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TWENTY FIRST CENTURY PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Heather and Tom Rossley, whose unwavering support and encouragement have propelled me forward in my educational pursuits. Their encouragement to further my education and pursue this degree has been a guiding force. Their emphasis on personal growth, instilling in me a desire to always better myself—through their unconditional love and support—have been instrumental in molding me into the person I am today, shaping my character and accomplishments.

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ABSTRACT

TWENTY FIRST CENTURY PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

With the shifts and newly evolving complexities of the 21st century, the significance of what is needed from a successful school principal has reached a critical point. Today, one of the most vital roles of an effective principal is to, "Create a climate hospitable to education so that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interactions prevail" (Foundation, 2013, p. 6). Therefore, the present study, using a constructivist research approach to conduct a phenomenological study, strove to understand a phenomenon, in this case, the phenomenon of leadership as it is practiced by high school principals (Adom, 2016). This study endeavored to use phenomenology to explore the experiences of those that practice leadership daily to examine the essence of how they lead.

To comprehend what leadership skills high school principals in Fairfax County employ to promote a positive learning environment, a qualitative research design was used. In this phenomenological qualitative interview study, three individual interviews were conducted with the principals of Woodmont High School, Marshall High School, and Robinson High School. Three separate focus-group interviews took place with assistant principals, and three separate focus-group interviews were conducted with district high school teachers from each of the aforementioned high schools. The aim of the researcher was to have a focus group size of two to four assistant principals for each focus group session and four to ten teachers for each focus group session. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and coded into theme-clusters (Field et al., 2016). The participants' lived experiences were examined to understand their interpretation of leadership, and to find connections within shared domains—specifically about meaningful experiences related to a positive learning environment (Nuñez & Yoshimi, 2017).

Chapter I: Problem and Significance

The 21st century has brought complex changes to communities that then influence our educational institutions. The world and organizations within them are changing. Traditionally, the role of school principals was akin to a managerial perspective (Rost, 1993). However, at the start of the 21st century, a growing interest in the complex role of principal leadership emerged (Mercer & Myers, 2013). While the 19th and 20th centuries brought societal, structural, and technological changes that impacted how organizations were structured, the 21st century demands scholars re-think best practices within the organization (Mercer & Myers, 2013; Rost, 1993).

Background of Problem

Leaders must be aware of what is needed for an organization to be successful, and then work to ensure success is attained. An organization in the 21st century requires leaders who facilitate, motivate, and inspire members to carry-out the organization's vision and embody the culture (Ayub et al., 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to examine how leaders can set the direction of an organization and align its people to the direction of the company (Ayub et al., 2014).

With the shifts and newly evolving complexities of the 21st century, the significance of what is needed and expected from a successful school principal has reached a critical point. A significant biproduct of the change in how leadership is defined is a shift in leadership roles themselves; thus, a rise in research studies focused on school leadership. As noted by Foundation (2013), "Previously absent from most research agendas, recent research and reform efforts focused on improving school leadership as well as how leaders' actions and behaviors impacted

teaching and learning" (p. 6). A significant finding of these studies is the empirical connection between student achievement and successful school leadership (Foundation, 2013).

Challenges and changes are a reality of the 21st century. Davies (2002) noted, "We are all prisoners of our past. It is hard to think of things except in the way we have always thought of them. But that solves no problems and seldom changes anything" (Handy, 1990, p. 54, as cited in Davies, 2002, p. 3). Due to this, it is vital those in education stop thinking historically and instead foster an environment that seeks new practice and policy to better the chance of success for all students (Davies, 2002).

Good leaders seek others like them creating a culture of mutual respect and admiration (Notar et al., 2008). Additionally, effective leaders require constant training and knowledge to hone their skills, that leaders pursue learning opportunities to further understand how to govern and lead, and that they foster a team environment (Notar et al., 2008). Notar et al. determined, "In essence, the quality of leadership effectiveness is the result of disciplined adherence to a set of fundamental tenets and skills that characterize an individual" (p. 26). Whether it be technology, student demographics, state, and federal policy, or economic or societal issues— schools and students are directly affected thus leaders need to be trained to positively impact their teachers, students, and communities (Mercer & Myers, 2013). The Wallace Foundation (2013) reported on five dimensions of principal leadership vital to the 21st century:

- "shaping a vision of academic success for all students,

- creating a climate hospitable to education,

- cultivating leadership in others,

- improving instruction, and

- managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement" (Foundation, p. 4).

These dimensions are relevant given the shifts in norms, school cultures, and clientele have created a climate where school principals are charged with transforming both the students and the environment, creating a more successful organization (Rost, 1993, Foundation, 2013). Bearing in mind the five dimensions presented by the Wallace Foundation one can purport today's principal leadership needs skills and strategies relevant to leading during the complexities and challenges that have arisen in the 21st century.

It has become apparent the 21st century demands scholars re-think best practices within the organization. The idea of 21st-Century Leadership arose as part of a need for a postindustrial paradigm shift challenging previously defined leadership roles by creating a more long-range frame of reference (Rost, 1993). The 21st-century leader is one who influences through persuasion, delegates leadership roles so both the leader and followers are active and involved in the influence relationship and ensures both the leader and followers are real in their intentions for change, and mutual purposeful in their attempts to enact said change. Collaboration and relationships are the key to success for the 21st-century leader, as well as a willingness to put hard work into whatever change has been proposed (Rost, 1993). These 21st-century skills are paramount to leadership in today's schools.

Leadership is presented as a collaborative discipline with which leaders and followers can solve the newly emerging problems of the 21st-century organization (Rost, 1993). In addition, Rost (1993) asserts the concept of leadership as a relationship is powerful; the idea of both leaders and followers influencing one another and sharing a mutual purpose in or to achieve effective leadership is particularly significant when viewed through the lens of an educator. In a

school setting, this means it is not enough to simply have a great principal and excellent teachers. The two must work as a cohesive unit. When used in conjunction with the four elements of leadership, the 21st-century leader emerges (Rost, 1993).

Challenges and changes are a reality of the 21st century. Shifts in norms, school cultures, and clientele have created a need for fluid leadership that involves all adults in the building. School leaders are charged with transforming both the students and the environment, creating a more successful organization; every school can be better. Thus, principals need to create an atmosphere where people are persuaded to change and work toward a mutual purpose (Rost, 1993). Subject specialists need to analyze data, coalitions need to be formed for school improvement and student advancement, and discipline and duty responsibilities need to be delegated to relevant personnel (Rost, 1993). These are just a few areas within a school where principal leaders can create an atmosphere where faculty and staff, leaders, and followers, are active and intentional in their purpose thus contributing to positive student achievement.

A successful shift into the 21st century requires a leader that practices elements of leadership relevant to the challenges of today's educational systems; an organization needs both leaders and followers that collaborate and are intentional in their purpose. In a school setting, this means it is not enough to simply have a great principal and excellent teachers. A transformative school needs to have intentional activities that reflect the purpose of the leader or leaders. Collaboration and relationships are the key to success for the 21st-century leader, as well as a willingness to put hard work into whatever change has been proposed (Rost, 1993).

One of the most vital roles of an effective principal is to, "Create a climate hospitable to education so that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interactions prevail" (Foundation, 2013, p. 6). Therefore, the present study, using a constructivist research

approach to conduct a phenomenological study, endeavored to understand a phenomenon, in this case, the phenomenon of leadership as it is practiced by district leaders and high school principals (Adom, 2016). The study used phenomenology to explore the experiences of those who practice leadership daily to examine the essence of how they lead.

Statement of the Problem

More research is needed on how to lead effectively. Current literature suggests, "Research on leadership styles offers instructive insights regarding the specific effects of various means that are relevant for innovations. There are relevant insights on how to produce specific effects regarding attitudes, mindset, trust, behavior, competence creation, etc." (Kesting et al., 2016, p. 35). However, while this may be true of leadership research as it relates to specific innovation stages, there is a lack of results that provide a clear answer to how to lead innovations (Kesting et al., 2016). Given the empirical connection between high achieving schools and successful school leadership, it is important to understand how high school principals in high performing high schools practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment.

Due to the complexities of the 21st-century, "Educational leaders, may it be Principal leader or teacher leader now have to think of giving direction to the followers, society and even to the world" (Luqman et al., 2012, p. 199). Therefore, the school leader needs to possess critical thinking and reflection skills. It is essential principal leaders encapsulate skills "that will inspire all interested parties (educators, educationist, learners, society/parents) for desired outcomes to be realized" (Luqman et al., 2012, p. 205).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to describe how high school principals in high performing high schools in Fairfax County Schools practice leadership to promote a positive school environment. Assuming the leaders who influence the learning environment in these schools

could be considered experts, the researcher endeavored to understand what these experts notice about their leadership methods that positively affect the learning environment. A goal of the study was to determine what skills high school principals employ to promote a positive learning environment for students and teachers. This was done by interviewing those who practice leadership daily thus allowing the researcher to examine how high school leaders practice leadership.

Research Questions

This study examined the leadership skills high school principals employ to promote a positive learning environment. The overarching research question was, *How does the high school leader in high performing high schools practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment?* Two guiding questions created to assure the overarching research question was answered were (a) What skills do high school principals employ to positively impact the learning environment? and (b) How do high school principals practice leadership?

Significance of the Study

Principal leadership has been identified as a vital indicator of school success (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Given the empirical connection between student achievement and successful school leadership, it is important to understand what skills high school principals employ to positively impact student achievement, and how high school principals practice leadership. Coelli and Green (2012) note, "individual school principals can matter in terms of affecting high school student outcomes. This conclusion, though, depends heavily on how we treat the dynamics of a principal's impact on a school" (p. 8). Considering this, and the potential for a substantial impact on student outcome, it is important to for further research to be conducted, "on the pathways through which principals affect student outcomes and the strategies employed by effective principals" (Coelli & Green, 2012, p. 12). The hope is the results of this

study can be used to: (a) inform district and high school principals of successful leadership pedagogy that is connected to student achievement; (b) and inform district and high school leaders of effective skills that positively impact student achievement.

Organization of the Study

Phenomenology is a powerful way to gain an understanding of leadership from those who are immersed in the practice of leadership daily. Edmonds & Kennedy (2017) state,

> Researchers use the phenomenological approach when they are interested in exploring the meaning, composition, and core of the lived experience of specific phenomena. The researcher explores the conscious experiences of an individual in an attempt to distill these experiences or get at their essence. (p.170)

In this phenomenological qualitative interview study, three individual interviews were conducted with the principals of Woodmont High School, Marshall High School, and Robinson High School. Three separate focus-group interviews took place with assistant principals, and three separate focus-group interviews were conducted with district high school teachers from each of the aforementioned high schools, to acquire a comprehensive understanding of each participant's lived experience related to leadership. The aim of the researcher was to have a focus group size of two to four assistant principals for each focus group session and four to ten teachers for each focus group session per school (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017).

Purposeful participant sampling, which is a *purposefully* selected small participant group, was used to place emphasis on in-depth understanding (Patton, 2002). Specifically, stratified purposeful sampling was given, "the purpose of a stratified purposeful sample is to capture major variations rather than to identify a common core, although the latter may also emerge in the

analysis. Each of the strata would constitute a fairly homogeneous sample" (Patton, 2002, p. 240). By interviewing a small sample group, the researcher was able make inferences regarding the population at large (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Again, using a sample group allowed the researcher to infer about an entire population of interest from the data gathered from a portion of the population, or sample group (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018).

Each focus-group interview, with a run time of 40-90 minutes, was recorded, transcribed, and coded into theme-clusters (Field et al., 2016). The participants' lived experiences were examined to understand both their interpretation of leadership, and to find connections within shared domains—specifically about meaningful experiences related to positive student achievement (Nuñez & Yoshimi, 2017).

Methodology

The study used a constructivist research approach to conduct a phenomenological study, which endeavors to understand a phenomenon, in this case, the phenomenon of leadership as it is practiced by the high school leader (Adom, 2016). A phenomenological research method was employed for the study to describe how high school principals lead to support student achievement. This is significant as, "A descriptive phenomenology seeks to describe, not just explain, the participant's lived experiences" (p.35). Thus, by conducting a phenomenological study, the researcher was able to understand the leadership experiences of the selected participants as they lived and experienced them (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1

Diagram of Methodology
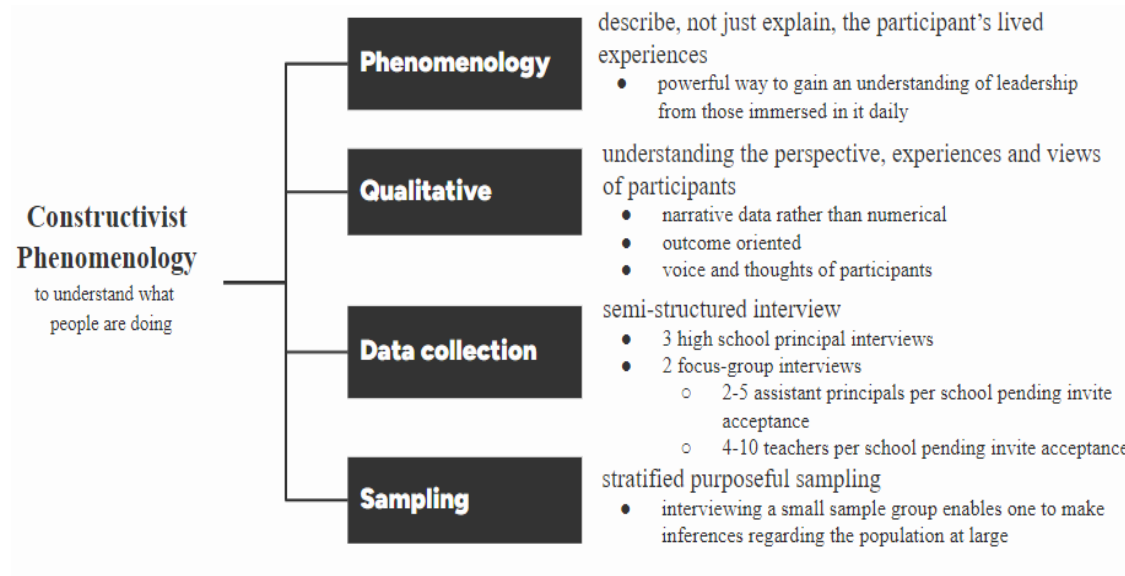
A constructivist research approach was used to conduct this phenomenological study. Constructivism is significant as "to understand what people are doing, we must look at the world through the actor's perspective. This does not mean that we must get into the actors' psyche, but we ought to understand the meaning of their interactions" (Kratochwil & Peltonen, 2022, p. 9). Constructivism is relevant given its origin and evolution over time, particularly during the complexities and changes of the 21st century (Kratochwil & Peltonen, 2022).

Constructivism emerged in 1989 when prominent researchers Onuf and Kratochwil coined some of their works "constructivist" (Kratochwil & Peltonen, 2022). Constructivism gained traction in the 1990s and expanded research, creating a theoretical revolution (Kratochwil & Peltonen, 2022). Constructivist purport shared knowledge, collaboration, and discovery within frameworks of assertation and validity are paramount to research (Kratochwil & Peltonen, 2022); thus, this study endeavored to use a constructivist approach to conduct a phenomenological study

to explore the experiences of those who practice leadership daily to examine the essence of how they lead.

The methodology that guided this study stemmed from constructivist phenomenology. The primary aim of the study was to construct the meaning of leadership through the individual perspective of the participants of the study. Phenomenology is a modern-day approach where one examines life experiences and an individual's construct reality (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). Constructivism is a qualitative approach largely used to understand a phenomenon (Adom, 2016). Combined, these methodologies allowed the researcher to examine the essence of leadership through a qualitative research design.

Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research is focused on narrative data as opposed to numerical data; the data collection is emergent given the role of the researcher can shift throughout the study (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Privitera and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2018) assert, "The focus of qualitative research is process oriented rather than outcome oriented, examining why and how a behavior, thought, or emotion occurs" (p. 383). Thus, qualitative research is the measuring of behavior, thought, or emotion as it occurs or is experienced rather than as something that is determined (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). The role qualitative studies have in research—specifically, that understanding the perspective, experiences, and views of participants—is a complex, scientifically rigorous process that should be respected by researchers and scholars alike (Hammarberg et al., 2016). "Quantitative studies generally involve the systematic collection of data about a phenomenon, using standardized measures and statistical analysis. In contrast, qualitative studies involve the systematic collection, organization, description, and interpretation of textual, verbal or visual data." (Hammarberg et al., 2016, p. 499). In a qualitative study, the researcher is interactive, whether through observation, interview, or field work—ultimately

developing a rapport with participants to better understand the phenomenon being studied (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018).

Qualitative research is vital to understanding attitude, motive, and perception of the phenomenon being studied (Ugwu et al., 2023). It is important to note, "Broadly, qualitative research is generally employed to support a researcher in generating a deep and nuanced understanding of a given phenomenon" (Lester et al., 2020, p.95). Additionally, a qualitative study enables the researcher to gain a deep understanding and garner deep meaning of non-numerical data (Ugwu et al., 2023).

Constructivism

One can contextualize constructivism by examining its origin and evolution over time, particularly during the complexities and changes of the 21st century (Kratochwil & Peltonen, 2022). Constructivism emerged in 1989 when prominent researchers Onuf and Kratochwil coined some of their works "constructivist" (Kratochwil & Peltonen, 2022). Constructivists research focuses on the "why" as opposed to cognitive issues—stressing the significance of shared experiences and knowledge (Kratochwil & Peltonen, 2022).

Constructivism gained traction in the 1990s and expanded research, creating a theoretical revolution (Kratochwil & Peltonen, 2022). Constructivism became significant as "to understand what people are doing, we must to look at the world through the actor's perspective. This does not mean we must get into the actors' psyche, but we ought to understand the meaning of their interactions" (Kratochwil & Peltonen, 2022, p. 9). Shared knowledge, collaboration, and discovery within frameworks of assertation and validity, are paramount to constructivists research (Kratochwil & Peltonen, 2022).

The constructivist approach stresses the significance of constructing the meaning behind a phenomenon through individual knowledge and experience (Adom, 2016). Adom (2016) determined,

> The constructivism approach is in fact one of the best philosophical approaches that helps us in understanding the complexities and multiplicity of phenomena especially in this 21st century where creative ideas and inventions marking novelty is earnestly sought through our research and education. (p. 9)

Thus, the researcher used a constructivist approach to understand the complexities of leadership through the shared experiences of those who practice leadership daily.

Phenomenology

The phenomenological approach is a powerful way to explore specific individual's lived experiences (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). According to Privitiera and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2018),

> When applied to education, we can examine how these experiences affect various aspects of education such as access to educational systems and educational attainment. The phenomenological approach assumes there is some essence of the lived experience that is shared by those who have experienced it. The goal is to understand the essence of the lived experience that is shared. (p. 409)

Phenomenology research design uses interview, videotape, and observation to collect data–the researcher then constructs a narrative to glean meaning from the participants experience (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). "As a theoretical framework, phenomenology rests on two key assumptions: first, that experiential knowledge is of value, and second, that experiential knowledge can be gleaned through prolonged engagement with those who have lived experience with a phenomenon" (Patton, 2002).

Phenomenology has its origin with Edmond Hurrerl's perspective on self-experience and has evolved into its modern-day approach where one examines life experiences and an individual' construct reality (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). According to Edmonds and Kennedy,

> Researchers use the phenomenological approach when they are interested in exploring the meaning, composition, and core of the lived experience of specific phenomena. The researcher explores the conscious experiences of an individual to distill these experiences or get at their essence. (p. 170)

Thus, for this study the researcher used phenomenology to get to the essence of how high school principals in high performing high schools in Fairfax County Schools practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment.

Clarification of Terms

Clarification of terminology is deemed significant when developing a research design study. The following operational terms are used throughout this study and are now defined. By providing specific definitions and explanations it is the goal of the researcher to establish a shared understanding of terminology and ensure coherence between the researcher and the reader.

Leadership: While theorists and researchers have provided a plethora of theories to explain leadership, there exists no singular definition for leadership (Stanca, 2021). Additionally, it is argued defining leadership is dependent upon the purpose of the theorists or researcher (Stanca, 2021). Northouse (2001) and Wu et al. (2020) explain leadership as a prominent control relationship in which a leader inspires change in followers. Struyve et al. (2018) assert leadership must be explored holistically, as "constructed and practiced in interactions between several

actors" (Struyve et al., 2017, p. 703). Rost (1993) presents leadership as a collaborative

discipline with which leaders and followers can solve the newly emerging problems of the 21st-

century organization.

The 21st-century Leader: One who influences through persuasion and delegates

leadership roles. Ensures both the leader and followers are active and involved in the influence

relationship and confirms both the leader and followers are real in their intentions for change,

and mutually purposeful in their attempts to enact said change. Collaboration and relationships

are the key to success for the 21st-century leader, as well as a willingness to put hard work into

whatever change has been proposed (Rost, 1993).

Principal: In any school, elementary, middle, or high, the highest position in the

administration is the school principal. Usually, the school principal reports to the school

superintendent. In big schools, he or she can also report to the associate superintendent or

superintendent's designee ("School Principal - Meaning and Definition," 2021).

Effective Leadership: There is significant research on what constitutes effective

principal leadership. These include Sweeney (1982), Leithwood et. al (2009), Hallinger and

Heck (2009), Murphy and Vriesenga (2007), and Darling-Hammond, et.al. (2009). The primary

theme within these works claim effective principal leadership is one where clear vison and

direction is dictated, emphasis is placed on organizational and instructional direction, students

and staff are supported, and a vision is in place for improved student performance.

Stratified Purposeful Sampling: Using a stratified purposeful sampling approach lends

authority to a research study (Patton, 2002). Patton explains "the purpose of a stratified

purposeful sample is to capture major variations rather than to identify a common core, although

the latter may also emerge in the analysis. Each of the strata would constitute a fairly homogeneous sample" (p. 240).

21st Century Skills: Shadiev and Wang (2002) state, "In the face of the evolving and changing society of the future, problem-solving skills are among the core 21st century skills, emphasizing learners' ability to define problems, think critically, and solve problems. Modern society needs people to be equipped with 21st century skills" (p. 1). These skills include but are not limited to critical thinking, communication, digital literacy, creativity, or collaboration skills. (Shadiev & Wang, 2022).

Culture: "The underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that have built up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges" (Peterson & Deal, 1998). Leaders who are reflective of community and school cultures have a greater understanding of their school's unique context. According to Peterson and Deal (1998), leaders can better facilitate shared development and understanding through a greater understanding of school culture.

School Culture*:* In 2018, the National Institute for Urban School Leaders at Harvard Graduate School defined school culture as being comprised of the connections, behaviors of students, core beliefs, educators, and families. A good school culture is the strong and overlapping interactions among all these factors (Communication, 2019). When said connections are understood and reflected upon, positive school culture ensues.

Summary

The 21st-century organization requires leaders that facilitate, motivate, and inspire members to carry-out the organization's vision and embody the culture (Ayub et al., 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to examine how leaders can set the direction of an organization and align its people to the direction of the company. While this chapter has clearly explained the

purpose of the study, which was to describe how high school principals in high performing high

schools in Fairfax County Schools practice leadership to promote a positive learning

environment, the following chapter will chapter review the literature related to what leadership

skills the high school leader employs to promote a positive learning environment.

Chapter II: Review of Related Literature and Research

This chapter reviews the literature related to the purpose of this study which was to determine what leadership skills high school principals in Fairfax County Schools employ to promote a positive learning environment. The first section examines content in leadership. The second section examines educational theory. It is the goal of this literature review to examine effective principal leadership to better understand the elements of leadership relevant to the challenges of today's educational system. A positive shift into the 21st century requires a leader that practices effective leadership to meet the needs of learners ensuring they are successful in what has become a complex, ever-changing world.

Content in Leadership

Research studies began to re-examine the complex role of principal leadership at the start of the 21st century (Mercer & Myers, 2013). While the 19th and 20th centuries brought societal, structural, and technological changes that impacted how organizations were structured, the 21st century demands scholars re-think leadership practices in schools (Mercer & Myers, 2013; Rost, 2013). With the changes and complexities of the 21st century, the significance of understanding what makes a school principal effective has become crucial when making connections between school leadership and a positive learning environment (Mercer & Myers, 2013).

Challenges and change are a reality of the 21st century. In education, "We are all prisoners of our past. It is hard to think of things except in the way we have always thought of them. But that solves no problems and seldom changes anything" (Handy, 1990, p. 54, as cited in Davies, 2002, p. 3). Thus, those in education need to stop thinking historically and instead foster an environment that seeks new practice and policy to better the chance of success for all students (Davies, 2002). Leithwood et al. (2009) asserts change is happening and claims,

Our present understandings about the nature of successful school leadership and the paths

along which its influence travels to improve teaching and learning include more than a few

"black holes", not to mention many more that are still only dimly lit. The research

community can now lay claim to be a source of increasingly powerful advice to those

willing to actually do school leadership work. This was most decidedly not the case 20

years ago. (p. 626)

A shift is occurring in educational leadership from a focus on tradition and compliance to a style that is more adaptive and in line with 21st century skills (Davies, 2002).

Current literature recognizes our educational system is in flux—and aims to differentiate between more traditional skills and the newly developing skills of 21st-century leaders. Principals with more adaptive traits, who model expected behaviors and visions, and lead passionately, are the leadership traits students and teachers value the most, contributing to a more positive learning environment for all learners (Corrigan & Merry, 2022). Principal leadership plays a critical role in school success (Thompson, 2017). Principals in the 21st century need to "possess a wider and sometimes different set of skills and competencies than the traditional skills and competencies which may have been typical of an earlier generation and about which the literature on leadership speaks" (Thompson, 2017, p. 15).

Literature suggests principals influence all avenues of a school. Coelli and Green (2012) found, "Individual school principals can matter in terms of affecting high school student outcomes. This conclusion, though, depends heavily on how we treat the dynamics of a principal's impact on a school" (p. 8). Considering this, and the potential for a substantial impact on student outcome, it is important to for further research to be conducted, "on the pathways through which principals affect student outcomes and the strategies employed by effective

principals" (p. 12). Given that literature indicates principals influence all avenues of a school, it is important for the school leader to recognize the extent to which he or she views them self as a leader.

Leadership Identity

In today's school, a principal's leadership identity is determined by a variety of factors, including experiences, socialization, and factors like school culture and community expectations (Cruz-González et al., 2021). Today's principals need to be aware of the ever-changing demographics, backgrounds, and complexities found in their schools (Thompson, 2017). The 21st century has brought complex changes to communities that then influence our educational institutions (Mercer & Myers, 2013). Whether it be technology, student demographics, state, and federal policy, or economic or societal issue—schools and students are directly affected thus leaders need to be trained to positively impact their teachers, students, and communities (Mercer & Myers, 2013).

Leaders impact educational institutions at every level making principalship a significant role, one where a single person has direct influence over so many teachers, students, and community members (Mercer & Myers, 2013). Due to the complexities of the 21st century, "Educational leaders, may it be Principal leader or teacher leader now have to think of giving direction to the followers, society and even to the world" (Luqman et al., 2012, p. 199) Thus, principal leadership abilities need to be prioritized as an efficient leader is the foundation of a successful organization (Tonich, 2021). Recognizing this, at the start of the 21st-century researchers began to re-examine the complex role of principal leadership, and where principal leadership fits within educational leadership theory.

Educational Leadership Theory

Leadership theory is complex and has largely evolved into a mutual development of followers and leaders who collaborate for positive change. While the classical organizational theory was the first step toward a systematic study of organizations, theorists began to link human relationships, power, influence, and change to the organization. Just as organizations have adapted, so too have the theories explaining them (Shafritz et al., 2016).

Crucial shifts because of societal, economic, and educational progress have led to changes in the way organizations are structured. As both scholars and practitioners' function within the complexities of the 21st-century organization, the work of researchers in the field of educational leadership theory will continue to serve as a guide for those who want to do leadership (Mercer & Myers, 2013). Narrowing the scope of the organization down to the field of education, specific frames of leadership are present to bridge the paradigm shifts due to evolving technology, access to resources, state and federal policy, and a more diverse clientele (Mercer & Myers, 2013).

In the world of organizations, many theories exist that aim to provide a concise understanding of how organizations and people behave and function. While some theories exist outside of others, some overlap and build upon preexisting ideas (Hoy & Miskel, 2001). Bolman and Deal (2017) introduced a Four-Frame Theory using the perspectives of the structural frame, the human resource frame, the political frame, and the symbolic frame. Each of the four frames is rooted in research, and while some leaders may adhere to one frame more than another, the most effective leaders incorporate all frames when organizational change is in progress (Sriram & Farley, 2014).

Frames of Organizational Leadership

The conceptual framework driving this study stemmed from three of the four theories noted by Bolman and Deal (2017)—the structural, political, and human resource frames—in addition to the concept of the 21st-century leader as introduced by Joseph Rost. Frames represent not only theories but also people—leaders—and the behaviors and decisions inside specific frames can impact each of the other theories (Goldman & Smith, 1991). Therefore, when applied to a district or school, the implementation of leadership theory and its impact on promoting a positive learning environment is far-reaching (Hoy & Miskel, 2001).

Structural Frame

The contemporary organization was one of the more critical innovations of the early twentieth century as understanding how organizations work became the focus of prominent scholars and practitioners (Bolman & Deal, 2017). It was, however, Classical Organizational Theory that laid the foundation for a systematic study of organizations with its origins dating back to ancient and medieval times (Shafritz, et al., 2016). Classical organization management transformed during the Industrial Age and continued to develop into the 20th and 21st centuries as economies changed. The Classical Organizational Theory dominated the early 1900s viewing workers as interchangeable parts; organizations, it was believed, "should work like machines, using people, capital, and machines as their parts" (Shafritz, et al., 2016, p. 34). This was the societal and scholarly mindset which shaped the principles of classical organization theory.

According to Shafritz et al. (2016) classical organization started as means to measure economic progress through structure. It developed into a system that is the foundation upon which other such theories have been built. At the start of the 19th century, the requirement for a prescribed management theory was the emergent indication that establishments needed an organized process to direct managers to advance both efficiency and productivity (Shafritz, et al.,

2016). Rost (1993) concurred given his argument society is too complex and ever-changing to forgo management at every level. In addition, Rost (1993) noted people crave stability and structure and gravitate toward goal-oriented tasks, all of which contribute to the success of an organization.

Rost (1993) concludes management is both necessary and vital to living a productive and worthy life. When applied to a school setting, the same was deemed to be true. Schools have structural elements where a hierarchy of authority exists, and a division of labor is necessary. An example where a successful division of labor can be detected is with the separation of the elementary, middle, and secondary grades. In addition, efficiency and success are more attainable because of subject and specialty areas (Hoy & Miskel, 2001).

In a study noted by Bolman and Deal (2017), it was determined morale in a school setting is higher when a clear chain of command is established. Teachers prefer precise expectations and clarity of the role they are to fulfill within the school setting. Thus, classical organizational management functions were found to be productive and beneficial in schools (Bolman & Deal, 2017). In a school setting, organization management theory can be applied to school leaders, faculty, and staff. A hierarchical structure within a school starts with the principal and pyramids down to teachers, aides, staff, and even custodians ensure a clear line of authority exists and everyone knows his or her role (Shafritz, et al., 2016). This prevents confusion when dealing with important questions related to anything from curriculum to behavior; clear lines of communication exist which allows for consistency and aids in high performance amongst all members of the school community (Hoy & Miskel, 2001).

Human Resource Frame

While the classical organizational theory was the first step toward a systematic study of organizations, it has been only a few decades since theorists began to link power, politics, influence, and relationships to successful organizational change (Shafritz, et al., 2016). The study of the human component within the organization is not a novel concept. However, it was not until the early 1960s that a focus was placed on the relationship between people and organizations in terms of how said relationships impact productivity (Shafritz, et al., 2016). The human resource frame focuses on the relationships of people and groups and considers people to be as significant to organizational success as the organization itself (Shafritz, et al., 2016).

Human resource theory is a large field of study supported by extensive research connecting human behavior to the effects of the work environment, and vice versa (Shafritz, et al., 2016). Human resource theory suggests in the right environment, people and organizations will thrive. It is the most optimistic and humanistic of all organizational perspectives and has become widely standardized (Shafritz, et al., 2016).

The human resource frame purports when the organization and individual function cohesively maximum gain will be achieved for both (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Accordingly, a school with effective leaders who support their teachers, a positive school culture, and motivated educators will produce learners achieving their maximum potential. As noted by Bolman and Deal (2017), the human resource theory is grounded in the assumption the worker is just as significant, if not more so than the organization itself. School leaders should foster a positive school culture where all members of the community feel safe, enabling self-actualization by teachers and students who then strive to achieve maximum potential (Bolman & Deal, 2017). With the centralized tenant focused on what and how people and organizations coexist, the human resource frame purports when the organization and individual function cohesively

maximum gain will be achieved for both (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Therefore, when applied to a

district or school, the impact of positive and negative human interactions is far-reaching.

Political Frame

The 21st-Century Leadership embraces power as a byproduct of an influence relationship

between leaders and followers. Like Rost (1993) and his theories on 21st-century leadership, the

political frame focuses on both individual and group interests. Political leaders mediate between

different interest groups (Bolman & Deal, 2017). They gain influence through networking and

negotiating. According to Bolman and Deal (2017), the political frame views power as an asset

and deems it vital in decision making, allocating resources, and managing an organization

comprised of coalitions of varying individuals with enduring differences. An organization is not

unlike a jungle or battleground with scarce resources and conflicting interests driving decision-

making (Bolman & Deal, 2017). From both conflict and common purpose, coalitions are formed,

creating a need for alliances in which power shifts emerge (Sriram & Farley, 2014).

The political frame emphasizes a need for conflict (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Coalitions are

in constant competition for scarce resources which creates a cyclical pattern of conflict.

Decisions are made from negotiating amongst conflicting coalitions leading to the

accomplishment of goals. Authority is essential to anyone in a formal position because social

control depends on it (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Without authority and power disputes would

remain unresolved and change would fail to take shape.

Within the political frame, leaders are tasked with delegating power, making both popular

and unpopular decisions, and implementing initiatives the coalition will support. The political

frame views the organization as a complex system steeped in power where coalitions of people

and groups are driven by conflict that results in successful decision-making outcomes (Bolman

& Deal, 2017). Bolman and Deal assert when an organization experiences political change

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different coalitions emerge in either support or opposition to the new agenda. Recognizing these divisions before making changes can tame conflict if one forms coalitions with those in support of change and uses them to gain further influence with staff (Shafritz, et al., 2016).

A school principal can be a politician when trying to implement organizational change. The agenda changes pending acceptance or opposition; when opposition occurs, coalitions emerge, and power struggles ensue. Negotiating between departments, gaining allies, and creating a culture less resistant to change requires decision-making and power. School leaders need to vary the type of power they exude; differing circumstances call upon different approaches (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Whether it be reverent, expert, reward, coercive, or legitimate power, power relations are necessary as powerlessness creates an ineffective organization lacking accountability (Shafritz, et al., 2016).

The political frame focuses on decision-making and power within the organization which is significant as organizational authority is necessary for social control. Bolman and Deal (2017) noted failed regimes require new authorities that exert power quickly or chaos ensues. Similar to the collapse of old regimes, the removal of a poor leader in a school requires someone to then assume power who quickly maps the political terrain and implements change most of the of employees' support (Bolman & Deal, 2017). This can be through coercion, reward, or even influence. An educational leader needs to be schooled in mindful negotiation and the leveraging of political power if he or she plans to successfully implement change (Shafritz, et al., 2016).

The political frame in education as related to leadership is vital as principals must have the wherewithal to effectively manage a school. From allocating resources, hiring personnel, and dealing with discipline to food services and groundskeeping, principals must delegate certain tasks to others while keeping applicable leadership roles for themselves (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

By delegating tasks and recognizing individual expertise, teachers feel empowered. As noted by Zhang et al. (2017), "Empowered employees are motivated and actively oriented to their work role. They feel their behavior makes a difference and they have responsibility for tasks" (p. 3). This is important in a school setting where the support of faculty and staff and a positive school culture drive success. According to Bolman and Deal (2017), power breeds effectiveness through either information and resources or gaining the necessary support to complete a task. Power is viewed as a source of more power with both the employers and employees having many avenues to achieve authority (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Therefore, a political leader will use skill to coerce, compromise, and negotiate the shifting needs of the organization ensuring the most productive outcome.

21st-Century Leadership

While the 19th and 20th centuries brought societal, structural, and technological changes that impacted how organizations were structured, the 21st century demands scholars re-think best practices within the organization (Rost, 1993). The concept of 21st-century leadership arose as part of a need for a postindustrial paradigm shift challenging previously defined leadership roles by creating a more long-range frame of reference (Rost, 1993). When applied to the field of education, 21st-Century Leadership is more necessary than ever. Shifts in norms and school cultures and the complexities of ever-changing clientele have created a need for transformative leadership that involves all adults in the building. The 21st-century leader is one who influences through persuasion, delegates leadership roles so both the leader and followers are active and involved in the influence relationship and ensures both the leader and followers are real in their intentions for change, and mutual purposeful in their attempts to enact said change (Rost, 1993). Collaboration and relationships are the key to success for the 21st-Century Leader, as well as a willingness to put hard work into whatever change has been proposed (Rost, 1993).

A particular strength of Rost's (1993) work on 21st-Century Leadership is he articulates a specific definition of leadership. Leadership is presented as a collaborative discipline in which leaders and followers can solve newly emerging problems of the 21st-century organization (Rost, 1993). In addition, the concept of leadership as a relationship is presented as a powerful component; the idea of both leaders and followers influencing one another and sharing a mutual purpose to achieve effective leadership is particularly significant when viewed through the lens of an educator (Rost, 1993).

When applied to the field of education, 21st-Century Leadership is more applicable than ever. Shifts in norms, school cultures, and clientele have created a need for fluid leadership that involves all adults in the building. School leaders are charged with transforming both the students and the environment, creating a more successful organization; every school can be better. Thus, leaders need to create an atmosphere where people are persuaded to change and work toward a mutual purpose (Rost, 1993). Subject specialists need to analyze data, coalitions need to be formed for school improvement and student advancement, and discipline and duty responsibilities need to be delegated to relevant personnel. These are just a few areas within a school where leading as a 21st-century leader can create an atmosphere where faculty and staff, leaders, and followers, are active and intentional in their purpose (Rost, 1993).

Rural School Districts in South Carolina

Historically, rural school districts in America face distinctive challenges, such as lower funding, limited access to advanced courses, and difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers (Temoney & Ullrich, 2018). This is oftentimes attributed to smaller student populations and fewer resources compared to urban areas and can vary from state to state. Despite these challenges, rural schools in America often play a significant role in their communities (Temoney & Ullrich, 2018).

South Carolina is comprised of a mix of urban, suburban, and rural school districts (School Directory, 2023). In 1993, 36 school districts in South Carolina sued the state for a lack of educational support, specifically funding. While the South Carolina Supreme Court recognized there were educational gaps in South Carolina due to funding and held the state accountable in 2014, the decision was overturned in 2017 (Temoney & Ullrich, 2018). Temoney and Ullrich (2018) conducted a study on the aforementioned school districts in South Carolina that included 10 "Corridor of Shame" counties along with 21 other districts that shared county lines along the Interstate-95 corridor. Of the 31 school districts involved in the study, Fairfax County School District were one of the districts included in the study (Temoney & Ullrich, 2018). The results of the study showed the State of South Carolina is lagging nationally in terms of legislative action geared toward improving the quality of education for South Carolina learners (Temoney & Ullrich, 2018).

The School District of Fairfax County, like many rural districts, faces its own unique challenges and opportunities (School Directory, 2023). It is important to note school districts may evolve, and policies, leadership, and programs may change over time—all of which contribute to both positive and negative change. It is because of this opportunity for change that understanding the nuances of Fairfax County leadership is imperative. The challenges of improving education are critical, thus the need for understanding how leadership is practiced in effective schools is necessary.

Justification of Education Leadership Theory

Our world and the organizations within it are changing. According to Rost (1993), a successful shift into the 21st century requires a leader who practices the four essential elements of leadership. This means,

(1) the relationship is based on influence, (2), leaders and followers are the people in this relationship, (3) leaders and followers intend real changes, and (4) leaders and followers develop mutual purposes. All four of these elements must be present if any relationship is to be called leadership. Three out of four are not sufficient. (p. 105)

An organization needs both leaders and followers that collaborate and are mutually intentional in their purpose. In a school setting, this means it is not enough to simply have a great principal and excellent teachers. A transformative school needs to have intentional activities that reflect the purpose of the leader or leaders. Collaboration and relationships are the key to success for the 21st-century leader, as well as a willingness to put hard work into whatever change has been proposed (Rost).

Narrowing the scope of the organization down to the field of education, specific frames and theories of leadership are present to bridge the paradigm shifts due to evolving technology, access to resources, state, and federal policy, and a more diverse clientele (Mercer & Myers, 2013). Frames represent not only theories but also people, and the behaviors and decisions inside specific frames can impact each of the other theories (Goldman & Smith, 1991). Therefore, when applied to a district or school, the implementation of leadership theory and its impact on positive and negative human interactions is far-reaching and therefore important to understand.

Summary

The 21st century has brought complex changes to communities that then influence our educational institutions (Mercer & Myers, 2013). Whether it be technology, student demographics, state and federal policy, or economic or societal issues—schools and students are directly affected thus leaders need to be trained to positively impact their teachers, students, and communities (Mercer & Myers, 2013). Literature suggests, "Leaders make the difference. This is uniquely evidenced in school districts where a single superintendent impacts the lives of so many

children, teachers, staff, and community members every day" (p. 2). It is significant to note the changes and complexities of this century and address the significant role a 21st-century leader plays in navigating how these changes impact our schools and learners (Mercer & Myers, 2013).

Leaders in the 21st century need to be lifelong learners, qualified and trained, and experienced in their field. In the 21st-century, organizations need leaders with high cultural intelligence to grow, reach goals, and develop successfully (Gokalp, 2021). Additionally, Principal leadership should be a cohesive power structure where principals facilitate the decision-making process encouraging participation from teachers and students alike (Aryani & Haryadi, 2023). These characteristics allow a leader to use the past to determine what is right or wrong when making decisions. As a result of the ever-changing world leaders are functioning in, an effective 21st-century leader leads with the ability to adjust knowledge, skill, and decision-making based on short-term and long-term objectives (Em, 2023).

Research on school leadership identity has increased significantly over the past 25 years, reflecting a growing interest in this topic among scholars and practitioners alike. A principal's leadership identity is determined by a variety of factors, including experiences, socialization, and factors like school culture and community expectations (Cruz-González et al., 2021). Considering this, and the potential for a substantial impact on positive student outcome, it is important to for further research to be conducted, "on the pathways through which principals affect student outcomes and the strategies employed by effective principals" (Coelli & Green, 2012, p. 16).

Study Overview

This chapter explains the methods and procedures used to determine how high school principals in high performing high schools in Fairfax County Schools practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment. The first section of this chapter explains the research design of this study. The second section presents the setting and participants used to conduct research. The third section describes the data collection and analysis used by the researcher to determine the findings of the study. Last, the fourth and final section includes information on the instrumentation used for this study, followed by a brief conclusion.

Research Design

The purpose of the study was to determine what leadership skills high school principals in Fairfax County Schools employ to promote a positive learning environment. Assuming the leaders who influence the learning environment in these schools could be considered experts, the researcher endeavored to understand what these experts notice about their leadership methods that positively affect the learning environment. Questions guiding this study were (a) What skills do high school principals employ to positively impact the learning environment? and (b) How do high school principals practice leadership?

Research Purpose

In an effort to comprehend what leadership skills high school principals in Fairfax County Schools employ to promote a positive learning environment, a qualitative research design was used for the study. Aspers and Corte (2019) purport,

> Qualitative research is about oscillation between theory and evidence, analysis and generating material, between *first*- and *second*-order constructs, between getting in contact with something, finding sources, becoming deeply familiar with a topic, and then distilling

and communicating some of its essential features. The main point is that the categories that

the researcher uses, and perhaps takes for granted at the beginning of the research process,

usually undergo qualitative changes resulting from what is found. (p. 151)

A qualitative approach was applicable given, "Qualitative research methodology is not a single

method, but instead offers a variety of different choices to researchers, according to specific

parameters of topic, research question, participants, and settings" (Austin & Sutton, 2014, p.

438). A significant component of qualitative research, which is not available when conducting

quantitative research, is the voice and thoughts of those involved in the study. Thus, the study

used a qualitative approach to determine what leadership skills high school leaders in Fairfax

County employ to promote a positive learning environment rather than a quantitative approach

(Austin & Sutton).

The goal of the researcher was to get to the essence of leadership; therefore, the use of a

qualitative method was used which, "involves asking participants about their experiences of

things that happen in their lives. It enables researchers to obtain insights into what it feels like to

be another person and to understand the world as another experiences it" (Austin & Sutton, 2014,

p. 436). Qualitative research has a place in every field as it enables the researcher to better

understand complex, distinct situations—in this case, the complexities of leadership at the high

school level (Austin & Sutton, 2014). Hence, a phenomenological approach was used to gain a

deep understanding of the topic. The researcher endeavored to use phenomenology to explore the

experiences of those that practice leadership daily to examine the essence of how they lead.

Qualitative research views behavior as dynamic and takes a holistic approach to reality;

qualitative research is outcome oriented and results are descriptive (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell,

2018). A qualitative design was significant for this study as,

We must assume that there is a single reality or truth in nature that can be measured the same way for all people. Behavior, then, is a measurable phenomenon that can be understood independent of the context in which any one individual experiences it. That is, behavior is a universal phenomenon. (Austin and Sutton, 2014, p. 381)

Edmonds & Kennedy (2017) state,

Researchers use the phenomenological approach when they are interested in exploring the meaning, composition, and core of the lived experience of specific phenomena. The researcher explores the conscious experiences of an individual in an attempt to distill these experiences or get at their essence. (p. 170)

Thus, the researcher used this method to understand the universal phenomenon of leadership; to get to the essence of the behaviors involved in effective leadership.

In this phenomenological qualitative study, the researcher conducted three individual interviews with the principals of Woodmont High School, Marshall High School, and Robinson High School. A semi-structured approach for the interview process was used because it

combines elements of both structured and unstructured interviews. Interviewers frequently have the flexibility to make changes, even though they might stick to a general plan and set of questions. Because of this, interviewers may be more creative in gathering the information they require for their studies. (Ugwu et al., 2023, p. 26)

This was a powerful way to gain an understanding of leadership from those who are immersed in the practice of leadership on a daily.
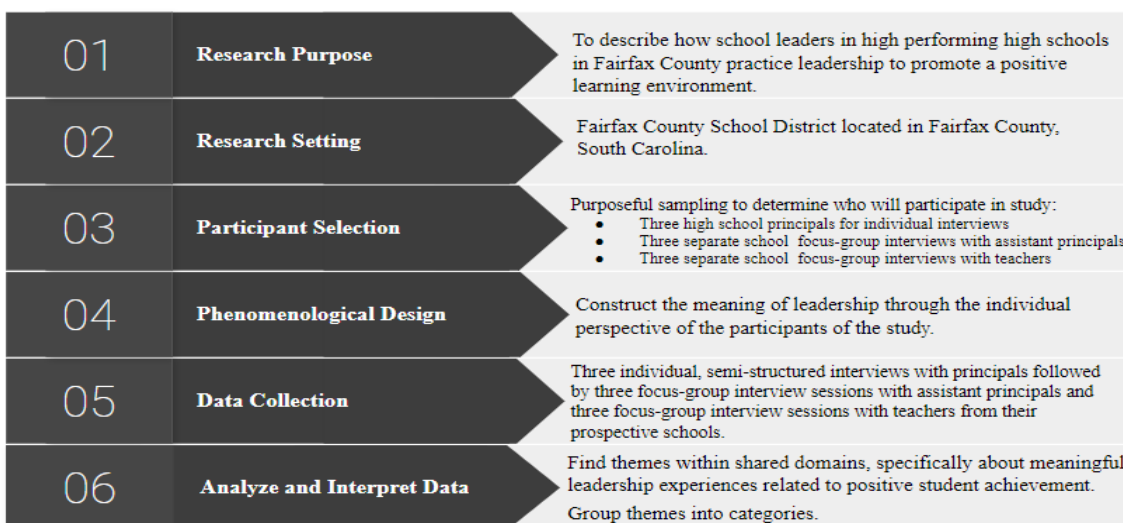
Each interview, with a run time of 45-90 minutes, was recorded, transcribed, and coded into theme-clusters (Field et al., 2016). The participants' lived experiences were examined to understand both their interpretation of leadership, and to find connections within shared

domains—specifically about meaningful experiences related to a positive learning environment (Nuñez & Yoshimi, 2017).

Stratified purposeful sampling, which is a *purposefully* selected small participant group, was used to place emphasis on in-depth understanding (Patton, 2002). By interviewing a small sample group, the researcher was able make inferences regarding the population at large (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Again, using a sample group then allowed the researcher to infer about an entire population of interest from the data gathered from a portion of the population, or sample group (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Additionally, the researcher conducted three school specific focus-group interviews with the assistant principals across three schools, and three school specific focus-group interviews with district high school teachers from Woodmont, Robinson, and Marshall to acquire a comprehensive understanding of each participant's experience and perspective related to leadership and a positive learning environment. Each focus-group interview was conducted separately with the participants from each school (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1

Diagram of Research Design

01	**Research Purpose**	To describe how school leaders in high performing high schools in Fairfax County practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment.
02	**Research Setting**	Fairfax County School District located in Fairfax County, South Carolina.
03	**Participant Selection**	Purposeful sampling to determine who will participate in study: • Three high school principals for individual interviews • Three separate school focus-group interviews with assistant principals • Three separate school focus-group interviews with teachers
04	**Phenomenological Design**	Construct the meaning of leadership through the individual perspective of the participants of the study.
05	**Data Collection**	Three individual, semi-structured interviews with principals followed by three focus-group interview sessions with assistant principals and three focus-group interview sessions with teachers from their prospective schools.
06	**Analyze and Interpret Data**	Find themes within shared domains, specifically about meaningful leadership experiences related to positive student achievement. Group themes into categories.

The researcher used a constructivist research approach to conduct a phenomenological study, which endeavored to understand a phenomenon, in this case, the phenomenon of leadership as it is practiced by district leaders and high school principals (Adom, 2016).

> Constructivism approach is in fact one of the best philosophical approaches that helps us in understanding the complexities and multiplicity of phenomena especially in this 21st century where creative ideas and inventions marking novelty is earnestly sought through our research and education. (p. 9)

Thus, the researcher constructed the meaning of leadership through the individual perspective of those who practice and live it daily.

Constructivism gained traction in the 1990s and expanded research, creating a theoretical revolution (Kratochwil & Peltonen, 2022). Constructivism is significant as "to understand what people are doing, we must look at the world through the actor's perspective. This does not mean that we must get into the actors' psyche, but we ought to understand the meaning of their interactions" (Kratochwil & Peltonen, 2022, p. 9). Shared knowledge, collaboration, and discovery within frameworks of assertation and validity are paramount to research—and equally significant to the goals of this study (Kratochwil & Peltonen, 2022). Focusing on the "why" as opposed to cognitive issues—stressing the significance of shared experiences and knowledge—enabled the researcher to construct the meaning of leadership through the individual perspective of the participants of the study (Kratochwil & Peltonen, 2022).

This study examined the leadership skills high school principals employ to promote a positive learning environment. Two guiding questions created to assure the overarching research question was answered were (a) what skills do high school principals employ to positively impact the learning environment? and (b) how do high school principals practice leadership?

District and principal leadership have been identified as a vital indicator of a positive learning environment (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Given the empirical connection between a positive learning environment and successful school leadership, it is important to understand what skills the high school leaders employs to promote a positive learning environment, and how high school principals s practice leadership. The hope is the results of this study can be used to: (a) inform district and high school leaders of successful leadership pedagogy connected to a positive school environment; (b) and inform the high school leader of effective skills that promote a positive learning environment.

Research Setting

This study was conducted in the School District of Fairfax County. Located in northwestern South Carolina, Fairfax County is approximately 497 square miles and is home to 132,229 people of various races, ethnicities, and economic statuses. The cities of Fairfax County—Columbia, Kingsport, Marshall, Central, and Woodmont—create a blend of rural and suburban communities served by 24 schools: 14 elementary schools, five middle schools, four high schools, and the Career and Technology Center (*School District of Fairfax County*, 2022).

Fairfax County is a suburban school district serving approximately 16,217 learners, with student scores regularly reported as above both the state and national average. Fairfax County School District is the 12th largest public-school district in South Carolina (*ACS School District Profile 2017-22*, 2022). The average graduation rate is 88%, while the average SAT score is 1170 and the average ACT score is 25 (*Explore Fairfax County School District*, 2021). The student population for the district consist of 76.1% White, 9.5% Hispanic, 6.8% Black, 6.4% Multiracial, and 1.2% Asian. Approximately 60.3% of the student population qualifies for free and reduced lunch (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1

Fairfax County Demographic Data

Factor	Number
Population of Fairfax County	132, 229
Median Age	36.4
Citizens US Born	126, 242
Citizens Not US Born	2, 841
Non-Citizens	3, 146
White	88.5%
Black	7.2%
Hispanic	4.6%
Average Teacher Salary	$58, 054
Number of Full-Time Teachers	1, 051
Median Income of Households	$53, 188
Median Home Value	$166, 800
Families with income below the poverty level	12.9%
Families with Food Stamp/SNAP benefits	17.2%
Household with Broadband Internet	81.5%
Married Households	70%
Single Mother Households	19%
Single Male Households	5%

(*ACS School District Profile 2017-22, Explore Fairfax County School District*, 2022)

This study included three of the four high schools in the School District of Fairfax County; Robinson High School, Marshall High School, and Woodmont High School (see Table 3.2). Robinson High School is in Kingsport, South Carolina and is ranked 7th in the state thus making it a top ranked high school in South Carolina (*Explore Fairfax County School District*, 2022). Marshall is in Marshall South Carolina and is ranked 121st in the state, and Woodmont High School is in Woodmont, South Carolina and is ranked 140th in the state out of 240 public high schools (*Explore Fairfax County School District*, 2022). Montclair High School is the researchers' place of employment thus it has been excluded to avoid a conflict of interest with the potential for bias to exist when conducting the study and/or in the interpretation of data.

Table 3.2

High School Comparison

School	Report Card Rating	Number of Students	Student to Teacher Ratio	Free and Reduced Lunch	Graduation Rate
Robinson High School	Excellent	1,194	20 to 1	29%	92%
Woodmont High School	Average	1,322	17 to 1	43%	83%
Marshall High School	Average	685	16 to 1	47%	87%

(*Explore Fairfax County School District*, 2022)

Participant Selection

Purposeful participant sampling, which is a *purposefully* selected small participant group, was used to place emphasis on in-depth understanding (Patton, 2002). Specifically, stratified purposeful sampling was given, "the purpose of a stratified purposeful sample is to capture major variations rather than to identify a common core, although the latter may also emerge in the analysis. Each of the strata would constitute a fairly homogeneous sample" (p. 240). By interviewing a small sample group, the researcher was able make inferences regarding the

population at large (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Again, using a sample group then allowed the researcher to infer about an entire population of interest from the data gathered from a portion of the population, or sample group (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018).

The principals interviewed for this qualitative study were the high school principals of Robinson, Marshall, and Woodmont. Additionally, the researcher conducted three focus-group interviews with the assistant principals of the aforementioned schools and three focus-group interviews with district high school teachers to acquire a comprehensive understanding of each participant's lived experience related to principal leadership (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). Interview participation requests were sent via email to assistant principals and to certified teachers at Robinson, Marshall, and Woodmont High School inviting them to participate in focus-group interviews. The aim of the researcher was to have a focus group size of two to four assistant principals for each focus group session and three to ten teachers for each focus group session—per school. There were five female and two male assistant principals interviewed, and seven female and two male teachers interviewed.

A semi-structured approach for the interview process was used given it combines elements of both structured and unstructured interviews. Ugwu et al. asserts,

> Interviewers frequently have the flexibility to make changes, even though they might stick to a general plan and set of questions. Because of this, interviewers may be more creative in gathering the information they require for their studies. (p. 26)

This is a powerful way to gain an understanding of leadership from those who are immersed in the practice of leadership on a daily basis. Each interview, with a run time of 45-90 minutes, was recorded, transcribed, and coded into theme-clusters (Field et al., 2016). The participants' lived experiences were examined to understand both their interpretation of leadership, and to find

connections within shared domains—specifically about meaningful experiences related to positive student achievement (Nuñez & Yoshimi, 2017).

Data Collection

This study involved the perceptions of individuals as they practice leadership. The researcher documented the descriptions given by high school principals as they discussed the leadership skills employed to promote a positive learning environment. Therefore, the data collection method was designed to glean an accurate picture of school leadership to understand how the high school leader practices leadership. Once the researcher completed the dissertation proposal, and prior to conducting the study, the researcher obtained approval from Anderson University, including the Instructional Review Board. A letter of introduction was submitted to both the superintendent and assistant superintendent of Fairfax County School District to gain consent to contact participants for the study. The letter included the purpose of the study. Following approval, email invitations were separately sent to all assistant principals and teachers across the three schools selected for the study, followed by consent letters to those who volunteered to take part in the study.

The researcher interviewed the principals of Robinson High School, Marshall High School, and Woodmont High School. Additionally, the researcher conducted three separate focus-group interviews with assistant principals and three separate focus-group interviews with district high school teachers to acquire a comprehensive understanding of each participant's lived experience related to leadership. The aim of the researcher was to have a focus group size of two to four assistant principals for each focus group session and four to ten teachers for each focus group session, per school, to acquire a comprehensive understanding of each participant's lived experience related to leadership (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). See Table 3.3 for approximate timeline of data collection and analysis.

Interviews

The researcher conducted two types of interviews for research. By conducting interviews, the researcher was able to understand the phenomena of leadership which is something that cannot be observed directly. By interviewing individuals that practice leadership daily the researcher was able to get to the essence of what successful leadership looks like. Interviewing assistant principals and high school teachers served to give further insight into the skills employed by the school leader to promote a positive learning environment.

Focus-Group Interviews

Three separate focus-group interviews took place with seven assistant principals across three schools including two assistant principals from Marshall High School, three assistant principals from Robinson High School, and two assistant principals from Woodmont High School. Five assistant principals were female and two were male, all participants ranging in age from 31 to 48 years. Additionally, three separate focus-group interviews were conducted with district high school teachers across three schools including three teachers from Woodmont High School, three teachers from Marshall High School, and three teachers from Robinson High School. Of the teachers interviewed seven were female and two were male. Teacher participant age ranged from 24 to 51 years.

The researcher contacted and received permission from the superintendent of the district prior to beginning the study. Each participant selected was contacted to obtain consent of participation in addition to obtaining approval by the principal of each school to conduct focus interviews with assistant principals and teacher participants at his school. The assistant principals and teachers who agreed to participate in the study took part in focus interviews at a time and location determined by them and me and had the choice of being interviewed via Zoom or face-to-face.

Individual Interviews

The researcher conducted three individual semi-structured interviews with the principal of Robinson High School, Marshall High School, and Woodmont High School at a time and location determined by them and me. All three principal participants were males between the age of 40 and 46 who have been in education for a minimum of 18 years. Each principal was contacted to obtain consent to participate. The researcher contacted and received permission from the assistant superintendent of the district prior to beginning the study.

Security and Protection of Rights

The information obtained through research was sensitive thus all effort was made to protect participant identities in addition to the study sites and district name. To ensure the privacy of participants all principals, assistant principals, and teacher leaders who participated in the study were assured of confidentiality including the use of pseudonyms. Individual and focus-group interviews were conducted at the convenience of the participants to include time and location. All information compiled throughout the course of the study was stored in a secure location only accessible by the researcher. Interview transcripts and other electronic data, especially data involving personally identifiable information (PII), was stored in an encrypted file on a secured computer system. Upon completion of the study research was shredded and deleted further ensuring data security.

All study participants were made aware he or she could withdraw from the study at any time. Each participant, the district superintendent, and the district assistant superintendent were provided the contact information of the researcher as well as the contact information of the researcher's Chair and the contact information for Anderson University's Institutional Review Board in the event any questions or concerns arose throughout the research study.

Table 3.3

Proposed Data Collection & Analysis Timeline

Date	Action
October 2023	Construct all forms – participant consent, invitations, interview protocol
November 2023	Defend dissertation/Qualifying exam
December 2023	Obtain IRB approval
January 2024	Establish interview dates Interview participants at each school, perspectivity
February 2024	Finish interviews Transcribe data Analyze and interpret data Start writing

Data Sources

The study followed a semi-structured approach for the individual interview process (see Appendix A for interview protocol). Questions were created using relevant literature. The aim of the researcher was to have three principals, a focus group size of two to four assistant principals for each focus group session and four to ten teachers for each focus group session—per school. The study incorporated three high schools in the School District of Fairfax County of varied demographics, socioeconomic status, and size to ascertain common themes of high school leadership. The commonalities found were used to describe the skills high school leader's employ to promote a positive learning environment.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The researcher used the constant comparative method, or grounded theory, to analyze the data gathered when conducting my qualitative study. Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe the constant comparative method as a process through which one can identify a phenomenon, in this case, the phenomenon of effective principal leadership. This method aligned with my study as

the goal of grounded theory is to explain how any given aspect of the social world works—thus the researcher used this method for analyzing data to determine how high school leaders in high performing high schools in Fairfax County practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment. The comparative method allowed me to unpack the phenomena of leadership.

Data analysis began upon completion of the first interview, allowing me to successfully transition between sampling, data collection, and analysis, aiding in successive sampling decisions (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Another crucial step in this process involved transcribing all interviews and focus group discussions verbatim to ensure conversational accuracy to the original experience (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). To uphold transcript integrity and mitigate errors, all interview and focus group recordings were transcribed.

Analysis continued with the data organizing process of the semi structured interviews and focus groups. After consolidating and refining the data, it was transcribed verbatim onto index cards. Each card was labeled with the participant's pseudonym and the corresponding interview or focus group question answered. Each index card was categorized and assembled into stacks corresponding to the 19 interview questions. For example, stack one included responses to interview question one from all participants, stack two included responses to interview question two, etc. Ultimately, there were 19 sets of index card stacks—each containing responses from every participant—facilitating the organization and coding of data from both the semi structured interviews and focus-group interviews. At the end of the study, having engaged with the research to find common themes, the researcher was able to formulate a theory concerning the essence of effective principal leadership.

Summary of Data

The final phase of data analysis involved the summarization of data. In this last step, the researcher specified any themes and information relevant to the study. Through this process the researcher gained insight into participants, gave meaning to the information, and identified phenomena crucial to understanding each participants' perspectives and actions. Findings were correlated with the research question and the study's purpose. The last phase within data summation was giving meaning to the data. This process encompassed the collection, transcription, and coding of data, culminating in systematic analysis (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Through data analysis, the research question was addressed, and new findings were highlighted, contributing to the existing knowledge base on the subject.

<div align="center">

Ethical Considerations

</div>

The information obtained through research was sensitive thus all effort was made to protect participant identities in addition to the study sites and district name. To ensure the confidentiality of participants all principals, assistant principals, and teacher leaders who participated in the study were assured of confidentiality including the use of pseudonyms. Individual and focus-group interviews were conducted at the convenience of the participants to include time and location. All information compiled throughout the course of the study was stored in a secure location only accessible by the researcher. Interview transcripts and other electronic data, especially data involving personally identifiable information (PII), was stored in an encrypted file on a secured computer system.

All study participants were made aware he or she could withdraw from the study at any time. Each participant, the district superintendent, and the district assistant superintendent were provided the contact information of the researcher as well as the contact information of the

researchers Chair and the contact information for Anderson University's Institutional Review Board in the event any questions or concerns arose throughout the research study.

Credibility of Qualitative Research

A qualitive research design was used for this study. Privitera and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2018) purport qualitative research is a methodology that can empower educators to identify and address challenges in their own classrooms or educational environments. Additionally, Aspers and Corte (2019) assert,

> Qualitative research is about oscillation between theory and evidence, analysis and generating material, between *first*- and *second*-order constructs, between getting in contact with something, finding sources, becoming deeply familiar with a topic, and then distilling and communicating some of its essential features. (p. 151)

As researchers are unable to identify every person in a group of interest he or she wants to answer a question about, the authors explain the researcher must then select a sample. Using a sample group then allows the researcher to infer about an entire population of interest from the data gathered from a portion of the population, or sample group. This was applicable in determining how principals and district leaders practice leadership.

Summary

This chapter explained the methods and procedures used to determine how high school leaders in high performing high schools in Fairfax County practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment. A qualitative research design was used for the study. The study used a constructivist research approach to conduct a phenomenological study, striving to understand a phenomenon, in this case, the phenomenon of leadership as it is practiced by district leaders, high school principals and educators (Adom, 2016). This chapter has presented the research design of this study, the setting and participants used to conduct research, the data

collection and analysis used by the researcher to determine the findings of the study, and the

instrumentation used for this study to comprehend what leadership skills high school principals

in Fairfax County Schools employ to promote a positive learning environment.

Chapter IV: Data Analysis and Findings

The problem addressed in this study is the need for further understanding of how high school principals in high performing high schools practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment. A goal of the study was to determine what skills the high school leader employs to promote a positive learning environment for students and teachers. This was done by interviewing those who practice leadership daily thus allowing the researcher to examine how high school principals practice leadership to successfully promote a positive learning environment for students and teachers.

In this phenomenological study, individual interviews were conducted with the principals of Woodmont High School, Marshall High School, and Robinson High School. All three principal participants were males between the age of 40 and 46 who have been in education for a minimum of 18 years. Three separate focus-group interviews took place with seven assistant principals across three schools including two assistant principals from Marshall High School, three assistant principals from Robinson High School, and two assistant principals from Woodmont High School. Five assistant principals were female and two were male, all participants ranging in age from 31 to 48 years. Finally, three separate focus-group interviews were conducted with district high school teachers across three schools including three teachers from Woodmont High School, three teachers from Marshall High School, and three teachers from Robinson High School. Of the teachers interviewed seven were female and two were male. Teacher participant age ranged from 24 to 51 years.

The purpose of each interview was to acquire a comprehensive understanding of each participant's lived experience related to principal leadership. During each interview session, principals provided data on themselves, assistant principals provided data on their school

principal, and teachers were providing data on their school principal. The researcher received written permission to conduct this study from the Assistant Superintendent of the School District of Fairfax County and from Anderson University's IRB.

The overarching research question guiding this study was, *How do high school leaders in high performing high schools practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment?* To ensure sufficient data were obtained to examine the leadership skills employed by high school principals to promote a positive learning environment for students and teachers, the researcher listened to the audio recordings and read the transcription of each interview. Additionally, the researcher ensured sufficient data were obtained to answer the two guiding questions created to assure the overarching research question was answered: (a) What skills do high school leaders employ to positively impact the learning environment?; and (b) How do high school leaders practice leadership?

During the interview processes the researcher recorded and took extensive notes which resulted in acquiring insight into the practices of leaders across three high schools and the perceptions of those they lead on principal leadership and its effect on promoting a positive learning environment. To ensure sufficient data were obtained to examine the leadership skills employed by high school principals to promote a positive learning environment for students and teachers, the researcher listened to the audio recordings and read the transcription of each interview.

Data Analysis

This study included three of the four high schools in the School District of Fairfax County: Robinson High School, Marshall High School, and Woodmont High School. Robinson High School is in Central, South Carolina and is ranked 7th in the state thus making it a top ranked high school in South Carolina (*Explore Fairfax County School District*, 2022). Marshall

is in Marshall South Carolina and is ranked 121st in the state, and Woodmont High School is in

Woodmont, South Carolina and is ranked 140th in the state out of 240 public high schools

(*Explore Fairfax County School District*, 2022).

Table 4.1

Educational Demographics

School	Number of Principals	Number of Assistant Principals	Number of Teachers
Robinson High School	1	3	61
Woodmont High School	1	3	78
Marshall High School	1	2	44

(*Explore Fairfax County School District*, 2022)

In this study, each individual interview session and each focus group session were

recorded, transcribed, and coded into theme clusters to find the link between the data collected

and their meaning (Saldana, 2013). To capture each participants response the text data were

coded into a single word, sentence, or phrase. According to Saldana (2013),

> A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns
>
> a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of
>
> language-based or visual data. The data can consist of interview transcripts, participant
>
> observation field notes, journals, documents, drawings, artifacts, photographs, video,
>
> Internet sites, e-mail correspondence, literature, and so on. (p. 3)

Specifically, vivo coding was used allowing me to capture, verbatim, the language of each

participant ensuring accuracy and intent (Saldana, 2013).

Upon completion of coding, categories were created to find common themes. The researcher then compared emergent themes from the principal interviews and assistant principal and teacher focus-group interviews. Data from the teacher focus-group interviews addressed teacher perception of principal leadership regarding the influence of their leadership in promoting a positive learning environment. During each interview session, principals provided data on themselves, assistant principals were providing data on their school principal, and teachers were providing data on their school principal.

Table 4.2

Focus-Group Participants

Name of School	Number of Eligible Assistant Principal Participants	Number of Actual Participants	Number of Eligible Teacher Participants	Number of Actual Teacher Participants
Robinson High School	3	3	61	3
Woodmont High School	3	2	78	3
Marshall High School	2	2	44	3

(*Explore Fairfax County School District*, 2022)

The data gathered from individual interviews and focus groups lead to the emergence of three major themes (see table 4.3). Overall, "A theme is an extended phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about and/or what it means" (Saldana, 2013, p. 175). Through the triangulation of data said themes emerged both within and across data sources adding to the reliability of my findings. According to Saldana (2013),

Themes can consist of such ideas as descriptions of behavior within a culture; explanations for why something happens; iconic statements; and morals from participant stories. The

analytic goals are to develop an overarching theme from the data corpus, or an integrative

theme that weaves various themes together into a coherent narrative. (p. 267)

By ensuring there was consistency in themes across the data, and the codes within each theme

exhibited common characteristics the researcher was able to ensure credibility and

trustworthiness of data analysis (Saldana, 2013). The following sections present each theme from

the principal, assistant principal, and teacher perspectives.

Table 4.3

Theme Development

Theme	Explanation of Theme	Associated Behaviors	Sample Data
Relationship building	Making relationships	Bonds with others	"You need to expose your heart." "The relational capacity needs to be in place."
Communication	Exchanging information	Speaking with others	"Hard conversations are needed for growing." "Feedback makes us better."
High expectations	Same high expectations	Positive outcome for all	"It is so important to cultivate high expectations." "By setting high expectations you are showing your students you believe in them and their potential."

Relationships

The overarching research question guiding this study was, *How do high school principals*

in high performing high schools practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment?

Discussions with principals, assistant principals, and teachers revealed effective leadership

hinges on the ability of leaders to build and nurture relationships both with the school and the community. Participants revealed relationship building shapes the school culture and climate creating an environment conducive to student success.

Within the relationship domain trust was emphasized as a priority. By fostering strong and purposeful relationships built on trust leaders can promote collaboration, common goals, and empower teachers and students to share the responsibility of learning. Additionally, by investing time and effort to get to know faculty, staff, and students individually, a sense of belonging and connection is established—trust is developed—and a positive learning environment takes shape.

Principal Perspectives

All three principals identified relationship building as the foundation of successful leadership. When promoting a positive learning environment, relationships were the point each came back to time and again. When Paul of Robinson High School was asked, *Describe your philosophy and approach to leadership* he passionately responded,

> My approach to education in general has developed over time. Really when working towards my Master's. I came to learn a simple philosophy. We need to get our students ready to learn. To mold and give kids a chance. It's mission work. Not everyone learns at the same time or the same way. So, we have to know them. Build relationships so when they are ready to take-off we are there for them. They need to look back and know we never gave up on them.

He spoke with a sense of awe about the responsibility we have toward students adding, "These kids might not remember each detail from a Math or Science class. But they remember the names of the people who loved them. Each adult in my building needs to be that person." Following the statement Paul seemed to internalize the thought and was reflective for a moment.

He continued, however, noting relationship building transfers into the community. When discussing the vital importance of relationship building, Paul made the important point:

> We do not just need to engage our students but their parents, too. A partnership needs to exist for real success. Communication, opportunities for involvement; we need our families invested in their kid's academic career. If know and trust each other, if we work as a cohesive team, the rest is going to happen.

There was a sense of connectedness about relationships the principals across all three schools spoke of. When asked the same question Matt became impassioned and responded:

> Get people out of their comfort zone. What it's always been isn't what's always best. You need to know your school—then you find the right people and put them in the right positions. In a place to succeed. You can't do that if you don't have relationships.

In having conversations with each of these leaders it became apparent a cornerstone of their approach to a positive learning environment was the relationships they fostered with all members of their school. When asked, *"How do you build a positive school culture or climate?* Jeff became animated in his response,

> Relationships are at the root of a positive school environment. And trust. We all need to trust each other. Students need to know they are loved. That starts with trust. It is the foundation of relationship building. Parents need to trust the school house. Need to trust our decisions. That leads to more support and less questioning of decisions, especially those involving change. If the relationship is there, the trust to follow your lead is also there.

He continued to ruminate on the importance of relationships, stressing the need for trust in our schools given the current political climate. While discussing relationship building Jeff reflected further:

> Collaboration builds relationships. Building departmental collaborative teams, guiding coalitions involving those in the school and in the community, gets people talking, sharing expertise. Getting to know their peers. You need to empower your people, give them autonomy, if you want to build relationships and trust.

In interviewing principals across all three schools, it became apparent they believed by fostering strong and purposeful relationships built on trust leaders can promote collaboration, common goals, and empower teachers and students to share the responsibility of learning. A remark made by Paul solidified this when he said, "It all starts at the top. I've seen this from day one when I started in this district. People care about people and that's what makes this district special."

Assistant Principal Perspectives

The participating assistant principals of Robinson, Marshall and Woodmont made it clear that effective principal leadership hinges on the ability of all leaders to build and nurture relationships with faculty, staff, and students. Participants revealed relationship building shapes the school culture and climate creating an environment conducive to student success. Marshall assistant principal Matt remarked on the necessity for both the principal and assistant principals to know their people and, "Have the skills to manage your staff and put them in the right place." He continued:

> If you love and respect people you get more out of them. Kids and adults. If you
> have high expectations for your faculty they need to know they can trust you. That's

why building relationships isn't just a good idea, it's a necessity if you want success

in your school.

While Matt spoke, his colleague nodded in agreement. She added on relationships, "It goes

both ways. If I want my people to trust me then in turn they need to know I can be trusted."

Similarly, Woodmont High School assistant principal explained the necessity of

building relationships saying, "You need to expose your heart. They need to know you are

their advocate. Your teachers, students, and the community. They need to know you have

their back." Jeff continued by stating,

> You have to put in the time. The relational capacity needs to be in place—I try to be
>
> visible, speak to people, learn their love language. So, when tough conversations are
>
> needed, or we embark on a new initiative, you know I come from a place of love and
>
> respect.

During the same conversation Jeff passionately discussed the impact relationships have on

students sharing:

> It takes four good teachers to fix a bad one. You have to be sure the people in your
>
> building have their heart right. If your heart isn't in it, if you don't care about people,
>
> you will do more damage than good. I don't care how much of a content expert you
>
> are. If you don't care about the kids you are in the wrong profession.

His colleague, Megan, responded similarly when asked *What do you think is a most*

important trait for a school principal to display? She seemed to laugh quietly before

answering, "If someone isn't genuine it's hard to connect or trust them. Just like we say

kids can spot a fake, it's the same with a principal. He or she needs to be a people person."

She expanded for a moment on "being a people person" then circled back stating, "You

have to be in it for the right reasons. You have to really care about the people you are leading. I want to know you have my back." She and Jeff then shared a look and Jeff remarked, "We certainly got lucky." Hearing that comment emphasized to me the significance, and importance of, having a positive relationship with your school principal.

While participants noted that relationships are paramount to a positive learning environment, it was made clear that relationship building is not easy. Jeff commented that it can be hard when a professional is vocal about his or her dislike of someone. He mentioned the end of the previous school year when the new principal was announced and recalled, "A older teacher was in the media center and looking at her it was obvious she was mad. When leaving, people were sort of walking around talking, she approached me and immediately said she was not happy with the announcement because she knew him when he was a teacher and they never got along." Jeff said these situations are hard and happen more than educators realize. Teachers will ask for a meeting and complain about a colleague or even an administrator. He said,

> Those are tough waters to navigate. You want everyone to be happy and get along. But
>
> sometimes all you can say to someone is the professionalism needs to be there. You
>
> don't have to like them but you need to respect your colleagues on a professional level.

These dynamics were interesting to hear about. Relationships are complex and while they can be very fulfilling—relationships can also cause issues and drama. Being able to navigate the complexities of personal and professional relationships in an educational setting is necessary for positive morale and school culture.

Teacher Perspectives

A question asked of all teacher participants was, *What leadership skills [of your administrator's] do you find to be most beneficial to your school?* The ability to forge authentic relationships was prioritized. The desire to have school leaders and staff who make their teachers

feel valued and respected was a cornerstone of need for teachers across all three high schools. Additionally, it was noted that if a strong student-teacher relationship is in place so is academic engagement and achievement. Speaking to this, Andrew made the connection:

> If students feel a connection to their teacher and friends, they are more motivated to participate and demonstrated their learning. Trust goes so far with kids making them more likely to take risks and engage in learning. Positive interactions lead to more successful student outcomes.

Having followed along with his answer, a colleague of his referenced the importance of peer support and providing opportunities for students to interact and collaborate. Another colleague connected the conversation to her principal saying, "I want my administrators to let me take risks and trust me to do what is best in my classroom. They have to know me to do that."

Kelsey of Robinson High School connected relationships to students by making the important point,

> We need to provide activities aimed at all student groups. That is something we do well at Robinson. We have a club for every interest, every need. Lion Time is our 25-minute intervention and remediation block. If students are not required to be somewhere for help they have a choice. Do yoga, play video games, write poetry, talk about your favorite fast-food chains. This to me is the time when we are connecting and interacting with students, and they are interacting with their peers. It is so important.

Sarah reiterated this point adding, "Our administrators are everywhere during this [Lion Time] time. They get to see us in a different role with our students. Having them come in my room and laugh at our games or song? That is what means something to me."

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Importantly, another teacher stressed the significance of forming relationships not just for academic growth but for mental health supports. Megan made the significant connection:

> Students need to know they can ask for help. They need to know we are here for them. That only happens when you put time into really knowing them. It goes beyond just teaching them. Ask about their weekend, attend an extracurricular activity. My kids are so excited, as high schoolers, when they see me at a game or performance. That is where I feel I'm making a difference. When they know I really care.

During this same conversation Morgan interjected, "Positive relationships lead to a better school culture." When asked *How do you build a positive school culture or climate?*, another educator passionately stressed, "Relationships are the pillar of a school environment and success of faculty, staff, students, and really then community as a whole."

Communication

Understanding how high school principals in high performing high schools practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment was the primary focus of this study. Communication was an emergent theme from the conducted principal interviews and assistant principal and teacher focus-group interviews. Data from this study purports high school leaders who prioritize open and transparent communication, active listening, and strategic planning are successful in creating a positive learning environment where inclusive and collaborative practices thrive. Additionally, communication arose as a pivotal component for promoting a positive learning environment at the high school level as it was the foundation for success in other areas of leadership practice. Given the importance of communication, it was noted when effective processes are not in place, an entire school can suffer.

Principal Perspectives

All three principals identified communication as a necessary skill for effective leadership. When asked, *What leadership skills do you find most useful?* Paul remarked, "It is my job as the leader of Robinson High School to communicate and collaborate effectively with all stakeholders." Matt also placed emphasis on communication noting, "A good school operates daily through communication." Remarking on communication, and its role and place in the school and community, the principal of Woodmont High School commented:

Technology has taken down the barrier of proximity. But nothing replaces talking face to face, people to people contact. That is how trust is built and you truly start to know your students and teachers, even parents. You can send messages, emails, newsletters – but people need to see and hear you in person to really build trust and understanding.

He continued his point by referring to communication as a cornerstone of improvement and growth,

Value and appreciate your people. Start conversations by making others aware you are there to help. Hard conversations are needed for growing. Feedback makes us better. So, you help them, and they help you. It's a team where the goal is to maximize each person's—faculty, student alike—potential.

Paul of Robinson High School was aligned with his colleague, noting,

Lead with joy and build a team. We are serving kids together. Communicate that we are putting-in culture work and mindset work. People have to know and understand the plan; they have to trust you to lead them down the right path. Let them take detours, but the destination needs to be clear. That only happens through purposeful communication.

Following the above statement, he continued with the necessity of communicating clearly replying, "Everything needs to be well planned and well communicated. A process where you incorporate all stakeholders to ensure buy-in." Upon further reflection he commented:

> Communication is truly the key to it all, success in any area. A collaborative culture, Dr. Peters uses the word winsome, is an environment where we lead and communicate with joy. Lead with joy and build a team where professionals feel respected and we serve kids together. Serve each student. That is difficult and powerful work.

Similarly, Matt of Marshall High School remarked about communication,

> Find the why. State the why. Be intentional about wanting better for ourselves and our kids. We need to be reminding ourselves and others why we are doing what we do. It isn't for the money. It's to be better and give them something better. We should be saying that more.

I found it pertinent that when discussing the implementation of a new strategy at their school (see Appendix A for interview questions) communication was again at the forefront. One principal remarked, "You need to be transparent and timely; communicate what is happening and how it will happen." Another principal stated, "You don't wait. You communicate what is to come and get your people on board and involved. Nobody wants to be part of something they have no voice in helping build."

Assistant Principal Perspectives

Several questions elicited responses focused on communication. Mary of Marshall High Schools referenced communication when she stated:

> Show purpose for buy-in. Without purpose and transparency there is no understanding of the why. This goes back to communicating what your vision is, big

or small. You need to make people understand the why. This happens when the lines of communication have been successfully established with all involved parties. Immediately following her remarks, her colleague Amanda mentioned the need for, "Transparent, purposeful, and timely communication." She added, "Hearing something the day of is the best way to be finished before you start." Similarly, Jeff asserted, "You have to be approachable and communicate. I can ask you or I can tell you, but rowing the boat together at the same time is what gets us to our destination." Sam of Robinson High School added another perspective when he remarked,

> Communicate that we have something for you. Make it accessible. Our vision is to know our kids and provide them with what they need to belong. They need peers and adults they can talk to, go to, celebrate with, and struggle with. And we have it. Making it available and accessible is key.

His colleague was nodding her head listening intently. She added to his remarks the need to, "Communicate a vision. Each individual needs to be provided a path to success that we then prepare for together." Interestingly, as the conversation on communication continued and Sam reflected further, he said that while communication is paramount to a schools' success, areas of weakness at Robinson were clear,

> We talk about this and it makes me think. Robinson prides itself on being the best of the best. In all areas really. But we need more work. Take our graduation rate. Are we so focused on the 98% that a small margin of students aren't being served to the best of our ability. Do we really try talk to those families, the caregivers of those students, and communicate a realistic vision of their future? I don't know if we do.

I asked what he meant and he explained that while those kids graduate, he often wonders if a very small demographic of students really feel like they are prepared for what comes next. That maybe the vison they communicate to the majority does not enable a handful of kids to really attain success. And more importantly, what needs to be done to fix that.

Jeff had noted a similar lapse in communication at his school. With an emphasis placed on communicating effectively he pondered what that looked like for the ESOL population noting, "We don't even have a Spanish speaking ESOL teacher. So how are we communicating to these families what is happening at our school? What their kids are doing? Or even communicating with the kids themselves?" Hearing this made clear to me that while an emphasis on effective communication was made ensuring a positive school environment, these schools had areas where leaders were less than effective.

The assistant principals' responses suggested communication is an important part of how high school leaders in high performing high schools practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment. Whether it be communicating the school vision, faculty, and staff expectations, having personal and purposeful conversations with students and staff; communication was prioritized as necessary for effective leadership. Additionally, in instances where poor communication, or a lack of transparent communication, existed, it was deemed critical to make improvements given the significance of communication as a whole.

Teacher Perspectives

Teacher participants spoke candidly about leadership and support in their perspective schools. When asked, *What do you think is the most important trait for a school leader to display?* Courtney of Robinson High School noted, "Making me feel supported is the most important thing my principal can do. If a parent is upset, or even a student, I need to believe my actions are supported and I won't be questioned." A colleague added, "We also need to feel

supported personally, not just professionally, and I think that is communicated regularly at Robinson. Just being asked how I feel, if I need anything, those things make a difference in my day."

Lisa remarked about how important it was to have established channels of communication. She gave weekly emails, monthly faculty meetings, and guiding coalition teams as examples saying, "These things, together, allow us to address concerns and be heard. It also allows us to know what is happening in our school. That really improves morale." Another participant stressed, "I need to feel heard." The responses of these teachers indicate the necessity of principals to offer personal and professional support—these acts of communication being significant to promoting a positive learning environment.

High Expectations

It was purported that a culture of excellence is fostered through the establishment and enforcement of high expectations by school leaders beginning with the principal. Participants communicated high expectations as fundamental to a successful school. Additionally, establishing high expectations arose as a cornerstone of leadership practices employed by high school leaders with emphasis placed on personal growth, academic standards, and behavioral expectations. Thus, a final theme to emerge following data analysis was the establishment of high expectations.

Principal Perspectives

The principals across all three schools identified the need for high expectations in their building. Participants acknowledged high expectations as the driving force behind student achievement, fostering a positive school culture, and shaping the ethos of the school. The principals of Marshall, Woodmont and Robinson asserted the successful ability of principals to set, communicate, and uphold high expectations across all facets within the school is paramount

in promoting a positive learning environment. The implication was that when all students are held to the same high standards it sends a message of equity and inclusion while creating an environment of excellence for every student.

An example of this occurred when the Robinson High School principal was asked, *How do you build a positive school culture or climate?* He startled me by thumping his hand on the table and passionately claiming, "High expectations are the foundation of our school culture. By challenging our students to really reach for a bright future we are showing them we know they are capable of greatness. If we get that buy-in, this is the best place to be every time you walk through our doors." It was truly inspiring to listen to his answer. Later in our conversation, Paul remarked,

> What is best for kids can be what is hardest for the professional. But you set those expectations once the foundation has been laid—you know and trust each other to meet the needs of each learner. By setting high expectations you are showing your students you believe in them and their potential.

He continued with the conversation stating, "It is so important to cultivate high expectations. Make each person in your building understand you want them to be their best version." Taking a different, perhaps more simplistic perspective, Matt of Marshall High School said of high expectations:

> For students. For teachers. High expectations are an easy one. The expectation is that you think. Thinking leads to in-depth conversation and discussion. We don't have to think due to technology—we are losing that need to really think. So, finding the art of processing information and getting people thinking is the highest expectation you can set. It transfers into life.

Garrett reflected further and continued,

It was not an answer many would expect. An odd point I'm making. But truly, the

expectation to simply think should be a norm in schools. I fear that skill is

disappearing. We repeat what we see on social media, what we hear. It's true of

adults and kids. So, expecting people to think is necessary. It carries into our

classroom, our behaviors, how we socialize. Let's start thinking for ourselves.

In conversation with Jeff of Woodmont High School, regarding high expectations he

commented, "Expectations need to be in place. We need to challenge our students so they learn

confidence and develop a willingness to try hard things." Jeff then shifted to discuss his own

personal motto in terms of what he expects of himself stating, "I have a two-minute philosophy.

If I see something that can be done in two minutes, I do it myself. Help where needed. Acts of

service go far in building relationships." He continued by noting that while it seems like a small

expectation to hold himself to, the point is that he holds himself "to a certain standard. We all

need to do that. In big ways and small ways." He spoke further about the impact high

expectations have on student achievement and wellbeing commenting, "My goal is for each adult

in my school to hold kids to a certain standard. This gives them a sense of purpose and a

direction. In all areas of pursuit."

Assistant Principal Perspectives

Assistant principals also touted high expectations. Participants espoused high expectations

as fundamental to a successful school. It was similarly noted that a culture of excellence is

fostered through the establishment and enforcement of high expectations by school leaders that

begins with the principal. Kathy of Marshall High School was adamant when she stressed:

We need to set high expectations. But that is not enough. It is then necessary to

prioritize communicated clearly those expectations to students, faculty, staff, and

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parents. This is where accountability begins. And empowerment. Empower teachers

to make something of their own. That is how you attain success. When students and

teachers take ownership.

Her colleague Matt was quick to agree making the comment, "I can't do my job if I don't know what is expected of me."

On expectations for himself and other leaders in the school, Jeff stressed the need of leadership to, "Have the skills to manage your staff and put them in the right place." He conversed about this, saying an important expectation of his, for both him and those above him, is that leaders need to delegate. This transfers, Jeff remarked, to the classroom, "We no longer need a sage on the sage, so to speak. From the top-down leaders need to delegate so others take ownership of their responsibility in the school."

Teacher Perspectives

When interviewing teachers from Woodmont High School the conversation veered into what we expect from our students. I asked, *Do you feel that school expectations are clear?* When reflecting on the questions it became clear that Woodmont High School teachers believed expectations were clear, but going further, they ruminated on the absolute necessity of high expectations throughout the entire school, for all people. When expressing her desire to have clear expectations set forth by administrators, Alex of Woodmont High School equated it to her classroom. She said with a smile,

I expect the same thing to be done for me that is expected of me in my classroom.

We know students should have high expectations and will perform if they want to be

good students. The same is true for teachers. Just like I establish guidelines at the

start of each class, so my students know my expectations, I want the same. Being on

the same page as a school creates a more positive environment.

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I was pleasantly surprised when Maya responded to the question, *What is your approach to student discipline? Is your approach supported by administration?* We had been discussing feeling empowered by school leaders and the conversation led me to ask this particular question. Maya professed:

> At Woodmont we have academic and behavioral expectations that we hold students to, and students hold each other to, and they even hold themselves to. We expect them to make good choices, so they are in the classroom learning. That starts from Mr. Duncan. We also expect them to make mistakes, and when that happens we take the time to "find the why" and solve the real issue. It is all about our school mission to serve our students. They know we expect them to make the right choices and most of them do because they know we want the best for them. Of course, we have a disciplinary plan in place for infractions that are supported by our assistant principals and principal alike. Even our parents.

It was not surprising to hear that the establishment of high expectations from teachers across all three schools was a priority. Justus remarked at the end of one focus group session, "We have expectations and standards that come from the State Department that we are expected to meet in our classrooms. I tell that to my students. I want my principal to do the same thing. I want to know what we are doing to be great together." This statement seemed to resonate with his peers as both jokingly gave a silent clap when he finished.

Summary

The purpose of the study was to describe how high school principals in high performing high schools in Fairfax County Schools practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment. The following segment introduced the findings collected from the data analysis of the three individual principal interviews, three assistant principal focus-group interviews, and

three teacher focus-group interviews. Through comprehensive research and analysis three themes—communication, relationship building, and high expectations—emerged as being pivotal in promoting a positive learning environment at the high school level.

Across three schools, principals were individually interviewed and asked 19 open-ended questions. Additionally, one focus group session took place at each school with participating assistant principals, and one focus group session took place at each school with participating high school teachers. Each focus-group interview consisted of 19 open-ended questions. The three principals interviewed identified communication, relationship building and high expectations as integral parts of effective leadership. Additionally, each assistant principal and high school teacher that participated in the focus-group interview indicated an emphasis on communication, relationship building, and high expectations as crucial for promoting a positive learning environment. Participants indicated these, amongst others, were both skills they modeled and skills they witnessed by principal leaders in their schools. In Chapter 5 the researcher will discuss an interpretation of the findings, recommendations for further research in the field of principal leadership, and limitations of the research study.

Chapter V: Discussion and Conclusion

This phenomenological study was developed to describe how high school principals in high performing high schools in Fairfax County Schools practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment. With the shifts and newly evolving complexities of the 21st century, such as increased autonomy, technological advancements, and the diverse needs of school clientele, the significance of what is needed and expected from a successful school principal has reached a critical point (Rony et al., 2023). A biproduct of the changes in how leadership is defined is a shift in leadership roles themselves, thus a need for research studies focused on school leadership (Foundation, 2013). Backed by empirical evidence, comprehending the lived experiences of principals and those under their leadership can result in the development of strategically acquired skills and behaviors that have proven successful in positively impacting a school learning environment.

To explore the leadership phenomenon of the high school administrator in high performing high schools in Fairfax County Schools, this study examined the leadership high school principal's employ to promote a positive learning environment. The overarching research question was, *How does the high school leader in high performing high schools practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment?* Two guiding questions created to assure the overarching research question was answered were (a) what skills do high school principals employ to positively impact the learning environment? and (b) how do high school principals practice leadership? The data gathered from individual interviews and focus groups led to the emergence of three major themes: (a) relationship building, (b) communication, and (c) high expectations.

The participants selected for this study work at either Marshall High School, Robinson High School, or Woodmont High School and include three principals, five assistant principals, and nine teachers. During the individual interview process, questions were asked to determine what leadership skills high school principal's employee to promote a positive learning environment. Additionally, the researcher conducted three school specific focus-group interviews with the assistant principals across three schools, and three school specific focus-group interviews with district high school teachers from Woodmont, Robinson, and Marshall to acquire a comprehensive understanding of each participant's experience and perspective related to leadership and a positive learning environment. Each focus-group interview was conducted separately with the participants from each school.

In this chapter, the researcher will present an interpretation of the findings and demonstrate how those findings are relevant to current research and literature. Next, recommendations for future practice and research will be presented. Finally, a discussion of study limitations and a conclusion are provided.

<div align="center">**Relationships**</div>

Relationship building has an impact on promoting a positive learning environment. Within the human resource frame of leadership, a centralized tenant is the focus on what and how people and organizations coexist (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The human resource frame asserts when the organization and individual function cohesively maximum gain will be achieved for both (Bolman & Deal). Therefore, when applied to a school, the impact of positive and negative human interactions is far-reaching. Applicable to the findings of this study, participants across three schools revealed relationship building shapes the school culture and climate creating an environment conducive to student success. The findings and implications from this study are explained below.

Findings

Participants across three schools discussed the role of relationship building when fostering a positive learning environment. Relationships between principals and assistant principals, teachers and administrators, teachers and students, administrators and students, students and students, and relations with the community by all members were all emphatically noted as important in promoting a positive learning environment. Interestingly, there was little mention by teachers of district personnel when reflecting on necessary leaderships skills to promote a positive school environment.

Trust was emphasized as a priority within the relationship domain. This was most notably mentioned by teacher participants. Teacher participants purport by fostering strong and purposeful relationships built on trust, principals can promote collaboration, common goals, and empower teachers and students to share the responsibility of learning. Additionally, by investing time and effort to get to know faculty, staff, and students individually, a sense of belonging and connection is established—trust is developed—and a positive learning environment takes shape.

Data analysis in this study suggested everyone benefits when administrators, teachers, and families coexist well. This beneficial environment is created through the building of meaningful relationships. All three participating principals stressed building relationships increases teacher morale, student engagement, and general community satisfaction. These data were supported by the assistant principal participants and teacher participants who implied a lack of communication decreases morale and leads to teacher turnover. Therefore, positive relationships have uplifting effects on the learning environment while negative interactions can have a detrimental impact on a school environment.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Relationship building emerged as a significant theme in this study. The findings indicate a strong correlation between relationship building and fostering a favorable learning atmosphere. Specifically, teachers referred to the need for transparency and trust—cornerstones, several participants asserted, of a successful relationship—when working to foster a positive learning environment. Therefore, it is recommended for principals to purposefully cultivate this skill within their schools. For this to happen it is crucial to provide principals with training to enhance relationship building further in their educational settings.

Recommendations for Future Research

Human resource theory is a large field of study supported by extensive research connecting human behavior to the effects of the work environment (Shafritz, et al., 2016). The human resource frame shows when an organization and individual function cohesively then the maximum gain will be achieved (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The human resource frame supports the data analysis in this study that points to the necessity of building positive relationships within schools and districts. The author suggests, however, there are still areas of knowledge related to relationship building yet to be explored which points to a need for further research in this area.

Data analysis in this study shows teachers, students, assistant principals, and principals coexist well when positive relationships are established. This study suggests that everyone benefits through the building of meaningful relationships; thus, relationship building, specifically understanding how people coexist, is pertinent to promoting a positive school environment. Therefore, while this study has determined relationship building as relevant to promoting a positive learning environment, the author proposes there are still gaps in this research that require further study.

Communication

A second finding from this study is communication contributes to promoting a positive

learning environment. Within Bolman and Deal's (2017) political frame, leaders are tasked with

delegating power, making both popular and unpopular decisions, and implementing initiatives

the coalition will support. The political frame views the organization as a complex system

steeped in power where coalitions of people and groups are driven by conflict that results in

successful decision-making outcomes (Bolman & Deal). Within this frame, it is communication

by the leader that drives the complexities of educational institutions.

Findings

Findings in this study indicate high school principals who prioritize open and transparent

communication, active listening, and strategic planning are successful in creating a positive

learning environment where inclusive and collaborative practices thrive. Additionally, visibility,

collaboration, and both face-to-face and timely tech responses were common attributes to

communication made by all participants. Communication arose as a pivotal component for

promoting a positive learning environment; analysis of the data showed communication as a

foundational skill necessary by school leaders when promoting a positive learning environment.

Furthermore, the ability to be transparent and communicate effectively were linked together.

Communication was expressed as a significant factor when promoting a positive learning

environment at the high school level. Teacher participants purported a culture of transparency

ensures staff is in the know; keeping staff informed and ensuring lines of communication are

open creates a positive school culture (Stickle & Scott, 2016). Additionally, it was noted by all

three participant groups that a culture of mutual respect and value is established when positive

recognition for accomplishments and an understanding of a work-life balance are communicated

(Stickle & Scott, 2016). An important biproduct of a culture of support and understanding is staff are more likely to have hard conversations because they know they are supported.

Analysis of the data indicated fostering a positive learning environment requires principals who engage in honest, open, and transparent communication. Teachers across all three schools expressed communication as being intricately linked to successful decision-making processes, conflict management, and coalition building. Teacher participants especially noted that confidence is built in one's leaders when student and learning centered communication is relayed clearly, regularly, and positively. A comment by a teacher participant resonated with all data regarding communication when she said, "I need to feel heard." This, in summation, encapsulates the necessity for communication in promoting a positive learning environment.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Communication was expressed as a significant factor when promoting a positive learning environment at the high school level. Teachers across all three schools expressed effective principal communication as being intricately linked to successful decision-making processes, conflict management, and coalition building. Principals should prioritize communication—offer training, develop feedback strategies, model effective communication practices—to create an environment where everyone feels valued.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings in this study provide foundational support for future research on how high schools principals can promote a positive learning environment. Principal leadership plays a critical role in school success (Thompson, 2017). Principals in the 21st century need to "possess a wider and sometimes different set of skills and competencies than the traditional skills and competencies which may have been typical of an earlier generation and about which the literature on leadership speaks" (Thompson, 2017, p. 15). It is significant to educational

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leadership that an understanding of skills that prove successful in building a positive school culture and environment be valued and researched further. Additionally, continued research is needed to determine how effective communication can positively impact a school's learning environment.

High Expectations

The 21st-century leader is one who influences through persuasion, delegates leadership roles so both the leader and followers are active and involved in the influence relationships and ensures both the leader and followers are real in their intentions for change. This includes mutual purpose in leaders' attempts to enact said change (Rost, 1993). Collaboration and relationships are the key to success for the 21st-century leader, as well as a willingness to put hard work into whatever change has been proposed (Rost).

This study purports the establishment of high expectations lays the foundation for a leader to achieve the aforementioned output. It is hard work to set, model, and ensure high expectations are fulfilled in the school setting (Rost, 1993). When principals set and follow-through consistently with student-focused expectations, success is likely. As noted by Paul of Robinson High School, "It is so important to cultivate high expectations. Make each person in your building understand you want them to be their best version."

Findings

The establishment of high expectations by high school principals is pivotal to promoting a positive learning environment. Setting high expectations arose as a cornerstone of leadership practices employed by a high school leader with emphasis placed on personal growth, academic standards, and behavioral expectations. It was asserted that a culture of excellence is fostered

through the establishment and enforcement of high expectations beginning with the school administrator. Participants communicated high expectations as fundamental to a successful school.

Recommendations for Future Practice

High expectations were a prevalent theme to emerge from this study; thus, it is relevant to note those who endeavor to practice leadership in high schools should be adapt at establishing and meeting high expectations. Because this theme emerged as significant to promoting a positive learning environment, it is recommended that principals make intentional efforts to practice this skill within their schools. Implementing more structured skills training to better understand how to establish and implement high expectations is also a recommendation for practice.

Recommendations for Future Research

High expectations from the school principal can strategically inform other research studies aimed at determining effective leadership skills and strategies practiced in successful high school settings. While this study has revealed the aforementioned theme as relevant to promoting a positive learning environment, the author proposes there are still gaps in knowledge that require further study about setting and meeting high expectations at the high school level.

Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study are limited in scope as the phenomenological research was conducted using a small, rural school district in South Carolina. A small sample of three principals was used in addition to three focus groups of assistant principals and three focus groups of teachers, all who were intentionally selected. Fairfax County School District was selected for the study because (a) of the high level of emphasis placed upon on distributive leadership by the superintendent (b) and due to teacher retention rates being the best in the state.

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The findings of the study are limited to a specific district, Fairfax County Schools. Data may be influenced by the demographics of the county, community, and school; thus, the findings of the study may be less applicable to broader educational settings.

A further limitation of the study arose from the researchers connections with the district where the research took place, which could have influenced that data by causing participants to be less forthcoming during interviews. As an insider, participants might have been hesitant to be completely candid. Additionally, two of the three principals were in their inaugural year at their respective schools; thus, the positive viewpoints expressed by candidates from these institutions might be linked to the novelty and enthusiasm typically associated with having a new administrator.

Other Confounding Factors

The primary purpose of the study was to understand the leadership skills high school principals employ to promote a positive learning environment. However, there may be other factors, including but not limited to, classroom environment, school culture, teacher efficacy, and family support, that contribute to a positive learning environment. Steps were made to control confounding factors, but it was not possible to account for all variables that could influence the findings of this study.

Lessons Learned

This research explored daily practices of leadership by conducting interviews and observing participants. By studying the phenomena of leadership, I was able to further my understanding of what is needed to effectively lead at the high school level. Through an outsider's perspective, I was able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the leadership skills utilized by high school principals in Fairfax County to promote a positive learning environment.

As a doctoral student at Anderson University, I had the privilege to collect data from administrators and teachers in a rural South Carolina school district. Engaging in interviews with participants deepened my understanding of leadership dynamics in secondary schools and furthered my growth as an educational leader. Furthermore, the exploration of the perceptions of principals, assistant principals, and teachers on the essential skills of effective high school principals allowed me to add to existing research and contribute to the ongoing discourse on improving the learning environment at the high school level.

Conclusion

Organizations are changing. A successful shift into the 21st century requires a leader that practices the four essential elements:

> (1) the relationship is based on influence, (2) leaders and followers are the people in this relationship, (3) leaders and followers intend real changes, and (4) leaders and followers develop mutual purposes. All four of these elements must be present if any relationship is to be called leadership. Three out of four are not sufficient. (Rost, 1993, p. 105)

An organization needs both leaders and followers that collaborate and are intentional in their purpose. In a school setting, this means it is not enough to simply have a great principal and excellent teachers. A transformative school needs to have intentional activities that reflect the purpose of the leader or leaders. Collaboration and relationships are the key to success for the 21st-century leader, as well as a willingness to put hard work into whatever change has been proposed (Rost, 1993).

Research on school leadership identity has increased significantly over the past 25 years, reflecting a growing interest in this topic among scholars and practitioners alike. A principal's leadership identity is determined by a variety of factors, including experiences, socialization, and factors like school culture and community expectations (Cruz-González et al., 2021).

Considering this, and the potential for a substantial impact on positive student outcome, it is important for further research to be conducted, "on the pathways through which principals affect student outcomes and the strategies employed by effective principals" (Coelli & Green, 2012).

The findings in this study indicate relationship building, communication, and high expectations are separate but important per the data. The establishment of effective relationships lays a foundation for communication and fosters an environment conducive to high expectations. It is through communication that relationships are maintained; high expectations are naturally reinforced in this type of environment. When mutual respect and trust exists, participants assert, it is more likely individuals will hold themselves and others to the expectation of setting and accomplishing goals. Additionally, clear communication ensures expectations are articulated and understood making successful outcomes more likely.

Principal leadership plays a critical role in school success (Thompson, 2017). Findings from this study support this; analysis of the interviews with participants across all three schools show relationship building, communication, and high expectations as central to promoting a positive learning environment at the high school level. Although this study revealed these themes as important to creating a positive learning environment there remain gaps in knowledge. Therefore, the researcher feels that more investigation and research should be conducted around this phenomenon.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Dear Shannon R Goodacre,

Proposal Title: Twenty First Century Principal Leadership

Submission date: Wednesday, December 20, 2023, 5:54 PM

The Human Subjects Committee (HSC) has received and reviewed the above-titled research proposal. I am happy to inform you that AU's IRB has voted to **APPROVE** your above-mentioned proposal. Your approval number is **AU202352IRB**. Please, whenever you contact us about this proposal, use your IRB approval number.

Also, be reminded that if at any point during the research, the risk level to any human subjects involved changes, either physical harm or loss of anonymity, or should you find it necessary to make any adjustments to the study as approved, please contact the HSC/IRB Chair in advance of implementing such changes. This may require that you submit an IRB Modification form.

We wish you well in your research.

If you need clarification regarding the committee's decision, please contact Dr. Gilbert Eyabi, IRB Chair, at HSC@andersonuniversity.edu.

Sincerely,

1/8/2024

_____
Gilbert Eyabi, PhD
Professor of Mathematics,
Assistant Provost,
IRB Chair, Anderson University.

APPENDIX B. INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Please tell me about yourself and your past and present work.

2. How did you come to work as an administrator in the School District of Fairfax County?

3. What motivates you?

4. Describe your philosophy and approach to leadership.

5. What leadership skills do you find most useful?

6. Tell me about a time you implemented a new strategy at your school.

7. How do you build a positive school culture or climate?

8. How have you dealt with challenges amongst staff, and what are some ways you have resolved them?

9. What do you feel is an adequate measure of student success within the classroom?

10. Please describe what you see as you walk into your ideal high school classroom.

11. What is your approach to student discipline?

12. In what ways do you empower teachers to be leaders and role models for students?

13. What are some strategies you have used to supported the ongoing success of staff members in leadership roles?

14. How do you monitor staff in leadership roles to ensure that expectations are clear and intended goals are being met?

15. What strategies you have used to ensure that staff has the resources and skills needed to support a wide range of needs within the classroom?

16. What strategies have you used to build authentic, productive relationships with and among students, staff, parents and caregivers, and the community in the interest of student learning.

17. What strategies have you used to promote, and ensure where applicable, diverse representation of school, staff, and student committees, clubs, and activities?

18. Describe the ways you have made your teachers feel empowered and supported to take the initiative to challenge one another when unprofessional conduct is exhibited.

19. Is there any additional information you would like to add?

APPENDIX C: ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Please tell me about yourself and your past and present work.

2. Why did you decide to go into the educational profession?

3. How did you come to work in the School District of Fairfax County?

4. Describe your philosophy and approach to education.

5. What leadership skills do you find most useful in a principal leader?

6. Tell me about a time you were part of a newly implemented strategy at your school.

7. What do you think is a most important trait for a school principal to display?

8. Have you been involved in conflict that required leadership intervention. If so, how was it handled?

9. What do you feel is an adequate measure of student success in a classroom? Is this supported by administration? How?

10. Please describe what your personal thoughts are on classroom observation.

11. What is your approach to student discipline? Is your approach support by school leadership?

12. In what ways do you feel empowered to be a leader and role model for students?

13. What are some strategies you have been provided with that support your ongoing success in educator?

14. Do you feel that school expectations are clear? If so, why? If not, why?

15. Do you believe strategies are in place to ensure that you have the resources and skills needed to support a wide range of needs within teacher classrooms?

16. What strategies do you see implemented regularly that support productive relationships with and among students, staff, parents and caregivers, and the community in the interest of student learning.

17. Do you believe your school leaders actively promote strategies that ensure a diverse representation of school, staff, and student committees, clubs, and activities?

18. Describe the ways you have, or have not, been made to feel empowered and supported to take the initiative to challenge your peers when unprofessional conduct is exhibited.

19. Is there any additional information you would like to add?

APPENDIX D: TEACHER FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Please tell me about yourself and your past and present work.

2. Why did you become a teacher?

3. How did you come to work as a teacher in the School District of Fairfax County?

4. Describe your philosophy and approach to education.

5. What leadership skills [of your administrator's] do you find most to be most beneficial to your school?

6. Tell me about a time you were part of a newly implemented strategy at your school and the role your principal played in its role-out.

7. What do you think is a most important trait for a school leader to display?

8. Have you been involved in conflict that required leadership intervention. If so, how was it handled?

9. What do you feel is an adequate measure of student success within your classroom? Is this supported by your school leaders? How?

10. Please describe what your personal thoughts are on classroom observation and their effectiveness.

11. What is your approach to student discipline? Is your approach support by school leadership?

12. In what ways do you feel empowered to be a leader and role model for students?

13. What are some strategies you have been provided with that support your ongoing success as an educator?

14. Do you feel that school expectations are clear? If so, why? If not, why?

15. Do you believe strategies are in place to ensure that you have the resources and skills needed to support a wide range of needs within your classroom?

16. What strategies do you see implemented regularly that support productive relationships with and among students, staff, parents and caregivers, and the community in the interest of student learning.

17. Do you believe your school leaders actively promote strategies that ensure a diverse representation of school, staff, and student committees, clubs, and activities?

18. Describe the ways you have, or have not, been made to feel empowered and supported to take the initiative to challenge your peers when unprofessional conduct is exhibited.

19. Is there any additional information you would like to add?

INFORMED CONSENT FOR
21st-century Principal Leadership Study

You are invited to participate in a research study to determine how high school leaders in high performing high schools in Fairfax County practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment. The researcher endeavors to understand what you, an expert, notices about your leadership methods that positively affects the learning environment. What skills do you employ to promote a positive learning environment? How do you practice leadership? Your data will be anonymously reported and will be kept confidential.

This study is being conducted by Shannon Goodacre. You were selected as a possible participant because you are the principal of a highly effective high school in Fairfax County thus I am able to conclude that as a leader who influences the learning environment in your school you can be considered an expert. I endeavor to understand what you, as an expert, notice about your leadership methods that positively affects the learning environment.

If you decide to participate in this phenomenological qualitative study you will participate in one semi-structured interview allowing me to acquire a comprehensive understanding of your lived experience related to leadership. A follow-up interview is a possibility, subject to participant approval, pending data synthesis. Each interview, with a potential run time of 60-90 minutes, will be recorded, transcribed, and coded into theme-clusters. Your lived experiences will be examined to understand both your interpretation of leadership, and to find connections within shared domains—specifically about meaningful experiences related to a positive learning environment—of others in your field.

The information obtained through our interview(s) will be sensitive thus all effort will be made to protect your identity in addition to the study site and district name, including the use of pseudonyms. Any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential. Any and all information complied throughout the course of the study will be stored in a secure location that is only accessible by the researcher. Interview transcripts and other electronic data, especially data involving personally identifiable information (PII), will be stored in an encrypted file on a secured computer system.

If you agree to participate you have the ability to withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not jeopardize your future relations with Anderson University.

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions or concerns about the study, you can contact the researcher, Shannon Goodacre at ▬▬▬▬▬▬ or via email

██████████████████████████████ For more information regarding your rights as a research participant you may contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Committee/Institutional Review Board by phone or e-mail at Dr. Gilbert Eyabi, **hsc@andersonuniversity.edu**, 864-231-2167. Additionally, the contact information for my dissertation Chair, Dr. Jeremy Watts, Associate Dean, Graduate Studies is provided in the event any questions or concerns arise prior to, or throughout the research study. Dr. Watts can be reached at (864) 231-2016 or by email at **jwatts@andersonuniversity.edu**.

_____ _____
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study   Date

_____ _____
Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study   Date

APPENDIX F: ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL FOCUS GROUP CONSENT FORM

INFORMED CONSENT FOR
21st-century Principal Leadership Study

You are invited to participate in a research study to determine how high school leaders in high performing high schools in Fairfax County practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment. The researcher endeavors to understand what you, an expert, notices about your leadership methods that positively affects the learning environment. What skills do you employ to promote a positive learning environment? How do you practice leadership? Your data will be anonymously reported and will be kept confidential.

This study is being conducted by Shannon Goodacre. You were selected as a possible participant because you an assistant principal at a highly effective high school in Fairfax County thus I am able to conclude that as a leader who influences the learning environment in your school you can be considered an expert. I endeavor to understand what you, as an expert, notice about your leadership methods that positively affects the learning environment.

If you decide to participate in this phenomenological qualitative study you will participate in one semi-structured focus-group interview session allowing me to acquire a comprehensive understanding of your lived experience related to leadership. A follow-up interview is a possibility, subject to participant approval, pending data synthesis. Each interview, with a potential run time of 60-90 minutes, will be recorded, transcribed, and coded into theme-clusters. Your lived experiences will be examined to understand both your interpretation of leadership, and to find connections within shared domains—specifically about meaningful experiences related to a positive learning environment—of others in your field.

The information obtained through our interview(s) will be sensitive thus all effort will be made to protect your identity in addition to the study site and district name, including the use of pseudonyms. Any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential. Any and all information complied throughout the course of the study will be stored in a secure location that is only accessible by the researcher. Interview transcripts and other electronic data, especially data involving personally identifiable information (PII), will be stored in an encrypted file on a secured computer system.

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_____   _____
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study   Date

_____   _____
Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study   Date

INFORMED CONSENT FOR
21st-century Principal Leadership Study

You are invited to participate in a research study to determine how high school leaders in high performing high schools in Fairfax County practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment. The researcher endeavors to understand what you, an expert, notices about your leadership methods that positively affects the learning environment. What skills do you employ to promote a positive learning environment? How do you practice leadership? Your data will be anonymously reported and will be kept confidential.

This study is being conducted by Shannon Goodacre. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an educator at a highly effective high school in Fairfax County thus I am able to conclude that as a teacher who influences the learning environment in your school you can be considered an expert. I endeavor to understand what you, as an expert, notice about your own leadership methods in addition to those of your school administrators that positively affects the learning environment.

If you decide to participate in this phenomenological qualitative study you will participate in one semi-structured focus-group interview session allowing me to acquire a comprehensive understanding of your lived experience related to leadership. A follow-up interview is a possibility, subject to participant approval, pending data synthesis. Each interview, with a potential run time of 60-90 minutes, will be recorded, transcribed, and coded into theme-clusters. Your lived experiences will be examined to understand both your interpretation of leadership, and to find connections within shared domains—specifically about meaningful experiences related to a positive learning environment—of others in your field.

The information obtained through our interview(s) will be sensitive thus all effort will be made to protect your identity in addition to the study site and district name, including the use of pseudonyms. Any information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential. Any and all information complied throughout the course of the study will be stored in a secure location that is only accessible by the researcher. Interview transcripts and other electronic data, especially data involving personally identifiable information (PII), will be stored in an encrypted file on a secured computer system.

If you agree to participate you have the ability to withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not jeopardize your future relations with Anderson University.

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions or concerns about the study, you can contact the researcher, Shannon Goodacre at ████████████ or via email

███████████████████████████ For more information regarding your rights as a research participant you may contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Committee/Institutional Review Board by phone or e-mail at Dr. Gilbert Eyabi, **hsc@andersonuniversity.edu**, 864-231-2167. Additionally, the contact information for my dissertation Chair, Dr. Jeremy Watts, Associate Dean, Graduate Studies is provided in the event any questions or concerns arise prior to, or throughout the research study. Dr. Watts can be reached at (864) 231-2016 or by email at **jwatts@andersonuniversity.edu**.

_____   _____
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study   Date

_____   _____
Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study   Date

APPENDIX H: EMAIL INVITATION FOR PRINCIPAL

21st-century Principal Leadership Study

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study to determine how high school leaders in high performing high schools in Fairfax County practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment. I endeavor to understand what you, an expert, notices about your leadership methods that positively affects the learning environment. What skills do you employ to promote a positive learning environment? How do you practice leadership? Your data will be anonymously reported and will be kept confidential.

You were selected as a participant because you are the principal of a highly effective high school in Fairfax County thus I am able to conclude that as a leader who influences the learning environment in your school you can be considered an expert. I endeavor to understand what you, as an expert, notice about your leadership methods that positively affects the learning environment.

If you decide to participate in this phenomenological qualitative study you will participate in one semi-structured interview allowing me to acquire a comprehensive understanding of your lived experience related to leadership. The interview, with a potential run time of 60-90 minutes, will be recorded, transcribed, and coded into theme-clusters. Your lived experiences will be examined to understand both your interpretation of leadership, and to find connections within shared domains—specifically about meaningful experiences related to a positive learning environment—of others in your field.

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. I am available via phone ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or via email ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ For more information regarding your rights as a research participant you may contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Committee/Institutional Review Board by phone or e-mail at Dr. Gilbert Eyabi, **hsc@andersonuniversity.edu**, 864-231-2167. Additionally, the contact information for my dissertation Chair, Dr. Jeremy Watts, Associate Dean, Graduate Studies is provided in the event any questions or concerns arise prior to, or throughout the research study. Dr. Watts can be reached at 864-231-2016 or by email at **jwatts@andersonuniversity.edu**.

I understand that your time is valuable and greatly appreciate your consideration to participate in this study. Please respond with your acceptance of this invitation, or that you decline to participate. Upon receiving your response, I will be in touch regarding times and dates that best work for you to schedule the interview.

Sincerely,

Shannon Goodacre
Principal Investigator

APPENDIX I: EMAIL INVITATION FOR ASSISSTANT PRINCIPAL

21st-century Principal Leadership Study

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study to determine how high school leaders in high performing high schools in Fairfax County practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment. I endeavor to understand what you, an expert, notices about your leadership methods that positively affects the learning environment. What skills do you employ to promote a positive learning environment? How do you practice leadership? Your data will be anonymously reported and will be kept confidential.

You were selected as a participant because you are the assistant principal of a highly effective high school in Fairfax County thus I am able to conclude that as a leader who influences the learning environment in your school you can be considered an expert. I endeavor to understand what you, as an expert, notice about your leadership methods that positively affects the learning environment.

If you decide to participate in this phenomenological qualitative study you will participate in one focus-group interview allowing me to acquire a comprehensive understanding of your lived experience related to leadership. The interview, with a potential run time of 60-90 minutes, will be recorded, transcribed, and coded into theme-clusters. Your lived experiences will be examined to understand both your interpretation of leadership, and to find connections within shared domains—specifically about meaningful experiences related to a positive learning environment—of others in your field.

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. I am available via phone ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or via email ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ For more information regarding your rights as a research participant you may contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Committee/Institutional Review Board by phone or e-mail at Dr. Gilbert Eyabi, **hsc@andersonuniversity.edu**, 864-231-2167. Additionally, the contact information for my dissertation Chair, Dr. Jeremy Watts, Associate Dean, Graduate Studies is provided in the event any questions or concerns arise prior to, or throughout the research study. Dr. Watts can be reached at 864-231-2016 or by email at **jwatts@andersonuniversity.edu**.

I understand that your time is valuable and greatly appreciate your consideration to participate in this study. Please respond with your acceptance of this invitation, or that you decline to participate. Upon receiving your response, I will be in touch regarding times and dates that best work for you to schedule the interview.

Sincerely,

Shannon Goodacre
Principal Investigator

APPENDIX J: EMAIL INVITATION FOR TEACHER

21st-century Principal Leadership Study

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study to determine how high school leaders in high performing high schools in Fairfax County practice leadership to promote a positive learning environment. I endeavor to understand what you, a teacher, notices about the leadership methods at tour school that positively affects the learning environment. What skills do leaders employ at your school to promote a positive learning environment? How do they practice leadership? Your data will be anonymously reported and will be kept confidential.

You were selected as a participant because you are a teacher at a highly effective high school in Fairfax County. If you decide to participate in this phenomenological qualitative study you will participate in one focus-group interview allowing me to acquire a comprehensive understanding of your lived experience related to leadership at your school. The interview, with a potential run time of 60-90 minutes, will be recorded, transcribed, and coded into theme-clusters. Your lived experiences will be examined to understand both your interpretation of leadership, and to find connections within shared domains—specifically about meaningful experiences related to a positive learning environment—of others in your field.

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. I am available via phone ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or via email ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ For more information regarding your rights as a research participant you may contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Committee/Institutional Review Board by phone or e-mail at Dr. Gilbert Eyabi, **hsc@andersonuniversity.edu**, 864-231-2167. Additionally, the contact information for my dissertation Chair, Dr. Jeremy Watts, Associate Dean, Graduate Studies is provided in the event any questions or concerns arise prior to, or throughout the research study. Dr. Watts can be reached at 864-231-2016 or by email at **jwatts@andersonuniversity.edu**.

I understand that your time is valuable and greatly appreciate your consideration to participate in this study. Please respond with your acceptance of this invitation, or that you decline to participate. Upon receiving your response, I will be in touch regarding times and dates that best work for you to schedule the interview.

Sincerely,

Shannon Goodacre
Principal Investigator