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Jared G. Wright  
*Brigham Young University*

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Learning Centered Leadership: Exploring How Distinguished  
Learning-Centered Principals Apply Key Processes  
of Learning-Centered Leadership

Jared G. Wright

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degrees of  
Doctor of Education

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## ABSTRACT

### Learning Centered Leadership: Exploring How Distinguished Learning-Centered Principals Apply Key Processes of Learning-Centered Leadership

Jared G. Wright

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Doctor of Education

School leadership is a complex and challenging endeavor, especially in an era when school principals are held accountable for student achievement outcomes. Research on school leadership has shown that a principal's influence on student achievement is indirect and significant. Over the past three decades, research on school leadership has developed conceptually and now offers more concrete descriptions of the actions and behaviors leaders can utilize for learning-centered leadership.

The developers of the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED) evaluation framework sought to create a school leader assessment tool that measures learning-centered behaviors, instead of measures that focus on the knowledge, dispositions, or personal characteristics of school leaders. In 2014 the VAL-ED, principals within a large school district in the Rocky Mountain region of the Western United States participated in the VAL-ED school leader assessment.

For this study, a sample of 16 of the principals who earned the highest ratings on the VAL-ED survey responded to open-ended questions during an in-person interview, in which they described their actions and/or behaviors related to learning-centered leadership. Responses were coded utilizing attributive and axial coding methods. Principals in this study identified specific actions of school leadership related to the VAL-ED defined key processes of learning-centered principals and core components of learning-centered schools. A comparative analysis was conducted to discover if a difference existed between elementary and secondary references to the VAL-ED key processes. No notable difference between elementary and secondary was found, however, principals identified 4 themes of learning-centered leadership not directly associated with the VAL-ED processes or components. A comparative analysis of the new themes revealed differences in elementary and secondary references within two of the new themes.

The findings revealed that distinguished learning-centered principals purposely exert their influence to improve student learning by being informed of the needs of their students and teachers and by understanding the school culture. They adapt to the needs of their schools and actively take measures to support and motivate teachers. Learning-centered principals understand that the way in which they can most directly influence student learning is to support and engage with their teachers because teachers have the most direct influence on students.

Keywords: VAL-ED, key processes, core components, learning-centered leadership

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I also wish to acknowledge and thank Dr. Pamela Hallam and Dr. W. Bryan Bowles for their steady and positive guidance throughout this journey. Like the distinguished leaders in this study, they both regularly exhibit the capacity to uplift those within their sphere of influence. Their positive impact on me will extend beyond the completion of this study.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE .....	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	vi
LIST OF FIGURES .....	vii
DESCRIPTION OF DISSERTATION STRUCTURE .....	viii
Introduction.....	1
Instructional and Transformational Leadership.....	3
Learning Centered Leadership and Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education.....	7
Methods.....	11
Research Questions.....	12
Research Sample.....	13
Data Collection and Analysis .....	14
Findings.....	15
VAL-ED Key Processes .....	16
Supporting.....	18
Planning and implementing .....	20
Monitoring .....	22
Advocating.....	22
Communicating.....	23

Participant-Identified Emergent Themes .....	24
Building and maintaining relationships .....	27
Capacity building .....	27
Shared leadership .....	29
Professional Learning Communities.....	30
Discussion.....	32
VAL-ED Key Processes .....	32
Supporting.....	32
Planning and implementing .....	33
Advocating.....	34
Monitoring .....	35
Communicating.....	35
Emergent Themes .....	36
Building and maintaining relationships and capacity building.....	36
Shared leadership and PLCs .....	37
Limitations of the Study .....	38
Conclusion and Implications.....	39
References.....	42
APPENDIX A: Review of Literature .....	47
References.....	70
APPENDIX B: Methods.....	76
References.....	83

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 <i>Behavior Framework</i> .....	8
Table 2 <i>Years of Experience, Gender, Graduate Degree</i> .....	14
Table 3 <i>Percentages of Total References to VAL-ED Key Processes and Response Examples</i> .....	17
Table 4 <i>Principal References to Communication by Subcategories</i> .....	24
Table 5 <i>Emergent Themes and Participant Responses</i> .....	26
Table 6 <i>Number of Principals Referencing Shared Leadership Within the Six Core Components</i> .....	30
Table 7 <i>Number of Principals Referencing PLCs within the Six Core Components</i> .....	31
Table 8 <i>Years of Experience, Gender, Graduate Degree</i> .....	78

## LIST OF FIGURES

*Figure 1.* Framework for examining instructional management. .... 52

*Figure 2.* Conceptual model of data collection..... 79



## DESCRIPTION OF DISSERTATION STRUCTURE

This dissertation, *Learning Centered Leadership: Exploring How Distinguished Learning-Centered Principals Apply Key Processes of Learning-Centered Leadership*, is written in hybrid format and is structured to adhere to the requirement of the hybrid format of the department of Educational Leadership and Foundations at Brigham Young University. The dissertation report is presented as a journal article with appendices providing supplementary and supportive information. The intent for this dissertation is submission for publication in a research journal as well as submission to the university as part of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree. The targeted journal for this article is the NASSP Bulletin (BUL). The Bulletin is sponsored and published by the National Association of Secondary School Principals and SAGE Journals. The manuscript length for submission is 25 to 40 pages. Conventions for APA 6<sup>th</sup> edition have been followed in the writing of this paper, according to department standards. A literature review is included in Appendix A and offers additional background on the research and theoretical foundation that is referenced in this study. Appendix B provides a more detailed account of the research methods.

## Introduction

Leadership is often perceived through the lens of the behaviors, characteristics, and traits of an individual who has been placed in a position of control or responsibility over others (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018; Fullan, 2007). Literature on leadership, however, commonly defines the construct more broadly. Murphy, Elliot, Goldring, and Porter (2006) defined leadership in three central ways:

First, we note that *leadership is a process*; it is not a personal trait or characteristic of an individual. Second, *leadership involves influence*; it requires interactions and relationships among people. Third, *leadership involves purpose*; it helps organizations and the people affiliated with them—in our case—move towards reaching desired goals. (p. 2)

As a school leader, the school principal has an indirect yet significant impact on student achievement (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018; Conley & Goldman, 1994; Cotton, 2003; Dufour, 2002; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). The necessity of an effective principal devoted to serving 21st century students has been brought into the school reform spotlight with the introduction of school accountability (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018; Cotton, 2003; Dufour, 2002; Elmore, 2004). Researchers in the field of educational leadership and school reform claim that the role of the principal is essential in the current era of school accountability, particularly in schools that need significant improvement (Elmore, 2004; Holloway, Nielsen, & Saltmarsh, 2018; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

Education policy developments in the United States over the past 20 years have led to significant changes to the role of the school principal, both perceived and actual (Mitchell,

Crowson, & Shipps, 2011; Murphy, 2006). Studies on student achievement outcomes, school culture, teacher retention, and overall school improvement indicate that the principal plays a central and necessary role in all these areas (Cotton, 2003; Goodwin, 2018; Mayes & Gethers, 2018; Orr & Cleveland-Innes, 2015; Schleicher, 2011). Richard Elmore stated that in this new era of school accountability, “There has never been a time for a greater need for effective leadership” (2004, p. 43).

The need for more effective school leadership calls for a greater understanding of how principal development and evaluation are essential features of effective schools, especially within the context of school improvement efforts (Elmore, 2004; Goldring, Cravens, et al., 2009; Hess, 2013; Rayner, 2017). In 2008, Vanderbilt University and the Wallace Foundation developed a principal evaluation instrument (VAL-ED) that assesses principals’ behaviors associated with what they called Learning-Centered Leadership (LCL). LCL was based on the two common principal strands of school leadership: leadership for learning (instructional leadership) and change-oriented leadership (transformational leadership). The VAL-ED evaluative instrument measures principal effectiveness using ratings on core components of effective schools and key processes, or behaviors, of school leaders that establish and support the core components (Murphy et al., 2006).

Because of the significant influences that principals have on the schools they lead, they will benefit from a deeper understanding of specific actions and behaviors that they can utilize to become effective learning-centered leaders. This study sought to identify learning-centered leadership patterns and themes from school principals who received a distinguished rating on the VAL-ED evaluation and to compare those patterns and themes between elementary and secondary principals. The questions that guided this study were:

1. What patterns or themes of leadership actions and behaviors are manifested from the in-person interviews of the distinguished principals in the 2014 VAL-ED survey?
2. Are there other themes of learning-centered leadership (LCL) in the data from the in-person interviews with learning-centered elementary and secondary principals?
3. How do the themes or patterns of leadership actions and behaviors compare between elementary and secondary principals?

### **Instructional and Transformational Leadership**

The focus on school leadership as a central component of school reform and student achievement, and the development of accountability policies for school leaders have refined research on leadership in education (Marzano et al., 2005). This shift has led to a greater focus on student learning leadership, commonly known as instructional leadership (Murphy et al., 2006; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, & Brown, 2014). Most school leadership credentialing programs emphasize instructional leadership as a significant component in school leader preparation (Elmore, 2004; Murphy, 2006). Professional development for school leaders also prioritizes the instructional leadership aspects of school leadership as essential to effectively improving student achievement (Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger, 2003)

Instructional leadership is conceptualized as targeting first-order variables, namely those variables that directly affect the instructional quality in the classroom, the creating of school-wide goals, *monitoring* teachers in their instructional practices, and coordinating the school instructional program (Marzano et al., 2005). Hallinger (2003) conceptualized instructional leadership in three dimensions: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school-learning climate. Each dimension is delineated by

several key functions, or specific actions or behaviors, of the principal. Of the first dimension, Hallinger (2003) concludes,

These functions concern the principal's role in working with staff to ensure that the school has clear, measurable goals that are focused in the academic progress of its students. It's the principal's responsibility to ensure that these goals are known and supported throughout the school community. (p. 323)

This dimension does not suggest that the school's mission is developed by the principal alone; rather, it is the principal's responsibility that the academic mission is clear and known to all stakeholders. In fact, a school mission developed collaboratively by school stakeholders (teachers, parents, and community members) is key to ensuring that the mission is known (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang, 2016).

Hallinger's (2003) second dimension, managing the instructional program, focuses on the coordination and control of instruction and curriculum. The related functions are supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum, and *monitoring* student progress. These functions require the principal to be immersed in the daily instruction of the school, from regularly *monitoring* classroom instruction to developing a school-wide framework for a school's instructional program. Hallinger (2003) conceded that in larger schools, it simply is not possible for the principal alone to have this role, "Yet this framework assumes that development of the academic core of the school is a key leadership responsibility of the principal" (p. 333).

The third dimension, promoting a positive school learning climate, is broader in scope and includes the following functions: protecting instructional time, promoting professional development, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers, and providing incentives for learning (Hallinger, 2003). Hallinger (2003) states, "It is the responsibility of the

instructional leadership to align the school's standards and practices with its mission and to create a climate that supports teaching and learning" (p. 332).

In each of these three dimensions of instructional leadership, intersections with the approaches of transformational leadership are evident. The reference to the school's climate in the third dimension, for example, and necessity of the principal to create and support a positive climate and culture, are tied to key concepts of transformational leadership, specifically culture building, rewards, shared vision, high expectations, and modeling (Blase & Anderson, 1995; Hallinger, 2003; Ninkovic & Knezevic Floric, 2018). Hallinger (2003) cited Leithwood et al.'s (2004) work on developing the concept of transformational leadership. Created in 1998, Leithwood et al.'s (2004) school leadership model includes seven components: individualized support, shared goals, vision, intellectual stimulation, culture building, rewards, high expectations, and modeling. These components suggest a motivational assumption, grounded in a leader's individualized support of faculty members instead of directed toward reaching an organizational goal. Hallinger (2003) characterized this feature of the transformational approach as a leader seeking to influence people from the bottom-up rather than from the top-down.

In the past decade, studies on transformational leadership, both as an individual topic of study and as a companion to instructional leadership, have gained attention (Holloway et al., 2018; Mayes & Gethers, 2018; Ninkovic & Knezevic Floric, 2018; Rayner, 2017). Additionally, leadership researchers have recently advocated for an ontological shift from the traditional "great man," or hero, approach to leadership to a new focus on the daily interactions of leaders and on leadership that is distributed and infused throughout an organization (Cravani, Lindgren, & Pakendorff, 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). For example, Cravani et al. asserted, "We must also challenge our deep-rooted tendency to make the abstract notion of 'leadership,' concrete in the

guise of individual managers” (2010, p. 78). Transformational leadership strategies focus on what Murphy et al. (2006) call organizational processes, or key processes that lead those in the technical core (teachers in a school) to be more productive.

Transformational leadership focuses on second-order effects, or those areas of influence that are more directly linked to school climate, such as building a relationship of trust with faculty members to grow their commitment to accomplishing the school mission and increasing motivation for individual improvement without explicit direction from the principal (Hallinger, 2003). Other theories of educational leadership focus on organizational elements and structures that include the leader as the person who stimulates organizational change from their position of authority and influence, which aligns more closely with the transformational leadership model (Hanna, 2001).

Stewart (2006) reviewed the conceptual and empirical development of transformational leadership research over nearly four decades. She draws a comparison between instructional and transformational leadership by highlighting how instructional leadership focuses on school goals, curriculum, instruction, and assessment, whereas transformational leadership focuses on restructuring the school by improving conditions. Stewart (2006) suggests that transformational leadership will continue to develop conceptually within the context of educational accountability and school reform in order to respond to the changing demands on a school leader. Hallinger (2003) argued that in order to be effective in leading a school, a school principal needs to integrate a combination of instructional and transformational leadership skills, and that a school’s context will help determine which of the two requires the most attention.

The effects of instructional and transformational leadership on student achievement have been measured by end-of-level, criterion-referenced tests (Marks & Printy, 2003). Shatzer et al.

(2014) surveyed 590 teachers in 37 elementary schools. Teachers in the study were asked to rate their principal's leadership style according to the Multifactor Rating Scale (a transformational measure) and the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (an instructional measure). The purpose of the study was to identify which theory or approach school principals should employ to maximize their impact on student achievement (Shatzer et al., 2014). The authors concluded that school leadership accounted for a meaningful variance in student achievement outcomes, with instructional leadership having a slightly higher observable impact than that of transformational leadership (Shatzer et al., 2014).

These findings were consistent with a meta-analysis by Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008), who measured and compared the influence of transformational and instructional leadership on student achievement. Robinson et al. conducted a meta-analysis of 22 studies on instructional and transformational leadership in which they compared the two styles by examining effect size. The authors found that instructional leadership has an effective size nearly four times greater than that of transformational leadership. Among their conclusions, the authors called for a more modern school leader model that extends beyond instructional or transformational models. The authors suggested that abstract leadership theories—such as those resembling the characteristics of transformational leadership—do not produce leadership practices in school settings that have direct impacts on student achievement outcomes (Robinson et al., 2008).

### **Learning Centered Leadership and Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education**

Learning Centered Leadership (LCL) incorporates both instructional and transformational leadership principles (Mayes & Gethers, 2018; Murphy, 2006) and places an emphasis on leadership behaviors linked to student learning (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliot, & Cravens,



2009b). Effective learning-centered school leaders have a singular focus on student learning and base their decisions and actions on desired achievement outcomes (Dufour, 2002; Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). LCL behaviors are manifested when school leaders “consistently” focus on all aspects of student learning, which Murphy et al. (2006) call the core technology of schooling. They state, “Learning, teaching, curriculum, and assessment make all the other dimensions of schooling work in the service of a more robust core technology and improved student learning” (Murphy et al., 2006, p. 3).

The Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED) framework for principal evaluation is an evidence-based, multi-rater scale based on decades of research on educational leadership, including the conceptual framework of Hallinger (2003) and Murphy et al. (2006), and focuses exclusively on LCL (Goldring, Cravens, et al., 2009). The conceptual framework of VAL-ED includes two key dimensions of LCL behaviors: core components and key processes (see Table 1). The evaluation is designed to “assess the intersection of what principals or leadership teams must accomplish to improve academic and social learning for all students (the core components), and how they create those core components (the key processes) (Goldring, Cravens, et al., 2009, p. 3.).

Table 1

*Behavior Framework*

Core components	Key processes
High standards for student achievement	Planning
Rigorous curriculum	Implementing
Quality instruction	Supporting
Culture of learning & professional behavior	Advocating
Connections to external communities	Communicating
Systemic performance accountability	Monitoring

*Note.* Learning-Centered Leadership Dimensions (Goldring, Porter, et al., 2009, p. 5)

A central rationale for creating the VAL-ED principal assessment tool was that assessing principal effectiveness is an important, even essential, part of school improvement and is commonly part of a standards-based accountability system (VAL-ED Manual, 2008). Goldring, Porter, et al. (2009) conducted a comprehensive review of principal leadership assessment tools, which included the content and usage of 65 assessment instruments. Using the leadership behavior framework of core components and key processes, the authors analyzed the content of the sampled instruments through an iterative and deductive coding process to identify themes “that research has shown lead to student academic achievement” (Goldring, Porter, et al., 2009, p. 21).

The learning-centered framework of VAL-ED measures only the most relevant indicators of LCL. Core components refer to what principals must accomplish, while key processes refer to what principals must do to activate and support those components (Goldring, Porter, et al., 2009). Key leadership processes are specific behaviors or actions leaders utilize to influence organizations and their constituencies to move toward achieving the core components (Goldring, Porter, et al., 2009). The VAL-ED Key Processes are as follows:

- *Planning* – Articulate shared direction and coherent policies, practices, and procedures for realizing high standards for student performance;
- *Implementing* – Engage people, ideas, and resources to put into practice the activities necessary to realize high standards for student performance;
- *Supporting* – Create enabling conditions; secure and use the financial, political, technological, and human resources necessary to promote academic and social learning;
- *Advocating* – Promotes the diverse needs of students within and beyond the school;

- *Communicating* – Develop, utilize, and maintain systems of exchange among members of the school and with its external communities;
- *Monitoring* – Systematically collect and analyze data to make judgements that guide decisions and actions for continuous improvement. (Goldring, Porter, et al., 2009)

The core components of LCL are linked to school conditions that lead to value-added performance in student achievement, attendance, graduation rates, and college enrollment. They represent the extent to which the principal ensures that the school has high standards of student learning, rigorous curriculum, quality instruction, a culture of learning and professional behavior, connections to external communities, and performance accountability (Goldring, Porter, et al., 2009).

VAL-ED Core Components:

- *Rigorous Curriculum* (content) – There is ambitious academic content provided to all students in core academic subjects;
- *Quality Instruction* (pedagogy) – There are effective instructional practices that maximize student academic and social learning;
- *Culture of Learning & Professional Behavior* – There are integrated communities of professional practice in the service of student academic and social learning. There is a healthy school environment in which student learning is the central focus;
- *Connections to External Communities* – There are linkages to family and/or other people and institutions in the community that advance academic and social learning;
- *Performance Accountability* – Leadership holds itself and other responsible for realizing high standards of performance for student academic and social learning.

There is individual and collective responsibility among the professional staff and student. (Goldring, Porter, et al., 2009)

The development of the VAL-ED evaluation tool consisted of field trials from 8,000 individual evaluations of elementary, middle and high school principals in 270 schools from all regions of the United States (Farnsworth, 2015). Teachers who participated in the evaluation ranked their principal on each of the key processes and core components using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from *ineffective* to *outstanding* (VAL-ED Manual, 2008). The total score and the mean score for each of the key processes and core components are interpreted against a national sample that includes principals, supervisors, and teachers, which provides a percentile rank. These results are then interpreted against a set of performance standards ranging from *Below Basic* to *Distinguished*. The authors of VAL-ED state that this assessment only evaluates and assesses those leadership behaviors that most directly affect student achievement outcomes (VAL-ED Manual, 2008). Evaluation results can be used from professional development design, formal professional evaluations, and overall improvement of principal effectiveness.

Principals who participated in this study earned a distinguished rating on the VAL-ED survey. According to VAL-ED, a distinguished leader exhibits leadership behaviors of core components and key processes at levels of effectiveness that over time are virtually certain to influence teachers to bring the school to a point that results in strong value-added to student (VAL-ED Manual, 2008).

## **Methods**

Given that principals are held accountable for student achievement in the schools they lead, the indirectness of their influence on student achievement can be problematic. Principals will benefit from knowing what behaviors and actions positively influence those who have direct

impact on student achievement, particularly teachers. Additionally, given the differences between elementary and secondary schools, principals at both levels could benefit from understanding the specific behaviors that have an impact at their school level.

In recent years, there has been a great deal of research designed to identify and analyze the behaviors, actions, or characteristics of effective school leaders. This research has been used to prepare future school leaders, train current school leaders, and show principals what kinds of actions or behaviors can maximize their indirect influence on their students (Goldring, Cravens, et al., 2009; Murphy, 2006). The Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED) is a tool used to measure principal learning-centered leadership. VAL-ED was developed based on extensive research on effective school leadership and is often used as a tool to evaluate principal effectiveness. The developers of the VAL-ED assessment identified six core components of effective learning-centered schools and six key processes, or behaviors, that principals need to employ in order to establish and maintain those core components (Goldring Cravens, et al., 2009). Participants in this study earned the highest-level rating from a VAL-ED survey administered in 2014. VAL-ED designates the highest-level rating as a distinguished rating.

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What patterns or themes of leadership actions and behaviors are manifested from the in-person interviews of the highest rated principals in the 2014 VAL-ED survey?
2. Are there other themes of LCL in the data from the in-person interviews with learning-centered elementary and secondary principals?

3. How do the themes or patterns of leadership actions and behaviors compare between elementary and secondary principals?

### **Research Sample**

This qualitative study was limited to principals (elementary and secondary principals and district officials) from one large school district in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. This district is composed of 10 traditional high schools with grades 10-12, eight junior high schools with grades 7-9, five middle schools (grades 7-8), 59 elementary schools (grades K to 6), and seven special purpose schools. With approval from the school district, all 19 of the principals who earned a distinguished rating in the 2014 VAL-ED assessment and who were still working in the district, were contacted via email requesting participation in an in-person interview. Sixteen principals responded and were interviewed. The remaining principals were contacted a second time, but did not agree to participate.

Results from the 2014 VAL-ED principal evaluation served as the determining variable to identify the principals for this study. Principals interviewed for this study received highest categorical composite rating on the 2014 VAL-ED evaluation, which was based on the mean score from the six core components and six key processes. Teachers and principal supervisors evaluated principals by providing effectiveness ratings on the key processes and core components, which were then interpreted against a national sample and yielded a percentile rank. The results were also interpreted against set of performance standards ranging from *Below Basic* to *Distinguished*. The scores associated with performance levels were determined by a national panel of principals, supervisors, and teachers.

As shown in Table 2, of the 16 principals who participated in the in-person interviews, eight were secondary principals, six were elementary principals, and two were former elementary principals who worked in the district office at the time of the interview.

Table 2

*Years of Experience, Gender, Graduate Degree*

	Total	Elementary	Secondary
Average Years of Experience as Principal	12.6	12.8	12.3
Percent Female	19%	25%	12%
Percent Male	81%	75%	88%
Percent with MEd	100%	100%	100%
Percent with EdD	13%	0%	25%
Number	16	8	8

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collected in this study were responses given by principals who earned a distinguished rating in the 2014 VAL-ED school leader evaluation. The objective of this study was to better understand the key processes of effective school leaders by identifying actions or behaviors of distinguished principals and to analyze the differences between elementary and secondary principals. The in-person interview questions were designed to illicit descriptive responses about what these distinguished principals do to operationalize key processes of LCL and to identify self-attributed leadership behaviors and actions.

Coding was conducted using NVivo software. The initial open-coding process followed the attributive coding method, which rendered basic descriptions and information on how highly effective principals operationalize LCL. These responses were first organized into categorization nodes based on the key processes and core components in the VAL-ED framework. For example, one principal described the actions that he took when he was appointed to a school with

chronically low reading scores. The principal described the actions he or she took in establishing a vision of student achievement, providing the materials needed to support instructional improvement, and individualized professional development for his teachers. During the initial open coding round, this description was coded in the *Supporting* and the *High Standards of Student Learning* nodes.

Through this iterative process, other potential themes were revealed in the second coding cycle by clustering patterns of themes or constructs that were evident in the data. Emergent themes were identified by common and recurring phrases or common threads in the participants' descriptions. An identification threshold of 56%, or at least nine of the 16 of the interview participants, was used to qualify new themes for analysis.

Axial coding was conducted to compare the principals' responses against school level assignments. Data from the first coding cycle and data from the emergent themes were disaggregated into two categories: elementary and secondary. This allowed for separate analysis of the data within the context of the difference school levels, thereby illuminating the relationships between the codes and the school level categories.

## **Findings**

The goal of this study was to determine: (a) what patterns or themes of leadership actions and behaviors emerged from in-person interviews with the highest-rated principals in the 2014 VAL-ED survey; (b) how themes or patterns of leadership actions and behaviors compared between elementary and secondary principals; (c) what other actions or behaviors do LCL principals utilize? Therefore, principals' references to the six key processes of learning-centered leadership within the context of the schools they led were analyzed and grouped into participant-identified emergent themes.



In addition, a comparative analysis between elementary and secondary principal responses was conducted. No substantive differences were found in the responses from elementary principals and secondary principals within the VAL-ED six key process themes. In addition to the six VAL-ED themes, four participant-identified themes emerged that met the established 56% threshold: 1) building and maintaining relationships; 2) capacity building; 3) shared leadership; and, 4) professional learning communities. There was a notable difference between elementary and secondary principals' references to the themes of building and maintaining relationships and capacity building.

### **VAL-ED Key Processes**

When asked open-ended questions about their leadership, the 16 principals offered 543 examples of actions or behaviors that illustrated how they exerted their influence as school principals and operationalized LCL. These references were coded and analyzed into 6 categories that aligned with the key processes of LCL. All 16 principals described their schools (or the school at which they were last assigned) which provided the contextual background for their responses. Responses that highlighted a core component of their school were also coded into categories aligned with the VAL-ED core components. Table 3 show that four of the six key processes (communicating, implementing, monitoring, and supporting) were referenced at least once by all 16 principals. The remaining two (advocating and planning) were referenced by 14 of the 16, or 87%, of the participants. The two processes most frequently referenced were supporting (138 mentions) and implementing (108 mentions). With only 57 references, advocating was the least-mentioned VAL-ED key process.

Table 3

*Percentages of Total References to VAL-ED Key Processes and Response Examples*

VAL-ED 6 Key Processes	Definition	% of total references to key processes	Participant Responses
Planning	Articulate shared direction and coherent policies, practices, and procedures for realizing high standards for student performance.	13%	<p>“So together with our instructional coach, we developed a benchmark plan that is going to be unified throughout the school using DIBELS” Elementary Principal 2 (ELE 2). “And then it was sitting down with our Math department to identify those key concepts and then develop a format and tool kit that’s quick and easy for teachers to use.” (ELE 3).</p>
Implementing	Engage people, ideas, and resources to put into practice the activities necessary to realize high standards for student performance.	20%	<p>“Once our school district officially articulated our vision for learning which is the idea of knowledge and skills and dispositions, we went after it unapologetically and we have been hyper-focused on really doing that.” Secondary Principal 3 (SEC 3).</p> <p>“We’re running a pilot next year with the University of Utah. Incorporating mindfulness into the English classrooms and then [using] a measuring tool that we can administer to evaluate the impact of the [mindfulness program] on student social emotional health using this tool.” (SEC 5).</p>
Supporting	Create enabling conditions; secure and use the financial, political, technological, and human resources necessary to promote academic and social learning.	25%	<p>“I make them feel supported and they work hard for you.” “I put my efforts into supporting them to make sure they’re comfortable, confident, supported and have resources...” (SEC 1).</p> <p>“The support was given [and] the follow-up was provided...” “I’m in the classroom all the time and I always leave notes for teachers with some of the good things that I saw and a few suggestions...it sends the message that I care.” (ELE 4).</p>
Advocating	Promotes the diverse needs of students within and beyond the school.	11%	<p>“...get parents involved and get them to know that this your school and not just for carnival night or a dance festival or things like that but in the actual process of educating your children.” (ELE 2)</p> <p>“I want to be sure that all of my students have access to rigorous classes, because that will make them a more successful students in the long run.” (SEC 6).</p>

(continued on next page)

VAL-ED 6 Key Processes	Definition	% of total references to key processes	Participant Responses
Communicating	Develop, utilize, and maintain systems of exchange among members of the school and with its external communities.	13%	<p>“We communicate a lot. Website, Facebook, weekly newsletters and also making sure they feel listened to and that I am truly approachable.” (ELE 1).</p> <p>“We make sure to keep our families and local businesses aware of what is happening at the school and what we are working on.” (ELE 4).</p> <p>“I’m consistent with admin updates to my staff.” (SEC 7). “And I think I just better appreciate [the] value, the power that hearing from the principal can have.” (SEC 8).</p>
Monitoring	Systematically collect and analyze data to make judgements that guide decisions and actions for continuous improvement.	18%	<p>“First of all, you have to be in the classrooms all the time, and not always in the capacity of an evaluation.” (ELE 5).</p> <p>“I attend PLCs, review data with teachers, offer assistance and try to place a high value on student achievement.” (SEC 4). “I work with instructional coaches and teachers to interpret data and to develop professional development.” (ELE 7).</p>

**Supporting.** Principals referenced *supporting* more than any other key process. The topic of *supporting* received 138 references, or 25% of all the references and 87% of the principals.

VAL-ED defines *supporting* as creating enabling conditions by securing and using the financial, political, technological, and human resources necessary to promote academic and social success.

“I make them feel supported and they work hard for you,” Courtney, a secondary principal, said.

She continued,

So, they'll work hard for me. I really genuinely care about the people that work here. If our kids feel safe and they feel that they have value they'll walk through walls for you. And I've seen that even with some of the teachers that you give them the opportunity to shine and to feel valued.

Courtney, like the other principals in this study, recognized that *supporting* teachers instructionally and emotionally is an essential behavior of an LCL. Mike, another secondary principal, described his role in *supporting* teachers similarly:

I have to put my effort into *supporting* them to make sure that they're comfortable, confident, supported and have resources you know whatever to do what they're doing. And then I'm right there with them. . . And so as long as I'm seen as the one who's *supporting* all the initiatives and that I am not just stepping back in a way, then that's my role.

During the interviews, principals described situations wherein they sought after additional resources in order to support teachers. For example, Thad, an elementary principal, talked about how he recognized that the district had under-allocated the school a teacher [Full Time Equivalent] FTE. That resource deficit created a barrier to making necessary changes within his school, which was already struggling with student achievement on state accountability assessments. He explained,

And I'll tell you [it] wasn't easy, I have to come and meet with my directors, with people in HR and say, hey you have to give us the rest of this FTE. That wasn't easy, but it had to be done in order to get to the business of teaching, professional development, and getting the school back on track.

Axial coding showed that 34% of the references to *supporting* revealed specific actions principals took to support teachers in their efforts to improve instruction. These supportive actions included regular feedback to teachers after both formal and informal classroom observations and professional development that aligned with the needs of their students. “The support was given [and] the follow up was provided in those conversations to build professional development . . . then to identify those needs with teachers,” said Kent, a veteran elementary principal. Heather, another veteran elementary principal, explained,

I'm in the classroom all the time and I always leave notes for teachers with some of the good things that I saw and a few suggestions. Its non-evaluative, but it sends the message that I care, that I am present and I'm open to talk about improvement in a non-threatening way.

The conceptual model upon which this study is based asserts that school leaders have an indirect yet significant impact on student learning. This study found that leaning-centered leaders understand that they must be supportive of teachers in a variety of ways because teachers do have direct influence on student learning. Courtney clearly conveyed the simple connection between *supporting* teachers in order to support students: "If we take care of our teachers, they'll take care of the kids."

**Planning and implementing.** The second most referenced key process in the interviews was *implementing*, with 108 references from all 16 principals. *Implementing* includes actions such as engaging stakeholders and ideas and finding resources to initiate activities necessary to attain high standards of student performance. *Planning*, which includes articulating a shared direction with clear policies, practices, and procedures, is an essential step that precedes implementation. Therefore, findings from these two key processes are presented jointly, even though *planning* has the far fewer references than *implementing*.

This study found that learning-centered principals deliberately put into place instructional and operational practices that had the potential to benefit student learning. Principals consistently described the process of problem identification, the collaborative development of a plan, and then the implementation of the plan. All references to *planning* and implementation by principals in this study were concentrated on improving student achievement outcomes, including a few references to problems that were also related to school operations. One secondary principal,

Jefferson, offered a metaphor to illustrate his role in *planning* and *implementing* school improvement: “You've got to be able to set the paving stones to let teachers walk down this path that you believe is going to lead to success with them and their students.”

Brent, an elementary principal, identified a literacy need in the lower grades in his school. The first step he took to address the need was to create a plan of intervention in collaboration with his teachers and instructional coach. He said,

So together with our instructional coach, we developed a benchmark plan that is going to be unified throughout the school using DIBELS [a reading assessment] but also using our wonders assessments [English Language Arts program] so that we can give good solid data to our teams [and] to each other.

Brent then talked about *supporting* his teachers with materials, additional collaborative time, being present and engaging in their PLCs, and following through by *monitoring* the benchmarks established by the teachers. He reflected, “Now we've seen those results... our second and third grade students started the year at 91 percent proficiency according to DIBELS.”

Scott was a veteran elementary principal who, not long before this interview, moved to a new school. Scott talked about the student achievement deficits at his previous school and explained how he had implemented a plan of professional development to help teachers ascribe to a belief system that every student is capable of success. Through professional development, he tried to provide teachers with the tools to be successful. The plan took several years to complete along with his commitment to allocate necessary resources so that each teacher could benefit. “By time I left every teacher had been to the Ron Clark Academy. . . But to pay to have those high standards and that's just kind of the philosophy we had as a faculty.” The result of the

complete implementation of the plan was that Scott's school came to embody a core component of learning-centered schools: high standards of learning for all students.

**Monitoring.** The interview question on *monitoring* referenced teacher evaluations, to which 94% of principals responded negatively. One elementary principal said, "We try to be compliant with the requirements of teacher evaluation and the research bears it out. Teacher evaluation does not improve instruction. It just doesn't." A secondary principal put his feelings about teacher evaluation this way: "To be flat out honest, we strive to get D minuses on the evaluations. We strive to be minimally compliant."

VAL-ED defines *monitoring* as "systematically collect[ing] and analyz[ing] data to make judgments that guide decisions and actions for continuous improvement." This definition closely matches a prescribed function of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which is probably why, when asked about *monitoring* and evaluations, principals in this study discussed PLCs. In fact, when asked about *monitoring* as a key process, all 16 principals mentioned PLCs as one of the platforms through which they systemically collected and analyzed data to drive school improvement. PLCs, incidentally, met the threshold of 57% for analysis and those results will be discussed later in this study.

**Advocating.** *Advocating* is described by VAL-ED as promoting the diverse needs of students. Fourteen principals mentioned 57 several actions through which they were *advocating* for underrepresented individuals or groups or those in greater need of the principal's attention, although it is important to note that only one principal in this study was principal of a title one school. Kent, a veteran elementary principal talked about being assigned to a school that was highly impacted by poverty and was failing on most accountability measures. One barrier that he and his leadership team identified was the lack of connection with parents. This was most

noticeable in the low number of parents participating in Student Education Plan (SEP) conferences. He and his teachers felt that it was a priority to “get parents involved and to get them to know that ‘this is your school and not just for carnival night or a dance festival or things like that but in the actual process of educating your children.’” Kent and his team set the goal of contacting 100% of their parents for SEP conferences. If the parents were unable to come to the school, the school would reach out to the parents in whatever way worked best for the parents. Kent reported that the school made contact with 100% of parents and as a result, the number of parents participating in SEP conferences increased to over 90%.

These students were underrepresented on the school’s committees and much of the school improvement efforts were focused on supporting minority students. He made a deliberate effort to invite minority parents to be members of the community council by explaining to them that he and the school community were in need of their input and guidance in making decisions about the education of their children. He celebrated his efforts by explaining, “And I never had anybody say no.” Scott successfully created a school community council that better represented his school community.

**Communicating.** Initial coding identified 73 principal references to communication. References were then clustered into 4 subcategories: 1) *communicating* with an individual; 2) *communicating* internally; 3) *communicating* directly with parents; and, 4) *communicating* with community partners (see Table 4). Standard communication practices, such as weekly emails, website updates, newsletters, surveys, and staff memos, were referenced by 75% of principals as a regular practice to keep stakeholders informed and connected to the school. These references were categorized into either the internal or parent categories, which accounted for 78% of all



communication references. This study found that principals viewed effective, constant, and clear communication with stakeholders as an essential key process of LCL.

*Communicating*, or engaging, with community partners had a total of 8 references, or 11%. Seven of the eight references came from principals who had recently opened their school and made efforts to include local businesses, community leaders, and neighbors in school-opening events. References related to individual communication, such as leaving notes for teachers after informal observations or following up with specific parents or students, accounted for 11% of the total references to communication. Discussing the theme of individual communication, Brent talked about how he needed to be available and to be seen as “approachable” so that people would come to him to discuss issues. Ben talked about the absolute need for trust and candor when dealing with interpersonal communication as a principal. Nick captured the importance of principal communication when he said, “And I think I just better appreciate [the] value, the power that hearing from the principal can have.”

Table 4

*Principal References to Communication by Subcategories*

	Individual	Internal	Parents	Community	Total
Number of References	8 (11%)	24 (33%)	33 (45%)	8 (11%)	73

**Participant-Identified Emergent Themes**

Through the iterative process of coding and analysis, four common behaviors or themes amongst these 19 principals emerged, four of which met the identification threshold of being referenced by at least 56% of the interview participants. As shown in Table 5, these participant-identified emergent themes were (a) building and maintaining relationships; (b) capacity building; (c) professional learning communities (PLCs); and, (d) shared leadership. Each of these

themes were specifically mentioned and described as a leadership behavior by at least nine of the 16 principals without a prompting question that referenced the theme.

There was no notable difference between elementary and secondary principal responses related to PLCs and shared leadership. However, there was a clear difference between elementary and secondary principals when referencing the other two themes. Building and maintaining relationships was mentioned by 75% of elementary principals, while only 38% of secondary principals mentioned this theme. An even greater difference existed between elementary and secondary principals in regard to capacity building, as 86% of secondary principals referenced this theme, while only 25% of elementary principals mentioned it.

Table 5

*Emergent Themes and Participant Responses*

Emergent Themes	Definition	Identification Threshold	Participant Responses
Building and Maintaining Relationships	Identifying and developing positive social and professional interactions and maintaining them in a way that benefits each party and the organization.	56%	<p>“Probably more so than I was effective at running the building I was effective at building a positive relationship with people. . . but probably the best thing I did was in fact about building good relationships with my people.” Elementary Principal 5 (ELE 5).</p> <p>“...you have to have the trust and the relationships in order to work together.” (ELE 6).</p> <p>“When I came into the school I had pretty in-depth conversations with all the teachers; I had to listen to them before I could lead the school forward.” (ELE 8). “...everything we do in education goes back to relationships.” (ELE 2).</p>
Capacity Building	The process of developing and strengthening skills, knowledge, and abilities of individuals to increase the capacity of an organization to reach its goals.	62%	<p>“So, it begins with your faculty...and then you just building your teacher capacity to help students achieve.” (ELE 3). “My job is to build teacher capacity.” (ELE 3). “...our job is to really build the capacity among those teachers.” Secondary Principal 5 (SEC 5). Effective professional development is key to raising the bar for all students. Teacher capacity has to increase and that is my job.” (SEC 2).</p>
Shared Leadership	The process of expanding a leader’s influence by distributing decision making and governance to stakeholders.	68%	<p>“Figuring out how to use those people has been key in help[ing] and using my leadership team. That is all key in helping me stay focused on the right things because otherwise I get bogged down in the minutiae of everything else.” (SEC 3). “I would say the thing we’re doing best right now is we have a really high functioning leadership team that includes teachers and coaches. We all work together to reach our goals. I can’t do it all myself and I’ve found that if I let other people take the lead, we move a lot quicker towards achieving our goals.” (SEC 6).</p>
Professional Learning Communities	A group of educators who regularly meet together, reviews student achievement data, shares expertise, and collaboratively plan to improve instruction.	87%	<p>“We tailor the instructional needs, those things that help us have those high standards of learning for every student, in PLCs. That’s where it happens.” (ELE 5). “I make sure our PLC coaches have time at least once a month presenting on high-yield practices.” (SEC 5). “PLCs are crucial for higher levels of instruction. I don’t know how else to get there.” “The first thing I did at my new school was immediately set up our PLCs.” (ELE 5).</p>

**Building and maintaining relationships.** There are obvious overlapping elements of building relationship and the VAL-ED key processes of *supporting* and *implementing*. Coding for this theme was based on principals' mention of building relationships as a distinct behavior or action. Principals who mentioned this theme often emphasized its vital role in maximizing their ability to set a vision for their school, to establish and implement school improvement plans, and to correct and change elements of a school culture that obstructed the focus on students. Five of the 16 principals (3 elementary, 2 secondary) were in the first or second year of their current assignment at the time of the interviews. Each of these five principals mentioned building relationships as an essential process as they entered a school community. At the time of her interview, Heather had just completed her 12<sup>th</sup> year as an elementary principal and her first year in her current assignment. When asked about establishing high standards of learning for all students in her new school, she identified trust and building relationship as preeminent:

The first thing that you have to do to be able to do anything whether it's you know high learning for all kids or any kind of change process; you have to have the trust and the relationship building. . . Well, first help building that relationship and that trust factor.

During the conclusion of his interview, in which he reflected on what he had done to earn a highly effective rating in the VAL-ED assessment, Alex, a former elementary principal and current district principal, said the following:

Probably more so than I was effective at running the building I was effective at building a positive relationship with people. . . but probably the best thing I did was in fact about building good relationships with my people.

**Capacity building.** When asked about how they established the VAL-ED core components, LCL principals in this study, 7 secondary principals and 2 elementary principals

specifically mentioned capacity building. Three principals linked capacity building to providing relevant and effective professional development for teachers. Noting the importance of establishing high standards of student learning for all students, one of the elementary principals, Grant, described a scenario in his school where he, in collaboration with his faculty and school community council, identified a need for improved writing instruction. Grant stressed the importance of including stakeholders when identifying a focus of instructional improvement. When he described *implementing* the improvement plan, he said, “So it begins with your faculty. . . And then you just build your teacher capacity to help students achieve.” He then talked about the actions he took to provide the support the teachers needed to reach the desired outcome of instructional improvement:

We did some in-services on writing. We train[ed] them about writing and we decided that we couldn't improve if we didn't measure it. So, we developed a writing rubric school-wide that we did three times a year and everybody graded the rubric.

The other elementary principal who mentioned capacity building described the concept this way: “So we did effective PD. And I took the lead on that. I was the lead learner of the building.” He concluded, “And that's how you get buy-in. And that's how you really get things to the end of the row. It's how you build capacity.”

One of the seven secondary principals also referred to his efforts in capacity building by providing relevant and effective professional development to improve the function of PLCs in his building. Logan stated,

You know the thing that we did we took it, this was a real culture changer for our teachers, we took all the CTLs (Collaborative Team Leaders) and a few other teachers to

San Antonio to a conference PLC conference...It totally changed the culture and the way they look at their job and the way they look at supporting each other.

As evidenced by the examples above, principals considered PLCs as valuable instruments for establishing and maintaining core components of learning-centered schools.

**Shared leadership.** All 16 principals referenced shared leadership 1 or more times without being asked directly about it, as shown in Table 6. Like other participant-identified emergent themes, principals identified and described shared leadership when asked about the core components of learning-centered schools; shared leadership was described as an action taken to establish and maintain those components. This study found that learning-centered leaders make deliberate efforts to include and empower others in their school as a method to maximize their own influence, particularly within the context of establishing and maintaining a culture of professional behavior, high standards for student learning, and quality instruction. “So, we're in this together,” said Heather, when talking about sharing the responsibilities of leadership and school improvement. “It takes us all,” Nick echoed. Brent described the role of his leadership team this way: “Figuring out how to use those people has been key in help[ing] and using my leadership team. That is all key in helping me stay focused on the right things because otherwise I get bogged down in the minutiae of everything else.”

When describing the condition of his school when he became the principal, Ben stated that the professional culture was healthy, but the school lacked a clear vision of how to move forward, particularly in terms of improving instruction. He understood that the best way to develop a vision, especially for a large secondary school, was to share the responsibility by utilizing his teachers and leadership team. “I think everything runs through the leadership team.” Ben continued,

I think you know we simply can't be our best if it's my vision. It has to be our vision.

When there's peers and teachers are seeing that these peers have really high standards for their own class and they're setting really awesome goals. Collaborative culture matters.

In other words, learning-centered leaders do not subscribe to the “hero-leader” philosophy.

Rather, they deliberately share responsibilities, the vision for the school, and the school’s purpose, thereby empowering teachers and creating a collaborative school culture.

Table 6

*Number of Principals Referencing Shared Leadership Within the Six Core Components*

	Culture of Professional Behavior	Connection to External Communities	High Standards for Student Learning	Quality Instruction	Performance Accountability	Rigorous Curriculum
Elementary	3 (19%)	2 (12%)	5 (31%)	4 (25%)	4 (25%)	2 (12%)
Secondary	6 (37%)	0 (0%)	7 (44%)	6 (37%)	3 (19 %)	3 (19%)
Total	9 (56%)	2 (12%)	12 (75%)	10 (62%)	7 (44%)	5 (31%)

### **Professional Learning Communities**

Fifteen principals mentioned PLCs one or more times without having been asked questions directly related to PLCs. The three core components that met the threshold for shared leadership—culture of professional behavior, high standards for student learning, and quality instruction—also met the threshold for PLCs (see Table 7). Learning-centered principals described PLCs as the primary strategic vehicle for bolstering learning-centered core competencies in their schools. One secondary principal, Nick, said that PLCs were, “crucial for higher levels of instruction.” Heather emphasized that PLCs were spaces in which individualized instruction was developed: “You tailor your instruction to meet those needs and that takes place in PLCs.” Paul detailed the PLC results cycle and the desired outcome of that process when he explained:

It's basically taking the work of teams and putting it in a very visible graphic that allows them to see how as teacher teams they can collaborate together to grow throughout the process, essentials, common assessments and interventions, but very important is that you have the goal in place and then when you don't reach the goal or you reach the goal there's that team conversation.

Principals placed a high value on PLCs, or the PLC results cycle, and credited effective PLCs as a major contributing factor to the core competencies of learning-centered schools.

Another function of PLCs emerged when principals were asked about monitoring, which is one of the VAL-ED key processes. VAL-ED defines *monitoring* as “systematically collect[ing] and analyz[ing] data to make judgments that guide decisions and actions for continuous improvement.” This definition closely matches a prescribed function of PLCs, which is probably why, when asked about *monitoring* and evaluations, principals in this study talked about PLCs. In fact, when asked about *monitoring* as a key process, all 16 principals mentioned PLCs as one of the platforms through which they systemically collected and analyzed data to drive school improvement.

Table 7

*Number of Principals Referencing PLCs within the Six Core Components*

	Culture of Professional Behavior	Connection to External Communities	High Standards for Student Learning	Quality Instruction	Performance Accountability	Rigorous Curriculum
Elementary	5 (31%)	1 (6%)	4 (25%)	4 (25%)	3 (19%)	4 (25%)
Secondary	4 (25%)	0 (0%)	6 (37%)	6 (37%)	5 (31 %)	2 (12%)
Total	9 (56%)	1 (6%)	10 (62%)	10 (62%)	8 (50%)	6 (37%)



## Discussion

Studies on student achievement outcomes, school culture, teacher retention, and overall school improvement indicate that the principal plays a central and necessary role in a school's success (Cotton, 2003; Goodwin, 2018; Mayes & Gethers, 2018; Orr & Cleveland-Innes, 2015; Schleicher, 2011). This study had three main goals. First, it sought to identify patterns or themes of leadership actions or behaviors are manifested from the in-person interviews of the distinguished principals in the 2014 VAL-ED survey. Second, to identify emergent themes in the data from the in-person interviews with learning-centered elementary and secondary principals. Third, the study sought to discover whether certain key processes were more commonly used by elementary or secondary administrators.

Data from this study revealed a variety of examples in which leaders applied key processes of learning-centered leadership to positively influence the core components of learning-centered schools. The key processes of supporting and implementing were referred to most frequently throughout the interviews. This study found no substantive difference in application of the original VAL-ED key processes between elementary and secondary administrators. Previous studies on learning-centered leadership have also indicated no difference between the approaches of learning-centered leaders at the elementary and secondary levels. However, four new self-identified themes also emerged from the data, and two of these were discussed differently by elementary and secondary administrators.

### VAL-ED Key Processes

**Supporting.** The key process of *supporting* was referenced the most by LCL principals in this study. Learning-centered principals in this study understand that they can directly influence student learning by supporting and engaging with teachers because teachers have the

most direct influence on students (Robinson et al., 2008). They understand the necessity to create and support a positive climate and culture, establish and maintain a shared vision of high expectations for all students, and set an example for their teachers and community (Blase & Anderson, 1995; Hallinger, 2003; Ninkovic & Knezevic Floric, 2018).

The type of support LCL principals offered their teachers varied from providing teachers with materials for instructional improvement, advocating for additional resources from the school district, and taking the time to engage with teachers, individually and collectively. These principals described how they were “right there along-side” their teachers by attending PLCs and professional development activities. This LCL behavior, promoting and participating in teacher learning and development, has a significant impact on school improvement (Robinson et al., 2008).

They were regularly present in classrooms for formal and informal observations and provided feedback to teachers. They included teachers in the process of school improvement, who helped create a culture of professionalism. They worked to hold teachers accountable to expected school achievement outcomes while simultaneously assuring that teachers were provided with whatever they needed to reach those expectations. These supportive LCL behaviors provide an example for teachers on how they should support their own students. LCL principals in this study demonstrated their confidence that when they support teachers, students are better served.

**Planning and implementing.** This study found that LCL principals deliberately put instructional and operational practices into place that had the potential to benefit student learning. LCL principals consistently described the process of problem identification, the collaborative development of a plan, and then implementation of the plan. All references to

planning and implementation by administrators in this study were concentrated on improving student achievement outcomes, including the few references to problems that were also related to school operations. This indicates that LCL principals are focused on student achievement and evaluate decisions and actions against that focus (Leithwood, Begley, & Cousins, 1990; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). It is interesting to note that *planning* and *implementing* only had a 2% difference in the total number of references between elementary and secondary principals, perhaps suggesting that these two LCL key processes have a more universal value.

**Advocating.** *Advocating* garnered the fewest references from LCL principals in this study, but was mentioned at least once by 87% of principals. Interestingly, the two principals who described detailed actions they took to support school improvement efforts that closely matched VAL-ED's definition of *advocating* were principals of high-need, Title 1 schools that had previously been suffering from very low student achievement scores on state assessments. One school, in fact, had some of lowest reading scores in the state before the principal interviewed for this study was appointed.

Both of these LCL principals recognized the need to promote the diverse needs of students within and beyond the school (VAL-ED Manual, 2008) by taking deliberate measures to include parents in school governance, by celebrating the diverse makeup of the school community, and by working to establish high standards of learning for all students by setting attainable goals for student achievement with parents and teachers. They also celebrated how not long after they advocated for the diverse needs of their students, student achievement data began to improve and the school culture became more student focused.

Establishing high standards of learning for all students is a core component of learn-centered schools. LCL principals in this study described advocating for the needs of their

students as a key process in closing the achievement gap in their schools. Research literature has supported the notion that *advocating* is an essential process to establishing high standards of learning and closing the achievement gap between advantaged and less advantaged students (Goldring, Cravens, et al., 2009; Leithwood & Louis, 2012).

**Monitoring.** All LCL principals in this study placed a high value on *monitoring* teachers and student achievement data. Of the principals that were questioned, 94% responded negatively when asked about the formal teacher evaluation as an effective tool to monitor teachers and to collect data; data collections being a core element in VAL-ED's definition of *monitoring*. They describe a wide variety of actions to assess the effectiveness of the educational programming in their schools, ranging from evaluating school wide data to participating in PLCs and reviewing common formative assessment data with teachers. LCL principals easily cited specific student achievement data in the interview without referencing notes or spread sheets. They knew how their students were progressing and what areas or individual teachers needed their attention and focus.

**Communicating.** LCL principals discussed *communicating* actions by publishing school newsletters, staff memos, maintaining current information on school websites and social media, and being visible at school events to talk with parents and community members. There is, however, an understanding among these principals' that what they say and what they write has greater authority and influence. What they communicate is distinct because they are in *the* position of authority in the school community. They believe that it is incumbent on the principal to communicate the school vision to the school community, to express direction to teachers and staff, to listen to input from stakeholders, and to regularly inform the school community of issues related to the school. Veteran principal, Nick, summarized the importance of the principal

effectively *communicating* when he said, “And I think I just better appreciate [the] value, the power that hearing from the principal can have.”

### **Emergent Themes**

The four new themes that emerged from this study’s data are: 1) building and maintaining relationships; 2) capacity building; 3) professional learning communities (PLCs); and, 4) shared leadership. Many elements of these emergent themes align with the VAL-ED key processes. Building and maintaining relationships, for example, includes actions that support teachers and other stakeholders in a school. Positive relationships between teachers and principals also contributes to VAL-ED components, such as a school’s culture of learning and professional behavior (Mayes & Gethers, 2018). This study discovered four emergent themes because (a) they were specifically mentioned and described by participants without being prompted directly, (b) the number of participants who referenced them met the threshold for inclusion into the study, and (c) the new themes provided rich insight into the actions of highly effective, LCL principals.

**Building and maintaining relationships and capacity building.** There was a distinct difference in the ways that elementary and secondary principals referred to the themes of building and maintaining relationships and capacity building. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to analyze why there was a difference between elementary and secondary administrators regarding these two themes, one might reasonably assume that differences between the two school levels and the limits of a single leader’s span of influence are contributing factors. Generally speaking, elementary schools have one administrator—the principal—while secondary schools, particularly large comprehensive high schools, typically have a principal and several assistant principals. Different school structures change the dynamics

between school administration, leadership, and teachers, thereby moderating the bureaucratic and hierarchal characteristics of a school (Elmore, 2004).

The organizational differences between primary and secondary schools could explain why all secondary school administrators in this study referenced capacity building as part of their practice. Interestingly, of the two elementary principals who described capacity building as a key process, one led a school of 1,100 students and had a full-time assistant principal. An elementary school of that size may possibly exhibit similar limits on a principal's span of influence that would be seen in a secondary school. The other described his leadership actions and behaviors within the context of opening a new school, which suggests an obvious need to build capacity because the school's capacity is mostly unknown

The differing characteristics of primary and secondary schools likely influenced the responses of administrators related to building and maintaining relationships. The theme of building and maintaining relationships was almost the exact inverse of capacity building and was referenced much more frequently by elementary principals than by secondary principals. This was an unanticipated finding.

**Shared leadership and PLCs.** Shared leadership fosters innovation, welcomes the participation of stakeholders, and increases the influence of the school principal (Conley & Goldman, 1994; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Mayes & Gethers, 2018; Orr & Cleveland-Innes, 2015). The principal alone cannot positively transform a school. Leadership, when authentically shared or distributed with teachers and other school stakeholders, can actually expand a leader's influence and is key to building overall school capacity and competency in achieving stated goals of student achievement (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood et al., 1990;).

The administrators in this study embraced the practice of shared leadership as a way to expand their influence. In fact, the theme of shared leadership emerged without any direct reference to the concept, yet all administrators discussed shared leadership as a way to improve student learning. Administrators described extending their sphere of influence by empowering teachers and establishing functional leadership teams focused on improving student learning.

Administrators repeatedly stressed the vital role of PLCs in improving student learning. PLCs were identified as key contributors to each of the learning-centered core components at both the elementary and secondary level, including connecting to external communities. The prevalence of references to PLCs may have resulted from the fact that the participants all belonged to a single organization, which may have contributed to common operative language and practices. If this was the case, the school district, and these particular school leaders, should be recognized for implementing evidenced-based practices. One participant summed up the sentiments of all the study's administrators when he said, "I believe very strongly in what we call [in] the PLC results cycle."

### **Limitations of the Study**

A limitation of this study was that all participants worked in the same school district. Their responses, therefore, were contextualized by the culture and practices of a single organization. For more than a decade, this particular school district has emphasized PLCs as an expected practice in each school. Within the last seven years, this district adopted the PLC results cycle framework and has supported its implementation by hiring PLC coaches to support both teachers and administrators. Beginning in the 2019 school year, the district provided a PLC coach for every school. Schools in this district were also equipped with leadership teams, comprised of administrators, teachers, academic coaches, and PLC coaches. Principals were

given the license to design and utilize their leadership teams to meet the needs of the school; as a result, there was variation in how principals utilize PLCs and leadership teams, but all schools in this district had these resources in place.

Another limitation was the relatively small sample size, which may account for limited variation in some of the data, particularly with regards to the limited differences between elementary and secondary principals. Additionally, after reviewing the data, it was noted that the interview questions did not elicit as much descriptive data on *advocating* as they had for other key processes. This is perhaps a result of inadequacy of the interview questions themselves and less of a result of a lack of advocacy on the part of study participants.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Over the past several decades principals have been increasingly held accountable for student achievement outcomes. A large body of school leadership research shows that a principal's influence on student achievement is significant, but indirect. This paradigm may indicate the critical need for current and future principals, and those who prepare principals for school leadership, to have the knowledge of specific leadership actions or behaviors that most directly influence student achievement, and an understanding on how to apply them into practice. Research on learning-centered leadership (LCL) validates the positive impact that LCL leaders have on student achievement and pinpoints specific actions and behaviors, or key processes, that LCL principals utilize to apply LCL. The key processes of LCL identified by LCL research include: (a) planning, (b) implementing, (c) advocating, (d) communicating, and (e) monitoring.

This study presents descriptive evidence from 16 principals, 8 elementary and 8 secondary, who earned the highest composite rating on the nationally normed *Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education* evaluation tool, which evaluates learning-centered



leadership. LCL leaders in this study describe how they apply key processes of learning-centered leadership in their daily interactions with teachers and parents, by establishing and implementing plans for instructional improvement, by closely monitoring student progress, and by grounding all that they do on student achievement. Moreover, the descriptive evidence in this study underscores how LCL leaders are purposeful in their targeted application of influence on teachers because they recognize that teachers have the most direct impact on student achievement. Therefore, the information presented in this study can better inform practicing and aspiring principals on which specific actions and behaviors they could employ in order to be learning-centered leaders; thus, maximizing their influence on student achievement.

*Supporting* received the highest number of references from participants in this study, which included examples of how principals support teachers on an individual level. Often their examples revealed motives to support teachers other than improving student achievement, such as showing compassion about a teacher's family situation. These instances of *supporting* teachers, along with the participant-identified emergent theme of building and maintaining relationships, underscore the value that principals in this study place on individuals and the building a culture of trust. This could reasonably be attributed character traits, dispositions, or personalities of principals, which the authors of VAL-ED may have deliberately steered away from in their LCL framework. Regardless, it is evident in this study that distinguished LCL principals demonstrate an authentic and caring disposition towards their teachers.

While this study provided insight into the actions and behaviors of LCL principals, more research is needed to understand how leaders develop these behaviors. What contributes to the development of a learning-centered leader? Do LCL principals of low socio-economic schools (SES) utilize key processes the same as LCL principals of high SES schools? How do

administrative certificate programs develop these skills into students prior to entering the field of school leadership? How much of a principal's leadership style is grounded in examples set by other leaders? Are there differences between female and male principals? How would the responses from below-basic rated principals differ from those offered by distinguished rated principals? The areas of difference between elementary and secondary school leaders also call for more research. Future studies should investigate how the size and structure of a school changes the way that leaders operationalize learning-centered processes. What are other possible variables? Further research is needed to better explore the variability in traditional school structures that lead to changes in the dynamics of learning-centered leadership.

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## APPENDIX A

### Review of Literature

The school principal has an indirect yet significant impact on student achievement (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018; Conley & Goldman, 1994; Cotton, 2003; Dufour, 2002; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004;). Researchers in the field of educational leadership and school reform claim that the role of the principal is essential in the current era of school accountability, particularly where there is a need for significant school improvement (Elmore, 2004; Holloway, Nielsen, & Saltmarsh, 2018; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004;; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002), along with other policy developments related to education in the United States over the past 20 years, have led to significant changes to the role of the school principal, both perceived and actual (Mitchell, Crowson, & Shipps, 2011; Murphy, 2006). Studies on student achievement outcomes, school culture, teacher retention, and overall school improvement indicate that the principal plays a central and necessary role (Cotton, 2003; Goodwin, 2018; Mayes & Gethers, 2018; Orr & Cleveland-Innes, 2015; Schleicher, 2011). School reform researcher Richard Elmore states that in this new era of school accountability, “There has never been a time for a greater need for effective leadership” (2004, p. 43).

Research on the influence of school leaders published before the 1990s, although often lacking adequate theoretical frameworks, clear conceptual definitions, and proven methodologies, supported the belief that the school leader was key to school success (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982; Bridges, 1982; Cotton, 2003; Farnsworth, 2015). From the mid-1990s to the present day, researchers have more clearly defined concepts of school leadership, refined methods of examining how leaders affect school culture and climate and have identified



other variables that indirectly affect student achievement (Farnsworth, 2015; Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2009; Murphy, 2006).

In educational leadership, the two theories or approaches to leadership that are most commonly employed are instructional leadership and transformational leadership (Ninkovic & Knezevic Floric, 2018; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). The greater focus on school leadership as a central component to school reform and student achievement, and the development of accountability policies (Marzano et al., 2005), refined research on leadership in education has led to a focus on student learning leadership, commonly known as instructional leadership (Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, & Porter, 2006; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, & Brown, 2014). Most school leadership credentialing programs emphasize instructional leadership as a significant component in school leader preparation (Elmore, 2004; Murphy, 2006). Professional development for school leaders also places the instructional leadership aspects of school leadership as essential to effectively improving student achievement. “Instructional leadership is the equivalent of the holy grail in educational administration” (Elmore, 2004, p. 48).

In the past decade, studies on transformational leadership, both as an individual topic of study and as a companion to instructional leadership, have gained attention (Holloway et al., 2018; Mayes & Gethers, 2018; Ninkovic & Knezevic Floric, 2018; Rayner, 2017). Additionally, leadership researchers have recently advocated for an ontological shift from the traditional “great man,” or hero, approach to leadership to a new focus on the daily interactions of leaders and on leadership that is distributed and infused throughout an organization (Cravani, Lindgren, & Pakendorff, 2010; Marzano et al., 2005). For example, Cravani et al. asserted, “We must also

challenge our deep-rooted tendency to make the abstract notion of ‘leadership,’ concrete in the guise of individual managers” (2010, p. 78).

With the growing understanding of how principal development and evaluation are essential features in school improvement efforts (Elmore, 2004; Goldring, Cravens, et al., 2009; Hess, 2013), in 2008, Vanderbilt University published a principal evaluation framework and program. The Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education, or VAL-ED evaluative framework, measures principal effectiveness using ratings on core components and key processes. The evaluation and ratings are given by teachers whom the principal supervises and by the principal’s supervisor, thus providing multiple perspectives of the principal within the same framework.

This review examines literature on: (a) the evolution and development of educational leadership research, specifically over the past four decades; (b) transformational leadership; (c) instructional leadership, otherwise referred to as learning-centered leadership; and (d) supporting research and publications used as the conceptual and theoretical basis for the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED).

### **Review of the Literature**

Leadership is a construct that has yet to be recognized as an academic discipline (Marzano et al., 2005). The concept of leadership, however, “dates back to antiquity” and is found in the scholarly works of Plato, Caesar, and Plutarch (Marzano et al., 2005). Even though it is not an independent academic discipline, “leadership has been intimately linked to the effective functioning of complex organizations throughout the centuries” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 5). Leadership matters, especially in difficult times or in times of transition (Goodwin, 2018;

Rayner, 2017). Murphy even asserted that leadership “is the key condition in explaining organizational success and failure” (2006, p. 2).

### **Leadership and School Effectiveness**

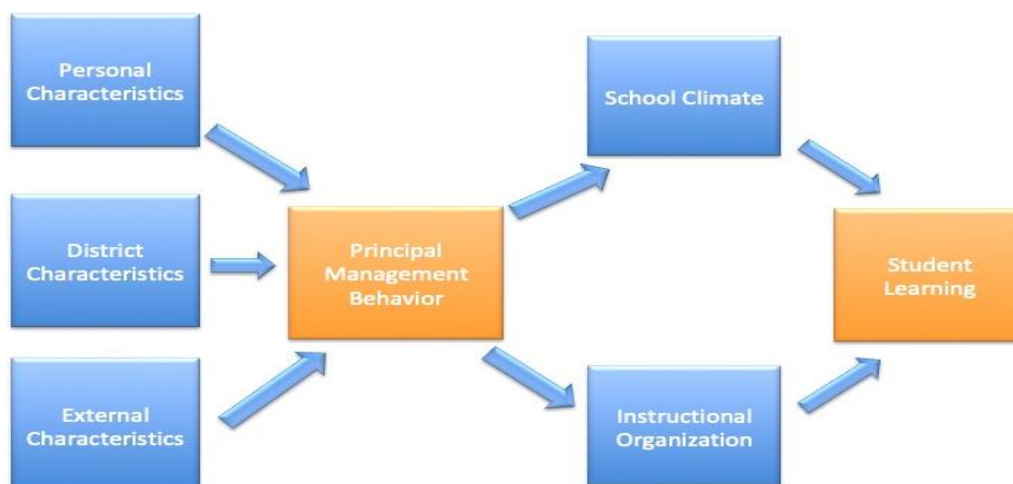
Leadership carries a variety of definitions and is often perceived through the lens of the behaviors, characteristics, and traits of an individual who by some action has been placed in a position of control or responsibility over others (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018; Fullan, 2007).

Literature on leadership, however, commonly defines the construct more broadly. Murphy et al. (2006) defined leadership in three central ways: “First we note that *leadership is a process*; it is not a personal trait of characteristic of an individual. Second, *leadership involves influence*; it requires interactions and relationships among people. Third, *leadership involves purpose*; it helps organizations and the people affiliated with them—in our case—move towards reaching desired goals” (p. 2). Due to the complexity and breadth of leadership as a construct, early educational leadership researchers acknowledged the lack of a clear conceptualization, theoretical basis, and valid methodologies (Bridges, 1982; Hess, 2013; Murphy, 1988).

School leaders have an indirect yet significant impact on a school’s effectiveness, specifically in regard to student achievement outcomes (Cotton, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004). This belief is common among education scholars and practitioners. Leithwood et al. (2004) claim that “we have found no documented accounts of schools undergoing successful reform without the presence of a strong, dynamic school leader” (p. 3). The necessity of a capable principal to lead schools to better serve 21st century students has been brought into the spotlight of school reform even more so with the introduction of school accountability (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018; Cotton, 2003; Dufour, 2002; Elmore, 2004).

Bridges (1982) analyzed 322 studies on school administrators, mostly using dissertation abstracts from 1967 to 1980 in order to map the domains of research on school administration and identify research problems and potential strategies. The study found that most of the research from that time period lacked a strong theoretical framework and centered on personality traits, experiential background, and school environment (Bridges, 1982). The author criticized researchers for treating research problems in an ad hoc manner (instead of programmatically) and for relying too heavily on “survey research designs, questionnaires of dubious reliability and validity and relatively simplistic types of statistical analyses” (Bridges, 1982, p. 25). The author further lamented the lack of any practical findings in the research. Bridges did find, however, a new trend of using administrative evaluations that included outcomes as a domain of measurement (Bridges, 1982).

In the same year that Bridges’ (1982) analysis of school and administrator effectiveness was published, Bossert et al. (1982) published a review of literature that targeted research on the conceptual definition of the instructional manager, or instructional leader. The authors asserted, “Recent work on ‘successful schools’ underscores the importance of instructional leadership, especially the role of the principal in coordinating and controlling the instructional program. Such work has led to a reappearance of the old maxim, ‘effective principal, effective school’” student learning (Bossert et al., 1982). Perhaps most significant to the development of educational leadership research, this study identified four central behavioral categories of principal leadership and an accompanying framework for examining instructional management (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Framework for examining instructional management.

The Bossert et al. framework (1982) illustrates that a principal's instructional management behavior affects two basic features of the school's social organization: climate and organization. Bossert et al. (1982) describe the framework as follows:

These are the contexts in which various social relationships are formed and which, in turn, shape teacher's behavior and students' learning experiences that produce student learning. At the same time, the principal's own management behavior is shaped by a number of factors external to the school. Although the inclusion of situational elements in this framework helps in synthesizing the current knowledge concerning the instructional management role of the principal, the framework actually raises more questions than it answers. (p. 39)

Bossert et al. (1982) acknowledged that their research did not account for the potential variability of the normative elements of a school's social organization, such as the climate of the school and its influence on the school principal. They also point out that their four central behaviors are based on the classic model of bureaucratic, hierarchal, tightly coupled organizations wherein the leader or manager of the organization closely oversees the actions of

his/her subordinates and adjusts structures as needed in order to improve capacity to achieve stated organizational goals (Farnsworth, 2015). This classic model does not align with the widely accepted organizational model of education, described as “loosely coupled,” wherein the leader (principal) administers the structures of the school and district instead of managing student learning (Elmore, 2004). Furthermore, the classic model of organizational administration is misaligned with traditional structures of public education. Generally speaking, elementary schools have one administrator—the principal—and secondary schools, particularly large comprehensive high schools, will have a principal and several assistant principals. The variability in traditional school structures changes the dynamics of school administration and leadership, thereby moderating the bureaucratic and hierarchal characteristics of a school. Regardless of its shortcomings, Bossert et al.’s work (1982) did significantly contribute to developing the concept of the principal as an instructional leader (Hallinger, 2003).

### **Causality and Educational Leadership**

Effective school research began in earnest in the 1970s from an ontologically qualitative approach (Bridges, 1982; Hess, 2013). Early research questions were designed to identify the characteristics of effective schools and how those characteristics contributed to better school outcomes. Much of the research on educational leadership is based on causality, which looks for patterns that demonstrate what leadership actions cause certain behaviors of the operating or technical core and how those actions affect organizational success in reaching desired outcomes. These research questions are designed to identify causal mechanisms (how x caused y), which are best answered using qualitative methods (Ward, 2013).

Teddlie (2005) published an article addressing causality and its implications for studies of educational leadership that focused on the methodological issues of causal education leadership studies assessing the impact of school leadership on student achievement outcomes. He stated:

There is considerable evidence of a link between school leadership and school effectiveness literature from several countries. Despite this, there is a lack of clarity regarding the best methods to further examine this link, both in terms of causal effects (i.e., the magnitude of the relationship between educational leadership and school outcomes) and causal mechanisms (i.e., the processes whereby education leadership affects school outcomes). (Teddlie, 2005, p. 222)

The study of the relationship between school leadership and school effectiveness is complex and contextually bounded. This creates distinct challenges that often require a mixed methods/blended approach. Issues in causality studies differ from the three basic methodological approaches in education leadership studies: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (also known as the pragmatic approach). In Teddlie's conclusion (2005), he argued that a pragmatic, or mixed methods approach, is the most effective to analyze education leadership:

These case studies serve as examples of the type of information that qualitative students of educational leadership can generate regarding the causal mechanisms at work in *differentially* effective schools. Quantitative studies can approximate the magnitude of causal effects, but qualitative studies are required to provide insight into the causal mechanisms whereby effective leadership operates across different contexts. (Teddlie, 2005)

In regard to quantitative analysis of school leadership, Teddlie (2005) referred to two key studies that analyzed the specific relationship between educational leadership and student

achievement. Witziers, Bosker, and Kruger (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of 37 studies in which they found that leadership has a small yet statistically positive direct effect on student achievement. Seven specific leadership behaviors were examined, and it was found that the behavior of defining and communication the mission had the largest effect on student achievement (Teddlie, 2005). Witziers et al. (2003) also conducted a meta-analysis of five other studies in which “the indirect effects of educational leadership (e.g., mediated through teacher behaviors) were estimated” (Teddlie, 2005, p. 219). They concluded that “the empirical evidence reported in these five studies support the tenability of the indirect effect model, and comparisons of the direct with the indirect model all favor the idea of mediated effects” (Witziers et al., 2003, p. 418). The authors also highlighted the need for further development of the conceptualization of educational leadership:

Better conceptualization of the phenomenon of educational leadership is needed. Context and intermediate factors should be taken into account in future research . . . Different school cultures can indeed be distinguished with different consequences for student outcomes. What is needed is more insight to the role of school leaders in developing and sustaining these cultures. (Witziers et al., 2003, p. 416)

This statement supports Teddlie’s claim that analysis of school leadership effects on school performance is contextually bounded, thus highlighting the need to a pragmatic analytical approach (Teddlie, 2005).

The other study Teddlie (2005) referenced was conducted by Hallinger and Heck (1996). The results of the Witziers et al. (2003) study supported the position of Hallinger and Heck (1996), who presented a conceptual scheme for classifying nonexperimental studies of the effects of school leaders. The authors analyzed 40 studies on the relationship between school leader



behavior and school effectiveness (student achievement). Three criteria were established to select the studies: (a) principal leadership as one of the independent variables; (b) an explicit measure of school performance as a dependent variable; and, (c) studies outside the United States were included if they met the first two criteria. At the onset of their analysis, the authors acknowledged the challenge of identifying, let alone analyzing, the relationship between school leadership behaviors and school outcomes because that relationship is complex and difficult to verify empirically (Farnsworth, 2015). In their view, “the principal’s role is best conceived as part of a web of environmental, personal, and in-school relationships that combine to influence organizational outcomes” (Hallinger & Heck, 1996, p. 6).

Over one-third of the studies reviewed by Hallinger and Heck (1996) fell into the model B classification (mediated effects with or without antecedents), which theorized that the influence of the school principal came about indirectly—the principal influenced variables that directly affected student achievement. This classification follows the pattern established in the Bossert et al. (1982) model. Hallinger and Heck concluded, “These studies categorized under models B and B1 used increasingly sophisticated theoretical models, stronger research designs, and more powerful statistical methods. These studies yielded more frequent instances of positive findings concerning the role of the principal in school effectiveness” (Hallinger & Heck, 1996, p. 37). The studies categorized as model B demonstrated the complex nature of educational leadership and the necessity of considering additional variables, such as organizational factors, in order to ensure validity and a correct sampling.

Teddlie (2005) identified three core limitations to quantitative approaches when studying educational leadership: (a) random assignment of treatment to sampling is hardly ever possible; (b) there is no group that could be logically designated as the control; and (c) educational

leadership is the independent variable, which is not manipulable. Teddlie (2005) also analyzed results of qualitative studies on the processes of effective leadership in schools. Qualitative orientated case-study research is very common in literature on school effectiveness research (SER). Evidence related to effective leadership in SER literature is most often associated with five leadership characteristics, namely: (a) being firm and purposeful; (b) involving others in the process; (c) exhibiting instructional leadership; (d) frequent, personal monitoring; and, (e) selecting and replacing staff (Teddlie, 2005). The second behavior, involving stakeholders in decision-making processes, has recently gained attention in the field of educational leadership and is considered an essential element in successful school reform (Bush, 2017; Holloway et al., 2018; Orr & Cleveland-Innes, 2015; Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang, 2016).

### **Instructional and Transformational Leadership**

Hallinger (2003) conceptualized instructional leadership in three dimensions: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school-learning climate. Each dimension is delineated by several key functions, or specific actions or behaviors, of the principal. Of the first the dimension, Hallinger (2003) states,

These functions concern the principal's role in working with staff to ensure that the school has clear, measurable goals that are focused in the academic progress of its students. It's the principal's responsibility to ensure that these goals are known and supported throughout the school community. (p. 323)

This dimension does not suggest that the school's mission is developed by the principal alone; rather, it is the principal's responsibility that the academic mission is clear and known to all stakeholders. In fact, a school mission developed collaboratively by school stakeholders

(teachers, parents, and community members) is key to ensuring that the mission is known (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Sebastian et al., 2016).

Hallinger's (2003) second dimension, managing the instructional program, focuses on the coordination and control of instruction and curriculum. The related functions are supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum, and monitoring student progress. These functions require the principal to be immersed in the daily instruction of the school, from regularly monitoring classroom instruction to developing a school-wide framework for a school's instructional program. Hallinger (2003) conceded that in larger schools, it simply is not possible for the principal alone to have this role, "Yet this framework assumes that development of the academic core of the school is a key leadership responsibility of the principal" (p. 333). The third dimension, promoting a positive school learning climate, is broader in scope and includes the following functions: protecting instructional time, promoting professional development, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers, and providing incentives for learning (Hallinger, 2003). Hallinger (2003) states, "It is the responsibility of the instructional leadership to align the school's standards and practices with its mission and to create a climate that supports teaching and learning" (p. 332).

In each of these three dimensions of instructional leadership, intersections with the approaches of transformational leadership are evident. The reference to the school's climate in the third dimension, for example, and necessity of the principal to create and support a positive climate and culture, are tied to key concepts of transformational leadership, specifically culture building, rewards, shared vision high expectations, and modeling (Blase & Anderson, 1995; Hallinger, 2003; Ninkovic & Knezevic Floric, 2018). Hallinger (2003) cited Leithwood et al.'s (2004) work on developing the concept of transformational leadership. Created in 1998,

Leithwood et al.'s model includes seven components: individualized support, shared goals, vision, intellectual stimulation, culture building, rewards, high expectations, and modeling (2004). These components suggest a motivational assumption grounded in a leader's understanding of the needs of individual faculty members instead of directed toward reaching an organizational goal. Hallinger (2003) characterized this feature of the transformational approach as a leader seeking to influence people from the bottom-up rather than from the top-down.

Hallinger (2003) conceptually contrasted his own approach with Leithwood et al.'s (2004) by categorizing them into first-order actions and second-order actions. Instructional leadership is conceptualized as targeting first-order variables, specifically those variables that directly affect the instructional quality in the classroom, the creating of school-wide goals, monitoring teachers in their instructional practices, and coordinating the school instructional program. In contrast, transformational leadership focuses on second-order effects, or those areas of influence that are more directly linked to school climate, such as building a relationship of trust with faculty members to grow their commitment to accomplishing the school mission and increasing motivation for individual improvement without explicit direction from the principal (Hallinger, 2003). Other theories of educational leadership focus on organizational elements and structures that include the leader as the person who stimulates organizational change from their position of authority and influence, which aligns more closely with the transformational leadership model (Hanna, 2001).

Leithwood, Begley, and Cousins' (1990) model also highlights the needs for distributed or shared leadership. The principal alone cannot positively transform a school. Leadership, when authentically shared or distributed with teachers and other school stakeholders, can actually expand a leader's influence and is key to building overall school capacity and competency in

achieving stated goals of student achievement (Leithwood et al., 1990; Leithwood & Louis, 2012).

Ninkovic and Knezevic Floric (2018) explored the relationship between transformative school leaders and teachers' self-efficacy among 120 post-secondary teachers in Serbia. Their findings showed that transformational leadership is positively related to teacher self-efficacy and that both were independent predictors of overall collective efficacy. The authors made two general claims about their data:

First, this study expanded the understanding of the relationship between different dimensions of transformational school leadership and collective teacher efficacy. Second, a contribution of teacher self-efficacy to collective efficacy beliefs was established, confirming the assumptions of social cognitive theory on reciprocal causality between two types of perceived efficacy: individual and collective. (Ninkovic & Knezevic Floric, 2018, p. 49)

The effects of instructional and transformational leadership on student achievement have been measured by end-of-level, criterion-referenced tests. Shatzer et al. (2014) surveyed 590 teachers in 37 elementary schools. Teachers in the study were asked to rate their principal's leadership style according to the Multifactor Rating Scale (a transformational measure) and the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (an instructional measure). The purpose of the study was to identify which theory or approach school principals should employ to maximize their impact on student achievement (Shatzer et al., 2014). The authors concluded that school leadership accounted for a meaningful variance in student achievement outcomes, with instructional leadership having a slightly higher observable impact than that of transformational leadership (Shatzer et al., 2014). These findings were consistent with a meta-analysis by

Robinson et al. (2008), who measured and compared the influence of transformational and instructional leadership on student achievement. Robinson et al. (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of 22 studies on instructional and transformational leadership in which they compared the two styles by examining effect size. The authors found that instructional leadership has an effective size nearly four times greater than that of transformational leadership (Robinson et al., 2008). Among their conclusions, the authors called for a more modern school leader model that extends beyond instructional or transformational models (Robinson et al., 2008). The authors suggested that abstract leadership theories—such as those resembling the characteristics of transformational leadership—do not produce leadership practices in school settings that have direct impacts on student achievement outcomes (Robinson et al., 2008).

In a secondary analysis, the authors identified and examined five sets of leadership practices: 1) establishing goals and outcomes; 2) resourcing strategically; 3) planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; 4) promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; and, 5) ensuring an orderly and supportive environment (Robinson et al., 2008). Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development had the largest effect size of .84, which was more than double the next largest of .42 for establishing goals and expectations. Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment had the smallest effect size of .27. Robinson et al. (2008) highlighted two major findings. The first related to instructional leadership; they stated that “the closer educational leaders get to the core business of teaching and learning, the more likely they are to have a positive impact on students’ outcomes” (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 664). The second finding focused on transformational skills, such as motivational, collaborative, and interpersonal skills, which are evidently embedded in instructional leadership practices (Farnsworth, 2015; Robinson, 2010).

Recent studies have mapped conceptual and qualitative methodological trends in educational leadership research. For example, Hallinger (2003) and Marzano et al. (2005) conducted meta-analyses in order to highlight research-based practices for effective leadership. The need for such studies came from the recurring limitations found in empirical investigations of a principal's role as an instructional leader. These limitations included lack of clearly explicated conceptual frameworks for studying relevant constructs, lack of valid and reliable instrumentation, lack of theoretical models that articulated how the principal influenced student learning, and reliance on weak research designs ill-equipped to test causal effects (Hallinger, 2003). Marzano et al. (2005) concluded, "Regardless of the theory used to explain it, leadership has been intimately linked to the effective functioning of complex organizations throughout the centuries" (p. 5).

In a study that analyzed the changes in education leadership research from the mid-1990s to 2005, Hallinger and Heck (2010) summarized their findings into five conclusions: (a) there is less agreement now than in past years about the problems researchers should address; (b) there is a shift towards a humanistic approach to leadership; (c) there are more robust methodological tools for inquiry, but still too few empirical studies; (d) inconsistency amongst leadership researches still leaves practices to rely on individual judgments; and, (e) the lack of empirical rigor in the field impacts future research (Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

Marks and Printy (2003) drew similar conclusions when they examined the relationship between transformational and instructional leadership within context of student achievement outcomes. They asserted that the transformational leadership style lacks the necessary elements to directly impact classroom instruction and also fails to prescribe specific practices for a successful school principal (Marks & Printy, 2003; Robinson, 2010; Shatzer et al., 2014). Marks

and Printy (2003) identified another variable in their sample of successful schools: “Our findings suggest that teachers have both the desire and the expertise to lead” (p. 24). Most of the 24 schools in the sample practiced some type of site-based management and/or shared governance. Schools in the study were undergoing some level of restructuring or turn-around effort due to low performance (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Conley and Goldman (1994) observed this “emerging” style of principal leadership, which they characterized by significant faculty involvement and ownership of site-based decisions, site operations, and especially the school’s vision of improvement and change. Facilitative leadership, as they called it, describes the “ability to lead without controlling, while making it easier for everyone in the organization to achieve agreed-upon goals” (Conley & Goldman, 1994, p. 3). The authors generally defined facilitative leadership as “the free movement of energy within a system” (Conley & Goldman, 1994).

Conley and Goldman’s study (1994) is an early examination of transformational leadership in schools and looks at the changing role of the principal from an operating manager to an instructional leader. The authors described elements of facilitative leadership, which include shared governance structures, a vision developed with input from all stakeholders, and high faculty empowerment (Blase & Anderson, 1995; Conley & Goldman, 1994). The authors emphasized the conflict among education leadership researchers, many of whom warned that the delineation of role boundaries in an organization could lead to power struggles, inefficiencies in site operations, and the weakening of principal influence (Conley & Goldman, 1994).

Regardless, the authors argued that in the new era of educator accountability and schools that are dynamic and responsive to the needs of students, facilitative leadership, executed correctly, could provide a framework to increase a school’s overall instructional capacity. Facilitative



leadership fosters innovation, welcomes the participation of stakeholders (which increases the probability of buy-in), and actually increases the influence of the school principal (Conley & Goldman, 1994; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Mayes & Gethers, 2018; Orr & Cleveland-Innes, 2015). The idea of facilitative leadership is represented in several studies of transformational leadership and is variously referred to as distributed leadership (Leithwood & Louis, 2012), appreciative leadership (Orr & Cleveland-Innes, 2015), collective leadership, or shared governance (Sebastian et al., 2016).

Stewart (2006) reviewed the conceptual and empirical development of transformational leadership research over nearly four decades. She draws a comparison between instructional and transformational leadership by highlighting how instructional leadership focuses on school goals, curriculum, instruction, and assessment, whereas transformational leadership focuses on restructuring the school by improving conditions (Stewart, 2006). Stewart (2006) argues that transformational leadership will continue to develop conceptually within the context of educational accountability and school reform in order to respond to the changing demands on a school leader.

Stewart (2006) analyzed the evolution of transformational leadership through the work of James MacGregor Burns, Bernard M. Bass, Bruce J. Avolio, and Kenneth Leithwood. Credit is given to Leithwood (2004) and his associates for bridging the works of Burns and Bass, particularly as their work is applied to the field of educational administration. Leithwood et al.'s conceptual model has "yielded extensive empirical studies and investigations over the past decade" (Stewart, 2006, p. 15). Rather than leading through control or coordination, Leithwood et al.'s model posits that leadership should be shared by the principal and teachers in order to cultivate individual support, personal vision, and intellectual stimulation (Stewart, 2006).

## **Leadership and Student Achievement**

Leithwood and Louis (2012) published a comprehensive work on the link between school leadership and student achievement. The three objectives of their work were: (a) identify school practices that influence student learning; (b) clarify how school leadership influences the quality of teaching and learning; and, (c) identify leadership characteristics and behaviors that are evident in leaders of effective or improved schools (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 2). Part one of their book focuses on the aspects of school leadership that matter most for students and analyzes studies, both qualitative and quantitative, linking student success to school leaders. “To date,” the authors concluded, “we have not found a single documented case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership” (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 3).

After collecting data from 180 schools in 43 districts in 9 states, Leithwood and Louis (2012) employed multiple methodological approaches, qualitative and quantitative, in order to maximize opportunities for cross-validating and cross-fertilizing. Furthermore, the authors drew on multiple theoretical perspectives (sociology, sociopsychology, political science, and organizational theory) in order to gain the particular insight that each perspective provides, thereby highlighting the complexity of leadership.

Our goal with this seemingly eclectic approach was to draw on the theoretical perspectives best suited to the question at hand – an approach especially useful for a project like ours with multiple principal investigators who had studied and used each stand of theory in their prior work. (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. xxv)

Their study provides a rich sampling of school leadership and their data verifies previous studies that demonstrate the importance of school leadership and its linkage to student achievement

(Leithwood & Louis, 2012). However, they also remind fellow researchers of the complexity of measuring the effects of leadership:

Our ability to track the interaction between leadership at multiple levels—within districts, between districts and schools, among schools, and within schools and classrooms. We have demonstrated that the effects of leadership on quality cannot be isolated in a particular unit of the particularly complex setting that is the U.S. educational system. Of course, good teaching is at the heart of student achievement—but fostering good teaching requires examining how leadership is integrated in a way that is responsive to the particular conditions facing the school. (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 228)

Leithwood's model also highlights the needs for distributed or shared leadership (Leithwood et al., 1990). The principal alone cannot positively transform a school. Leadership, when authentically shared or distributed with teachers and other school stakeholders, can actually expand a leader's influence and is key to building overall school capacity and competency in achieving stated goals of student achievement (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood et al., 1990)

### **Research using VAL-ED**

The Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED) framework for principal evaluation is an evidence-based, multi-rater scale based on decades of research on educational leadership (VAL-ED Manual, 2008). VAL-ED measures learning-centered leadership behaviors for the purpose of providing performance feedback and professional development planning for school leaders (VAL-ED Manual, 2008). A major contributor to the creation of the VAL-ED evaluation framework was the framework for analyzing effective school leadership proposed by Murphy et al. (2006). They focused on the two common principal strands

of leadership: leadership for learning (instructional leadership) and change-oriented leadership (transformational leadership). Murphy et al. (2006) argued that both leadership strands are evident in the leadership behaviors in high-performing schools. Instructional leadership behaviors are manifested when school leaders “consistently” focus on all aspect of student learning, which Murphy et al. (2006) call the core technology of schooling. They state, “Learning, teaching, curriculum, and assessment make all the other dimensions of schooling work in the service of a more robust core technology and improved student learning” (Murphy et al., 2006, p. 3). Effective learning-centered school leaders have a singular focus on student learning and base their decisions and actions on desired achievement outcomes. In contrast, transformational leadership strategies focus on what Murphy et al. (2006) call organizational processes, or key processes that lead those in the technical core (teachers in a school) to be more productive.

A central rationale for creating the VAL-ED principal assessment tool was that assessing principal effectiveness is an important, even essential, part of school improvement and is commonly part of a standards-based accountability system (VAL-ED Manual, 2008). Goldring, Porter, et al. (2009) conducted a comprehensive review of principal leadership assessment tools, which included the content and usage of 65 assessment instruments. Using the learning-centered framework of core components and key processes, the authors analyzed the content of the sampled instruments through an iterative and deductive coding process to identify themes (Goldring, Porter, et al., 2009). Then, the learning-centered framework was used to emphasize principal behaviors “that research has shown lead to student academic achievement” (Goldring, Porter, et al., 2009, p. 21).

The learning-centered framework of VAL-ED measures only the most relevant indicators of effective school leadership (VAL-ED Manual, 2008). The two dimensions of highly effective leadership within the framework are core components and key processes (VAL-ED Manual, 2008). Core components refer to what principals must accomplish, while key processes refer to what principals must do to activate and support those components (VAL-ED Manual, 2008). Key leadership processes refer to the ways in which leaders individually and collectively influence organizations and their constituencies to move toward achieving the core components (VAL-ED Manual, 2008). The core components of learning-centered leadership are linked to school conditions that lead to value-added performance in student achievement, attendance, graduation rates, and college enrollment (VAL-ED Manual, 2008). They represent the extent to which the principal ensures that the school has high standards of student learning, rigorous curriculum (content), quality instruction (pedagogy), a culture of learning and professional behavior, connections to external communities, and performance accountability.

The authors of VAL-ED state that this assessment only evaluates and assesses those leadership behaviors that most directly affect student achievement outcomes (VAL-ED Manual, 2008). Evaluation results can be used for professional development design, formal professional evaluations, and overall improvement of principal effectiveness.

### **Conclusion**

Educational leadership has evolved conceptually over the past four decades, especially with the introductions of school improvement research and initiatives and with accountability measures that were a part of NCLB. Due to the complex nature of leadership and education in general, researchers have struggled to conceptualize educational leadership and to develop theoretical frameworks and methodologies with which to study educational leadership. Since the

early period of educational leadership research, researchers and practitioners have agreed that quality school leaders are essential for schools to be successful, especially in a time of school reform or improvement. Research has shown that principals have a significant but indirect impact on student achievement. Effective leaders who apply both instructional and transformational leadership strategies are an essential factor in school improvement.

Principal assessment instruments can be an effective way to help train new school leaders and help current principals improve their school by making improvements to their own leadership behaviors. The VAL-ED assessment, with its learning-centered framework, examines and measures the most essential elements of effective school leadership.

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## APPENDIX B

### Methods

#### Problem Statement

Principals have a significant, yet indirect, impact on student achievement. In other words, school principals influence the variables that directly impact student success (Berkovich & Eyal, 2018; Conley & Goldman, 1994; Cotton, 2003; Dufour, 2002; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Given that principals are held accountable for student achievement in the schools they lead, the indirectness of their influence on student achievement can be problematic. Principals will benefit from knowing what behaviors and actions positively influence those who have direct impact on student achievement, particularly teachers. Additionally, given the differences between elementary and secondary schools, principals at both levels could benefit from understanding the specific behaviors that have an impact at their school level.

In recent years, there has been a great deal of research designed to identify and analyze the behaviors, actions, or characteristics of effective school leaders. This research has been used to prepare future school leaders, train current school leaders, and show principals what kinds of actions or behaviors can maximize their indirect influence on their students (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2009; Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, & Porter, 2006). The Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-ED) is a tool used to measure principal learning-centered leadership. VAL-ED was developed based on extensive research on effective school leadership and is often used as a tool to evaluate principal effectiveness. The developers of the VAL-ED assessment identified six core components of effective learning-centered schools and six key processes, or behaviors, that principals need to employ in order to establish and maintain

those core components (Goldring et al., 2009). Participants in this study earned the highest-level rating from a VAL-ED survey administered in 2014. VAL-ED designates the highest-level rating as a *distinguished* rating.

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

- What patterns or themes of leadership actions and behaviors are manifested from the in-person interviews of the highest rated principals in the 2014 VAL-ED survey?
- Are there other themes of LCL in the data from the in-person interviews with learning-centered elementary and secondary principals?
- How do the themes or patterns of leadership actions and behaviors compare between elementary and secondary principals?

### **Representation and Data Collection Process**

This qualitative study was limited to the highest rated principals (elementary and secondary principals and district officials) who participated in the 2014 VAL-ED evaluation from one large school district in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. This district is composed of 10 traditional high schools with grades 10-12, 8 junior high schools with grades 7-9, five middle schools (grades 7-8), 59 elementary schools (grades K to 6), and seven special purpose schools. With written approval from the school district, all 19 of the principals who earned a distinguished rating in the 2014 VAL-ED assessment and who were still working in the district, were contacted via email requesting participation in an in-person interview. Sixteen principals responded and were interviewed. The remaining principals were contacted a second time but did not agree to participate. As shown in Table 8, of the 16 principals who participated in the in-person interviews, eight were secondary principals, six were elementary principals, and

two were former elementary principals who worked in the district office at the time of the interview. The average years of experience as a principal was 12.6 year.

Table 8

*Years of Experience, Gender, Graduate Degree*

	Total	Elementary	Secondary
Average Years of Experience as Principal	12.6	12.8	12.3
Percent Female	19%	25%	12%
Percent Male	81%	75%	88%
Percent with MEd	100%	100%	100%
Percent with EdD	13%	0%	25%
Number	16	8	8

Results from the 2014 VAL-ED principal evaluation (Figure 2) served as the determining variable to identify the principals for this study. Principals interviewed for this study received highest categorical composite rating (*distinguished*) on the 2014 VAL-ED evaluation, which was based on the mean score from the six core components and six key processes. According to VAL-ED, a distinguished leader exhibits leadership behaviors of core components and key processes at levels of effectiveness that over time are virtually certain to influence teachers to bring the school to a point that results in strong value-added to student achievement (VAL-ED Manual, 2008).



Figure 2. Conceptual model of data collection.

The 18 participants were ranked in the top 25% of a cohort of 89 principals. The development of the VAL-ED evaluation tool consisted of field trials from 8,000 individual evaluations of elementary, middle and high school principals in 270 schools from all regions of the United States (Farnsworth, 2015). Teachers who participate in the evaluation rank their principal on each of the key processes and core components using a 5-point Likers scale, ranging from *ineffective* to *outstanding* effective (VAL-Manuel, 2008). The total score and the mean score for each of the key processes and core components are interpreted against a national sample that includes principals, supervisors, and teachers, which provides a percentile rank. These results are then interpreted against a set of performance standards ranging from *Below Basic* to *Distinguished*.



Open-ended interview questions were designed to illicit specific examples of LCL behaviors and actions from distinguished LCL principals. Often, answers included material related to succeeding questions. When this occurred, clarification was sought to for additional explanation, detail and context. Interview questions were as follows:

1. Please tell me about your school. What are some highlights of your successes here?
2. You participated in the VAL-ED assessment in 2014 in which your teachers and supervisors completed an evaluation of your effectiveness as a principal. How did you use the evaluation data and report? Did the evaluation influence your practice?
3. What do you do to establish high standards for student learning in your school?
4. Explain what quality instruction looks like in your school? What do you do as the principal to ensure quality instruction for all students in your school? How do you monitor it?
5. Do you feel that there is a culture of learning and professional behavior at your school? If so, what role do you play as the principal in establishing and/or maintaining that culture? If not, what are you doing to establish that kind of culture?
6. How do you go about leading teachers to teach their curriculum with rigor?
7. What do you do as the principal to ensure quality instruction for all students in your school?
8. What programs or initiatives have you implemented to involve families in your school?
9. Tell me about the teacher performance accountability measures you use? How do those measured help improve instruction?
10. What are you focusing on to become a more effective learning-centered principal?

11. What are you doing for school improvement? Can you share the major components of your school's improvement plans?

### **Analysis and Modeling**

The research purpose of this study is to better understand what learning-centered principals do to operationalize the VAL-ED key processes and to identify additional learning-centered behaviors. Episodic interviews were conducted following the guidelines for qualitative analysis outlined by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), specifically *in vivo* and *axial* coding methods. In order to establish an accurate understanding of the interviewee's responses, interview transcription and initial coding were conducted within two days of the interview. NVivo software was used to code and collect data from the interviews.

Categorization nodes that correlate with the VAL-ED six key processes and six core components were developed for the initial coding in order to assure effective analysis of the new qualitative data from the in-person interviews. *In Vivo* coding method was used for the initial coding, specifically by coding words and short phrases from the principal's own responses related to the VAL-ED key processes and core components. In some instances, descriptive responses were coded into two category nodes. For example, of the 24 references to *building and maintaining relationships*, nine were also coded into the *supporting* category node. The participant-identified themes emerged from the attribute coding during the second coding cycle by noting basic-descriptive examples of actions and behaviors related to learning-centered leadership. A threshold of 56% was established for analysis of the emergent themes.

Axial coding was conducted to compare the principals' responses against school level assignments. Data from the initial coding cycle and data from the emergent themes were disaggregated into two categories: elementary and secondary. This allowed for separate analysis

of the data within the context of the difference school levels, thereby illuminating the relationships between the codes and the school level categories.

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