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## **School Leadership that Impacts Student Achievement in Blue Ribbon Schools in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas**

Sonya Y. Rodriguez  
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SCHOOL LEADERSHIP THAT IMPACTS STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN BLUE RIBBON  
SCHOOLS IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY OF TEXAS

A Dissertation

by

SONYA Y. RODRIGUEZ

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Major Subject: Educational Leadership

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

May 2022



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May 2022



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## ABSTRACT

Rodriguez, Sonya Y., School Leadership that Impacts Student Achievement in Blue Ribbon Schools in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Doctor of Education (EdD), May, 2022, 122 pp., 8 tables, 1 figure, references, 124 titles.

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple-case study was to determine the leadership actions, behaviors, and practices of effective school leaders in Blue Ribbon Schools in South Texas who resulted in the schools receiving the distinction by the U. S. Department of Education of being a Blue Ribbon School. Data were collected through a series of interviews with principals and teachers from the selected sample of Blue Ribbon Schools in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using inductive coding to determine themes.





## DEDICATION

First and foremost I have gratefulness in my heart to God for his unending grace in my life and for my loving family whose love and support provided me a constant motivation to continue my education resulting in the realization of my dream.

This work is dedicated to my daughter, Gabriella, who I always strive to be the best example for and who without this work would not have been as meaningful. Thank you Mija for always understanding the times we couldn't be at all places and events but most of all, thank you for being there throughout the process, encouraging me. Know that you have been a driving force and motivation to me with your constant belief in my abilities to get this job done. Always believe in your own strength and determination to achieve your own dreams. You make me proud each and every day.

Next, I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Juan and Maria I. Rodriguez. Both of you have taught me the value of an education and gave me my work ethic. You have shown through your own examples in your own work and in life, the way I should approach any and all I set my mind to with integrity and love for what I do. In your own words to me, "si vas hacer algo, haslo bien." Thank you for loving me and for providing all of us with a solid foundation from which we all learned.

To my siblings: my sister, Dalia L. Quick, my brothers, Raul R. Rodriguez, and John Rodriguez, you all have made our parents proud in your own quality of work and service to our community. Thank you all for your support and encouragement to finish this program. I love all of you very much.

Finally, to my lifetime friends Dr. Debra Arce, Velma Perez, and Arminda Lozano, who have heard me talk about my classes and dissertation and understood when I couldn't go to breakfast, etc. Your support and encouragement to keep going meant the world to me as well!

To my doctoral friends, Dr. Nancy L. Castillo and Dr. Juan Garza, I did it! We stuck together throughout our studies, and now, we have all completed the journey. Thank you both for your constant encouragement and for celebrating each step with me until all steps were complete. Si se puede!!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Rosalinda Hernandez, chair of my dissertation committee, for her guidance, support, and encouragement throughout my doctoral journey in helping me bring this dissertation to completion. My most sincere thanks goes out to my committee members: Dr. Alejandro Garcia, Dr. Velma Menchaca and Dr. Anthony Garza. Your advice, input, corrections, and comments on my dissertation helped me continue in my quest of knowledge in this experience.

To all my professors who I have had the pleasure of meeting and learning from throughout my entire time here at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, thank you for inspiring me and other students to follow in your prestigious footsteps in the doctorate program.

A special thanks to Dr. Alejandro Garcia for helping me make sense of my qualitative data and for providing me the guidance in ensuring I looked at the validity and reliability of my data.

I would also like to acknowledge one of my other professors in the Superintendent Program who I learned so much from, Dr. Miguel De Los Santos. A special word of gratitude for always encouraging me throughout my program and ensuring I knew that I could finish strong.

Lastly, I would like to thank the teachers, principals and staff who gave of their time to respond to questions about their school and their participation in the study.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Within the last five years, the Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA) of 2015 and related state and federal regulations have dramatically changed the public education practices in Texas and across the United States (Tan, 2018). ESSA increased accountability for school principals based on improvements in student achievement on standardized tests (Leithwood & Sun, 2018), and the overall accountability for schools and student achievement has never been greater (Wohlstetter, Datnow, & Park, 2008). ESSA also mandated incremental, annual improvements in academic achievement for each teacher, school, and school district referred to as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The current alignment of standards and level of rigor to meet the accountability no longer allows for educators to choose teaching methods and materials based on personal preferences or ease of implementation (Englert, Fries, Goodwin, Martin-Glenn, & Michael, 2004; Guskey, 2007). Therefore, in order to meet ESSA (2015) requirements, campus leaders administer assessments to analyze student achievement. Not only are school principals expected to analyze data, but they must come up with plans of action to meet both federal and state accountability. Principals failing to meet specific AYP (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2012) goals can experience a series of personal and professional consequences, including diminished compensation, mandated school improvement plans, restructuring of schools, and personnel and public scrutiny (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). Thus, principals' performance appraisals depend upon school

improvement (TEA, 2012). School principal leadership is critical for effective schools and overall student achievement (Leithwood & Sun, 2018). Research indicates that principal leadership was second only to teacher quality in factors that impacted student learning outcomes (Tan, 2018). The relationship that exists between effective school leadership and positive student achievement is neither new nor controversial (Heck & Chang, 2017). With ESSA (2015) mandating incremental annual improvements in student achievement, leadership can transform the culture of schools where improvement is needed (Sun & Henderson, 2017; Young, Winn, & Reedy, 2017). As it stands, ESSA only highlights all the critical nature of educational leadership and the importance of developing a strong leadership pipeline (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016).

Currently, school improvement is a leading national issue, and improving school leadership ranks high on the list of priorities for school reform. According to Glickman (2002), “Successful schools understand the direct improvement of teaching and learning in every classroom comes with a constellation of individuals and groups who undertake a myriad of initiatives” (p. 2), including leadership influence. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to gain a greater understanding of the leadership actions, behaviors, and practices of successful principals who lead schools that earned the Blue Ribbon designation in Texas during the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years.

The United States Department of Education (DOE) established the Blue-Ribbon Schools Program in 1982 to identify and recognize exemplary public and private learning institutional leadership (Visone, 2018). The requirements for the Blue Ribbon School designation are either that a) schools have their state’s highest high school graduation rates and rank in the top 15% in English and mathematics, measured by state assessments, or b) schools

have made the greatest advances (top 15%) in closing subgroup achievement gaps in English and mathematics over the preceding five years, measured by state assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2019b). Successful schools do not share one set of characteristics or demographics. Exceptional schools share one quality: an exceptional leader who influences teachers and students alike (Leithwood & Sun, 2018), and one aim of this study is to examine leadership practices among a sample of South Texas principals who earned the Blue-Ribbon designation between 2016 and 2018.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The ESSA mandates continuous improvement in student achievement on standardized measures of academic achievement (Tan, 2018). Cumulative scores on content-standard tests and common core assessments are tabulated, compared within and among districts and published for public access in the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness Report (STARR) (Erdogan & Stuessy, 2016). School rankings impact funding decisions, staff retention, and community perceptions of how well the school is serving the educational needs of children and youth. Thus, principals experience pressure to increase student achievement and to meet both state and federal assessment goals (Young et al., 2017).

As stated earlier, in education, current research suggests the importance of school leaders regarding their impact on many aspects of school operations, and most importantly, on student achievement (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013; Leithwood et al., 1996). Principals provide leadership that is pivotal in creating organizational conditions under which teachers work best (Heck & Chang, 2017). Strong leadership characteristics displayed by effective elementary school principals in collaboration with stakeholders was determined to be a defining factor in school transformation (Ward, 2013), and it is known that



transformational leaders lead by example, clearly articulate shared goals, and promote followers' excitement and sense of moral obligation (McKinney et al., 2015).

While some research exists, more is needed to examine leadership practices that positively influence student achievement in Blue Ribbon schools (Leithwood & Sun, 2018; Maslyk, 2012; Tan, 2018). Principals of Blue Ribbon schools in South Texas are of interest because they were already recognized as exceptional in producing effective learning outcomes and high performances on the STAAR assessments despite accountability pressures (Maslyk, 2012). Maslyk (2012) studied the leadership practices of principals whose schools attained the Blue Ribbon School distinction status in Pennsylvania; therefore, it is the researcher's goal to see if Texas principals mirror similar leadership practices in their Blue Ribbon schools.

### **Need for the Study**

As some studies show, leadership is of great importance, and particular leadership characteristics are known to be more consistent in leading organizations toward success (Bass, 2008; Collins, 2001). As Bryant (2016), states in her study, questions about how to recognize, recruit, and develop effective leadership continue to be asked and explored, and the same is true in public school education. The actions taken by successful leaders on a daily basis is of great interest to the researcher, which follows what Heck and Chang (2017) state in their study that what is not known is exactly how principals in Blue Ribbon elementary schools in Texas employ leadership actions, behaviors, or practices to make extraordinary improvements in school performance and student academic achievement. Likewise, researchers have examined the traits of Blue Ribbon designated principals using the Leadership Practices Inventory; however, there is a gap in the literature regarding leadership actions, behaviors, or practices employed by Blue Ribbon designated principals (McKinney et al., 2015).

Because of this conceptual diversity, researchers on the impact of school leadership have failed to give conclusive answers to one of the key questions regarding research on the role of school leaders in school effectiveness and school improvement, which asks, “How did Blue Ribbon designated school principals in South Texas employ leadership practices to ‘make a difference?’” (Heck & Chang, 2017; McKinney et al., 2015). It is for this reason that the researcher is eager to examine leadership practices employed by a sample of South Texas elementary school principals whose schools earned the designation of National Blue Ribbon School.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Transformational leadership theory, as developed by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985), was the theoretical framework for the qualitative study. According to Bass, transformational leaders enable followers to exceed performance expectations by engaging in “the four Is” of behavior: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Transformational leaders possess the ability to influence positive follower outcomes by identifying and addressing followers’ needs and inspiring trust, instilling pride, communicating vision, and motivating followers to perform at higher levels (Hoch et al., 2018). Burns posited that transformational leadership was an ongoing process, whereby “leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation beyond self-interest to serve collective interests” (p. 84). Transformational leadership stands in contrast to transactional leadership, which is based on contingent reinforcement based on short-term goals, self-interest, and immediate gratification (Bass, 1985).

The Texas Education Association (TEA) developed guidelines for school boards and principals entitled “Effective Practices of High Performing Principals” based in part on transformational leadership theory (TEA, 2019). The guidelines are an evidence-based approach to leadership development based on numerous empirical studies that support a relationship between transformational leadership style and positive follower outcomes, including organizational climate, group and organizational performance, job satisfaction, engagement, and reduced turnover (Avolio et al., 2010; Avolio & Hannah, 2009; De Jong et al., 2016; Nyenyembe et al., 2016). The choice of transformational leadership theory for the study was consistent with Texas state and local principal leadership development policy and practices (TEA, 2019).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the qualitative case study was to examine transformational leadership practices of principals who earned the Blue Ribbon designation in South Texas between 2016 and 2020. This researcher gained an in-depth view of the impact the leader plays in student achievement through performance on the STAAR exam by interviewing those principals and examining the school’s Blue Ribbon application. The Blue Ribbon application contained vital information in many categories that provided the explanation of school practices in essay form. The phenomenon for this study was principals who lead highly successful elementary schools. Schools in the United States selected as Blue Ribbon schools have proven their ability to create and sustain student achievement for at least five consecutive years (U.S. DOE, 2018). The study sample included principals and teachers from Blue Ribbon designated schools and investigated transformational leadership commonalities in those who led schools to excellence in the current state and federal accountability systems.

## Research Questions

The following questions guided the researcher in the study:

RQ1: How do principals of National Blue Ribbon elementary schools in South Texas *describe* leadership behaviors, actions, and practices that improved and sustained student achievement?

RQ2: How do principals of National Blue Ribbon elementary schools in South Texas *prioritize* leadership actions, behaviors, or practices that improved and sustained student achievement?

RQ3: What are teacher perceptions at National Blue Ribbon elementary schools in South Texas about the leadership behaviors, actions, and practices of the principal who improved and sustained student achievement?

## Definition of Terms

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): AYP is a component of No Child Left Behind that established the growth students must make each year on standardized tests if schools are to meet 100% proficiency by the stated year. For example, in 2015, the target in all content areas was 60% mastery and in all sub-groups. Every year this will continue to increase until schools are at 100% or meet the government standard (Heck & Chang, 2017).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): NCLB is the federal law for K-12 education that made major revisions to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. NCLB outlines the federal role in education and designates significant changes in the way schools operate and educate the nation's children and evaluates the achievement of agreed upon standards in each state (NCLB, 2001).

Blue Ribbon School Program: The Blue Ribbon School Program was established in 1983 by the U.S. Department of Education (2018). It identifies and gives national recognition to a diverse group of public and private schools that are unusually effective in meeting local, state, and national goals and in educating all students. The program comprises the Elementary School recognition program and the Secondary School recognition program, recognizing elementary and secondary schools in alternate years and was designed as a national school improvement strategy. The intent is to affect improvement through collaborative self-evaluation required of local school communities that participate and affect improvement through the stimulus that recognition provides to continue the pursuit of excellence (U.S. DOE, 2018).

Transformational Leadership: Transformational leadership refers to a style of leadership that occurs “when leaders broaden and elevate the interest of their employees; when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir employees to look beyond their own self-interests for the good of the group (Leithwood & Sun, 2018).

### **Nature of the Study**

A qualitative case study, research design was used to examine principals of National Blue Ribbon elementary schools in South Texas to describe and prioritize leadership behaviors, actions, and practices that improved and sustained student achievement (Yin, 2017). A case study approach enables the researcher to capture richly textured, holistic data of social phenomenon and capture participant experiences in their own words (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2017).

A case study method also allows a researcher to share a story as it happens, giving a voice to participants' subjective experience. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with principals and teachers from Blue Ribbon schools and a review of Blue Ribbon applications.

### **Significance of the Study**

Understanding the new accountability system in Texas is difficult, and meeting the new requirements poses an even greater challenge to practicing and aspiring leaders. This study is important because findings can be used by principals in Texas who are seeking research on how to transform their own schools in the ESSA environment. Within the last few years, research focusing on accountability has increased, resulting in a multitude of findings associated with leadership styles and models (McKinney et al., 2015). While many researchers have attempted to identify leadership styles that contribute to student achievement, there is little agreement in the research (McKinney et al., 2015). Therefore, this study was designed to add to the body of knowledge regarding elementary school transformational leadership practices associated with exemplary performances of Blue Ribbon designated schools in the ESSA environment.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Some limitations that occurred while conducting this study are that the focus was on National Blue Ribbon schools in the Rio Grande Valley, so the initial pool was limited and may also be further limited to elementary schools with this distinction. Another limitation was the need to identify schools that have had the same principal for at least three consecutive years in order to demonstrate sustainability of improvements and correlate improvements with the leader.

## Summary

The ESSA of 2015 changed public education practices of schools and districts in Texas and across the United States and led increased accountability for school administrators based on student achievement on standardized exams (Leithwood & Sun, 2018). Research indicates that principal school leadership is second only to teacher quality as the most important variable effecting student learning outcomes (Tan, 2018). The Blue Ribbon School Program established by the U.S. Department of Education (2018) identifies and recognizes public and private schools with a five year record of exceeding local, state, and national goals and in educating all students. The purpose of the qualitative, multiple-case study was to examine transformational leadership practices of principals who earned the Blue Ribbon designation in South Texas between 2016 and 2018. Transformational leadership theory was employed as the theoretical framework to address research questions. The significance of the study was to identify characteristics and practices of exemplary leadership for use by other principals to improve their own schools. A sampling of principals and teachers from grades one through five from each Blue Ribbon designated schools in South Texas participated. Data were collected by semi-structured interviews with principals and teachers and reviews of Blue Ribbon application material. Inductive thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes for interpretation.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA) of 2015 mandates incremental annual improvement in student academic achievement based on standardized tests (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016; Leithwood & Sun, 2018). Educational leaders struggle to meet the growing pressures to produce continuous improvement in student learning outcomes of ESSA accountability performance-based policies (Leithwood & Sun, 2018). The State of Texas chose transformational leadership theory as an evidence-based means to address mandated academic achievement improvement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016; Leithwood & Sun, 2018; TEA, 2019). The TEA (2019) developed evidence-based guidelines for school principal leadership development entitled *Effective Practices of High Performing Principals* based on empirical transformational leadership research studies. Effective principal leadership begins with a school-wide vision of commitment to high standards and the success of all students and a plan for all stakeholders in which to participate (TEA, 2019). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine transformational leadership practices of principals who earned the Blue Ribbon designation in South Texas between 2016 and 2018.

#### **Literature Search Strategy**

The literature review included searches of the following online scholarly research databases: *Academy of Management*, *ERIC*, *Google Scholar*, *JSTOR*, *SAGE*, *ScienceDirect*, *Taylor & Francis Online*, and *Wiley*. The researcher utilized the *Google*



*Scholarship* search engine to initiate all searches using keywords and phrases except for government resources such as the U.S. Department of Education, and the Federal Register

Keyword and phrase development was an iterative process that resulted in the following primary keyword list in combinations: “Blue Ribbon schools in Texas,” “ESSA academic achievement mandates,” “leadership and academic achievement,” “school leadership,” “transformational leadership,” “school principal leadership,” “teacher effectiveness,” and “Texas Education Association Leadership Program.” Cited material included state and federal government websites, peer-reviewed journals, books, and doctoral dissertations. The primary period of study was from between 2014 and 2019; however, earlier works were included as a foundation for history, background, and theoretical foundation to relate origins, applications, and evolution through time. Approximately 55% of the cited works were quantitative in nature, and only 45% were qualitative, historical, or theoretical.

The literature review in this section explores the relationships between leadership, school climate, and student achievement. Since leadership is possibly the most important single determinant of an effective learning environment, this study is pertinent to aspiring school leaders or practicing ones who are looking for new ways to create the conditions necessary for organizational improvement (Kelley et al., 2005). A historical review of education reform over the past several decades is summarized to demonstrate the current rise in pressure and accountability to improve student achievement. Although, there is a significant amount of literature in this topic and because of the size of this paper, only a small number of the most prevalent sources are referenced. Sources of information for the literature review include online academic articles, peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertation studies, and governmental documents on or related to leadership styles and student achievement.

## **Historical Review**

A historical review of education reform over the past several decades leads to today's current rise in pressure and accountability to improve student achievement (Valenti, 2010). Early research conducted in the 1960s and 1970s recognized that the main reason for school success was due to the family background of the student. Those findings suggested that educators had little hope of overcoming barriers of poverty or a parent's lack of education (Coleman et al., 1966) and gave support to those who thought schools did not make a difference. American public education deteriorated rapidly in the late 1960s and early 1970s and began to draw the attention of critics who published many reports detailing severe problems in schools and who called for widespread reform. "The Coleman Report," released by James S. Coleman in 1966, reported that socioeconomic status was the primary determinant in academic achievement. In other words, schools, teachers, and money had little bearing on the level of a student's academic achievement (Coleman et al., 1966).

In 1983, American education reform entered a new era, according to the reports of historical significance on education reform. In that year, the federal government published a report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education entitled "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform." Terrel H. Bell, the secretary of education at the time and a group of other educators and politicians began to examine the quality of elementary and secondary education in the United States and found there was a "rising tide of mediocrity" that was threatening the nation's future.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1990), states played an active role in promoting reform during the 1990s. State governments passed legislation, adopted new procedures and standards, and pursued policies in a number of areas that reflected a new

emphasis on outcomes in addition to inputs. To facilitate discussion of the diverse set of education policies states adopted during this decade, the report grouped the reform efforts into broad categories, one of which was *standards, assessment, and accountability*. This category reflected the primary ways in which states sought to change the provision of education. The first category: *standards, assessments, and accountability* included those policies that attempted to directly affect the achievement levels of students by specifying what students should learn and be able to perform.

In late 1989, President Bush and the nation's governors met in Virginia for a bipartisan Education Summit. At this summit, the groundwork was laid for the National Education Goals that are all part of the Goals 2000 Education Program. Under the Bush administration, the program was called "America 2000." The goals were not to be used for political gain or as a hollow promise. They were the centerpiece for education reform in both the Bush and Clinton Administrations. The passing of the GOALS 2000: Educate America Act on March 31 of 1994, allowed the federal government a new role in its support for education. The federal government would then promote a comprehensive approach to help all students succeed in life.

Today, educators continue to meet the goals and demands in education that are set forth by our government. Since its initial passage in 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act has been reauthorized seven times, most recently in January 2002 as the No Child left Behind Act. Each reauthorization has brought changes to the program, but its central goal of improving the educational opportunities for children from lower income families remains. The 1994 reauthorization, the Improving America's Schools Act, put key standards in place and accountability elements for states and local school districts that receive funding under the law.

These accountability provisions were further developed in the most recent reauthorization, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which later became the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015.

### **School Leadership and Student Achievement**

According to Cerni et al. (2014), schools are complex organizations that require orchestrated initiatives across multiple domains to develop meaningful student improvements. The research examining the relationship between school principal leadership styles and school effectiveness has found that the most effective form of principal leadership focuses on key internal processes and student learning outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 1996). These school processes ranged from teacher best practices to school policies and norms e.g., academic expectations, school mission, students' opportunity to learn, instructional organization, and learning time (Cerni et al., 2014).

In a general review of the literature, various sources such as Ross and Gray (2006), referenced that some studies, although limited, indicated there was no statistically significant direct effect of leadership on achievement; however, sources did demonstrate that teacher beliefs about their capacity and their professional commitment mediated the impact of principals on student achievement. The results also indicated that principals who adopted a transformational leadership style were likely to have a positive impact on teacher beliefs about their collective capacity and on teacher commitment to organizational values.

Scholarly articles like the debate by Witziers et al. (2003) on the possible impact of the principal's leadership on student achievement where both "direct effect" and "indirect effect" models are discussed, while Bredeson's (1996) article noted that "there is ample evidence in the literature that effective leadership can and does positively affect school and student outcomes" (p. 6).

Barth (1990) describes the role of the principal as follows:

The principal is ultimately responsible for almost everything that happens in school and out. We are responsible for personnel—making sure that employees are physically present and working to the best of their ability. We are in charge of programs—making sure that teachers are teaching what they are supposed to do and that children are learning it. We are now accountable for children’s achievement of minimum standards at each grade level, for the growth of children with special needs, of the gifted, and of those who are neither. The principal has become the provider of social services, food services, health care, recreation programs, and transportation—with a solid skills education worked in somehow. (pp. 4-6)

Finally, in 2005, Marzano et al. articulated the results of a conducted meta-analysis of the research on school leadership spanning some 35 years. The study directly or indirectly examined the relationship between the leadership of the building principal and student’s academic successes. Their meta-analysis indicated that principals could have a profound effect on student achievement in their schools, further stating that the purpose of the principal’s supervision should be the development of teachers’ pedagogical skills with the ultimate goal of enhancing student achievement (Marzano et al., 2011).

### **School Climate**

Another factor in this study besides school leadership is school climate, and with today’s high accountability, principals are more focused on instruction rather than building management as they must shape the vision for their campus, create a climate of learning, develop the leaders around them, improve instruction by analyzing data and teaching others to do so, and manage people, data, and processes. Principals are a guide to the path to better instruction, and they help

teachers see their worth and recognize how important their work is to academic performance in the classroom (Mendels, 2012).

Kelley et al. (2005) also stated in their study that skilled leaders correctly envision future needs and empower others to share and implement that vision. In addition to investigating the dimensions of leadership and measures of school climate, principal perceptions of their own leadership styles were compared with teachers' perceptions of their principals' leadership styles. The behaviors of building level principals are linked to the climate of school buildings, and effective leadership is critical. In summary, principals have the power, authority, and position to impact the climate of the school, but many lack the feedback needed to improve. All principals need to understand effective leadership behaviors and teachers' perceptions of their behaviors. Principals must also understand how to provide the foundation for creating an atmosphere conducive to change.

Scholarly researchers such as Fink and Resnick (2001) make it clear that those in the administrative line are, in theory, accountable for student achievement with the support from the curriculum branch who control curriculum and program choices. The principal must be knowledgeable but must also be able to lead others (Fink & Resnick, 2001). A principal in another study communicated that he along with two designated support teachers would spend much of their time in the classroom modeling and assisting the individual students as requested by the teacher (Ward, 2013). This same principal began to develop people by giving specific feedback from classroom visits, side-by-side teaching, modeling instruction in classrooms, and promoting professional learning communities, and by giving release time to observe other teachers on and off campus (Ward, 2013).

Policymakers have discovered that teachers, tests, and textbooks cannot produce results without highly effective principals to facilitate, model, and lead (McEwan, 2003).

### **Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leadership served as the framework in the study to examine Blue Ribbon school principal leadership behaviors, actions, and practices that improved and sustained student achievement. Transformational leadership was conceptualized by Burns (1978), advanced by Bass (1985) in non-educational contexts, and evolved into the educational context by Leithwood (1992) followed by Cerni et al. (2014). The purpose of transformational leadership is to work toward transcendental goals instead of immediate self-interests and strive toward achievement and self-actualization, rather than safety and security (Bass, 1985; Cerni et al., 2014). Furthermore, transformational leaders motivate followers to exceed performance expectations using transparent communication, inspirational behaviors, trustworthiness, and teamwork (Avolio & Bass, 1994). Transformational leaders also motivate outstanding performance by linking followers' idealized self-concepts with the group mission and by transforming followers' values and self-esteem in a manner that encourages loyalty and respect (Tipu et al., 2012).

Transformational leadership involves inspirational goal development with followers' consent built on a foundation of trust rather than by implicit or explicit agreements (Ismail et al., 2012). Transformational leaders create an environment that encourages personal, professional, and organizational change with the explicit understanding that every act has an impact on organizational effectiveness (Birasnav, 2014). Transformational leaders create change through the following three-step process: 1) recognize the need for change, 2) create a new vision, and 3) institutionalize change. The transformational leader "arouses followers to think in new ways and

emphasizes problem solving and the use of reasoning before taken action” (Hater & Bass, 1988, p. 696). Transformational leadership was positively correlated with group efficacy, cohesiveness, and empowerment (Thomas et al., 2018). Theorists posited four critical aspects of transformational leadership: a) idealized influence, b) inspirational motivation, c) intellectual stimulation, and d) individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1997; Birasnav, 2014; Burns, 1978). Transformational school leaders embrace intrinsic motivation to raise performance expectations, enhance self-efficacy, and inspire followers to commit to a collective vision of the organization (Leithwood et al., 1996).

### **Idealized Influence**

Transformational leaders serve as role models for idealized attributes and idealized behaviors, which translate into idealized influence (Bass & Avolio, 1997). Idealized attributes are characteristics of leaders ascribed to the leader by followers, and idealized behaviors describe specific actions taken by the leader. Idealized influence is interactional in nature and is typically ascribed to risk-takers with legendary success and consistently high moral standards. Educators who manifested high levels of idealized influence were perceived by followers as fair and consistent, dealt with issues in a timely manner, and were significant contributors to organizational commitment (Hauserman et al., 2013)

### **Inspirational Motivation**

Transformational leaders motivate and inspire followers by creating meaning in their work (Bass & Avolio, 1997). Inspirational motivation measures the degree to which the leader articulates the vision that is appealing and inspiring to followers. Clear communication of a vision and specific goals generates excitement and optimism that supports commitment. This is an important characteristic because a principal’s involvement in establishing, expressing, and



sustaining the purpose and goals of the campus he/she serves can have an indirect influence on school outcomes (Hauserman et al., 2013). Teachers who worked for principals who manifested high levels of inspirational motivation perceived a high level of commitment to excellence and reported appreciation for their work.

### **Intellectual Stimulation**

Transformational leaders stimulate innovation and creativity within their staff members (Bass & Avolio, 1997). Transformational leaders innovate and consistently encourage others to try fresh solutions to old problems. Intellectual stimulation refers to a philosophy of spending time and money on training and professional development to foster an innovation-oriented climate (Leithwood, 1994). Transformational principals support risk-taking to create change and are inclusive of all stakeholders affected by a decision-making process.

### **Individualized Consideration**

Transformational leaders recognize everyone's potential for personal and professional growth and achievement, which is referred to as individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1997). This characteristic creates and sustains a climate in which innovations can grow (Bass & Avolio, 1997). Leaders pay attention to individual needs, mentor followers to exceed their goals, manifest confidence in followers' abilities, innovate and share responsibilities and risks with team members, and recognize individual staff contributions (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

Teachers perceive the characteristic of individualized consideration as a principal's ability to empower teachers through authentic collaboration (Hauserman et al., 2013). Teachers feel valued by their principal as a partner in developing and building school programs, which can lead to results in higher levels of commitment to the vision and shared goals. Teachers refer to principals as colleagues, rather than bosses, which is proof of authentic collaboration.

A principal's self-assessment of leadership characteristics matched their teachers' perceptions of the same characteristics according to Goff et al. (2014). These authors discovered that there is often a large, measurable gap between the two sets of perceptions, suggesting that teachers see and interpret various leadership characteristics differently than the principals (Goff et al., 2014). Finnigan and Stewart (2009) found that transformational leadership behaviors were most frequently evident in high-performing schools, lending credence to the belief that transformational leadership is the most effective form of leadership. This is one example that documents that transformational leadership is a key component in the establishment of successful schools.

### **Behaviors and Actions of Principal Transformational Leadership**

Transformational principal behaviors and actions have significant, yet indirect, positive effects on student achievement (McKinney et al., 2015). Principals affect student outcomes indirectly by providing teachers with necessary resources and professional development opportunities, supervision of classroom practices, and prompting supportive, collegial relationships among teachers. Leaders who communicate a strong, clear, shared vision and provide resources and give attention necessary for continuous organizational improvement positively affect student achievement (McKinney et al., 2015). Onorato (2013) found that transformational principals developed strategies and activities aligned with the school mission and manifested specific behaviors that influenced teacher performance. Research indicated that effective principals build rapport with teachers and staff members through developing and implementing transformational behaviors and actions: "Transformational behaviors and actions include: a) developing cooperative relationships among teachers, b) actively listening to teachers, c) treating teachers and staff members with respect and dignity, d) supporting progressive

decisions made by teachers, and e) growing staff members through professional development” (McKinney et al., 2015, p. 164).

Transformational principals influence teaching and learning, which positively effects student achievement indirectly by stimulating teachers’ engagement in professional learning activities and fostering conditions associated with school improvement (Thoonen et al., 2011). The leadership style of a principal is influenced by three factors: a) the relationship between the principal and the teacher, b) academic goals of the school, and c) the latitude to select administrative staff. School administrators must have staff members who believe in their vision and support a positive culture of positive and professional learning communities (Vanblaere & Devos, 2016). Effective principals exhibited the following behaviors and actions: a) praised teachers and staff members, b) showed confidence in teacher and staff member capabilities, c) rewarded teachers for creative contributions, d) publicly recognized teachers for their commitment, and e) celebrated school accomplishments (Vanblaere & Devos, 2016). Study findings indicated that transformational principals invested time facilitating rapport with and among teachers (McKinney et al., 2015; Vanblaere & Devos, 2016). Principals who created a culture that embraced collaborative teamwork as embodied in PLCs were associated with performance in the upper quartile (Vanblaere & Devos, 2016).

### **Transformational Leadership and Student Achievement**

The importance of leadership to school outcomes and student achievement should not be underestimated, given the connection between leadership practices and positive school outcomes. Transformational leadership was examined with implications identified for school districts and principal preparation programs. Quin et al. (2015) conducted a study using a quantitative research approach that relied on surveys to generate data with participants completing the

Leadership Practice Inventory. Following analysis of leadership data from the inventory, the researchers concluded that principals involved in high-performing schools were those most likely to use leadership practices. Their peers in lower performing schools were less likely to rely on leadership practices to improve the school's performance. This research suggested the importance of leadership practices to improving student outcomes and implied that preparation programs for principals should involve emphasizing the importance of implementing leadership practices.

Researchers connected transformational instructor leadership to academic performance among students (Balwant et al., 2019). Transformational instructor leadership was examined and characterized as transformational leaders who acted in an instructional capacity to students who could potentially increase student engagement (Balwant et al., 2019). The researchers suggested that these leaders could increase student engagement and student achievement. Student engagement was investigated as well as its relationship between transformational instructor leadership and student achievement (Balwant et al., 2019). After analyzing data collected from 183 students, researchers found that student engagement was a intermediary between transformational instructor leadership and academic achievement. The findings indicated that while there was a relationship between transformational instructor leadership and student achievement, student engagement served as an underlying process by which leadership impacted student outcomes (Balwant et al., 2019).

Transformational instructor leadership was examined in a meta-analytic review of higher education outcomes (Balwant, 2016). Transformational instructor leadership is a fractured field of study and there existed a lack of consensus regarding the impact of transformational instructor leadership on educational outcomes. Transformational instructor leadership was examined in a

variety of outcomes in the literature ranging from student motivation to academic performance and cognitive learning (Balwant, 2016). Transformational instructor leadership was positively associated with improved academic outcome, improvements to student motivation and satisfaction, improvements to both affective and cognitive learning, and improvements to perceptions of instructor credibility (Balwant, 2016). The findings of the meta-analysis were consistent with those of Balwant et al. (2019) who identified a positive relationship between transformational leadership and academic outcomes though Balwant et al. (2019) indicated that positive outcomes could be a result of an underlying mechanism such as student engagement. However, the researchers' findings did generally agree with the literature and indicated that implementing transformational leadership could lead to several positive student outcomes.

Transformational leadership benefited academic outcomes (Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016). Variables were examined that mediated the relationship between leadership and student academic achievement. A quantitative study of 5,392 students and 569 teachers regarding principal leadership and collective teacher efficacy indicated that transformational leadership predicted above average reading and mathematics scores on standardized tests (Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016). As such, the researchers indicated that transformational leadership should be implemented as a form of instructional management although the sense of teacher collective efficacy, which facilitated the relationship between leadership and academic achievement, and student emotional engagement, mediated the relationship between leadership and mathematics achievement (Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016).

Findings indicated the importance of mediating variables, which were similar to findings by Bird et al. (2010) who indicated that the relationship between achievement and leadership was mediated by student engagement. The findings of Boberg and Bourgeois (2016), therefore,

indicated once more the role of mediating variables in the relationship between leadership and student outcomes. Furthermore, the findings by Boberg and Bourgeois (2016) seemed to indicate that transformational leadership behaviors helped to explain variance in math and reading outcomes among students. These findings found partial support in a separate study of South Carolina public school principals. Newman (2017) indicated that principals' self-perceived transformational leadership behaviors were associated with improvements in reading although not in the areas of math, science, and social studies. These findings added support to the idea that transformational leadership had a positive impact on academic achievement; however, the findings were not a perfect reflection of the findings of Boberg and Bourgeois (2016).

Research associated certain transformational behaviors with academic achievement. Day et al. (2016) indicated that successful principals were able to both directly and indirectly create ongoing improvements over time. These successful principals did so through a combination of transformational and instructional leadership but critically required that principals adequately diagnose problems within their schools. Principals needed to be able to articulate specific needs within the school in order to identify potential solutions and behaviors that would help to address those shortcomings. These findings indicated the importance not merely of adopting a transformational leadership style to improve student outcomes but to use those behaviors to address specific school needs.

Not all findings regarding transformational leadership reflected positively on the use of this leadership style in an academic setting. Munir and Aboidullah (2018) explored transformational leadership with the focus on understanding gender differences in its usage among instructors. The study was performed by having participants complete the "Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire," which was administered to approximately 250 school principals and

2300 teachers from both private and public secondary schools. Upon analysis of the data, no significant gender differences were found in how instructors practiced transformational leadership. However, the researchers did find there was a negative relationship between the use of transformational leadership practices and the academic effectiveness of teachers. The researchers indicated that principals using transformational leadership behaviors led to a decline in teacher effectiveness.

The findings of Munir and Aboidullah (2018) were at odds with separate findings that generally indicated a positive relationship between transformational leadership and academic outcomes (Balwant, 2016; Balwant et al., 2019). Balwant (2016), for example, indicated that meta-analytic research revealed that transformational leadership led to positive outcomes in an academic setting. Findings from meta-analysis, therefore, indicated the findings of Munir and Aboidullah (2018) may be an outlier with regards to findings on transformational leadership outcomes. However, additional research indicated that in at least one other case, there was no impact of transformational leadership on student achievement (Allen et al., 2015).

The research performed by Allen et al. (2015) included an examination of transformational leadership that was based on data drawn using the “Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire” that measured the degree to which principals displayed transformational leadership behaviors. No relationship could be identified between those behaviors and student achievement. The findings did not perfectly echo those of Munir and Aboidullah (2018), which indicated a negative relationship between transformational leadership and student achievement. However, the findings of Allen et al. (2015) again, indicated that transformational leadership may not have the positive outcomes indicated by the larger amount of literature as seen in meta-analyses (Balwant et al., 2019).

The findings regarding transformational leadership were therefore mixed. This was consistent with the statement by Balwant (2016) who indicated that research into the outcomes of transformational leadership yielded fractured results. The research by Balwant included a meta-analytic review that indicated positive outcomes from the use of transformational leadership, which were consistent with several other studies identified in the literature (Balwant et al., 2019; Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016; Day et al., 2016). However, there were also indications that transformational leadership did not have an impact on student achievement (Allen et al., 2015) and may have had a negative impact on outcomes (Munir & Aboidullah, 2018). Considering these findings, further research was necessitated that would help to clarify the relationship between student achievement and academic outcomes though the literature generally leaned more in favor of transformational leadership having a positive impact on student outcomes.

### **National Blue Ribbon Schools Program**

The United States has long tried to recognize the schools that stand out in each state. The National Blue Ribbon Schools Program has existed since 1982 as a means of recognizing great schools across America and exists today as a national program meant to award excellence (U.S. DOE, 2019a). This award is given to both public and private schools in all grade levels of elementary, middle, and high school, and the award is specifically given as a means of recognizing academic achievement within a school. The National Blue Ribbon is awarded annually with more than 9,000 schools recognized for excellence since the program began. Schools awarded the National Blue Ribbon are able to fly a flag that is a symbol of its accomplishment. As such, the National Blue Ribbon Award is a coveted award sought out by schools that both performed well and hoped to improve the gaps that exist in education;



consequently, there is more than one award handed out as part of the National Blue Ribbon Schools Program (U.S. DOE, 2019a).

**National Blue Ribbon Eligibility**

Schools that want to qualify for the National Blue Ribbon award need to meet certain award criteria. Importantly, there are two major categories that the program lists (U.S. DOE, 2019a). The first of these programs is the Exemplary High Performing Schools Award and the second is the Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing Schools Award. The Exemplary High Performing Schools award requires schools to meet specific criteria. These criteria are listed in the following table:

Table 1.

*Eligibility for National Blue Ribbon School Award*

Criterion	Threshold	Measure for Ranking Schools		
		First Option	Second Option	Third Option
1a. Whole school performance	Top 15% within the State	Reading\ELA and math performance separately	Reading\ELA and math performance combined	Composite Score = Reading\ELA + Math + other measures
1b. School subgroup performance	Top 40% within the State	Reading\ELA and math performance separately	Reading\ELA and math performance combined	Composite Score = Reading\ELA + math + other measures
1c. High school graduation rate	Top 15% within the State	Most recent high school graduation rate available		

*Source:* U.S. Department of Education, 2019b.

There are therefore, three major criteria by which the Exemplary High Performing Schools category of the National Blue Ribbon award is given (U.S. Department of Education,

2019b). The first category, *whole school performance*, refers to a criterion in which all schools are ranked based on the performance of every student within each school and gauged against state assessments in reading and math. However, states may rank schools based on how they perform on each topic combined, how schools perform on each topic separately, or how schools perform on both subjects in combination with other measures of performance.

Other measures of performance can vary but often include measures such as graduation rates or performance on state assessments (U.S. DOE, 2019b). Schools that qualify for the award perform in the top 15% of schools statewide. The second criteria, *school subgroup performance*, is characterized by states ranking all schools based on the performance of students within those schools in subgroups tested using state assessments in reading and math. Once more, math and reading can be considered in a combined fashion as separate subgroups or alongside other criteria. To be considered for the National Blue Ribbon Award, schools must perform in the top 40% within the state using this criterion. Finally, high school graduation rates are one more criterion by which states consider a school for the Exemplary High Performing Schools Award. Schools must be in the top 15% of schools statewide to be considered for the award. A second form of award is also considered in the National Blue Ribbon School Program. This award, the Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing Schools Award, must meet the criteria listed in Table 2.

Table 2.

*Criteria for National Blue Ribbon School Award*

Criterion	Threshold	Measure for Ranking Schools		
		First Option	Second Option	Third Option
2a. School subgroup improvement	Top 15% within the State	Reading\ELA and math performance separately	Reading\ELA and math performance combined	Composite Score = Reading\ELA + math + other measures improvement
2b. School subgroup performance	Top 40% within the State	Reading\ELA and math performance separately	Reading\ELA and math performance combined	Composite Score = Reading\ELA + math + other measures
2c. High School subgroup graduation rate	Top 40% within the State	Most recent high school graduation rate available		
2d. Whole school improvement	Equals or exceeds whole state improvement	Reading\ELA and math improvement separately	Reading\ELA and math improvement combined	Composite Score = Reading\ELA + math + other measures improvement

*Source:* DOE, 2019b.

There are consequently four rather than three criteria for the Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing Schools Award. However, the categories are similarly judged on those categories for the Exemplary High Performing Schools Award though with an emphasis on improvement rather than pure performance. The school subgroup improvement category is a criterion in which schools are ranked based on the increase in performance on the state’s subgroups of math and reading either separately, combined, or in combination with other measures of improvement. To qualify for the award, schools need to show they were in the top 15% of schools with regard to

improvement. In school subgroup performance, students are characterized by ranking schools based on student performance in subgroups either separately, combined, or in combination with other criteria with schools in the top 40% meeting this criterion.

The High School Subgroup Graduation Rate category is a category that ranks schools based on the school's most recent high school graduation rates with schools performing in the top 40% of all schools in the state meeting the criteria. Finally, the whole school improvement category is used to assess schools based on improvements in math and reading either separately, combined, or in combination with other measures. This final measure varies from year to year and requires schools to equal or exceed the current whole state improvement rate.

There are additional criteria that schools must meet in order to be nominated for one of these rewards. Schools must have at least 100 students enrolled and have assessment data for at least 10 students in each tested grade for both the categories of reading/ELA and math. If a state has an excessive number of schools with less than 100 students enrolled, then it may use different percentages for nominating schools for the award although each school nominated must have assessment data taken from at least 10 students in each tested grade.

Nominations can be made for schools that are non-profit, non-public schools through the Council for American Private Education; however, these schools still must meet minimal criteria, which include the school placing in the top 15% in the nation in testing for reading/ELA and math. Non-public schools that use both state and national achievement tests must perform in the top 15% in both, and all student groups (e.g. disadvantaged students) must perform similarly. Finally, graduation rates must be 95% or higher in the most recent year measured.

## **Profiles of National Blue Ribbon Winners**

Schools recognized under the National Blue Ribbon program must meet the criteria laid out in Table 1 and Table 2. In profiling these schools, the U.S. DOE (2019a) noted that 362 schools were recognized for the award in 2019. Of these, 312 were public and 50 were private schools. These schools were public and non-public elementary, middle, and high schools. These schools were nominated from among traditional, magnet, parochial, independent, and charter schools from around 46 states and the Department of Defense Education Activity schools in Alabama, Italy, the Netherlands, and the District of Columbia. As such, the number of schools that can be nominated, as well as their diversity, are extensive.

## **Profiles of Texas Blue Ribbon Schools**

Considering how long the program has been in existence, it should be no surprise that there are approximately 9,000 schools recognized with the National Blue Ribbon Award. In Texas alone, in the years 2017 and 2018, there have been 49 National Blue Ribbon winning public and private primary schools (U. S. DOE, 2019a). In 2019, 22 Texas primary schools made up the total of 362 schools that received the reward. In total, Texas had 27 schools awarded in 2019, meaning that the vast majority that were recognized for the National Blue Ribbon were primary schools. To consider this breakdown even further, since the start of this program, there have been 86 primary schools recognized under the Exemplary High Performing Schools category and 24 primary schools recognized under the Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing Schools Award. Consequently, this means that 86 primary schools met the 15/40/15 percent criteria for Exemplary High Performing Schools, and 24 primary schools met the 15/40/40 percent criteria along with the whole state improvement rate criteria of the Exemplary Achievement Gap Closing Schools award.

## **Professional Learning Communities and Teacher Efficacy**

Professional learning communities (PLC) are communities designed to improve instructional quality (Gray et al., 2016). In practice, PLCs help to improve the overall performance of schools by instructing teachers in methods that are then passed along to students (Schaap et al., 2019). PLCs are groups of colleagues within a school committed to a singular vision of improving academic achievement through knowledge sharing and continuous improvement and learning from one another to foster improvement (Gray et al., 2016). PLC members learn about superior teaching interventions by sitting in on each other's classes and creating a collaborative decision-making environment. Schools that become PLCs in turn, become environments in which teachers become learners (Schaap et al., 2019). Insights gained within these communities, such as new pedagogical approaches, help teachers to better instruct students.

There are three elements to PLCs. The first of these, cultural elements, refer to the values and beliefs that guide a school's operations (Schaap et al., 2019). The second, structural elements, refer to relationships that exist between stakeholders in the school, the roles stakeholders have in the school's operations, the trust between stakeholders, and the divisions of power. Finally, PLCs are defined by material elements that include physical resources and the ability of the physical environment to facilitate learning. Even when a school has positive aims and emphasizes trusting relationships and the use of resources, the ability for a PLC to improve school outcomes relies on the availability of the abovementioned three resources to teachers when trying to transfer their insights into practice.

Researchers have connected several variables to the development of PLCs. In at least one study, researchers noted that PLCs could not be considered independent of a school's

bureaucracy and the organizational trust within that school (Kalkan, 2016). Teachers need to perceive the bureaucratic structure within their schools as enabling of change, allowing them to transfer insights learned as part of their communities in their classrooms. However, effective PLCs could also be undermined whenever there was the presence of a coercive bureaucracy that did not empower teachers, which teachers often associated with negative attitudes held by principals.

Teachers in professional communities often felt a high degree of trust toward principals in addition to trusting their colleagues (Kalkan, 2016). Trust within an organization impacted how the bureaucracy of a school impacted a PLC, suggesting the complex relationship between all three variables. Bureaucracy and its role in empowering teachers and creating effective PLCs was explored in greater depth by Spillane et al. (2016). The researchers noted that bureaucracy could act in tandem with existing collegial arrangements to impact the design and performance of PLCs. Professional learning communities flourished due to bureaucratic mandate, and how school administrators used the existing bureaucracy to monitor PLC impacted outcomes of those communities. When desired academic outcomes were not achieved, administrators could administer bureaucratic controls, such as modeling teaching practices or hiring more staff, to support the community and improve outcomes.

Research also examined how PLCs impacted outcomes among teachers, including how those communities impacted teaching practices. Vossen et al. (2019) noted that among science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) instructors, research and design activities were taught separately to instructors. In practice, those instructors went on to design projects for students that were either research only or design only.

Researchers noted the importance of projects that integrated both research and design elements to maximize student outcomes (Vossen et al., 2019). After participating in professional trainings during which they increased their pedagogical content knowledge, teachers were better able to create those research and design projects. The improvement in project creation was attributed to lessons learned in PLCs from instructional strategies taught to instructors and from collective projects. Yet, despite those improvements in one measure, contrary results were found in a study by Hurley et al. (2018) who were unable to find any positive student outcomes following the development and implementation of a PLC.

The study by Vossen et al. (2019) examined 1,514 teachers across 84 schools and included an assessment of performance before and after the implementation of such communities. The study findings of this research indicated that there was no measurable effect on student learning. The contradictory findings made it difficult to assess the impact of PLCs, while Vossen et al. (2019) seemed to suggest that such communities improved teaching practices; the findings of Hurley et al. (2018) indicated that there were no measurable outcomes for students. This divide in the findings provided at least one avenue for future exploration of these communities and suggested a need for further research.

### **Professional Learning Communities and Transformational Leadership**

Over the past five years, there has been a limited number of studies conducted in the role of transformational leadership and its impact in U.S. schools. Within the United States, general school leadership has previously been associated with the development of PLCs. Researchers examined the role of principals in the development of PLCs and found that high-functioning teams in PLCs felt supported by their principals, while lower performing teams did not feel the same way (Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017). Researchers interviewed principals and team members



and noted the importance of principals being active in supporting these teams, which impacted within-school variations of how teams performed. Findings suggested principals' active development and participation in PLCs improved student outcomes (Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017).

PLCs provide a foundation in a rapidly changing and increasingly complex world where education quality relies on teachers continuously improving their professional skills and pedagogical knowledge throughout their entire tenure (Vanblaere & Devos, 2016).

Transformational principals engage in and promote reflective dialogue. School professionals, including both principals and teachers who regularly engage in reflective and in-depth conversations regarding curriculum, instructional practices, and student achievement are critical to having effective PLCs. Principals' enthusiasm, energy, and commitment were critical predictors of positive working relationships with and among teachers and played a pivotal role in creating and sustaining PLCs.

The importance of leadership within the development of professional communities was further emphasized by Wiestling (2010) who noted that transformational leadership practices employed by a principal had an impact on the development of PLCs. A quantitative study of 59 elementary school principals from school districts throughout south central Pennsylvania revealed that principals perceived there was a connection between their practices and the ability to create professional leadership communities, and practices that principals often favored were consistent with transformational leadership practices. Principals often tried to observe classrooms, share a vision for where the school was heading, and tried to create a collective educational environment in which teachers collaborated in the educational process. These principals tried to provide feedback to teachers and generally involve teachers in the school

improvement process. With most of the research into transformational leadership and professional communities focusing on schools internationally, these two studies highlighted the importance of leadership in U.S. schools to develop PLCs.

### **Leadership in Blue Ribbon Schools**

There has been some research into the traits possessed by principals of Blue Ribbon schools. McKinney et al. (2015) investigated the traits of those principals who managed to transform the cultures of their schools and reshape their schools into national Blue Ribbon schools. Those principals were rated using the Leadership Practices Inventory as were teachers, counselors, and assistant principals. The data collected measured principals along sub-scales of a) teacher rapport with their principal, b) rapport between teachers, and c) instructional issues. The findings of the study suggested that teachers rated the principals of Blue Ribbon schools highly along all those traits.

Correlations were also established between scores on sub-scales and principal leadership traits (McKinney et al., 2015). The data researchers produced indicated that teachers who got along with each other and their principals were associated with principals who demonstrated leadership traits of a) modeling behavior, b) inspiring a shared vision, c) challenging existing processes, d) enabling others, and e) encouraging the heart. In essence, the principals of Blue Ribbon schools transformed school cultures by setting a vision. They did not continue business as usual within their schools but instead, tried to institute new processes. They gave support by modeling innovative approaches within their schools and enabling their teachers to take risks and try innovative approaches themselves. They also encouraged figures who helped inspire their subordinates.

Qualitative investigation further continued research into the roles that principals played in conjunction with teachers to create Blue Ribbon schools. Watson (2016) explored the lived experiences of exemplary National Blue Ribbon elementary school teachers with regard to their efforts, improving student outcomes using coaching conversations with their principals. This phenomenological examination involved semi-structured interviews with 12 participants who provided qualitative data that were thematically reviewed and coded to identify themes in participant experiences. Following the review of data, there were nine major themes the reviewers identified along with four major barriers to improving outcomes. Based on the findings, the researchers noted there were several implications for teachers and principals.

Teachers preferred coaching conversations to help improve student learning instead of undergoing observations and feedback from principals (Watson, 2016). As such, principals should engage with teachers in such conversations. Principals should also create close connections with their teachers, which should encourage teachers to seek more help. Principals who had an open-door policy and were clearly visible in their schools were likely to inspire teachers, and school districts should encourage conditions in which principals are able to be more present in their schools. Finally, both teachers and principals should learn to engage in productive coaching conversations that help to improve teaching and student outcomes.

More broadly, research was also conducted that examined schoolwide responses to changes in teaching mandates. Researchers examined how Blue Ribbon elementary schools negotiated changes to English Language Arts standards in Pennsylvania (Dishong, 2016). The changes to the existing standards often necessitated changes in both curriculum and school-wide instructional practices. These changes were undertaken under the assumption that they would be

more effective at helping meet the new standards, and research was focused on Blue Ribbon schools because of their previous demonstrations of academic excellence.

The research by Dishong (2016) was conducted using a case study approach designed to examine the lived experiences of both teachers and administrators with all participants demonstrating experience in the implementation of professional development practices related to ELA standards and changes in curriculum and instructional practices. Following reviews of the data, the researchers found that while practices changed in some cases, what did not change were philosophies regarding how to teach students. Both teachers and administrators felt it necessary to change instructional practices at times but still emphasized the importance of creating the appropriate schoolwide culture conducive to learning. The development of a PLC that supported instructional practices was considered important as was creating a collaborative environment between school leaders and teachers and setting high-performance expectations.

Researchers not only examined what helped make schools into Blue Ribbon schools, but they also examined what made it difficult for schools to transition into Blue Ribbon schools (Martin et al., 2019). In their examination of one such school, researchers noted there were several factors associated with an inability to become high-performing. School context and cohesion between professional development and needs of students/teachers were two such factors, but school administrators were also found to play a significant role in the performance of the school. The researchers looked specifically at a failing Title I school that had experienced 10 years of continuous failure to meet standards. School context referred to the fact that the school's population, from administrators to students and the surrounding community, all had to be considered when shaping school routines.

Martin et al. (2019) also indicated a need for an alignment between expectations set by federal and state standards and professional development that met those standards. However, school administrators guided setting those standards. Researchers indicated that administrators set the tone for how well their faculty worked together and needed to create a positive environment. Schools failed when administrators did not create an environment in which teachers and staff collaborated. Successful administrators distributed shared responsibility and established a vision for what the school would become. Lack of such vision and an overly authoritative leadership style that did not empower teachers contributed to school failure. As such, administrators needed to employ several transformative practices or risk their schools failing.

### **Summary**

Transformational leadership is a motivating form of leadership that inspires subordinates. This form of leadership relies on communication, trustworthiness, inspirational leadership, and teamwork to drive improved outcomes within an organization (Avolio & Bass, 1994). In the past, researchers have identified four critical aspects of transformational leadership that include a) idealized influence, b) inspirational motivation, c) intellectual stimulation, and d) individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1997; Birasnav, 2014; Burns, 1978). These four aspects come together to create a transformational leader who can motivate positive changes within the organization. Also addressed in the literature review were National Blue Ribbon schools, schools that have undergone positive organizational change and been awarded for excellence (U. S. DOE, 2019a). These schools either were awarded for high-performance or for improving their performance remarkable within a given school year (U. S. DOE, 2019b). Texas itself has managed to generate 110 National Blue Ribbon winning primary schools since the start

of the program with 86 primary school recognized for high-performance and another 24 recognized for improved performance.

The third major topic reviewed in the literature was PLCs that were designed to help improve student learning outcomes. This occurred as colleagues increasingly collaborated and learned from one another although the research was mixed on whether improved student outcomes occurred (Hurley et al., 2018; Vossen et al., 2019). Though little research was conducted in the United States over the last five years into transformational leadership employed in PLC within U.S. schools, research did indicate that leadership impacted the outcomes of those schools (Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017; Wiestling, 2010).

Leadership is also tied to the performance of Blue Ribbon Schools, finding that many of these schools often include leadership who empowered teachers and collaborated with them on guiding the direction of the school (McKinney et al., 2015). Close conversations guided the improvement of teacher performance (Watson, 2016) and included administrators who created positive environments in which teachers and staff worked closely with one another, sharing responsibility to guide the future of their schools (Martin et al., 2019). As such, even when the literature did not directly reference transformational leadership, leaders of Blue Ribbon schools exhibited practices consistent with transformational behavior.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

Effective school leadership actions and practices have a direct impact on the culture of the learning organization and student achievement as well as the growth and development of stakeholders. School leaders who employ transformational qualities show that they work in collaboration with teacher, leaders, and students to change the focus of the school to the work that is required for student achievement. This chapter describes the methodology and procedures used to explore the perceptions of principals in South Texas who have been successful in earning the Blue Ribbon School designation for their elementary schools. The qualitative research methodology employed in this study was used in order to document and to examine the experiences of South Texas elementary principals who applied and achieved the United States Department of Education's Blue Ribbon School of Excellence Award. This qualitative approach utilizing case studies was employed to examine the leadership practices and experiences that were shared by a set of Blue Ribbon school principals in the lower Rio Grande Valley in South Texas. The researcher also investigated the effect their leadership had on student achievement; interviews were conducted with a set of principals regarding their leadership practices and what they did on a daily basis to motivate and support teachers, hence creating an environment for student achievement, thus reaching and meeting the state accountability system standards.

The goal of this study was to document those actions and practices proven successful within those elementary schools that allowed them to qualify for and attain the Blue Ribbon

School designation. This study addressed a gap in the research that specifically gave meaning to thoughts and actions of those leaders, and the knowledge gained complemented existing research and may prove useful to both current and aspiring school leaders. Qualitative researchers Miles et al. (2014), stated that “In order to understand the world, we must face the fact that numbers and words are both needed. When statistical tools of a good quantitative study are combined with the up-close, deep, credible understanding of complex real-world contexts that characterize good qualitative studies, we have a powerful mix” (p. 43).

This section includes the research methodology that was used to conduct the study. A description of the research design, sampling, instrumentation, research questions, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures and limitations of the study is also included. One area of focus of this study was to explore the practices and experiences of the principals of the selected schools in the lower Rio Grande Valley in South Texas. The second area of focus was the perception teachers have about the principal’s role in student achievement.

### **Research Design**

In order to gain an even deeper understanding of elementary school principal perceptions regarding their own leadership practices and experiences at Blue Ribbon Schools, a qualitative approach was employed. This was a suitable approach, considering the researcher wanted to explore in depth the practices exhibited by an effective leader. Creswell (2009) suggested the use of qualitative research if one was looking to present a more detailed view of the topic while studying the individuals in their natural setting. Qualitative researchers describe how to make sense of their world and assign meaning to those experiences (Merriam, 2009). It was the intent of the researcher to describe perceived leadership practices of elementary school principals to uncover commonalities among those successful leaders of Blue Ribbon schools in the Rio



Grande Valley. For this type of in-depth look, the researcher utilized a case study approach, which allowed the researcher to delve into the daily actions and practices demonstrated by Blue Ribbon leaders at the elementary school level. Qualitative inquiry answers the “how” and “what” rather than the “why,” while exploring a topic in depth (Creswell, 2009). Data were collected from stakeholders within the learning organizations selected, allowing them to function within their natural setting where daily interactions related to the topic at hand that occurred (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative methods foster the collection of multiple sources of data in the form of interviews, observations, and documents, as opposed to depending upon a single source of data. Case study is an appropriate method to use when the researcher wants to answer the “how” questions, uncovering conditions relevant to the phenomenon being studied (Yin, 2003). Studies regarding leadership practices of school leaders have been conducted, but it is important to define them regarding effective school leaders within the Blue Ribbon school environments in the state of Texas.

### **Case Study**

The qualitative research method of a descriptive case study was described by Creswell (2009) as an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., an activity, event, process, or individual) based on extensive data collection; it is considered an appropriate approach for a research study. To fully understand principal actions and practices that impact student achievement, one must look closely at the experiences of those principals and teachers who were involved in the process on a daily basis that allowed them to be recognized as a school organization eligible for the Blue Ribbon School Award. Data sources were utilized to provide qualitative data for this study. The first data source was gathered from an open-ended interview with the principal at each participating school. The second data source was gathered from open-

ended interviews with classroom teachers to investigate their perceptions of the principal's actions and practices seen through their lens as they worked with those leaders. Finally, Blue Ribbon school applications and other pertinent documents were studied by the researcher to gain an even greater understanding of the principal's leadership style.

As established by Baxter and Jack (2008), qualitative case studies allow researchers to investigate and interpret circumstance or curiosity in context, employing a plethora of data as sources. In triangulation, researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence (Ely et al., 1991; Erlandson et al., 1993; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1980, 1990). In this study, the researcher used interviews, observations, and document analysis for triangulation to occur, and through the data, this study provided multiple sources to corroborate the conclusions, therefore, adding to the credibility of the research.

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to fully understand the effective actions and practices being used by a set of principals in a sample of Blue Ribbon Schools in South Texas in order to ultimately influence current and aspiring leaders in their development of promising practices and actions that led to student achievement. The following questions were used to guide the researcher in the study:

**RQ1:** How do principals of National Blue Ribbon elementary schools in South Texas describe leadership actions, behaviors, and practices that improved and sustained student achievement?

**RQ2:** How do principals of National Blue Ribbon elementary schools in South Texas prioritize their leadership actions, behaviors, and practices that improved and sustained student achievement?

**RQ3:** What are teacher perceptions at National Blue Ribbon elementary schools in South Texas about the leadership behaviors, actions, and practices of the principal who improved and sustained student achievement?

### **Site Participation and Selections**

This study focused on discovering the actions, behaviors, and practices employed by Blue Ribbon School elementary school principals in South Texas. The population sample for this study also included teachers employed within the selected sites. After obtaining IRB approval from the University of Texas–Rio Grande Valley and permission from selected school district superintendents, the principal and teachers from the identified Blue Ribbon Reward schools were invited to participate. The subjects in this study were selected from a group of Blue Ribbon schools as designated by the U.S. Department of Education that were in sample school districts in the lower Rio Grande Valley in South Texas. The study took place directly at each school site, and the information gathered within those learning environments is likely to prove valuable to other school leaders.

In applied fields of practice such as education, management, social work, health professions, and so on, many research topics come from one’s personal interest in the field and from the work setting itself (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As a former elementary principal, the chosen topic was of great interest, given the current state of accountability and the need to assist current practitioners in the field to employ effective and successful practices.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

There were two forms of data collection for this qualitative study. The first step in this process was to secure a list of Blue Ribbon schools from the U.S. Department of Education Agency website. This list was utilized to obtain schools in the Rio Grande Valley that achieved the Blue Ribbon School Award. Once the list was secured, the researcher requested permission from the IRB to conduct the study. Upon approval from the IRB, the researcher approached the superintendents from the sample district(s) to request permission to conduct the study in their district(s) at the designated elementary school(s). After official approval from each district was secured and a letter detailing it was procured, the researcher first in an email, attached the district letter showing approval, and then informed the teachers and principals of the purpose of the study. A separate email was sent to invite teachers and principals to participate on a voluntary basis along with an included informed consent form for them to sign. Those who were asked knew that their participation was confidential. It was promised that their identities would be kept secret, and their names were not to be mentioned in any part of the study, which meant that the collection preserved the confidentiality of the teacher or staff member.

For this part of the study, the goal was to gather information about the selected principals and their schools, discuss how each one of them perceived their leadership practices, and explore the impact of leadership on student achievement in this age of accountability. Principals were interviewed using a set of questions and were directly observed by the researcher in their daily environments. As Rubin and Rubin (2012) stated, “When using in-depth, qualitative interviewing, one of the key naturalistic research methods, researchers talk to those who have knowledge of or experience with the problem of interest” (p. 3). In this case, the researcher spoke to principals who have had success in the current accountability system and hence,

obtained the Blue Ribbon School Award in an effort to obtain key actions, behaviors, and practices of those successful principals.

### **Sources of Data**

Data collection occurred in predetermined PK-5 public elementary school sites in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas that were identified by the list of the U.S. Department of Education of Blue Ribbon Schools within the noted time span.

The researcher accessed the U.S. Department of Education website and obtained the selected school campus lists for the applicable years chosen in the website Historical Database. In this study, the researcher also utilized the *Accountability Manual* by the Texas Education Agency. The *Accountability Manual* for the specific years of the awards is a technical resource that explains the accountability system used by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to evaluate the performance of public-school districts and campuses. The manual provides details of the accountability system for that year or years, including ratings, academic achievement distinction designations, safeguards, and special issues. Districts and campuses can also find the information necessary to compute ratings and distinction designations. Student achievement as measured by the accountability system in Texas at the elementary level is comprised of assessments geared to third through fifth-grade students, and data were obtained from this website as needed. The assessments covered in these grade levels in Texas are in the content areas of reading, math, writing, and science. When determining which campuses are eligible for the Blue Ribbon distinction, the U.S. Department of Education utilizes the state's accountability system.

### **Interviews**

The primary data collection for this case study was done through face-to-face interviews with principals and teachers as well as through existing data gathered through observations of the

principals at work on each site. Each interview was conducted in a location where the principal was assigned at the time of the study. Prior to the interviews, the researcher reviewed the purpose of the study and explained how and why the principal was chosen. The researcher also secured a participant-informed written consent. The researcher answered any questions the participant had before beginning the interview process. To get the most from the interviews as far as detail and depth, the interviewer structured the questions around “three types of linked questions: main questions, probes, and follow-up questions” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p 6).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal and current teachers. Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in the interview process so that respondents were free to express their perceptions of the exhibited actions, behaviors, and practices. Additionally, semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to respond to the interview situation in varied ways in order to best explore the emerging themes and current ideas expressed by the respondents (Merriam, 2009). Overall, qualitative interviewing requires the researcher to listen intently and understand the experiences and perspectives of the principals and teachers. For this reason, the researcher audio recorded the sessions, so that proper attention could be paid to questions and follow-up questions. When the researcher could not discern participants’ meaning, follow up questions were asked to gain clarity and precision (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Session recording also facilitated proper transcribing. Those interviews coupled with the on-site observations and document analyses provided the data necessary for this study.

### **Instrumentation**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal and current teachers. Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in the interview process, so respondents were free to express their perceptions of the actions, behaviors, and practices exhibited. In addition,

semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to respond to the interview situation in varied ways in order to best explore the emerging themes and latest ideas expressed by the respondents (Merriam, 2009).

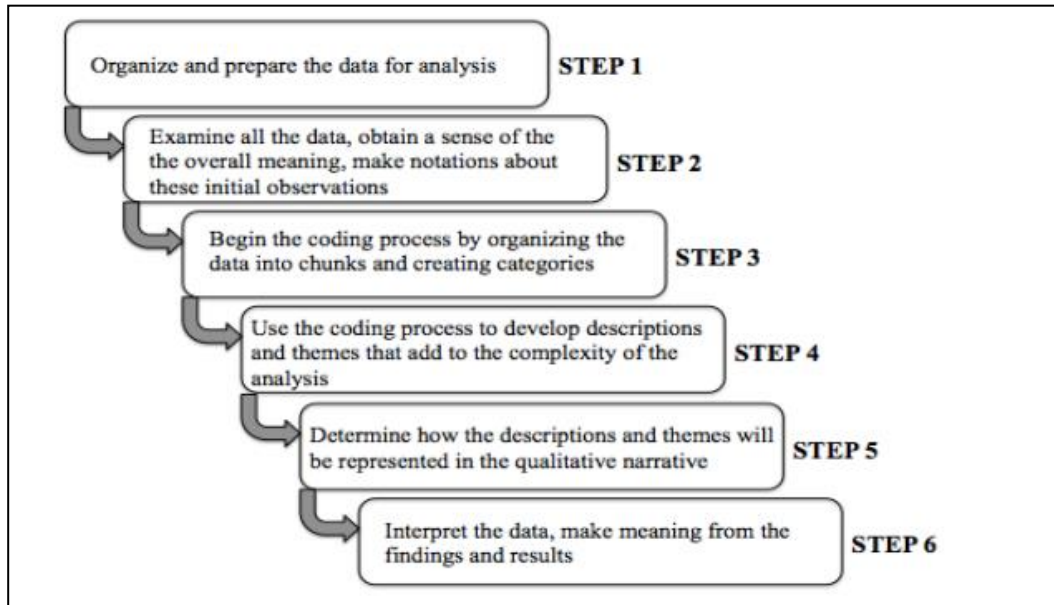
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with study participants, allowing for the respondents to describe and define the actions, behaviors, and practices explored in individualized ways, allowing for flexibility within the interview (Merriam, 2009). Attached appendices outline the protocol questions used for each group being interviewed. Less structured, open-ended questions followed prepared questions, allowing for more in-depth analyses and richer descriptions by participants (Gall et al., 2007). The session recordings also facilitated proper transcribing, thus ensuring that participants' responses, thoughts, and perceptions were captured accurately. Once the interviews were transcribed, a copy was emailed to each participant for their review. The interviews coupled with the on-site observations and document analyses provided the necessary data for this study.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

For this qualitative study, the data collected through interviews were transcribed by the researcher. First, the data collected were reviewed and analyzed manually by the researcher, so that categories could be seen, and themes could be highlighted as well. After the collection of one-on-one interviews, each interview was transcribed verbatim through the use of a computer, utilizing audio tapes obtained during each interview session. The NVivo software was utilized to assist with organization and analysis of the data.

Creswell's (2014) six steps for data analysis was also used to assist the researcher in answering the posed research questions. Figure 1 is a graphic representation of Creswell's six

steps collaborated with a thematic dissertation group in another qualitative study (Bryant, 2016). Permission for this graphic representation has been requested.



**Figure 1. Creswell's (2014) Model for Qualitative Data Analysis**

*Note:* Creswell's six step model for Qualitative Data Analysis collaborated with a thematic dissertation group from Bryant's 2016 study.

The researcher will analyze the transcripts from the semi-structured interviews per Creswell's (2014) six steps per Saldana's (2016) decision rules for theme development. The researcher used NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software to implement the steps. The operation of each of the steps using NVivo was as follows (for both the semi-structured interview transcripts and the focus group transcripts):

### **Preliminary Coding of Transcripts**

The researcher developed the initial codes for the transcripts using the concepts from the theoretical framework that informed the development of the semi-structured interview protocol. The researcher used NVivo's node functionality to implement this step.



### **Iterative Coding of the Transcripts**

The researcher coded iteratively until two iterations occurred without the development of new codes and without the revision of the previous round's codes. The researcher used NVivo's node functionality to implement this step. It took five iterations of coding to achieve two consecutive rounds of coding without the development of new codes and without revision to the previous round's codes.

### **Categorizing the Codes**

The researcher iteratively assembled the codes into categories until two iterations produced no new categories and no revisions to previous categories. The researcher included at least two codes in each category. The researcher used NVivo's cascading node functionality to implement this step. It took five iterations of categorizing to achieve two consecutive rounds of categorization without the development of new categories and without revision to the previous round's categories.

### **Thematic Analysis**

The researcher iteratively assembled the categories into themes that directly addressed the research questions for the study. The researcher performed thematic analysis until two iterations produce no new themes and no revisions to previous themes. The researcher included at least two categories in each theme. The researcher used NVivo's cascading node functionality to implement this step. It took three iterations of thematic analysis to achieve two consecutive rounds without the development of new theme categories and without revision to the previous round's themes.

### **Extraction of Illustrative Direct Quotations**

For each theme, the researcher cut and pasted into a separate Microsoft Word document direct quotations that illustrated the theme. Direct quotations are “illustrative” when they add depth or richness to the general explanation of a given theme or subtheme (for the latter, see step 6). The researcher extracted at least two direct quotations for each theme for eventual inclusion in Chapter IV of the dissertation.

### **Analysis of the Direct Quotations for Subtheme Development**

The researcher interpreted the direct quotations for each theme for substantive variation. In the instance that the direct quotations for a given theme varied substantively in ways other than the categories used to develop the theme (see step 4), the researcher would have developed subthemes for the theme. However, the interpretation elicited no subthemes that were not category-based.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Yin (2017) suggested that qualitative researchers need to document the procedures of their case studies and to document as many of the steps of the procedures as possible. He also recommended setting up a detailed case study protocol and database, so others can follow the procedures. Other researchers stated that repeated use of a given instrument with consistent results helps to determine reliability (Mash & Wolfe, 2010). Lincoln and Guba (1985) also concur that the reliability in qualitative research refers to dependability and identifying the ability to successfully repeat research findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) outlined six strategies to assist qualitative researchers in establishing validity of findings:

*Prolonged engagement:* Spending extended time in the participant's environment to obtain a formal understanding of the culture, identifying characteristics of the setting, and developing relationships with participants.

*Persistent Observation:* Identifying specific characteristics that affect the selected research problem.

*Triangulation:* Using multiple sources of data to increase understanding of the findings.

*Peer debriefing:* Presenting information to a third party with no connection to the research process in order to uncover unintended bias and review the research process.

*Negative case analysis:* Incorporating data that is not relevant to the study or contradicts study findings.

*Referential adequacy:* Selecting a portion of data for secondary analysis to ensure soundness of the initial analysis of data.

*Member Checking:* Providing opportunities for participants to review both the data they contributed to the research process and the interpretations of the data to confirm accuracy and credibility of information.

The researcher utilized member checks to enhance the credibility of this doctoral study by providing participants with the analyses and interpretations of the interview data for review. The participants were given a five-day window in which to give their feedback regarding the accuracy of the findings. Harper and Cole (2012) noted that member checking can provide participants with comfort regarding their validation of documented experiences and ideas. The researcher also met with and debriefed the participants throughout the process with a peer from the researcher's professional network to review the information throughout the research process, which added a layer of validity. Scheduled meetings with the peer were kept where feedback was

documented. This feedback also assisted the researcher in maintaining neutrality and avoiding bias.

To ensure reliability of this study, the researcher utilized some of Gibbs (2007) suggested qualitative reliability procedures as outlined below:

- Check transcripts to make sure they do not contain obvious mistakes made during transcription.
- Make sure that there is not a drift in the definition of codes or a shift in the meaning of the codes during the process of coding. This can be accomplished by constantly comparing data with the codes and by writing memos about the codes and their definitions.

As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state, “The researcher can choose among several software programs specifically designed to deal with qualitative data or use basic word processing software such as Microsoft Word or Excel and adapt it to use with qualitative data” (p. 222).

Organization of collected data is important for accurate review, analysis, and reporting. Organization methods used for the data maintain the integrity and validity of the information. Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) agree that Microsoft Excel is a helpful tool for organizing qualitative data and information. Using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to record receipts of the signed consent forms, the scheduling of the semi-structured interviews (i.e., date and time), and the interview location for all participants helped the researcher.

Reliability subprograms in qualitative computer software packages were also used to determine the level of coding consistency. NVivo software designed to organize and analyze qualitative data was used to streamline the analysis process. Miles et al. (2014) recommended that the consistency of the coding should agree at least 80% of the time for good, qualitative reliability.

In this study, the researcher used interviews, observations, and document analyses for triangulation to occur; through the data, this study provided multiple sources to corroborate the conclusions, therefore, adding to the credibility of the research. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “Triangulation using multiple sources of data means comparing and cross-checking data collected through observations at different times or different places or interview data collected from people with different perspectives, or from follow-up interviews with the same people” (p. 245). This study added to the validity of the findings of effective school practices through the use of interviews and observations at different sites as designated by the sample of Blue Ribbon Schools with different school principals.

### **Bias**

Researcher bias refers to any expectations or outcomes the researcher anticipates prior to the conclusion of the study that might affect participants’ behavior and the overall outcomes (Gall et al., 2003). The research findings were grounded in the data analyses and evidence, and only facts found from the data results were reported. The researcher, being a former principal, had first-hand knowledge of the subject matter; as Creswell (2013) mentioned, it is important to clarify the bias the researcher brings to the study. The fact that the researcher is a former principal may have affected the study during the interview data collection phase; therefore, the researcher remained aware of her perceptions while gathering the detailed self-perceptions of school principals by using a self-reflection journal. This self-reflection journal assisted the researcher in keeping notes on her experiences during the study to practice reflexive thinking. Creswell and Creswell (2018) highlighted the need to practice reflexivity by recording notes during the research process, reflecting on personal experiences, and considering how personal experiences may shape interpretation of the results. The use of personal and introspective notes

during the interview research process to combat occurrences of and ensure confirmability were maintained (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2011; Searle & Hanrahan, 2011). Reflectivity has already been mentioned as a core characteristic of qualitative research. Good qualitative research contains comments by the researchers about how their interpretations of the findings is shaped by their background such as their gender, culture, history, and socioeconomic origin.

### **Summary**

The goal of the research conducted in this study was to grasp a better understanding of those actions, behaviors, and practices of Blue Ribbon School principals in South Texas and to examine the impact those leadership actions have on student achievement. Qualitative measures were appropriate for this study as the experiences of Blue Ribbon School principals were collected and told in an effort to add to the body of knowledge regarding effective practices of school principals. This chapter focused on the process for carrying out a study on school leadership and its impact on student achievement in the current state of accountability. It provided a rationale for employing the methods utilized as well as support for why this method was best suited for the study.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### **Overview**

The data collection, data analyses, and results are presented in Chapter IV. The data were collected from a purposive sample of Blue-Ribbon School principals and teachers per the fundamental concepts of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1997). Three semi-structured interviews with principals were conducted one-on-one, and three focus groups with teachers included three or more teachers. The data analysis method used was inductive thematic, which consisted of iterative coding followed by combining codes into categories and then categories into themes. NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software was used to perform the analyses.

The analysis of the semi-structured interview transcripts produced 22 codes that were combined into eight categories that were combined into four themes. The second data analysis, which was of the focus group transcripts, elicited 16 codes that were combined into five categories that were combined into two themes. Each category required two or more codes, and each theme required two or more categories. The decision rules for combining codes into categories and categories into themes are discussed in the presentation of the results below.

The next section includes presentation and explication of the results of the inductive thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview transcripts.

Following is a section that presents and explicates the results for the focus groups. The penultimate section reorganizes the results by research question. The final section of the chapter is a brief summary and a preview of Chapter V. Discussion of the convergence and divergence of the results from the interviews with principals and those for the focus groups with teachers is reserved for Chapter V.

### **Inductive Thematic Analysis of the Semi-structured Interview Transcripts**

There were three semi-structured interviews with principals. The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software. The first phase of the analysis used was iterative coding until the full set of codes went unchanged for two rounds of coding the three semi-structured transcripts. Specifically, the iterative coding was stopped upon the second consecutive round of coding the three transcripts that elicited no new codes, no reduction of extant codes into more specific codes, and no converging of extant codes into the same code (Saldana, 2016). The coding took five iterations to achieve two consecutive rounds of coding with no changes to any of the codes. There were 21 codes upon the second consecutive round of coding with no changes.

Once finalized, the codes for the semi-structured interview transcripts were combined into categories based on their conceptual similarities. Accordingly, and unlike the coding, categorization was not iterative, but rather interpretive. For example, the codes *informal training* and *formal training* comprise the category *professional development*, and the codes *cooperation*, *collaboration*, and *trust* comprised the category *participative decision making*. Each category was required to include at least two codes (Saldana, 2016). The categorization phase of the analysis of the semi-structured interview transcripts elicited eight categories from the 21 codes.



Each theme was required to have at least two categories (Saldana, 2016). The decision rule for combining categories into themes was that they contributed to the same fundamental concepts of transformational leadership theory: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1997). For example, the theme for intellectual stimulation was comprised of the categories *evidence-based practice* and *path-goal leadership* insofar that principals reported instructing teachers (i.e., path-goal leadership style) on how to pursue and achieve student performance metrics by implementing practices that had already been demonstrated to be effective (i.e., evidence-based practice). The thematic analysis phase of the analysis of the semi-structured interview transcripts elicited four themes from the eight categories with two categories per theme.

### **Results for the Inductive Thematic Analysis of the Semi-structured Interview Transcripts**

Table 3 includes 21 codes for principals' self-reported perceptions and behaviors when transforming their schools into Blue Ribbon School awardees for the state of Texas. The self-reported perceptions and practices were predominantly principals' perceptions and practices regarding the transformation of teachers, students, and parents alike towards a data-driven mission implemented with evidence-based practices to improve academic achievement at the student level (not just at the aggregate school level). The codes related to this mission included *data collection and analysis*; for example, participant 2 (P2) stated, "So, that's really what I focused on the first year... the data building [and] data literacy [and] developing a data-driven culture and really making decisions based on the data." The emphasis on *data* and *data literacy* as part of the school mission included data literacy for parents as well as for principals and teachers as seen from participant 1 (P1, "[It was] also building data literacy in the parents, when

we do parent meetings about data in a grade level in a parent conference, I always try to bring in some data.”

Table 3

*Interview Codes, Example Direct Quotations, and Counts*

Code label	Example direct quotation	Participant count	Frequency count
Collaboration	“We encourage the teachers and how to continue to open doors for teachers and support them in a way that they're going to be able to bridge that gap and provide accelerated instructions.”	3	27
Communication	“My messaging has changed. I communicate with the teachers very differently now...”	3	14
Cooperation	“It was no longer competition among each other, it was like we're going to help each other out when somebody's not doing well...”	3	10
Data collection and analysis	“It’s always data, you know some sort of data piece all the time...”	3	17
Evaluation	“Whether I’m looking at a STARR test or STARR results or a benchmark result and I’m looking at it by teacher and whose kids are doing what...”	3	5
Expertise	“I really do think that what has benefited me professionally most definitely in the principal ship is my educational background.”	1	6
Formal training	“You have those campus staff Development Days it was a course on vertical alignment.”	3	3
Informal training	“Peer observations... I highly encourage that whether it's a instructional round or where it's a one-on-one where I feel the teachers struggle...”	3	7
Innovation	“It’s just getting new ideas... it's just always about being innovative and finding new ways to get to the kids, new ways to teach different things... new ways to identify students...”	3	9
Instruction	“The whole thing is that I never chastise a teacher to make her feel like she can't do it, it's always ‘you can do it, we just need to find a different method’ ...”	3	9
Study groups	“Study groups or PLC is a professional learning community, and it is a huge foundation of what we do...”	3	16

Table 3, cont.

Code label	Example direct quotation	Participant count	Frequency count
Listening	“I just kind of wanted to listen from their perspective, what the what needed to change.”	3	9
Monitoring	“The details, is that you also have to look at your data and not take high up at data, because you start climbing in one area and another area starts to fall, then there you go, you know.”	3	6
Parent connections	“If you don't have buy-in from the parents it's not going to work...”	3	5
Teacher connections	“I always tell teachers how hard they work and how we appreciate everything they do...”	3	7
Problem mapping	“There was division and the school with amongst grade levels certain levels were aligned horizontally, but then there were some that were teaching individually, so there was a lot of disconnect.”	3	20
Recognition	“It’s acknowledgement for the teacher... I can say “I remember being in your class and remember you did this lesson, and you were teaching the kids how to do this, and that was so great ...”	2	4
Resources	“She's an excellent teacher, I don't know what I'm gonna do without her because I need to replace her...”	3	11
Reward	“A lot of rewards that honestly that that is what has helped a lot of rewards and a lot of appreciation, making sure that the teachers and the students know how much we appreciate their hard work...”	3	15
Student connection	“I have a very good memory I don't know how I know my kids by name I know the 700 kids by name.”	3	7
Teacher empowerment	“So that was one thing that I did do to empower our lead teachers is that I gave them power... to make decisions...”	2	4
Trust	“The superintendent put me in here with a trust that I could do it...”	3	13

Principals’ focus on parents as well as on teachers was evident in terms of the basic leadership objective of motivating followers. For parents, study participant 3 (P3) gave one of numerous responses that comprised the code *parental connection*: “If you don't have buy-in from the parents, it's not going to work.” Further, from P2, “We wanted to bring parental involvement

and get parents back into the school to be supportive of what the teachers were attempting to do.”

Of course, principals were very focused on motivating teachers to embrace the new data-driven, evidence-based practice mission and transforming their approaches to curricula and teaching. Principal approaches to transforming teachers emphasized *collaboration* and *cooperation*. From P1, “There would be groups of teachers walking together during their planning and going to the dean’s office or to my office... to ask us something about how to implement this or how to do that.” The remaining codes are illustrated in Table 5 with direct quotations. The remaining codes also are illustrated with additional direct quotations in the presentation of the categories and themes below.

Following the coding of interview data, the codes were then reviewed for conceptual similarity. Table 4 below includes eight categories developed from the 21 codes presented in Table 3 above. The theory of transformational leadership is a meta-theory that encompasses numerous other theories of leadership style, albeit not explicitly (Northouse, 2009), so the concepts used to group codes into categories were not the fundamental concepts of transformational leadership theory. For example, the category *path-goal leadership* is a leadership style in its own right but one that is more specific than inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, and individualized consideration (Northouse, 2009). That said, the category of path-goal leadership included codes for principal perceptions and behaviors about instructing teachers on implementing data-driven, evidence-based practices in the classroom, specifically *instruction*, *resources*, and *teacher empowerment*.

Table 4

*Combining Interview Codes into Interview Categories*

Category	Codes (from Table 2)	Definition	Participant count	Frequency count
Collective learning	Listening	Principals listening to teachers and parents about students	3	46
	Study groups	Two or more teachers and/or principals developing understanding of a specific topic together		
	Problem mapping	Identifying barriers to teacher and student success		
Participative decision making	Collaboration	Teachers and principals harnessing expertise to implement solutions	3	54
	Cooperation	Sharing of information and resources		
	Trust	Interpreting stakeholder input as valid and informing decision making with it		
Mission mentality	Communication	Conveying short-term objectives and long-term goals	3	40
	Data collection and analysis	Use of secondary and primary data at the student, school, and/or school-district level		
	Innovation	Developing new approaches to problems		
Leader engagement	Parent connections	Principal-parent interactions	3	19
	Student connections	Principal-student interactions		
	Teacher connections	Principal-teacher interactions		
Evidence-based practice	Expertise	Formal education	3	17
	Monitoring	Examining the implementation of evidence-based practices in real time		
	Evaluation	Examining the outcomes of evidence-based practices ex post		

Table 4, cont.

Category	Codes (from Table 2)	Definition	Participant count	Frequency count
Path-goal leadership	Instruction	Informal advice on how to perform a specific task	3	24
	Resources	Money, equipment, human resources		
	Teacher empowerment	Delegation of decision-making authority to teacher-level by principals		
Equity	Teacher recognition	Consistent informal acknowledgment of good performance	3	30
	Teacher reward	Consistent formal acknowledgement of good performance		
	Resources	Money, equipment, human resources		
Professional development	Formal training	Continuing education courses	3	10
	Informal training	Mentoring		

To illustrate collectively, principals reported instruction, provided resources, and empowered teachers to implement data-driven, evidence-based practices in their own ways (i.e., the path) as fundamental to helping teachers to improve student academic performance (i.e., the goal). From, P2, “You're looking for all kinds of resources beyond what the district can give you because it's going to take a monumental task....” Also from P2, “The whole thing is that I never chastise a teacher to make her feel like she can't do it; it's always ‘you can do it, we just need to find a different method,’” and “So that was one thing that I did to empower our teachers is that I gave them power; I did; I empowered them to make decisions.” The remaining categories are defined in Table 5 and are also defined in the presentation of the themes below.

The final step of the analysis of the semi-structured interview transcripts was interpreting categories and combining them into themes. The decision rule for combining categories into

themes was that categories were to be combined only if they were conceptually related to the same fundamental concepts of transformational leadership: idealized influence, individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, or inspirational motivation.

The first theme was *idealized influence via collective learning and decision making*. The second theme was *inspirational motivation via mission mentality and leader engagement*. The third theme was *intellectual stimulation via evidence-based practice and path-goal leadership*. The fourth theme was *individualized consideration via equity and professional development*.

For example, the theme for inspirational motivation was comprised of the categories *mission mentality* and *leader engagement* as principals more often than not, expressed their sense of mission and engagement with teachers, students, and parents in terms of motivating those stakeholders to participate in the mission of school transformation into a Blue Ribbon awardee by way of data-driven problem identification and evidence-based practices for improving student academic achievement. Table 5 summarizes the four themes that were developed from the eight categories in Table 4.

Table 5

*Combining Interview Categories into Interview Themes*

Theme	Categories (from Table 4)	Definition	Participant count	Frequency count
Idealized influence via collective learning and decision making	Collective learning  Participative decision making	Principals and teachers work together as equals to diagnose and learn how to overcome barriers to teacher and student success	3	100

Table 5, cont.

Theme	Categories (from Table 4)	Definition	Participant count	Frequency count
Inspirational motivation via mission mentality and leader engagement	Mission mentality	Principals explicitly communicate a mission to help students achieve and engage with all stakeholders (parents, teachers, students) on a continual basis when communicating so	3	59
	Leader engagement			
Intellectual stimulation via evidence-based practice and path-goal leadership	Evidence-based practice	Use of data and results to instruct teachers on how to overcome barriers to student success	3	41
	Path-goal leadership			
Individualized consideration via equity and professional development	Equity	Principals treat all teachers and students equally in terms of time, energy, and other resource allocations, including but not limited to professional development opportunities	3	40
	Professional development			

### Theme 1: Idealized Influence Via Collective Learning and Participative Decision Making

The theme for idealized influence was developed by combining the categories *collective learning* and *participative decision making*. The general underlying mechanism of the theme was that transformation was to be a team or group effort, i.e., that the principals were learning by way of data and evidence-based practice alongside teachers, students, and parents. The categorical mechanisms of collective learning and participative decision making were combined for the theme *idealized influence* insofar that collective learning and participative decision making were leader behaviors that were interactional in nature and demonstrative of how leaders wished followers to behave (Bass & Avolio, 1997). This can be seen in the statement from P2, “Study



groups or professional learning communities are a huge foundation of what we do since the very first year... it's the foundation of our learning,” and from P1, “Our professional learning community... by truly following those tenants... [we] structured the school in a way that you are allowing us all to collaborate.” Obviously, team learning led to participative decision making. As stated by P3 about applying a new curriculum, “I wrote the application alongside [teachers], so we went through the application; the teachers told me what they wanted or what we needed to include.”

In addition to study groups for collective learning, principals also emphasized listening to teachers and parents as part of generating idealized influence for change. P1 stated, “I just kind of wanted to listen from [the teacher] perspective about what needed to change.” From P3, “Listening to both [teachers and parents] was a fundamental way I got everybody on board; it was the only way it could really work.” P2 additionally emphasized listening to the students, “I have a very good memory; I don't know how I know my kids by name; I know the 700 kids by name, but I try to talk to them all to listen to them.”

Another way that principals developed idealized influence for change was by demonstrating an acute understanding of the problems to resolve. P3 stated, “I know the data is... proof that I know exactly where I need to start off.”

Idealized influence was generated by collective learning due to the participative decision making and trust it facilitated as stated by P2: “I needed to build those relationships first, and I needed them to trust me, and I needed them to understand that I can do it, and I can help [them] facilitate this process to respond to what we have learned together about our challenges and issues.”

P3 echoed this sentiment in terms of cooperation with teachers facilitating trust over time, “It was no longer competition among each other; it was like we were going to help each other out when something’s not going well.” From P1: “...we are now a team who works together and trusts one another and helps each other to succeed.”

## **Theme 2: Inspirational Motivation Via Mission Mentality and Leader Engagement**

The theme for inspirational motivation was developed by combining the categories *mission mentality* and *leader engagement*. The general underlying mechanism of the theme was that transformation will happen more readily when teachers, parents, and students are motivated by the vision of the principal, which he or she communicates to followers in an engaging manner. The categorical mechanisms of mission mentality and leader engagement were combined for the theme *inspirational motivation* insofar that inspirational motivation was conceptualized as a leader’s articulation of a vision that is appealing and thusly, inspiring to followers (Bass & Aviola, 1997). For example, P3 stated:

If you don't have buy-in to what we are trying to do here, then it doesn't work... I tell [teachers and parents] “we're going to do it, and to do it, we have to do it together.” I tell them “it's going to take work, and we're all going to do our part, and we're all part of this chain, and I can't have one link fail.”

Similarly, from P1: “My role is to facilitate change and deliver the message and frame it in a way that it's going to be well received and motivating and look years into the future ....” P2 emphasized motivating students as well as teachers and parents: “Our vision is to have our kids become those self-motivated lifelong learners and just to never stop learning, and I think we do that through emotional and social support plus their education.”

The principals also reported achieving inspirational motivation by way of innovations in the classroom. From P1, “It’s just getting new ideas... it's just always about being innovative and finding new ways to get to the kids, new ways to teach different things... new ways to identify students.” Similarly, from P2, “I am always thinking of new ways to be better. It keeps everyone inspired.” Also, P2 stated: “In any school transformation... the key steps in the school transformation process was new thinking for revitalizing the climate and culture of the school.”

Leader engagement was a common addendum to principals’ remarks about the need for innovation to inspire and motivate, which can be seen from P3:

It was a lot of conversations [with teachers and parents] about [innovations for change] and that's why bringing them in and engaging with them was so important if the transformation was going to work; it was so important to motivate everyone to do things differently than before.

P2 emphasized inspiring and motivating students as well as teachers and parents:

“Everything we do is for the kids... we will do anything for them and they like when they get prizes and announce their names on the intercom during the morning announcements.”

### **Theme 3: Intellectual Stimulation Via Evidence-Based Practice and Path-Goal Leadership**

The theme for inspirational motivation was developed by combining the categories *evidence-based practice* and *path-goal leadership*. The general underlying mechanism of the theme was that transformative practices can augment student achievement when they are field-tested and when principals show teachers creative ways to implement new practices. The categorical mechanisms of evidence-based practices and path-goal leadership were combined for the theme *intellectual stimulation* insofar that intellectual stimulation was conceptualized as a

leader encouraging fresh solutions to old problems and fostering an innovation-oriented climate (Bass & Aviola, 1997).

For example, from P3: “I always communicated the research base of the curriculum; told them ‘if you understand the research, you can translate it very well to the practitioner side,’” and from P2: “You need to be the one at the head showing teachers new ways and say ‘Look, I researched this and I found this.’” P1 emphasized helping teachers develop new ways to implement evidence-based practices for student achievement: “[The teachers] have a problem, and they come to me, and I’ll tell them, ‘oh no, let’s do it like this, or let’s do that,’ you know, sometimes you have to find a way to make it work.”

Bringing in outside expertise was another way in which principals reported keeping teachers interested in learning new ways to help facilitate change as seen from P1:

My scientific background enabled me to translate research results from the experts into new ideas for the teachers to think about. I understood that on a scientific side because I know research papers, and it was very easy for me to translate that from an educational standpoint into a practitioner standpoint.

P2 reported bringing in outside expertise rather than using the extant literature: “I’d have the curriculum specialists visit because again, I knew the teachers wanted to know how to do better.”

P3 stated, “[The teachers] were eager learners once you presented them with the strategies and best practices.”

Empowering teachers to take on more challenging roles was another way that principals reported stimulating the intellects of their teachers. From P3, “I started moving my stronger people into positions where they needed to be leaders who would be the grade level chairs.” Similarly, from P1, “One thing that I did do was to empower our lead teachers to figure things

out and learn on their own. I empowered them to make decisions and to share things with the teachers in their grade.”

#### **Theme 4: Individualized Consideration Via Equity and Professional Development**

The theme for inspirational motivation was developed by combining the categories *equity* and *professional development*. The general underlying mechanism of the theme was that principals could help teachers implement transformative practices for student achievement by recognizing the potential for professional and personal growth for all teachers. The categorical mechanisms of equity and professional development were combined for the theme *individualized consideration* insofar that individualized consideration was conceptualized as a leader paying attention to the individual needs of followers to help followers exceed their goals (Bass & Aviola, 1997).

For example, P3 stated, “[The teachers] want equity; they want [all teachers] to have the same playing field,” and from P2, “We want equity as a leader, and as a principal, we want equity... I didn't feel like, you know, one teacher should get all the good kids, or all the high-performing kids.” P1 expressed the very same sentiment: “[The teachers] want equity... they want everybody to have the same playing field.” P1 also emphasized equity in treatment by the principal as well as equity in opportunity for a successful classroom: “Everyone deserves compassion and respect; fact is, some teachers have a harder group than others, no matter how even you try to make it.”

Individualized consideration was also achieved through professional development opportunities for teachers. P1 emphasized providing professional development opportunities when teachers request help:

My job is to work for [the teacher]. As the principal, I am going to make sure that I'm assisting you to get to the next level and making sure we're doing things that are right for kids. So, I always tell them, "I'm working for you...."

P2 emphasized the informal development of "data literacy" for teachers: "Building that data literacy in [the teachers]... I always try to bring in some data [for each teacher]." P3 mentioned both informal and formal professional development to achieve individualized consideration: "You have to understand the needs of each teacher and staff... Everyone requires different ways to grow and to help achieve change."

### **Inductive Thematic Analysis of the Focus Group Transcripts**

There were three teacher focus groups. The qualitative data from the focus groups were analyzed using NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software. The first phase of the analysis was iterative coding until the full set of codes went unchanged for two rounds of coding. Specifically, the iterative coding was stopped upon the second consecutive round of coding the three transcripts that elicited no new codes, no reduction of extant codes into more specific codes, and no converging of extant codes into the same code. The coding took four iterations to achieve two consecutive rounds of coding with no changes to any of the codes.

Once finalized, the codes for the focus group transcripts were combined into categories based on their conceptual similarities. Accordingly, and unlike the coding, categorization was not iterative, but interpretive; for example, the codes *leader dedication*, *leader accountability*, and *concern for others* comprised the category *authentic leadership* insofar that teachers observed the behaviors that were expected of them by their principals were exhibited by the principals themselves. Each category was required to include at least two codes (Saldana, 2016). The categorization phase of the analysis of the focus group transcripts elicited five categories.

The categories were combined into themes interpretively as well. Each theme was required to have at least two categories (Saldana, 2016). The decision rule for combining categories into themes was that they contributed to the same fundamental concept of transformational leadership theory: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1997). For example, the theme for *inspirational motivation* was comprised of the categories *authentic leadership* and *fairness* insofar that teachers were motivated by example (authentic leadership style) as well as by the fact that their principals treated everyone fairly (fairness) in terms of resource allocation, reward, and recognition (each of these codes for the category included language about fairness). The thematic analysis phase of the analysis of the semi-structured interview transcripts elicited two themes from the five categories.

### **Results for the Inductive Thematic Analysis of the Semi-structured Interview Transcripts**

Table 6 includes 21 codes for teacher perceptions of leader practices and behaviors when transforming their schools into Blue Ribbon School awardees for the state of Texas. Teacher perceptions emphasized predominantly the visions of principals for their schools and their dedication to their visions. For example, for the code *dedication* from focus group 2 (FG2), “[The principal] works on weekends, she works at night and early in the morning; I mean she is very dedicated, very passionate,” and from focus group 1 (FG1), “[The principal] talks to the students in a very sweet way, and I think they feel like they know her personally.” For the code *vision*, focus group 3 (FG3) emphasized a dedication to more than just educating students: “[The principal’s] vision is just to have our kids become those self-motivated, lifelong learners and just to never stop learning and to do that through emotional and social support plus their education.” The remaining codes are illustrated in Table 6 with direct quotations. The remaining codes also

are illustrated with additional direct quotations in the presentation of the categories and themes below.

Table 6

*Focus Group Codes, Example Direct Quotations, and Counts*

Code label	Example direct quotation	Focus group count	Frequency count
Accountability	“The principal is there to say ‘you know what, I’m also accountable because I’m the leader of the school.’”	1	3
Adaptation	“[The principal] is always willing to adapt and change.”	2	3
Communication	“It’s like you’re just friends, and you’re able to communicate freely with these parents, and you can communicate with the children better.”	2	5
Concern	“Concern not only for the students. She does make sure that “Okay, is my teacher happy, it is my teacher comfortable what they’re doing what they’re teaching.”	3	5
Data	“She’s very data driven... and you better look and analyze left to right across... you better to have everything checked off.”	2	7
Dedication	“She works on weekends; she works at night and early in the morning; I mean she is a very dedicated, very passionate.”	2	7
Evaluation	“So, she’s very fair and what you know organized and prepared; you know she won’t say something that she hasn’t researched; and you know she knows her numbers... about your performance.”	2	5
Goal clarity	“She also did that for the goals and expectations Okay, this is what they’re going to be doing in this grade level, these are the goals that are expected for your child, and this is what’s happening.”	2	7
Listening	“I believe she does take advice from everybody to meet everybody’s needs, and I believe she is an excellent listener so she can implement change for the better for all of us.”	3	10
Leader-member exchanges	“She just treats everyone the same it doesn’t matter, what role you have on campus where everyone is treated, you know the same.”	2	6
Participative leadership	“[She has] respect for the teacher because she’s partnering with teachers... can change [the curriculum she gives us], depending on the needs that we have for specific students. ”	2	8



Table 6, cont.

Code label	Example direct quotation	Focus group count	Frequency count
Resources	“Everybody will get given the same tools, so we can achieve the same goal, which is create better citizens for our city or for the world from in this case so.”	1	7
Respect	“It’s just incredible how respectful she is in her emails and that she never like I never seen her lose her cool”	2	2
Role clarity	“I think she just gives a clear message on what she wants going on in the classroom when she comes in, you know she wants to see the kids working whether it's in groups if you're doing a whole class instruction.”	3	10
Validation	“They need to be recognized so there's that, you know that shows a staff member that she cares and that makes us feel good... and want to come back tomorrow.”	2	12
Vision	“[Her] vision is high expectations.”	2	13

Following the coding of focus group data, the codes were then reviewed for conceptual similarity. Table 7 below includes five categories developed from the 16 codes presented in Table 6 above. The theory of transformational leadership is a meta-theory that encompasses numerous other theories of leadership style, albeit not explicitly (Northouse, 2009), so the concepts used to group codes into categories were not the fundamental concepts of transformational leadership theory. For example, the category *path-goal leadership* is a leadership style on its own, but it is one that is more specific than and subsumed by the fundamental transformational leadership concept of *idealized influence* (Northouse, 2009). That said, the category of path-goal leadership included codes for teacher perceptions of principals’ practices and behaviors about transforming schools into exemplars of student academic achievement by implementing data-driven, evidence-based practices in the classroom, specifically *role clarity*, *goal clarity*, *vision*, and *adaptation*.

Table 7

*Combining Focus Group Codes into Focus Group Categories*

Category	Codes (from Table 6)	Definition	Focus group count	Frequency count
Fairness	Evaluation	Equity in allocation of criticism, resources, and praise	3	24
	Resources			
	Validation			
Path-goal leadership	Role clarity	Clear communication of how to achieve goals and objectives, sometimes via adapting strategies and tactics	3	33
	Goal clarity			
	Vision			
	Adaptation			
Authentic leadership	Dedication	Leading by example by holding oneself accountable for school performance and by being an exemplar organizational citizen	3	15
	Accountability			
	Concern			
Team culture	Participative decision making	Allowing for and giving serious consideration to input from teachers and support staff when making decisions	3	25
	Listening			
	Communication			
	Respect			
High expectations	Data	An empirical approach to performance at the classroom level and holding teachers accountable	3	10
	Accountability			

To illustrate collectively, teachers reported that principals would clarify both goal and role adaptation for teachers on a student-by-student basis. FG2 stated, “[The principal] adapts goals and expectations. She’ll say ‘Okay, this is what they’re going to be doing in this grade level, and these are the goals that are expected for this specific child, and this is what's we need

to do over here.” FG3 mentioned, “We have the curriculum that is provided by the district every year... but of course that's just our base,” and “[The principal] just gives a clear message on what she wants going on in this classroom and that classroom.” The remaining categories are defined in Table 6 and also are defined in the presentation of the themes below.

The last step of the analysis of the focus group transcripts was interpreting categories and combining them into themes. The decision rule for combining categories into the themes was that categories were to be combined if they were conceptually related to the same fundamental concept of transformational leadership: idealized influence, individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, or inspirational motivation.

The first theme was *idealized influence via path-goal leadership, team culture, and high expectations*. The second theme was *inspirational motivation via authentic leadership and fairness*. Themes for intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration did not emerge for the focus groups with teachers like they did for the principal interviews. Moreover, teacher perceptions of the ways that idealized influence and inspirational motivation was achieved by principals differed from the principals’ perceptions. For example, the theme for *inspirational motivation* was comprised of the categories *authentic leadership* and *fairness* as teachers reported being motivated by the examples of long hours and hard work on the part of their principals as well as by their principals’ fair treatment of teachers and students even in difficult situations. Table 8 summarizes the two themes that were developed from the five categories in Table 7. Notably, the focus group data elicited themes for just two of the four fundamental concepts of transformational leadership: idealized influence and inspirational motivation.

Table 8

*Combining Focus Group Categories into Focus Group Themes*

Theme	Categories (from Table 6)	Definition	Focus group count	Frequency count
Idealized influence via path-goal leadership, team culture, and high expectations	Path-goal leadership	Teachers were influenced by principals to implement new evidence-based practices by way of helpful instruction and adaptation, a team culture emphasizing collaboration, and high expectations for teacher and student performance.	3	68
	Team culture			
	High expectations			
Inspirational motivation via authentic leadership and fairness	Authentic leadership	Teachers were inspired by principals that lead-by-example in terms of dedication to the vision of the school and the fair treatment of teachers and students when underperforming	3	39
	Fairness			

**Theme 5: Idealized Influence Via Path-Goal Leadership and Team Culture**

The theme for idealized influence was developed by combining the categories *path-goal leadership*, *team culture*, and *high expectations*. The general underlying mechanism of the theme was that teachers were motivated by principals “walking the talk” (FG2) and by helping teachers to do the same by way of facilitating a team culture where teachers helped other teachers find ways to succeed and where principals and teachers alike had high expectations of themselves as well as of their students. The categorical mechanisms of path-goal leadership, team culture, and high expectations were combined for the theme *idealized influence* insofar that these were interactional in nature and demonstrative of how leaders wish followers to behave (Bass & Aviola, 1997). For example, FG1 stated: “One would take the low group; the other one would

take the middle, and then we would share ideas to see what was working, what wasn't working like we need to tweak this; we need to change that.” FG3 mentioned, “We all work together, you know, with each other, and there's a lot of teamwork,” and team culture was a function of high expectations in addition to path-goal leadership. From FG2, “I really think it was just the high expectations that we set, you know, for our ourselves and the kids and for our community,” and from FG1, “We're at it and going to stay this motivated and just really help these kids, and I think that with [the principal's] style of being, that motivator for us was setting those high expectations.” The following comment from FG1 combined all three of the categories that comprised the theme: “[The principal's] structure was an open-door policy, so that she could help us be successful when they needed direction. We always left her office feeling that the bar was very high, and that she kind of pushed us to be our best for our students.”

FG1 then followed this with their view of the principal as developing team culture by working as hard as the teachers by tutoring students and not just delegating those activities to the teachers:

Staying those extra hours after school and coming in early, you know, sometimes [the principal] would even tutor at 7:15 in the morning in the cafeteria... this motivated [us teachers] and just really helped these kids, and I think that with her style of being that motivator for us sets our own expectations of ourselves high... I think that's what allowed us to be a Blue-Ribbon school.

### **Theme 6: Inspirational Motivation Via Authentic Leadership and Fairness**

The theme for inspirational motivation was developed by combining the categories *authentic leadership* and *fairness*. The general underlying mechanism of the theme was that transformation would happen more readily when teachers were motivated by principals who lead by example and who treated teachers fairly. The categorical mechanisms of authentic leadership

and fairness were combined for the theme *inspirational motivation* insofar that inspirational motivation is conceptualized as a leader's enactment of a vision that is appealing and thusly inspiring to followers (Bass & Aviola, 1997).

For example, from FG2, "Everything [the principal] does is for our students and for how for the benefit of them and for their success." Also from FG 2, "[The principal] leads by example by staying those extra hours after school and coming in early." These comments about authentic leadership were often accompanied by remarks about the fairness of the principal. From FG1, "I think that in [the principal's] eyes, everyone is equal, and so there's always help, and you know, everyone here has great ideas and... she listens to everybody, so everyone's treated the same." Similarly, from FG2, "She's very fair and organized and prepared, you know, she won't say something [about teacher practices or performance] that she hasn't researched."

Teacher perceptions of the authenticity of principals was also a function of the principals holding themselves to the same standards to which they held the teachers. From FG1, "There's a spot [on the individualized learning plan form] where the principal signs it, and we're all accountable, not just the child, and so the child sees they're all accountable for [her or his] work," and "[The principal] considers herself as responsible for our success as we are, which really can motivate you to work harder because you see her working harder for you."

### **Summary**

Chapter IV presented the results for inductively and iteratively developing codes, combining codes into categories, and combining categories into themes for the semi-structured interviews with principals and the teacher focus. In total, the data analysis elicited 37 codes, 13 categories, and six themes.

Chapter V discusses the themes vis-à-vis, the research questions, the theoretical framework, and the extant literature. Chapter V also includes a discussion of the implications of the themes for future research on and the practice of transformational leadership in educational settings.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

#### **Overview**

School leadership requires effective practices and actions to create positive student achievement, growth, and development. In this study, the perceptions of principals and teachers in South Texas who successfully earned the Blue Ribbon School designation for their elementary schools were explored following a qualitative approach. This qualitative study gained the perspectives of principals and teachers in South Texas who applied and achieved the United States Department of Education's Blue Ribbon School of Excellence Award. A case study approach was employed to examine principals' and teachers' actions, behaviors, and practices that influenced their impact on student achievement and growth to gain eligibility for the Blue Ribbon School Award. The following research questions were delineated to address the purpose of this study:

**RQ1:** How do principals of National Blue Ribbon elementary schools in South Texas describe leadership actions, behaviors, and practices that improved and sustained student achievement?

**RQ2:** How do principals of National Blue Ribbon elementary schools in South Texas prioritize their leadership actions, behaviors, and practices that improve and sustain student achievement?



RQ3: What are teachers' perceptions at National Blue Ribbon elementary schools in South Texas about the leadership behaviors, actions, and practices of the principal who improved and sustained student achievement?

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with principals and through a focus group with teachers. In this chapter, the researcher presents an overview of the findings in alignment with the guiding research questions. Additionally, the researcher reviews the findings in relation to congruent literature. Finally, the researcher will present recommendations for practice and research at the end of this chapter.

### **Summary of Semi-structured Interviews**

In this section, a summary of the findings is presented as organized by the guiding research questions regarding how principals describe leadership actions, behaviors, and practices that improve and sustain student achievement. The findings are also examined in relationship with congruent literature to represent a thorough interpretation of the findings. First, as employed by principals, idealized influence is discussed in the following section.

### **Idealized Influence Via Collective Learning and Decision Making**

The first component of transformational leadership, idealized influence, is necessary for leaders to influence positive outcomes in the organization based on their behaviors and practices (Bass & Avolio, 1997). The first theme in this study, as reported by principals, related to the process of idealized influence, which principals reported was developed through collective learning and decision-making procedures. In this theme, principals reflected on the importance of working together to create individual plans. The individualized focus aided in identifying potential challenges and facilitators for change to improve the successes of students and teachers.

Principals also reported that idealized influence was manifested through collective learning and decision-making processes. These findings are congruent with Hauserman et al. (2013) who argued that educators who employed elevated levels of idealized influence were more likely to be perceived as fair and consistent. The use of idealized influence is also associated with positive outcomes in terms of organizational commitment (Hauserman et al., 2013). The findings of this study also expand upon the work of Hauserman et al. (2013) by demonstrating that principals specifically fulfilled the component of idealized influence through collective learning and decision making to improve outcomes for students and support teachers.

Principals also employed collective learning procedures through engaging with stakeholders such as teachers. As a result, principals reported experiencing high achievement based upon their exemplary status within the Ribbon School of Excellence Award. The decision-making process was also essential for creating trust in leadership from teachers. When fostered through collective learning and shared objectives, previous researchers noted that decision-making processes improved teacher support and student achievement (Kalkan, 2016; Vossen et al., 2019), which indicated that principals supported teachers through the use of transformational leadership and created effective decision-making processes based upon collective learning experiences in the school setting.

### **Inspirational Motivation Via Mission Mentality and Leader Engagement**

The second theme identified elucidated the importance of inspirational motivation compared to mission mentality and leader engagement. Principals reported that clear communication of a mission was critical to ensuring that students and teachers were prepared with adequate resources and support to gain high academic achievement. Further, principals discussed the importance of communicating and engaging with all stakeholders, including

parents, teachers, and students. The continual communication and engagement process was considered crucial to ensure that all stakeholders were motivated and prepared for high achievement school-wide.

Regarding inspirational motivation, Bass and Avolio (1997) argued that this component of transformational leadership is critical for the motivation and inspiration of followers by ensuring that meaning and value are identified within daily work tasks. For this study, principals reported that inspirational motivation was achieved by creating a mission mentality and engaging with followers. These findings align with Hauserman et al. (2013) who demonstrated principals should guide teachers through specific goals, optimism, and increasing commitment through specific missions or objectives.

Previous researchers also focused closely on instructor leadership to improve academic performance among students (Balwant et al., 2019). Balwant et al. (2019) found that transformational leadership led to high student engagement when employed by instructors, while Bird et al. (2010) found a mediating relationship between academic achievement and leadership. Thus, in this study, the findings expanded upon these explorations by identifying those principals who employed inspirational motivation to improve engagement with all stakeholders and creating high achievement in their schools.

Based upon the school's eligibility and achievement of the Ribbon School of Excellence Award, the findings of this study indicated that leadership application of transformational leadership is associated with high academic achievement, which follows the findings of Boberg and Bourgeois (2016) and Newman (2017). The findings of this study demonstrated the importance of using transformational leadership to positively impact student achievement. Further, these findings expanded upon previous literature by demonstrating that the principal's

engagement with stakeholders such as students, teachers, and parents is central to aligning specific objectives regarding student achievement.

### **Intellectual Stimulation Via Evidence-Based Practice and Path-Goal Leadership**

The third theme identified included the importance of intellectual stimulation by using evidence-based practices and focusing upon path-goal leadership. In this theme, principals reflected that relying on data regarding student achievement was critical in guiding teachers to benefit the academic achievement needs of students. Principals also emphasized the importance of guiding teachers using path-goal leadership to meet student success. In addition, principals reflected on the importance of ensuring that evidence-based practices were employed to ensure students' academic achievement is satisfactory. Further, evidence-based practice through path-goal leadership can ensure that teachers have appropriate resources and clear expectations to obtain student academic achievement.

The third theme aligned with the component of transformational leadership regarding intellectual stimulation. Principals noted they fulfilled this component through implementing evidence-based practices and engaging with path-goal leadership. The component of intellectual stimulation was considered essential for training, fostering innovation, and ensuring that innovation and risk were supported through evidence-based practices (Bass & Avolio, 1997; Leithwood, 1994). Principals in this study emphasized the importance of implementing transformational leadership to support student academic achievement. In tandem with evidence-based practices, path-goal leadership was critical for meeting student needs through guiding teachers toward successful approaches and methodologies.

These findings also aligned with the choice from the state of Texas to use transformational leadership theory as an evidence-based practice to improve academic

achievement needs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016; Leithwood & Sun, 2018; TEA, 2019).

The development of evidence-based guidelines by the TEA (2019) is delineated as necessary for ensuring that principals implement effective practices following empirical research. These findings demonstrated that the application of transformational leadership was crucial for principals' ability to meet academic achievement through engaging with principals and other stakeholders, while also implementing empirical-based evidence to create effective pedagogical methodologies.

### **Individualized Consideration Via Equity and Professional Development**

As a result of the open-ended interviews, the final theme identified was the importance of individualized consideration through equity and professional development. Principals noted that professional development was essential for guiding stakeholders to meet student achievement needs. Principals argued that ensuring all teachers and students were provided equal time, energy, and resources was critical to meeting their individual needs. The use of professional development was effective for guiding stakeholders such as teachers toward meeting student needs.

Professional development was noted to be critical in terms of ensuring that resources were provided for teachers to meet the needs of students. In addition, multiple academic researchers have fostered professional development in meeting the needs of teachers and guiding student academic achievement (Dishong, 2016; Goff et al., 2014; McKinney et al., 2015). Thus, the current findings extend the literature by demonstrating that the principal's application of individualized consideration guided the achievement of students and supported teachers through the process of fostering equity and creating professional development opportunities for teachers.

The tenants of transformational leadership indicated that each follower should be considered personally in terms of their ability for personal growth and achievement (Bass & Avolio, 1997). In this study, principals employed individualized consideration to create equity and guide professional development for teachers. Hauserman et al. (2013) noted that teachers valued by principals are more likely to demonstrate high levels of commitment and engagement with shared goals and values. In this study, principals' reflections regarding individualized consideration were critical as they were also mirrored by teachers' perceptions in the focus group, which is discussed in the following section.

Though the purpose of this study was not quantitative, these findings expanded upon recommendations such as the discussion by Witziers et al. (2003) regarding how principal leadership influenced student achievement. Further, these findings are aligned with earlier recommendations that effective leadership using transformational leadership may positively influence student outcomes (Barth, 1990; Bredeson, 1996; Marzano et al., 2005). The findings guarding teacher perceptions of employing transformational leadership also expanded upon previous assessments that demonstrated the importance of considering how leadership employed the components of transformational leadership to meet student academic achievement (Allen et al., 2015; Munir & Aboidullah, 2018). Further, this study expanded upon previous assessments by demonstrating leadership perspectives in terms of transformational leadership as a means of meeting student achievement. The qualitative approach employed in this study ideally provided a renewed perspective regarding principals' application of translators and student achievement and demonstrated the variable behaviors, characteristics, and practices employed to address student academic achievement needs.

## **Summary of Teacher Focus Group**

In this section, the researcher presents the summary of the focus groups conducted with teachers. Additionally, the researcher also presents congruent literature related to the findings of the teachers. Additionally, the research also discusses the interpretation of the findings.

### **Idealized Influence Via Path-Goal Leadership, Team Culture, and High Expectations**

The first theme identified from the teacher focus group was principals' focus upon path-goal leadership, team culture, and high expectations through idealized influence. Teachers discussed the importance of path-goal leadership to guide their ability to meet the needs of student academic outcomes. Additionally, teachers reflected on the importance of team culture as fostered throughout the school. Team culture allowed for a creation of support amongst teachers and administration to ensure they could meet student needs. Finally, teachers also reflected on high expectations as emphasized by the principals. According to the teachers, high expectations were essential in meeting student needs. High expectations also ensured teachers were clear on guiding administration expectations to meet student academic outcomes.

The findings of this study expanded upon the understanding of idealized influence as applied by school leadership by demonstrating that teachers felt that principals accomplished this expectation through path-goal leadership, team culture, and high expectations. Idealized influence is a vital component of transformational leadership that ensures that followers are treated based upon their ability to reach personal and professional goals and objectives (Bass & Avolio, 1997). Notably, teacher perceptions of principal fulfillment of this component differed from principal reflections regarding their fulfillment of individualized influence. Cerni et al. (2014) argued that schools are multifaceted organizations that require different perspectives to create a comprehensive perspective. Therefore, the variation in teacher and principal reflections

may be associated with different tasks, expectations, and interactions that teachers have with leadership.

### **Inspirational Motivation Via Authentic Leadership and Fairness**

The teacher focus groups only demonstrated perceptions of the fulfillment of two components of transformational leadership when compared to principals reporting fulfilling all four components. These findings indicated a potential gap in principal perceptions of their leadership and how this was realized by teachers within the school. The findings also demonstrated the potential converse nature of perceptions of transformational leadership as demonstrated by Balwant (2016) who noted that transformational leadership, while often indicating positive outcomes, has varying stakeholder perceptions (Balwant et al., 2019; Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016; Day et al., 2016). In part, these findings may be explained by the differential perspectives of teachers based upon their engagement, communication, and interaction with principals. However, future research is encouraged to explore how principal perceptions of their leadership may vary compared to follower perceptions.

The teacher focus group identified the theme of inspirational motivation via authentic leadership and fairness. Authentic leadership was considered necessary for principals to guide teachers. Further, authentic leadership was considered crucial to creating a dynamic team culture that guided academic expectations for students and teachers alike. These findings were converse to principals who reported that path-goal leadership was a crucial factor in inspirational motivation. Teachers reflected on the importance of principal fairness in guiding expectations and ensuring students were provided appropriate resources and support to meet academic achievement goals. These findings aligned with indications from previous literature that follower perceptions of inspirational motivation was important to their ability to meet objectives and goals



in the workplace (McKinney et al., 2015; Onorato, 2013). Clear goal communication through authentic leadership has also been noted by previous assessments in terms of teachers' ability to meet student needs and effectively engage with leadership (Day et al., 2016). However, teacher reflections of authentic leadership and fairness were variables that previous research has not noted regarding using transformational leadership in a school leadership setting, thus, indicating a potential aspect for future research to expand upon follower perceptions of leadership application transformational components.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory that informed the data collection for this study was transformational leadership theory (Bass 1985; Burns 1978). The findings of the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview and focus group transcripts supported the overarching premise of transformational leadership theory, i.e., that trust, inspirational behaviors, and teamwork can facilitate organizational citizenship behaviors on the part of followers. Indeed, in the semi-structured interviews, the three principals who participated in this study emphasized putting faith in others to make good decisions on behalf of the students through leading by example and with having a mission mentality and using participative problem-solving. The themes from the teacher focus groups portrayed this premise of transformational leadership theory. The findings of the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview and focus group transcripts also supported Balwant's (2016) contingency approach to transformational leadership with perceptions and experiences thereof varying by stakeholder group. Where principals reported fulfilling all four components of transformational leadership theory, teachers reported that principals had fulfilled only two of the components; therefore, the results of the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview and focus group transcripts did not challenge the fundamental premise of

transformational theory or extensions of the theory emphasizing contingencies across stakeholder groups.

Transformational leadership is aligned to current practices for schools in need of improvement in the Effective School Framework. The principals at these case study schools demonstrated high-leverage actions much like those employed by principals of schools in need of improvement. The three principals in this study sought to consistently create conditions where teaching and learning were a high priority. In the interviews with both the principals and focus group teachers, the culture conveyed was one of high expectations for all stakeholders. Data driven planning and learning were two of the primary motivators needed for student achievement. The principals all stated they held meetings right after student benchmarks throughout the year in order to speak with teachers about what the data was telling them about instruction. Moving schools forward requires regular reflection on the part of principals and their role in the learning process as well as honest and respectful feedback and support for their teachers. As discussed in Chapter II, transformational leaders motivate followers to exceed performance expectations using transparent communication, inspirational behaviors, trustworthiness, and teamwork (Avolio & Bass, 1994). Transformational leaders also motivate outstanding performance by linking followers' idealized self-concepts with the group mission and by transforming followers' values and self-esteem in a manner that encourages loyalty and respect (Tipu et al., 2012).

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study was limited in that the focus was upon the Blue-Ribbon School schools in the Rio Grande Valley classified with a level of distinction. As a result, the study's findings were limited to the reflections of principals who experienced success regarding guiding teachers,

parents, and students towards success. A secondary limitation of this study was the findings were based upon principal reflections and did not include parents or other relevant stakeholders in this exploration. The study findings also indicated differences in perspectives from teachers and principals. As a result, future research may expand upon these findings through gaining alternative experiences and perspectives, potentially through parents and teachers, which is elaborated on within the proceeding recommendations for research.

### **Recommendations for Research**

In this section, the researcher presents the recommendations for research, which include the importance of exploring teacher and parental perceptions, exploring path-goal leadership, and considering collective learning and participative decision-making to benefit educational leadership.

#### **Exploring Teacher Perceptions of Principal Leadership**

In this study, the findings reflected by teachers varied in comparison to how principals reported their leadership. As a result, the researcher recommends gaining additional information regarding how teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership vary. In addition, future researchers are encouraged to examine teacher perceptions of leadership to examine how these vary upon communication, engagement, and interaction with leaders in the school context. Exploring teacher perceptions may potentially demonstrate different variations in how transformational leadership is effectively implemented for student success.

#### **Exploration of Path-Goal Leadership**

Path-goal leadership was identified multiple times by both teachers and principals in this study. Future researchers are suggested to examine path-goal leadership to understand how principals can meet the needs of teachers and guide student academic achievement. Additionally,

a key element of path-goal leadership is advising specific tasks with informal advice. Thus, it is recommended that future researchers examine how formal and informal advice is created through transformational leadership. Understanding how informal versus formal advice is fostered through path-goal leadership may elucidate potential findings that will foster effective outcomes for teachers, principals, and students.

### **Collective Learning and Participative Decision Making in Educational Leadership**

Principals in the study reflected that collective learning and decision-making were important in educational leadership. Future researchers may benefit by examining how collective learning and decision-making effectively further student academic outcomes. Additionally, it may be beneficial for exploration to examine teacher perceptions of decision-making and collective learning as a means of effective leadership in the school context.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

In this section, the researcher presents practice recommendations that include continual stakeholder engagement, focus on evidence practice, resource allocation, and consideration of followership perspectives in creating effective leadership approaches.

#### **Continual Stakeholder Engagement**

Principals reflected in this study the importance of stakeholder engagement. Stakeholder engagement refers to communication and decision-making processes by parents, teachers, and students. Principals and school leadership are encouraged to explore how continued stakeholder engagement may benefit student academic achievement outcomes.

#### **Focus on Evidence-Based Practice**

Based on this study's evidence, the alignment of principals' application of evidence-based practice was crucial in achieving high academic outcomes for students. Further, as the

participants in this study were effective in achieving the Blue Ribbon School Award, it is encouraged that practitioners consider the use of evidence-based practices in terms of leadership and student achievement outcomes.

### **Resource Allocation**

Resource allocation was a noted consideration in terms of supporting teachers in meeting the needs of students. Future practitioners should consider how resources are appropriately allocated in the school setting to ensure their ability to meet the needs of teachers. Teachers who are supported in the classroom through informal and formal training may be better able to meet the needs of students. Further, considering how school resources are distributed may elucidate challenges and potential facilitators to create positive change for student achievement.

### **Followership Perspectives in Creating Effective Leadership Approaches**

The final recommendation for practitioners is a close consideration of followership perspectives to create effective leadership approaches. This study identified that teacher perceptions of leadership varied from how principals reported their leadership. This comment is important for ongoing communication and engagement with all stakeholders to ensure that principals know leadership perspectives and potential methods for improving or mediating their behaviors and characteristics to continually support their followers.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored the perceptions of principals in South Texas who successfully earned the Blue Ribbon School Award for elementary schools. A series of three research questions were posed to explore how principals and teachers reported their perceptions of leadership behaviors, actions, and practices. The findings regarding principals indicated they perceived fulfilling all four components of transformational leadership. Behaviors, actions, and practices included

collective learning, decision making, mission mentality, leadership engagement, evidence-based practice, path-goal leadership, equity, and professional development.

Teachers, conversely, reflected those principals only fulfilled two components of transformational leadership. According to teachers, those perceptions included idealized influence via path-goal leadership, team culture, high expectations, and inspirational motivation via authentic leadership and fairness, indicating the importance of considering teacher perceptions of transformational leadership in future research explorations. In this study, the researcher also presented recommendations for research and practice that should include the importance of considering how teacher perceptions of leadership may vary compared to principal reported perceptions of the fulfillment of transformational leadership. The findings of this study indicated the importance of employing transformational leadership to meet high academic outcomes for students. Further, the findings demonstrated the importance of ensuring quality communication, engagement, and resource allocation to support teachers in terms of their ability to guide students.

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## APPENDIX A

## APPENDIX A

### COVER LETTER

UTRGV College of Education and P-16 Integration

February \_\_, 2021

Dear Principal,

My name is Sonya Y. Rodriguez, I am a student in the Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership, from the Department of at the University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study in an effort to gain a greater understanding of the characteristics of elementary school principals in Texas who have been awarded a Blue Ribbon School designation.

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) at the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley.

As the principal of a Texas Blue Ribbon elementary school, your school has been recognized as a successful educational institution. Your contribution to this success as a school leader is worthy of study. You are invited to participate in this study to explore how principals perceive their own leadership actions, behaviors and practices in an era of High-stakes accountability with regards to their impact on student achievement.

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

As a participant, you will be asked to complete an interview with me online virtually which should take about 60 minutes to complete. All data will be treated as confidential. My study will be based on information collected through an interview with you, public assessment data, and any other artifacts relevant to the Blue Ribbon Award. The tape-recorded interview will take approximately one hour and will focus on questions related to leadership behaviors in successful elementary schools.

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

In order to participate you must be 18 years or older. Participation in this research is completely voluntary, you may choose not to participate without penalty. If you choose to participate, all information will be held in the strictest of confidence. You will not be identified by name,

school or district. In the event that findings in this study are published, pseudonyms will be used to conceal the identities of the participants. Participants may withdraw at any time by notifying the principal investigator via email at [sonya.rodriquez01@utrgv.edu](mailto:sonya.rodriquez01@utrgv.edu). If you withdraw from the study, all data pertaining to your involvement in the study will destroyed.

If you would like to participate in this research study, please read and fill out the attached consent form. If not, simply exit the web browser or click on “I do not want to participate”.

If you have questions related to the research, please contact me by telephone at (956) 457-0625 or by email at [sonya.rodriquez01@utrgv.edu](mailto:sonya.rodriquez01@utrgv.edu).

Within the next week, I will contact you to answer any questions.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Sonya Y. Rodriguez, Principal Investigator  
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley  
Educational Leadership Program  
1201 W. University Dr., Edinburg, Texas 78539  
[sonya.rodriquez01@utrgv.edu](mailto:sonya.rodriquez01@utrgv.edu)

Dr. Rosalinda Hernandez, Dissertation Chair  
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley  
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1201 W. University Dr., Edinburg, Texas 78539  
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## APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM



*INFORMED CONSENT FORM*

**Study Title:** School Leadership that Impacts Student Achievement in Blue Ribbon Schools in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas

**Consent Name:** Insert consent name here

Principal Investigator: Sonya Y. Rodriguez Telephone: (956) 457-0625

Emergency Contact: Dr. Rosalinda Hernandez Telephone: (956) 225-8388

[Key points you should know](#)

- We are inviting you to be in a research study we are conducting. Your participation is voluntary. This means it is up to you and only you to decide if you want to be in the study. Even if you decide to join the study, you are free to leave at any time if you change your mind.
- Take your time and ask to have any words or information that you do not understand explained to you.
- We are doing this study because we want to learn
  - The purpose of the proposed qualitative case study is to examine transformational leadership practices of principals who earned the Blue-Ribbon designation in South Texas between 2016 and 2020. This researcher intends to gain an in-depth view of the impact the leader plays in student achievement through performance on the STAAR exam by interviewing those principals and examining the school's Blue Ribbon application.
- Why are you being asked to be in this study?
  - You are a Blue-Ribbon School Principal who led a Blue-Ribbon designated campus awarded between the years 2016-2020
  - You are a teacher who has worked at a Blue-Ribbon School between the awarded years of 2016-2020 with the school principal.
- What will you do if you agree to be in the study?

- As a principal, participation in this study, the principal investigator will interview you on your leadership actions, practices, and behaviors.
  - 
  - As a teacher, participation in this study, you will participate in a focus group interview with other teachers from your campus and your identity will be kept confidential.
  - Participation in this study requires an audiotape of the interview, by signing this consent form you are giving us permission to make and use these recordings.
- Can you be harmed by being in this study?
    - Risks to your personal privacy and confidentiality: Your participation in this research study will be held strictly confidential. You will not be identified by name, school or district. In the event that findings in this study are published, pseudonyms will be used to conceal the identities of the participants.
    - If we learn something new and important while doing this study that would likely affect whether you would want to be in the study, we will contact you to let you know what we have learned.
  - What are the costs of being in the study?
    - There will be no additional costs to you by taking part in this study.
  - Will you get anything for being in this study?
    - You will not receive any payments for taking part in this study.
  - What other choices do you have if you decide not to be in the study?
    - You could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
  - Could you be taken out of the study?
    - You could be removed from the study if you have not been a Blue-Ribbon School Principal or a teacher who has not worked with a Blue-Ribbon School principal at a designated Blue-Ribbon School from the years 2016-2020,

#### Can the information we collect be used for other studies?

We will not use or distribute information you gave us for any other research by us or other researchers in the future.

#### What happens if I say no or change my mind?

- You can say you do not want to be in the study now or if you change your mind later, you can stop participating at any time.
- No one will treat you differently. You will not be penalized.

#### How will my privacy be protected?

- If you choose to participate, all information will be held in the strictest of confidence. You will not be identified by name, school or district. In the event that findings in this study are published, pseudonyms will be used to conceal the identities of the participants.
- Data and audio recording of the interviews and focus group interviews will be downloaded and stored on the principal investigator's home computer and will be kept for three years.

**Who to contact for research related questions**

For questions about this study or to report any problems you experience as a result of being in this study contact Sonya Y. Rodriguez at (956)457-0625 or email at [sonya.rodriguez01@utrgv.edu](mailto:sonya.rodriguez01@utrgv.edu).

**Who to contact regarding your rights as a participant**

This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Protections (IRB). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel that your rights as a participant were not adequately met by the researcher, please contact the IRB at (956) 665-3598 or [irb@utrgv.edu](mailto:irb@utrgv.edu).

**Signatures**

By signing below, you indicate that you are voluntarily agreeing to participate in this study and that the procedures involved have been described to your satisfaction. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this form for your own reference. To participate, you must be at least 18 years of age. If you are under 18, please inform the researcher.

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Date

## APPENDIX C



## APPENDIX C

### PRINCIPAL GUIDING QUESTIONS

#### General Questions

1. What is your educational background and professional experience?
  - a. Number of years in education
  - b. Number of years as principal
  - c. Number of years in your current school
2. What led you to become a principal?

#### School Climate

3. How would you describe your school?
4. Please describe the professional collaboration process in your school.
5. What factors do you believe contributed to becoming a Blue Ribbon School?
6. How are the accomplishments of students celebrated in your school?

#### Instructional Leadership

7. What are your primary responsibilities as an elementary principal?
8. How would you characterize your role in: (Inspire)
  - d. defining the school mission?
  - e. managing the instructional program?
  - f. promoting a positive school climate? (Hallinger, 1993)
9. In your view, what does it mean to be an instructional leader?

#### Accountability

10. Has your focus as a principal changed since you entered administration? If so, how?
11. How has NCLB and the increasing AYP benchmarks affected your role as a principal

12. How does data-driven decision-making influence student achievement in your school
13. What strategies have you implemented for monitoring student achievement?
14. What existing or new structures and programs are in place to reach these goals?

#### Theoretical Framework

15. In what ways do you encourage teacher input or opinions when decisions are made?
16. Describe the opportunities that your teachers have to engage in:
  - g. Action research projects
  - h. Study group or PLC's
  - i. Peer observations
  - j. Walkthroughs/opportunities for feedback?
17. Does a common vision and team spirit exist at your school?
18. Through what means do you set a positive example for your staff? (Model)
19. What is the school's reputation in the school community?

#### Blue Ribbon Schools

20. What are the steps in becoming a Blue Ribbon School?
21. What was your role in the Blue Ribbon process?
22. How did the Blue Ribbon designation impact your teachers? The school climate?

#### Conclusion

23. What changes do you anticipate in your leadership style or your administrative role in the next 5 years?
24. Is there anything else that you would like to share that would give additional insight into the success of your school?

## APPENDIX D

## APPENDIX D

### TEACHER FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

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

**Start Time:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Introduction:**

Hi, my name is Sonya Y. Rodriguez and I am a doctoral student from the University of Texas Rio Grande, Texas. Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about your experience working with a principal at a Blue Ribbon School designated campus. I will be conducting the focus group interview. I will ask some questions to guide the discussion. This is meant to be a semi-structured interview with possible follow-up questions.

In order to ensure accuracy and my full attention on you, I will be audio taping the interview. Once the interview has been transcribed, you will have an opportunity to review the transcript. The tape will only be used for the purpose of note taking and transcription and will be destroyed following the completion of the study.

Remember, you should feel free to answer honestly. If at any time, a question is unclear, please ask clarifying questions. You may refuse to answer any questions or to stop the interview at any time.

This interview should last approximately one hour and there will be no formal break. Please let me know if you need to break at any time. Do you have any questions before we get started?

<p><b>Questions: RQ1:</b> How do principals of National Blue Ribbon elementary schools in South Texas <u>describe</u> leadership behaviors, actions, and practices that improved and sustained student achievement?</p> <p><b>RQ2:</b> How do principals of National Blue Ribbon elementary schools in South Texas <u>prioritize</u> leadership actions, behaviors, or practices that improved and sustained student achievement?</p> <p><b>RQ3:</b> What are perceptions of teachers at National Blue Ribbon elementary schools in South Texas about the leadership behaviors, actions, and practices of the principal who improved and sustained student achievement?</p>	<p><b>Research Question(s):</b></p> <p>Q1</p> <p>Q2</p> <p>Q3</p>
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**Opening Questions: 5 min.**

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How long have you taught at the case study school?</li> <li>How long have you been in education?</li> </ol>	
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**Introductory Questions: 5 - 10 min.**

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How would you describe your school community?</li> <li>What do new staff members need to know about the case study school?</li> <li>What do new students need to know about the case study school?</li> </ol>	<p>Q1, Q2</p> <p>Q2</p> <p>Q1</p>
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**Transition Questions: 5 - 10 min.**

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is the Vision of your school?</li> <li>How was the vision developed?</li> <li>What practice does the leader employ to communicate the vision to the school community? Teachers? Students?</li> <li>How do you as teachers address the instructional process?</li> <li>How does the vision of the case study school influence how you address the instruction in your classroom?</li> </ol>	<p>Q1, Q2</p> <p>Q1, Q2, Q3</p> <p>Q1</p> <p>Q1, Q3</p> <p>Q1, Q2, Q3</p> <p>Q1, Q2, Q3</p>
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11. How are your professional development needs met regarding the instruction in your classroom and student achievement?	
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**Key Questions: 35 - 45 min.**

12. How would you describe the leadership style of the administrator?	Q1, Q2
13. How did the leadership style influence the relationship with staff members?	Q1, Q3
14. What is the leader's practice for supervision of instruction?	Q1, Q3
15. How does the school leader motivate staff members?	Q1, Q2
16. How does the leader share the success of teachers to develop others?	Q1, Q3
17. How does the leader motivate students?	
18. How does the administrator's leadership style impact instruction?	Q1, Q3
19. Through what ways does the leader set a positive example for the staff?	Q1, Q2, Q3
<i>Questions Probe: Biggest change</i>	Q1, Q2
20. How did the administrator's leadership style promote student success?	Q1, Q2, Q3
21. How did the administrator's leadership style influence the visions of the case study school?	
22. How would you describe the leadership practices and structures of the administrator?	
23. How would you describe the impact of the leadership style on the overall success of the case study school?	

**Ending Questions: 5 min.**

24. Is there anything else you would wish to tell me that I have not asked?	
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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sonya Yvette Rodriguez was born on November 11, 1965, in Edinburg, Texas, to Juan and Maria I Rodriguez. She graduated from Edinburg High School in 1984 where she was involved in different leadership roles. She attended the University of Texas-Pan American and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Education with a minor in Bilingual/Bicultural studies in 1990. She began her teaching career in 1990 with the Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District, teaching a sixth-grade, high-intensive language development class to recently migrated students. She went on to teach reading language arts in the middle school for two years after that. She completed her Master of Education Degree in Administration, a second degree, in 1994 and earned a certification in Library Science from the University of Texas in Austin during her summers off. She became a librarian at Jefferson Elementary where she served for four years. During that time, she assisted her principal with administrative duties and began her role as an administrator shortly after. She worked as an instructional supervisor and a curriculum assistant for seven years. She became an elementary school principal in 2003 for Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District where she led three different schools to excellence. Her role as a principal was her inspiration for her doctoral dissertation and ignited her passion for the work she does today in leading principals in her hometown of Edinburg at ECISD. Since 2015, she has served at the district level as an area director for elementary schools and middle schools. She earned her doctorate in Educational Leadership in the Spring of 2022. Sonya Y. Rodriguez, EdD; [Sonyagab6@gmail.com](mailto:Sonyagab6@gmail.com)