

LEADERSHIP STYLES OF PRINCIPALS  
IN SUCCESSFUL TITLE I ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

A DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION  
BY  
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BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

MUNCIE, INDIANA

MAY 2016

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BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

MUNCIE, INDIANA

MAY 2016

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandfather, William Redmayne, whom I never met. His love and dedication to perfection in my mother Dana McClanahan created the ideal model of a leader and educator whom I strive to emulate.

## ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: Leadership Styles of Principals in Successful Title I Elementary Schools

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The problem addressed in the dissertation is the relationship between high poverty and low academic achievement that persists in spite of efforts to change it. In one Western state, a small proportion of the schools that are eligible for Title I funds, a measure of poverty, have achieved recognition for high student achievement. The recognition, indicated by state-mandated standardized test scores, consists of earning the state's Academic Achievement Award (AAA). The role of the principal and his or her leadership style may influence and impact student achievement in Title I schools. The ability of the principal to unite teachers, staff, parents, and the community to enable students to rise above poverty and achieve academically is addressed in this phenomenological case study. To understand their leadership styles, 10 principals of AAA-designated, Title I, elementary schools in three counties in the state were interviewed and their documents reviewed. The analysis of the interviews through a coding process revealed 16 first-level codes that were then aggregated into three themes: Interactions/Relationships, Principals' Strivings, and Characterization of Leadership Style. The codes and themes were then applied to the research questions and yielded answers on the following topics: opportunities and challenges of leading Title I schools, leadership style, activities and behaviors of the principal that lead to student achievement, and attributions for student success. From the results of this study, it is

clear that award-winning school leaders are not identical. Overall, these principals tended to exhibit several positive leadership characteristics including attention to school climate, involvement in data-driven practices, and intentional data-driven decision making in their instructional leadership practices. The results also suggested that the principals of AAA-designated, Title I elementary schools in the state characterized their leadership styles primarily as situational, transformational, transactional, and open or participatory. Transactional leadership requires administrative precision; a school in chaos cannot thrive. To achieve student success, principals cited interactions and relationships as important across the board. In addition, they did not restrict these interactions and relationships to only one group, but to all constituents including teachers, students, staff, parents, and community members. The principals were also all involved in “progressive success making”; that is, they made sure that everything from the safety of the students to the cleanliness of the school to the high quality of instruction to the smile on the face of the office secretary was designed to be positive and would incrementally lead to student academic—and social—success. Finally, a number of people recall school as a punitive environment where punishments were meted out for a variety of infractions, and academic failure led to future failure and a lifelong lack of self-esteem. These principals agreed that their schools would not be about being bad, but would be only about being good, positive, supportive, and successful in academic and social situations. These findings have implications for principal leadership especially in low socioeconomic status, Title I, and low-achieving schools and for future research in the field of educational leadership.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

#### **Background**

The American mass public education has long been praised and criticized. While the sheer enormity of the enterprise is praiseworthy, the fact that students complete high school unable to read causes concern. Repeatedly, research and test data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have shown a relationship between academic achievement and poverty: High poverty is generally associated with low academic achievement. More recent studies have suggested that this relationship does not always occur and have cited numerous reasons that some children of low socioeconomic status (SES) achieve (Milne & Plourde, 2006). One such reason may be school leadership.

“The job description of a school principal cannot be adequately described” in brief (Habegger, 2008, p. 42). The reason is that the principal of a school typically holds the roles of instructional leader, budget manager, and personnel coordinator. Among other responsibilities, the principal schedules the classes and the extracurricular activities, acts as a liaison to parents and the community, and tries to know and understand students. Within the last 12 years with the advent of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), enacted in 2001, principals have to demonstrate accountability through high-stakes testing, showing their students can achieve at the expected levels. As part of NCLB, schools have had to meet annual yearly progress (AYP) goals that, for many low-SES schools in particular, may have been far out of reach.

Title I is a program, embedded in the amended Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, that “provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and

schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, para. 1). To qualify for Title I funds, a school in the Western state<sup>1</sup> where this study was undertaken has to meet poverty guidelines set by the State Department of Education. In this state, the Department of Education has instituted a special recognition program for Title I schools that achieve stellar progress as noted by standardized test scores. Few schools have gained this recognition, the Academic Achievement Award (AAA) Program for Title I Schools, reinforcing the relationship between poverty and academic achievement (State Department of Education, 2013b). The ability of the principal to unite teachers, staff, parents, and the community to enable students to rise above poverty and achieve academically will be addressed in this study.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem addressed in the dissertation is the relationship between high poverty and low academic achievement that persists in spite of efforts to change it. Title I schools are evidence of high poverty, and the AAA designation in this state is a demonstration of high academic achievement. Some Title I schools have been able to gain the AAA designation, while others have not. The role of the principal and his or her leadership style may influence and impact student achievement in Title I schools.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological case study is to explore the leadership style of principals whose Title I schools have achieved the AAA designation. For a more cohesive study, only elementary school principals in three counties within this state were invited to participate.

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<sup>1</sup> To ensure confidentiality, the state in the Western United States used in this study is referred to as “State” either with or without a capital letter or “Western state.” The three counties will be given the pseudonyms “Blue,” “Green,” and “Purple.”

The results of this study may help principals to examine their own leadership style to better understand what works for leading schools to improve student achievement, especially in low-SES schools.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this exploration of principals' leadership styles in successful Title I elementary schools in the subject state:

1. What features of a Title I elementary school are identified by their principals as posing unique professional opportunities and challenges for a leader of that school?
2. How do principals of successful Title I elementary schools characterize and describe their own leadership styles?
3. What are the activities and behaviors principals of successful Title I elementary schools use on a day-to-day basis that appear to influence student success?
4. To what do principals of successful Title I schools attribute their success?

### **Significance of the Study**

Poverty and low student achievement go hand in hand. High-stakes testing and AYP have reinforced the reality of that relationship. In fact, Sean F. Reardon (2011), in an extensive study of the gap between rich and poor students in schools, noted that the gap has widened dramatically over the last 50 years. Moreover, according to Reardon, the Black-White gap that was evident before 1970 has now shifted to a rich-poor gap, demonstrating a causal relationship of poverty connected to low achievement. Further, "the income achievement gap is large when children enter kindergarten and does not appear to grow (or narrow) appreciably as children progress through school" (p. 1). In addition, parents' income enables them to provide additional cognitive development resources to move their children forward, opportunities unavailable to

children of low-income parents. Finally, parents' level of education, previously thought to predict academic achievement, and family income are now equal predictors of academic achievement (Reardon, 2011).

As states and the federal government continue to require school accountability measured by high-stakes test scores, principals, especially at the elementary (K-5) level, who lead low-SES schools need to understand the influence and impact of their leadership on student achievement in order to promote the type of leadership behaviors and strategies that help lead a school to high academic achievement. The research on principal leadership style has suggested that the leadership style of the principal promotes a positive school climate that results in all facets of school success, most notably student test scores. Trait, authoritative, participatory, transformational, and situational leadership styles, for example, may or may not influence school climate and lead to student success in high-poverty schools. This research will explore the leadership style of principals whose low-SES, Title I elementary schools were deemed by the State Department of Education to be successful, as evidenced by their achievement of AAA status. The results of this study may shed light on the topic and enable less successful elementary school principals to consider how they are leading their schools.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms, defined here, will be used consistently throughout the study:

**Academic Achievement Award:** The Academic Achievement Award (AAA) is a designation awarded to Title I schools that meet AYP for 2 or more years as Title I schools or “significantly close the achievement gap among numerically significant subgroups” (State Department of Education, 2013b, para. 1).

**Academic Performance Index (API):** According to the State Department of Education's Analysis, Measurement, and Accountability Reporting Division (n.d.),

The API is a single number, ranging from a low of 200 to a high of 1000, which reflects a school's, an LEA's, or a student group's performance level, based on the results of statewide assessments. Its purpose is to measure the academic performance and improvement of schools. The state has set 800 as the API target for all schools to meet. Schools that fall short of 800 are required to meet annual growth targets until that goal is achieved. API targets vary for each school and student group.

The API is calculated by converting a student's performance on statewide assessments across multiple content areas into points on the API scale. These points are then averaged across all students and all tests. The result is the API. An API is calculated for schools, LEAs, and for each student group with 11 or more valid scores at a school or an LEA. (p. 1)

School APIs are used to meet state requirements under state and federal laws to demonstrate participation and growth rates. API is one factor of several strict criteria in determining the AAA designation.

**Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP):** First defined in 1994 with the reauthorization of the ESEA, "Adequate yearly progress (AYP) is the measure by which schools, districts, and states are held accountable for student performance under Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001" (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2011, para. 1). AYP standards are determined at the state level, and students in grades 3-8 and during 1 year of high school are annually tested to see if students and subgroups of students are meeting expected state standards (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2011).

**Elementary school:** This term has been used over time to define a variety of school configurations that might range anywhere from Pre-K-Grade 8 to grades 1-3. The configuration of the school may change the leadership style required for the environment. The federal government left the definition of elementary school to the states (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The State Department of Education (2013a) has defined public and private schools, but has not defined elementary schools. For the present study, elementary schools will be those defined as such by their names, school districts, and principals.

**Leadership style:** According to Leadership-Toolbox.com (2008), the term *leadership style* refers to the ways a leader conducts, views, perceives, and accomplishes his or her role and relationships with others. Kouzes and Posner (2007) identified the following seven considerations that constitute leadership style: (a) what leaders do and what constituents expect, (b) model the way, (c) inspire a shared vision, (d) challenge the process, (e) enable others to act, (f) encourage the heart, and (g) leadership for everyone. For example, authoritative, participatory, transformational, trait, and situational leadership styles may or may not influence school climate and lead to student success in high-poverty schools.

**Leadership theory:** a set of underlying assumptions regarding a leader used for the purpose of conducting research or explaining the concept of leadership (IAAP, 2009).

**Principal:** “is responsible for all aspects of school administration including supervision and evaluation of staff, fiscal responsibility, student discipline and safety, supervision and evaluation of curriculum, and assessment of academic achievement and school accountability” (State Department of Education, 2013a, para. 5).

**Title I:** A part of the ESEA, as amended in 1976, *Title I* was named in 1965 as Financial Assistance to Local Educational Agencies for the Education of Children of Low-Income

Families. Part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's so-called War on Poverty, the goal of Title I was to level the playing field for low-income students by providing parity funds to schools to provide whatever was needed to increase academic achievement. The legislation has also been termed *Title 1* (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the impetus for this study including the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and its significance. Research questions were stated, and key words were defined. In the next chapter, the literature on the topic of low-SES and student achievement, high-achieving schools, leadership theories and styles, and the impact and influence of the principal on student achievement is reviewed.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this phenomenological case study is to explore the leadership style of principals whose Title I elementary schools have achieved the Academic Achievement Award (AAA) designation, indicating high student academic achievement as measured by state-mandated standardized test scores. For a more cohesive study, only elementary school principals were invited to participate. The results of this study may help principals to examine their own leadership style to better understand what works for leading schools to improve student achievement, especially in low-SES schools.

The following research questions guided this exploration of principals' leadership styles in successful Title I elementary schools in one Western state:

1. What features of a Title I elementary school are identified by their principals as posing unique professional opportunities and challenges for a leader of that school?
2. How do principals of successful Title I elementary schools characterize and describe their own leadership styles?
3. What are the activities and behaviors principals of successful Title I elementary schools use on a day-to-day basis that appear to influence student success?
4. To what do principals of successful Title I schools attribute their success?

Based on the purpose of this inquiry and the research questions, this literature review will cover the following topics: (a) Title I, (b) the AAA designation, (c) the relationship between poverty and student achievement, (d) effective school leadership, (e) challenges of leading Title I schools, (f) leadership theory and principal leadership styles, and (g) the impact of the principal

on student achievement. First, however, is a discussion of the theoretical framework to be used for analyzing the results of the study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Discovering a theoretical foundation for principals' leadership style constituted a challenge because the majority of the literature (i.e., Bulach, Boothe, & Pickett, 2006) presented quantitative measures of leadership behaviors that were assessed by teachers rather than reported by the principals themselves. Moreover, the tool developed by Bulach et al. has 49 behaviors. The search for this study was for something that would represent the voices of the participants; therefore, the holistic leadership model developed by social worker Julie Orlov (2003) was selected as the theoretical framework for this study.

The holistic leadership model expects the leader to understand people and lead them, while simultaneously understanding himself or herself; thus, the holistic leader has the perspective of the intra- and inter-actions between and among all constituents in his or her environment. Orlov (2003) defined holistic leadership as:

- (a) Being able to lead from the mind, the heart, and the soul;
- (b) To apply a methodology that encompasses a developmental systemic approach in order to impact oneself as leader, others as followers, and the environment; and
- (c) Lastly, this process should reflect a journey that leads toward transformation at the individual, team, and organizational/community levels. (p. 1)

The holistic leadership model draws upon the work on situational leadership of Hersey and Blanchard (1988) and systems thinking of Senge (1990). According to Orlov (2003), "Holistic leadership, when channeled through situational and systems models, journeys towards transformation at three levels: the individual, the team, and the organization" (p. 6). Holistic

leadership is therefore consistent with situational leadership, transformational leadership, and effective schools research on principal effectiveness.

### **Title I**

Title I was enacted in 1965 as a part of the first ESEA. This part of the ESEA was an attempt by President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty to level the playing field for low-income students by providing funds to schools to pay for academic supports. Title I defined those supports as either school-wide or targeted to specific at-risk students (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The State Department of Education (2013b) reported that Title I is the largest federally funded K-12 program in the state, serving 6,000 of the state's 9,000 schools. In addition, under NCLB, schools that accepted Title I funds and failed to meet AYP were placed in a "Program Improvement" status that had financial sanctions; therefore, Title I funding was not automatic based on poverty alone.

The question regarding the success of Title I programming in reducing the academic achievement gap for disadvantaged students cannot be answered easily. To this end, Stillwell-Parvensky (2011) conducted a study for the Children's Defense Fund. She defined Title I as a "funding mechanism rather than a clearly defined program" (p. 4); therefore, the impact of Title I as a program cannot be measured. In addition, comparing test results of Title I recipients with those of non-Title I recipients would be inadequate because such students differ primarily on the key aspect of poverty that affects test scores. As a result, determining the direct impact of Title I funds on student test scores, the most common measurement of academic achievement, is not possible. Consequently, despite more than 45 years of data collection regarding the potential impact of Title I funds and programming, no definitive answer is available (Stillwell-Parvensky, 2011).

As Stillwell-Parvensky (2011) was maintaining the inability of measuring the success of Title I, the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences commissioned Mathematica Policy Research to conduct a study entitled *Impacts of Title I Supplemental Educational Services on Student Achievement* (Deke, Dragoset, Bogen, & Gill, 2012). In this study, the researchers analyzed Supplemental Educational Services in six school districts in three states that were fiscally able to offer Supplemental Educational Services to some, but not all eligible students as required by NCLB. The goal of the research was to predict "potential benefits of offering [Supplemental Educational Services] in districts that have unmet need" (p. xiii). The authors claimed that this was the first study, through a regression discontinuity design, that was able to determine cause-and-effect of receiving such Supplemental Educational Services through Title I funding. The method used was to check participating students' post-services test scores with those of students who missed the cutoff for Supplemental Educational Services by scoring slightly too high. Deke et al. found that receipt of Supplemental Educational Services and failure to receive Supplemental Educational Services had no impact on student achievement.

Matsudaira, Hosek, and Walsh (2012) also used a regression discontinuity design to assess the effects of Title I on student achievement in one large urban school district. The authors found no impact of students' receipt of Title I services on their test scores at the school level. In addition, Matsudaira et al. discovered no impact on test scores among student populations typically the target of Title I funds—low-SES students generally. Matsudaira et al. also found that schools manipulate free lunch eligibility by altering the reported number of students signed up in order to receive more Title I funding; however, they also noted that the net increase in revenue to schools receiving Title I funds is only about 4% of budget.

In her doctoral dissertation on the impact of Title I-funded services, Herrin (2010) similarly found minimal impact of such services on student achievement. Her study was longitudinal over 3 years and quantitative. Herrin learned that in the second year of the 3-year study, low-SES and Hispanic students who received Title I services scored higher on standardized testing in language arts than their peer groups who did not receive such federally funded services. This finding offers hope for a positive measurable impact of Title I services.

### **AAA Designation**

ESEA required states to establish recognition programs for Title I schools that met AYP for at least 2 consecutive years and/or significantly reduced the achievement gap in targeted groups of students. The Western state that is the subject of this study instituted a AAA program that recognizes Title I schools that have met AYP for at least 2 consecutive years and were eligible for Title I funds based on a minimum of a 40% poverty rate during that time (State Department of Education, 2013c). To celebrate the AAA achievement, the state superintendent of public instruction awards the designation at a ceremony held annually for all eligible schools. Funding for the award and the ceremony are provided by educational organizations and interested corporations throughout the state. One Distinguished Award is presented by the National Association of State Title I Directors to the school that made the most gains in closing the achievement gap for the students it serves. For the 2010-2011 school year, 207 schools earned the AAA designation; in 2011-2012, 117 schools; in 2012-2013, 56 schools. This very small percentage and declining number of eligible Title I schools designated AAA supports the need for the present study on the relationship between elementary school principal leadership style and student achievement so school leaders can consider a revision of their leadership style and/or practices to best encourage high achievement.

**The Relationship Between Poverty, Race or Ethnicity,  
and Student Achievement**

To set the stage for a discussion of the relationship between poverty and student achievement, Table 1 offers national and state population data from the United States Census Bureau (2014). With 12.1% of the nation's population, this Western state has a slightly higher proportion of children under 18 years old, a smaller proportion of persons who are White or Black, and more than twice the proportion of Hispanics. Further, the proportion of high school graduates is lower, but the proportion of college graduates is higher by 2%. Finally, this Western state has a slightly higher proportion of persons living in poverty than the national average. The higher proportion of Hispanics and persons living in poverty suggests possible problems with student academic achievement.

Children cannot control the families into which they are born. "The socioeconomic status of a child's parents has always been one of the strongest predictors of the child's academic achievement and educational attainment" (Reardon, 2011, p. 3). In 1966, the Coleman Report (as cited in Reardon, 2011) identified the relationship between poverty, race or ethnicity, and academic achievement; this finding led to the establishment of the Head Start preschool program. Subsequent decades of research, according to Reardon, have focused on trying to figure out exactly why this relationship exists and persists, but the studies, usually sociological in nature, have failed to identify specific biological, educational, or policy "causes" (Reardon, 2011, p. 3) of the relationship between poverty and poor academic achievement.

Table 1

*United States and Western State Census Data*

Data element	United States	Western state
Population	316,128,839	xxx
< 18 years old	23.5%	24.3%
White only	77.9%	73.7%
Black only	13.1%	6.6%
Hispanic any race	16.9%	38.2%
High school graduate	85.7%	81.0%
Bachelor's degree or above	28.5%	30.5%
Below poverty level	14.9%	15.3%

### **High-Poverty High-Performing 90/90/90 Schools**

Douglas B. Reeves (2003) defined high-performing high-poverty schools as “90/90/90” (p. 1). This definition means that at least 90% of students in a given school receive free or reduced-price lunch, a definition of poverty; at least 90% of students are minority; and at least 90% of students demonstrate academic achievement in reading and/or mathematics as evidenced by state-mandated test scores. Reeves claimed the belief that poverty, minority status, and poor academic achievement are synonymous is not a given; therefore, programs and pedagogies must exist that lead schools to be defined as 90/90/90.

In a study of more than 200 90/90/90 schools, Reeves (2003) noted that five common characteristics emerged: (a) academic achievement focus, (b) curriculum choices, (c) many opportunities for student progress evaluation and improvement, (d) emphasis on nonfiction writing, and (e) collaborative scoring of students' work (p. 3). In addition, a walk-through of a 90/90/90 school provided the observer in a study discussed by Reeves a look at an abundance of student work everywhere from graphs indicating school-wide progress to science projects to students' essays, exemplifying Reeves' contention that 90/90/90 schools exhibit specific

characteristics. Further, the emphasis throughout the school was on improvement in specific areas, especially literacy, and no consistent specialized program was used from school to school; however, improvement goals tended to be direct and limited, and students who needed additional instruction might receive as many as 3 extra hours of literacy instruction each day, for example. This emphasis on direct goals differed, according to Reeves, from many schools in need of improvement that offer plans with generalized improvement goals in many areas rather than one or two goals in very specific subjects such as literacy, mathematics, or writing. Instead of covering all subjects equally, 90/90/90 schools emphasized reading, writing, and mathematics and achieved success in science and social studies as a result as well because the basics are a foundation for all fields of academic endeavor.

Assessment in 90/90/90 schools involved a two-pronged approach (Reeves, 2003). First, assessment was weekly, and students were encouraged to improve the subsequent week. In other schools, assessment occurred, but the teacher then moved to the next topic of study, not allowing the student to try again. Second, in 90/90/90 schools, most assessment was through writing rather than through oral, forced-choice, or single-answer responses. This practice required students to think and to apply the reading and writing skills they had acquired, thus enabling teachers to know where improvements were needed so that they could direct their teaching accordingly. Additionally, expectations for high-quality writing are made clear in all areas of study through the use of common rubrics in 90/90/90 schools.

One finding regarding 90/90/90 schools (Reeves, 2003) specifically related to the present study is the use of sources other than the classroom teacher for evaluating writing. In some cases, in fact, the principal took responsibility for reading and assessing papers. Further, most 90/90/90 schools did not use proprietary programs; instead, they used teachers' capabilities and teaching

techniques to achieve stellar results. Finally, techniques used in 90/90/90 schools are, according to Reeves, persistent, replicable, and consistent; therefore, any school, in theory at least, can become a 90/90/90 school.

If Reeves (2003) is correct that any school can become a 90/90/90 school, then his research supports the present study. The belief in the present study is that the principal's leadership style in successful Title I schools somehow makes a difference in the achievement of that success. The task, then, is to identify those activities and behaviors of the principal in the successful Title I elementary schools that suggest a specific leadership style. Another hope is that the principal himself or herself is able to identify his or her own leadership style and is consciously able to apply that leadership style to the conduct of the work of the school, thereby achieving success as evidenced by AAA recognition.

### **Evidence-Based and Data-Driven Reform in Education**

As evidenced in 90/90/90 schools, the close examination and explicit control of what data are produced are essential in education reform. Cordeiro and Cunningham (2013) provided a chapter on school reform movements and noted that evidence-based educational reform is most exemplified in data-driven instructional requirements. The authors noted a number of comprehensive school reform (CSR) programs that have sought to improve instruction and learning at the classroom and school levels. In very large school districts, such as the one in which this author is employed, reform movements are rampant throughout hundreds of schools, and success varies. Further, the research on such programs, while ubiquitous, may be tainted by the funding source or the authors of the studies who may also have been among the creators of the program. Studies of Slavin's Success for All program, for example, most often have Slavin as a coauthor (Slavin & Madden, n.d.; Success for All Foundation, 2012).

Programs are often based in the philosophy or beliefs of the developer regarding how children learn or which learners should be targeted. Three widespread CSR programs are Success for All, the Accelerated Schools Project, and America's Choice. The Accelerated Schools Project, offered at the K-8 level, was designed more than 20 years ago by Henry M. Levin, then a professor at Stanford University, in the belief that at-risk students can learn at the same pace as students who are academically gifted. Success for All, a Pre-K-8 program, emphasizes reading and literacy through components involving a scripted curriculum, cooperative learning, family involvement and support, and tutoring as well as via school restructuring (Cordeiro & Cunningham, 2013). The America's Choice program began in 1998, the product of a nonprofit agency called the National Center on Education and the Economy that evolved into America's Choice, Inc., a for-profit organization, in 2004 (Toch, 2005). The America's Choice CSR design "features research-based teaching strategies, a 2½-hour daily literacy block at the primary school level, in-school math and literacy coaches and a safety-net system for struggling students that includes double-period courses in literacy and math" (para. 3). The CSR programs are often funded by Title I (Toch, 2005).

In an important piece of research, Borman, Hewes, Overman, and Brown (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of 33 CSR programs active before 2002. The significance of this study was that among the factors considered in the meta-analysis were the authors of the studies—program developers or third party. Based on the analysis, the following three programs were deemed to have the strongest evidence of effectiveness: (a) Association for Direct Instruction, based on specified lessons aimed at specific skills (Cordeiro & Cunningham, 2013); (b) School Development Program, a character development program emphasizing student-adult relationships in K-8 (Cordeiro & Cunningham, 2013); and (c) Success for All. Two of the most

popular programs, Accelerated Schools and America's Choice, were determined to show "promising evidence of effectiveness" (p. 29). One comment about Success for All was the overpresence of developer research and the limited amount of third-party research; however, little significant difference was found between the two types of studies.

Correnti and Rowan (2007) examined the effectiveness of CSR programs from a different perspective, adopting the perspective of methods of literacy instruction. For their study, Correnti and Rowan looked at the three "most widely disseminated" (p. 298) CSR programs: (a) Accelerated Schools, (b) America's Choice, and (c) Success for All. The researchers found some differences in instruction with America's Choice and Success for All and noted the importance of fidelity to a program's requirements and guidelines. In addition, on-site facilitation from the program's source assists in achieving program fidelity, thereby improving instruction.

The concept of CSR has been reframed as data-driven decision making (DDDM) in education from the student through the district level (Marsh, Pane, & Hamilton, 2006). Although data may come from a variety of sources, in education, the data most often refer to classroom, school-wide, or standardized high-stakes test scores (Marsh et al., 2006). Consequently, DDDM places a heavy burden on school leaders in their decision-making process regarding student and school achievement, especially in low-SES schools and districts. Unfortunately, Marsh et al. noted that research on DDDM had not addressed student achievement as of that time.

Data-driven decisions and processes are aimed at accountability at all levels and are based on business practices such as Total Quality Management, a Japanese design popular in the 1980s (Marsh et al., 2006). The use of outcome data in education also has a long history; however, the concept of DDDM has risen to popularity since its inclusion in NCLB as standards-based accountability that was tied to funds. In their discussion of DDDM, Marsh et al. included a

conceptual framework, depicted in Figure 1. In this framework, four types of data—input, process, outcome, and satisfaction—become information that, in turn, results in actionable knowledge. Six types of decisions result: (a) Set and assess progress toward goals, (b) Address individual or group needs, (c) Evaluate effectiveness of practices, (d) Assess whether client needs are being met, (e) Reallocate resources in reaction to outcomes, and (f) Enhance processes to improve outcomes (p. 3). This data-driven approach can function at the classroom, school, or district level. Because DDDM is required currently from the federal level, it is an important consideration in the present study of the leadership style of principals of Title I schools, a federally funded program. Knowing how these principals use data in their decision making may provide useful insights into their success.

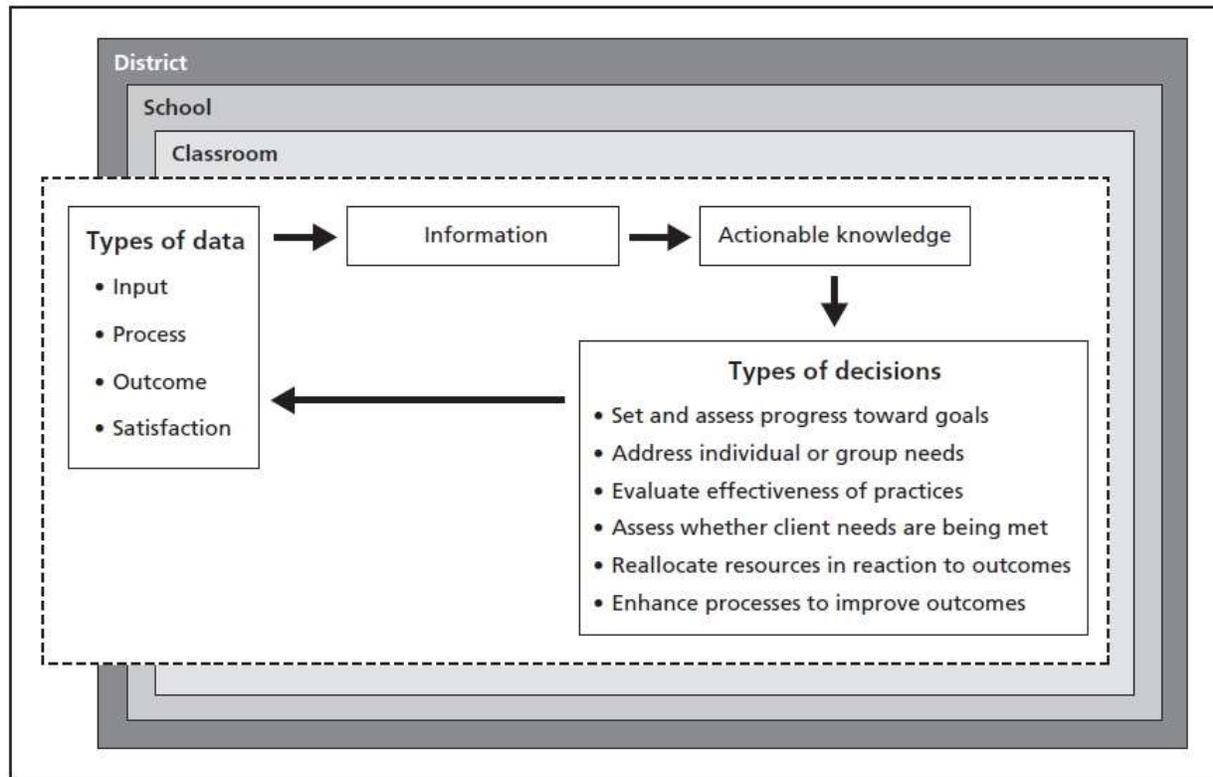
### **Low Socioeconomic Status and Student Achievement**

The prevailing belief is that a direct correlation exists between academic achievement and low SES as evidenced in a study by Caldas and Bankston (1997). A study that took a different perspective on the achievement of low-SES students was conducted by Milne and Plourde (2006). These authors wanted to know why some of their low-SES students succeeded academically while others did not. To this end, Milne and Plourde conducted a qualitative study with six of their primary-grade students and found that their homes were not typical of low-SES environments. In the homes of these poor, but achieving students, educational materials were available, time was set aside for school studies, and an adult was always present to assist the child.

The Western state that is the target of this study faces issues of low-SES and minority students. The research on the relationship between poverty, race, and student achievement revealed two important pieces of information. First, a correlation is evident in the data between

poverty, race or ethnicity, and low academic achievement (Reardon, 2011). Second, this correlation does not have to be a determinant; that is, high-poverty schools can evidence student academic achievement through a combination of teacher quality and excellent school leadership (Reeves, 2003). Additionally, evidence supports the home environment as an important factor in low-SES student academic success (Milne & Plourde, 2006).

#### Conceptual Framework of Data-Driven Decision Making in Education



*Figure 1.* Conceptual framework of data-driven decision making in education. Adapted from “Making Sense of Data-Driven Decision Making in Education,” by J. A. Marsh, J. F. Pane, and L. S. Hamilton, p. 3. Copyright 2006 by RAND.

### **Effective School Leadership**

The leadership of a public elementary school most often falls to the principal (Simmons, 2010; Villareal, 2001). The effectiveness of the principal, or school leader, determines everything from teacher job satisfaction and effectiveness to school climate to parent and community support to student achievement (Villareal, 2001). The discussion in this literature review relates to effective elementary school leadership in low-SES schools, especially in conjunction with the effects of leadership on student achievement.

In 2013, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) combined their efforts in the release of report entitled *Leadership Matters: What the Research Says About the Importance of Principal Leadership*. NASSP and NAESP began by recounting the multifaceted responsibilities of the school principal that range from being visionaries to budget analysts to educational leaders and more. Acknowledgment of this range of demands on the school principal, the authors argued, is long overdue. The bottom line, however, appears to be that collaboration among the principal, the teachers, the staff, the students, and all other school constituencies makes the difference in the link between principal leadership and student learning, for it is the principal as leader who pulls all the school variables together.

The Wallace Foundation (2011), which investigates school leadership issues, noted the following five main functions of principal leadership which must interact with one another in order to be successful:

- Shaping a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards.
- Creating a climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail.

- Cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision.
- Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost.
- Managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement. (p. 4)

In addition, school principals, especially of low-SES schools, who view their role as transformative rather than static, develop a collaborative vision, make change happen, and create a school culture where teachers can teach and children can learn (NASSP & NAESP, 2013).

Leaders are in a position to find and give free rein to the underlying potential available within the school. As a case in point, Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) reported that only the quality of classroom instruction supersedes school leadership as a factor in student achievement, although Milne and Plourde (2006) also found home factors to be critical in achievement of low-SES students. How leadership affects student learning has been studied extensively, but often as a simple list of the principal's responsibilities and behaviors. In their research on principal leadership for the Wallace Foundation, Louis et al. (2010) defined leadership this way: "Leadership is all about organizational improvement; more specifically, it is about establishing agreed-upon and worthwhile directions for the organization in question, and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in those directions" (pp. 9-10). Leadership is gaining buy-in and doing what is right in the right way, whatever that may be for the situation.

Through a meta-analysis, Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) found a relationship between principal leadership behaviors and student achievement. One important behavior was the ability of the principal to identify current and possible problems and address them before the

issues got out of hand. One chronic problem is attracting, supporting, and retaining excellent teachers; therefore, a high-quality principal who knows what he or she is doing in terms of hiring, supporting, and retaining teachers becomes a critical factor in principal selection. Further, research has found (as cited in NASSP & NAESP, 2013) that supportive leadership is the most important factor identified by teachers regarding their retention in their positions and, for that matter, in the teaching profession.

Researchers agree about the role of principals as instructional leaders; however, over time, the concept of instructional leader appears to have shifted (NASSP & NAESP, 2013). Historically, the principal was viewed primarily as an instructional leader and manager of a school, but the role of instructional leader has expanded to include an emphasis on how that leader spends his or her personal and on-the-job time, and the research has also expanded to explore other aspects of the leader's life, leadership style, and focus. For instance, if students, teachers, and staff need a safe place in which to learn, the principal's focus might be on budget for security personnel, procedures for lockdowns and other hazards, or danger awareness. In other words, the shift has gone from just instructional support to administrative support as well (Blase, Blase, & Phillips, 2010).

In a study of the relationship between effective schools research and principals of high-performing low-SES schools, Suber (2011) contended that school principals demonstrate success through close physical and psychological involvement with classroom instruction and student learning. Suber sought to learn the characteristics of principals of the very few high-performing high-poverty elementary schools in urban and rural South Carolina; no effort was made to connect this finding to principal leadership style. His theoretical foundation for this study was effective schools research that supports the concentration of school leaders on two factors:

school improvement and student learning. Characteristics common to leaders of effective schools regardless of the students' SES include the following: (a) "alignment of instruction, (b) supervision of teacher behavior and student achievement, (c) professional development, and (d) a positive school culture" (p. 2). Leaders of effective schools, Suber also asserted in connecting effective school leaders to their leadership styles generally, exemplify transformational leadership.

The current phenomenological study examines principal leadership styles of successful Title I elementary schools in one Western state and asks four research questions directly related to the principals and their leadership styles. Suber (2011) had only one research question for his grounded theory case study of two exemplary high-poverty high-performing elementary schools in South Carolina: "What are the leadership characteristics of principals who promote student achievement in high-poverty, high-performing elementary schools?" (p. 3). Exploring the characteristics of principals through the effective schools research lens, Suber assessed principals' effectiveness on the following factors: "(1) instruction and assessment, (2) supervision of teacher behaviors and student achievement, (3) professional development, (4) teacher attrition, and (5) school culture" (p. 5). Using a mixed-methods approach, Suber surveyed teachers to discover each school's climate and culture, observed interactions and processes in each school to determine their impact on student achievement, and interviewed principals about their day-to-day activities, one similarity to the present study. Suber found that the effective schools characteristics were present both in schools and in the common factors of "teacher empowerment, relationships, and setting the example for all stakeholders" (p. 13); these were apparent along with visible team effort and collaboration. These characteristics along with

shared accountability combined for student success that was evident in the awards received by both schools.

Despite this more recent evidence that effective schools characteristics included developing relationships, empowering teachers, and setting the example for all stakeholders, in 1966, a controversial and influential study, the Coleman Report, was published by the U.S. government. Under the title *Equality of Educational Opportunity Study*, this investigation of a large population of students and teachers was mandated by the Civil Rights Act, resulting only in a loose link between student performance and school quality. Additional findings were that socioeconomic background was a far more influential factor in academic success; therefore, one of the most important things a school can do to ensure student success is to provide students with quality teachers (Coleman, 1966).

In an attempt to ensure that high quality teachers are provided to students, Obama's Race to the Top competitive funding program links student achievement to teacher evaluations, creating a definitive correlation between teacher performance and student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Flowers and Hancock (2003) illustrated that political perception links teachers to student achievement, thus creating pressure on the school and administrators for high student performance (p. 161). Additionally, if schools fail to meet accountability standards, the school's principal is held accountable to the local, state, or federal government. Further, as Bulris (2009) pointed out in his meta-analysis of research on effect size of principals on student achievement, student success is connected most to effective teaching. According to studies by Vecchio (1987) and Northouse (2004), principal leadership style has minimal effect on the performance of experienced teachers; therefore, the effect of a principal on

the academic achievement of students is often mitigated by the number of less experienced teachers on staff. Bulris (2009) cited the following research:

Although research shows that principal leadership is correlated with student achievement (Hallinger et al., 1996; Hallinger & Heck, 1996, 1997; Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters et al., 2003), research has found few direct impacts of principal leadership on student achievement. Rather, the majority of research reveals that principal leadership impacts student achievement through indirect or mediating factors (Hallinger et al., 1996; Hallinger & Heck, 1996, 1997; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson, 2007). (p. 7)

In summary, the job of the principal is to create an effective school. The principal, however, depending upon the school district, may be one of many district principals or the only principal in a district comprised of only one school. Much of society places the responsibility of student achievement on the principal of the school, while Race to the Top (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) pushes to hold teachers directly accountable for student achievement. Many challenges of achieving and maintaining high achievement in a Title I school overlap regardless of the type of school and include instructional leadership, discipline, budget, personnel, public relations, and other administrative responsibilities. In a time of administrative accountability, principals face an array of challenges, especially if they lead low-SES and/or low-performing schools, but the research is not clear on how directly the principal's leadership style affects success of students.

### **Challenges of Leading Title I Schools**

By definition, the majority of students in Title I schools are poor and minority (low-SES). Before NCLB, such schools faced a number of challenges; after NCLB, accountability for student achievement was added with the threat that the principal could be fired or reassigned if

the students failed to demonstrate the required improvement. Villarreal (2001), in his research in association with the Intercultural Development Research Association, identified the following 13 distinct challenges to low-performing schools, especially those with large proportions of non-English speakers:

1. school climate;
2. establishment and nurturing of human relationships among all school constituencies;
3. opportunities for collaborative lesson and unit planning and curriculum design;
4. professional development on effective teaching strategies;
5. recruitment of competent, sensitive, capable teachers;
6. guidance and mentoring for teachers new to the profession and/or to the school;
7. determination of community and family assets and integrate them into instruction;
8. innovative and flexibility in instructional design;
9. a challenging, intellectually enriching curriculum;
10. horizontal and vertical curriculum alignment through scaffolding;
11. programs that capitalize on the community's linguistic strengths;
12. delivery of grade-level content to all students; and
13. fostering of biliteracy and content acquisition.

Villarreal also looked at how principals can use their leadership styles to overcome the identified challenges. He selected the research of Bolman and Deal (1997) on the four sides of leadership to frame solutions for these challenges: (a) structural, (b) human resource, (c) political, and (d) symbolic leadership. Application and integration of these frames into their leadership styles helps school leaders build on their strengths.

Student success in any type of school requires a minimum set of practices to be performed by school leaders such as determining the direction of the curriculum, developing the people involved in the school, and redesigning the school itself, if necessary (Jacobson, 2008; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). High-poverty low-performing schools present seemingly insurmountable challenges because change must occur in performance. Jacobson (2008) found that the two most important strategies for turning around these schools are “creating safe learning environments and engaging greater community involvement” (p. 3). In addition, the principals from a multinational study investigated by Jacobson indicated a strong passion for making better the lives of low-SES students.

Developing a positive school climate can also be a challenge for principals of Title I schools. School climate is an umbrella term that encompasses many elements which relate to the way members of a school work together. A school’s climate is created as a result of the school administrator’s leadership style. Among these elements are the attitudes of principals and teachers that create an atmosphere for learning (Price, 2012). School climate is often described as being positive or negative and includes the internal characteristics of each school that influence the behavior of members and uniquely sets one school apart from another (Hoy & Hannum, 1997). The combination of these internal characteristics constitutes positive or negative climate and thus positively or negatively affects teacher job satisfaction, as school climate is a direct reflection of the leadership style of the school administrator. It is evident that the interactional relationship between a principal and teachers is important in maintaining a positive and satisfying working environment.

When the supervisory climate between principals and teachers was examined, a high positive climate was evident in schools with high positive supervisory scores; low climate

correlated with low supervisory scores (Bulach et al., 2006). The interactional relationship between a principal and teachers is therefore important in maintaining a positive and satisfying working environment.

Many teachers have reported that they derive job satisfaction from working with students in schools with a high academic climate where colleagues set goals, where teachers think children can learn and are orderly, and where teachers are serious and have a positive impact on achievement (Goddard, Sweetland, & Hoy, 2000). Teachers working in an academic climate at schools reported having a good administrator was important and was a motivating reason to stay in the classroom working with students (Marston, Courtney, & Brunetti, 2006). Moffitt's (2007) research demonstrated that a school with a positive academic climate has a principal who actively protects instruction time, is visible, and creates a path to student achievement. To reiterate, school climate is an umbrella term that encompasses many elements which relate to the way members of a school work together.

A school's climate is created as a result of the school administrator's leadership style. Among these elements are the attitudes of principals and teachers that create an atmosphere conducive to learning (Price, 2012). Principals can set up a positive milieu, culture, or instructional climate which supports teachers' professional learning, thus leading teachers to report high levels of instructional climate in high-performing schools (Seashore, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). A study of climate in schools in South Carolina, which included administrative support as an indicator of positive climate, found that schools with a more favorable climate did increasingly better on achievement tests than schools with a poor climate (Gareau et al., 2010). Additionally, teachers rated themselves as highly satisfied when they had high levels of support from an administrator (Cha, 2008), creating positive relationships; thus,

high morale has been reported when teachers and principals create a positive and participatory environment (Randolph-Robinson, 2009; Singh & Billingsley, 1998).

Research by Kelley, Thornton, and Daugherty (2005) reported that a positive climate is directly related to teacher perceptions of principal effectiveness, recognizing that a school has many sources of leadership. School principals are important, however, and they are generally the focus of the leadership. In addition, they affect achievement indirectly through the climate they attempt to emulate (Seashore et al., 2010). The principal's knowledge and understanding of the effects of the strategic use of leadership skills to affect the overall school climate and teacher job satisfaction positively is critical in cultivating the positive environment required for high student achievement and effective schools. The principal's leadership style therefore impacts school climate, which, in turn, influences student achievement.

### **Leadership Theory and Principal Leadership Styles**

Differentiating leadership theories from leadership styles is challenging. For instance, a Google search revealed nearly 3 million possible hits on the topic of differentiating the two; however, careful consideration of only the first 20 or so revealed that even the best matches did not understand the differentiation well. As a case in point, the International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP) at East Tennessee State University (2009) published an attempt at making this distinction in a presentation entitled *Leadership Theories and Styles*. The initial work on leadership theory was reported by IAAP to have begun with Frederick Taylor in the late 19th century. Further efforts were made to define leadership; by the 1930s, Chester Barnard defined leadership in a way that is still considered today: "The ability of a superior to influence the behavior of subordinates and persuade them to follow a particular course of action" (IAAP, 2009, p. 4). In the 1960s, leadership and power were studied together (IAAP, 2009).

IAAP (2009) listed the following leadership theories: (a) great man theory, (b) trait theory, (c) behavioral theories such as the managerial grid and theory X and theory Y, (d) participative leadership, (e) situational leadership, (f) contingency theory, (g) transactional leadership, and (h) transformational leadership (pp. 8-9). It is not until the discussion of participative leadership that the notion of style is presented, however (p. 19). Based on IAAP's description of participative leadership style, the concept of *leadership style* can be construed to consist of a skill set or a set of behaviors or activities exhibited by the leader in his or her role. In contrast, *leadership theory* can be interpreted to mean a set of underlying assumptions regarding a leader used for the purpose of conducting research or explaining the concept of leadership. Kurt Lewin (Lewin, Lippit, & White, 1939) was the first to identify and write about the following leadership styles: (a) autocratic, (b) democratic, and (c) laissez-faire. Many others, as noted by IAAP (2009), have followed.

The literature is replete with a plethora of theories related to different leadership styles for various positions. Some that are often ascribed specifically to school leaders are reported in this review of the literature. The purpose of the study is not to expand upon leadership theory, but to explore the leadership styles exhibited and expressed by principals of successful Title I elementary schools in the subject state; therefore, no attempt was made to indicate that one leadership style is more preferable than another.

### **Classical Leadership Theory and Style**

A classical or bureaucratic style of leadership or management is associated with sociologist and philosopher Max Weber, whose research dates back to the 1920s. This leadership model is most commonly displayed as a traditional top-down, hierarchal leadership communication and philosophy like that used in the military. Often applied in stressful

situations, educational leaders find themselves leaning toward this style of leadership because it is traditional and allows the leader to possess a vast amount of power and control. In this theory, the belief is that the behavior of employees related to how hard they work and is also directly correlated to their salary. Applying this theory in a school may not be beneficial because teachers have very clear roles, and rules are very important to maintain a safe learning environment (Jacobson, 2008). Applied to schools, however, principals adhering to Weber's classical theory find no specific value in individual teachers and their skills, and teachers can be substituted for one another with little regard to their specific skills. Teachers who fail to adhere to the strict rules and policies are punished; those who demonstrate good work are rewarded. Principals who typically apply this theory to their practice assume that their teachers require careful supervision because they are inherently lazy and therefore require close supervision (Sergiovanni, 1992).

Only one leader in a school is delegated or bestowed the authority inherent in the classic leadership style; therefore, in schools with the need for shared decision making and collective efficacy, this leadership style can be employed only strategically. Used appropriately in schools with regard to student safety, accountability, emergency policies, discipline, attendance policies, and teacher evaluation policies, a principal may find some merit in the use of this style in practice on a consistent and routine basis. Moreover, in an era of accountability, the authoritarian nature of the classical leadership style emphasizes getting the job done. Clearly, schools must have a chain of command in order to run smoothly and work towards common goals, thus requiring an element of classical leadership.

When Lewin et al. (1939) presented three leadership styles, they were referring specifically to the leadership style as it related to decision making. In the autocratic leadership style, for example, the leader acts on his or her own without consultation and believes that

consultation would result in no benefit. Unfortunately, an autocratic leadership style often leads to discontent among followers (Lewin et al., 1939). The autocratic and the classical leadership style are often used interchangeably.

The second leadership style offered by Lewin et al. (1939) was the democratic style, the direct opposite of the autocratic style. A democratic style is often called a participative style because the democratic leader considers all constituencies or participants in decision making. Democratic leadership runs into a quandary, however, when too many opinions are evident.

Finally, Lewin et al. (1939) proposed a laissez-faire leadership style. Now considered an open style of leadership, a laissez-faire leader lets others make decisions, often not involving himself or herself in the process. With capable and motivated workers, such as many educators, a laissez-faire approach to decision making may have some benefit.

### **Sociopolitical Leadership Theory and Style**

Sociopolitical leadership, both in theory and in style, focuses on the organization as politics. In the sociopolitical theory, informal groups form a system of interpersonal relationships that form within an organization to affect decisions of the formal organization (Zembylas & Iasonos, 2010). Additionally, unwritten rules of the organization are called *norms*, which are expected to be followed by all members of the group even though they are unstated. School principals using a sociopolitical leadership style are under a great deal of pressure to conform to the norms of the groups that they are supervising, such as teachers and staff, and they must also be aware of the norms of the parents of their students. Overall, teachers and other staff members have the most control over the behaviors of those with whom they work; moreover, due to the power of the informal groups, those who complain, gossip, or report to supervisors about their coworkers are often isolated from their peers and excluded from the social benefits of the group.

In a situation where the principal applies the sociopolitical leadership style, despite any reward given by the school leaders, the life of a teacher or staff member who works slowly, works too hard, or tattles will be difficult (Zembylas & Iasonos, 2010).

Muldoon (2012) identified Elton Mayo as the most important theorist associated with the sociopolitical leadership style. Mayo conducted studies in the Western Electric wiring room at the Hawthorne site. This study—and its later interpretations—revealed that the power held by informal groups such as parent groups, teacher groups, and staff groups can be stronger than that of a supervisor. Mayo observed that the focus of the experiment, lighting, was not what led to change; instead, the fact that the workers were the subject of research and received attention led them to behave in a team fashion. The behavior demonstrated in Mayo's study of having a common goal and improving as a result of group work and attention has become known as the Hawthorne effect (Muldoon, 2012).

The sociopolitical leadership style is difficult to maintain for bringing about change because of the power of the workers (Muldoon, 2012). Once change is to a point of being institutionalized, people become comfortable with the change, and it becomes a part of their culture (Zembylas & Iasonos, 2010). By applying the sociopolitical leadership style in education, progress can seem to be attained like winning a game of chess because multiple roles or players are involved. Like in a school with leadership teams and parent groups, one person cannot be in control of the entire system, nor can one individual completely control other people's actions. Teachers should be planning lessons and selecting focus standards, creating tests, and analyzing data together. Parents should have involvement in some of the school's and district's decision making via committees and parent organizations. In an educational environment, people must work together using Professional Learning Teams (PLT) and cadres in order to succeed.

### **Situational Leadership Theory and Style**

Studies have addressed the question of principal leadership style and have explored different style theories and their effectiveness in improving student achievement, school climate, and related teacher job satisfaction. The dynamic events of any one day at a school highlight the need for leaders to adapt to the condition or situation as it is happening (Hardman, 2011). As a case in point, Hallinger and Bickman (1996) found that leadership should vary to reflect the needs of the school as a community and should differ systematically in the daily context of the school community. To this end, the following five leadership dimensions were analyzed by Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008): (a) establishing goals and expectations, (b) strategic resourcing, (c) curriculum, (d) teacher development, and (e) orderly/supportive environment. The authors found that leadership practices require an integration of tasks and relationships, as schools at different stages require different leadership emphasis.

In examining the relationship between leadership and student achievement, Waters et al. (2003) developed a framework of 20 balanced leadership responsibilities which had been found in prior research to correlate positively to student achievement: (a) culture, (b) order, (c) discipline, (d) resources, (e) curriculum, (f) focus, (g) assessment, (h) visibility, (i) rewards, (j) communication, (k) outreach, (l) input, (m) affirmation, (n) relationship, (o) change agent, (p) optimizer, (q) ideals, (r) flexibility, (s) situational awareness, and (t) intellectual stimulation. Two of these balanced leadership responsibilities are directly related to a situational leadership style. Situational awareness, an awareness of details and undercurrents used to address problems, and flexibility, the adaptation of leadership behavior to the needs of the current situation, are two leadership practices which, when used appropriately, can lead to significant gains in student achievement (Waters et al., 2003).

Hardman (2011) defined situational leadership as a strategy “to select the right choice for the school institution” (p. 131). In a study examining teacher job satisfaction and the four leadership activities of telling, selling, participating, and delegating, the leadership descriptor of telling, described as a high telling/low relationship style, was determined to elicit significantly higher levels of supervision and total teacher job satisfaction (Wetherell, 2002).

Situational leadership was initially developed as a theory in 1969 by Hersey and Blanchard and was called the *life cycle theory of leadership*; however, the theory was subsequently revised in 1976 and renamed *situational leadership theory*. Hersey and Blanchard (1988) believed that an effective leader modifies his or her leadership *style* in an attempt to influence the direction or work of a group of individuals. Successful leaders consider task behavior “the extent to which a leader engages in one-way communication” (p. 349) when explaining, outlining, and providing direction about what needs to be done. In addition, successful leaders consider relationship behavior “the extent to which a leader engages in two-way communication” (p. 349) when providing emotional support when facilitating a task. This theory therefore describes a two-dimensional leadership model utilizing four quadrants displayed on two axes. The resulting four basic styles are identified by the authors as (a) high relationship and low task, “participating”; (b) high task and high relationship, “selling”; (c) low relationship and low task, “delegating”; and (d) high task and low relationship, “telling.”

When they redefined their theory into situational leadership, Hersey and Blanchard (1976) introduced the concept of *participant maturity* that was intended to be considered by the leader as each task is approached in the daily business of an organization, as no one group or individual is at a specific level of maturity across all situations. Accordingly, the leader adopting a situational leadership style adjusts the level of interaction with the group to address the socio-

emotional level of the group in each specific situation, and as the maturity of the group evolves, less direction is required. Considering situational leadership theory and style, Walter, Caldwell, and Marshall (1980) reported that situational theory and the idea of flexibility and “balanced use of task and relationship behaviors is beneficial for organizational productivity and personal satisfaction” (p. 620). They reported that principals were viewed positively when they used high task/low relationship behavior when implementing new and unfamiliar programs. In addition, the use of high task/high relationship behaviors allowed principals to manage many differing and often conflicting elements in the daily operation of a school. Conversely, principals using high relationship/low task methods were viewed by teachers as not assuming appropriate leadership. The use of flexibility and balance described in situational leadership theory was found to support success for individuals and for an organization when exhibited as a situational leadership style (Walter et al., 1980).

A number of studies have raised questions about situational leadership theory and concerns regarding modifications to situational theory since its inception (Fernandez & Vecchio, 1997; Graeff, 1997; Johansen, 1990). Situational leadership theory is a significant theory, however, because studies and scholarly articles across varied leadership fields as well as two large meta-analyses identified the need for leaders to be able to navigate the daily maze of leadership challenges and analyze and respond effectively with flexibility in different situations (Seashore et al., 2010; Waters et al., 2003). Principals applying situational leadership theory adopt a situational leadership style.

### **Open Leadership Theory and Style**

Open leadership theory assumes the existence of a sufficient degree of rationality and predictability in organizations to permit the decision making that allows a leader to consider

using a method of behavior conditional upon the situation. Katz and Kahn (1966), organizational behaviorists, are associated with this kind of meta-theory that puts great emphasis on cycles of events, partnerships, and networking.

A leader adopting an open leadership style is likely to find too many demands placed on the needs of the environment as a whole that, in turn, can cause strain and problems for the organization. In education, adoption of an open leadership style can be used to solve emergent problems as needed while running a school as an institution and to develop linkages among stakeholders. In current American society, schools must have strong relations with community leaders, businesses, and local organizations in addition to conducting the business of education. Schools must be preparing students for what future employers both locally and globally are looking for and must have strong ties to those organizations.

### **Transformational Leadership Theory and Style**

The concept of transformational leadership came from James MacGregor Burns (1978), a presidential biographer and expert on leadership. He observed that transformational leaders make change in and with the cooperation of their followers. Moreover, transformational leaders may exhibit traits or a set of skills that enable them to inspire others literally to transform their expectations, perceptions, and motivations in order to achieve a common goal.

Bernard M. Bass (1985; Bass & Riggio, 2008) developed a transformational leadership theory. Bass defined transformational leadership in terms of the effect the leader has on his or her followers by gaining the trust, respect, and admiration of others. Transformational leaders do the following: (a) offer opportunities for creative stimulation, (b) foster supportive relationships by exhibiting caring and encouragement and by keeping lines of communication wide open, (c) provide a clear and well-articulated vision of goals and expectations, and (d) serve as role models

(Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2008). They concern themselves with “emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals, and include assessing followers’ motives, satisfying their needs, and treating them as human beings” (Northouse, 2004, p. 169).

Principals adopting a transformational leadership style would likely support and empower teachers and lower-level administrators in meeting student academic achievement goals and personal career goals. They are considered catalysts for change and team players because they trust the teachers to do their jobs (Davidson & Dell, 1996). By creating change and working with “the team,” principals exhibiting a transformational leadership style tend to establish a positive school culture, as all constituents feel valued and worthy (Liontos, 1992).

### **The Impact of the Principal on Student Achievement**

Elementary schools have a school principal who is charged with the multifaceted responsibility of effective school leadership and performance of duties that result in a positive organizational climate. The principal is also expected to see that all functions of the school are met, from ensuring high student achievement and managing the human resources to assuring that the school facility is clean, safe, and properly maintained. A classic definition of leadership is the use of a person’s interpersonal influence through communication to reach a goal or goals (Tannenbaum, Weschler, & Massarik, 1961). According to research conducted by Moffitt (2007), the most important responsibility of the principal as a leader is to facilitate quality teaching with the overall goal of improving student achievement.

Through meta-analysis, Waters et al. (2003) found a relationship between principal leadership and student achievement. The classroom teacher’s responsibility is to deliver direct instruction to students, and principals whose leadership practices include a direct focus on teacher instruction do have an indirect impact through teachers on student achievement

(Seashore et al., 2010). The challenging task of effective school leadership and subsequent high student achievement requires the understanding and implementation of skills and formal goal setting used by exceptional leaders in their schools.

Maintenance of a positive school climate may be one reason for the relationship between the principal's leadership style and student achievement. The responsibility for leadership by the principal has been examined in the research through many related descriptors of leadership behavior; one such behavior is the maintenance of a positive school climate (Randolph-Robinson, 2009). Climate or milieu at the elementary school level can be described as a feeling tone in the school organization and is part of the culture of the school. In research reported by Tillman and Tillman (2008), teacher job satisfaction, the attitude of an employee toward a job, is an important component of school climate.

A significant component of school climate is instructional climate, which is related to principal behavior in setting a tone for professional learning and growth. Instructional climate has been reported as high in high-performing schools where leadership is centered on improvement of instruction (Seashore et al., 2010). Elementary teachers with 15 or more years of experience ascribed the following characteristics to a positive instructional climate: (a) having a good administrator, (b) valuing relationships with colleagues, (c) providing collegial collaboration for professional development, and (d) obtaining personal satisfaction working with students as important factors in job satisfaction (Marston, 2010). Principals have the potential of affecting the milieu of the school positively, including both student achievement and teacher workplace job satisfaction. Important to identify are those specific leadership skills that principals can utilize in the school setting to maximize their effectiveness as leaders and affect teacher job satisfaction and high student achievement positively.

### **Summary**

This literature review focused on the topics related to the present study: (a) Title I, (b) the AAA designation, (c) the relationship between poverty and student achievement, (d) effective school leadership, (e) challenges of leading Title I schools, (f) principal leadership theory and styles, and (g) the impact of the principal on student achievement. The relationship found in the research between principal leadership style and student academic achievement supports the need for the present study on Title I elementary school principals' leadership styles in schools in one Western state that received the AAA designation. In the next chapter, the research methodology used in this study is presented.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological case study was to explore the leadership style of principals whose Title I elementary schools had achieved the Academic Achievement Award (AAA) designation, indicating high academic achievement as measured by test scores.

#### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this exploration of principals' leadership styles in successful Title I elementary schools:

1. What features of a Title I elementary school are identified by their principals as posing unique professional opportunities and challenges for a leader of that school?
2. How do principals of successful Title I elementary schools characterize and describe their own leadership styles?
3. What are the activities and behaviors principals of successful Title I elementary schools use on a day-to-day basis that appear to influence student success?
4. To what do principals of successful Title I schools attribute their success?

#### **Research Design**

To explore the leadership style of elementary-level principals whose Title I schools have achieved the AAA designation, the research employed a phenomenological case study design. In a phenomenological design, the participant considers his or her own lived experience within a specific context in search of deeper understanding of the group studied—in this case, the AAA-designated Title I elementary school in the subject state. The case is a set of principals of AAA-

designated Title I elementary schools in this state, who will explain their leadership phenomenon in their own voices.

This phenomenological case study methodology was selected because quantitative results of self-reported principal leadership styles and teachers' reports of principals' leadership styles have appeared to be inadequate (e.g., Bentley, 2011; Bulach et al., 2006; Eyal & Roth, 2011; Florence, 2012; Ghamrawi, 2013; Simmons, 2010). As a case in point, in quantitative studies of principal leadership styles, principals are given forced-choice statements that describe or characterize leadership styles for them. In contrast, in an interview, the principals will have the opportunity to use their own voices to characterize and describe actions and activities that reflect or exemplify their leadership styles. In addition, the focus of quantitative studies seems to be on teachers' beliefs about principals' leadership, secondary school leadership, specific school districts, or other variables that are beyond the scope of the present study, which seeks to hear the voices of the elementary school principals themselves.

Case study research, according to Yin (1994), is used when the phenomenon under investigation can be explored in a real-life context. In the case of principals' leadership styles in successful Title I elementary schools, the opportunity to explore the phenomenon of success in the school itself would enable the researcher to view the real-life context and gain a feel for the environment. The principal would also be able to describe his or her leadership style and more thoroughly explain how and why he or she uses it. In addition, case study is often used with open-ended research questions when researchers want know "how" and "why" some phenomenon operates.

In a case study design, the researcher enters the exploration without preconceived notions of the results. Data that are gathered are generally qualitative, often through interviews, and are

analyzed for emergent patterns and themes. In addition, the goal is not generalizability; rather, the intent is to form a conclusion from the data that is not statistical, but is analytical (Yin, 1994).

The unit of analysis in a case study is the source of the information. In the present study, the source of the information will be elementary school principals from AAA-designated Title I elementary schools in the subject state in the Western United States. The group of principals will represent a single case, and their comments will be analyzed both individually and as a group.

### **Population and Sample**

The number of schools in the state that were eligible for the AAA designation fulfilled the following requirements:

Section 1117 (b) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Act of 2001 requires that all states receiving Title I funds establish a program that recognizes Title I schools that exceed Adequate Yearly Progress for two or more years or significantly close the achievement gap among numerically significant subgroups. In order to be considered for honor, schools must meet a variety of eligibility criteria including designated federal and state accountability measures based on Adequate Yearly Progress and Academic Performance Index requirements. (State Department of Education, 2013b, para. 1-2)

Generally, the eligibility criteria required the following: (a) Title I funds were received for the two years prior to the award, (b) at least 40% of students were deemed disadvantaged in both years, (c) the school met its AYP requirement in both preceding years and was not identified as needing program improvement, (d) certain API scores were met and targeted groups must not have declined or must have doubled depending on previous scores, and (e) the school may not have had any testing irregularities reported (State Department of Education, 2013c).

In this state, approximately 6,000 elementary schools were eligible for Title I funding, about two-thirds of the total number of schools; of these, only 207 received the AAA designation in 2010-2011, the first year of the award. In each of the two subsequent years, the number declined: 117 in 2011-2012, and 56 in 2012-2013. That means that only 380 schools have earned the AAA designation over the 3-year award period, about 6.3% of the total eligible.

The population of eligible schools for the study at this time was 380, as already described. A convenience sample from among the 380 AAA-designated schools was identified from the following counties: (a) Blue, (b) Green, and (c) Purple<sup>2</sup>. The reason was that the researcher has contacts in that area. In addition, the focus of the study was on elementary school principals; therefore, selection of participants was limited to AAA-designated Title I elementary school principals. Table 2 indicates the total number of elementary schools in each of these three counties that have earned the AAA designation.

Table 2

*Number of AAA Schools in the Three Counties, 2012 and 2013*

County	AAA Schools
Blue	30
Green	15
Purple	9
Total	54

Principals of 54 AAA-designated Title I elementary schools were eligible for inclusion in the present study. In order to include the principal of that school, he or she must have been

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms for county names in the subject state.

employed at that school during the eligibility period; that is, 2 years prior to the award. All 54 principals were invited to participate and were excluded only if they did not meet the inclusion criterion of years as principal at the school. The goal was to have at least 10 participants, 18.5% of those eligible, who agreed to be interviewed.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The researcher contacted each eligible elementary school by telephone and asked to speak to the principal. This preliminary telephone call included a congratulatory message and an invitation to participate if warranted. The decision was based on a determination if the current principal was the one who was principal during the qualifying years for the AAA designation. If the answer was yes, the researcher asked if the principal was willing to be interviewed and scheduled the interview when the principal agreed. If the current principal was not in place during the qualifying years, then the researcher asked who was and how to contact him or her. When that happened, the researcher followed up with the principal who met the interview criteria and, if agreeable, scheduled the interview. Interviews were conducted in person with those willing to participate. The initial number of participants anticipated was 10 principals.

The concept of *saturation* is important to interview research. When interviewing participants on the topic under study, over time, if no new information comes forth from the participants, then at that point, the data are saturated, and the research is considered complete. The researcher can then stop gathering data with some confidence that he or she has all the qualitative data necessary to identify patterns and themes that represent the results. Because the number of interviewees could not be determined in advance, the researcher anticipated starting with 10-25 participants, but the actual number might have been higher or lower.

An interview requires a planned script that includes questions and probes. Typically, the questions are based on what the researcher wants to know in response to the research questions. In addition, the questions may serve to relate to the review of the literature to see if the responses confirm or deny what others have found. Some of the questions for the preliminary interview script for the present study that were based on a combination of what the researcher wanted to know and what the literature review revealed included the following:

1. Let's start with some basic information about you. Please describe the following:
  - a. Your educational background
  - b. Your professional experience
  - c. Your years as an educator
  - d. Your years as a principal
  - e. Your years in your current position
  - f. Your personal and professional goals
2. How would you describe your school?
3. How do you celebrate the accomplishments of your students?
4. How do you view your role in deciding the school's mission and goals? If you don't, who decides these?
5. Who ensures that your mission and goals are implemented? How does that happen?
6. If you were walking up to two teachers in your school, what would you want them to say about you as an instructional leader?
7. If you were implementing a change in your building and you had a teacher who refused to get on board with the change, how would you handle it and gain his or her buy-in and participation?

8. Think back to when you first remember how your leadership style evolved to making you the leader you are today. What events triggered those changes in you?
9. How has your leadership style changed over your career? Can you provide an example of that change?
10. What are some of the factors that determine or drive student achievement at your school?
11. How do you monitor student achievement?
12. How do you use data in your decision making about your school?
13. How do you encourage teachers to work together?
14. How do you motivate students, teachers, and staff?
15. Why did you decide to apply for the AAA designation?
16. What has the AAA designation meant to your school?

After all 10 interviews were conducted, a need was recognized for additional information from the principals. Consequently, five of the principals agreed to be interviewed again with additional probes; five did not agree. This resulted in expanded information from the principals. In addition to the interviews, the researcher gathered data available from the State Department of Education's website that offered additional insight into the socioeconomic characteristics of the school.

### **Data Analysis**

Interview data are generally analyzed by carefully reviewing the transcripts and determining patterns and themes that emerge from the words. Software programs are also available to accomplish the task.

In interview research, data analysis is an ongoing, iterative process that requires the researcher to analyze the interview transcripts immediately upon obtaining them. In this way, the researcher is able to reflect on the text without forming conclusions, but by exploring any patterns and themes that may already emerge. As each successive interview occurs and is analyzed, either previously identified patterns and themes are supported, or new ones emerge. When saturation is reached, no new patterns and themes appear. Additionally, the researcher typically maintains a log of field notes which serve to capture all of thoughts in the field as they occur and out of the field upon reflection.

Interviews were transcribed. Data were analyzed from the interview transcripts following the seven-step procedure outlined by Moustakas (1994). The first step, listing and preliminary grouping, required the listing of every expression relevant to the experience, a process called *horizontalization*. In this process, the farthest horizon, or distance, of the research was approximated. In the second step, the invariant constituents, those that reflected the fundamental meaning of the information, were determined. According to Moustakas, determining the presence of the invariant constituents requires understanding if the words or phrases are necessary and enough to understand the experience and deciding if it is possible to label and abstract the words. The process of identifying invariant constituents is called *reduction and elimination*: The words are reduced to their essential meanings, and unnecessary ones are eliminated.

The third step proposed by Moustakas (1994) was clustering the invariant constituents and identifying the core themes that had emerged. The fourth step required the researcher to make a final identification of invariant constituents and themes by checking them against what the participants said. If inaccurate, they were dropped from the analysis. In the fifth step, the

researcher started to describe the experience under study, using words from the transcripts, based on the invariant constituents and themes that had emerged from the data. This process produced a textural description. In the sixth step, a structural description of the experience under investigation was written, describing the structure of the experience. Finally, the researcher wrote the description of the phenomenon under study, attempting to combine the individual experiences into one overall experience of all participants (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 120-121).

Any field notes produced by the researcher were also reviewed for utility. Any interactions with teachers, staff, and students were noted and analyzed to paint a descriptive picture of the school that may have demonstrated the principal's leadership style. Finally, quantitative data regarding the school's socioeconomic characteristics were considered potentially useful in exploring some of the challenges faced by the principal.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to describe the research methodology of this study, explain the sample selection, describe the procedure used in collecting the data, and provide an explanation of the procedures that were used to analyze the data. The results follow.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESULTS**

This chapter begins with a review of the purpose of the study and the research questions that guided it. Methods of data collection and analysis follow, including details and findings of the process of coding the interview transcripts. Next is a description of the principals and their schools, explicating the demographics of each. Further details of the findings from the coding of the transcripts follows, and then results of the interviews are reported in the sequence of the interview questions. The chapter ends with a summary of the findings of the study.

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

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explore the leadership style of principals whose Title I elementary schools had achieved the Academic Achievement Award (AAA) designation, indicating high student academic achievement as measured by state-mandated standardized test scores. For a more cohesive study, only elementary school principals were invited to participate. The results of this study may help principals to examine their own leadership style to better understand what works for leading schools to improve student achievement, especially in low-SES schools.

#### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this exploration of principals' leadership styles in successful Title I elementary schools in one Western state:

1. What features of a Title I elementary school are identified by their principals as posing unique professional opportunities and challenges for a leader of that school?

2. How do principals of successful Title I elementary schools characterize and describe their own leadership styles?
3. What are the activities and behaviors principals of successful Title I elementary schools use on a day-to-day basis that appear to influence student success?
4. To what do principals of successful Title I schools attribute their success?

Based on the purpose of this inquiry and the research questions, this chapter reviews existing principal- and state-supplied data, explains the coding process applied to the transcribed interviews with 10 principals, and discusses emerging themes from individual interview sessions with the principals of 10 elementary schools eligible for Title I that had received the AAA designation. Common philosophies, characteristics, behaviors, and practices found among participants are noted. The goal was to determine common themes in an effort to gain an understanding of how the leadership practices of these principals of AAA-designated Title I elementary schools may have influenced their school's earning the award. The results of this study may help principals to examine their own leadership styles to better understand what leads schools to improve student achievement, especially in low-SES schools. The presence and values of major themes may suggest that the leaders of AAA schools possess certain characteristics, behaviors, or leadership styles that address the needs of all stakeholders despite accountability pressures.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were gathered through qualitative methods in this phenomenological case study, primarily interviews and document reviews to obtain school-related data. Through interviews and a review of existing public data, the researcher explored the personal experiences of principals in 10 award-winning elementary schools. To obtain participants, as noted in Chapter

III, a list of the state's AAA elementary schools in Blue, Green, and Purple counties was compiled from online public resources. The state AAA data for each target elementary school were reviewed to determine which schools had the principal in place 2 years prior to the award presentation, a requirement for inclusion in this study. The principals of the elementary schools who met these criteria were invited to participate in the study. Schools with a different principal were eliminated from the list of possible participants.

In an effort to manage the data, the researcher created and organized a file for each participant, containing the transcriptions from each interview, the notes from the researcher during the interview, and the audio file of the interview. In considering data analysis, Merriam (2009) proposed, "the right way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it simultaneously with data collection" (p. 162). Accomplished through the process of coding, the researcher used this method to look for patterns while collecting data. Categorization, description, and synthesis of codes therefore comprised the process of data analysis resulting from the information acquired in the interviews with the participants and from the acquisition of school data (Wiersma, 2000).

The data analysis process in this study followed several steps. The researcher transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews, using the notes the researcher took during the interview as a guide. The transcripts for each interview were read twice by the researcher before the data were coded and then categorized into what appeared to be the prevailing themes. These categories were then re-categorized into preliminary themes developed for each section of the interview. At this point, five principals were interviewed a second time to acquire additional information for analysis. The transcripts were reread and organized using the themes and categories that emerged from this categorization and the theme development process.

### **Coding of Interview Transcripts**

In qualitative inquiry, a *code* is generally “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 3). This process is akin to Moustakas’ (1994) horizontalization, in which every relevant experience, word, or phrase is listed as the first step in analyzing qualitative data. Qualitative analysis through coding should not, however, be either prescriptive, restrictive, or inflexible, thereby interfering with the very process of analysis it seeks to assure (Cooper, 2009; Saldaña, 2009). Quite simply, coding requires interpretation (Saldaña, 2009, p. 4): “The act of coding requires that [the researcher] wear [his or her] analytic lens. But how [the researcher] perceive[s] and interpret[s] what is happening in the data depends on what type of filter covers that lens” (p. 6).

Saldaña (2009) suggested looking at codes through a variety of ways such as the following that were used in the present analysis: (a) the study’s research questions; (b) emergent patterns, themes, categories, and concepts; (c) overlaps and connections among codes, patterns, themes, categories, and concepts; (d) problems or limitations in the study; and (e) possible future research (p. 40). He also presented the possibility that two cycles of coding might be needed. In the first cycle, codes are identified and initially grouped in a way reminiscent of horizontalization, the method proposed in Chapter III for the present study (Moustakas, 1994). In Saldaña’s (2009) second coding cycle, “a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization [is developed] from [the] array of First Cycle codes” (p. 149). This process combines the second and third steps in Moustakas’ (1994) method of qualitative analysis in identifying invariant constituents that reflect the meaning of the codes and then by clustering them into emergent themes.

Also known as *pattern coding*, pattern identification occurs in Saldaña's (2009, 2013) second coding cycle (Cooper, 2009), equivalent to Moustakas' (1994) fourth step in qualitative analysis. According to Hatch (2002), pattern coding looks at the following:

- (a) similarity (things happen the same way),
- (b) difference (they happen in predictably different ways),
- (c) frequency (they happen often or seldom),
- (d) sequence (they happen in a certain order),
- (e) correspondence (they happen in relation to other activities or events), and
- (f) causation (one appears to cause another). (p. 155)

Pattern coding, occurring in Saldaña's (2009, 2013) second coding cycle, examines initial codes; identifies trends, patterns, and relationships; and assigns labels for categories or themes. Codes and themes were then displayed visually, as will be shown later in this chapter.

### **School and Participant Findings**

This study focused on 10 principals of AAA-designated elementary schools in one Western state, specifically in Blue, Green, and Purple counties. The participating principals were the instructional leaders in the schools in both the year prior to the qualifying AAA award year and in the qualifying year, a factor that significantly decreased the number of possible qualifying elementary school principals.

**School A.** This AAA elementary school is located in a district located in Amaryllis<sup>3</sup>, a small, highly transient town in Purple County. Amaryllis covers 31.5 square miles and has a population of about 72,000. In a complex arrangement, two major school districts serve the high schools of the city, and one sub-district of the Amaryllis School District includes eight elementary and one middle school. School A is in the Begonia School District, comprised of 22 schools. When School A was awarded the AAA designation, it had grades K-5, and all students received free- or reduced-price lunch (FRPL).

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<sup>3</sup> For confidentiality, the towns and school districts have been designated with the names of flowers or trees.

The principal of this building has been in education for 17 years—6 years as principal of School A. His teaching experience began in peer tutoring and in an Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program. His family includes 13 teachers. After obtaining his master's degree and principal certification, he began working as an elementary principal and has remained in this role for the last 6 years.

**School B.** This school is also located in the Begonia School District and enrolled grades K-5 at the time of the AAA award. In School B, like School A, all students are FRPL-eligible.

An educator for 11 years, the principal of this building has been a principal for 6 years, all at School B. Her prior experience was as a civilian employed by the Department of Defense at an air force base, located in Purple County. Teaching is her second career, and after obtaining her master's degree and principal certification, she began working as a fifth-grade teacher and then an instructional coach. When her former principal became ill, she took over as the administrator. Her professional goals do not extend past her current role as site administrator.

**School C.** Like the first two schools, School C is located in Begonia School District in Amaryllis. Like the others, School C was a K-5 school at the time of the AAA award, and all students are FRPL-eligible.

The principal of this building has been in education for 27 years, with 19 years as a principal—4 years have been as principal of School C. Previously, he had worked as an engineer for a local large company. Teaching is his second career, and after obtaining his master's degree and earning principal certification, he began working as a classroom teacher. For 17 years, he served as an administrator in another town in the state, before moving to the Begonia School District. His parents are educators, and he is very close to retiring.

**School D.** This elementary school is located in Carnation, a small city in densely populated Green County. Carnation covers 17.96 square miles and has a population of approximately 175,000. Carnation School District is the only district serving the community; 66 schools serve nearly 48,000 students. When School D, one of 44 elementary schools in the district, was awarded the AAA designation, it contained grades K-5, and all students were FRPL-eligible.

School D's principal has 19 years as a professional educator, six of them as a principal. She has been principal of School D for 4 years. She attended one state school for both her bachelor's and master's degrees in education and later pursued her administrative credential at a local university. According to this principal, the Carnation School District is highly successful at placing administrators in the best positions to match their strengths, and she felt the administrator before her was an excellent fit for the school. As a result, the previous principal set the stage for the school's success, so the transition was "superior."

**School E.** Located in Dahlia, a small city in Purple County, School E is a K-5 elementary school in the Dahlia School District. Covering 30.93 square miles and having a population of 37,000, this district is the only district serving the community. Dahlia has 10 traditional schools, one adult school, and one virtual school. When this elementary school was awarded the AAA award, all students were FRPL-eligible.

A seasoned educator with 34 years of experience, the principal of School E has held that role for 20 years, and she has been principal of School E for 12 years. She is a graduate of the local school system including Dahlia High School and attended a state university farther away from home for her bachelor's degree in teaching. She earned her administrative credential and master's degree from a private university in the state. Her entire teaching career encompassed

only the primary grades, and she began her tenure as an administrator as the principal of a K-2 school. Although nearing retirement, she has thought about writing a book or working in a related field that would continue to involve her actively with children. She claimed that she has remained at the site level due to her love of student interaction.

**School F.** This K-5 elementary school is located in Eucalyptus, a highly populated city in Blue County. Covering 9.75 square miles, Eucalyptus has a population of about 107,000. Freesia School District is one of two districts serving the community with seven elementary schools and two middle schools. All students at School F are FRPL-eligible.

An educator for 30 years, the principal of this building has been a principal for 17 years—6 years at School F. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in English from a local state university and her teaching credential from another. Returning to her alma mater, she then got her administrative credential and a master's degree. This principal began her teaching career as a lunchroom monitor, then became a classroom assistant, and was finally hired as a classroom teacher. No longer at School F, this principal's professional goal is to continue to grow as a communicator and as an administrator in her present middle-school setting.

**School G.** Like School F, School G, a K-5 elementary at the time of the AAA award, is located in Eucalyptus; however, it is in the Eucalyptus-Gladiolus School District. School G's district has 17 elementary, six middle, five high, and four other types of schools, serving 19,350 students. All students in School G are FRPL-eligible.

A professional educator for 15 years, the principal of School G has headed the school for 5 years and has never worked at another school site. He graduated from a private Catholic high school and studied at a local state university, a more prestigious state university far away, and another somewhat local private institution of higher education. An English-as-a-second-language

(ESL) student, he was the first in his family to graduate college. His professional goal is to be a servant leader by making sure that all his teachers have everything they need to be successful.

**School H.** Also located in the Eucalyptus-Gladiolus School District, School H was a K-5 school when awarded the AAA designation. All students are considered FRPL-eligible.

The principal of School H has spent her 30-year career at that school—20 years as principal. She earned her bachelor's degree from a local university, her master's degree and teaching credential from a large private university, and her administrative credential at another state university not far from home. Primarily a teacher in the upper grades, she made her transition into administration as a teacher on special assignment (TOSA), serving as a middle school administrator. In that role, she noted that she gained many insightful and essential skills. Her professional goal is to lead a school to achieve more by engaging students in their learning.

**School I.** Located in Hyacinth, a highly populated city in Blue, the Hyacinth School District covers 16.4 square miles and serves a population of about 110,120 and approximately 14,000 students. Hyacinth is one of two districts serving the community; it has five elementary, two middle, and five high schools. When School I was awarded the AAA award, its configuration was K-5, and 20% of its students were FRPL-eligible.

School I's principal has worked in the field of education for 30 years—15 years as a principal. He earned his bachelor's degree in cultural anthropology along with his teaching credential, and he has a master's degree in public administration. Primarily a teacher in the upper grades, this principal made his transition into administration as a select member of a project in a major city in the state, in which the school's stakeholders had the opportunity to select their administrator. His professional goal is to lead a school to achieve more by engaging students in their learning.

**School J.** Located in Carnation, a highly populated city in Green County, the Carnation School District covers 17.96 square miles and serves a population of about 175,000 and approximately 48,000 students. Carnation School District serves six cities in the region and has 44 elementary, 10 middle, and seven high schools. When School J was awarded the AAA designation, its configuration was K-6, and 72% of its students were FRPL-eligible.

School J's principal has worked in the business field, and she has her teaching credential from a local state university and her Doctor of Education degree from a selective private university in the state in K-12 urban education. Primarily a teacher in the upper grades, this principal made her transition into teaching and administration after working in the retail industry for a long period of time. She wants students to understand that she cares about their success as individuals.

### **Summary of Findings From Schools' and Principals' Demographic Information**

As evident from the text, the schools and school districts differed in size, location, and population, as shown in Table 3. Principals were asked six demographic questions related to the following: (a) educational background, (b) professional experience, (c) years as an educator, (d) years as a principal, (e) years in the current position, and (f) personal and professional goals. All participants had earned at least a master's degree and principal certification. All but four began as professional educators; the others were a financial advisor, an engineer, a civil servant, and a worker in the retail industry. Experience as a classroom teacher ranged from 10-16 years, with an average of 12 years of teaching experience. The number of years as a principal ranged from 5-20 years, averaging 12.4 years. The number of years in their current position ranged from 1-18 years, averaging 7.3 years.

Table 3

*Summary of School Information*

School	County	Approximate population	District	School enrollment	School configuration	% FRPL-eligible
A	Purple	72,000	Begonia	750	K-5	100
B	Purple	72,000	Begonia	720	K-5	100
C	Purple	72,000	Begonia	895	K-5	100
D	Green	175,000	Carnation	465	K-5	100
E	Purple	37,000	Dahlia	420	K-5	100
F	Blue	107,000	Freesia	400	K-5	100
G	Blue	107,000	Eucalyptus-Gladiolus	420	K-5	100
H	Blue	107,000	Eucalyptus-Gladiolus	750	K-5	100
I	Blue	110,120	Hyacinth	535	K-5	20
J	Green	175,000	Carnation	390	K-6	72

Responses to the questions about personal and professional goals varied, typically depending upon the number of years as educators that, in turn, related to age. Two principals, for example, are considering retirement, but another has not thought beyond her current position as an elementary school principal. One wants to work at the district level in order to impact a greater number of students, while two others want to remain in their current position or at the school level where they feel they can influence student outcomes more directly. Another wants to return to school and use a more effective teaching model. Four principals reported they wanted to do their jobs better, increase student achievement, and engage students in learning.

### **Coding of the Responses to the Interview Questions**

Interviews with the 10 principals were transcribed, read, reread, and coded according to the steps proposed by Moustakas (1994). Like Quick, Boyland, and Harvey (2013), Saldaña's (2009, 2013) two coding cycles were applied to the interviews. The analysis resulted in the following 16 codes at the first level or horizontalization: (a) caring; (b) administrative; (c) instructional leadership (coaching); (d) leadership (style, theory, philosophy); (e) leadership (activities, characteristics, strategies); (f) culture/positive attitude; (g) innovator/innovation (risk taking); (h) success (students, teachers, school, principal); (i) celebration/hoopla; (j) data-driven decision making, instruction, and goal setting; (k) communication (of data, among constituencies); (l) teamwork (collaboration, shared leadership); (m) individualized/differentiated instruction (flexible grouping); (n) teachers/teaching (professional development, best practices); (o) student achievement; and (p) professional learning community (PLC). Unlike Quick et al. (2013), however, who analyzed only two open-ended responses on a written questionnaire from a variety of administrators with specific measurable standards to define, this study looked at a single type of administrator—principals of elementary, Title I-eligible, AAA-designated schools in the subject state. Additionally, the overarching question related to principal leadership style, a single concept, so that the definitions and analysis of the first-level codes offered several options for categorization, as shown in Table 4. Further, the first-level codes were then sorted and regrouped in a way that would facilitate the researcher's responding to the research questions, as shown in Table 5. Codes are then defined in terms of themes.

Table 4

*Coding Results*

First-level codes	Theme #1 Interactions/Relationships	Theme #2 Principals' strivings	Theme #3 Characterization of leadership style
Caring Administrative Instructional leadership/Coaching Leadership Style Theory Philosophy Leadership Activities Characteristics Strategies Culture/Positive attitude Innovator/Innovation/Risk taking Success Students Teachers School Principal Celebration/Hoopla Data-driven— Decision making Instruction Goal setting Communication— Of data Among constituencies Teamwork Collaboration Shared leadership Individualized/Differentiated instruction Flexible grouping Teachers/Teaching Professional development Best practices Student achievement Professional learning community (PLC)	Principal Teachers Students Staff Parents Other constituents District-level administrators	Instructional leaders Data-driven Communicators Caring Tough, but kind Narrowly focused on student achievement	Situational Top-down Participatory/Open Transformational Transactional

Table 5

*Research Question Themes/Topics With Applicable First-Level Codes*

Research question theme/topic	Applicable first-level codes
1. Opportunities and challenges	Administrative, instructional leadership, culture, innovation, risk taking, success throughout the school, becoming data-driven, communication among constituencies, individualized/ differentiated instruction, flexible groupings, professional development, best practices, student achievement, creating a PLC
2. Leadership style	Caring, administrative, theory, philosophy, characteristics, positive attitude, innovator, risk taker, using data in decision making, communicator, teamwork, collaboration, support professionalization of teachers
3. Activities/Behaviors leading to student achievement	Caring, administrative, instructional leadership, strategies, positive attitude, innovation, risk taking, including all constituencies toward a common goal of success, celebrations/hoopla, using data in decision making, communication, creating teams, collaborating, individualized/differentiated instruction, flexible groupings, professional development for teachers, implement best practices, creating a PLC
4. Attributions for success	Caring, administrative, instructional leadership, leadership style, culture, innovation, risk taking, culture of success, use of data in decision making, communication, collaboration and teamwork, ability to individualize/differentiate instruction, create flexible groupings, professional development for teachers, implementation of best practices, PLC

**Meanings of First-Level Codes**

At the first level of coding, 16 codes were identified and were then categorized into three major themes, as shown in Table 4. The researcher then derived meanings of the 16 codes based on the interviews.

**Caring.** *Caring* was described by participating principals as both characteristics and behaviors. When a principal behaves in a caring way, he or she listens actively to all the school's

constituencies; develops positive, supportive relationships; and motivates others to perform at their highest level. In terms of a leadership style during a period of accountability and change, caring suggests a situational, participative (i.e., Theory Y), open, or transformational leadership style among these principals of Title I-eligible, AAA-designated elementary schools. These leadership styles assume active involvement of the leader with his or her constituents, not only allowing, but also encouraging their input into their daily activities and the accomplishment of the mission and goals of the organization.

**Administrative.** Some duties, activities, and behaviors were described by the principals as *administrative* or *managerial*, relating to their everyday responsibilities and the operations of their schools. In translating the code administrative or managerial into a leadership style, an administrative or managerial leadership style, sometimes thought of as Theory X, might be considered a transactional or classical hierarchical style, often associated with school and school district administration (Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013). The goal is to get the job done—in this case, improved student achievement—in a safe, caring, supportive environment. Research has shown that schools like those exemplified in this study that demonstrate student achievement tend to have principals who are organizational managers (Horng & Loeb, 2010).

**Instructional leadership/coaching.** Traditionally, instructional leaders in effective schools focused on curriculum and instruction. More recently, however, the notion of instructional leadership has emphasized coaching or “organizational management for instructional improvement rather than day-to-day teaching and learning” (Horng & Loeb, 2010, p. 66). Instructional leadership therefore involves teacher hiring, teacher assignment, teacher retention, and opportunities for teachers to improve their teaching capabilities. Instructional

leadership and coaching now go beyond merely classroom instruction to the whole concept of everything that goes on in a school and the support of all constituencies to reach a common goal.

**Leadership—style, theory, philosophy.** In describing their leadership styles, the principals discussed their theories and philosophies regarding what they do and how they are or wish to be. The most common descriptors related to supporting, mentoring, and facilitating teachers in achieving student outcomes. The principals appeared to be describing their leadership styles primarily as situational or open/participative or even transformational, and they recognized when they needed to “walk the walk” in building confidence among teachers, students, and staff and serve as a sounding board for those who may want to try something new.

**Leadership—activities, characteristics, strategies.** As school leaders, these principals reported many daily activities from speaking personally to staff, students, and teachers to ensuring fire drills occurred to enforcing school rules. The characteristics of which they were most proud included those that referred to support, encouragement, and motivation of students and teachers. Strategies emphasized data that drove the mission and goals of the school and the ability to understand and communicate such data to all constituents. This definition of leadership suggests a situational, open/participative, transactional, or transformational style of leadership.

**Culture/Positive attitude.** School descriptors relating to culture and positive attitude looked at the environment of the schools that were influenced by the principals. They hoped for a positive place where collaboration and support were fostered, and resources were provided across the board in a fair way. The culture of the school emphasized what is best for students sustained by clear expectations, respect for all, and a collective wisdom supporting a positive environment.

**Innovator/Innovation, risk taking.** Burns (1978) observed that transformational leaders make change in and with the cooperation of their followers. Such leaders motivate and inspire, and they are also willing to take risks. These principals exhibited innovation in how they changed their schools from low-performing to earning the AAA designation. They modeled and taught best practices and served as role models of innovation, suggesting a transformational leadership style.

**Success—students, teachers, school, principal.** In these Title I-eligible elementary schools, success was defined through the mission and goals of the schools. The principal, serving as instructional leader, manager, administrator, and coach, fosters, encourages, inspires, and motivates everyone under his or her umbrella to achieve success, and these principals have been successful in this effort as evidenced by the AAA designation. Success in these schools appears to require a transformational and/or situational leader who can make change, try new ideas, have confidence in the constituency, and champion the mission and goals of the school.

**Celebration/Hoopla.** The code *celebration/hoopla* related to all types of activities offered in the schools and supported by the principals. Such celebrations most often related to student achievement and took many forms of festivities, including the hiring of a taco truck to provide food. Celebrations might occur daily, weekly, monthly, or annually and might be student-student, student-teacher, student-principal, teacher-teacher, teacher-principal, or any other combination of members of the school community. Marzano (n.d.), as part of connecting teacher growth to student success, has included “Celebrating Success” as an element of teacher observation (Figure 2). The principals in this study recognized the importance of celebrating success.

<b>3. Celebrating Success</b>					
The teacher provides students with recognition of their current status and their knowledge gain relative to the learning goal.					
<b>Teacher Evidence</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher acknowledges students who have achieved a certain score on the scale or rubric <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher acknowledges students who have made gains in their knowledge and skill relative to the learning goal <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher acknowledges and celebrates the final status and progress of the entire class <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher uses a variety of ways to celebrate success <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show of hands</li> <li>• Certification of success</li> <li>• Parent notification</li> <li>• Round of applause</li> </ul>					
<b>Student Evidence</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Student show signs of pride regarding their accomplishments in the class <input type="checkbox"/> When asked, students say they want to continue to make progress					
<b>Scale Levels: (choose one)</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Innovating <input type="checkbox"/> Applying <input type="checkbox"/> Developing <input type="checkbox"/> Beginning <input type="checkbox"/> Not Using <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable					
Scale	Innovating	Applying	Developing	Beginning	Not Using
<b>Celebrating success</b>	Adapts and creates new strategies for unique student needs and situations.	Provides students with recognition of their current status and their knowledge gain relative to the learning goal and monitors the extent to which students are motivated to enhance their status.	Provides students with recognition of their current status and their knowledge gain relative to the learning goal.	Uses strategy incorrectly or with parts missing.	Strategy was called for but not exhibited.
<u>Comments</u>					
<b>4. Student Interviews</b>					
<b>Student Questions:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What learning goal did today's lesson focus on?</li> <li>• How well are you doing on that learning goal?</li> <li>• Describe the different levels you can be at on the learning goal.</li> </ul>					

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Figure 2. Classroom observation form for student celebration (Marzano, n.d.).

**Communication—of data, among constituencies.** The principals of these successful schools used communication inside and outside the school as important means of conveying data, missions, goals, and progress. Their sharing of information, displaying a sense of humor,

walking around the building to talk to teachers, having open dialogue with teachers and staff, and using active listening skills are among the activities exercised in the process of communication, suggesting an open or participative leadership style.

**Teamwork, collaboration, shared leadership.** Professional learning communities (PLCs) and grade-level meetings are among the ways these principals developed teamwork, collaboration, and shared leadership. In this sense, they perceived themselves as open or participatory leaders who understand that teachers are also professionals who should have a strong say in how they instruct their students.

**Individualized/Differentiated instruction, flexible grouping.** Individualized or differentiated instruction and flexible grouping result from data-driven instruction, communication of data, and teamwork or collaboration. Through the data, principals and teachers are able to recognize gaps in student learning and fill them through methods of grouping that provide the best one-on-one or small-group learning environments for achieving success. This best practice was described in concert with an open or participatory, transformational, or situational leadership style.

**Teachers/Teaching, professional development, best practices.** Principals who focus on teaching represent instructional leaders and coaches who believe that a strong teaching staff makes the difference between obtaining, or not obtaining, the AAA designation. These principals were quick to offer professional development that trains teachers in the best classroom management and instructional practices that will guide the students to achieve success in reading, writing, and mathematics, in particular. They exemplified transformational and situational leaders in their ability to make change and to adjust their leadership activities to fit the situation.

**Student achievement.** Student achievement was a mission and goal, set by these principals, measured by scores on standardized tests, and celebrated by the AAA designation. Reflected in the culture and positive attitude throughout the school, students are taught the habits of scholars while they improve their abilities in reading, writing, and mathematics. Principals supporting student achievement where such achievement was not evident before reflected a transformational or situational leadership style in their ability to gain the confidence of all constituencies to move students forward in their learning despite the challenges of poverty and social status.

**Professional learning community (PLC).** One goal of a PLC, according to these principals, was to improve the professional capacity of the teachers in their school. In a PLC, teachers work and share together, to the extent possible given time limitations, so that each one is not “reinventing the wheel” for every lesson. This trend began as a means of school reform in appreciation of the work of Senge (1990), and principals instituted grade-level meetings, professional development sessions, and other training seminars to engage teachers in learning new practices, all with the goal of improved student achievement. Once again, PLCs evidence transformational, open/participative, and situational leadership styles.

### **Summary of the Coding Process**

Ten initial and five follow-up interviews were conducted with 10 principals of Title I-eligible, AAA-designated, elementary schools in one Western state. As the researcher read and reread the transcripts of the interviews, she identified repeated words or codes that seemed to be meaningful to the study of leadership styles of these principals. The meaning for each code was derived by the researcher and summarized in relation to its expression and to leadership style. The codes were then categorized into three themes: (a) interactions/relationships, (b) principals’

strivings, and (c) characterization of leadership style (Table 4). The codes were also sorted by their applicability to the four research questions (Table 5). The section that follows specifically reports the principals' responses to each of the 14 remaining questions from the interview protocol (Appendix C).

### **Responses to the Interview Questions**

The interview protocol consisted of 15 questions (Appendix C). Each principal was interviewed once, and a second level of probing was added to clarify and bring depth to the responses to the research questions. The first question, already reported, explored the background of each of the 10 principals of 10 different AAA-designated elementary schools in three counties in one Western state. The responses to the remaining 14 questions, which were open-ended, are reported in sequence.

### **School Descriptions**

When asked to describe their school, most principals used phrases like “my families are hard-working” and “the school has a really good group of students.” The principals of schools A and E said that they have a high English language learning (ELL) population and achieve most of their school-wide goals in reading comprehension, oral language, reading fluency, and writing. The principal of School B described the school as a family. Principals of schools C and F added that they have strong instructional strategies in place and use Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) in their schools. The principal of School G exemplified those who described their schools as one that values small group instruction as a best practice.

### **Celebrating Accomplishments**

Principals were asked, “How do you celebrate the accomplishments of your students?” In general, the principals (schools A, F, G, J) said they instituted big assemblies with awards and

programs like College Day. In addition, parents were invited to be a regular part of their school's culture. The principals of schools B and G also mentioned that student projects are displayed in a variety of highly visible places around the school, and big celebrations occur both before and after state testing. For ease of programming, three schools (C, E, G) use technology to announce accomplishments on the school's intercom system or broadcast honor roll presentations directly into the classroom through the Intranet. In schools D, F, and G, the principals award successful Positive Interventions Behaviors and Supports (PBIS) with positive tickets and reward drawings for setting an example of best behavior practices. Some principals (schools D, F, G, J) telephone parents and take 2 minutes to compliment the student, informing the parent about the scholarly behaviors or good character choices the students made. The principals of schools E, G, and H explained that they meet privately with students to monitor their goal setting and celebrate personal successes (both big and small) with staff and students to build relationships.

### **Mission and Goals**

In terms of deciding the school's mission and goals, the consensus among the principals of schools A, B, C, D, E, and H is that everything is done as a team; the principal, however, is in the position of making the final decision. They all also emphasized that teachers are a part of the leadership team, and the term "collaboration" appeared frequently in responses. The principals of schools A, B, C, D, and F further noted that many of the structures and expectations with which they deal come from a well-structured district office, so school sites make decisions that impact only the specific children they serve. Another major theme acknowledged distributive leadership with the use of School Site Councils (SSC) and English Learner Advisory Committees (ELAC) (principals of schools G, H, J).

Despite the support of the parents, teachers, and the district office and the use of distributive leadership, the principals fundamentally agreed that they were the ones eventually held accountable for the implementation of the mission and vision of the school on a daily basis. The principals did, however, take into consideration the recommendations of the leadership team, the best interests of stakeholders, and adherence to the guidelines of the school district and the State Board of Education.

### **Instructional Leadership**

The principals were asked, “If you were walking up to two teachers in your school, what would you want them to say about you as an instructional leader?” Overall, most of the principals want to be known as approachable, always having the best interests of the students in mind. They want their teaching and support staff to understand that they remember what it is like to be a teacher; therefore, they feel they maintain a soft approach with people, but remain hard on the issue at hand.

When probed further, principals reported that they wanted to provide teachers the services, support, and resources to teach effectively, especially in an era of changing core curriculum standards. They recognize that teachers are in a “learning curve” (School F) regarding the new State Curriculum Standards and the need to help teachers adjust. The principal of School F referred to “unpacking” and “unwrapping” the standards so that teachers would become familiar with them. Further, principals understand that the data with which they work were based on earlier standards, so they may or may not apply to the new standards. This requires principals and teachers to work together in a data-driven environment to assure that all children are able to learn whatever standard is current.

Very simply, the principal of School E wants to be perceived as “motivated, supportive, open, and excited.” This principal wants to be known for providing the resources teachers need and the time to plan collaboratively. Additionally, “I would want [the teachers] to feel like I gave them meaningful feedback related to their teaching practices and encouraged a growth mindset and risk taking during this time of Common Core implementation.” The principal of School J added that she would want her teachers to see that she makes a difference in student learning, has an open door, creates trust, listens to them, and holds honest conversations about improving teaching practice. The principal of School I feels he leads by example; as a case in point, he volunteered to teach a new strategy to the instructional staff and then modeled by teaching students with teachers observing. He also always attends teacher training so that he is able to know what is going on in the classrooms and if it is the best for students.

The principal of School G wants to be known as “the guy to work for.” One of his gurus is Michael Fullan (2014), whose new book *The Principal* is one this man insisted the researcher quote directly:

Principals’ responsibilities have increased enormously over the past two decades. They are expected to run a smooth school; manage health, safety, and the building; innovate without upsetting anyone; connect with students and teachers; be responsive to parents and the community; answer to their districts; and above all, deliver results. More and more, they are being led to be direct instructional leaders, and therein lies the rub. How is this for a shocker: the principal as direct instructional leader is not the solution! If principals are to maximize their impact on learning, we must reconceptualize their role so that it clearly, practically, and convincingly becomes a force for improving the whole school and the results it brings. (p. 6)

To the principal of School G, this quote redefines the concept of the instructional leader's having to be the principal to the teachers sharing their expertise in providing instructional leadership. Additionally, this principal wants to be known as one who was respected by his teachers for his leadership abilities and who gave them the resources they needed to be successful. He noted that he has 31 teachers and 800 students in a K-5 school configuration, and he takes pride in the abilities and expertise of his teachers. He also hopes to continue to share that expertise through the "collective wisdom" of the school and support the teachers through the PLC philosophy and shared leadership. This principal is aware that he does not have all the answers, so he relies on the experts within the school and hires consultants to assist with whatever is unavailable to him through his school or district.

### **Implementing Change**

The principals were then asked, "If you were implementing a change in your building and you had a teacher who refused to get on board with the change, how would you handle it and gain his or her buy-in and participation?" The principals of schools A, E, and F explained that their biggest assets are their ability to listen and their keen desire to try to help teachers improve. Others (principals of schools C, D, G, H, J) noted it is important to recognize the strengths of staff, build relationships, and ask the uncooperative teacher what support would be most beneficial, gaining his or her input. Another essential strategy proposed by the principals of schools A, B, D, H, and I is to offer instructional coaching and modeling. Setting clear expectations and goals was mentioned as a strategy for obtaining support for change by the principals of schools F and H.

### **Leadership Style**

The principals were asked to think back to their memories of how their leadership style evolved, considering any events that may have triggered changes. In response, the principals of schools A, D, and I claimed that their experience working with staff and students demonstrated the need for effective leadership, triggering their determination to achieve an effective leadership style. The principal of School A also reported having read the book *Good to Great* by Jim Collins (2001), which assisted his determination of an effective leadership style. The principals of schools C and E said words like these: “I realized that I was reactionary instead of reflective and began to investigate and understand all aspects of a situation.” The response of the principal of School D was that the school district leadership modeled the “practice what you preach” philosophy, applying a selfless and effective leadership style to emulate. The principal of School I indicated a strong impact of social justice on “how I approached the leadership role.”

The principals were then asked how their leadership style has changed over their careers, if it has. The principal of School A offered several ideas, saying that he learned to provide training, support, and follow up. He also emulated role models, did not worry about making friends, and developed a thick skin. Like the principal of School A, the principals of schools G and H learned to provide training, support, and follow up; the principal of School D similarly emulated role models; the principal of School E did not worry about making friends and had a thick skin. The principals of schools B, F, and I differed in their responses: They became stricter in accordance with the expectations that were set at district and state levels.

Further probing of the respondents yielded additional comments. For example, the principal of School I changed his leadership style by recognizing that everything done in the school must be student-based. He holds everyone to the same rigorous standard and has high

expectations for teachers, students, staff, and himself. The principal of School J responded differently: “My leadership style has not changed as much as my understanding of the plethora of ideas that exist to reach students.” She ticked off on her fingers the “pendulum swings” in curriculum that have occurred during her career in education: “core literature, back to basics, problem solving, guided discovery, thinking maps, early detection and intervention (EDI), sheltered English, phonics approach [to reading], and whole language approach.” This principal asserted that she is flexible, able to adjust her plans when the unexpected occurs. She is also flexible in that she is aware that more than one way to accomplish a task or goal is always available, and she recognizes the importance of using the strengths of people around her to take on the challenges at hand.

In discussing how her leadership style has changed over her 21-year career, the principal of School E remarked that she has “thick skin” and has grown more confident as a leader over time. Moreover, because she is now a senior administrator, she speaks up more in meetings and is better able to decide not to reappoint an unsuccessful teacher. She noted that at the time of the interview, she was trying to dismiss a veteran teacher “who is no longer able to successfully teach students in an appropriate manner.” Her focus is on the students and what is best for them, as is that of the principal of School G, who added that he has become more reflective over time.

The principal of School F recalled that when she became an administrator in 1998, the leadership style/approach was very top-down: “The principal was in charge of the school and ultimately accountable for everything that happened in it.” An advocate of PLCs, she noted that PLCs require shared leadership in order to function properly for the benefit of all. She reported a safety problem related to staff supervision that she was able to resolve through shared leadership that would have been a greater challenge from a hierarchical standpoint. Communication, she

said, is a critical component of shared leadership; historically, complaints would have been heard “here and there,” and she would have made a change for everyone to live with. In the PLC, everyone gets to discuss the problem, have input, and come up with a solution which all can support. The teachers need to have “a voice,” she said.

Like the others, the principal of School F reiterated her having become a facilitator rather than a director. She asked questions rather than imposing answers, as is consistent with Fullan’s (2014) view of instructional leadership. Overall, the leadership styles of the principals have changed over their careers not only because they have become primarily facilitators, but also because they have learned to improve their communication with all constituents, use data to support decision making, and share the leadership with other professionals in the building—namely, teachers.

### **Driving Student Achievement**

The principals were asked, “What are some of the factors that determine or drive student achievement at your school?” The factors ranged from goals to people to models of instruction and interaction. Basically summarizing what leads to student achievement, the principal of School I said, “Creating excitement about learning is critical for high academic achievement.” Regarding instruction, the principals of schools A, C, and J said that much of the instruction is data-driven; therefore, goal setting is an essential resource. The principals of schools D and E observed that they have teachers who are highly motivated and dedicated to the school; such teachers are critical to the success of their schools. The principal of School E added the understanding of the cultural differences and needs of the school’s stakeholders. In terms of models, schools A and F use the Collaboration, Coaching, and Learning (CCL) model, and the principal of School F feels that the PLC process also drives student achievement. This giving of

time for implementation of new programs and strategies was a critical part of the PLC and coaching models.

Along similar lines, the principal of School C indicated staff development is effective in best-practice instructional strategies that, in turn, drive student achievement. The importance of follow through in regard to staff development and consistency in programing was discussed by the principal of School A when he noted the book *Good to Great* by Jim Collins (2001).

Summarizing his take on the book, he said: “He [Collins] talks about getting the right people on the bus. He also talks about Level 5 leadership is if you start something even when you leave—that something keeps going like Ford Motor Company or Walt Disney.”

Curriculum drives student achievement in School J. Although districts often provide curriculums, at School J, the teachers form committees to select curriculum with the approval of the principal. Teachers then set goals for students. The principal of School J would like to empower students in goal setting, but she recognizes that “teachers are paid to make sure students are learning and learning the right goals based on test data and teacher observation.” Rubrics, she noted, are used only in writing so that students can see their strengths and weaknesses, but she said that “this type of evaluation takes time and expertise, and some teachers are farther along in [knowing] this process . . . than others.”

### **Monitoring Student Achievement**

The most common means of monitoring student achievement are the use of PLCs to look at data (principals of schools A, B, C, D, E, F, H, I) and employing PBIS and an understanding of social justice to support the whole child with the Behavior, Academic, Health, Attendance (BAHA) model (principals of schools A, D, E, F, G, H, I). For the principals of schools B, C, G, and I, common assessments help monitor student achievement effectively. School J offers

tutoring and RTI to ensure student gaps are eliminated. Additionally, School E uses a variety of tests to monitor student achievement and focuses on meeting and celebrating goals.

In School F, district-wide data are acquired through common assessments six times per year. Teachers also conduct formative assessment as they teach. In this school, which uses a PLC model, the principal and the teachers review and analyze all of the assessment data to determine which students require the most help and how to help them. For example, the principal of School F reported, “We had students who became homeless, and they needed other things that were not so academic. We had resources in the district, so I called our homeless liaison” and asked for assistance for those children. Those supports led to academic help as well. This principal also maintains data binders that contain the pacing guide, common assessments, and the strategies used to address academic issues. To make sure next steps were followed, the principal monitored the data, charting it per grade level per area of study. Once problems, say in reading or math, were identified, she would gain the commitment of the teachers to a daily activity such as guided reading to improve student achievement. She then monitored further by going into classrooms to observe.

In School G, data are closely examined as a means of monitoring student achievement. Teachers then set goals with students, and small-group instruction and high engagement strategies are emphasized as primary instructional means of achieving student success. The whole language arts block is taught with small-group rather than large-group instruction; therefore, teachers are constantly differentiating instruction based on student needs, providing one-on-one or small-group instruction. The principal of School G said that his teachers are using Lucy Calkins’ writing kits, and the principal is also insisting that teachers conference one-on-one with students about their writing to “get an understanding of whether [students] are

understanding things.” This principal has ensured that children at every level—from Pre-K up—know how to work quietly at centers while the teacher is working individually with another student. As a result of these efforts, students are able to be monitored regularly.

### **Data-driven Decision Making**

Schools are expected to use data to plan everything from school lunches to bus transportation to instruction. When asked how they use data in their decision making about their schools, the principals offered a variety of responses. For example, through data, schools B and D build heterogeneous classes and ensure they are equitable; consequently, schools B, D, and J are able to select an instructional and behavioral intervention specific to the needs of each grade level by examining test results. In schools H, I, and J, teachers are able to use data for student groupings and RTI. In schools C, D, I, and J, data exploration helps decide what staff development is needed to support best instructional practices, and schools A, D, H, and I opted for the CCL model and used CCL to make instructional decisions to set goals for student achievement. Similarly, schools B, D, and I employ data to determine an appropriate strategic intervention for writing. In School B, the only principal to mention this, data are used to create groups for parents to help them gain a variety of skills.

Additional probing of their responses led to further insight. For example, in School F, located in a small school district, the superintendent and the assistant superintendent frequently conduct walk-throughs to observe the teachers in their classrooms. Because of the size of the district and the frequency of the walk-throughs, teachers view the top administrators’ presence as support rather than punishment; consequently, administrators and teachers are seen as constantly using data to support student instruction. In School E, teachers use data for grouping and to drive instruction. This school has “a team of support staff who provide assistance inside (push-in) and

outside (pull-out) of the classroom.” In all the schools, the emphasis is on directed or targeted student instruction based on data that identify students in need.

### **Encouraging Teachers to Work Together**

The most common way the principals are able to encourage teachers to work together is through PLCs where teachers can build in time for vertical articulation as well as school-wide collaboration that is separate from staff meetings (schools A, B, C, D, G, H, I). In schools A and H, teachers are supported in their effort to look at data to make strategic decisions. The principals of schools C, D, G, and I find effective staffing is critical for getting the most out of teachers and coaches, and the CCL model is a useful tool. The principals of schools E and J rely on personal connections to encourage teachers, students, and parents. The principal of School F focuses on strengths to validate people so they can emphasize the positive. Finally, the principals of schools F and J reported that “bucket filling” is critical for recognizing good qualities or acts, and respecting culture is essential for encouraging teachers to work together.

### **Motivating Students, Teachers, and Staff**

Not only are principals responsible for encouraging teachers to collaborate among themselves, but they must also motivate students, teachers, and staff to yield excellent student achievement. One characteristic used by the principals of schools C, F, G, I, and J is that they are not only upbeat and positive, but they are also realistic in their expectations. The principals also do positive, productive things. For example, the principals of schools E, F, and G make phone calls to stakeholders to create and maintain personal relationships. In addition, the principals of schools E and I have found in order to motivate stakeholders, it is effective to “name what you see so you are not assessing a behavior”; instead, the principal is simply verbalizing the good things that are seen around the school. For the principals of schools B, D, and F, the concept of

“positive breeds positive” is reflected in repeated positive feedback to recognize hard work and student leadership roles, and strategic lunch-time games motivate a variety of stakeholders in these schools. The principals of schools A, G, and H provide regular formal and informal recognition actions or activities. Finally, the principal of School C attends regular data-driven staff development sessions and provides food for the event for the teachers.

### **Importance of the AAA Designation**

The last question asked of the principals was, “What has the AAA designation meant to your school?” With the award, the schools receive a flag to advertise their award of the AAA designation, and the principals of schools A, B, H, and J “proudly fly the flag outside the school.” These principals also accepted the award at a major theme park with five teacher and parent representatives from the school, and they met or received a phone call from the state superintendent. For the principals of schools B, F, and G, earning the AAA designation was a validation of a focused goal—improved student achievement. Principal A reinforced the belief that to motivate stakeholders, the school clearly and widely celebrates when goals are accomplished. The principals of schools D, E, F, G, and H added that the award highlighted the hard work and unity of stakeholders, the support of the community, and the pride among parents in their children and in the school that serves them. School J ordered a taco truck to celebrate the AAA designation through shared Mexican food.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to provide the results of the data collected through the questionnaire and state data regarding the participating principals and their schools. The method of collecting the data from 10 principals of 10 different AAA-designated, Title I elementary

schools in three counties in one Western state was reiterated, and a preliminary discussion of the coding of the interview transcripts ensued.

School and participant findings were reported first, indicating the size, location, and population of each community where the school is located. With each school description was the background of each principal. Demographic information was then summarized in text and Table 3, disguising the counties and school districts to protect confidentiality.

To ascertain the important words in the interview transcripts, the transcripts were coded. Sixteen first-level codes led to the emergence of three major themes (Table 4): (a) Interaction/ Relationships, (b) Principals' Strivings, and (c) Characterization of Leadership Style. In addition, the codes relating to the topic of each research question were identified (Table 5). The researcher-interpreted meanings of the codes were then stated with suggestions for resulting leadership styles.

The interview (Appendix C) is composed of 15 questions. The first question resulted in the demographic information. The responses to the subsequent 14 interview questions, along with later additional probes, were reported in sequence using the voices of the principals. They described their schools including mission and goals, talked about instructional leadership, discussed celebrating accomplishments, reviewed how they implemented change, and characterized their leadership styles and how they have changed over time. They also reported how student achievement is driven at their school, how they monitor student achievement, how data-driven decisions are made, how they encourage teachers to work together, how they motivate all constituencies, and how important the AAA designation has been to them and their school.

The next chapter serves several functions. First, the results of the study are summarized. Then, the research questions are answered with reference to the results of the research and the literature reviewed earlier in this document. A discussion follows with implications for the field of educational leadership and suggestions for future research. Finally, the entire study is summarized for the reader.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter begins with the restatement of the purpose of the study and the research questions that guided it. Next is a summary of the findings in terms of the themes that emerged from the interviews and how they relate to the literature provided in Chapter II. The research questions are then answered in terms of the findings from the study and the literature. A discussion follows relating business and school leadership and looking at leadership, change, and school reform. The study's implications, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research are presented. Conclusions are then formed, and last is a summary of the entire dissertation.

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

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explore the leadership style of principals whose Title I elementary schools have achieved their state's Academic Achievement Award (AAA) designation, indicating high student academic achievement as measured by state-mandated standardized test scores. For a more cohesive study, only elementary school principals were invited to participate. Ten principals fulfilling all requirements for inclusion in the study were interviewed; five were re-interviewed with additional probes. Archival data were reviewed about their schools and school districts. The results of this study may help principals to examine their own leadership style to better understand what leads schools to improve student achievement, especially in low-socioeconomic status (SES) schools.

### Research Questions

The following research questions guided this exploration of principals' leadership styles in successful Title I elementary schools in three counties in one Western state in the United States and are answered in this chapter:

1. What features of a Title I elementary school are identified by their principals as posing unique professional opportunities and challenges for a leader of that school?
2. How do principals of successful Title I elementary schools characterize and describe their own leadership styles?
3. What are the activities and behaviors principals of successful Title I elementary schools use on a day-to-day basis that appear to influence student success?
4. To what do principals of successful Title I schools attribute their success?

### Summary of Findings

The 10 principal interviews resulted in 16 first-level codes that could then be categorized among the following three themes: (a) interactions/relationships, (b) principals' strivings, and (c) characterization of leadership styles. These themes are discussed in the sections that follow.

#### **Theme #1: Interactions/Relationships**

Interactions and relationships were explored in seven categories: (a) principal, (b) teachers, (c) students, (d) staff, (e) parents, (f) other constituents, and (g) district-level administrators. All these interactions and relationships intertwined to yield high student achievement and a school that is responsive to its students.

**Principals.** The principals want to be seen as leaders who are supportive, make a difference, communicate, collaborate, can be accountable, act as decision makers, appear flexible, and have a sense of humor. They wish to interact with and relate well to all

constituencies, especially students, teachers, staff, and parents. These principals reported that they are positive and upbeat, lead their schools without favoritism, and act as role models within the school community. They listen actively and sympathetically to others as they remind their constituents of the school's mission and goals and strategize to achieve them, even if they must initiate change to do so. The principals repeated the ideas of *culture* and *positive attitude* as central to their leadership style.

**Teachers.** In their interviews, the principals demonstrated a great deal of respect for their teachers, indicating their dedication, strong work ethic, high standards, and enthusiasm. The principals also quite unanimously wanted to provide the teachers all the supports and resources possible to improve their teaching, such as professional development, dedicated time for grade-level meetings, curriculum and teaching supplies, professional learning communities (PLCs), and opportunities to reflect. One repeated descriptor of the principals' relationships and interactions with teachers was "support/supportive."

**Students.** The principals wanted the students to know that these principals are adults in their lives who care about them. This group of principals cares about instilling the habits of scholars and seeing their students become successful high achievers, as evidenced by local- and state-level test scores. They also aim to provide a high quality education for each and every child in their care. Although principals repeated "success" and "high achievement," they reiterated the concept of "care/caring" over and over in talking about students.

**Staff.** The principals did not talk much about staff. When they did, they mentioned that staff members are dedicated, have a strong work ethic, and exhibit values that are consistent with the mission and goals of the school.

**Parents.** These principals preferred parents who are involved with their child's education and support the efforts of the school towards excellent student achievement. They hoped for community interest and involvement, and the principals viewed parents as the conduit for connection. Safety, a major concern of parents, was also a high priority for principals, and it should be noted that the site of the recent (as of this writing) San Bernardino shootings, initiated at a facility for persons with disabilities by a husband-and-wife terrorist team on December 2, 2015, is in the same general area of the country as these schools ("Full Coverage," 2015). These principals also wanted to be sensitive to the culture of the parents, whatever it may be.

**Other constituents.** As with parents, the principals wanted to involve other constituents and seek relationships with them so that the entire community supports the school. They would like stakeholders to be purpose-driven and raise funds for the school to enhance education through activities and resources for children and professional development for teachers.

**District-level administrators.** Although the principals commented rarely about staff, they mentioned district-level administrators even less frequently despite the fact that the principals' responsibility is to carry out the demands of the district. In one instance of a small school district, the superintendent was a frequent visitor; as a result, teachers viewed the key administrator as a purveyor of support rather than punishment. The principals of these schools tended to view accountability to the district as a primary responsibility and did not shirk it; however, they achieved the goals in a way that suited them and their situation. In addition, more than one principal reported having developed a "thick skin" for dealing with administrative details and accountability while remaining caring and proactive for teachers and students.

**Theme #2: Principals' Strivings**

These principals viewed themselves as instructional leaders, excellent communicators, caring administrators, and tough, but kind individuals. Narrowly focused on student achievement, as directed by their district administrators, they were data-driven in their approach to instruction. They believed in educating the whole child and in supporting teachers to do their best. Caring deeply about the children and the communities they serve, the principals were deeply involved in providing high quality education to all. They truly wanted the children in their care to achieve at a high level in school.

**Theme #3: Characteristics of Leadership Style**

The principals identified six primary activities that consume their daily work lives: (a) supervision, (b) follow up, (c) delegation of tasks, (d) work with a leadership team, (e) facilitation, and (f) meetings. In addition, they came up with an array of descriptors for traits, characteristics, or behaviors that they perceive they have that reflect their leadership style. The principals are: (a) accountable, (b) collaborative, (c) decisive, (d) flexible, (e) genuine, (f) good listeners, (g) grateful, (h) showing no favoritism, (i) open, (j) positive, (k) professional, (l) respectful, (m) selfless, (n) having a sense of humor, (o) strict, (p) supportive, and (q) possessing thick skin. In their leadership roles, the principals think communication is critical, and best practices are an intrinsic part of instruction. In addition, the principals need to be role models for all constituencies, and they must develop relationships. Further, their attitude and environment must be positive. According to the principals, their leadership style may be situational, top-down, participatory/open, transactional, or transformational. The answers to the research questions will elaborate on these points.

### **Answers to the Research Questions**

The phenomenological research process enabled the exploration of how principals viewed their leadership practices and their possible contribution to their earning the AAA designation in one Western state. In addition, the analysis revealed the pressures of academic accountability and the ways that collective teacher efficacy were supported by each principal. The examination of the data focused on the commonalities and differences among coded responses and how those consistencies and variances might transfer to an understanding of the leadership styles of all principals, especially those in low-SES, low-achieving schools. Patterns emerged constituting three major themes: (a) interactions/relationships, (b) principals' strivings, and (c) characterization of leadership style. In the following sections, these emergent themes are discussed in response to the research questions along with the codes that yielded them.

#### **Research Question 1**

The first research question asked: "What features of a Title I elementary school are identified by their principals as posing unique professional opportunities and challenges for a leader of that school?" Clearly, serving a Title I population while maintaining a teaching and learning environment that earns the AAA designation is challenging. The requirements of the AAA award are even more intensive, requiring infinitely more effort to achieve. Under the general topic area of opportunities and challenges, the following first-level codes were applicable: (a) administrative, (b) instructional leadership, (c) culture, (d) innovation/risk taking, (e) success throughout the school, (f) becoming data-driven, (g) communication among constituencies, (h) individualized/differentiated instruction, (i) flexible groupings, (j) professional development, (k) best practices, (l) student achievement, and (m) creating a professional learning community (PLC).

This finding relates to the literature on working in low-SES schools. As a case in point, Villarreal (2001) identified 13 challenges to and recommendations for leading low-SES, low-performing, high-ELL schools. Villarreal first recommended improving the school climate. The principals in the present study did so by initiating, maintaining, and rewarding the presence of a pervasive positive attitude throughout the school. Next, Villarreal suggested establishing and nurturing human relationships among educators, teachers, and administrators; among educators and students; and among educators and families. The principals reiterated the importance of interactions and relationships over and over again so that interactions/relationships emerged as an important theme. The principals also supported Villarreal's contention that school leaders should provide opportunities for collaborative planning and designing curriculum and lessons. They made that happen through regularly scheduled grade-level meetings, instructional leadership that included teachers, and open discussions about curriculum and teaching. To this end, they also fulfilled Villarreal's next recommendation to provide staff development opportunities on effective teaching strategies as often as possible to ensure that evidence-based instruction to meet core curriculum content areas was practiced throughout the school.

One basic suggestion made by Villareal (2001) for leading low-SES schools was that principals need to recruit competent teachers who are sensitive and capable to teach all student populations. According to Waters et al. (2003), particularly for low-SES, low-performing schools, a chronic problem is attracting, supporting, and retaining excellent teachers. The principals in this study agreed and spent a great deal of their time in supporting their teachers. One strategy they used was to provide guidance to new teachers and protect them from the influence of other teachers who overtly or covertly were sabotaging any innovative school reform (Villarreal, 2001). Like Villarreal, the principals took the time to map the assets

represented in the community and in families and integrate them into the instructional plan. They also organized instruction in innovative ways and built flexibility into the instructional design by allowing teachers to be the instructional leaders in the school. As a result, the principals provided a challenging, intellectually enriching curriculum and were able to align curriculum both horizontally and vertically, ensuring the delivery of appropriately challenging grade-level content. Finally, the principals explored and acknowledged the cultural and linguistic differences in the communities in which they led their schools. Consequently, as Villarreal recommended, they established programs that capitalized on the linguistic strengths of students and families in the community, and with testing and data in mind, the principals promoted instructional approaches that fostered literacy development and content acquisition.

Through their responses to the interview questions, the participants acknowledged and addressed the unique challenges for leaders of Title I schools resulting from the shift towards accountability through testing that also leads to the AAA designation (Villarreal, 2001). Many discussed the changes that they have made in their leadership style and practice as well as the way that accountability pressures are felt by stakeholders throughout their school districts. A positive identity of a supportive role as an instructional leader was a repeated theme throughout the interviews. The principal of School C explained,

I try to establish a relationship with the teacher[s]. I would understand their strengths and talk to them about why they first go into teaching. I would give the teacher the opportunity to want to change and the resources [such as] modeling instruction, training, or observation to help that teacher.

Similarly, the principal of School J emphasized the unique challenge of this role as the instructional leader. He said he found that his skills “evolved with the trends of time.” In

addition, one skill he really valued was the ability to “read the tea leaves and sense the needs of the students and teachers.” His ability to sense what is happening as well as what will occur and identify needs enabled him to be ready always to face any challenge that running a Title I school might provide. This was consistent with the findings of Waters et al. (2003) that an important leadership ability for principals is identifying current and possible problems and addressing them before the issues get out of hand.

Research conducted by NASSP and NAESP (2013) delineated the multifaceted responsibilities of public school principals in the United States. The report indicated that collaboration among the principal, the teachers, the staff, the students, and all other constituencies makes the difference in the link between principal leadership and student learning, for it is the principal as leader—instructional or otherwise—who pulls all the school variables together. For this reason, one opportunity and challenge prevalent in low-SES schools is relationships with stakeholders, also a prevalent theme. The principal of School E described her role:

I try to be a cheerleader just by vocalizing the positive behaviors that I see within the school. I want to create excitement and pride in learning. I will text parents, call parents, and email photos. I have gone so far as [to] call a teacher’s parent and tell [him or her] how amazing [his or her] child is as a teacher at our school.

This emphasis on relationships threaded through every principal’s interview. For example, the principal of School D said, “I honor teachers as individuals and use an honest and soft approach. I am soft on the people and hard on the issue [of highly successful students].” The focus of the principal of School C in helping a struggling teacher, as noted before, simply re-emphasized relationships and communication.

Although the focus on relationships may not be unique to Title I schools, this emphasis was prevalent in the literature (i.e., NASSP & NAESP, 2013; Price, 2012; Waters et al., 2003). Proactive, positive relationships result in a positive school climate, creating an atmosphere of learning. Hoy and Hannum (1997) found that building relationships adds a positive perspective to the human aspect of leadership and influences the climate of the school. Creating positive relationships can be more challenging in a low-SES school where cultures may vary widely, and school goals may not be in agreement across the population or community (Villarreal, 2001). As Reeves (2003) pointed out, 90/90/90 schools have 90% of students who are high-performing academically, 90% are high-poverty, and 90% are racial or ethnic minorities. Despite being low-SES, success is quite possible among these schools if challenges of culture and poverty are acknowledged rather than set aside, and academic achievement is the focus. Additionally, the success of 90/90/90 schools is attributed to making curriculum choices available, regularly assessing students for progress and aiming instruction at improvement. Further, nonfiction writing is emphasized, and student work is scored collaboratively. The principals in the present study turned challenges into opportunities, and with the help of the school community, clear goals, and extraordinary dedication and motivation of all constituents, they pursued and achieved the AAA designation for their schools.

### **Research Question 2**

The second research question asked: “How do principals of successful Title I elementary schools characterize and describe their own leadership styles?” In most cases, principals identified theirs as a transformational leadership style. They based their response on their desire to concentrate on the human aspect of their stakeholders and to strive for buy-in as a means of gaining cooperation, demonstrating their hope of inspiring others to elicit needed change. Words

that appeared in the first-level coding supported a transformational leadership style: (a) caring, (b) theory, (c) philosophy, (d) characteristics, (e) positive attitude, (f) innovator, (g) risk taker, (h) use of data in decision making, (i) communicator, (j) teamwork, (k) collaboration, and (l) support for professionalization of teachers. A positive attitude was a repeated refrain. For example, the principal of School E explained that her leadership style depends on the “power of positive,” a theme reiterated by the principal of School D who said, “Positive breeds positive,” and she further believes in rewarding hard work. Moreover, positivity is required on all sides. The principal of School E put a great deal of emphasis on a leadership style focused on authentic praise. She explained that she values being genuine about her pride in the accomplishments of the stakeholders, and she names or labels the good things that she sees from stakeholders.

The principal’s leadership style depended on his or her ability to transform an environment. For this reason, recruitment and retention of teachers as an element of leadership style also pervaded the interviews with the principals of AAA-designated Title I elementary schools (Waters et al., 2003). “Good student teachers always come to this school, and we often hire them,” noted the principal of School B. “Young and excited teachers help invigorate the school,” reported the principal of School B, which was a sentiment shared by the principal of School D, who characterized the staff as being dedicated to the school and student success. The quality of instruction and the desire to make a difference in children’s lives, related to recruitment and retention, comprised pervasive incentives for striving to offer the best instruction. As a case in point, the principal of School H stressed the centering of both personal and professional goals on positive educational experiences for children. Similarly, the principal of School I emphasized the importance of her leading by example, emanating the need for

accountability, and exhibiting pride in the profession. As a result, her teachers followed suit with most of them remaining on campus working until after 5:00 p.m. despite union requirements.

Believing in the school's staff and its constituents is also a critical component of a transformational leadership style (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). For example, the principal of School C presumed that "all teachers are here because they want to make students better. This keeps me focused on always working to find the best in people and ways to help people be successful." The principal of School G noted the staff's focus on students, reflected in the statement that "the school chose to transform itself by changing curriculum delivery to small group all the time with a systematic ELD (English language development) focus so that there was no 'gap' between ELL (English language learners) and EO (educational opportunity) students." This choice, the principal explained, enabled more monitoring of goals and individual student focus than what is generally found in a typical instructional setting. He further emphasized that his leadership style is to empower staff to make these critical instructional decisions as a team, again consistent with a transformational leadership style (Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013). This principal also described with pride the fact that the staff of School G never cares about winning awards like District Teacher of the Year, and they do not look for outside individual accolades; instead, they find value in making students successful as a school. The principal of School J added that while he would like to take all the credit for the success of School J, overall, the school has had a low staff turnover and a high desire to succeed. Further, students and teachers inspired change within themselves with a small quantity of support and some researched-based direction from him.

Leadership style can change when necessary, defined in the literature as situational leadership (Hardman, 2011). The principal of School J, exemplifying situational leadership, was

asked about how he went about implementing change in a building when he had a teacher who refused to get on board:

I believe that I can get more with honey than with vinegar. There is no problem getting staff on board with new concepts or strategies. Most teachers want to be here. I had one teacher who was unkind and appeared unprofessional. I got to know her and used her strengths to get the best out of her. My job is sometimes 10% IQ and 90% public relations.

When asked the same question regarding gaining participation from a teacher who was not compliant, the principal of School H suggested beginning by offering support to the teacher with strong clear communication of expectations. Next, she would use teachers on special assignment to offer coaching and assign the teacher a buddy who could offer support, structured opportunities to observe, and a sounding board. Finally, she would ensure that the staff member was given clear directions along with goal setting and progress monitoring. Addressing the same situation, the principal of School I explained that grade-level pressure is generally very influential because it allows for a natural accountability process that is highly effective in moving grade levels and the school forward with best practices. This principal further noted that she would solicit the teacher on special assignment to provide support because she believes that teachers should be given the opportunity to be self-reflective enough about areas in need of improvement to self-improve. Her last line of defense, she indicated, was to use progressive discipline and tow the hard line, an element of transactional leadership (Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013), but she recalled this stance has rarely been needed in her career. These principals adjusted their leadership style to fit the situation (Hallinger & Bickman, 1996; Hardman, 2011).

The principal of School G provided an example of his leadership style by explaining that he persuades about change and gains support by establishing relationships (i.e., Robinson et al., 2008). He has learned that getting to know his teachers and their perspectives regarding both home and work is critical to his success as a school leader. He continued to describe how he discovers where the teachers started in education and why they got into the profession. Finally, to ensure teachers are appropriately supported, which is how buy-in is gained, he ensures that the observation and reflection piece is in place through questioning and discussion, focusing on the question, “How can I help you?” Based on a conversation that creates reflection, the principal of School G ensures that he makes resources available to teachers using a nonthreatening and supportive instructional model. The principal of School G reflects an open style of leadership (Katz & Kahn, 1966).

The principals identified their leadership styles in different ways. The principal of School D observed that good communication as an element of her leadership style has enabled her to persuade teachers to buy in to new policies or strategies, thereby avoiding the need to write them up for noncompliance. She referred to her leadership style as an open leadership style and said that it is critical to “walk the walk” and be a role model. Recognizing her collaborative leadership style, the principal of School H described how she has learned to delegate work and follow up on the progress of the task assigned. The principal of School F described her strategy of talking personally to teachers to understand the gist of the problem. Additionally, this principal sets expectations and follows up to ensure that teachers have all the tools and support they need to be successful. Indicating a collaborative leadership style, indicative of Theory Y, participatory leadership, or open leadership, the principal of School I reported that both the principal and the Instructional Leadership Team wrote the school goals and decided how they

were to be implemented by shared decision making. The principal of School I further noted that she leads by example, and all decision making is motivated by what is best for students. This effective use of leadership teams was a prevalent theme among all the principals.

The idea of servant leadership also characterized the leadership style of a number of principals. This concept was identified by Greenleaf (1970) and examined with school principals by Salameh (2011). Salameh noted that servant leadership has been operationalized as “valuing people, developing people, building community, displaying authenticity, providing leadership, and sharing leadership” (p. 138). As a case in point, the principal of School G openly referred to himself as a “servant leader” and noted that he “grew into his leadership style”: “My *aha* moment was when I realized that my role in life was not only that of an educator, but that of a servant leader.” The principal of School D referenced the same terminology regarding her leadership style: “It is still evolving,” but the district “is a centralized district with lots of role models. I believe in servant and selfless and effective leadership styles. They [the district leadership] practice what they preach.” She indicated her desire to emulate her role models with the example of relationship-building.

A self-identified transformational leader, the principal of School F gave details of regular visits from the superintendent and school board along with consistent data monitoring from the district office. These district-level efforts served to remind principals in the district that they might desire to be on the “Schools to Watch” list so their best practices can be emulated by other schools. The principal of School C continued this theme by stating that the district leadership that was in place was strong instructionally and philosophically. He added that the culture of the district appeared to be one of collaboration and coaching, a participatory or open leadership style, which is highly beneficial to the school site in supporting students. This concept of strong

district leadership was consistent among the principals, and they indicated that relationship and communication style was conveyed as highly positive and effective at the district level. The principal of School D especially emphasized the benefit of an effective district leadership, noting the excellent quality of professional development. The bottom line, however, continued to be relationships, part of any effective leadership style (i.e., NASSP & NAESP, 2013; Waters et al., 2003).

### **Research Question 3**

The third research question asked: “What are the activities and behaviors principals of successful Title I elementary schools use on a day-to-day basis that appear to influence student success?” In other words, what do principals of successful Title I schools do every day? First-level coding responses to this question included the following: (a) caring, (b) administrative, (c) instructional leadership, (d) strategies, (e) positive attitude, (f) innovation, (g) risk taking, (h) including all constituencies toward a common goal of success, (i) celebrations/hoopla, (j) using data in decision making, (k) communication, (l) creating teams, (m) collaborating, (n) individualized/differentiated instruction, (o) flexible groupings, (p) supplying and supporting professional development for teachers, (q) implementing best practices, and (r) creating a PLC. This is consistent with the literature on leadership theories and styles, effective school principals, and school climate.

As an example of leadership activities and behaviors from the literature review, Orlov (2003) recognized holistic leadership and the traits of leading from the soul, using a systematic developmental approach to leadership, and developing a transformational journey for all stakeholders (p. 1). As a holistic leader, the principal of School B felt her role has been to inspire teachers to take risks; being given the space for creativity to take risks will better student

learning. As a case in point, this principal described a “radical” new method of instruction that her fifth-grade teachers adopted. In this “flip” method, students gained basic information at home through prerecorded videos that the teachers put on the school’s website for students to watch. When students came to school, they had the foundational knowledge on the topic; depth and complexity could then be addressed in class through project-based learning.

Professional learning communities (PLC) are evidence of a holistic leadership style (Orlov, 2003) and also reflect the literature on effective school leadership (Wallace Foundation, 2011). For instance, the principal of School J has arranged for grade-level PLC meetings that do not include the administrator unless specific guidance is needed for data analysis. Staff meetings are reserved for the principal, noting the need for “a collaborative process, as the school no longer has a scope-and-sequence type of environment, the switch to standards-based instruction and such assessment caused this change in planning style.” The principal of School D reported that the school had formal collaboration every Wednesday that was like a PLC, but was not defined as a PLC because the PLC model was not used in planning, but was limited to analysis of data, instruction, and students. According to the Wallace Foundation, implementation of the PLC provides several elements of effective leadership such as a cooperative spirit, cultivation of leadership in others, improvement in instruction, and management of people, data, and processes that result in student achievement and school improvement (p. 4).

Principals described the same common characteristics that are often found in 90/90/90 schools: (a) academic achievement focus, (b) curriculum choices, (c) student progress evaluation, (d) the PLC model of evaluating student progress, and (e) a strong focus on RTI (Reeves, 2003) as well as the data-driven necessity of a high-stakes testing environment. In reflecting upon what made this school so highly successful compared to previous appointments, the principal of

School A stated, “I saw the difference in how hard the teachers worked at the low-achieving school compared to the teachers at the high-performing school. The difference was in the effort that was put into looking at data and using it to make informed educational decisions.”

Formalizing a data-driven strategy, the principal of School D reported that her school uses a behavior, academic, health, attendance (BAHA) vertical articulation model to support students: “It is essential that we examine [how] the child is examined so that we are very strategic in the sharing of information.” She continued to explain that time is built in for vertical articulation and school-wide collaboration: “We selected strategic interventions based on the needs for each grade level by strategic examination of data and selected a school-wide strategic intervention for writing.” Noting the 90/90/90 schools, the principal of School D said,

Marzano and Doug Reeves want you to build this utopia . . . these 90/90/90 schools. You need to make connections with teachers and find out what drives them. Take [for example] a teacher who has taught for 25 years, but is not using strategies and methods that are considered to be best practices. This makes that teacher the weakest link, so I have to figure out how to approach that. I need to find out what drives that teacher, not what drives me. I need to find [out] how to make a teacher be willing to be reflective in his or her practices.

This emphasis on relationships to improve best practices tied together all the activities and behaviors that principals of successful schools intermingle to influence student success. This notion was further reflected in the emergence of the theme Interactions/Relationships and is one primary conclusion to be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

What principals and their constituents choose to focus on also drives the day-to-day work of the principals of these successful Title I elementary schools. For instance, the principal of

School A shared the same emphasis on 90/90/90 schools regarding academic rigor (Reeves, 2003): “When 21st-century standards came out, our team decided the biggest hurdle to get over would be writing, so we decided to spend money on training in writing so we could learn to better write writing performance tasks.” Similarly, the principal of School F commented, “We have a strong PBIS focus with a very formal data examination process along with a meaningful and systematic RTI intervention focus in guided reading.” Data are also used, according to the principal of School F, to guide actions in classrooms for both students and teachers because this information helps determine learning objectives, content, language objectives, and academic vocabulary on a daily basis. Taking the commitment to student success one step farther, the principal of School G explained that his school hired an outside contractor to help the teachers specialize instructional choices based on data and the cultural strengths of the school. The staff at School G also focused on their need for academic vocabulary instruction and chose to develop their own vocabulary programs—both academic and essential ESL vocabulary (Reeves, 2003; Villarreal, 2001).

Overall, the principals identified a need, discussed with the teachers how to address it, and then implemented the change with their buy-in (Waters et al., 2003). The constant reflection and examination of data to find ways to improve the teaching and learning of students is a clear expectation of all these effective principals of AAA-designated Title I elementary schools. In addition, they carried out activities and exhibited the behaviors and characteristics of their identified leadership style.

#### **Research Question 4**

The final research question asked, “To what do principals of successful Title I schools attribute their success?” Addressing this research question were the following first-level codes:

(a) caring, (b) administrative, (c) instructional leadership, (d) leadership style, (e) culture, (f) innovation, (g) risk taking, (h) culture of success, (i) use of data in decision making, (j) communication, (h) collaboration and teamwork, (i) ability to individualize/differentiate instruction, (j) creation of flexible groupings, (k) professional development for teachers, (l) implementation of best practices, and (m) PLC. All principals emphasized the importance of data-driven instruction for the continued growth of the students in their schools. Along these lines, the principal of School A asserted,

I only am aware that I am Principal when I look at the name on the door, but on a daily basis, we function as a team in setting the goals for the school, examining data, goal setting, and decision making. I am not the team; I am part of the team.

Interestingly, the principal of School G described his leadership style and strong belief in a school leadership team in nearly identical words:

If you looked at the school's leadership team and how well we operate as a group, you would be hard-pressed to know I am the principal except for the name on the door for when hard decisions are made. We make decisions for the schools as a team. My role is as an advisor, expert, middle man to the district and final decision maker.

These statements were reflective of the concept of the holistic leader as defined by Orlov (2003), which provided the theoretical framework for this study.

In a different way, the principal of School F ascribed her success to the importance of examining data in professional conversations, explaining that teachers at her school have a strong PBIS focus with a very formal data examination process along with a meaningful and systematic RTI intervention focus in guided reading to meet school-wide goals. The principal of School A said the previous principal had not focused on data; as a result, that was one of this principal's

main priorities for making the school success-driven. He noted that as part of the CCL data-driven coaching method,

Collaboration, Coaching, and Learning [has] instructional coach-video lessons, and [the section on evaluation] has in the first lesson, the principal teaches, and the teachers critique the principal so that they learn to critique and check their ego at the door and focus on best practices.

Supporting the use of data in a slightly different way, the principals of schools H and I took a precise stance in that data were to be individual to each student. The principal of School H further explained that the school adopted a very targeted and intentional approach to using individual student data, noting that school staff review data student-by-student, and she pointed to stacks of papers on her desk regarding precisely this individualized process. She clarified, “We meet with students and teachers using a teacher on special assignment and tutors and try to ensure that nothing slips through the cracks. It is a very in-depth approach.” Likewise, the principal of School I reported that data drives instructional choices at School I. Teachers at her school enjoy teaching, so their drive and love for learning create excitement in students. The principal meets with the students at-risk by goal-setting individually with students and checking up on the student as a whole person using a BAHA approach. As a result, students know someone cares about them as successful individuals.

Explaining further this individualized approach, the principal of School I described how she has gone to extreme lengths to support her students and assures that she personally meets with every student who scores *Far Below Basic* or *Below Basic* on standardized tests to set goals and teach “habits of a successful scholar.” This principal said that she personally analyzed assessment data and gave it individually to teachers to review and make instructional decisions.

She then explained that she created an error analysis on state-mandated test responses and set goals with students based on test trends found in her data analysis. Then, the principal of School I reported that she gave release time to teachers to analyze data and set the expectation that teachers use the district's data server to disaggregate data. This individualized focus on students is a critical element of what successful administrators do differently.

In School E, according to the principal, teachers use data for grouping students, to drive instruction, and for RTI groupings and content choices. She continued to explain that they employ data to make instructional decisions like planning staff development and setting new goals. The principal of School F said that the leadership team and grade-level teams analyze the state test each year to see how many questions correlate to each content standard and ensure that the language used in the question is directly taught with explicit instructions; they then use the information to select the method to best teach each standard. Similarly, the principal of School I indicated that after about a year of building relationships with stakeholders, the leadership team set goals and created common assessments, using the resulting data to drive instruction to follow along the pacing guides. She added that she is always educating herself and staying current with best practices, always modeling theory with teachers, always offering staff development based on needs identified by analyzing data, always attending staff development, and always being positive. These are the qualities of a successful Title I elementary school principal whose school has earned the AAA designation for student achievement.

### **Discussion**

At this point in understanding the findings, the researcher decided to look once more to available literature on leadership. Table 6 shows the basic result of a Google query. As the research string extended, of course the number of hits decreased so that the original 947 million

hits for “leader” ended with a mere 160 thousand for journal articles on “educational leadership style” plus “student achievement.” A review of the first dozen or so of these hits revealed no new information from what has already been cited in the literature review, and no strong direct relationship was noted between principal leadership style and student achievement (Rautiola, 2009), although this observation is inconsistent with the goals of the present study. This statement in fact contradicts Horng and Loeb’s (2010) later contention that “numerous studies spanning the past three decades link high-quality [instructional] leadership with positive school outcomes” (p. 66).

Table 6

*Google Query Regarding Leadership*

Search string	Number of hits
Leader	947,000,000
Leadership	477,000,000
Business leadership	478,000,000
School leadership	478,000,000
Education leadership	108,000,000
Educational leadership	61,600,000
Educational leadership style	20,400,000
Educational leadership style research study journal	11,600,000
Educational leadership style research study journal “student achievement”	160,000

### **School and Business Leadership**

School and business leadership are sometimes compared. For example, Diane Ravitch (2012b), a former Assistant Secretary of Education under Lamar Alexander and Richard Riley, noted that education is “and must be” a business because schools and school districts have all the components of a business: (a) employees, (b) labor costs, (c) capital costs, and (d) budgets (para. 1). In contrast to many production and fabrication businesses, the business of schools can be classified as a service business like, as Ravitch noted, “Verizon and Citibank” (para. 1). The critical difference between schools and businesses is that the service provided by schools is the education of children without the goal of profitmaking, and funding is public, not private. School leaders might therefore want to consider some of the attributes of a business leadership style.

In *Leading at a Higher Level*, Ken Blanchard (2007) argued for “treating customers right” in business (p. 1). In the case of schools, customers may be considered students and/or the greater community. One of the principals in the present study compared the level of service to consumers or customers at that school to customer service at Nordstrom’s, a retailer noted for excellent customer service. To Blanchard, a leader is one who has “the capacity to influence others by unleashing the power and potential of people and organizations for the greater good” (p. 2). A leader, then, is responsible not only for outcomes, but also for benefiting the people who serve and are served by the organization, in this case—a school. The notion of servant leadership, as described by the principal of School G, emanated from Blanchard’s definition of a leader who is leading at a higher level.

Blanchard (2007) contended that leaders performing at a higher level need to envision their organizations as ones that are high-performing. Elementary schools in the subject Western state that are Title I-eligible and have earned the AAA designation can be viewed as high-

performing organizations (HPOs). Applying that understanding, this part of the discussion focuses on Blanchard's contention that all HPOs follow the SCORES model containing the following six elements:

- S = Shared Information and Communication
- C = Compelling Vision
- O = Ongoing Learning
- R = Relentless Focus on Customer Results
- E = Energizing Systems and Structures
- S = Shared Power and Investment (pp. 2-3)

Based on the interviews with 10 principals of AAA-designated schools, all the schools are HPOs as defined by Blanchard because all of the six elements were evident in their responses.

Blanchard (2007) added, "If becoming a high performing organization is a destination, leadership is the engine" (p. 3). The leadership of each principal interviewed appeared to reflect that principle. First, all the principals were open in their communications and shared information routinely (S). In fact, the principals reported being data-driven; they also used the data to work with teachers and students in developing individualized/differentiated lessons and goals, employing flexible grouping to the extent possible given legal and political constraints. Next, all the schools had similar compelling visions (C) that emphasized student academic achievement and teacher collaboration. Third, ongoing learning (O) through professional development was a component seen as extremely important by the principals to engage teachers in evidence-based practices and improved teaching and learning. Fourth, the principals had a relentless focus on customer results (R): Improved student achievement was the major goal in every school. Additionally, all of the schools achieved excellent results. Next, the principals aimed at

providing their schools those energizing systems and structures (E) that would enable employees and students to feel empowered through participatory governance and the ability to make choices. Finally, these principals believed and practiced shared power and high involvement (S), a less hierarchical and power-intensive way of leading an organization. Grade-level meetings are only one example; teams tasked with decision making another.

Blanchard (2007) reiterated, “In high performing organizations, everything starts and ends with the customer” (p. 3). The principals interviewed for this study understood that students were the total focus of the school, and staff and teachers were there to educate them and ensure that they were successful. Further, the principals did not see themselves as the only holders of knowledge and power; therefore, they were willing and eager to share certain responsibilities, especially when it came to teaching. Blanchard noted the importance of treating employees “right” (p. 4). One way is through empowerment. The first key to empowerment, he noted, is sharing information, and in a data-driven environment such as a school, that is critical and not hard to do. All the principals recognized the importance and necessity of sharing data, especially with teachers. The use of self-directed individuals and teams is another key element of empowerment proposed by Blanchard. Differing from traditional or classical hierarchical leadership styles, these principals engaged individuals and teams in working together to improve teaching and learning, thereby increasing student achievement.

A situational leader, according to Blanchard (2007), has three major skills: (a) diagnosis, (b) flexibility, and (c) partnering for performance. All of the principals exhibited these skills of situational leaders. For example, through data, they were able to learn where gaps in teaching and learning were occurring and were able to provide the flexibility necessary to address those gaps. They then partnered with the teachers and the community to be sure that student

achievement goals were met. Results were evident in the AAA designation, and that honor was celebrated throughout the school community.

### **Leadership, Change, and School Reform**

Anyone who has taught in a public school for a decade or more can begin to list major curriculum, budget, or teaching strategy changes that have occurred over his or her career. The principals in the present study with the longest tenure reported that changes happen, and the principal—and the teachers—have to roll with them. Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983) more than 30 years ago, the American Institutes of Research (AIR, 2013), among other think tanks, have tried to assess its effects. According to AIR, “The three decades since [*A Nation at Risk*] jarred the conventional wisdom about the nation’s educational system [and those three decades] have seen many efforts to bring about change” (para. 4). The consensus is that results are mixed at best. Despite all the programs before and after NCLB, which has had the most federally imposed stringent requirements for testing and accountability, school leaders at every level have had to learn to adjust. Moreover, within the last few days of this writing, Congress passed and President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, December 10, 2015), the reauthorization of NCLB. In contrast to NCLB, ESSA leaves more responsibility and accountability to the states rather than to the U.S. Department of Education (Korte, 2015), although the overall goal of closing the achievement gap remains. What this means for the principals who were interviewed is, perhaps, less stress on testing and more emphasis on learning, however it may be accomplished and measured.

The proposed positive change to be brought about through ESSA will surely affect the principals who were interviewed for this study. Blanchard (2007) offered eight strategies for leading change, outlined in Table 7. For principals, Blanchard’s strategies require some

adaptation to the high-performing school, such as one earning the AAA designation. For example, the principals already have obtained buy-in, so that they have likely earned the trust of their teachers, staff, students, parents, and the community at-large. Additionally, all constituents have probably already experienced change in some form or another within the school context, so now they require the second strategy: the compelling case for change. The future goal and vision most likely remains the same: improving student achievement; however, the method of achieving that goal may change. Next is aligning the infrastructure—engaging collaborative efforts for the next strategy of enabling and encouraging others to achieve implementation and measure impact. To this end, the principals were asked how they would deal with a teacher who refused to get on board with change, and all of them had strategies requiring personal communication and support. The sixth step is most important for schools: accountability for results. Every principal in this study was accountable for his or her results and shared that accountability and responsibility with all constituents of the school—and celebrated success with them all.

### **Implications**

This study has implications for school leaders who want to improve student achievement in their schools, especially low-performing, low-SES, Title I-eligible elementary schools. First, principals must understand that they are not only instructional leaders, but also business leaders (Blanchard, 2007; Ravitch, 2012b). Their “primary responsibility is to promote the learning and success of *all [sic]* students” (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 1). To accomplish this task well, principals must adopt a leadership style that supports all constituents of the school community—typically, students, teachers, staff, other administrators, parents, family members, and community members—to assist the principal in this goal.

Table 7

*Blanchard's Eight Change Leadership Strategies*

Strategy #	Strategy	Outcome
1	Expand opportunities for involvement and influence	Buy-in
2	Explain the business case for change	Compelling case for change
3	Envision the future	Inspiring vision
4	Experiment to ensure alignment	One voice and aligned infrastructure
5	Enable and encourage	New skills and commitment
6	Execute and endorse	Accountability for results
7	Embed and extend	Sustainable results
8	Explore possibilities	Options

*Note.* Adapted from "Leading at a Higher Level: The Summary in Brief" by K. Blanchard, 2007, *Soundview Executive Book Summaries*, 29(3), Pt. 1, pp. 7-8.

Second, school leaders need to understand leadership theory so that they recognize their own leadership styles and are able to select from an array of leadership theories and styles that fit their situations. Next, and perhaps most important, as the first theme in this study acknowledged, interactions and relationships are critical components of successful leadership no matter what the style. Additionally, the reauthorization of NCLB as ESSA may make it easier for all school constituents to help all students to improve academically and enjoy going to school and learning. Finally, classical theories of leadership such as the great man theory, trait theory, and theories X and Y, and leadership styles such as hierarchical and authoritarian are too simplistic for today's public schools. The modern principal has a variety of leadership styles from which to choose and

should consider the tasks, responsibilities, and people in the situation before committing to a single approach to leadership.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study had several limitations. Like many qualitative studies, the number of participants was small—only 10—although saturation was reached at that number. Additional participants may have provided some new useful information about principal leadership styles. The study was also limited geographically and by school level, so principals of elementary schools in three specific urban or semi-urban counties in one Western state in the United States were the most attainable. As a result, principals from suburban and rural schools were unavailable for the research. The study was also limited by design to one interview, and it became necessary to re-interview the principals in order to probe their previous responses. Only five of them (50%) agreed to be interviewed a second time. More active observation in the schools might also have been helpful to understand the school context better; however, the majority of the interviews were conducted during the summer when school was not in session. Further, it may have been beneficial to use a leadership style inventory to obtain additional information about the principals' leadership style. This idea had been rejected because the majority of such inventories are self-report, forced-choice response, or opinions of others.

One goal of this study was to explore the principals' leadership styles in their own voices. This may also have been a limitation in that only those voices were heard regarding the leadership styles of the principals as they related to the success of their schools and the attainment of the AAA designation. The voices of the teachers, staff, students, and parents may also have supported the research and the words of the principals.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The topic of leaders and leadership is huge, as shown in Table 7, and this research addressed only a small part. This study obtained only the point of view of the principals themselves. Future research might wish to explore perceptions of teachers, students, and other school constituencies. A mixed-methods study, perhaps employing one or more leadership style, teachers' perceptions of the principal's leadership style, or school climate surveys, may have added support to the voices of the principals. This study was qualitative; some quantitative measures are available that look at other constructs such as school culture that may intersect with principal leadership style to achieve student academic success (Le Clear, 2005; Martin, 2009). No attempt was made to investigate the culture of the school in relation to student success and principal leadership styles as has been explored quantitatively by Martin (2009) and Le Clear (2005).

The present study did not consider demographics of the principals such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, or level of education as contributing to their leadership style. Further, although each school's demographics were reported, no attempt was made to analyze the meaning of the demographics other than poverty. The reason is that poverty is the main criterion in Title I eligibility. In addition, this research was limited to elementary schools in one Western state because the AAA designation provided a number of delimitations that were useful; however, expanding to secondary schools and a broader geographic area may offer new insights on principal leadership style. This study also addressed only low-SES schools. The next question to be answered may be the following: What is the leadership style of principals of high-SES, high-performing schools and how does that contrast with that of principals of low-SES, low-performing schools? Finally, a cross-sectional meta-analysis of the literature on leadership styles

of leaders of schools and service businesses may provide additional support for how schools function as businesses and need to be similarly led—or not.

### **Conclusions**

This study was undertaken in the belief that the leadership style of principals influences student achievement. Moreover, this contention applied to low-performing schools in low-SES communities. Like the research of Reeves (2003) on 90/90/90 schools and Milne and Plourde (2006) on academically successful low-SES primary students, for example, this research did not explore the gap that exists in academic achievement between rich and poor or majority and minority populations (i.e., Reardon, 2011). This study instead investigated academic success in low-SES high-achieving schools. The selection of these schools was limited to elementary schools in three counties in one Western state in the United States that were Title I-eligible and had earned the state's AAA designation indicating low-SES and high academic achievement. The leadership style of 10 principals who led those schools was then explored through a phenomenological case study design using in-person interviews with open-ended questions.

The lack of forced-choice responses freed the principals to indicate the traits, characteristics, values, activities, and behaviors of their leadership styles without predetermined options. As a result, they characterized their leadership styles as situational, participatory/open, transformational, or top-down when referring to district-level interactions and relationships. Situational leadership was evident when the principal varied his or her leadership style to reflect the needs of the school as a community, and this style should differ systematically in the daily context of the school community (Hallinger & Bickman, 1996). Waters et al. (2003), in their balanced leadership framework, identified situational awareness, an awareness of details and

undercurrents used to address problems, and flexibility, the adaptation of leadership behavior to the current situation, as elements of situational leadership that lead to student achievement.

Open and participatory leadership styles, comprising a meta-theory (Katz & Kahn, 1966), have been used interchangeably to describe a leadership style in which the leader believes the situation within and outside the organization to be rational and predictable. This style looks at cycles of events, partnerships, and networking in the decision-making process. An open leadership style involves stakeholders in the goals and mission of the organization. A transformational leadership style (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978) relates to the ability of a leader to inspire others to help make change. Among other things, transformational leaders engage support, are supportive and caring, foster collaboration, keep the mission and goals clear, maintain wide channels of communication, and serve as role models (Bass, 1985). The principals in the present study exhibited characteristics of these three styles and characterized their leadership styles mainly as situational, open/participatory, and transformational.

To be a transformational leader, the principal, in this case, could not have a school environment steeped in chaos; therefore, some evidence of transactional or managerial leadership was evident in the findings. Instead of transactional leadership as a descriptor, the principals characterized their leadership as transformational with administrative elements. Considered a subset of transformational leadership by Odumeru and Ifeanyi (2013) and related to a Theory X hierarchical leadership style is transactional, or managerial, leadership. In a school, transactional leadership can operationally refer to any task of an administrative nature. For this reason, words related to administrative tasks uttered by the principals in the interviews were categorized initially as “managerial,” but that term, because it could be confused with transactional leadership, was changed to “administrative.” In fact, one could argue that transformational

leaders apply forward-thinking ideas to inspire others, and transactional leaders are beset with the task of getting things done before they can literally transform the organization (Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013). Transformational leadership requires an orderly environment (Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013).

The theoretical framework applied to this study was holistic leadership (Orlov, 2003), which is based on Hersey and Blanchard's (1988) situational leadership theory and Senge's (1990) systems thinking. A holistic leader leads from the mind, the heart, and the soul; works in a systemic developmental way that impacts the individual as a leader, others as followers, and the school environment; and transforms the organization at the individual, team, and school/community level (Orlov, 2003, p. 1). The combination of situational, open/participatory, transactional, and transformational leadership styles claimed by the participating principals could be construed as holistic leadership; therefore, holistic leadership is the style most used by principals of Title I-eligible elementary schools in three counties in one Western state that have earned the AAA designation, suggesting high-poverty, high-performing students.

This research raised the question of how well the administrators interviewed self-identified their leadership style and how aware they were of the leadership style they practice. The question pondered this notion: If administrators were more aware of their leadership style, would the overall success of their leadership be more evident or improve? Overall, the findings from the interviews suggested that those principals who identified themselves as servant leaders also evidenced this style of leadership. This researcher's conclusion is that the servant leadership style, in particular, is self-identified because it most closely connects to a principal's values and morals, relates to how the leader was raised to view himself or herself, and provides a spiritual aspect for his or her life's purpose of serving others. Those who do not self-identify as servant

leaders would be unlikely to evidence that style in their leadership practices because it is a style based on values and morals learned over a lifetime, not absorbed through an academic course.

The other leadership style most self-identified by respondents was situational leadership. Were more principals able to apply this identity, they might benefit in their ability to apply situational leadership on a regular basis by recognizing the need to shift their style to meet daily challenges and reflect accountability. Knowledge of a transformational leadership style as the leadership style a principal uses would benefit the principal in creating change that leads to success through transformation. Additionally, understanding the open/participatory style of leadership would benefit leadership practice because through the application of that style, the principal gains buy-in and participation from all stakeholders.

The emphasis that American society, educational reform, and state and federal government has placed on high-stakes testing has caused an increase in legislated accountability and reform. This focus has resulted in attention to test scores and data that may lead to the devaluation of relationships that, in turn, creates a negative school culture; consequently, the school may become devoid of the human connection and its associated values. The data collected for this dissertation evidenced that the most critical element of any successful leadership style is emphasis on building positive and trusting relationships. In almost all answers to questions asked by the researcher, the participant's responses somehow evolved to an inclusion of positive relationships.

### **Summary of the Dissertation**

Through the journey of collecting, analyzing, and reporting the data in this phenomenological case study, the researcher concluded that serving as the principal of an award-winning school requires many leadership practices that are interconnected along with strong

communication skills with all stakeholders. In comparing the data gathered at the 10 sites, it was insightful to explore the views of the participating principals as they related to leadership and communication practices. The 10 schools were from different school districts within a large geographic area and varied in SES, yet all were able to achieve the AAA distinction. Reflecting on these factors, it seems that each school required a slightly different leadership approach to find success and obtain the AAA designation. From the results of this study, it is clear that award-winning school leaders are not identical. Overall, these principals tended to exhibit several positive leadership characteristics including attention to school climate, involvement in data-driven practices, and intentional data-driven decision making in their instructional leadership practices. The pursuit of these leadership practices is encouraged.

Several of the findings were quite surprising. First, interactions and relationships were cited by the principals as important across the board. In addition, they did not restrict these interactions and relationships to only one group, but to all constituents including teachers, students, staff, parents, and community members. Second, the principals were all involved in “progressive success making”; that is, they made sure that everything from the safety of the students to the cleanliness of the school to the high quality of instruction to the smile on the face of the office secretary was designed to be positive and incrementally lead to student academic—and social—success. Finally, a number of constituents of these principals recalled school as a punitive environment where punishments were meted out for a variety of infractions, and academic failure led to future failure and a lifelong lack of self-esteem. These principals agreed that their schools would not be about being bad, but would be only about being good, positive, supportive, and successful in academic and social situations.

Specific leadership behaviors may be associated with AAA-designated elementary school principals. It is apparent from the research that successful principals manage the general operations of the school in a transactional leadership style and foster relationships with all stakeholders in a transformational leadership style. Prioritizing the importance of a positive climate for learning and providing direction through a clear vision and mission comprised a part of the principal's accountability required in these award-winning schools. In addition to the daily responsibilities needed simply to keep the doors of a school open, these leaders must also be skilled in understanding and implementing data-driven instructional practices and serving as an effective school leader. It is this complex role that successful principals take on every day to ensure their schools remain high-achieving and successful.

This study did not affirm the relationship between high poverty and low academic achievement that persists in spite of efforts to change it. The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explore the leadership style of principals whose Title I schools have achieved the AAA designation, suggesting high poverty and high achievement. This study affirmed the accountability pressures in education and increasing demands on school principals that might be slightly relieved by the recent passage of the ESSA legislation. The results of this study may help principals to examine their own leadership style to better understand what works for leading schools to improve student achievement, especially in low-SES, low-achieving schools. In response to this demand for student achievement as measured by test scores, successful principals of AAA-winning schools have implemented data-driven practices and effective instructional leadership; they serve as positive models for leading elementary schools. The fostering of a positive school climate and the application of effective communication styles only serve to strengthen schools. These practices of successful school principals are lessons to learn as

schools strive for continuous school improvement as indicated in the repeated AAA designation of these elementary schools.

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## Appendix A

## Cover Letter

**Department of Educational Leadership**

January 7, 2015

Dear Fellow Principal,

I am a student in the Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at Ball State University. I am inviting you to participate in this study in an effort to explore the leadership style of principals whose Title I schools have achieved the AAA designation. The Academic Achievement Award (AAA) is a designation awarded to Title I schools that meet AYP for two or more years as Title I schools. The results of this study may help principals to examine their own leadership style to better understand what works for leading schools to improve student achievement, especially in low-SES schools.

As the principal of a State AAA elementary school, your school has been recognized as a successful educational institution. Your contribution to this success as a school leader is worthy of study. This research will explore the leadership style of principals whose low-SES, Title I elementary schools were deemed by the State Department of Education to be successful, as evidenced by their achievement of AAA status. The results of this study may shed light on the topic and enable less successful elementary school principals to consider how they are leading their schools.

The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision as to whether or not you would like to participate.

My study will be based on information collected through an interview with you, public assessment data, and any other artifacts relevant to the AAA designation. The recorded interview will take approximately one hour and will focus on questions related to leadership behaviors in successful elementary schools.

*To be eligible to participate in this study, you must have served as the principal during the qualifying years for the AAA designation (two years prior to the award date).*

I understand how busy a principal's day can be. By taking time to talk with me about your success and the success of your school, we can inform our colleagues and aspiring principals about the quality leadership that exists in this state's schools.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, all information will be held in the strictest confidence. You will not be identified by name, school, or district. In the event the findings in this study are published, pseudonyms will be used to conceal the identities of the participants. Participants may withdraw at any time by notifying the

principal investigator via email at cagonzales@bsu.edu. If you withdraw from the study, all data pertaining to your involvement in the study will be destroyed.

*Within the next week, I will contact you to answer any questions and determine if you are willing to participate in this study.*

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,  
Cameron Gonzales

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## Appendix B

## Informed Consent

**Study Title**

LEADERSHIP STYLES OF PRINCIPALS IN SUCCESSFUL TITLE I ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

**Study Purpose and Rationale**

The purpose of this phenomenological case study is to explore the leadership style of principals whose Title I schools have achieved the AAA designation. The Academic Achievement Award (AAA) is a designation awarded to Title I schools that meet AYP for 2 or more years as Title I schools. The results of this study may help principals to examine their own leadership style to better understand what works for leading schools to improved student achievement, especially in low-SES schools.

This research will explore the leadership style of principals whose low-SES, Title I elementary schools were deemed by the State Department of Education to be successful, as evidenced by their achievement of AAA status. The results of this study may shed light on the topic and enable less successful elementary school principals to consider how they are leading their schools.

**Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria**

- Participants have a right to participate or not.
- You have been selected to participate in this study because you are an administrator in one of the schools that will be included in the research.
- You must be 21 years or older to participate.
- To be eligible to participate in this study, you must have served as the principal during the qualifying years for the AAA designation.
- A candidate would be excluded if he or she was not the principal in place during the years the school qualified to be an AAA school.

**Participation Procedures and Duration**

- If you agree to participate in the study, the primary investigator, Ms. Gonzales, will ask you a series of questions about your leadership experiences regarding an AAA school.
- It will take approximately 45 minutes to complete the interview.

**Audio or Video Tapes (if applicable)**

For purposes of accuracy, with your permission, the interviews will be audio taped. Once the interview is concluded, a transcription of the interview will be coded and analyzed in terms of the themes that emerge. Only Ms. Gonzales will have access to the tape. The narrative transcripts will be stored on a password-protected laptop that is locked in Ms. Gonzales' office nightly. Once transcribed, a pseudonym will be ascribed to the transcript so that no identifiable information will be attached to the comments. All recordings will be destroyed once transcription is complete. Do I have your permission to tape this interview?

My initials in the following box indicate my permission to audiotape the interview:

**Data Confidentiality or Anonymity**

All data will be maintained as confidential (if collecting identifiable data); no identifying information such as names will appear in any publication or presentation of the data.

**Storage of Data**

Paper data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office for three years and will then be shredded. The data will also be entered into a software program and stored on the researcher's password-protected computer for three years and then deleted. Only members of the research team will have access to the data.

The data will be digitally destroyed after a period of three years.

**Risks or Discomforts**

There are no perceived risks or discomforts in this study.

**Whom to Contact Should You Experience Any Negative Effects from Participating in this Study**

There are no perceived risks or discomforts in this study.

**Benefits**

There are no perceived benefits to the person for participation in the study.

**Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw your permission at any time for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator before signing this form and at any time during the study.

**IRB Contact Information**

For one's rights as a research subject, you may contact the following: For questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Director, Office of Research Integrity, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5070 or at irb@bsu.edu.

**Study Title:** LEADERSHIP STYLES OF PRINCIPALS IN SUCCESSFUL TITLE I ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

**Principal Investigator:** Cameron Gonzales, Ball State University, cagonzales@bsu.edu, (765) 285-3287, (714) 319-8920 (Cell)

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**Consent**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in this research project entitled, "LEADERSHIP STYLES OF PRINCIPALS IN SUCCESSFUL TITLE I ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS." I have had the study explained to me, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

To the best of my knowledge, I meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation (described on the previous page) in this study.

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

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Researcher Contact Information**

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## Appendix C

## Interview Protocol for Administrator Interviews

These questions will be asked during the administrative interviews:

1. Let's start with some basic information about you. Please describe the following:
  - a. Your educational background
  - b. Your professional experience
  - c. Your years as an educator
  - d. Your years as a principal
  - e. Your years in your current position
  - f. Your personal and professional goals
2. How would you describe your school?
3. How do you celebrate the accomplishments of your students?
4. How do you view your role in deciding the school's mission and goals? If you don't, who decides these?
5. Who ensures that your mission and goals are implemented? How does that happen?
6. If you were walking up to two teachers in your school, what would you want them to say about you as an instructional leader?
7. If you were implementing a change in your building and you had a teacher who refused to get on board with the change, how would you handle it and gain his or her buy-in and participation?
8. Think back to when you first remember how your leadership style evolved to making you the leader you are today. What events triggered those changes in you?

9. How has your leadership style changed over your career? Can you provide an example of that change?
10. What are some of the factors that determine or drive student achievement at your school?
11. How do you monitor student achievement?
12. How do you use data in your decision making about your school?
13. How do you encourage teachers to work together?
14. How do you motivate students, teachers, and staff?
15. What has the AAA designation meant to your school?

Probing questions may be asked to further clarify respondents' answers.