used at a previous school that was effective. She stated that, "...I had a program where I had a reading recovery teacher with every kindergarten, first and second grade teacher. It was really great because not only did they impact the kids in the classroom but they helped teachers how to teach reading." She has adapted the program with the resources available at the current school by taking the following steps, "...first off you have to make sure that you have the materials that your teacher needs and I've really worked to make sure that they had what they needed to meet the needs of the students in the classrooms. I mean we've gotten the early literacy program....for the ESE teachers and making sure that they had time." She has carefully examined the resources available and the support that is needed and has planned to expand the program "by hiring three resource teachers...so that they can do some pull out, but so that they can also do some push in. So that they can be in the classrooms and support the students so that they're not missing things..." This comprehensive model has expanded the services by investing fiscal and personnel resources.

All five of the participants prioritized resource allocation in order to meet the needs at the individual schools. There was evidence of schools redistributing funds to broaden, continue or refine the service delivery model at the schools. One participant (Participant 4) decided to increase school-wide support by adding another administrator. All schools reviewed their financial and personnel resources in order to support students and increase achievement. Even though each school varied the level of support for students with SLD based on needs at the school, they each consciously and effectively utilized their personnel and financial resources.

Research Question 3, Theme 3: Reflection that informs decision making

Another theme that was revealed during the interviews was reflection that informs decision making. Each participant identified barriers and described the intentional actions and the reflection that was used to inform decision making.

Participant 1 identified barriers to overcome in order to maximize student performance. She listed, “Staff understanding, lack of data, not enough time in the day, and scheduling” as the critical priority areas. She further explained her response to these and similar challenges as “I’m a processor whereas if somebody comes to me with some sort of information, I typically just listen and absorb and oftentimes will have more questions the next day. I think things through. I don’t kind of just jump to conclusions.” She stated that she believes that this deliberate approach through reflection has been effective in creating and sustaining change.

Participant 2 identified that having no elementary teaching or leadership experience before being selected to be the principal of School 2 as the primary obstacle to overcome before realizing success. Participant 2 relied on previous experiences and reflection as the primary resources for problem solving. In contrast to working with teachers at the high school level, he came to realize that “you have got to be sometimes more circumspect (when working with teachers at the elementary school level). You have to be more, and maybe it is because elementary schools (teachers) are more nurturing and motherly. So you have to that same kind of approach to conversations and decision making with them. Whereas in high school they are more detached. More like a college professor where they see students as employees not as their kids. So that was a huge paradigm shift for me. It took most of the year, if not all of it, to really understand that. I don’t mean understand it on a surface level, I made some decisions that looking back, I would never make ever. I would make the same decision but how I implement it

would be totally different. Maybe that is a better way of describing it. Now the decision that I made was correct. Removing a teacher from fifth grade was correct. The teacher was ineffective with kids, but the way I handled it was not correct and I know that. If I had to do it all over again, I would have readdressed how I did it. So that was huge that first year. Then understanding mechanics of an elementary school. The small group instruction - what is effective small group instruction look like? Unfortunately in high school you don't see a lot of small group instruction, but in elementary school it is all over the place as it should be. It took me the year to realize just having the kids in a group of four does not mean it is effective instruction even though I might have looked at it like, 'Oh great they're collaborating, they're working together, they look engaged.' It took me that year to start parsing out just kids being in a group just doing an activity to really small group instruction." Participant 2 maximized reflection and adapted his decision making style to accommodate the needs of elementary school teachers, resulting in school improvements, according to the participant.

Participant 3 described her leadership with an analogy that she saw in an email that featured clip art. The clip art had "children standing behind a fence, and the fence was all the same height. It had holes at different levels." She continued, "In the picture, you can see beyond the fence and there was some kind of sporting event going on. And then, in the forefront were all the children. But each of them was standing on different leveled boxes...the text said, "We all need different lifts to learn..or something like that....But the whole idea behind (the clip art) was that all those kids wanted to see what was over the fence, what was beyond the fence. Everybody didn't have the same level box. Some kids needed a taller box. Some kids needed a lower box. Some kids' little hole was down lower. Every child can learn. Every child can learn." This analogy was used to convey the theme of reflection that informs her decision making.

Reflection, in this participant's case, underscores the importance of differentiation to meet the needs of all learners.

Participant 4 used reflection to enrich his previous experiences as an assistant principal and during his internship and to clarify his beliefs about leadership. He stated, "The expectation is that if you are a principal, number one you are providing and rigorous and challenging curriculum for the students. My philosophy is that this is going to be the best experience that kids are going to have in their lives is at the elementary level. If it's not good at the elementary level then it's not going to be good at all, so when they leave here it has to be the best experience that they have had in their lives. And so, it also has to be good for teachers and it also has to be good for parents too. And so, and sometimes that is a challenge making that work, but when that is your focus is thinking about those things.... not as an obstacle...but as a pathway for success. You have to make it work. There really is not an option." Participant 4 explained his effort at being conscious of the demands and needs related to making informed decisions.

Participant 5 reported seeing many changes throughout her tenure as principal. She expressed frustration with the lack of autonomy given to principals, in comparison to the level of responsibility and accountability expected. Reflecting on those changes and challenges has informed her philosophy about being the instructional leader of the school. She stated that in order to be an effective principal, "...you need to understand curriculum and content and teaching. I think you have to be a great teacher because if you aren't and you can't coach, then you aren't respected as an instructional leader at your school." Her undeniable passion for professional development and teacher improvement has been informed by her reflection on her experiences throughout her time as a principal.

The interviews indicated that reflection is a critical characteristic of effective leadership. Each of the participants communicated the ways that they used reflection to inform decision making. This decision making was acknowledged in a variety of ways that involved day-to-day decision making as well as major school-wide planning. Reflection, as described by the participants, is critical to the leadership experience.

Document Analyses from Teacher Nominees

In addition to the data derived from the qualitative interviews, each participant nominated a teacher from their respective school to summarize the individual's leadership competencies and practices that are used regularly to help all students (and students with SLD, in particular) to succeed. These statements were analyzed to identify statements that would support or deny the themes that had previously been identified in the qualitative interviews of each of the principal participants. Five of the seven themes that were identified by the participants were supported by claims from some of the teacher nominees. The five themes that were confirmed in the document analyses were: 1) Embedded personal and/or professional experiences; 2) Relationship oriented and Commitment to collaboration; 3) Focused responsibility and accountability; 4) Hiring and supporting teachers while maintaining a culture of high expectations; 5) Effective resource allocation. Two of the themes, Adaptability and Reflection that informs decision making, were not revealed as themes from the teacher nominees. Other themes did not emerge from the document analyses. The descriptions are detailed below.

Research Question 1

Question 1, Theme 1: Embedded personal and professional experiences

One of the teacher nominees included the impact of the participant's previous experiences in the leadership summary. The teacher nominee explained that Participant 5 uses her personal experiences to support families. She said that, "When parents are feeling uneasy about making a big decision about their child being in a specialized program, (Participant 5) shares her son's story who was an ESE student and how she approached the situation as a parent. She is always present at the table as one of the team members to make decisions based on data, assessments and any other information that is presented." There is evidence from the teacher nominee of Participant 5 that embedded personal and professional experiences are present at the school. Other documents did not demonstrate the theme in the analyses.

Question 1, Theme 2: Adaptability

The document analyses indicated that there were no statements from the teacher nominees that were consistent with the adaptability, a theme identified in the qualitative interviews.

Research Question 2

Question 2, Theme 1: Relationship oriented and commitment to collaboration

The document analyses overtly supported the theme of relationship orientation. The teachers nominated by Participants 2, 3, 4, and 5 commented on the value that the participants placed on relationships and collaboration at the schools.

The teacher nominated by Participant 2 focused on the relationship aspect of Participant 2's leadership when she stated, "With his dedication to excellence in education coupled with the

ability to work well with others in a positive and encouraging manner, (Participant 2) is the epitome of what it means to be an effective leader.” The teacher added, “As a leader, (Participant 2) serves as a role model. He has high expectations for his teachers, his students, and for himself. He demonstrates respect and concern for others and recognizes the uniqueness of each person. Whatever the challenge, (Participant 2) tailors a plan for success and provides constant encouragement to all.” The teacher nominee indicated the focus on building positive relationships is evident throughout the school.

Like Participant 2, the teacher nominated by Participant 3 described the principal as one who “develops relationships with her staff, school families, and students. She has an open door policy that allows anyone to share their opinion with her at any time and will listen and provide suggestions to assist students and teachers in their daily activities and routines.” Being relationship oriented and committed to collaboration is a theme that Participant 2 demonstrated.

Participant 4 has shown his commitment to positive relationships, according to the teacher nominated to provide a written summary of his leadership. She stated that, “He shows leadership in all he does from working with teachers and parents to working with the students themselves. I teach students who are visually impaired and some with SLD as well, and I have seen how (Participant 4) interacts with students of varying exceptionalities. He knows all of our students by name, and has been an open advocate for all our students and always available to discuss and resolve any issues that may arise. During team meetings, (Participant 4) has sat in to help make and support important decisions such as student placement (grade level and diploma), student services, parental involvement, and team communication. He has met on behalf of the students and team with other district members in order to advocate for our students.” Participant

4 was viewed as collaborative and committed to building positive relationships with students, teachers and families.

The teacher, nominated by Participant 5, explained that “The staff members are always willing to step outside the box in order to make our school the best in the state because they know she (Participant 5) is right by their side. She builds a strong family foundation with not only the teachers and staff but all stakeholders in our school.” This was viewed as evidence that Participant 5 values positive relationships and collaboration.

Teachers nominated by Participants 2, 3, 4, and 5 expressed their views of the participants as being relationship oriented and committed to collaboration. These results indicate theme congruence with the qualitative interviews.

Question 2, Theme 2: Focused responsibility and accountability

Theme 2, Focused responsibility and accountability, was evident throughout each of the documents that were submitted by the teacher nominees. The documents detailed a level of commitment that was evident to the individual and by some accounts, to the community.

The teacher nominated by Participant 1 described the strategies that are used to focus on student achievement. She described Participant 1 as, “extremely dedicated to all students” and explained the approach that Participant 1 uses as, “During the first data meeting (Participant 1) gave each teacher a “Who” chart to get to know their students. Teachers had to list all of their students, along with ethnicity, SWD, ED, etc. This allowed teachers and admin to get a feel of exactly who is in each classroom.” Furthermore, she explained that, (Participant 1) “conducts teacher data meetings bi-monthly to stay on top of all student data, and she tends to focus on ESE student data during these meetings to make sure they too are making learning gains. She

also conducts “IDC’s” which are individual data chats with teachers one on one to review progress students are making progress.”

The teacher nominated by Participant 1 explained another strategy that Participant 1 uses to ensure accountability. She said that Participant 1 “asks all teachers in grades 2-5 to conduct data chats with their students so they too are aware of how their data is changing and areas they are exceling in or where they need to make improvements. Students collect their personal data in their own data notebook which is shared at Individual Teacher data chat meetings. All student data is kept on sharepoint where teachers have individual class study sheets. This is where all teachers record student data, giving administration an opportunity to analyze student’s data. All ESE students are pulled out according to their IEP for additional reading and math support. This is a critical part of (Participant 1’s) plan to help keep all ESE (SLD) students learning, providing additional intervention and support. (Participant 1) is a competent leader and takes pride in knowing all ESE students are given the same opportunity as regular students.” The document that was submitted by the teacher, nominated by Participant 1, supported the theme, Focused responsibility and accountability.

The teacher, nominated by Participant 2 to complete a leadership summary, listed 13 supports that the principal has developed to increase the achievement of students at School 2. These supports included both remedial and enrichment options for students as a means of encouraging student progress and as demonstration of the response to increased levels of accountability. Specific changes in the service delivery models were listed by the teacher nominee as critical improvements that demonstrated the participant’s level of responsibility and accountability. Support programs during the school breaks, along with tutoring and volunteer programs, were considered by the teacher nominee to be critical to the success related to the

increased levels of accountability. The teacher nominee described a number of strategies and programs that the participant added or enhanced in order to improve the intensity of supports for students with SLD and struggling students. The breadth of these offerings explains the commitment of the leader to improving student achievement and serves as support of the identified theme.

The level of responsibility and accountability of Participant 3 was explained briefly by the teacher she nominated. She explained that Participant 3 “looks at every student’s learning and growth and stretches teachers in a positive way to achieve the highest level of learning for each and every student in their class” during grade level data meetings. All of the teacher nominee’s responses indicated that she respected the commitment and responsibility of the participant.

Participant 4 was also described as responsible, as he was attempting to meet the needs of all students and as providing comprehensive support to teachers in a variety of ways in order to help all students achieve. She described him as making decisions that were based on various factors in order to best meet the needs of students.

Participant 5 was described as being an administrator with an approach that is “hands-on when it comes to ensuring the integrity of the school’s programs, curriculum, and supplementary interventions and participates actively in planning and supporting instruction.” The school has applied for, and subsequently has received, the Blue Ribbon Award, a distinguished recognition of overall academic excellence, which the participant, the teacher nominee, and other stakeholder groups value.

There was definite evidence of the extent that the participants valued responsibility and accountability in the documents that were submitted by the teachers who were nominated by the participants.

Research Question 3

Question 3, Theme 1: Focus on hiring and supporting teachers while maintaining a culture of high expectations

This theme was identified in the documents that were submitted by all of the teachers who were nominated by the participants to complete a leadership summary. Either directly or indirectly, the teacher nominees identified professional development as a recognized priority among the principal participants.

The teacher, nominated by Participant 1, explained that Participant 1 uses the bi-monthly data meetings and individual data chats to “see where teachers need additional support.” Acknowledging teachers’ needs and addressing them through a deliberate professional development plan was recognized as critical for the participant’s success, by the teacher nominee.

Participant 2 was described as someone who, “Whatever the challenge, (Participant 2) tailors a plan for success and provides constant encouragement to all.” This profile describes the intentional focus on school improvement by maintaining high expectations.

Participant 3 was described as a leader who “communicates her goals and values through regular PLC, data, and faculty meetings.” Furthermore, “During grade level data meetings, (Participant 3) looks at every student’s learning and growth and stretches teachers in a positive way to achieve the highest level of learning for each and every student in their class. (Participant 3) has attended 504 and IEP meetings and shares her honest opinion and thoughtful suggestions

that put students first in decision making. She provides many opportunities for professional development on and off campus for teachers and staff. (Participant 3) is an excellent leader that proves on a daily basis her belief that every student can achieve and be successful.” The teacher nominee recognized that Participant 3 communicates high expectations for all groups at the school.

The teacher who described Participant 4 stated that, “As a leader, Participant 4 does not hesitate to allow instructors receive additional training if it benefits special education and our students.” This statement supports the participant’s position on providing professional development in order to improve student achievement.

Participant 5 was described as a “visionary,” sharing “her values, beliefs and coherent vision of the future by setting high expectations to ensure success in all students.” Furthermore, the teacher explained that Participant 5 “hires and retains highly-qualified teachers and staff who are lifelong learners.” In addition, Participant 5 was perceived as being “hands-on when it comes to ensuring the integrity of the school’s programs, curriculum, and supplementary interventions and participates actively in planning and supporting instruction. Her hands-on approach is a very positive indicator that she wants what is best and appropriate for all students. (Participant 5) extends her high expectations to all students in the school. One of her main focus is on implementing the Florida Standards with rigor by providing the “tools” necessary to assist the teachers. She is not a person who focuses on just the status quo where education is concerned.” Participant 5 has clearly communicated high expectations and the need for ongoing professional growth, according to the document that was submitted by the teacher nominee.

Question 3, Theme 2: Effective allocation of resources

The teachers nominated by Participants 1, 2, and 5 identified the effective allocation of resources as descriptive of the participants' leadership. The teacher nominees mentioned the distribution of resources that included modification of the service delivery models, along with fiscal and personnel allocations.

The teacher nominated by Participant 1 explained that "All ESE students are pulled out according to their IEP for additional reading and math support. This is a critical part of (Participant 1's) plan to help keep all ESE (SLD) students learning, providing additional intervention and support. (Participant 1) is a competent leader and takes pride in knowing all ESE students are given the same opportunity as regular students." This description implies that resource allocation is a priority for Participant 1 in order to adequately address the needs of the students, while meeting the compliance demands of the IEP.

Participant 2 was described as being dedicated to helping all students succeed by effectively using resources to focus on the following targeted actions: "1) Push-in support with ESE certified teachers during reading and math instruction; 2) Pull-out services to meet specific IEP goals; 3) Targeted intervention based on weekly mini-benchmark data; 4) Enrichment activities and incentives provided during Thanksgiving, winter and Spring breaks [(School 2) Diner, STEM Camp, etc.]; 5) Ongoing progress monitoring through MTSS, Student Studies, and weekly PLCs; 6) Instructional decisions based on progress monitoring data; 7) Additional support from (university) volunteers (Boots on the Ground) during whole-group instruction, small group work, and independent learning; 8) Daily Planners (2nd-5th) to teach and provide effective organizational strategies; 9) Before and/or after school tutoring; 10) *Boot Camp* for additional support in science (5th grade); 11) Participation in math club; 12) Small group,

targeted instruction with instructional coaches; 13) Participation in school and district-wide academic competitions. The teacher identified these actions as significant demonstration of the effective use of allocated resources that have contributed to student success.

Neither the teacher nominee from Participant 3 nor the teacher nominee from Participant 4 included any direct reference to resources used by the participant at the school.

According to the teacher nominee, Participant 5 is an “advocate for students who are in need of specialized programs. She focuses not only on student achievement but developing the whole child by understanding the strengths and weakness of exceptional students in conjunction with the research-based strategies being implemented in the classroom daily. Her implementation of an intervention block built into the daily schedule, has allowed us to differentiate learning and focus on what students know, what they need to learn, and to close any achievement gaps.”

Participant 5 was described by the teacher nominee as being “an advocate for students who are in need of specialized programs. She focuses not only on student achievement but developing the whole child by understanding the strengths and weakness of exceptional students in conjunction with the research-based strategies being implemented in the classroom daily. Her implementation of an intervention block built into the daily schedule, has allowed us to differentiate learning and focus on what students know, what they need to learn, and to close any achievement gaps.” According to the teacher nominee, these structures have provided students with a unique set of resources that have been used to improve achievement.

Three of the teacher nominees, nominees of Participants 1, 2, and 5 mentioned a description of the participants effectively using resources as a means of supporting students at the school.

Question 3, Theme 3: Reflection that informs decision making

The document analyses indicated that there were no statements from the teacher nominees that indicated that reflection that informs decision making was a critical feature of leadership.

Summary of the Document Analyses

Each participant nominated a teacher to write a brief summary that explained their perception of the participant's leadership. The purpose of the written summaries was to provide a second data point that supported or denied the presence of specific qualities that are evident in elementary school principals who were leading schools where students with SLD are proficient in reading.

The principal summaries that were submitted by teacher nominees support the presence of the following themes that had been identified in the qualitative interviews: 1) Embedded personal and professional experiences; 2) Relationship oriented and commitment to collaboration; 3) Focused responsibility and accountability; 4) Focus on hiring and supporting teachers while maintaining a culture of high expectations; 5) Effective allocation of resources. The other two themes, Adaptability and Reflection that informs decision making were not evident in the summaries. The document analyses provided evidence of theme congruence in five of the seven themes that were identified in the qualitative interviews.

Informal, Non-Evaluative Observations

Each of the participants was observed by the researcher in an informal setting related to some aspect of school leadership. Following the qualitative interviews, each participant suggested an event or meeting where the researcher could conduct an informal observation.

Prior to the observation, the researcher reviewed the transcripts of the interviews to determine a focus for each of the observations. The results of the informal observations are detailed next. Not all of the themes were observed, and when there was evidence of more than one theme observed, the dominant theme was noted below.

Neither Theme 1 (Embedded personal and professional experiences) nor Theme 2 (Adaptability) nor Theme 6 (Effective allocation of resources) were overtly identified in the informal, non-evaluative observations. Theme 3, (Relationship oriented and Commitment to collaboration), Theme 4 (Focused responsibility and accountability), Theme 5 (Hiring and supporting teachers while maintaining a culture of high expectations) and Theme 7 (Reflections that informs decision making) were demonstrated in the informal, non-evaluative observations.

Theme 3: Relationship Oriented and Commitment to Collaboration

Participant 3 was involved in an awards ceremony for fifth graders during the scheduled observation. She knew students by name and had prepared an anecdote about each student receiving an award. Students embraced her or shook her hand when the awards were distributed, indicating comfort with interacting with the principal. Behaviors from the principal and from the students indicated that positive relationships had been developed.

Like Participant 3, Participant 4 demonstrated a focus on relationships. He was greeting students at the arrival of the car riders. He called approximately 8 of 10 students by name. Parents who were dropping off their child at the designated area waved and/or exchanged greetings with the principal. Students leaving the cars, driven by their parents or guardians, waved and/or greeted the principal with, “Good Morning, Dr. (Participant 4).” One student stated, “See you on morning announcements, Dr. (Participant 4).” This informal dialogue was perceived as an indicator of a relationship orientation at the school.

Participant 3 and Participant 4 demonstrated an orientation toward the development of positive relationships. The observations were evidence that supported Theme 3.

Theme 4: Focused Responsibility and Accountability

Participant 1 was observed during an end-of-year meetings with grade level teams of teachers where the purpose was to create classes for the upcoming year. She had created a form that the teachers had completed prior to the meeting beginning. She had discussed the purpose and format prior to the meeting and repeated it at the outset. She frequently asked the teachers, “What does the data tell us?” when they were unsure of the best placement. She committed to making classes heterogeneous and fairly divided, based on race, gender and academic need. She reiterated the purpose frequently throughout both sessions. She did not accept teacher contribution without data that would support the decision. This observation served as evidence of Theme 4.

Theme 5: Focus on Hiring and Supporting Teachers While Maintaining a Culture of High Expectations

Theme 5 was identified during the observation of Participant 5. While observing Participant 5, she was collaborating with her assistant principal to develop the School Improvement Plan through a dynamic leadership process. She reminded the assistant principal that every action had to be accompanied by professional development so that there would be teacher buy in and so that the teachers would feel adequately prepared and included. She asked the assistant principal for her opinion about the best way to provide professional development to the group and to specific groups. She also supported the importance of communicating the goals of the newly designed School Improvement Plan to the teachers so they could embrace the goals and become involved in the realization of the goals. This observation was attributed to Theme 5.

Theme 7: Reflection That Informs Decision Making.

Theme 7 was identified during the observation of Participant 2. Participant 2 was observed during a leadership team collaboration that was focused on the development of the School Improvement Plan. As in the face-to-face interview, where he frequently noted reflection on previous experiences to inform current decisions, he also reflected on previous experiences during this observation. He asked aloud, “How was this action plan decided last year?” Then, he asked the team, “What were the results of the plan? And how much confidence do we place in these results?” He listened to his team members and clarified their statements and restated their claims. By the end, he had compiled the input and guided the team to consider several options. With this process of reflection, he was able to get each of the group’s members to agree on the next steps. Participant 2 demonstrated behaviors consistent with Theme 7.

Summary of the Informal, Non-Evaluative Observations

The results of the informal, non-evaluative observations provided evidence of the participants actively demonstrating the themes of relationship orientation, focused responsibility, hiring and supporting teachers while maintaining a culture of high expectations, and reflection that informs decision making. This data source provided live interactions with other stakeholders, some with faculty and administration and some with students and family members. The triangulated data provides further evidence of the validity of the themes that were identified by the researcher from the data obtained during the qualitative interviews.

Summary

The purpose of the research was to examine the perceptions of elementary school principals where students with SLD were demonstrating reading proficiency, based on

performance on FCAT Reading. Research participant selection criteria included analysis of the reading performance of SLD students within the elementary schools in a large, urban school district in Central Florida. In total, 15 schools met the eligibility criteria. Of those 15, five were eliminated for participation. Five declined to participate. The remaining five principals participated in qualitative interviews to address the three research questions.

Three research questions were addressed within the framework of the qualitative study, including:

Question 1: How do principals of effective elementary schools describe their experiences and views of leadership and typical behaviors?

Question 2: What are the characteristics of elementary school principals with the highest percentage of students with SLD who have demonstrated proficiency in reading, as measured by FCAT 2.0?

Question 3: What is the essence of effective, inclusive school leadership?

Qualitative interviews were conducted with each participant. The results revealed seven themes in response to the research questions:

- 1) Embedded personal and professional experiences;
- 2) Adaptability;
- 3) Relationship oriented and commitment to collaboration;
- 4) Focused responsibility and accountability;
- 5) Focus on hiring and supporting teachers while maintaining a culture of high expectations;
- 6) Effective allocation of resources;
- 7) Reflection that informs decision making.

Each participant nominated a teacher who provided a written summary of the participant's leadership. The results of the document analyses supported five of the themes that were identified in the qualitative interviews including:

- 1) Embedded personal and professional experiences;
- 2) Relationship oriented and commitment to collaboration;
- 3) Focused responsibility and accountability;
- 4) Focus on hiring and supporting teachers while maintaining a culture of high expectations;
- 5) Effective allocation of resources.

In addition to the document analyses, the researcher conducted an informal, non-evaluative observation of each of the participants in order to ensure validity with data triangulation. The observations revealed evidence of four of the themes that had been identified in the qualitative interviews:

- 1) Relationship oriented and Commitment to collaboration;
- 2) Focused responsibility and accountability;
- 3) Hiring and supporting teachers while maintaining a culture of high expectations;
- 4) Reflection that informs decision making.

These results indicate that the lived experiences of elementary school principals where students with learning disabilities are proficient in reading are a complex blend of characteristics and practices. Based on the qualitative interviews, the lived experiences are predicated on personal and/or professional experiences. Furthermore, the participants consistently demonstrated adaptability, relational characteristics, and an ongoing commitment to collaboration. The interview data indicate that the essence of effective school leadership hinges

on an orientation toward responsibility and accountability, supporting teachers through professional development, effectively using financial and personnel resources, as well as reflection that creates an insight on decision making.

Following the analysis of the qualitative interviews, document analyses were conducted to confirm the themes that had been identified in the qualitative interviews. Five of the themes, with the exception of Adaptability and Reflection that informs decision making, were confirmed in the document analyses. Informal, non-official observations were conducted to triangulate the data as a third source. Four of the themes, with the exception of: 1) Embedded personal and professional experiences; 2) Adaptability; and 3) Effective allocation of resources were overtly identified in the informal, non-evaluative observations.

The themes that were present in all three data sources, the qualitative interviews, the document analyses and the informal, non-evaluative observations were: 1) Relationship orientation and commitment to collaboration; 2) Focused responsibility and accountability; and 3) Hiring and supporting teachers while maintaining a culture of high expectations. The themes identified in this research will serve to clarify the dispositions and characteristics of school leadership and to provide a firm foundation for future research.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

In the previous chapter, the presentation and analysis of data were reported. Chapter 5 consists of a summary of the research study, discussion of the findings, implications of the findings, and recommendations for future research and practice to allow the current research to be extended to future models. This research was intended to inform the field of special education leadership.

Summary of the Study

This chapter begins with a restatement of the purpose and a review of the structure that was used to respond to the research questions. The major findings are, then, synthesized in relation to previous findings that focused on school leadership.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences and the implementation of leadership practices of elementary school principals in schools where students with SLD have demonstrated reading proficiency. Principals suitable for inclusion in the research study were identified using a matrix of identifying factors that focused on the performance of students with SLD. Associated criteria involved the continuity of the tenure of the principal. Data were collected from elementary school principals via face-to-face qualitative interviews, and teachers who were nominated by each principal completed a brief summary of the individuals' leadership. The researcher also conducted an informal, unofficial, non-evaluative observation of each participant.

Synopsis of Research

In Phase One of the study, the researcher identified elementary schools where students with SLD demonstrated reading proficiency on FCAT. A summary of the performance of this specific subgroup of students at each school was reviewed for the years of 2011-12 and 2012-13. Schools where the subgroup exceeded the state average for the two consecutive years were identified. To be included in the study, the principal was also required to have been in place for the selected years. These student performance criteria yielded 15 individual schools that were eligible for inclusion. Of these 15 schools, five principals were not available, and five principals declined to participate.

Of the five principals who agreed to participate, three were female and two were male. Three of the five participants were Caucasian, and two of the five participants were African American. The average number of years of experience of the participants is 9.2 years. Four of the five participants had fewer than five years of experience, and the median number of years of experience of the participants was four years. None of the five schools was eligible for funding from the Title I Free and Reduced Meal Program. All of the participants maintained certification in Educational Leadership and as Principal. Three of the five participants maintained certification in Elementary Education. One of the five participants maintained certification in Exceptional Education (K-12). The purposeful selection process was used in Phase One of the research to accurately identify participants who met the eligibility criteria.

Phase Two of the study was conducted using the principles of phenomenology. A face-to-face interview of the selected principals was scheduled with each individual. The research consisted of semi-structured interviews of selected participants in order to identify the essence of support and leadership in schools where students with SLD were demonstrating reading

proficiency. Principals' reports of their beliefs, experiences, and actions that impacted student performance and school climate were accessed in the interviews.

Three primary research questions were identified based on previous research, in alignment with the qualitative research process (Seidman, 2013). The primary research questions of this study were as follows:

1. How do principals of effective elementary schools describe their experiences and views of typical leadership behavior?
2. What are the characteristics of elementary school principals with the highest percentage of students with SLD who have demonstrated proficiency in reading, as measured by FCAT 2.0?
3. What is the essence of effective elementary school leadership?

The interviews were divided into three main sections with identified questions and follow-up questions to clarify the participants' responses. These sections included: 1) Life History; 2) Contemporary Experience; 3) Reflection. Questions in the Life History section included: 1) "Describe your past experiences that have impacted your beliefs and actions related to providing support for students with SLD." 2) "What situations have influenced or affected your experiences of leading an elementary school where students with learning disabilities are proficient?" Questions in the Contemporary Experience section included: 3) "How have you structured your support services for students with SLD?" 4) "What does ongoing support for students with SLD look like?" 5) "What have you experienced, as a principal, in terms of leadership in an elementary school?" 6) "What were the major challenges that were encountered before success was achieved?" 7) "Tell me about your day-to-day experiences, including relationships, decisions, and actions related to leading an elementary school where intermediate-

level (grades three through five) students with SLD are proficient.” Questions in the Reflection Interview section included: 8) “Given what you’ve told me about your life before becoming an elementary school principal, how do you understand school leadership where students with SLD are proficient?” 9) “Where do you foresee changes in the future?” 10) “What are the anticipated barriers to sustaining this level of effectiveness and increasing this level of student performance?” 11) “How would you describe yourself as a leader?”

The research questions were intended to access the current beliefs, attitudes, and practices that effective principals use. The questions were also intended to extract the impact of previous experiences on the perceived critical features of leadership in schools where students with SLD are proficient in reading. The questions that made up each section were selected based on literature findings, consistent with Seidman’s model (2013).

The researcher transcribed the interviews and conducted the data analysis process associated with identifying themes (Kamarulzaman, Madun, & Abdul Ghani, 2011; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). A member check was held when the researcher invited each participant to review the individual’s interview transcript, giving the interviewee and the researcher the opportunity to clarify any miscommunications, to identify inaccuracies, and to obtain additional data.

Following the face-to-face, qualitative interviews, each participant nominated a teacher from the school to submit a brief description of the principal’s leadership. Document analyses were conducted to determine agreement between the participants’ perceptions and the teachers’ perceptions of the principals’ leadership. Finally, an informal, non-evaluative, unofficial observation of the principal was conducted to serve as a third data point of data triangulation.

The data were analyzed to identify the commonalities in the principal interviews and were subsequently used as themes addressing each of the research questions. The next section will describe those findings and the interpretation of those findings.

Summary and Interpretation of Findings

Qualitative Interviews

The Life History section of the qualitative interviews, the document analyses, and the leadership summaries were analyzed to determine how effective elementary school principals describe their experiences and views of typical leadership behavior. The responses to the questions in the Life History section led to the conclusion that effective school principals believe that adaptability and prior experiences contribute to their leadership.

As Fullan (1997) suggested, the participants in the research study reported having experienced increasing demands that focused on instructional leadership, along with management of facilities and other resources of the school (Barnett, 2004; Shellard, 2003; Wakeman et al., 2006). The participants reported having developed a wide range of competencies and the need for adaptability, as emphasized by Fullan (2007). The participants declared the need for flexibility and adaptability when describing their experiences of leadership. This theme, adaptability, was pronounced throughout every face-to-face interview, particularly when they were asked about their typical, day-to-day experiences. They each reported the necessity to adapt to the demands that each day brings, including responding to a variety of student, teacher, family, and community requests and demands.

At times, this flexibility was intentional and prescribed, as when Participant 1 described the way the MTSS tiers have been structured. She described the strategic use of the data to adapt to the students' demonstrated needs. Participant 4 discussed the need to be adaptable in order to

address the varying needs that are presented each day. Having spent more than 33 years as a principal, Participant 5 described the changes that occurred over time that shifted the principal's role from being a site-based manager to supporting a more centralized view of leadership. All of these descriptions support the theme of adaptability as being central to the role of leadership in an elementary school where students with SLD are proficient in reading.

One of the emerging themes from the interviews of the participants was the development of views based on professional and personal experiences. All of the participants reported embedding previous professional experiences into their view of leadership in order to meet the demands of being a principal. The participants described classroom experiences with students, administrative experiences with the guidance of previous principals, and preparation programs as ways that they developed their views of leadership and typical behaviors. Several participants alluded to the immersion in the principalship as the primary means of developing their views of leadership. Previous research has identified the impact of leadership preparation programs on the development of effective school leaders (Barnett, 2004; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Orr & Orphanos, 2011). This research study, aligned with previous research, suggests that teacher leadership opportunities and leadership preparation programs, particularly with job embedded experiences, have the potential to strengthen the expertise of school leaders.

Two of the five participants reported that having a family member with a disability impacted their views of leadership and underlined the critical role that involving the family plays. It seems natural that having direct experience with a close family member would impact the views of leadership, and current research supports the theme (Cummings, 2001; Stainton &

Besser, 1998). This finding is consistent with the theme that emerged that emphasized the importance of past experiences shaping the beliefs of leaders.

The Contemporary Experiences section of the qualitative interviews, the document analyses, and the informal, unofficial observations were analyzed to define the characteristics of effective elementary school principals with students with SLD who are proficient in reading. The analyses identified the themes related to being relationship oriented, collaborative, responsible, and accountable as critical features of effective school leadership.

One of the themes that emerged in response to Research Question #2 indicated that relationship orientation was among the dominant characteristics that the participants described. A focus on developing positive relationships was demonstrated by each of the participants in the interviews, by the teacher nominees in the leadership summaries, and in the informal, unofficial observations of the participants. There was evidence of compassion, understanding, active listening, as well as caring about students and others in all three data sources. Participant 3 expressed with clarity the importance she attaches to relationship when she quoted James Comer, who said that, “No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship” (Payne, 2008). Participant 2 shared similar beliefs and arranged for college student mentors to provide tutoring for students but focused on the adult–child relationship as much as the academic involvement between the pairs.

These findings were consistent with Goleman’s research that identified emotional intelligence as a key indicator of principal effectiveness because of the need for openness, collaboration, and focused vision in order to build capacity for improvements in student achievement (Goleman, 1997). Likewise, this theme was aligned with the research of Lashley

(2007), who found that personal dispositions and relational skills are needed in order for school leaders to be successful.

In line with a positive relationship orientation was the participants' statements of their commitment to collaboration. The theme of collaboration was evident throughout the interviews and was supported by the leadership summaries and by the informal observations. Participant 2 expressed his belief that teacher buy-in was critical to the effective implementation of selected programs. He summarized his views of school leadership as,

I want a school that thinks of itself as a community and not just a collection of classrooms. That means that students with disabilities, all disabilities, are a part of the overall school. Initiatives in that we can move them together as much as possible.

Participant 5 likened the collaboration necessary for success at school to a family. She stated that,

I also believe in relationships as far as a family atmosphere. Ever since I've opened this school, we have a family picnic that is just my faculty and staff and their families because we spend a lot of time together and I want them to feel connected.

To these participants, collaboration and community building are essential components of effective schools. These views and behaviors are associated with the foundational, relational skills that have been identified by McLaughlin and Talbert (2006). Likewise, relationship orientation and collaboration are aligned with the results of Mastrangelo, Eddy and Lorenzet (2004) and Robinson (2007), who have identified interpersonal skills as being critical for school leadership.

The second theme that surfaced during the data analysis, in response to Research Question #2 that was intended to determine the characteristics of effective principals, was the emphasis on focused responsibility and accountability. Each of the participants acknowledged the definitive focus on responsibility and accountability. Participant 3, though, articulated the profound feelings of responsibility she experiences, especially as she transitioned from being an assistant principal to assuming the role as principal. She stated,

I'm responsible not just for that year's learning but for that child being as prepared as possible for the future. I think that was one of the first things that hit me as a new principal ... that it's not just preparing for the test but preparing a child for life. I think just that situation ... just knowing that I'm the educational leader of that building.

Her continued feelings of responsibility were expressed when she stated, "I feel responsible for everything that happens here ... Everything!—the good, the bad, and everything in between." This description, though more pronounced and defined than the others, was similar to the others' portrayal of their experiences being the principal of a school where students with SLD demonstrated reading proficiency.

Maintaining a focus on positive relationships, collaboration, and focused responsibility were identified as the critical characteristics of effective leadership in the present study. These results indicate that a comprehensive profile of characteristics is employed by effective leaders. These results are consistent with previous research (Fullan, 2008; Hattie, 2009; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011; Mastrangelo et al., 2004; Robinson, 2007; Seashore, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010) that suggest that effective school leaders demonstrate a dynamic set of characteristics that complement the work and goals of the school.

The Reflection section of the qualitative interviews, along with the document analyses and the informal, unofficial observations, in combination with the previously discussed two sections, were intended to define the essence of effective elementary school leadership where students with SLD demonstrate reading proficiency. The analyses of the responses to the research questions identified the themes related to being relationship oriented, collaborative, responsible, and accountable as critical features of effective school leadership. Personal and professional experiences seem to impact the development of effective leadership as well. The results of this research study indicate that the essence of school leadership appears to be related to: 1) A focus on hiring and supporting teachers while maintaining a culture of high expectations; 2) Effective allocation of resources; and 3) Reflection that informs decision making. In conjunction with the previously discussed sections, this section of the interviews was based on participants' reports of their perceptions of their accounts of leadership, anticipated barriers, and changes.

The first theme, a focus on hiring and supporting teachers and maintaining a culture of high expectations, was identified as a primary theme. The researcher decided to combine the two seemingly separate constructs into one theme because each time one of the statements was analyzed as a distinct theme, there was mention of the other. They appeared to be linked directly to each other and they may appear as individual themes as well. The responses from Participant 5 were unmistakably coupled with this theme and were used as an example of the theme here. She responded in several sections of the interview about her views of the importance of hiring highly qualified teachers and providing ongoing support for their professional development. At the same time, she embedded the importance of high expectations being established and met as a result of hiring and supporting teachers. Furthermore, this theme, while pronounced in this

participant's interview, was also included in the leadership summary and in the informal observation of the participant. Each of the five participants expressed high expectations for teachers and students as a cultural priority and incorporated these expectations into efforts to support teachers. The present research study supported the findings of earlier meta-analytic studies that indicated that high quality professional development was critical to school success and effective school leadership (Hattie, 2009; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2008).

Each of the participants also described the effective use of resources to support the priorities that were established at the school. All of the participants described ways that they provided financial and personnel resources to support students' inclusion within general education whenever possible. Although not explicitly stated in the interviews, the funding formula for students with mild disabilities such as a student with a SLD generates less money than actually needed to fund the salary for an individual to support students. This authentic and ongoing challenge requires principals to efficiently analyze and effectively use their limited funds from the formulated budget. This was evident in the interviews and the other triangulated data sources and supports the findings of previous studies that noted that the quantity of funds allocated is less important than the quality of the programming and teacher quality, along with the effective utilization of the funds (Hanushek, 2003; Hattie, 2009).

Finally, the essence of school leadership involves a deliberate approach to reflection that informs decision making. Participant 2 provided an elaborate description of this strategy. Like Participant 4, Participant 2 had most recently served as an administrator in a traditional high school. Participant 2 noted the contrast between working with teachers at the secondary level and teachers at the elementary level. He stated that,

It took most of the year, if not all of it, to really understand that (difference between teachers at the high school and elementary school levels). I don't mean understand it on a surface level; I made some decisions that looking back, I would never make ever. I would make the same decision but how I implement it would be totally different.

This description was compelling evidence to determine the theme and was supported by the other participants' responses and previous research (Fullan, 2004, 2006b; Fullan, Cuttress, & Kilcher, 2005; Southwood, 2002).

Document Analyses

Each participant nominated a teacher to write a brief summary that explained their perception of the participant's leadership. The purpose of the written summaries was to provide a second data point that supported or denied the presence of specific qualities that are evident in elementary school principals who were leading schools where students with SLD are proficient in reading.

The principal summaries that were submitted by teacher nominees support the presence of five of the themes that had been identified in the qualitative interviews, including: 1) Embedded personal and professional experiences; 2) Relationship oriented and commitment to collaboration; 3) Focused responsibility and accountability; 4) Focus on hiring and supporting teachers while maintaining a culture of high expectations; 5) Effective allocation of resources. The other two themes, Adaptability and Reflection that informs decision making were not evident in the summaries. Due to the brevity and nature of the summaries, all themes were not addressed but provide a data source for evaluation.

Informal, Non-Evaluative Observations

Following each qualitative interview, each of the participants was observed by the researcher in an informal setting related to some aspect of school leadership. The observations were conducted in order to add a third data point to determine theme congruence. The results of the informal, non-evaluative observations provided evidence of the participants actively demonstrating the themes of: 1) Relationship orientation; 2) Focused responsibility; 3) Hiring and supporting teachers while maintaining a culture of high expectations, and 4) Reflection that informs decision making. This data source provided live interactions with other stakeholders, some with faculty and administration and some with students and family members. Neither Theme 1 (Embedded personal and professional experiences) nor Theme 2 (Adaptability) nor Theme 6 (Effective allocation of resources) was overtly identified in the informal, non-evaluative observations. This third data source provides further evidence of the validity of the themes that were identified by the researcher from the data obtained during the qualitative interviews.

The themes that were present in all three data sources were: 1) Relationship oriented and commitment to collaboration; 2) Focused responsibility and accountability; and 3) Hiring and supporting teachers while maintaining a culture of high expectations. However, the qualitative interviews, due to the time required and the direct, intensive questioning, most likely carry increased weighting in determining conclusions. These findings indicate that these factors appear to contribute to effective elementary school leadership, where students with learning disabilities demonstrate proficiency in reading.

The results of this research indicate that the participants demonstrated a constellation of qualities that support the achievement of students with SLD. In response to the three research questions, the research identified seven primary themes that were displayed by the participants.

The essence of the lived experiences of principals leading schools where students with SLD demonstrated proficiency in reading was explained by the participants as involving characteristics and typical behaviors that are aligned with the previous research and with professional standards (Billingsley, 2005; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Gray & Streshly, 2008; Green, 2005; Hattie, 2009; James et al., 2006; Lashley, 2007; Leithwood, Louis et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Praisner, 2003; Whitaker, 2010).

The framework that was established by Gray and Streshley (2008) and clarified by Dufour and Marzano (2009, 2011) was consistent with the results of this research study. Leader disposition, along with professional actions and interactions with others are consistently used to determine the most appropriate decisions for the benefit of the students and the goals of improving the schools. Specifically, the results of this research corroborate the extensive work of Hehir and Katzman (2012) and Hoppey and McLeskey (2013) that focused on the leadership in inclusive schools. In the qualitative interviews, there was a pervasive tone that demonstrated the participants' commitment to students by focusing on instruction and ways to support continuous improvement through collaboration and supporting professional development. Likewise, the characteristics that the participants described were aligned with the Council for Exceptional Children Standards of Professional and Ethical Conduct. There was less emphasis on the research-based and evidence-based practices throughout the interviews than expected. This finding may be a function of the format of the interview or of the interview questions; however, the absence of this component in the responses may have value in future research. Taken altogether, the results of this study, in combination with previous research, indicate that elementary school principals where students with SLD are proficient in reading demonstrate a

dynamic model of leadership that involves both facets of instructional leadership and transformational leadership models.

Limitations

The limitations of this research study are based on methodological restraints. Phenomenological research was selected and deemed appropriate for early research purposes. Because there had been very limited prior research in this particular area, qualitative research was endorsed. First, sample size was a limitation of the study. This research revealed themes about the lived experiences of the five individuals who participated in the research. However, the sample size of the research may inhibit the full understanding of the phenomenon. Even though the original sample that met the study criteria was larger, many were excluded because of the participant availability and other factors. It was determined that the need for sample integrity was greater than the need for a larger sample size, when minimum sample size and research saturation requirements were met.

Another sample concern is that no Title I schools met the eligibility criteria for participation. This missing element in the participants may be a factor that limited the findings.

The types of data that were used to triangulate the qualitative interviews may have contributed to limitations in the research study. The document analyses of the leadership summaries that were submitted by teachers who the participants nominated may be seen as suspect. Furthermore, the participants also scheduled a time or event to be observed by the researcher. Although the data from these sources were valuable to the process, the data derived from the summaries may have been biased toward the participants. The research was conducted with fidelity to the best of the researcher's ability and experience, and the interviews were standardized, recorded, transcribed and checked. However, the limited experience of the

researcher may have contributed unintentional bias in the process. The researcher did identify research biases that were not violated throughout the research, contributing to the research integrity, but should be considered a source of limitation (Creswell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Finally, all of the participants in the study led schools that were not eligible for Title I funds, based on the percentage of students whose families have limited financial resources. Therefore, it is possible that the students at all of the schools included in the study may have had access to programs and services that would require family support, either financial or other types of support and may confound the results.

Implications of Findings

This study has identified the parallels between the findings from previously conducted research on school leadership and this unique group of participants. The essence of effective elementary school leadership, as defined in this research study, has been characterized by beliefs and actions that are focused on supporting students with SLD. The findings are consistent with the patterns identified in the school leadership literature. Therefore, the results show promise for increasing the performance of students with SLD by strategizing to increase the professional repertoire and capacity of school leaders with commonly accepted practices.

This research has unique benefits to the field of special education leadership. First, this study focused exclusively on administrators where students with SLD were considered proficient in reading. Typically, students with SLD are included within the subgroup of students with disabilities, limiting the focus on this specific subgroup. Because this group with mild disabilities has shown very little progress as a specific group on standardized tests and gets clustered with other types of disabilities, the needs of this group may have been overlooked in the past. This study may bring attention to the leadership practices needed to support this

specific group of students. Second, the present research study contributes to the field of special education leadership by bringing attention to the importance of the beliefs and actions of school leaders when focusing on closing the achievement gap between students in general education and students received special education.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should be considered to verify and validate the findings of this research study. The participant selection process should be reviewed to address the sample size limitations. Expanding the criteria to include other administrators or other locales may be used to confirm or deny these results. Depending on whether the participants in this qualitative study are representative of greater numbers of leaders who have experienced having a family member with a disability, this could be a critical feature to investigate with future research.

In the future, including schools that receive funding from Title I federal programs may reveal another aspect of school leadership that will contribute to the field. This would involve expanding the eligibility criteria of the current research study or developing a new matrix for including Title I schools. Research that examines the demographics of the school, along with the school culture, may facilitate improvement of the understanding of this critical construct as well.

This research study focused on examining the lived experiences of principals in elementary schools. Expanding the sample to include school leaders in secondary schools should be considered in order to deepen the understanding of school leadership. In addition to expanding the sample to include various levels of leadership, it may be helpful to examine the service delivery models used at the schools that have been identified as being effective in more depth,. This may help to define the specific types of supports that are provided and are deemed effective.

In addition to expanding the sample, the themes that were identified in the present research study should be given consideration in future research. The research questions were based on the previous research findings and were aligned to the model that Seidman (2013) proposed. However, more specificity added to the research questions and sub-questions may produce alternate themes and results. Other sources of data, including quantitative results from surveys that include more individuals, may also be a consideration when designing future research.

This research may be expanded to examine the quality of university–school district partnerships in order to impact the future direction of special education. Because of the limited growth that students with SLD have made in recent years and the increased expectations of the Common Core State Standards and the Florida Standards, research that identifies the needs more specifically will inform these critical partnerships.

A final recommendation for future research is to evaluate current leadership preparation programs and the standards that are used to guide these programs. This research step would be used to determine the level that these dispositions and behaviors are included and are supported throughout the programs. Determining whether there are differences in programs within the state of Florida and throughout the nation would further contribute to the understanding of leadership demands in the future. When the preliminary results of this research study were presented at the National Urban Special Education Leadership Initiative in 2015, the attendees recommended that a logic model be developed to identify the inputs, outputs, and outcomes as a means of evaluating leadership preparation programs within the context of the findings in this research. Utilizing a logic model would enhance the viability of the research recommendations that could be used as the foundation for evaluation of programs and their sustainability.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

Life History Interview Questions:

- 1) “Describe your past experiences that have impacted your beliefs and actions related to providing support for students with SLD.”
- 2) “What situations have influenced or affected your experiences of leading an elementary school where students with learning disabilities are proficient?”

Contemporary Experience Interview Questions:

- 4) “How have you structured your support services for students with SLD?”
- 5) “What does ongoing support for students with SLD look like?”
- 6) “What have you experienced, as a principal, in terms of leadership in an elementary school?”
- 7) “What were the major challenges that were encountered before success was achieved?”
- 8) “Tell me about your day to day experiences, including relationships, decisions, and actions, related to leading an elementary school where intermediate-level (grades three through five) students, with SLD, are proficient.”

Reflection Interview Questions:

- 9) “Given what you’ve told me about your life before becoming an elementary school principal, how do you understand school leadership where students, with SLD, are proficient?”
- 10) “Where do you foresee changes in the future?”
- 11) “What are the anticipated barriers to sustaining this level of effectiveness and increasing this level of student performance?”

12) “How would you describe yourself as a leader?”

APPENDIX B: IRB LETTER



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: UCF Institutional Review Board #1
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: Elizabeth Theis

Date: December 11, 2014

Dear Researcher:

On 12/11/2014, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination
Project Title: Lived experiences of principals where students with learning disabilities demonstrate reading proficiency
Investigator: Elizabeth Theis
IRB Number: SBE-14-10791
Funding Agency:
Grant Title:
Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joanne Muratori".

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 12/11/2014 10:37:13 AM EST

IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX C: SCHOOL DISTRICT RESEARCH APPROVAL FORM



Orange County Public Schools

RECEIVED
DEC 18 2014
BY: _____

Research Request Form

Complete this form in full and send a copy, along with all required attachments, to:

Brandon McKelvey, Sr. Director
Accountability, Research and Assessment
445 W. Amelia Street
Orlando, FL 32801

GENERAL INFORMATION

Requester's Name Elizabeth Theis

Date 12/16/14

E-mail Elizabeth.theis@ocps.net, Elizabeth.theis@knights.ucf.edu

Phone 407-808-4934 407-317-3700 X5954
Cell Home Work

Address 3820 Norbury Ct. Orlando, Florida 32835
Street City, State Zip

Institutional Affiliation University of Central Florida

Project Director/Advisor Dr. Suzanne Martin/Dr. Maria Vazquez

Project Director/Advisor Phone Number 407-823-4260/407-317-3700

Project Title Lived experiences of principals impacting students with learning disabilities who demonstrate reading proficiency

DEGREE PROGRAM

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Associate's | <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor's | <input type="checkbox"/> Master's |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Specialist | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Doctorate | <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable |

DIRECT CONTACT WITH OCPS STUDENTS AND/OR PERSONNEL

- This research will require direct contact with students, teachers and/or administrators.

Please describe in detail the number and type of participants needed, the amount of time each participant will be engaged in the project and the methods that will be used to gather data. Include any school identified as a participant in the project. Include a description of the measures taken to ensure the confidentiality of all participants.

Number and type of participants needed

This research study will involve elementary school principals, within OCPS, having students with SLD who have demonstrated proficiency in reading. The proficiency levels of the SLD subgroup in each grade level of each elementary school in 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 will be analyzed. All schools with proficiency levels that exceed the state average will be included as potential participants.

The principals selected for participation in the research will be revealed as the researcher creates a hierarchy ranking system of student data, compiled by the district from a state database. The report will provide a comprehensive listing of the performance of the subgroup of students with learning disabilities in each school. The researcher will use this report to select elementary schools within the school district. Next, the researcher will compile the data for each of the schools in the district and determine whether the group exceeded the state average in each grade level. A summary of the number of grade levels that exceeded the state average will be compiled. Schools with the greatest number of grade levels across the two years of data will be included.

This ranking procedure will be conducted using the results from FCAT, 2013 and the results from FCAT, 2014. This ranking will serve as the basis for the final selection of schools that will be involved in the subsequent phase of research. This process will allow the data to be stratified equitably and will result in a sample that meets purposeful sampling requirements (Mertens, & McLaughlin, 1995; Richey, & Klein, 2007). The principals of the elementary schools with the highest number of grade levels where students with SLD exceed the state, as measured by FCAT 2.0 Reading, will be included in the research.

For the purposes of this research, the participants will be selected, with the intention that at least five participants complete involvement in the research. The principals of the schools with the greatest number of grade levels where students with SLD exceed the state average will be considered. Principals of at least ten schools will be identified to counteract the possibility of attrition or principals electing not to participate. If there are multiple schools with the highest ranking with the same number of grade levels above the state average, all principals will be contacted for possible participation in the research study. In the event that the highest ranked principals elect not to participate, the principal next in the ranking will be invited to participate. In that case, each of the principals will be contacted for possible participation in the study. The list of remaining schools will be maintained in the event that the principals of the schools with the highest percentage of proficient students with SLD are not available for study inclusion.

Revised 9.30.13

Amount of time each participant will be engaged in the project

We expect that each participant will be directly involved in this research study for a maximum of 2-3 hours. Participation may be completed in one visit or span across several visits. The researcher will conduct the initial interview with the participant, and together, they will plan subsequent interview dates, if needed, as determined by availability and research constraints. The observation will take place in a pre-arranged setting, where the participant is already planning to be present.

Methods that will be used to gather data

The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experiences of effective elementary principals and their views of leadership and practices. In particular, this study will focus on the qualities and competencies of principals, within elementary schools, where students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) are performing at proficient levels in reading.

Data will be collected, using phenomenological protocol. Each participant will be involved in a face-to-face qualitative interview with the researcher to explore experiences and views of their leadership style and practices. The interview will be recorded for research purposes. Up to two additional, follow up sessions will be used to continue the interview, as needed. The interviews will be followed by at least one qualitative observation of each of the selected participants. Additionally, each principal will nominate at least two teachers to complete a description of the principal's leadership qualities, as related to the reading proficiency of students with LD. The observation and teacher descriptions will be used to attain multiple perspectives.

Include any school identified as a participant in the project

The selection process will include only principals from elementary schools within OCPS. The ranking procedure, described in the section above, will be conducted using the results from FCAT, 2013 and the results from FCAT, 2014. This ranking will serve as the basis for the final selection of schools that will be involved in the subsequent phase of research. The principals of the elementary schools with the greatest number of grade levels that exceed the state average will be included in the research. Schools will be included, if there are at least four (of the six total) grade levels that exceed the state average.

For the purposes of this research, the participants will be selected, with the intention that at least five participants complete involvement in the research. The principals of the schools with the greatest number of grade levels where students with SLD exceed the state average will be considered. Principals of at least ten schools will be identified to counteract the possibility of attrition or principals electing not to participate. If there are multiple schools with the highest ranking with the same number of grade levels above the state average, all principals will be contacted for possible participation in the research study. In the event that the highest ranked principals elect not to participate, the principal next in the ranking will be invited to participate. There is a possibility that the frequency distribution will reveal that several schools have the same ranking, based on the percentage of proficient students. In that case, each of the principals will be contacted for possible participation in the study. The list of remaining schools will be maintained in the event that the principals of the schools with the highest percentage of proficient students with SLD are not available for study inclusion.

Leadership retention and availability will also be considered. If the principal was present at the school for the designated years and remains at the school as the principal, the principal will be included in the study. If the principal was present at the school for the designated years but the

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principal is no longer at the designated school site and remains employed in the school district, the principal will remain in the selection pool. If the principal has relocated outside of the district but is available for participation, the individual will be included. If the principal is unavailable by usual contact means, the principal will be excluded from the research.

Only principals in good standing with the district and state requirements will be included. No children, pregnant women, prisoners or other groups of vulnerable populations will be included.

Description of the measures taken to ensure the confidentiality of all participants

Participants will be assigned a code following receipt of consent to participate, and this code will be used for tracking purposes in data collection and to locate any data stored in electronic form. Only the principal investigator will have direct access to the participant code assignments. All data from participants will be coded, based on initial assignment, described in the IRB application, to ensure confidentiality. All data collection forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the investigator's office.

All recordings will be immediately transcribed and transferred to the principal investigator's computer. All files will be saved using a password protection. The external hard drive will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the primary investigator's locked office. All data will be secured and kept confidential, and only the faculty advisors will have access to the data. This process will provide confidentiality of all participants throughout all phases of the research.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH PROJECT

Please provide a brief summary of your research project that includes your research questions, the relevance of your project and your research methods.

Background and Relevance

Over the course of time, the role of the principal has evolved, and principals are now, more than ever, expected to be instructional leaders of the school (Hattie, 2009). Principals have had to develop competencies in a variety of areas to accommodate the changing needs of students and the increasing complexity of schools (Elmore, 2006; Reeves, 2006; Fullan, 2007; Erkens, & Twadell, 2012). These changes have required an increased focus on achievement for all student subgroups; however, there is strong evidence that students with disabilities, along with other targeted subgroups, are performing significantly below their same-age peers (Florida Department of Education, 2013; Nation's Report Card, 2013). In order to address students' underperformance, this research will be conducted to identify the key qualities of effective elementary school principals where students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) are proficient in reading, thereby strengthening the understanding of school leadership.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experiences of effective elementary principals and their views of leadership and practices. In particular, this study will focus on the qualities and competencies of principals, within elementary schools, where students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) are performing at proficient levels in reading.

Research Design

This research study will utilize a qualitative research design to explore the qualities of principals who lead elementary schools, where students with SLD are proficient in reading. Specifically, the phenomenological research approach will be used to study the meaning individuals attach to their lived experience (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005).

Each participant (selection process described above) will be involved in a face-to-face qualitative interview process with the researcher to explore experiences and views of their leadership style and practices. The interview will be recorded for research purposes. Up to two additional, follow up sessions will be used to continue the interview, as needed. The interviews will be followed by at least one qualitative observation of each of the selected participants. Additionally, each principal will nominate at least two teachers to complete a description of the principal's leadership qualities, as related to the reading proficiency of students with LD. The observation and teacher descriptions will be used to attain multiple perspectives. The participants do not have to answer every question or complete every task.

The research question or hypotheses to be tested:

1. How do principals of effective, elementary schools describe their experiences and views of typical leadership behavior?
2. What are the characteristics of elementary school principals with the highest percentage of students with SLD, who have demonstrated proficiency in reading, as measured by FCAT 2.0?
3. What is the essence of effective elementary school leadership?

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BENEFIT FOR ORANGE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

All research approved must have a specific benefit to the students, teachers and/or administrators of Orange County Public Schools. Please describe in detail how this research project directly benefits the district.

Because the subgroup, "Students with Disabilities," is the lowest performing subgroup in OCPS, based on data reported in the Annual Measurable Objectives report, the district has a vested interest in identifying the factors associated with student proficiency.

This research will attempt to define the key competencies needed for leadership success, thereby, informing leadership development, and ultimately, student achievement. This research is intended to benefit Orange County Public Schools because the results can be used to define the critical competencies, leadership qualities and lived experiences of elementary principals where students with SLD demonstrate proficiency. These results could be used to prepare new principals, as in the Preparing New Principals Academy, or to support developing principals throughout the district.

ATTACH THE FOLLOWING ITEMS TO THIS FORM:

- A copy of your IRB approval (if available)
- (2) Two copies of your approved proposal, grant, or project
- All survey and/or interview instruments

ASSURANCE

Using the proposed procedures and instrument, I hereby agree to conduct research within the policies of Orange County Public Schools. Deviations from the approved procedures must be cleared through the Senior Director of Accountability, Research and Assessment. Reports and materials should be supplied when specified.

Requester's Signature *E. Theis* Date *12/16/14*

NOTE TO REQUESTER: When seeking approval at the school level, a copy of the entire Request Form, signed by the Senior Director, Accountability, Research, and Assessment, should be shown to the school principal who has the option to refuse participation depending upon any school circumstance or condition. The original Research Request Form is preferable to a faxed document.

APPROVAL STATUS



Approved: The research request was completed in full and the research meets all OCPS requirements. The following must be completed to meet security requirements before your research can begin:



Conditionally Approved: The research request contains one or more elements that must be clarified or are missing. However, the request has an opportunity to be approved if the following is completed:

Please make these changes within two weeks and resubmit the entire Request Form and supporting documents.



Rejected: The research request contains significant omissions and/or does not meet OCPS requirements. This research request has been rejected due to the following:

Signature of the Senior Director for Accountability, Research and Assessment

Tary Chen on behalf of Brandon McKelvey
Tary Chen

Date

2/5/15

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