Spring 5-2022

A Qualitative Study of the Collaborative Relationships Between District Leaders and School Principals in High-Performing and Low-Performing Schools Within a Single High-Performing School District

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN DISTRICT LEADERS AND SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN HIGH-PERFORMING AND LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS WITHIN A SINGLE HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOL DISTRICT

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education: Educational Leadership

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY

May 2022

LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

March 28, 2022
Date of dissertation defense

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be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

Research on effective collaborative relationships between district leaders and school principals have shown to exhibit characteristics that positively impact student achievement. Characteristics such as reciprocal communication, shared decision making, intensive support, and quality professional learning opportunities are repeated in literature. Therefore, this qualitative case study examined whether there are differences in collaborative relationships between district leaders and school principals in high-performing and low-performing schools within a single school district based on those common characteristics. The following research questions guided the current study: (a) What are the differences, if any, in communication between district leaders and principals of high- and low-performing schools?, (b) What are the differences, if any, in decision-making opportunities between district leaders and principals of high- and low-performing schools?, (c) What are the differences, if any, in needs-based support between district leaders and principals of high- and low-performing schools?, (d) What are the differences, if any, in professional learning opportunities between district leaders and principals of high- and low-performing schools?

The current study took place in one high-performing school district using semi-structured interviews, observations, and analyses of documents. Participants in the study included two district leaders, two school leaders from high-performing schools, and two school leaders from low-performing schools. Findings show that there are no differences

in the relationships between district leaders and school principals in high- and low-performing schools within a high-performing school district.

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DEDICATION

First and foremost, I want to thank God for the blessings You have given me. Your will and Your timing are always perfect. I would like to thank my family for all the support and encouragement you have given me throughout this journey. Mom and Dad, you have been models of hard work and commitment my entire life, and I am thankful for the support you have given me in everything I have pursued. To my children, Jake and Samantha, I am grateful for your understanding in the times that I was not as available as I wanted to be and pray that you truly know how much I love you both. To my husband, Doug, I absolutely could not have done this without you. You are my rock. Thank you for your patience throughout this process and for listening to me all the times I needed to talk through my projects. Your love for the Gospel, your leadership, your dedication to everything you do, and your love for others inspires me and leaves me in awe.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Bryan McCoy, my committee chair, for your support, guidance, and patience throughout the doctoral program. I would also like to acknowledge my committee members, Dr. Patsy Hughey and Dr. Richard Shrubb, for your support and encouragement. I will always reflect on this experience with a deep gratitude for the commitments that you made to ensure that I was successful in this endeavor. I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues who have been an incredible support system throughout this process. I am truly blessed to have been a part of such a great group of professionals.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Effective superintendents develop relationships with school site personnel to lead the work in school districts of developing and articulating a shared vision focused in alignment with the district's goals (Björk et al., 2005; Devono & Price, 2012; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Nino et al., 2014). Superintendents regularly shift between leadership roles and responsibilities including directing the critical work of improving teaching and learning through communication, collaboration, and support of school leaders as the instructional leader of the district (Björk et al., 2005; Devono & Price, 2012; Fenn & Mixon, 2011; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; McFarlane, 2010; Peterson, 2002; Rosin et al., 2007). As superintendents direct collaboration, relationships among and between district office and school principals allow for the networking opportunities to transfer information and knowledge and produce an atmosphere of trust (Daly & Finnigan, 2009; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Mania-Singer (2017) emphasized the need for superintendents to ensure that supports and services are differentiated and are based on the needs of all schools so all students have the potential to grow academically. Superintendents in larger districts delegate some of their responsibilities to other district leaders to meet the needs of principals and other stakeholders (McFarlane, 2010). However, in smaller school districts, superintendents

may not have an opportunity to delegate the work, leaving it them to directly satisfy the needs of stakeholders (Browne-Ferrigno & Glass, 2005; Hentschke et al., 2009; McFarlane, 2010).

District involvement at the school level has continued to increase with the implementation of accountability measures (Björk & Blase, 2009; Devono & Price, 2012; Hentschke et al., 2009; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; Hvidston & McKim, 2019; Marzano & Waters, 2009). For several decades' research related to school performance and student achievement has been focused on the school level and has often ignored the impact of district offices, but more recently, district involvement and leadership has been correlated to student achievement (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Daly & Finnigan, 2009; Honig & Copland, 2008; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Rorrer & Skrla, 2005; Togneri & Anderson). Additionally, effective collaborative relationships between district leaders and school principals in conjunction with principal leadership also impact student achievement (Bottoms & Fry, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

Principals' roles have evolved over the years from a more managerial leader to an instructional leader, and they must work with and receive support from district level leaders to increase student achievement (McFarlane, 2010; Sanders, 2014). Principal influence on school performance has shown to be second, only to teacher influence, so it is important that principals develop and refine skills through ongoing professional learning that will positively transform student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004; National Association of Secondary School Principals & National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013). Within the school setting, principals are responsible for creating atmospheres of high expectations and for supporting the work of the district

to increase academic success of students (Hvidston et al., 2018; Rosin et al., 2007). With the added pressure of meeting accountability requirements, principals might perceive district leaders as threats as they work with schools, limiting leadership capabilities of those principals (Akinbode & Shuhumi, 2018; Daly et al., 2011). It is important to understand how district leaders and school principals can develop relationships that eliminate threat-rigidity and, instead, positively impact student achievement. Common characteristics of collaborative relationships between district leaders and school principals include communication, collaboration, feedback, decision-making opportunities, professional learning opportunities, and support of specific needs of individual schools (Agullard & Goughnour, 2006; Anderson, 2003; Daly, 2009; Daly et al., 2011; Daly & Finnigan, 2009; Mania-Singer, 2017; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Trujillo, 2013).

Problem Statement

Common practices in effective school districts include establishing collaborative relationships between district leaders and school principals in addition to taking a systemwide approach to improve student achievement (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Nino et al., 2014; Rorrer & Skrla, 2005; Sanders, 2014). Additionally, effective collaborative relationships established between district leaders and school principals have proven to be a critical link within the system for improving teaching and learning (Lawson et al., 2017). Once established, maintaining effective relationships with all schools, through a systemwide approach, is essential to continuous improvement within the district (Mania-Singer, 2017; Sanders, 2014). While there have been studies to determine effectiveness of district leaders' and school principals' collaborative

relationships and to analyze differences in the relationships between district leaders and school principals of high-performing and low-performing schools in low-performing districts, there is a gap in literature on evaluating these relationships in high-performing districts (Mania-Singer, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

There are many factors other than leadership behaviors and relationships between district leaders and school principals that impact student achievement; however, the current study only considered these factors and did not aim to determine cause-effect (Whitehurst et al., 2013). Relationships between these factors are critical as district leaders and school principals have the highest levels of accountability within the district (Devono & Price, 2012; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; Hvidston & McKim, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2004; McFarlane, 2010; Rosin et al., 2007; Supovitz et al., 2010). Missing characteristics of effective relationships result in a negative impact on school and district performance, instructional practices, and student achievement (Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). The purpose of the current study was to better understand the differences, if any, of collaborative relationships between district leaders and school principals of high-performing and low-performing schools in a high-performing school district in a southern state.

Based on the purpose of this qualitative case study, the following research questions were answered:

RQ1. What are the differences, if any, in communication between district leaders and principals of high- and low-performing schools?

RQ2. What are the differences, if any, in the decision-making opportunities at the district level for principals from high- and low-performing schools?

RQ3. What are the differences, if any, in the types of support that district leaders provide to principals from high- and low-performing schools?

RQ4. What are the differences, if any, in professional development opportunities provided to principals from high- and low-performing schools?

Significance of the Study

Superintendents are responsible for establishing coherence across districts as they develop collaborative relationships with principals (Agullard & Goughnour, 2006; Daly & Chrispeels, (2008); Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). Coherence of a systemwide commitment to a shared purpose and goal, to reciprocal communication, to needs-based instructional support, to data-based decisions and accountability, to developing principals as instructional leaders, and to supporting teachers' needs through professional learning opportunities are common characteristics to those collaborative relationships (Marzano & Waters, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). A systemwide approach includes all district and school personnel being engaged in the work of improving student achievement (Daly & Finnigan, 2009).

Nine characteristics of high-performing schools and of low-performing schools that are improving have been identified improving share with them, including the collaborative district relationship with schools (McFarlane, 2010; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). Lawson et al. (2017) explained that a reciprocal relationship of trust and communication between district leaders and school principals establishes a foundation for school improvement. Mania-Singer (2017) found differences in collaborative relationships between district leaders and school principals within a low-performing

urban district and made a recommendation for examining differences in these relationships within a high-performing district.

Leadership behaviors are a critical piece to the success of effectively developing and maintaining schools and districts that are high-performing (Björk & Blase, 2009; Finnigan, 2011; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McFarlane, 2010; Sanders, 2014; Spillane, 2006; Supovitz et al., 2010). Fluctuating between leadership styles is common as different circumstances occur. Some leadership styles, such as transformational and instructional leadership, complement each other and impact the commitment, the sense of community, and the provision of high expectations for instructional practices (Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Daly & Chrispeels, 2008; Ramosaj & Berisha, 2014; Stewart, 2006). Leithwood et al. (2004) assert that transformational leaders are instructional leaders with skills that develop trusting relationships with staff by supporting teachers through facilitating improvement and allowing them to participate in the decision-making process. Characteristics of these leadership styles support collaborative relationships (Leithwood et al., 2004).

The current study contributes to the limited literature on differences that may exist in relationships between district leaders and school principals of high-performing and low-performing schools in a high-performing district. Not only does it identify differences but it also identifies specific areas where those differences occur so that a deeper evaluation of the relationships and the impact of those differences can happen (Mania-Singer, 2017). The field of education will benefit from more definitive research on district and school leader interactions. Another significance of the current study is for school boards as they seek to hire superintendents who will improve achievement levels

for all students and who will develop high-performing schools while serving as the instructional leaders of the district (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). The collaborative relationship between district leaders and school principals serves to enhance the work that they are expected to perform systemwide to support student achievement (Björk et al., 2018; Nino et al., 2014; Rorrer & Skrla, 2005; Sanders, 2014). Finally, superintendents will benefit from the current study as they work to develop systemwide coherence in effective collaborative relationships to positively impact school and district performance.

Methodology

This was a single qualitative case study to explore the relationships between district leaders and school principals in a single high-performing, medium-sized district with high-performing and low-performing schools. Qualitative research is designed to discover and interpret the way people construct meaning in their lives and in the world around them (Merriam, 2009). It is an interpretive type of research that uses an inductive process of data collection and analysis that results in a rich description of the study to allow the reader to make naturalistic generalizations based on their experiences (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). It was the responsibility of the researcher, as the data collection and data analysis instrument, to acknowledge any biases throughout the process to avoid misinterpretation (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). This was an instrumental case study with an in-depth study of a bounded system as it sought to gain a deeper understanding or insight of an issue (Stake, 1995; Stake, 2005, as cited in Merriam, 2009). A bounded system is defined as a unit of analysis by Stake (1995), which in the current study was the school district while the issue was differences in relationships between district leaders and school principals within the district.

Data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analyses, which are common to case research (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). Interviews were semi-structured, which left opportunities to expand on answers to the predetermined questions. The researcher observed a principal's meeting where notes were carefully taken of presentations and interactions between district leaders and school principals. Documents were also collected, reviewed, and analyzed. The researcher was given documents at the principal's meeting and downloaded other documents from the district website that were relevant to the study.

Theoretical Frameworks

Theoretical frameworks for the current study were open systems theory, transformational leadership theory, and instructional leadership theory, which fit within the broader framework of General Systems Theory. Bertalanffy (1950a, 1950b, 1968, 1972) paid special attention to the concept of an open system within his work in General Systems Theory as he described the state of constant change that occurs in all living systems. According to Senge (2006), organizations are living systems as they are made up of a community of humans, which is applicable to school districts. Within the system, leaders may display a variety of leadership styles including transformational and instructional leadership (Björk & Blase, 2009; McFarlane, 2010). Transformational and instructional leadership styles have been deemed a style that is part of the systems approach to leadership (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Systems leadership, according to Ramosaj and Berisha (2014), is not meant to replace other forms of leadership as a style all its own but to complement them by applying systems thinking to organizations as open systems that receive input to be processed or transformed through actions that focus

on the goal or the output with a feedback loop to continue to improve and learn. According to Hallinger (2003) transformational leadership is not seen as a top-down leadership style but as a type that develops others as leaders to meet organizational goals, which is fitting for the current study of collaborative relationships as leaders share responsibilities with to meet the goals of the district. Instructional leadership also has characteristics that are appropriate for the current study as it is focused on predetermined goals for school improvement through the management of coherent curriculum and instruction systemwide (Hallinger, 2003).

Limitations and Delimitations

A limitation to the current study was that the methodological approach did not allow cause and effect claims to be made. Additionally, internal and external validity were not able to be determined statistically as it was a single case study (Merriam, 2009. A delimitation was that districts that were high-performing or that had an accountability District Performance Score (DPS) of C, D, or F were not considered for the current study. In addition, high-performing districts with a superintendent that had less than 2 years of experience were not considered for the study. Participants were delimited to at least 1 year of experience in an administrative or school leader role. The years of experience were required so that the participants would be able to experientially answer the questions. Only school leaders from the elementary level were considered for the study.

Definitions of Key Concepts and Terms

High-performing school district: for the purposes of the current study, a high-performing school district has an A or B rating based on accountability measures from the State.

Low-performing school district: for the purposes of the current study, a low-performing school district has a C, D, or F rating based on accountability measures from the State.

High-performing schools: for the purposes of the current study, high-performing elementary schools have an A or B rating based on accountability measures from the State.

Low-performing elementary schools: for the purposes of the current study, low-performing elementary schools have a C, D, or F rating based on accountability measures from the State.

Naturalistic generalization: conclusions made through personal engagement in life's affairs or by vicarious experience so well constructed that the person feels as if it happened to himself/herself (Stake, 1995).

Triangulation: working to substantiate an interpretation or to clarify its different meanings (Stake, 1995).

Threat-rigidity: the inability to move toward innovative methods of making decisions based on internal or external threats (Daly, 2009).

District leaders: superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors, and supervisors.

School leaders: principals and assistant principals.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the impact of districts in school performance and the relationships between district leaders and school principals. Although superintendents are ultimately responsible for the work of increasing student

achievement through developing productive relationships with school leaders, the size of the district usually dictates how much involvement is delegated to other district leaders (Hentschke et al., 2009; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; McFarlane, 2010). Research questions presented were established from recurring themes in literature related to district involvement with schools and the collaborative relationships between district leaders and school principals. An overview of the instrumental case study was provided in this chapter that explained the data collection and analysis conducted that led to the findings. Literature is reviewed in chapter 2 of effective districts and relationships between district leaders and school principals while establishing the need for the current study that will help learn more about differences in these relationships between district leaders and school principals from high- and low-performing schools. The literature review provided the foundation to support the research methods for the current study that are described in Chapter 3. Following the methodology chapter is Chapter 4 that provides the results of the study. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings as well as implications for practice and further research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relationships between district leaders and school principals impact school performance, and it is necessary to understand the characteristics or attributes of these relationships to sustain high-performing schools and to improve low-performing schools (Honig, 2012; Mania-Singer, 2017; McFarlane, 2010; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). Early efforts of improving schools were performed on a school-by-school basis with little to no coherence across the district (Mania-Singer, 2017). While all schools within a system benefit from a strong relationship between district leaders and school principals, it is the low-performing schools who must improve to avoid sanctions or negative labels and who may benefit most (Daly et al., 2011; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Rorrer & Skrla, 2005). Differences in the relationships between district leaders and school principals of high-performing and low-performing schools could negatively impact student achievement efforts (Honig, 2012; Mania-Singer, 2017; McFarlane, 2010). This review analyzes literature relevant to improving relationships between district leaders and school principals.

Date parameters for the literature search were 2000-2021, geographical parameters were limited to the United States, and the institutional context was PK-12. Three search engines, Google Scholar, Google, and Bing, were used to find studies related to the current study, and EBSCO, ERIC, JSTOR, Academia, and ResearchGate

were databases accessed when searching for relevant literature. The initial search terms included: central office relationships, superintendents effect reform, trust between central office and principals, district leadership reform, transformational leadership, collaborative leadership, systems theory, and General Systems Theory. A mixture of empirical research and literature reviews resulted from search efforts to determine those that were relevant to the current study. The studies that were most relevant to the current study and were most cited in the relevant studies were chosen, analyzed, and detailed in the literature review. This process continued until reaching a saturation point in the literature search.

The theoretical framework of General Systems Theory is discussed, followed by transformational and transactional leadership, then transformational and instructional leadership, and ending with systems thinking. The organization of the literature focused on the topics Theoretical Framework, the Importance of Central Office Leadership, and the Effective Relationships between District Leaders and School Principals.

Theoretical Framework

Bertalanffy (1950a, 1950b, 1968, 1972) developed a curiosity in his study of biological systems, which expanded the field and led to him establish what is known as General Systems Theory. Bertalanffy explained that the study of systems was not limited to one discipline but could be applied to systems in a general sense, and he paid special attention to the concept of an open system as he described the state of constant change that occurs in all living systems. General Systems Theory continued to expand to fields of economics, social sciences, studies of organizations, etc. (Boulding, 1956; Senge, 2006). Senge (2006) studied organizational learning and stated that organizations are living

systems as they are made up of humans as a community. The next section describes the larger context of General Systems Theory with an explanation and description of open systems based on the work of Bertalanffy. This section ends with an explanation of how transformational leadership and instructional leadership fits within the broader scope of General Systems Theory through systems thinking leadership (Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Ramosaj & Berisha, 2014).

General Systems Theory

Ludwig von Bertalanffy was a biologist, born in Austria, who became interested in the application of systems theory in the 1920's as he began to study organisms as systems (Bertalanffy, 1950b). A system, according to Bertalanffy (1972), is "a set of elements standing in interrelation among themselves and with the environment" (p. 417). To fully appreciate General Systems Theory, understanding the relationships and interactions between parts of the organized whole must be examined (Bertalanffy, 1972). In 1956, Kenneth Boulding responded to Bertalanffy's work on his theory of systems related to living organisms communicating his similar conclusion of general system theory applicable to the fields of economics and the social sciences (Bertalanffy, 1968, 1972; Laszlo & Krippner, 1998). Following his connection with Bertalanffy, Boulding (1956) wrote about General Systems Theory as a framework or structure for developing entire applications of the theory in other disciplines. Boulding acknowledged the ability of systems theory to spread into areas of study that had not already been addressed and

suggested new approaches to structure general systems theory that would focus on communication systems and organizational structure.

Additionally, Bertalanffy (1950a) described living organisms as open or closed systems that may allow a flow of materials in or out of the system and further explained that systems may also achieve a steady state when the inflow and outflow of materials is in continuous change and eventually establishes constancy or a steady state. Bertalanffy then applied open systems to organizations as a feedback loop where input, internal transformation, output, and feedback are constant and impacted by the environment (Ramosaj & Berisha, 2014). As General Systems Theory continued to advance with the idea of an open system, Senge (2006) described organizations as living systems made up of human communities that involve a feedback process structured in a circular, recursive relationship that does not flow in a linear direction. Senge wrote about learning organizations defined as places where people continually expand their capacities to create the results they truly desire, where collective aspirations are set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together. Leadership within organizations is essential, whether in the private or the public sector, for goal attainment and must be considered when discussing the system or organizational functions (Amanchukwu et al., 2015).

Organizational success is impossible without leadership, but organizations can also fail due to ineffective leadership (Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016). Amanchukwu et al. (2015) analyzed leadership theories, leadership principles, and leadership styles and described effective leaders as those who inspire, motivate, and direct activities to achieve goals of the organization, but they also acknowledged that

there has not been a leadership style identified as one that is best or applicable to all situations. The systems approach for organizations is often found in literature as related to management and not leadership, but Ramosaj and Berisha (2014) argue that it increasingly applies to leadership due to the growing complexity of all types of organizations in which systems approach can serve as a valuable method for modeling and problem solving. Further, systems leadership is not a stand-alone leadership style but instead encompasses other styles of leadership including transformational and instructional leadership. However, transformational leadership must first be discussed in relation to transactional leadership.

Transformational and transactional leadership styles are commonly examined in studies on organizational learning as a systems approach (Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Bass, 1999; Ramosaj & Berisha, 2014; Stewart, 2006; Vera & Crossan, 2004). It is rare to find transformational leadership in literature without it being compared to transactional leadership, and it is important to point out that leaders often fluctuate between the two styles as situations warrant (Bass, 1999). Those within the organization often prefer one over the other as transformational leadership is associated with change, and transactional leadership is associated with structure that strict rule followers typically prefer as it is predictable (Vera & Crossan, 2004). Additionally, transformational leadership seeks to empower followers by enhancing their performance and developing them as leaders while transactional leadership uses a contingency-based relationship where followers work on a rewards-based system to meet the expectations of the leader (Bass, 1999).

While a great leader is skilled at transformational and transactional leadership as situations change (Bass, 1999), the following section will focus on transformational

leadership coupled with instructional leadership in the educational organization. Burns (1978, as cited in Stewart, 2006) very distinctly points out that transformational leadership develops a common purpose between leaders and followers whereas transactional leadership develops a similar purpose among leaders and followers. Burns (1978) compared differences between transformational leadership and transactional leadership to that of leadership and management. Continuing Burns' point, Stewart (2006) asserted that transactional leadership might better be termed as transactional management. Leithwood et al. (2004) found that there is a need to incorporate some managerial characteristics with leadership characteristics to effectively lead a successful organization.

Instructional and transformational leadership styles serve different purposes, but they are appropriate within the educational organization (Hallinger, 2003). Specifically, Hallinger (2003) found that instructional and transformational leadership are connected more by their similarities than by their differences. According to Hallinger, transformational principals focus on:

> creating a shared sense of purpose in the school, developing a climate of high expectations and a school culture on improvement of teaching and learning, shaping the reward structure of the school to reflect goals set for staff and students, organizing and providing a wide range of activities aimed at intellectual stimulation and development for staff, and being a visible presence in the school, modelling the values that are being fostered in the school (p. 343).

Instructional leadership has historically been applied to principals in their work to improve teaching and learning by focusing on curriculum, instruction, goals, and conditions at the school level but has more recently been applied to superintendents as leaders at the district level (Kowalski, 2005a; Stewart, 2006). Transformational

leadership is not considered a hierarchical type of leadership because it is considered as a style that shares leadership to meet the broader goals of the organization as a whole (Hallinger, 2003). According to Stewart (2006), the principal and, on a larger scale, the superintendent are oftentimes not seen as expertise in curriculum and instruction, which complicates the idea of instructional leadership in those positions. However, current research shows that in effective districts, superintendents and principals must become knowledgeable about effective instructional practices while collaborating among themselves and with teachers, which Marks and Printy (2003) refer to as shared instructional leadership.

Transformational and instructional leadership applied through the lens of systems thinking leadership, were the theoretical frameworks used for the current study as leadership is a determinant factor on effectiveness within organizations (Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Daly & Chrispeels, 2008; Ramosaj & Berisha, 2014). Leithwood et al. (2004) assert that transformational leaders are instructional leaders with skills that develop trusting relationships with staff by supporting teachers through facilitating improvement and allowing them to participate in the decision-making process. There have been several models or frameworks developed for transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and instructional leadership. A comparison of a model for instructional leadership and of transformational leadership adapted by Hallinger (2003) is shown in Appendix A to provide a foundation for the conceptual framework developed by the researcher for the current study.

Evers and Lakomski (1996, as cited in Stewart, 2006) were critics of transformational models because the models were too dependent on leaders having the

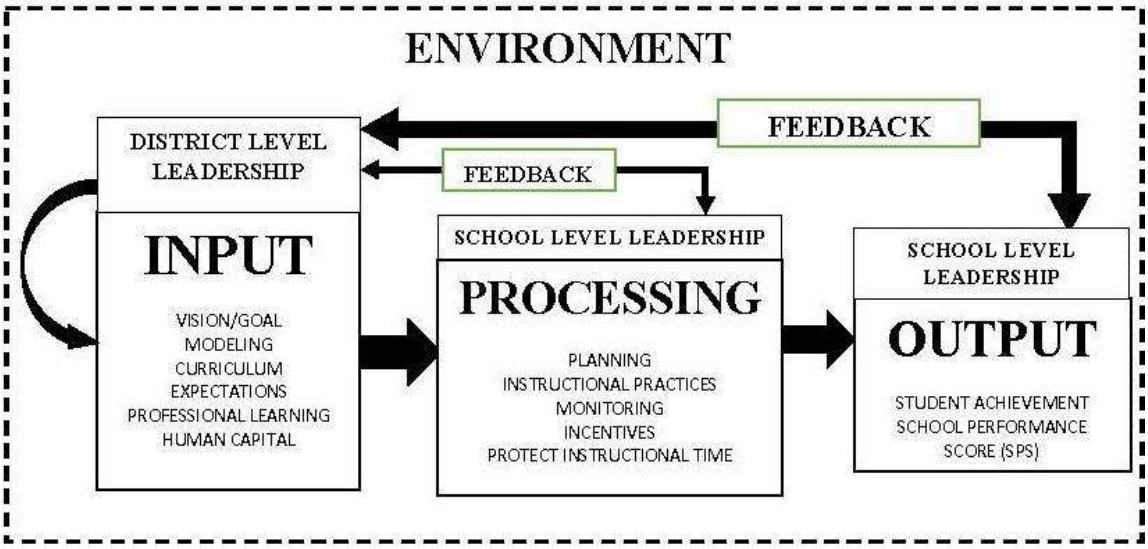
necessary skills to adopt that style of leadership. Instead of depending on transformational leaders to transform an organization, Evers and Lakomski asserted that select individuals could, with the development of feedback loops, as with open systems theory, collectively become their own transforming devices (Stewart, 2006). Additionally, Marks and Printy (2003) found that school performance, through the joint application of transformational and instructional leadership in an educational organization, is profoundly beneficial.

Relationships between district leaders and school principals represent interrelated subsystems, interdependent on each other for success, within the larger system that is the organization (Bertalanffy, 1950a, 1950b, 1968, 1972; Mania-Singer, 2017). General Systems Theory was the larger theoretical framework for the current study with transformational leadership and instructional leadership applied through the lens of systems thinking (Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Daly & Chrispeels, 2008; Ramosaj & Berisha, 2014). A systemwide approach to leadership styles that support effective instructional practices and that increases student achievement in turn positively impacts school performance (Agullard & Goughnour, 2006; Björk et al., 2018; Daly & Finnigan, 2009; Hentschke et al., 2009; Leithwood et al., 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Through seeking others' perspectives and ideas in the process of organizational improvement, transformational leadership builds commitment, passion, and loyalty, which guided the researcher's decision for its use in the current study (Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016). Additionally, Farazja and Khademi (2010, as cited in Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016) stated that the leadership style, modeled by a leader, will guide the support or resistance that members of an organization exhibit toward change.

Communication systems are also more effective in collaborative relationships when reciprocal feedback is employed, which can be done so when modeled using a feedback loop in an open system (Evers & Lakomski, 1996, as cited in Stewart, 2006). Feedback loops are characteristic of open systems, which were part of the literature review and developed by Bertalanffy (1950a, 1950b, 1968, 1972) as inputs, internal transformation, outputs, and recursive feedback. In Appendix C, an open systems model developed by Katz and Khan (1978, as cited in Ramosaj & Berisha, 2014) is shown as an example of a type of feedback loop for organizations. For the purpose of the current study the researcher developed a model for a feedback loop in an open system to show feedback at processing and output instead of only after output. Earlier feedback allows for modifications for input before final results are determined, which provides opportunities to make changes while in the process. Figure 1 represents the framework developed by the researcher. Conceptual frameworks of open systems theory, transformational leadership theory, and instructional leadership theory, which fit within the broader theoretical framework of General Systems Theory, were used for the current study.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Feedback Loop



Note. This development of this feedback loop was influenced from the adapted model by Hallinger (2003) and Bertalanffy (1950a, 1950b, 1968, 1972).

Open systems were applied to the current study to examine whether there are differences in the relationships between district leaders and school principals of high- and low-performing schools in a high-performing district in a southern state. Application of open systems is relevant for the current study because the relationships between parts of the system impact the whole based on the effectiveness of their relationships.

Importance of District Level Leadership

District leadership has not always been supported as positive or beneficial in the involvement with school sites from the district level as positive or beneficial and was even considered the "blob" in a speech by Bennett (1987, as cited in Marzano & Waters, 2009). The "blob" included all the educators outside the classroom that were part of the education establishment preventing real improvement from taking place (Bennett et al.,

1999, as cited in Marzano & Waters, 2009). While Marzano and Waters (2009) acknowledge that ineffective districts do exist and may be part of the "blob," they assert that the general label is not true of many districts whose leaders assume the responsibilities and characteristics necessary to positively impact student achievement thus improving school performance. District involvement at the school level has continued to increase with the implementation of accountability measures (Björk & Blase, 2009; Devono & Price, 2012; Hentschke et al., 2009; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; Marzano & Waters, 2009). However, Honig and Copland (2008) state that research related to school performance and increasing student achievement had been focused on the school level and often ignored the impact of district offices for several decades. Student achievement is impacted by district involvement, which has been correlated to district leadership practices, but Whitehurst et al. (2013) concluded that while there may be a correlation of district leadership to student achievement, there is not necessarily a causation of such (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Daly & Finnigan, 2009; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Rorrer & Skrla, 2005; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). There are factors that contribute to student outcomes not directly related to district leadership, and Whitehurst et al. assert that much of the previous literature has failed to control for those other factors.

A clear, coherent systemwide focus on teaching and learning through specific goals concerning curriculum and instruction as well as consistency with programs and resources in the district were characteristic of high-performing and improving districts (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). Further, effective approaches to address the needs of schools by adopting a systemwide approach for supporting

teachers' instructional practices with district-level support include coherent instructional expectations and accountability through multiple types of data to inform instruction (Agullard & Goughnour, 2006; Anderson, 2003; Burch & Spillane, 2004; Daly, 2009; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Nino et al., 2014; Sanders, 2014; Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Trujillo, 2012).

Marzano and Waters (2009) assert that leadership responsibilities and practices of superintendents do impact teaching and learning in schools. Nino et al. (2014) further this finding by indicating that superintendents and other district level leaders serve to improve student achievement by supporting school level educators in multiple ways, one of which is through high quality professional development. Additional methods of support for improving student achievement include a clear and shared focus, high levels of communication and collaboration, monitoring of teaching and learning, and support of the learning environment through needed resources (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007). Without support systems, even the best school leaders cannot do the work of an instructional leader to maintain a focus on supporting teachers' instructional needs to impact student achievement (Ikemoto et al., 2014).

As classroom instruction has a direct impact on student learning efforts to improve instruction through high-quality professional development serves as a pathway to accomplish that goal (Leithwood et al., 2004; Nino et al., 2014). Though superintendents indirectly impact student achievement, effective superintendents use collective leadership to develop opportunities for collaboration and communication among stakeholders and support the use of data to inform instructional decisions, and they are also active and present in leading their districts collectively (Finnigan et al.,

2013; Nino et al., 2014). Nino et al. (2014) also indicate that effective leadership behaviors include demonstrating leadership, providing adequate resources, using data to set priorities, using research to make decisions about instruction, collaborating with others, and ensuring equity for all students.

Superintendents are hired and held responsible for multiple functions as the leaders of the school districts, one of which is creating and sustaining a successful school district consisting of high-performing schools (McFarlane, 2010). Through guidance of superintendents, district leadership has repeatedly shown to have an impact, albeit indirect, on the growth and success of schools in their charge (Björk et al., 2018; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McFarlane, 2010; Nino et al., 2014; Trujillo, 2012). District leadership influences school level leadership, which has shown to impact the climate and culture of schools (Devono & Price, 2012; McFarlane, 2010). According to McFarlane (2010) the more technical leadership factors corresponded to a more positive school climate and the more effective leadership factors corresponded to a less positive school climate. McFarlane asserted that the results might indicate that stakeholders in the accountability era desire more transactional leadership than transformational leadership. School districts' organizational structures are set under the direction of the superintendents and has the potential to improve student achievement through the working relationships of leader interactions within the districts (Marzano & Waters, 2009; McFarlane, 2010; Nino et al., 2014; Rorrer & Skrla, 2005; Sanders, 2014). Accountability of school performance requires superintendents to engage in leadership practices that allow for and encourage collaborative relationships with principals to

effectively and accurately diffuse knowledge and information to other stakeholders (McFarlane, 2010).

Marzano and Waters (2009) through a meta-analysis of 27 studies determined what influence district leaders have on student achievement and found five key responsibilities:

- collaborative goal setting, setting non-negotiable goals for student achievement through effective classroom instruction supported by the principal;
- alignment and support of by the school board to ensure that a clear focus on the established district goals;
- continuous monitoring of work towards district goals through student achievement data and monitoring of teachers' behavior and classroom instruction; and
- providing resources to support schools in achieving district goals through providing the necessary time, money, personnel, and materials with a special emphasis on providing resource support for professional development for teachers and principals.

Further, they determined that district-level leadership that takes stakeholder beliefs and values into account positively correlates to student achievement. Whitehurst et al. (2013) sought to find the influence of school districts relative to the influence of schools, teachers, and individual differences among students on student achievement; differences among districts in their contributions to student achievement that are large enough to be relevant for policy; if districts can be categorized based on patterns of influence on

student academic achievement in ways that would inform efforts to improve district performance; and what the distinctive features of exceptional districts are. District level effect on student achievement is slightly smaller than that of the school level and quite a bit smaller than the teacher level (Whitehurst et al., 2013). Effective district involvement can provide an increase of a little over a quarter of a school year in student learning, which would be significant in school improvement efforts. Although there is only a small district impact, it was large enough to be statistically significant, and Whitehurst et al. determined that districts that serve as models for effectiveness should be chosen from districts that are high-performing or are at least showing continuous improvement because district involvement in schools impacts student achievement.

Togneri and Anderson (2003) identified important functions of district leadership to help guide districts to develop coherent strategies shared across entire systems. They include:

- developing a focused vision in each district,
- committing to using multiple measures to make data-informed decisions about instructional practices,
- providing professional learning opportunities at the district level based on needs that emerged from data, and
- moving the district beyond the thought of leadership as only the responsibility of the superintendent and principals to incorporate more internal actors to work together in leadership roles where they could collaborate and best support instruction.

Coherence within the district allows all stakeholders to work collaboratively toward the shared district goal to improve instruction (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Additionally, superintendents, as district instructional leaders, are responsible for leading their districts through a systemwide approaches by collaborating with others, clearly communicating district goals, supporting schools to meet their needs, and ensuring high quality professional development opportunities to improve teaching and learning (Daly et al., 2011; Devono & Price, 2012; Finnigan, 2011; Kowalski, 2005a; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Mitchell & Castle, 2005; Peterson, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Whitehurst et al., 2013).

Principals must have the support of the superintendent and district leaders through coherent, data driven approaches for implementing reform to transform teaching and learning for increased student achievement, and principals in turn must work with the superintendent and district leaders to accomplish the goals of the district (Daly et al., 2011; Devono & Price, 2012; Finnigan, 2011; Hentschke et al., 2009; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Mitchell & Castle, 2005; Nino et al., 2014). Leadership from superintendents, district leaders, and principals, each as a part of the system, determine the effectiveness of efforts to improve instruction, which in turn improves learning (Anderson, 2003; Björk et al., 2005; Daly, 2009; Daly & Finnigan, 2009; Devono & Price, 2012; Honig, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Peterson, 2002; Rosin et al., 2007; Supovitz et al., 2010).

The lenses for the theoretical connections to the current study were systems theory, leadership theory, transformational leadership theory, organizational learning

theory, expectancy theory, and unit of change or change theory in studying differences in relationships between district leaders and school principals (Daly et al., 2011; Devono & Price, 2012; Finnigan, 2011; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). General Systems Theory used in my study coincides with the studies in this section as they analyzed the district as a system, and the use of transformational leadership in my study fits within the scope of the general use of leadership theories as well as transformational leadership theory in the studies presented**.**

Effective Relationships Between District Leaders and School Principals

Formal social structures within systems can be used to advance school performance by increasing collaboration between central office and school sites and by increasing communication opportunities as well as other strategies (Agullard & Goughnour, 2006; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003). Common characteristics of collaborative working relationships between district leaders and school principals are successfully diffused and implemented to academically grow students and include communication, decision-making opportunities, professional development, and support of specific needs of individual schools (Agullard & Goughnour, 2006; Anderson, 2003; Daly, 2009; Daly et al., 2011; Daly & Finnigan, 2009; Mania-Singer, 2017; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Trujillo, 2013).

Principal leadership and the impact principals have on school performance has shown to be second only to the impact of teacher influence, which emphasizes the need for principals to obtain skills that will positively transform student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004; NASSP & NAESP, 2013). The role of the principal as school-level instructional leader is essential to the success of improving teaching and learning as

he/she works with district leaders to improve school performance. As principals are tasked with leading their schools in manners to improve teaching and learning, making it possible to meet accountability requirements, they are not able to do this alone and should have the support of the district (Daly et al., 2011). Bottoms and Fry (2009) determined working conditions they believe should be established by the district to support their jobs to improve school performance. Johnston et al. (2016) stated that principals value support from district offices that help develop them as instructional leaders of their schools.

Understanding the impact of accountability measures regarding assistance from districts as perceived by principals is important to the overall effectiveness of relationships between district leaders and school principals. School accountability measures may cause principals to perceive that district leaders are threats when they respond to supporting schools, which may limit effective leadership capabilities of those principals (Daly et al., 2011). According to Daly et al. (2011), principals' self-efficacies are negatively impacted by low-performing labels placed on schools which, in turn, negatively impact student achievement. Low performance labels increase the perception of threat-rigidity, the tendency of organizations to respond to the low-performing label by resorting only to what has worked in the past and not by finding innovative ways to improve, from the district, resulting in leadership that may not be able to lead their schools out of low-performing status (Daly et al., 2011). Principals perceive district leaders as a potential support in flexible and innovative ways when threat-rigidity is removed. School performance labels continue to impact district leaders and school

principals, and Rorrer and Skrla (2005) encourage district leaders to work with school leaders to mediate requirements of accountability in a positive manner.

District office leaders are essential in bridging the gap between district offices and school principals for school improvement purposes so that communication and knowledge are not isolated (Daly & Finnigan, 2009). Daly and Finnigan (2009) examined social networks to understand the "relationship between these networks and the capacity for districts to change" while facing the threat of accountability sanctions (p. 112). With a focus on low-performing districts and the networks within them, they found sparse communication and knowledge ties between site and district leaders. According to Daly and Finnigan, district leaders must not only provide more time for collaboration but also must develop a structure that supports relationships that are effective in communication and exchanges of knowledge throughout districts. In addition, district leaders must redefine roles as they begin to support the work of schools. An increased external threat-rigidity of high stakes accountability may prevent districts from enacting organizational change through communication and knowledge transfer between district and school site leaders resulting in a lack of diffusion of effective practices across the district (Daly & Finnigan, 2009).

Through the years, the roles of superintendents in school districts have evolved, and superintendents may not be properly prepared for the roles that are expected of them as they accept the challenge of leading districts (Björk et al., 2005; Devono & Price, 2012; Kowalski, 2005b). Student achievement has been indirectly correlated to superintendents (Marzano & Waters, 2009), and according to Devono and Price (2012) is an important reason to determine what roles principals and teachers perceive that

superintendents play in developing environments where all students can be successful. Superintendents develop effective learning environments when willing to work with all stakeholders in a collaborative manner to develop district goals, to work as visionary leaders with principals to establish goals for their schools, to support schools in achieving those goals, and to develop a strategic plan to meet district goals.

Superintendents indicated that articulating a vision and mission was the most important role with consensus building ranking second (Devono & Price, 2012). Principals also indicated that articulating a vision and mission was the most important role of the superintendent, and principals and teachers identified curriculum knowledge and consensus building among those roles that are important. Superintendents understand that buy in is valued and is obtained by including principals and teachers in the decision-making process. Finally, superintendents understand that supporting school leaders through professional development to specifically meet the needs of teachers and principals is critical to collaborative relationships with school leaders.

Superintendents through their leadership are ultimately responsible for establishing cultures of support and development of principals as instructional leaders to improve teaching and learning systemwide (Devono & Price, 2012; Honig, 2012; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McFarlane, 2010; Nino et al., 2014). As instruction improves, student achievement follows, but principals, as school level leaders, cannot accomplish this alone and must be supported through intense job-embedded systems of support from central office (Devono & Price, 2012; Honig, 2012; Mania-Singer, 2017; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McFarlane, 2010; Nino et al., 2014).

A critical piece of a principal's job is that of instructional leader (Honig, 2012; Mitchell & Castle, 2005). Honig stated that there is not a consistent definition for instructional leadership, and the way it looks in practice varies, resulting in differences in how the work among districts was completed. The work of developing principals as instructional leaders must be priority for central office administrators through job-embedded support. District leaders need to be actively involved in implementing strategies within schools and need to identify whether or not the relationships between district office members and elementary school principals from high-performing and low-performing schools influence the success of implementing and sustaining reform initiatives to improve student outcomes (Mania-Singer, 2017). Relationships between district office leaders and elementary principals were unreciprocated after principal initiation, and principals did not have many opportunities to provide feedback to the district office leaders. Differences between district leader and school principal relationships were based on high-performing and low-performing schools with high-performing schools receiving more opportunities for decision-making and feedback (Mania-Singer, 2017). Lower performing schools did not receive the support that higher performing schools received, and the continuation of those types of relationships will likely leave schools to perform at their current statuses (Mania-Singer, 2017).

District leaders tend to be socially isolated among each other, which limits communication, transfer of knowledge and skills, and collaboration between district offices and schools (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Daly et al., 2011; Mania-Singer, 2017; Rorrer & Skrla, 2005; Whitehurst et al., 2013). Superintendent leadership is key to effective relationships between district leaders and school principals by creating an

organizational structure that defines roles, creates trust, establishes reciprocal communication, encourages and allows collaboration, develops coherence across the district, and provides support to stakeholders (Hentschke et al., 2009; Honig, 2012; Mania-Singer, 2017; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McFarlane, 2010; Nino et al., 2014; Rorrer & Skrla, 2005; Sanders, 2014). Relationships between district leaders and school principals suffer when there is a lack of clear communication, collaboration, shared decision-making, feedback from principals, intensive support based on needs of the school, and opportunities for high-quality professional development from the district level (Daly et al., 2011; Daly & Finnigan, 2009; Finnigan & Daly, 2012; Finnigan et al., 2013; Honig, 2012; McFarlane, 2010; Opfer et al., 2008).

In connection with the current study, the lenses for the theoretical frameworks were leadership theories, systems theory, change theories, transformational leadership theory, instructional leadership theory, expectancy theory, and Social Network Theory (Daly et al., 2011; Daly & Finnigan, 2009; Devono & Price, 2012; Finnigan, 2011; Honig, 2012; Mania-Singer, 2017; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McFarlane, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Mitchell & Castle, 2005; Nino et al., 2014; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). The theories most commonly used were leadership theory followed more specifically by transformational and instructional leadership (Daly et al., 2011; Devono & Price, 2012; Finnigan & Daly, 2012; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Mitchell & Castle, 2005; Nino et al., 2014; Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

Summary

Superintendents are responsible for guiding other district leaders, especially in larger districts, to carry out the work necessary to make effective changes in the district

(Browne-Ferrigno & Glass, 2005; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Though superintendents indirectly impact student achievement, effective superintendents, through collective leadership, work to increase student achievement by developing opportunities for collaboration and communication among stakeholders and by supporting the use of data to inform instructional decisions (Finnigan et al., 2013; Nino et al., 2014). Devono and Price (2012) included the need for superintendents to recognize the importance of including other stakeholders in the process of developing effective learning environments and of developing relationships with principals that allow for autonomy as the school leader. Superintendents lead districts in multiple capacities to improve teaching and learning, and effective superintendents possess leadership qualities that support principals and teachers in their work at the school level (Devono & Price, 2012; Nino et al., 2014). The next chapter outlines the methodology used in the current study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the current study is to better understand the differences, if any, of collaborative relationships between district leaders and school principals of high-performing and low-performing schools in a high-performing school district in a southern state.

This qualitative case study sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the differences, if any, in communication between district leaders and principals of high- and low-performing schools?

RQ2. What are the differences, if any, in the decision-making opportunities at the district level for principals from high- and low-performing schools?

RQ3. What are the differences, if any, in the types of support that district leaders provide to principals of high- and low-performing schools?

RQ4. What are the differences, if any, in professional development opportunities provided to principals of high- and low-performing schools?

Design of the Study

The purpose of this single, instrumental qualitative case study was to explore the relationships between district leaders and school principals in high-performing and low-performing schools in a high-performing, medium-size district in a southern state.

Qualitative research is designed to discover and interpret the way people construct meaning in their lives and in the world around them (Merriam, 2009). It is an interpretive type of research that uses an inductive process of data collection and analysis that results in a rich description of the study to allow the reader to make naturalistic generalizations based on his/her own experiences (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). The researcher then, as the data collection and data analysis instrument, must acknowledge any biases throughout the process to avoid misinterpretation of data (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995).

This was an instrumental case study with an in-depth analysis of a bounded system to gain a deeper understanding or insight of an issue (Stake, 2005, as cited in Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). A bounded system, as defined by Stake (2005, as cited in Merriam, 2009), is a unit of analysis and an issue within that unit of analysis. In the current study, the unit of analysis within the bounded system was the school district, and the issue was the differences in relationships between district leaders and school principals within a single school district. The role of the researcher was to interview and observe participants of the study as well as read and review documents related to the issue.

Sample Selection

Non-probability or purposeful sampling was used for this case study because it was a qualitative study that attempted to gain a deeper understanding of something within the case (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). Because specific criteria were used to determine which unit of analysis would be studied, purposeful sampling was used to select participants who would provide thorough information for the researcher to obtain answers to the research questions for the study (Merriam, 2009). According to Merriam

(2009), sampling for a qualitative case study usually requires two levels of sampling: first, to determine the case for the study and second, to identify the people, documents, and activities to study within the case.

Mania-Singer (2017) examined the relationships between a district central office and principals in a large, urban low-performing district and recommended further research on these relationships in high-performing districts. Additionally, Mania-Singer recommended research in smaller and/or rural districts. The school district in a southern state was chosen for the current study based on the recommendations by Mania-Singer to study a high-performing district. There are a total of 70 school districts within the state; however, the researcher only considered 64 school districts using specific criteria: size of the district, district performance scores, and proximity to the researcher.

The size of the district was the first criteria used to make the final decision for which district would be used as the unit of analysis for the current study. Data were available that showed the number of sites and the number of students enrolled in each district to develop a list of mid- to large-sized districts that would be considered. First, data based on the number of sites or schools for each district followed by the number of students enrolled were used to determine which districts met the criteria. Based on that information, a list of 16 districts, based on school sites, and a list of 14 districts, based on the number of students enrolled, were established. Thirteen districts were cross-referenced on both lists for meeting the criteria.

Next, the researcher used district performance scores to determine which district would be used as the unit of analysis. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a gap in state testing data due to school closures during the 2019-2020 school year. No testing data

were available for analysis from the 2019-2020 school year, so the 2018-2019 data were used. The researcher used the list of 13 mid- to large-sized districts and determined which of those were also high-performing districts. Only 11 out of 64 districts throughout the state were eligible.

Finally, the researcher used proximity for ease of access to make the final determination for the unit of analysis for the current study. The researcher chose to remove the district he/she works in from the list of remaining sites to help eliminate bias. Only 10 possible choices remained. Two districts fit the criteria for proximity to the researcher. The final decision between the last two districts was made based on the district that was closest to the researcher. Once the decision was made for the unit of analysis, a list of elementary schools was developed to determine which sites were high-performing and which were low-performing. That list showed 11 options for each performance type.

Next, principals to be contacted for participation were based on level of education and years of experience in administrative roles. The level of education is usually pre-determined by the job description for that position, but the researcher required at least a master's degree. Principals who participated worked in elementary schools and had at least 1 year of experience in administrative roles. Two principals representing high-performing and two principals representing low-performing schools were selected and agreed to participate in the interview process. For purposes of the current study, high-performing schools have A or B as their School Performance Scores (SPSs) while low-performing schools have C, D, or F as their SPSs. Appendix B shows the demographics of participants in the study.

Organizational structure of the district was analyzed to help determine which district leaders would be chosen for participation. The superintendent granted permission for the study to be conducted in the district and, based on the size of the district, directors that led departments within the district office were contacted to be participants for the study. Again, level of education and years of experience at the district level were criteria used to determine eligibility for participation. District leaders were required to have obtained at least a master's degree and have at least 2 years of experience in their current positions. Four district leaders were contacted by email and by phone, but only two responded and agreed to participate.

Data Collection

In qualitative or more specifically, case study research, data gathering is done by collecting words, most often through interviews, observations, and document review (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). The qualitative researcher used relationships and experiences to gather and organize data that are reported later through an interpretive process. A system to organize data as it was collected was used by the researcher, as suggested by Stake (1995). Progress of the study was recorded in a Word document based on date and event or action. According to Merriam (2009) and Stake, case study research does not have a definitive time in which data gathering occurs but instead is being acquainted with and developing an understanding of the case being studied. Thus, the progress of the study document was a living document throughout the research process. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis.

Interviews

There was a structured section of the interview to learn the history of participants, and the other sections were semi-structured. Prior to interviewing participants, the researcher conducted pilot interviews with school and district leaders from a different district. Conducting pilot interviews helps ensure that questions are worded correctly, should remain or be eliminated, and are in the correct order if it is a structured interview (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). There were specific questions that were asked, but each interview had follow-up questions that varied based on respondents' answers. Interviews were conducted in person and via Zoom dependent on the setting that the interviewee was most comfortable with due to COVID-19. Each interview lasted from 50 minutes to an hour and 45 minutes. Range of experience in each participant's current role was from 1 to 10 years while overall experience in education ranged from 14 to 51 years. Table 1 provides information regarding interview participants.

Table 1

Career Information for Participants

Participant	Years in Current Administrative Position	Experience
SL1	2	educator for 14 years, elementary school teacher, assistant principal
SL2	8	served as curriculum coach then as assistant principal current school prior to becoming assistant principal, then moved to current principal position
SL3	10	middle school teacher, spent time at the university level, curriculum coordinator after returning to P-12, then moved to current principal position
SL4	1	special education teacher, curriculum coordinator, principal
DL1	8	educator for 51 years, elementary and middle school teacher, worked at the state level, instructional coach, elementary principal, middle school principal, then moved to current director position
DL2	8	educator for 38 years, taught upper elementary and middle school, assistant principal, principal then moved to current director position

Note. School and district leader career information obtained from interviews.

Observations

Permission from the superintendent was granted for the researcher to observe a principal's meeting in which the superintendent, district leaders, and principals interacted formally and informally. Principals attended the meeting in person at the central office, and assistant principals were asked to join this meeting via Zoom. Assistant principals

remained at the school so that an administrator was on campus at all times, but the topic of special education discipline was discussed, which the superintendent stated was important for assistant principals to hear. Notes were taken throughout the meeting including comments, body language, and reactions of principals to the speakers at the meeting. The researcher had already interviewed the principals and scheduled district leader interviews prior to attending the meeting. This provided the researcher knowledge of which principals in which to focus attention. However, all attendees were observed throughout the meeting. Names of speakers and the department they represented were documented for later analysis. The researcher spent time searching the district website prior to the interviews and the observations to gain an understanding of the context of the district and of individual schools. Following the larger, whole group portion of the principal's meeting, breakout sessions took place based on grade level bands. Elementary principals met with the two district leaders who were interviewed for the current study. The researcher was able to observe formal and informal interactions before and during this meeting, which was specifically targeted to the elementary principals. The role of the researcher for this type of data collection was as an observer.

Documents

Documents were collected at the principal's meeting and from the state, district, and school websites. An agenda and copies of notes from multiple departments were gathered at the principal's meeting. Handbooks from the district and school sites were accessed from websites. A document from the district website showed which district leaders were assigned to each school as the principal evaluator and the assigned support person for Urgent Intervention Required (UIR) and Comprehensive Intervention

Required (CIR) schools. According to Merriam (2009), documents are not as limiting as interviews and observations as the researcher is not as intrusive when accessing documents. Merriam further explained that the researcher may use documents in imaginative and creative ways to include in the study.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analyses are not distinguishingly separate processes and should be completed simultaneously as the study progresses (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). The nature of qualitative research is that discoveries are made as data are collected and analyzed, which allows for flexibility in altering data collection as it is analyzed (Merriam, 2009). As data were collected, a system of coding to organize the data was employed. Merriam (2009) stated that is up to the researcher as to how the coding will take place but suggests an inductive and constant comparative method for analyzing data that ultimately answers the research questions through analysis of emerging themes or categories to holistically understand the case. Furthering the necessity to develop categories, Stake (1995) distinguished data analysis for intrinsic and instrumental case studies by clarifying that intrinsic case studies use direct interpretation while instrumental case studies, as is the current study, use categorical aggregation.

Merriam (2009) explained that data analysis is ultimately used to answer the research questions by moving through data in various ways that will lead to bits of information that can be assigned to categories, codes, or findings. Each interview was transcribed and initially analyzed within 3 days of the interview. Fieldnotes were taken during the observation at the principal's meeting to record interactions between district leaders and school principals, and open coding through an inductive and constant

comparative method of data analysis was used initially as suggested by Merriam. After each interview, two-column tables were created in Word documents used by the researcher for analyzing transcribed interviews. This allowed small phrases or words to be noted in the right-hand column to begin to develop codes. Through the continuation of data analysis, there was a shift to a deductive mode that occurs when no new information is presented and is also verified against other data (Merriam, 2009). Finally, as Merriam described, the researcher analyzed data to support final categories, which resulted in categories being named in reflection of supporting literature and subcategories named according to the specific data. Collection and analysis of data were not intended to explain why issues in the case were a particular way but instead were to describe the issues in a particular time and place (Stake, 1995). It was the purpose of the study to determine the differences, if any exist, in relationships between district leaders and school principals of high- and low-performing schools in a southern state.

Researcher Positionality

Because the researcher in the current qualitative study is central to all interactions within the case study, it is important that the researcher's preconceptions that existed prior to entering the case are evident. A potential bias of the researcher is the current position held is that of a low-performing elementary school assistant principal in a high-performing district. However, personal experiences of the researcher were not used in the current study. Additionally, the district where the researcher is employed was eliminated from the potential list of school districts that qualified for the current study to eliminate bias.

Trustworthiness

Reliability seeks to measure the ability to replicate the findings of a study, but in qualitative research, data are presented as explanations or depictions of people and how they define the world around them (Merriam, 2009). The actions, attitudes, and behaviors of humans do not remain fixed but change with the circumstances of the moment, which makes replication nearly impossible. Wolcott (2005, as cited in Merriam, 2009) stated that would not be suitable in determining reliability. However, Merriam asserted that the results or findings that are reported in qualitative research need not be discounted simply because the actions or behaviors of humans cannot be replicated. Dependability of a study is accomplished when the data and the findings of the study are consistent (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, in qualitative research, the goal is to keep the results reported consistent with the data collected in the study.

There are systems that can be implemented so that consistency can be achieved. Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Merriam, 2009) encourage the use of an audit trail in which Richards (2005, as cited in Merriam, 2009) described as keeping a log to document the steps taken and decisions made by the researcher throughout the study for the purpose of dependability. Yin (2009) suggests maintaining a database for the case study to eliminate error or bias as much as possible. A digital database of interviews, scanned documents, downloaded documents, and field notes for observations was kept throughout the study. Hard copies of field notes, transcribed interviews, and documents were also kept in a hard-copy collection to eliminate the risk of losing the digital copies.

In qualitative studies, participants provide their views of the world through their own experiences, and the researcher then presents that data in a way that is meaningful to

the study (Merriam, 2009). According to Merriam (2009), the degree to which findings of the research and reality match is how validity is determined, and because data collected from participants are not necessarily reality, but are constructed reality, there is a need to determine validity in some other manner. Internal validity cannot be determined in qualitative research using statistical data analysis, so Merriam and Stake (1995) provided strategies for determining validity or credibility through triangulation of data. Triangulation of data analyzes multiple methods of data collected to ensure accuracy (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). Merriam provided additional strategies for validity, including saturation in data collection and reflexivity to eliminate assumptions and biases. Data should be collected to a point that nothing new is being presented, and the researcher realizes that the same information is being repeated, resulting in saturation (Merriam, 2009). Lincoln and Guba (2000, as cited in Merriam, 2009) described reflexivity in the researcher as the instrument of data collection with the ability to self-reflect, especially to communicate any biases or assumptions that may influence their findings. As an instrument of data collection and data analysis, the researcher communicated her assumptions in the current study.

The researcher used triangulation, adequate engagement in data collection, and peer review to ensure validity of the study. As the instrument of data collection, the researcher gathered the data through multiple methods for triangulation to ensure the findings are consistent across multiple data sets to ensure internal validity of the study. Adequate engagement in data collection was also used to ensure validity of the study. The researcher interviewed participants until saturation of information was established

with no new information being shared. Finally, peer review was used by the researcher to ensure accurate findings from data occurred.

Generalizability or external validity, also known as transferability, in qualitative research is dependent on the ability to transfer findings of one study to other situations (Merriam, 2009). Interestingly, the researcher or investigator is not responsible for determining areas that transferability might occur, but it is incumbent upon the reader of the study to be able to apply the study if applicable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 as cited in Merriam, 2009). It is, however, the responsibility of the researcher to provide richly descriptive interpretations of the data so that the reader can make that determination accurately (Merriam, 2009). Through a rich, descriptive manner, the researcher sufficiently communicated the data and findings, so readers are able to determine transferability or to develop naturalistic generalizations. The reader will determine whether the study is transferable to his/her experiences or situations based on the presentation of the study.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to better understand the differences in characteristics, if any exist, of relationships between district leaders and school principals of high- and low-performing elementary schools in a high-performing school district in a southern state. Four research questions were studied:

RQ1. What are the differences, if any, in communication between district leaders and principals of high- and low-performing schools?

RQ2. What are the differences, if any, in the decision-making opportunities at the district level for principals from high- and low-performing schools?

RQ3. What are the differences, if any, in the types of support that district leaders provide to principals of high- and low-performing schools?

RQ4. What are the differences, if any, in professional development opportunities provided to principals of high- and low-performing schools?

This chapter reveals the themes that emerged through detailed analysis of data collected through interviews, observations, and analyses of documents in a mid-sized, high-performing district in southern state. Each finding is supported by data from multiple sources.

District Leader Accessibility

When describing the relationship between the district and administrators, SL4 stated,

> So, there's kind of this, depending on what you need, there's kind of this hierarchy of people that can help you. If I can't reach one person, I just go to the next person because like I said, there's several people that you can go to.

SL4 went on to explain that even though sometimes there is a challenge in knowing who the best person may be to reach out to, principals will always get assistance if they call district leaders. SL2 supported that they get assistance when they stated, "When I ask for something, I get it, but I usually don't ask for a lot." There are other times that school leaders seek assistance or have questions and SL1 stated, "I know our elementary supervisor is very, very good at communication. I would say he responds when. . . I can call him on his cell phone if I need him." SL1 elaborated about district leaders being easy to reach and responsive when they contacted them, "They always say if you need something, reach out, we'll send it, we'll do it. We'll help you."

District leaders shared that they encourage principals to reach out to them through phone call or email if needed. DL1 stated,

> Like one lady right now, she wanted to talk with me and I told her, I said I have an interview and I'll come after the interview. I'm not gonna let them down and I think that's that principal in me, you know.

It was important and emphasized by both district leaders that they felt it was important that they had been principals. DL2 stated,

> Well, one of the things I hope you heard when you talked to people was that I've never forgotten my role as a principal, and so I always want the principals that I work with now to not view me as a district leader who has forgotten.

In hoping that school leaders understood this, DL2 went on to say, "I will do whatever I can to help them if they reach out to me." School leaders exhibited a sense of confidence that they can communicate with district leaders when needed.

Leadership Priorities

Safety was listed as a district priority by all participants. One participant simply listed what she felt the district prioritized: "Safety. Scores. And I think being fiscally responsible" (SL2). Another participant stated, "The thing we have talked about the most, or always bring back to that point we want to emphasize is safety. Then of course our scores, our district score, it's pretty good, and we've maintained that during COVID" (SL4). SL1 and SL3 shared their thoughts on district priorities, stating, "So they always say safety is number one. . . and then it's always data and test scores," and "Priorities are safety and instruction that leads to growth," respectively. District leaders were asked the same question and provided the following statements. DL1 stated, "Safety. Because of the pandemic and because you don't want something to happen to somebody's child. Safety is one of our goals. And curriculum." DL2 said, "I'm not listing them in any particular order. I mean, to me safety is going to be of course the top and then supporting them in the educational part of, you know, the reading, the writing, and math."

Nature of Feedback

School leaders shared examples of times that district leaders provided feedback specific to them. SL1 recalled a situation when the accountability supervisor brought test scores to discuss Student Learning Targets (SLTs). The supervisor brought data for students that they considered "on the bubble" and stated that school leaders needed to focus on those students. SL1 stated, "Our SLTs, he didn't feel like were strong enough to meet the district's growth, because everybody kind of fell so they went through and found our students for us." Another school leader spoke about test scores being put on her computer by a district person but did not give any indication that they discussed the scores. SL3 stated, "Somehow they had disaggregated the scores, and he wanted me to see." SL2 shared the perspective from a high-performing school that there is not much feedback if you are an A school, but ". . . you do hear [from the district] if you are a B school."

District leaders shared that feedback given to school level personnel was specifically for teachers but that principals were welcome to sit in. Principals are welcomed in debrief sessions with district instructional team members and the teacher after walk through observations are completed. DL2 shared,

> Now the principal is welcome to be in the debriefing, but my English person sits down with the teacher, and they talk about the grows and the glows. And, you know, what I might see when I come back is different from what I saw today.

School leaders supported the district leaders' responses pertaining to feedback. SL1 stated, "They do walk-throughs, or they go sit in classes and observe and give teachers feedback." Another school leader spoke about feedback given to teachers from district

level leaders. SL4 shared what district leaders have said, “Here’s what I see going great in your room and here’s the next thing I would like you to work on.”

Opportunities for school leaders to provide feedback to district leaders are provided through multiple means. One school leader began her response by stating,

> You know, I always take opportunities if I feel that there’s a need for feedback. That’s my personality, you know. I call whoever I need to call, but no, there is not like an annual time when they say, tell us what you think about that. (SL3)

While SL3 indicated that there was not a set time in the school year to give feedback to the district, when asked about giving feedback specific to things such as curriculum, she stated, “. . . Google Forms are the big thing. We have gotten quite a few Google Forms.” One of the district leaders spoke about Google Forms as well to get feedback from school leaders. DL2 stated,

> As a matter of fact, you heard me the other day in the principal’s meeting say, “I will send you out a Google form for you to complete,” and they kind of laugh about that one and said, “Oh, you mean you’ll send us out another Google Form.”

SL1 recalled a principal’s meeting where principals were asked to vote on an important issue and another time that a Google Form was sent to get feedback. SL3 remembered district leaders sending a survey and stated, “They did send out a survey that said they got like round two and round three of that [Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief (ESSER)] money.” She indicated that district leaders were asking for ideas for ways to spend the money. DL1 supported the school leader’s statement regarding surveys in her response when she stated, “We do surveys. We do a lot of surveys, and we have our breakout sessions [referring to principal’s meetings].”

While school leaders did not share that they receive feedback from the district during their observation, SL4 stated, “District leaders don’t visit much, but I am able to give feedback during my observation to the assistant superintendent. I can express my concerns.” Regarding principal evaluations, DL2 talked about how he gets feedback from principals that he evaluates,

> So, I go and sit down and have the pre-observation, and we talk about things that are going on in their school, issues, problems, good things. What is going to be your focus for this year? How can I help at the district level with that?

SL3 shared that school leaders are able to give feedback to district leaders in a meeting after test scores are released. She shared:

> I know that after test scores come out, we have like a one-on-one meeting with the Superintendent and talk about our goals for our school and that’s kind of your time. We go to central office, your leadership team can come and meet with him and talk about goals. Looking at your test scores of course, and you know, if you’re having a problem with a teacher or if you’re having issues with the community, you know, that’s your time to kind of say this is maybe what’s hindering us. What can you do to help?

Decision-Making Opportunities

All school leaders have decision-making opportunities through serving on committees. School leaders are usually selected to serve on committees, but at times they volunteer. District leaders verified that school leaders are rotated through committees so that everyone has an opportunity to participate in the process. Committees were the most common method to help make decisions at the district level. SL3 stated, “All committees

do have some school representation. I feel like I did have input on the committee I was on." Common committees that were listed include: ESSER committee, finance committee, and calendar committee. Speaking about the committees that she or her assistant principal have been a part of, SL2 stated, "I have been a part of the finance committee for 4 years. My AP was able to be a part of the ESSER pilot committee."

One of the school leaders stated that her previous principal served on committees, but that she had not, yet. SL4 did share that district leaders ensure representation of school leaders at different grade band levels. Concerning committees at the district level, she stated, "They made sure that they had elementary, middle, and high and that everybody was kind of covered for different things." The two school leaders who had served on committees differed, slightly, on their answers concerning volunteering or being chosen for committees. SL3 stated that the district chooses while SL2 stated that sometimes it is volunteer, and sometimes district leaders choose. There are multiple committees on which school level leaders can participate, which allows opportunities for input in district-level decisions. District leaders had additional comments related to school leaders' opportunities for decision-making through committees. DL1 said, "We have our finance committee we have principals on." DL1 tried to list other committees but struggled with remembering the names of the committees. When asked whether principals volunteer or are selected, DL1 went on to explain,

> Sometimes it rotates. Somebody will choose one and somebody will choose another. The superintendent may choose somebody, the personnel director may choose somebody, and we have our calendar committee. We have all kinds of committees, so they have input in everything.

The other director also shared how principals are included in making district-level decisions. DL2 stated, ". . . you actually have a committee, then sometimes the bigger the committee is, the less you get done because you've got several people's opinions to take time listening to their take on something." He went on to give an example of how they handle large committees at times by giving advance notice so that principals can get feedback from teachers to give to the elementary principal representative for the committee. ". . . Express to your representative whether or not that's something you think you and your faculty would like to see again. They actually brought some comments that were made from other principals that were given to them prior to this meeting" (DL2). When asked about how school leaders are chosen for committees, DL2 shared, "We usually rotate and choose and we make sure that we get representation from non-title and title, male and female, experienced not so experienced. Yeah, we rotate it around."

Nature of District-Level Support

When school leaders spoke about support from the district level, they primarily referred to the curriculum department. According to SL2, "The curriculum department comes more often than anyone else." Regarding the curriculum department, SL1 said, "There are teams, curriculum teams, that come out and visit, make school visits and help." Additionally, SL4 stated, about support from the curriculum department,

> I have one that comes in and observes teachers and lets them know, you know, here's directives coming from the state. Here's what I see that's going great in your room. And here's, you know, your next thing that I would like you to work on.

One school leader spoke about the support from the curriculum department as being very helpful:

> There are curriculum teams that come out and visit, make school visits and help. They always say if you need something, reach out, we'll send it, we'll do it. So, they're very open to help, you know, if we want it. (SL1)

SL3, a Title I, Urgent Intervention Required (UIR) and/or Comprehensive Intervention Required (CIR) school leader, acknowledged that district leaders do make visits to the school but also talked about the extra visits that schools like hers receive. She shared, "Our CIR schools get a lot more site visits. We have people that come from the state, and we have our Title I people. So, they'll come in and do walkthroughs." SL3 continued to explain that she does get support from the curriculum department but, ". . . I think the most support that we actually get is from our federal programs. You know, because it's really one of those situations that if you need support, you have to request it."

One district leader shared that support is provided through curriculum coordinators at each school who help principals work through data. DL1 stated,

> We have a reading coordinator and a math coordinator. Well, we have a curriculum person in each school. They do that. They work, they sit with their principal, and they walk that data. They make sure that the principal will understand, because in some meetings we ask principals about certain things pertaining to their data.

DL2 expressed his desire as the director of curriculum, professional development, and accountability. He shared, "I definitely want a priority on my end to be support for the

principals in however I can support them." Describing how his team supports teachers, DL2 stated,

> My instructional team. We have what we call a lit team and a math team and the lit team is made up of the English person, the science person and the math person. Then I have a technology person on my staff that goes in and they sit down in the summertime and they plan out a schedule for the entire year. The lit team goes in on one day, and they're there all day and at school, and they're in classrooms. Then they have actual debriefings with the teacher themselves, not just the leadership team. Now the principal is welcome to be in the debriefing, but my English person sits down with the teacher and they talk about the grows and the glows.

Lack of Coherence in Curricula

There is a lack of coherence in curricula used across the district, which determines whether the curriculum department or the Title I department supports schools in teaching math and reading. Some school leaders expressed that support varies based on the label of the school whether by Title I label, UIR, and/or CIR. Only one school leader in the current study was under the UIR and/or CIR label, but there was another principal of a Title I school. That principal, SL4 explained,

> And it, but it even ended up that it wasn't just Title I/non-Title I, it was UIR/CIR and non-UIR/CIR. And you just kind of move to the other side if you get that label. But it got weird. The curriculum director would just say, 'That's Title I, I'm not over that.'

She continued to clarify, stating, “I’m in the middle right now, because I’m a Title I school, but I’m not UIR/CIR” (SL4). Curricula for elementary UIR/CIR schools differ in math, kindergarten through fifth grade, and in ELA, kindergarten through second grade, which the Title I department, not the curriculum department is assigned to support. SL4 explained,

> When schools first started going into UIR/CIR, there was only a limited number of Tier 1 curriculum. Eureka and American Reading Company [ARC] were pretty much it. They [the district] decided to give Title I the Tier 1 curriculum and they did not switch the rest of the district to that Tier 1 curriculum, so we’ve been using two different curriculums now in reading and math.

SL3 shared that for kindergarten through second grade, “. . .our Reading curriculum is American Reading Company.” SL3 explained that all UIR and/or CIR schools use ARC, but “. . . the rest of the district is still in Wonders, but everyone is in textbook adoption right now. The rest of the district may or may not adopt ARC, so we may or may not all have the same thing.” For math, SL3 shared, “We have, I can’t even say all title schools, mostly UIR/CIR schools have Eureka Math. The rest of the district is Ready Math.” When explaining differences in the reading curriculum for kindergarten through second grade and third through fifth grade in UIR and/or CIR and non-UIR and/or non-CIR schools SL4 stated, “Everybody uses Guidebooks, of course.” District leaders acknowledged that support from the curriculum department varies based on school label. All schools receive support from the curriculum department in reading and science. DL2 shared that his department supports reading for third through fifth grades because all

schools use Guidebooks in those grade levels. His department also supports science whether they are UIR and/or CIR schools or not. He stated,

> We have partnered with SchoolKit to provide our ELA guidebook training. So what we did for about the first 3 years that we had School Kit was, they went through this School Kit training every year if they were in UIR schools or CIR schools, and they were teaching guide books.

DL2 explained that his lit team goes to all schools. He stated, "The lit teams spend 15 to 20 minutes in each classroom. But when the lit team converges upon your school, you've got my science person hitting your science teachers." DL1 had a list of UIR and/or CIR schools on a document with assigned district leaders associated with them. When asked how those schools are supported, she said, "They fall under Title I." She went on to say that even if they are not Title I schools, but they are UIR/CIR, ". . . they fall under Title I." As a UIR and/or CIR school leader, SL3 explained why support from the curriculum department is different for her school. Specifically, she said,

> It [the Curriculum Department] has very limited training or knowledge about the curriculum that we are using in our CIR schools which is why I say that our support comes from Title I. They've been training us in the schools and then our Title I supervisors are trained and some of them come in and help.

Increase in Severe Student Behaviors

School and district leaders have seen a notable increase in severe student behavior, and they are not equipped to handle it effectively. School leaders expressed the need for more support from the special education department and dealing with behavior. SL1 stated, "I mean I really do feel like our hands are tied and then teachers are looking

at us like, ‘Why won’t you take this kid out of my class. . . I want to cry when I can’t help somebody.” There is a lack of understanding for why there is not more support for this type of situation. SL1 said,

> I want to know why, like why there’s not a school, why can’t we have a school for these students to go. They cannot function. . . and that’s what I worry about, you know, these other students who are seeing this child act this way.

Based on a call for assistance from the special education department, one school leader associated the absence of support in this area to some district level leaders having never been principals. She said, “And if it is someone who has never had to deal with this, you know” (SL3). School leaders stated that there has been an increase in disruptive behaviors and trauma induced behaviors. SL2 stated, “The district is trying to provide 19 positions for mental health professionals that they put in the schools.” One of the district leaders spoke about the crisis with behavior and mental health. There are concerns about how to support principals and teachers in elementary schools when dealing with these kinds of behavior or trauma needs. According to DL2,

> There are not enough people at the district level that when you have a crisis going on at your school, and there is a crisis somewhere every day, that can get to your school. They [principals] are not trained in mental health issues.

Funding for Professional Learning Opportunities

Professional learning opportunities for teachers are provided from the state, the district, and the school through multiple funding sources. One school leader expressed professional learning opportunities during the 2021-2022 school year in the following way: “So this year there was extra funding for some things and so they made a push for

new teachers to have some special professional development and feel more supported" (SL4). Another school leader spoke about this training as well. SL1 stated, "Specific training or professional learning also occurs for teachers to better implement curriculum." Continuing with professional learning opportunities with curriculum, SL4 stated, "Within the district, schools that are using American Reading Company have training from the company, but the district provides training for Ready Math." SL3 confirmed professional learning opportunities for teachers through her response: "American Reading Company still comes over and they come to the classrooms." SL1 responded,

> So our curriculum team, they kind of are elementary supervisor, sets up a PD schedule for everybody or the beginning of the year back to school schedule and he sets up who's going to be doing what, where, when." She also shared that there are opportunities for teachers to sign up for technology training for help with things like Nearpod.

District leaders were also asked about the training and/or professional learning opportunities they provide for teachers to support principals' needs. One district leader talked about meeting with principals to assess what is needed. DL1 stated:

> We discuss their needs and if they find out that somehow else, as they go back and review and analyze, we need more PD on this, that, or the other. Sometimes we're bringing in people to go back there called trainer of trainers, you know, and the principals will send a person that they knew could deliver. Then as directors, we go in and we monitor, you know, as we go to a teacher's room, we want to see some of this, to make sure it's happening. That means we got to know it, too, because you can see it and not know what you're looking at. So, we have to

> understand the process so that we will know whether or not they are on the right road.

DL1 also shared that there is a meeting with the principal to discuss what was seen in the classroom and explained how the teacher receives support if he/she is struggling with implementing new curriculum. DL1 explained, “But then if they need extra help. Then they have to get that same person that we sent to the training, or someone else, a director or someone to come in and work with that teacher.” Another district leader, regarding professional learning, shared, “You know, I don’t see where you can really separate curriculum from professional development from testing because the curriculum leads to training teachers in that curriculum.” Both district leaders were asked whether professional learning or training were different for high- and low-performing schools. One district leader reported that the opportunities were not different, stating, “We don’t separate when we have professional development.” DL2 spoke about receiving some feedback about having repeated training. After meeting in the summer with UIR and/or CIR principals, there was an understanding that there needed to be a change in professional learning for teachers. He stated, “Principals were asked what they did need as UIR and/or CIR schools, because the district is required to provide some types of professional learning opportunities” (DL2). An example DL2 gave was:

> Well, we have partnered with School Kit to provide our ELA guidebook training. So what we did for about the first 3 years that we had School Kit was, they went through School Kit training every year if they were in UIR schools or CIR schools and they were teaching Guidebooks. Well, after about 3 years I

> started getting feedback from principals. They said, "Look. I've got teachers that we've sent through this for 3 years. It's totally not necessary."

There are areas where all schools receive the same professional learning opportunities from the district. DL2 said, "Teachers in all schools whether UIR/CIR or non-UIR/CIR schools, whether Title I or not, receive training and professional learning opportunities in curriculum from the district through instructional teams.

School leaders also provide training and professional learning opportunities, and funding sources vary. One school leader responded to the question about how the district seeks to provide training or professional learning for teachers: "I mean, they don't have to ask what we want because they just give us a budget so we can buy what we want and, they sign off on it" (SL3). While school leaders of non-Title I and non-UIR/CIR schools do not have availability of certain extra funds that Title I and UIR/CIR schools get, they do receive other types of funds, or they can have fundraisers to provide professional learning opportunities for their teachers. As a non-Title I, non-UIR and/or CIR principal, SL1 spoke about the way district leaders provide opportunities for their teachers:

> If we pay, yeah, if we pay for it, like if we pay for somebody to come in, we can do that. Yeah, I mean we have to pay for it but like our some of our Title II money we can pay for things like that. We did use Title II money to have somebody come in and work with trauma. It was so good. Our teachers loved it.

When responding to how she provides professional learning opportunities for her faculty, SL2 said, "I typically have to use school money to get specific PD for my faculty." She continued to explain other ways that she can provide opportunities for her faculty:

> Sometimes Title II funds are used to provide district and/or school professional learning opportunities. ESSER money has been used for school-wide PD for Trauma informed schools. The district will give Title IV money, which has to be used for very specific reasons—professional learning—and sometimes we have to be very creative in ways to use it.

SL1 shared, "The district sends teachers to the teacher leader conference given by the State each year, which provides opportunities for professional learning." Further, the district started a new teacher program before school starts for new teachers to be trained on things specific to the district. SL1 described: "I mean like every day was filled with something. This day we're working on math. This day we're working on social studies. This day we're working on financial stuff, I mean, you know, like your benefits and all that."

Professional Learning Opportunities for Principals

Principals are rarely offered professional learning opportunities to grow their leadership skills. The district began a training program for new teachers, and, according to SL4,

> They also did that with new principals, so it just so happened that this is my first year as principal. I was out yesterday at a conference in Lafayette. They just asked the new principals because there were four new principals.

While allowing the new principals to attend the conference was appreciated, SL4 further explained that there are still things on which she needs further training. Specific to principal professional learning opportunities in the district, SL4 shared:

> I hate to say the best professional development I have is those Facebook groups, hearing what other people are doing. Because we don't have that networking time here, and I have said that yesterday there were four principals that got to go to this conference and just hearing what they're doing. And hey, you haven't filled this out yet, either? OK, I'm not the only one. What are you going to do with this money and what are you gonna do with this? I have asked before like --Is everybody having behavior problems?

Some schools in the district are Teacher Advancement Schools (TAP), which provide opportunities for principals to meet with other principals. Speaking about being a TAP school, SL3 stated, "This is our third year, and we have National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) meetings. Then we have principal collaborations once a month." One opportunity that was mentioned by multiple participants was the Louisiana Principal Fellowship Program partnered with the National Institute of School Leaders (NISL) offered by the state. SL4 stated, "They offer internships for principals through NISL." One district leader explained, "Well, we usually have several principals. . . But when the leadership training institutions took place, we made sure that we got our principals in there, especially our new principals." DL2 went on to say, "I've heard several say, after they were voluntold to go, that it was very helpful, and they did gain a lot of good experience from being in it." When the district offers training for teachers, DL2 said that he makes sure to provide it for principals, as well. Specifically, DL2 said:

> Anytime I do any professional development for math programs, ELA programs, and science programs, then I reach out to the vendors and part of my scheduling and paying for PD is to tell them, "OK, I want an administrator session as well,

> and I don't want it necessarily the same as the teacher, because the principal isn't going in there to teach. I want the principal to be aware of what to look for when she or he goes in to know that the curriculum is being taught appropriately and to the greatest extent possible effectively."

When asked how the district supports principals in their own development, DL1 spoke about principal's meetings and said, "We can turn that into a training of things that those principals need, like when Compass first came out." She also referenced the principal's meeting that was observed and stated, "You saw what we did today with the director of special education and her crew" as they trained principals and assistant principals on special education and discipline procedures per Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Networking opportunities for principals were shared as being possible ". . . in the summer when principals do not have teachers and students at their schools and principals can more casually talk and share ideas" (DL2).

Observations

Observations were used to triangulate the findings of the current study. The researcher observed each participant's body language as participants answered questions during the interviews. At times participants were more open and relaxed in their answers, but there were times that facial expressions and body movements indicated hesitance in full disclosure of their perceptions related to specific topics. The researcher was able to observe a principals' meeting at the district central office. Interactions between district leaders and school principals were observed prior to the meeting starting as well as facial expressions and body language of district leaders and school principals throughout the meeting were observed. The analysis of observations supported the findings that district

leaders communicate through disseminating information to school principals and that school principals feel comfortable with seeking help and information from district leaders. Also supportive of the findings, school principals are regularly asked to provide feedback to district leaders through Google Forms.

Document Analysis

Document analyses were used to triangulate findings from district leader and school principal interviews. District and school performance scores were accessed from the state department website to gain a better understanding of the performance levels on standardized tests. To become more familiar with the participating district and schools, the researcher accessed handbooks from the district and school websites. There was a document on the district website that showed a table with the school listed in the first column, the principal evaluator from the district in the second column, and the district leader that was assigned for support to the principal in UIR and/or CIR schools in the third column. That document allowed the researcher to better choose district leader participants who directly worked with the school principals so that interviews would be more meaningful. Since the current study pertains to relationships between district leaders and school principals, that document also provided evidence of already established working relationships. Documents such as the agenda and those that provided information that were shared at the principals' meeting were also analyzed. Participants described the ways that district leaders communicate and school principals communicate, and the documents supported their statements.

Summary

Responses from participants provided insight to the characteristics of the relationships between district leaders and school principals. Perceptions of these relationships and of the roles they each play within these relationships showed the complex dynamics in establishing meaningful and effective communication, decision-making, and support between district leaders and school principals. A lack of curriculum coherence across the district was an unexpected finding. The next chapter will synthesize the findings from this chapter and provide recommendations for district leaders and school principals as they work to establish effective and meaningful relationships to improve student achievement.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The current study sought to explore differences, if any existed, in relationships between district leaders and school principals of high- and low-performing elementary schools in a high-performing district in a southern state.

Systems Thinking Leadership

Leadership within systems or organizations sometimes referred to as systems leadership or systems thinking leadership, must acknowledge the interconnections and interrelationships of units within the system and must develop structures and processes that support those units to work together towards the organizational goals (Garland et al., 2018). Leadership practices and behaviors determine what types of structures, if any, are established to then complete any processes that will accomplish meeting organizational goals. According to Ramosaj and Berisha (2014) systems leadership complements other types of leadership by applying systems thinking to organizations as open systems that receive input to be processed or transformed through actions that focus on the goal or the output with a feedback loop to continue to improve and learn. Feedback loops work as a process once the structures are put in place to effectively improve teaching and learning. The idea of open systems, expressed by Ramosaj and Berisha, was related to the feedback

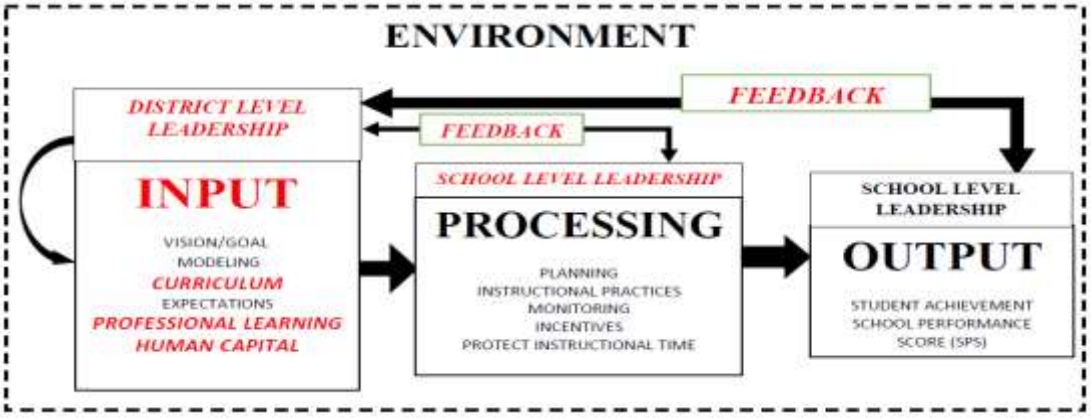
loop of inputs, internal transformation, outputs, and recursive feedback first introduced by Bertalanffy (1950a, 1950b, 1968, 1972) through General Systems Theory.

The current study applied open systems through the use of a feedback loop (Figure 1) to examine whether there are differences in the relationships between district leaders and school principals of high-performing and low-performing elementary schools. Application of systems thinking was relevant for the current study because the way that parts of the system and relationships between those parts impact the whole was the focus.

The current study demonstrated that inputs are most often pre-determined by district and state leaders. Which types of outputs are analyzed as a result of the transformation process are also externally directed. Examples of outputs include student achievement exhibited through grades and individual test scores and through state testing data. While inputs were pre-determined, there were differences in that area of the open system's feedback loop because all elementary schools did not use the same curricula or receive the same types and levels of support. Figure 2 shows the areas of the feedback loop that were analyzed and evaluated in the current study.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework for Feedback Loop with Emphasized Areas



Note. Red, bolded words were specific areas of the feedback loop that were discussed as part of the current study.

Discussion of Findings

In response to the first research question, there are no differences in communication between district and school leaders based on high-performing and low-performing school status. First, school principals, like district leaders in the current study, feel that dissemination of information is one of their primary purposes for communication because it keeps everyone aware of guidelines and procedures for completing tasks. In addition, school principals are confident that they receive all information as needed to keep them aware of directives and any other relevant information from district leaders. Effective communication systems include disseminating information; however, that alone is not sufficient. Effective communication systems between senders and receivers create effective and collaborative relationships that share a common focus on shared goals, beliefs, purpose, and priorities which include supportive structures for these relationships (Lawson et al., 2017; Leithwood, 2013; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). Lawson et al. (2017)

describe communication as the way messages are sent, received, and interpreted by those involved, which impacts reciprocal trust between district and school leaders.

In the current study, communication between district and school leaders does not include reciprocal, open dialogue where collaboration can occur and trust can be built. The lack of reciprocal communication inhibits the ability to effectively communicate because school leaders, the receivers of information and directives, are not able to develop the trust with district leaders, who are the senders of information (Burch & Spillane, 2004). Additionally, dialogue consists of reciprocal communication, involving speaking and listening, which lends itself to networking within an organizational system to obtain information and knowledge (Kodish, 2017; Spears, 2016). Developing effective communication systems between district leaders and school principals is fundamental in building collaboration and trust of which there is a direct correlation (Kodish, 2017; Lawson et al., 2017).

Second, district leaders are sure to make themselves available to school principals as they are encouraged to reach out for any help or information they need. In the current study, school principals appreciate staying informed by district leaders, and they are comfortable in reaching out to district leaders for gaining information and knowledge. Likewise, district leaders value sharing information and knowledge with school principals. As district leaders communicate, they reduce unpredictability and increase common knowledge, which could produce effective dialogue, but it did not do so in the current study. Knowledge sharing is more than sharing information. It utilizes strengths and expertise of stakeholders through communication and collaboration, which is essential to trust, because it helps build relationships (Kodish, 2017). According to Daly

and Finnigan (2009), district office leaders are essential in bridging the gap between district office and schools through a systemwide approach so that communication and knowledge are not isolated.

Third, reciprocal relationships build trust that allow for feedback in the communication system (Lawson et al., 2017). School leaders in the current study were given opportunities to provide feedback to district leaders, but feedback from district leaders to school principals was limited. Additionally, feedback, as a form of communication, did not differ between district leaders and school principals, but it was not characteristic of effective feedback due to the near absence of reciprocal feedback. According to Hassan et al. (2012), school principals value opportunities to give and receive feedback, which leads to high levels of trust, so district leaders should ensure that reciprocal feedback is a common practice. Ikemoto et al. (2014) asserted that effective districts do not assign a burdensome number of principals to district leaders for support and/or evaluation of school principals, so district leaders can adequately spend time with principals and provide feedback to them which is necessary for building trust and for school improvement.

Finally, when applied to leadership, effective communication is critical. Effective leaders are able to determine what to say, when to say it, and when to remain silent (Spears, 2016). The ability to remain silent allows leaders opportunities to listen, which is as important, if not more so, as speaking, and it lends itself to reciprocal, instead of unidirectional, communication (Spears, 2016). Principals and teachers perceive that collaborating and communicating are essential leadership characteristics for visionary leaders in setting the direction of the district to meet the academic needs of students,

which should encourage district leaders to engage in working to build relationships at the school level (Devono & Price, 2012). Feedback can be a valuable tool to inform decisions made at the district level or at the school level if done effectively. According to Hassan et al. (2012), decision-making opportunities for school leaders at the district level also help develop trust.

Decision-making opportunities are provided to all school leaders through serving on committees on a rotational basis indicating that there are no differences between opportunities for school leaders in high-performing or low-performing schools, which answers RQ2. According to Leithwood et al. (2004), transformational leaders are instructional leaders who are skilled in developing trusting relationships, which includes collaboration among stakeholders in decision-making processes. School leaders are allowed to participate in shared decision-making opportunities with district leaders, and, when it is done effectively, results in autonomy for school leaders. Providing tools and support so that autonomy does not become a detriment to the goal of improving student achievement is critical (Devono & Price, 2012; Ikemoto et al., 2014). The use of multiple sources of data to make informed decisions is a key component of effective decision-making that is shared between school and district leaders (Corallo & McDonald, 2001; Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood, 2013; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Once data-informed decisions are made, district leaders must support school principals in the work they do to improve teaching and learning.

High- and low-performing schools, as they are defined in the current study, are not the determinant factors for differences in support. However, schools identified by labels of UIR and/or CIR and Title I do show differences in the support provided by the

district. The answer to the third research question then is that there are no differences in support between high- and low-performing schools. District level support, through resources of time, money, personnel, and materials, is an important piece for improving student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009). According to the Leithwood et al. (2004) and Ikemoto et al. (2014), support for principals should be differentiated according to school needs based on data. Finnigan (2011) found that principals, as instructional leaders, regard support from the district as an important piece of the work they do in school improvement efforts. School leaders in the current study appreciate support from the district but do not always feel that it actually addresses the needs of the school. District leaders make some decisions about the types of support specific to schools without communicating with school leaders about their needs. Additionally, when school leaders perceive that support from the district will be rigid and stifle innovations, the benefits of the support efforts might be damaged (Daly et al., 2011). This is more likely to happen in schools that are negatively labeled through the accountability systems (Devono & Price, 2012).

Effective districts share a commitment from district leaders to support schools in school improvement efforts whether through financial or human resources along with an understanding that change takes time (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Financial support for schools in Scottsville School District varies based on UIR and/or CIR and Title I status; however, more monetary support was available to all schools due to COVID-19 ESSER funds from the federal government. District leaders understand that supporting principals is one of the most important parts of what they do to impact student achievement. However, results do not show that district leaders

effectively collaborate with school leaders to specifically meet the needs of individual schools.

In response to RQ4 there are no differences in professional learning opportunities for high- and low-performing schools based on definitions for the current study. Differences in professional learning opportunities for teachers and school leaders do exist, but they are based on labels of UIR and/or CIR. First, professional learning for teachers must be provided on an ongoing basis allowing teachers to sharpen their instructional skills, and opportunities should be targeted to the needs of the teachers as supported by data. Leithwood et al. (2004) concluded that classroom instruction has a direct impact on student achievement, which further emphasizes the need for professional learning opportunities to improve instructional practices for teachers. Additionally, consistency in curriculum and instruction across the system makes a more coherent alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, which impacts district effectiveness in positive ways (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Trujillo, 2013). In the current study, professional learning opportunities offered by the district vary for schools depending on the curriculum used in each school. Based on the UIR and/or CIR status, the curricula for math and reading are different. These differences result in a lack of coherence in some professional learning opportunities and limits the ability for teachers to network within the district, which can be a form of professional learning itself.

Second, principal leadership and the impact principals have on school performance has shown to be second only to the impact of teacher influence in research, which emphasizes the need for principals to obtain skills that will positively transform student achievement. (Leithwood et al., 2004). Superintendents should work to improve

schools by allowing resources to be used in the area of professional learning, which can positively impact teaching and learning through building capacity in teachers and principals (Devono & Price, 2012; Nino et al., 2014). Principals are the instructional leaders of schools and should be supported by district leaders in building capacity through professional learning opportunities. Unfortunately, findings in the current study show that principals are rarely offered professional learning opportunities to grow their leadership skills, including that of instructional leader of the school. Instructional leadership includes the role of leader through developing a shared focus and vision to improve student achievement through classroom instruction and of manager through supervising and managing the work of teachers within the classroom (Hallinger, 2005). Principals in the current study are given opportunities to sit in professional learning opportunities for curriculum and instruction that is provided for the teachers, and, while this does provide support for gaining knowledge of the curriculum, it does not develop skills that are critical to the jobs they do as instructional leaders.

Beyond gaining knowledge of curriculum and supervising teachers, principals, as instructional leaders, impact school culture by directly involving themselves in improving student achievement through modeling and working with the teachers to improve instructional practices (Hallinger, 2003, 2005). Improving schools requires leadership behaviors that effectively balance leadership with management through a lens of systems thinking leadership.

Implications for Practice

The first recommendation for district leaders is to model systems thinking leadership at the district level by developing a district office that is dedicated to the work

of developing trusting relationships with schools by meeting their specific needs through collaboration and communication. Results from the current study revealed information not indicative to highly effective school districts. Structures within the district are fractured and lack systemwide coherence in areas of collaboration, curriculum, feedback, support, and professional learning.

When decisions for support and professional learning opportunities are based on communication and collaboration through open dialogue and reciprocal feedback, differences based on needs will be evident and necessary to address. High-performing districts must develop structures to continuously meet the needs of all schools systemwide. Districts that have a larger number of elementary schools than other types should work to ensure that those schools are functioning at a high level not only for maintaining high-performing status but also to truly improve student achievement.

The second recommendation for district leadership is to address this concern through reciprocal communication to determine specific needs and to support schools through resources and professional learning opportunities. Communication, collaboration, and feedback would reveal the need for increased support needed for mental health and severe behaviors that are needed for school leaders and teachers. School and district leaders have seen a notable increase in severe student behavior, and they are not equipped to handle it effectively. School leaders feel helpless when extreme behaviors are exhibited by students with disabilities due to the sensitive nature of handling their discipline requirements. Mental health and trauma support were not reviewed in literature as they were not foci of the current study. Additionally, monitoring effectiveness of

supports and professional learning must occur through feedback opportunities directly related to school needs.

A third recommendation for practice is for district leaders to develop a consistent and, therefore, coherent approach to curriculum systemwide so that school leaders and teachers are able to effectively be supported by the district. Consistency in curriculum across the district is necessary for coherence between schools and classrooms. Low-performing schools typically have a higher transient population than those that are high-performing and are more likely to feel the impact of this inconsistency. According to Leithwood et al. (2004), inconsistency of curriculum across a district leads to a fragmented system of professional learning, which negatively impacts student achievement. Furthermore, scope and sequence among different curricula make it difficult for teachers to determine which standards have not been taught to students as students transfer within the district. Additionally, curriculum coherence allows district leaders to provide support and professional learning opportunities that improve instructional practices in a structured and unfragmented method.

Finally, the final recommendation is that district leaders engage in feedback with school leaders while input is being transformed or processed as indicated on the researcher's conceptual model (Figure 2) to potentially avoid negative results at the output phase where it is too late to make adjustments while in the process. Leadership within systems or organizations, sometimes referred to as systems leadership or systems thinking leadership, must acknowledge the interconnections and interrelationships of units within the system and must develop structures and processes that support those units to work together towards the organizational goals (Garland et al., 2018). Leadership

practices and behaviors determine the types of structures, whether support, relational, instructional, etc., are established to then complete processes that will accomplish meeting organizational goals.

Once structures are established and are functioning properly, feedback loops work as a process to effectively improve teaching and learning. Connecting leadership and feedback loops, Ramosaj and Berisha (2014) assert that systems leadership complements other types of leadership by applying systems thinking to organizations as open systems that receive input to be processed or transformed through actions that focus on the goal or the output with a feedback loop to continue to improve and learn. An application of open systems through the use of a feedback loop (Figure 1) was used in the current study to examine whether there are differences in the relationships between district and school leaders of high- and low-performing elementary schools. The current study demonstrated that inputs are most often pre-determined by district and state leaders, and the types of outputs are analyzed as a result of the transformation process that are also externally directed. Examples of outputs include student achievement exhibited through grades and individual test scores and through state testing data. Additionally, the researcher developed a new conceptual framework model for a feedback loop that added feedback at the transformation process (Figure 2).

Implications for Future Research

Future comparative case study research would be useful to expand the literature concerning these relationships. Specifically, comparative case studies between high-performing and low-performing districts could enhance the literature. Findings from this qualitative case study provided insight to relationships between district and school

leaders in high- and low- performing schools from one high-performing school district in a southern state.

Further research is needed to examine teachers' perceptions of the relationships between district leaders and school principals since teachers are directly impacted by leader behaviors, actions, and decisions. Additionally, teachers have the largest impact on student achievement, which further supports the need for teacher perceptions (Leithwood et al., 2004).

The current study showed that further research is needed to examine differences in district leaders' relationships with school principals who lead schools that are deemed UIR and CIR compared to those that are not. Accountability grades that determined whether schools are labeled high-performing or low-performing in the current study were used as a basis for examining differences in relationships between district leaders and school principals. However, the most recent labels of UIR and/or CIR proved to be more conducive to this type of study at this point.

A recommendation for future research is to have the researcher embedded in the case over an extended time to allow participants' guards to be broken down to reduce hesitancy in answering questions. It was evident that school leaders found it difficult to get beyond suspicion and were guarded in their responses, which may have impacted the results of the study. Trust in the researcher will allow for more genuine and honest answers that will be more meaningful for the findings in the study. Differences in curricula across the district are just one area that resulted in some frustration and hesitancy in answering questions.

Conclusion

This application of systems thinking in the current study was significant because relationships between district leaders and school principals impact individual schools (parts) which, in turn, impact the district (whole). Critical to district and school improvement efforts, leaders at both levels play essential roles through collaborative relationships to enhance their work in improving teaching and learning systemwide (Björk et al., 2018; Lawson et al., 2017; Nino et al., 2014; Rorrer & Skrla, 2005; Sanders, 2014). The current study can contribute to the limited literature on whether differences in relationships between district leaders and school principals of high-performing and low-performing schools exist and in what areas those differences occur, which could impact improvement efforts systemwide.

The field of education will benefit from more definitive research on district and school leader interactions that contribute to effective reform implementation that impacts teaching and learning. Additionally, the current study provides information for school boards as they hire superintendents with expectations that superintendents will improve achievement levels for all students and produce high-performing schools as the instructional leaders of the districts (Hilliard & Newsome, 2013). Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the superintendents to lead school districts effectively in systemwide improvement of teaching and learning through support and development of principals as instructional leaders (Devono & Price, 2012; Honig, 2012; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McFarlane, 2010; Nino et al., 2014). To accomplish the work that is critical to improving student achievement, leadership skills and behaviors of the superintendent, district leaders, and school leaders must be effective.

Previous studies have indicated that there is a connection between leadership and student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Marzano & Waters, 2009), and the current study helps better understand the need for transformational and instructional leadership traits with a systemwide focus on school improvement efforts. Characteristics of high-performing and improving school districts have been identified through research, and systemwide approaches should be used when implementing school improvement efforts (Leithwood, 2013; Marzano & Waters, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003; Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Whitehurst et al., 2013).

Determining whether there are differences in relationships between district leaders and school principals in high-performing and low-performing schools in a southern state was the focus of the current study in order to contribute to the gap in literature on these relationships in high-performing districts (Mania-Singer, 2017). While there are differences in the collaborative relationships between district leaders and school principals of high-performing and low-performing schools, the differences are not based on the labels of high- and low-performing as defined in the current study. Differences were evident in the relationships based on the label of UIR or CIR, non-UIR or non-CIR, and Title I or non-Title I. Literature supports the need to differentiate supports and professional learning that are provided to schools based on data analysis, communication, and feedback that determine needs (Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano & Waters, 2009). High-performing districts must ensure that they do not become complacent and satisfied with their current label and neglect the individual needs of schools and school principals. Characteristics of effective relationships between district leaders and school principals have proven to be a critical link for improving teaching and learning (Lawson et al.,

2017). Differences in characteristics regarding reciprocal communication, shared decision making, reciprocal feedback, intensive support, and quality professional learning do not necessarily negatively impact student achievement. However, when the differences in characteristics are not based on individual school needs negative impacts on student achievement could occur (Daly et al., 2011; Daly & Finnigan, 2009; Finnigan & Daly, 2012; Finnigan et al., 2013; Honig, 2012; McFarlane, 2010).

It is the intent of the researcher that district leaders will evaluate the relationships they develop with school principals so that any differences that may be detrimental to the district can be corrected. It is also the intent of the researcher that school boards, as they hire superintendents, understand the leadership traits needed to lead an effective school district.

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APPENDIX A

LEADERSHIP MODEL COMPARISONS

A Comparison of Instructional Leadership and Transformational Leadership Models

Instructional leadership	Transformational leadership	Remarks on differences and similarities
Articulate and communicate clear school goals	Clear vision Shared school goals	I.L. model emphasizes clarity and organizational nature of shared goals, set either by the principal or by and with staff and community. T.L. model emphasizes linkage between personal goals and shared organizational goals.
Coordinate curriculum Supervise and evaluate instruction Monitor student progress Protect instructional time	———	No equivalent elements for these coordination and control functions in the T.L. model. T.L. model assumes others will carry these out as a function of their roles.
———	Individualized support	I.L. model assumes that this will come about through supervision and curriculum coordination. T.L. model views meeting individual needs as a foundation of organization development.
High expectations	High expectations	
Provide incentives for learners Provide incentives for teachers	Rewards	Similar focus on ensuring that rewards are aligned with mission of the school.
Providing professional development for teachers	Intellectual stimulation	I.L model focuses on training and development aligned to school mission. T.L. model views personal and professional growth broadly. Need not be tightly linked to school goals.
High visibility	Modeling	Essentially the same purposes. Principal maintains high visibility in order to model values and priorities.
———	Culture-building	I.L. model also focuses on culture-building, but subsumed within the school climate dimension.

Note. This model was adapted by Hallinger (2003) in *Leading Educational Change: Reflections on the Practice of Instructional and Transformational Leadership* from Hallinger and Murphy (1985) and Leithwood et al. (1998).

APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHICS

District Demographics

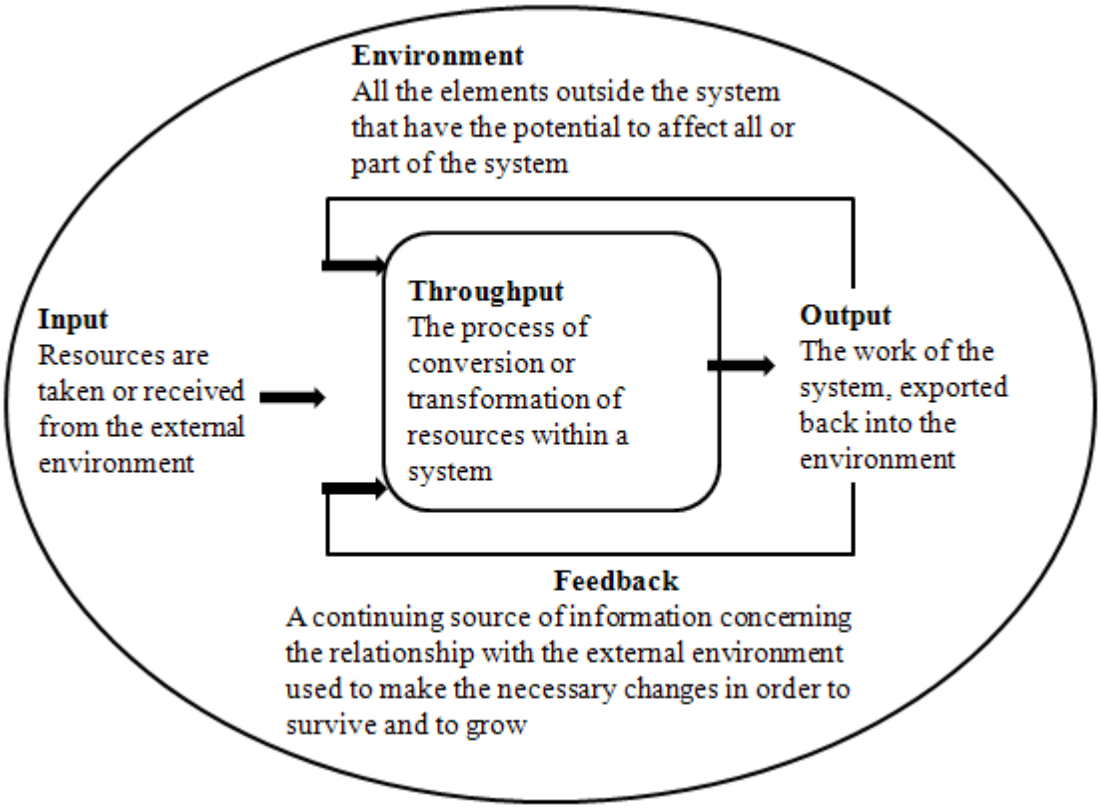
No. of Elementary Schools	Total Enrollment	2018-2019 School Performance Score	2018-2019 Progress Rating	% Limited English Proficient	% Economically Disadvantaged	% Students with Disabilities
22	19,252	B	B	1%	67%	13%

School Demographics

School	Total Enrollment	2018-2019 School Performance Score	2018-2019 Progress Rating	% Limited English Proficient	% Economically Disadvantaged	% Students with Disabilities
School 1	436	B	A	0%	43%	10%
School 2	767	A	A	1%	48%	15%
School 3	269	D	A	0%	99%	16%
School 4	298	C	B	8%	94%	16%

APPENDIX C

THEORETICAL MODEL



Note. This is an open system model developed by Kahn and Katz (1978, as cited in Romasaj and Berisha, 2014).

APPENDIX D

HUMAN USE EXEMPTION LETTER

LOUISIANA TECH
UNIVERSITY

OFFICE OF SPONSORED PROJECTS

EXEMPTION MEMORANDUM

TO: Ms. Shaunna Pierrelee and Dr. Bryan McCoy

FROM: Dr. Richard Kordal, Director of Intellectual Properties
rkordal@latech.edu

SUBJECT: HUMAN USE COMMITTEE REVIEW

DATE: June 1, 2021

TITLE: "District Leaders and Principals: Are There Differences in Relationships between High-and Low-Performing Schools?"

NUMBER: HUC 21-105

According to the Code of Federal Regulations Title 45 Part 46, your research protocol is determined to be exempt from full review under the following exemption category(s): 46.104(a)(d)(1)(2)(i)(ii).

(a) Unless otherwise required by law or by department or agency heads, research activities in which the only involvement of human subjects will be in one or more of the categories in paragraph (d) of this section are exempt from the requirements of this policy, except that such activities must comply with the requirements of this section and as specified in each category.

(d) Except as described in paragraph (a) of this section, the following categories of human subjects research are exempt from this policy:

(1) Research, conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

(i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects;

(ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Thank you for submitting your Human Use Proposal to Louisiana Tech's Institutional Review Board.